

Lesson 40

Last week, we looked at verses 9-11, and we saw how the seven heads followed by an eighth fit perfectly with the first seven emperors of Rome followed by Domitian, where we ignored the three short-lived civil war kings. We looked back in Daniel, and we saw where Daniel had said that three kings would be uprooted six centuries before it happened in AD 69.

It all seems to fit like a glove, but we need to be careful with regard to Domitian. Some argue that Domitian was not actually a great persecutor of the church, but that he was later turned into one by those who wanted to make him fit the description of the eighth king. Is that a fair criticism? Yes and no.

Yes, in the sense that some commentators have overstated the evidence for Domitian to perhaps make him a better fit for their theories. One such statement describes Domitian as “the emperor who bathed the empire in the blood of Christians.” We have such evidence for Nero, but not for Domitian. Is it possible that Domitian persecuted the church to that extent? Yes, and perhaps even likely. Do we *know* from the evidence that Domitian persecuted the church to that extent? No.

But saying that we do not know whether Domitian bathed the empire in the blood of the saints does not mean that we cannot know whether Domitian was a persecutor of the church. I think we can know that, and I think Domitian was a persecutor of the church. And I would point to three sources of evidence: circumstantial evidence, extra-Biblical evidence, and Biblical evidence (**not** listed in order of importance!).



We have already examined some **circumstantial evidence** for a Domitian persecution of Christians. In Lesson 27, we looked at a Roman coin that showed Domitian’s infant son pictured as a divine child reaching for seven stars and that described Domitian himself as a son of a god. **How could such a person not come in conflict with the church?**

We also know that Domitian was very paranoid about his position, and that he paid attention to every rumor he heard about any potential threat to his position. How could such a person not be concerned with a group in his empire that worshipped a king other than himself and that refused to bow down to him?

In the beginning of his reign, Suetonius tells us that Domitian spent hours alone each day by himself in private, during which time he did nothing but catch flies and stab them with a sharp pin. When some one once asked “whether any one was with the emperor,” Vibius Crispus answered, “not so much as a fly.”

I think we will all agree from that description that Domitian had some serious mental health issues — which made him even more dangerous. Perhaps a modern day example of Domitian would be Kim Jong-un, the “dear leader” of North Korea, and we might even be able to think of another modern day example or two.

Suetonius gives us some examples of Domitian’s cruelty.

- He got so mad at one Roman writer for something he had written that he had the man put to death, and he crucified all of the slaves who had transcribed the work.
- He had a governor of Britain executed because the man had allowed a new type of lance to be named for him.
- He had a playwright killed because the man had written a play that Domitian felt could be seen as a criticism of his own divorce.
- He had one of his own cousins killed because a herald had mistakenly proclaimed him as Emperor rather than as consul.

And his arrogance?

- After his father and his brother were dead, Domitian would boast that it was he who had made them both emperors, and that they had now returned to him what was his.
- He demanded that he be addressed as “our Lord and our God” both in speech and in writing.
- He renamed the months of September and October after himself!

I think the Senate’s reaction to the news of his assassination also tells us something about the type of person he was. Here is how Suetonius describes their reaction.

The Senators however were filled with joy and rushed to the House to denounce the dead Emperor, shouting out bitter insults, and calling for ladders so that his votive shields could be torn down and his statues toppled to the ground before their

eyes. Then they decreed that all inscriptions mentioning him should be effaced, and all record of him obliterated.

And although Suetonius does not tell us that Domitian persecuted the church, he does tell us that Domitian persecuted the Jews and “those who lived as Jews,” which could be a reference the church.

I think the **circumstantial evidence** is very strong in pointing to Domitian as a persecutor of the church.

As for the **direct extra-Biblical evidence** for persecution, there is quite a bit (but admittedly not nearly as much as we have for Nero).

When Pliny wrote to the Emperor Trajan in AD 111 for advice on how to conduct trials for Christians, he said that some Christians had defected “as much as twenty-five years ago.” That would have been during the reign of Domitian.

When Melito, a bishop of the church in Sardis, wrote an apology to the emperor Marcus Aurelius in AD 175, Eusebius tells us he wrote that “Nero, and Domitian, alone, stimulated by certain malicious persons, showed a disposition to slander our faith.”

Tertullian was an attorney in Carthage, and in his apology to Septimius Severus in AD 197, he wrote: “Consult your histories. There you will find that Nero was the first to rage with the imperial sword against this school in the very first hour of its rise in Rome,” and “Domitian too, who was a good deal of a Nero in cruelty, attempted it ... soon stopped ... restored those he had banished. Such are ever our persecutors.” Tertullian speaks of Nero as “the first emperor who dyed his sword in Christian blood, when our religion was but just arising at Rome,” and he called Domitian “a limb of the bloody Nero.”

Eusebius quotes Tertullian to the effect that John returned from exile on Patmos during the reign of Domitian and lived in Ephesus until the reign of Trajan. Eusebius also writes that Domitian “finally showed himself the successor of Nero’s campaign of hostility to God. He was the second to promote persecution against us.”

Hegesippus, who lived between AD 117 and 189, writes of Christians who were called before Domitian and examined by him. Upon hearing them, “Domitian despising them, made no reply; but treating them with contempt, as simpletons, commanded them to be dismissed, and by a decree ordered the persecution to cease.”

So the extra-Biblical evidence clearly points to a Domitian persecution. Perhaps it was not as bad as Nero's and perhaps it was intermittent at times, but it could still be very, very bad and not be as bad as what Nero had done.

As for the **Biblical evidence**, we have looked at it already. It comes from the Old Testament and the New Testament. It comes from the pen of Daniel, the pen of Paul, and the pen of John, all writing by inspiration from God. There is a reason Christians have been seeing Domitian in the pages of Revelation for millennia.

If our interpretation is correct, then both Daniel and John were prophesying that there was to be a renewed persecution by an "eighth king" who would come to power after the death of Nero. Who else could that be but Domitian? What other dynastic family took over after Nero died and after the dust cleared?

The Bible is our best evidence on this subject, and it does just about everything in pointing to Domitian other than mention Domitian by name. (But Nero is never mentioned by name in the Bible, either.)

I think the evidence is clear that Domitian persecuted God's people. To those who would argue otherwise, I would respond as did Tertullian: "Consult your histories!" And I would add: **Consult your Bible!**

But that extra-Biblical evidence raises another potential problem: how can we date the book during the reign of Vespasian when much of that extra-Biblical evidence dates the book during the reign of Domitian?

We dealt with that issue at length during our introductory lessons, where you will recall we suggested that John may have been exiled by Domitian before Domitian became emperor but while he was acting as emperor when Vespasian and Titus were away from Rome. Also, the book may have been written during the reign of Vespasian, but then not circulated until John was released, perhaps during the reign of Domitian. Also, dating the writing of this book during the reign of Vespasian fits with Revelation 17:8, which suggests that Revelation was written during a lull in the persecution, which was the case when Vespasian was on the throne.

Revelation 17:12-18

12 And the ten horns which thou sawest are ten kings, which have received no kingdom as yet; but receive power as kings one hour with the beast. 13 These have one mind, and shall give their power and strength unto the beast. 14 These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful. 15 And he saith unto me, The waters which thou sawest, where the whore sitteth, are peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues. 16 And the ten horns which thou sawest upon the beast, these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire. 17 For God hath put in their hearts to fulfil his will, and to agree, and give their kingdom unto the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled. 18 And the woman which thou sawest is that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth.

Who are the ten horns? Even with the angel's explanation, there remain many different opinions as to the identity of these ten horns — so we need to proceed very carefully. I will tell you what I think they mean, along with why I think that, but I will also give you some other choices to consider. Let's start with the clues we are given.

In verse 10, the angel tells us that the ten horns are ten kings. Which kings? Verses 10-17 provide a number of clues as to their identity.

- Verse 12 tells us that they “have received no kingdom as yet.”
- Verse 12 tells us that they “receive power as kings one hour with the beast.”
- Verse 13 tells us that they “have one mind.”
- Verse 13 tells us that they “shall give their power and strength unto the beast.”
- Verse 14 tells us that they “shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them.”
- Verse 16 tells us that they “shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire.”
- Verse 17 tells us that God “hath put in their hearts to fulfil his will, and to agree, and give their kingdom unto the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled.”

We have a lot of clues about these ten horns! In fact, the angel tells us more about these ten horns than he does about anything else — which makes it all the more surprising how much disagreement there is as to the identity of these ten kings.

Let’s start with this question: Is the number ten *literal* or *figurative* in the angel’s explanation?

The number seven was literal — seven mountains and seven kings — but we also saw that the number seven was chosen for a symbolic reason — to make Domitian the **eighth** king. The angel does not explain every detail of what John saw, and so perhaps the symbolic number ten is one of those unexplained details. On the other hand, the number ten may also have a literal meaning, as we saw with the number seven. So let’s keep our options open as we look at various possibilities for the ten kings.

Let’s begin with what I believe is the correct view about the identity of these ten kings.

View 1: The ten kings are the first ten Roman emperors.

Under this view, the ten kings and the seven heads are really representing the same set of kings. The difference is that the ten horns includes the three civil war kings, while the seven heads do not. Under this view, the symbolic number ten also has a literal meaning, just as we see with the symbolic number seven.

What evidence supports this view?

First, this view fits well with the prophecies we read from Daniel 7. In that chapter, Daniel also looked at the first century emperor of Rome, and Daniel referred to them as “ten horns” ... “before whom three fell” (Daniel 7:20). Those ten **horns** in Daniel 7 are the seven **heads** in Revelation 17 after those three horns in Daniel 7:20 have fallen. This view of the ten kings in Revelation 17 would link the ten horns of Revelation with the ten horns of Daniel 7.

This view would mean that the three uprooted kings aren't ignored in Revelation at all — they are included among the ten kings, even though they are not included among the seven kings.

If we don't adopt this view, then how then do we explain the switch from horns in Daniel 7 to heads in Revelation 17, with the horns in Revelation 17 referring to something other than the horns in Daniel 7? That's not hard. We already know that the same symbol can apply to different objects. Also, the symbols of “heads” and “horns” are common symbols for kings — and that is what those symbols mean both in Daniel and in Revelation. The only question is which kings?

The real question is whether the Roman emperors fit the textual clues that we are given about the ten horns. With some there is a very close fit, but seemingly less so with others. Let's look at each of the textual clues.

Verse 12 tells us that they “have received no kingdom as yet.”

Shouldn't we stop the bus right here? Isn't this a show stopper when it comes to this first view of the ten kings? How can it be said that they have received no kingdom yet when eight of them have ruled over Rome and died, and the ninth one is presently ruling over Rome? Most commentaries at this point immediately move on to the next possibility, but perhaps they have been too quick to dismiss this first view. Let's look at a bit closer at it.

They “have received no kingdom as yet.” What could that mean?

For starters, we might ask another question — why would Daniel have used horns for these kings, with Revelation using both heads and horns for the same kings? Perhaps it was just because Revelation wanted us to keep one foot in Daniel 7 while we were studying Revelation 17. **Perhaps the ten horns in Revelation 17 are viewing the kings from Daniel's perspective, while the seven heads are viewing the kings from John's perspective.**

If that is the case, then verse 12 is explained. When Daniel prophesied six centuries earlier, then ten kings had not yet received a kingdom, and in fact they had not yet been born!

Two different perspectives on Rome? Have we seen that before? Yes. We just saw Rome represented by two different perspectives — a beast from the sea (the royal perspective) and a beast from the earth (the religious perspective). Perhaps the seven heads and the ten horns are once again showing us Rome from two perspectives — Daniel’s perspective six centuries earlier and John’s perspective.

What else could the word “yet” mean in verse 12 mean? Is there a way we can make sense of that word even if we decide that the horns and the heads are not from two different historical perspectives?

If the word “yet” in verse 12 is not from Daniel’s perspective and if it means that these kings never had that royal power prior to when they received it here, then the ten horns and the seven heads can’t be looking at the same Roman kings from the same historical perspective. Why? Because by this time, eight of them had already been king.

But saying that something has not happened **yet**, does not mean that it has never happened before. I have not eaten lunch yet, but I have eaten plenty of lunches before today. Likewise, it may be that some of these kings had already been a king. In fact, doesn’t the text suggest that? “The ten horns which thou sawest are ten kings, which have received no kingdom as yet.” The verse does not say that the ten horns are **ten men** who are not yet kings; the text says that the ten horns are **ten kings** who have not yet received a kingdom. That sounds to me like they were already kings prior to whatever is about to happen in verse 12.

So, it may be that some of these kings had already been a king, had lost that kingship when they died, but are now being shown as receiving their kingship again for a short time. Why would the vision of the harlot have shown that?

What happens at the end of a play? What usually happens is that the entire case comes out onto the stage — even those cast members who died during the play. They all come out and take a bow. Maybe that is why we have the 10 kings in Revelation 17. God wants them to be around to see what happens to Domitian and to Rome. God wants them to have a front row seat for the judgment — not to take a bow, but to bend a knee!

This whole section reminds me of Isaiah 14. In that chapter, the king of Babylon is judged and cast into hell. And guess who he meets there? All of the previous kings, just waiting to greet him and to mock him.

*Isaiah 14:9-10 — Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming: it stirreth up the dead for thee, even all the chief ones of the earth; **it hath raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations.** All they shall speak and say unto thee, Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us?*

Perhaps that is why we see the ten prior kings of Rome being paraded out once again in verse 12. In this way, they are all present to see what is about to happen.

As embodied in Domitian, those earlier ten kings (although all now dead) received a kingdom and royal power when Domitian did. Domitian came from them and through them. Domitian was here now because they had been here before. As verse 13 says, they “have one mind.”

Verse 11 told us that the eighth king (Domitian) “is **of the seven.**” That is, Domitian came from the earlier kings and he embodied the earlier kings. Revelation is setting Domitian up as the personification of the emperors who preceded him. Daniel 7:8 describes the little horn in similar terms: “behold, there **came up among them** another little horn.”

The phrase “one hour” in verse 12 just means a time of critical importance, and in fact this point of the vision is a key point of focus in this book and a key point of focus in Daniel.

So what I am saying? What I am saying is that we shouldn’t (as many commentaries do) automatically dismiss the view that the ten horns are the first ten kings of Rome just because of verse 12. There are at least two ways to understand verse 12 so that it does not rule out the ten kings being the first ten emperors of Rome. Either the 10 horns are the ten emperors from Daniel’s perspective six centuries earlier, or the ten horns are the now dead emperors being ushered back onto the stage to witness the end of the play and the judgment of the harlot. I favor the second option, but either can explain verse 12.

Didn’t we see the same thing in Daniel 7, not with regard to the ten kings but with regard to the three kingdoms that preceded Rome?

***Daniel 7:12** — As concerning the rest of the beasts, they had their dominion taken away: yet their lives were prolonged for a season and time.*

God wanted them to be around to see Rome's fall, and that may have been the case with the ten kings as well.

And won't this also be true at the end of all time? We know what the dead in Christ will be raised on that last great day, but why will the dead out of Christ be raised? One reason is so that they can bend their knee to Jesus and confess to God (Romans 14:11). God wants them around on the last day to see the vindication of the church. Perhaps these prior Roman emperors are just catching the early show!

Is there any support for this view elsewhere in Revelation? Yes, perhaps. Think back on the two earlier times that we saw these same symbols in the book.

***Revelation 12:3** — And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and **seven crowns** upon his heads.*

***Revelation 13:1** — And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns **ten crowns**.*

Did you catch it? The first time we saw the seven heads and ten horns, the text told us there were **seven crowns**. The second time we saw the seven heads and ten horns, the text told us there were **ten crowns**. Is the text perhaps letting us know that we are really just looking at the same set of kings in those two verses and in the symbols of the heads and the horns?

What about the other textual clues? Do they fit the Roman emperors?

Verse 12 tells us that they “receive power as kings one hour with the beast.”

If the ten horns are the ten emperors from Daniel's perspective six centuries earlier, then the time of critical importance in verse 12 is the first century, in which they all reigned as king.

If the ten horns are the now dead emperors being ushered back onto the stage to witness the judgment of the harlot, then the time of critical importance in verse 12 is the reign of Domitian in which the judgment of Rome would see its fulfillment.

Verse 13 tells us that they “have one mind.”

If the ten horns are the ten emperors from Daniel’s perspective six centuries earlier, then that one mind is that of the office of emperor that each held. They were united in their view that Rome was the eternal kingdom and that no other kingdom could ever be allowed to take precedence over Rome.

If the ten horns are the now dead emperors being ushered back onto the stage to witness the judgment of the harlot, then that one mind is the mind of Domitian in which all of the previous emperors were now embodied.

Verse 13 tells us that they “shall give their power and strength unto the beast.”

The beast here is the beast from the sea, which represents the royal side of Rome. The emperors’ power and strength came from the beast and was in turn given to the beast. Each depended on the other for survival.

Verse 14 tells us that they “shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them.”

Caesar or Christ? The Lamb or fill in the blank with the name of the current emperor? That was the choice. It was choice that God was calling on everyone to make, and it was a choice that Rome was calling on everyone to make. You had to choose one or the other, and you could not choose both. And when you chose one side, that meant you were the enemy of the other side. In short, it was war! The emperors were making war with the Lamb!

And the outcome? We have seen the outcome in every chapter of this book. There is no doubt about the outcome. The Lamb shall overcome them! The mighty Roman empire and the all powerful Roman emperors were defeated by what? By a Lamb!

And have no doubt about it — the Lamb shall overcome them no matter who “them” refers to! If the Lamb overcame the Roman empire, then the Lamb can overcome anybody or anything. Nothing can stand in the way of the Lamb and the kingdom of the Lamb.

Daniel 2:44 — And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.

Matthew 16:18 — *And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*

Hebrews 12:27-29 — *And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things **which cannot be shaken** may remain. Wherefore we receiving a kingdom **which cannot be moved**, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire.*

There is but one Lamb, and there is but one eternal kingdom, the church of the Lamb. All earthly kingdoms and earthly rulers will fall.

Verse 16 tells us that they “shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire.”

Wait a second! Whose side are these emperors on? Verse 14 told us they were against the Lamb, and now verse 16 tells us they are against Rome? How can that be?

Proverbs 28:15 — *As a roaring lion, and a ranging bear; so is a wicked ruler over the poor people.*

Why was the harlot being judged? Why was she falling? Why was she desolate and naked? Because of the evil Roman emperors who persecuted God’s people and who demanded that people worship them as gods. The emperors were why Rome was being judged!

But the emperors loved Rome, right? How can it be said that they hated the harlot? Haven’t we already talked about how the emperors were liars? Haven’t we seen their lying wonders described in this book, and haven’t we seen how they are being led by Satan, who “is a liar, and the father of it” (John 8:44)? What does the Bible tell us about liars?

Proverbs 26:28 — *A lying tongue **hateth** those that are afflicted by it.*

So, yes, the emperors did hate Rome.

But did the emperors eat her flesh? Yes, they were leading Rome down the path of destruction. They were corrupting Rome, and they were taking from Rome. They were like the leaders described by Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 22:27 — *Her princes in the midst thereof are like wolves **ravening the prey**, to shed blood, and to destroy souls, to get dishonest gain.*

Ezekiel 34:10 — *Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I am against the shepherds; and I will require my flock at their hand, and cause them to cease from feeding the flock; **neither shall the shepherds feed themselves any more; for I will deliver my flock from their mouth, that they may not be meat for them.***

Yes, the emperors were eating the flesh of those they led.

But did the emperors burn Rome with fire? Yes — both literally and metaphorically! Nero almost burned the entire city down in AD 64! It was that fire that led to Nero's great persecution of the church after he placed the blame on them to divert attention from himself.

Verse 17 tells us that God “hath put in their hearts to fulfil his will, and to agree, and give their kingdom unto the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled.”

Verse 17 is explaining verse 16. Verse 17 is telling us why the 10 kings were hating the whore, and making her desolate and naked, and eating her flesh, and burning her with fire. Why? Because they were fulfilling the words of God. What words of God? The words of God spoken by Daniel for starters.

Daniel had written all about these kings, and Daniel had described what they would do. They were now doing it. Those kings thought they were in charge, but they were not. God had told us what they would do, what they would be like, and even how many of them there would be six centuries before they arrived! When Daniel wrote those prophecies, Rome was a tiny trading settlement. No one would ever have dreamed that someday that settlement would rule the known world — but God knew. God made it happen!

But did Daniel say somewhere that the Roman emperors would hate Rome and eat Rome's flesh and leave Rome desolate and naked? Yes, Daniel said that Rome would devour everything!

Daniel 7:23 — *The fourth beast shall be the fourth kingdom upon earth, which shall be diverse from all kingdoms, **and shall devour the whole earth, and shall tread it down, and break it in pieces.***

And that's not all. Do you remember the giant statue representing four kingdoms that Nebuchadnezzar saw in Daniel 2? Here is how Daniel described the fourth kingdom, which was Rome.

Daniel 2:40-43 — *And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron: forasmuch as iron breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things: and as iron that breaketh all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise. And whereas thou sawest the feet and toes, part of potters' clay, and part of iron, the kingdom shall be divided; but there shall be in it of the strength of the iron, forasmuch as thou sawest the iron mixed with miry clay. And as the toes of the feet were part of iron, and part of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong, and partly broken. And whereas thou sawest iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men: but they shall not cleave one to another, even as iron is not mixed with clay.*

You mean that Rome had feet of clay? Yes, and in fact that is where that saying “feet of clay” came from! But mighty Rome was all-powerful — how did it have feet of clay?

Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* lists four reasons why Rome fell: external invasion, inner decadence, inner strife, and the injury of time and nature. Notice those middle two: **inner** decadence and **inner** strife. There's the feet of clay!

Writing six centuries earlier, not only did Daniel know that that dusty trading settlement on the Tiber river would one day rule the known world, but Daniel also knew that that mighty kingdom would be full of rot and strife and decadence. Daniel knew it would look like it was made of iron, but it would have feet of clay. How did Daniel know these things? Let's let Daniel answer that question.

Daniel 2:29 — *O king, thy thoughts came into thy mind upon thy bed, what should come to pass hereafter: and he that revealeth secrets maketh known to thee what shall come to pass.*

Daniel and Revelation are bookends. On one end we have Daniel, looking forward through four mighty kingdoms of this earth ending with Rome, and on

the other hand we have Revelation looking back across time at those same earthly kingdoms starting with Rome. In Daniel, Rome was a mighty nation only in the mind of God, but in Revelation, God's plan has come to pass and Rome has played its part in that plan, but Rome's part is over. And it is time for Rome to experience what happened to Babylon, Persia, and Greece.

And what happened between those two bookends? The plan of redemption. Jesus, the long promised Messiah, came to this world and gave his life so that all might be saved. He gave up his life on the cross, having been nailed there by Roman hands, he rose from the dead, and he ascended back to the Father. And just a few days later God established the eternal kingdom of Christ in Acts 2. The kingdom that Daniel told us about in Daniel 2, the kingdom that Isaiah told us about in Isaiah 2, and the kingdom that Joel told us about in Joel 2. A kingdom that "shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever."

That is the first possible view for the identity of the ten kings — the ten emperors of Rome, with the three civil war kings included.