

The Mark & Number of the Beast (Revelation 13:16-18)

We have seen from Ch. 12 that the devil is symbolized by a great red dragon (12:3), the kingdoms of this world are symbolized by a beast from the sea (13:1-10), and false religion by a beast from the earth (13:11ff). The Church is symbolized by the woman (12:1) and the witnesses (11:1-14). But notice how John uses numbers to symbolize also. The Church is symbolized by a number 144,000 (7:1-8). The period of the church-age is symbolized by three and a half years (12:14), 1,260 days (12:6) and 42 months (11:2, 13:5). Following John's model of using numbers for the main characters then, we will see that the beast also is symbolized by a number—666 (13:18). We will come back to this.

But let's step back and see the broader context of the devil's work in his section. It is the devil's purpose to draw men and women away from Christ to worship antichrist. He will try to coerce, manipulate and deceive and even force men and women to fall into line with antichristian government and worship antichristian religion (the beasts). The point that John is making in these verses is that aside from deception and spiritual manipulation (the signs and wonders of false religion 13:13ff), he will force men and women to turn away from worshipping Christ by evil forces in government (13:1-10) and religion (13:11-15).

The forces of evil will control the kingdoms and governments of the world. As it resists, the Church will be forced to the sidelines, to a place where Christians are reduced and squeezed economically and socially, to a place where they will not be able to buy or sell (13:17). Daniel's prophecy has helped us understand this passage before (Daniel 7:1-6; Rev. 13:1-10). Here again, we can look to Daniel and see how he was persecuted and forced to worship the image but refused (Daniel 3:1-20).

From the time of Christ, the Church has wrestled with the forces of evil in the world also. The dragon is still pursuing the women and the rest of her offspring (12:17). John was persecuted on Patmos, and spiritual deception was already at work in some of the churches in Asia Minor. So, this was already going on in John's day (see Rev. 2:9). Evil forces in government and religion are still at work, and the devil will enforce his power and authority through them. He will impress himself so fiercely and forcibly on the world that those who follow him will bear his mark, as Christians are marked by the One who owns them, and who they follow.

The mark on the hand indicates that the wearer would faithfully conform in his actions to the will of his master, and on the forehead indicates that the wearer has the mind of the master and will openly proclaim himself a servant of the beast. We should not, however, think of this mark as a literal mark on the forehead or hand, like a tattoo, or as some think, a bar-code or a microchip, or the number on a credit card. This is not at all what John has in mind.

The imagery is borrowing from the ancient practice in Rome of marking the slave or sealing him/her to a particular owner, or of branding defeated soldiers. In the times between the Old and New Testament, there are records of Jews in captivity being branded, who submitted to registration. The mark then, on a slave or even on a beast came to mean ownership. But the imagery of an identifying mark may also be connected to a practice in ancient Israel. In Deuteronomy 6:8 the Israelites were to bind the words of God "as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes." Later in Israel, they misunderstood this and developed a practice of actually tying a small leather box with Hebrew texts in it, to be worn as a reminder to keep the law. These are called phylacteries.

So, we should not make the same mistake as the Israelites and look for a physical mark. We can understand this "mark" if we look at how John has already used this same language to speak of the Christian sealed by the gospel, the evident characteristics of Christ in the believer (7:3). The "seal of the living God" indicates a spiritual reality (7:2) not a physical mark, and it is said the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father was written on their foreheads (14:1). So also, with this "mark of the beast," it indicates a spiritual reality. It shows ownership, and it represents the climax of satanic deception and manipulation.

This mark is also identified with a number. Throughout the book, John has continually made a distinction between the Lord's people, those who follow the Lamb (14:4) and the devil's people, "earth-dwellers" who will worship the beast (13:8; see also 3:10; 6:10; 11:10; 13:8,14 where "those who dwell on the earth" mean those who are at home on the earth).

The number 666 which identifies those who worship the beast has been explained in various ways. Some see it is an example of an ancient practice among those who speak Greek, Hebrew and Latin called *Grematria*. According to this practice, each letter of the alphabet had a numeric equivalent; A=1, B=2, C=3, and so on. Those who follow this method of interpreting the number, try to find a particular person whose name can add up to 666. But there are many names that could add up to this number, so it is unclear who the beast actually is! Some commentators see the name Nero Ceasar in this, but to get Nero

the name has to be transliterated from Greek into Hebrew characters. Fanciful manipulation like this are not becoming of sound biblical interpretation.

Another way however, a simpler and better approach, and more in line with how we approached the other numbers is presented (Hendrickson, Hoeksema, Walvoord, etc.). Six is the number of man, as the text says. Picking up on this "number of a man" sets this number in sharp contrast to the number seven in Revelation as the number of completeness (seven angels, seven churches, seven seal, trumpets and bowls). Man was created on the sixth day. He failed to reach seven, the number of perfection. The spirit of the beast can be identified throughout history against God's people. "Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits" (Daniel 3:1). "Goliath of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span," and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron" (1 Samuel 17:4). 666 then means "failure upon failure upon failure" (Henrickson, 151).

At any rate, while the details are difficult and contended the message is clear and all Christians can agree on it. This number of man is not only given as a help for understanding the nature of the beast, but as a confirmation that this beast will fail in his deception and persecution. While it appears that the beast reached perfection, in recovering from the fatal wound and the signs and wonders, he will still fail. Only the Lamb and those who follow him will conqueror!