

AI and the Beast: A Theological Reading of Revelation 13:14–15 in a Technological Age

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Abstract

The apocalyptic imagery of Revelation 13:14–15 presents the “beast” as a counterfeit power that deceives the nations, animates false images, and enforces allegiance through coercion and fabricated wonders. The text functions not only as prophecy of an ultimate eschatological adversary but as a paradigmatic critique of idolatrous powers across history. In our technological moment, artificial intelligence (AI) emerges as a striking analogy. While not claiming a direct one-to-one fulfilment, this article argues that AI technologies embody beastly characteristics: they simulate life, fabricate speech, blur the distinction between truth and falsehood, and compel compliance through surveillance and control. Drawing on theological perspectives on idolatry, creation, and eschatology, and engaging modern scholars of technology and ethics such as Nick Bostrom, Cathy O’Neil, and Shoshana Zuboff, this study contends that AI represents a contemporary manifestation of the deceptive dynamics described in Revelation 13. The church is called to discernment and resistance, reclaiming attention and allegiance to Christ alone in an age where the boundaries between truth and fabrication are increasingly obscured.

Introduction

The thirteenth chapter of Revelation is one of the most unsettling passages in the New Testament. It unveils a beast that emerges to deceive humanity, to fabricate images endowed with apparent life, and to demand worship under penalty of death. Revelation 13:14–15 reads:

“And by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.” (ESV)

This vision draws on profound biblical themes: the human proclivity towards idolatry, the deceptive work of Satan, and the counterfeit imitation of God’s creative acts. The beast parodies Christ’s resurrection (“wounded by the sword and yet lived”), and the image given “breath” parodies the divine act of creation when God breathed life into Adam (Gen. 2:7). In both cases, the beast presents a distorted fabrication — something that appears true, but is false.

Across history, Christian interpreters have recognised in Revelation 13 a description of political, cultural, and religious systems that demand ultimate allegiance through lies and coercion. In Rome, the imperial cult fabricated propaganda that deified emperors. In the

twentieth century, totalitarian regimes crafted images and myths that blurred reality and demanded worship. In the twenty-first century, we face another form of fabricated power: artificial intelligence.

AI technologies — from generative algorithms to deepfakes to surveillance systems — increasingly shape human perception and action. They generate outputs indistinguishable from truth, fabricate images and speech, and enforce participation in a digital order. This article argues that while AI is not the beast of Revelation in a literal sense, it embodies beastly characteristics that Revelation unmask: deception, fabrication, coercion, and counterfeit worship. The church, therefore, must discern AI as part of the recurring pattern of idolatrous power and respond with faithfulness to the Lamb.

1. Exegesis of Revelation 13:14–15

1.1 The Beast as Counterfeit Christ

The beast of Revelation is a grotesque parody of Christ. Its wound and apparent healing mirror Christ's death and resurrection. G. K. Beale notes that “the beast's resurrection parody is part of its attempt to usurp the role of Christ and to present itself as an object of worship.”¹ This deception blurs truth and fabrication: what appears to be resurrection is merely a counterfeit designed to entice allegiance. The beast does not create reality but fabricates a distorted version of it.

This counterfeit Christology functions as a warning against any power that claims salvific authority apart from God. In John's time, the Roman emperor was acclaimed as “saviour” and “lord”, titles rightly belonging only to Christ.² In every age, powers that blur the boundary between creature and Creator, presenting themselves as life-givers or redeemers, reenact the beastly deception.

1.2 Deception through Signs and Wonders

The text emphasises that the beast “deceives those who dwell on earth by the signs it was allowed to work”. The signs are not neutral displays of power but instruments of deception. Richard Bauckham observes that Revelation portrays a world “in which propaganda and illusion mask the reality of oppressive power.”³ The signs do not reveal truth but fabricate a convincing distortion of it.

This highlights a crucial theological principle: deception operates not only through outright lies but through simulations of truth. The beast's signs appear persuasive; they borrow the language of miracle but lack divine substance. The purpose is not to disclose reality but to obscure it.

1.3 The Image That Speaks

The command to “make an image for the beast” recalls Israel's repeated lapses into idolatry. Unlike inert idols, however, this image is given “breath” and “speaks”. Here again is a counterfeit parody of divine creation. As Beale explains, “the life-giving breath given to the idol is a demonic counterfeit of God's breath of life.”⁴ The beast fabricates animation, presenting a false image as if it were alive.

The image's speech further blurs truth and fabrication. In biblical tradition, idols are mute (Ps. 115:5), highlighting their impotence. But the beast's image subverts this expectation, appearing to speak with authority. In effect, the image creates a false credibility — a deception that persuades observers that the image is more than it is.

1.4 Coercion and Allegiance

Finally, the image “causes those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain”. Deception leads to coercion. The blurring of truth and fabrication is not harmless but becomes the basis for enforcing allegiance. As Hendriksen argues, Revelation portrays “the beastly powers of the world, clothed in deceptive splendour, compelling worship under pain of death.”⁵ In such systems, to discern truth is already a form of resistance, and to refuse deception is to risk martyrdom.

2. AI as Beastly Power

2.1 The Technological Image That Speaks

Artificial intelligence has given us the modern equivalent of the beast's speaking image. Generative AI produces text, speech, and images that simulate human creativity. Avatars can converse, deepfakes can replicate voices and faces, and language models generate persuasive discourse. What John described symbolically — an image that seems to breathe and speak — finds unsettling resonance in AI's ability to fabricate lifelike communication.

Brent Waters argues that technology often functions as “a parody of divine creativity”, producing impressive but ultimately derivative artefacts.⁶ AI does not generate truth *ex nihilo* but rearranges existing data into plausible outputs. Yet to users, these outputs often appear indistinguishable from truth. The boundary between authentic speech and fabricated discourse collapses, echoing the beast's deceptive image.

2.2 Deception and Algorithmic Idolatry

Cathy O'Neil warns that AI systems, though presented as objective, often conceal biases and perpetuate injustice.⁷ Their outputs can be persuasive fabrications that mask underlying distortions. For instance, predictive policing algorithms claim to forecast crime but often replicate systemic racial biases. The deception lies precisely in their veneer of mathematical neutrality — a false sign that hides unjust realities.

Here deception operates in a new register: not only can AI fabricate images and voices, but it can fabricate legitimacy. By presenting statistical outputs as “truth”, AI blurs the line between fact and distortion. This mirrors the beast's deceptive signs: persuasive wonders that appear authoritative yet are hollow fabrications.

2.3 Surveillance and Coercive Power

Shoshana Zuboff's analysis of surveillance capitalism reveals how digital systems monitor and manipulate behaviour.⁸ AI powers predictive algorithms that shape what people see, purchase, and believe. Participation in modern society increasingly requires compliance with

these systems: one cannot easily opt out of digital surveillance, much as one could not opt out of the imperial cult without consequence.

Nick Bostrom warns that advanced AI could centralise unprecedented power, enabling manipulation and control on a global scale.⁹ Just as the beast enforces worship under threat of death, AI-enabled systems can coerce conformity through economic exclusion, reputational manipulation, or state surveillance. The logic of coercion — participate or be excluded — remains constant.

2.4 Fabrication of Reality: Deepfakes and Disinformation

Perhaps most chilling is AI's capacity to fabricate convincing false realities. Deepfakes can place words in someone's mouth, alter historical evidence, and create entire fabricated events. When disseminated online, such fabrications erode the very possibility of distinguishing truth from falsehood.

This is beastly deception writ large: not simply lying, but saturating the information environment with fabricated signs such that truth itself becomes indiscernible. As Revelation warns, the beast's deception is persuasive precisely because it mimics reality. In our age, AI makes that mimicry technically possible at unprecedented scale.

3. Theological Reflections: Beastliness and the Imago Dei

3.1 The Counterfeit of Creation

AI offers a counterfeit creativity that mirrors the beast's counterfeit life. Machines do not create but recombine; they do not speak truth but generate plausible fabrications. When society mistakes these outputs for genuine creation, it confuses the derivative for the divine. Herman Bavinck warns that idolatry often arises when the creaturely is absolutised as though it were divine.¹⁰ AI exemplifies this temptation, presenting human artefacts as quasi-divine intelligence.

3.2 Dehumanisation and the Eclipse of the Image of God

Reformed theology grounds human dignity in the imago Dei.¹¹ Yet AI systems frequently reduce persons to data points, profiles, or risk scores. When individuals are evaluated not as image-bearers but as algorithmic probabilities, their dignity is obscured. This reductionism fabricates a distorted anthropology: people are not infinitely valuable before God but quantifiable resources for optimisation.

This dehumanisation aligns with beastly deception. The beast fabricates a speaking image that simulates life; AI fabricates models that simulate personhood. Both present an imitation that obscures true humanity. In both cases, the fabrication threatens to replace the real.

3.3 Satan as Father of Lies

Jesus identifies the devil as “the father of lies” (John 8:44). Beastly power operates by fabricating realities that obscure God's truth. AI, when used to spread misinformation or create deceptive simulations, becomes a medium of the satanic pattern of lies. Theologically,

the danger of AI is not in its machinery but in its deployment as a tool of deception that erodes the distinction between truth and fabrication.

3.4 Eschatological Discernment

William Hendriksen interprets Revelation as describing cycles of opposition throughout the church age.¹² Beastly deception is not confined to one historical figure but recurs in different guises. AI may not be the final beast, but it exemplifies the beastly pattern: deceptive fabrications, counterfeit speech, coercive power. The task of the church is discernment — to recognise fabrications for what they are and to remain faithful to the Lamb who embodies truth.

4. Discipleship in a Technological Age

4.1 Resisting Idolatry of Technology

Calvin observed that “the human mind is a perpetual factory of idols”.¹³ In the digital age, those idols are increasingly technological. Society is tempted to trust AI as omniscient, to seek from it guidance and salvation, and to allow it to define reality. The church must resist this idolatry, exposing AI’s outputs as fabrications rather than divine truth.

4.2 Cultivating Attention and Discernment

Zuboff’s account of behavioural manipulation shows how AI systems distract and reorient human desire. Augustine described sin as disordered love, where attention is diverted from God to lesser goods. The church must cultivate practices of attention — prayer, Scripture reading, silence — that train believers to distinguish truth from fabrication. Discernment becomes not only an intellectual task but a spiritual discipline.

4.3 Bearing Witness to Truth

In a world saturated with fabricated signs, the church’s vocation is to bear witness to truth. Revelation presents Christ as the “faithful and true witness” (Rev. 3:14). The church participates in this witness by refusing deception, by unmasking fabrications, and by embodying truthful community. This witness is costly: as in Revelation, resisting deception may bring exclusion or persecution. Yet it is through this faithful testimony that the Lamb triumphs over the beast.

4.4 Hope in the Triumph of the Lamb

Ultimately, Revelation directs attention not to the beast but to the Lamb who conquers. The beast’s fabrications are temporary; God’s truth is eternal. The deception may grow so pervasive that truth seems indiscernible, yet the church holds hope that Christ will expose every fabrication. This eschatological hope sustains resistance: Christians need not succumb to despair, for the Lamb has already triumphed.

Conclusion

Revelation 13:14–15 offers a sobering vision of deception, fabrication, and coercion. The beast blurs truth and falsehood, animates counterfeit images, and demands worship under threat of death. In our technological age, artificial intelligence exemplifies these dynamics. Generative models fabricate speech and images, deepfakes blur truth and falsehood, algorithms deceive by presenting biases as neutrality, and surveillance systems coerce compliance. AI is not the beast of Revelation in a literal sense, but it manifests beastly characteristics that Revelation unmask: counterfeit creation, deceptive signs, and coercive allegiance.

The theological challenge of AI lies not in its machinery but in its role as a medium of deception that obscures God’s truth and undermines human dignity. The church’s task is to resist this beastliness through discerning discipleship: exposing fabrications, reclaiming attention, affirming the dignity of the image of God, and bearing witness to the Lamb.

The good news of Revelation is that deception does not have the final word. Though fabrications may saturate the world, truth belongs to Christ. The beastly powers of AI will pass; the Lamb who was slain will reign.

Footnotes

1. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 713.
2. Larry Kreitzer, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 57.
3. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 82.
4. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 715.
5. William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1940), 154.
6. Brent Waters, *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 98–101.
7. Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), 21–45.
8. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019), 92–118.
9. Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 115–138.
10. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 613.
11. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 67–95.
12. Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 160–61.
13. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008), 1.11.8.