

666
Revelation 13:11-18

In his final two letters written not long before he was beheaded in Rome under orders from the Emperor Nero, the Apostle Paul was clearly energized and concerned about the emergence of false teaching that he obviously believed would pose a great threat to the health and well-being of the church.

In 1 Timothy 4:1 he wrote: “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.” Later he exhorted his young protégé, Timothy, to keep a close watch on himself and especially “on the teaching” of biblical truth (1 Tim. 4:16).

In his final letter, written perhaps only days before his execution, he again said to Timothy: “Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Tim. 1:13-14). He again warned Timothy that “the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching” but “will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3-4). And it was the invasive and influential presence of false teachers that prompted Jude to say in his short epistle that we should “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

Let me be as clear and straightforward as I can: false teaching, deceptive doctrines, distortions of biblical truth are perhaps the single greatest threat to the health and flourishing of the church in this present age. If you ask me for explicit biblical support for this notion, we need go no further than what we read here in Revelation 13:11-18.

The So-Called “False Prophet”

We read in v. 11 that John saw yet another beast, this one arising from the earth (cf. Dan. 7:17). Like the first beast it too is a demonic parody of Jesus, for it has two horns “like a lamb” (v. 11b). Perhaps it has “two” horns instead of seven in order to mimic the two witnesses, the two lampstands, and the two olive trees of Revelation 11:3-4. There have been numerous suggestions as to the identity of this “earth beast”.

Some argue that this refers to the Jewish religious system of the first century that conspired with the Roman state to suppress and persecute the early church. Others point to the Roman imperial priesthood that sought to enforce worship of Caesar as god. Many of the Protestant Reformers and Puritans believed this is descriptive of the priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church or

perhaps even the Pope himself. Most dispensationalists believe the “false prophet” is a literal individual living and working in conjunction with the Antichrist at the end of the age

But I’m persuaded that John is describing, once again in highly figurative language, *the presence and influence of false teachers, particularly false prophets, throughout the course of church history* (see especially Matt. 7:15-23). This beast is later called “the false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10) and together with the Dragon (Satan) and the sea-beast forms *the unholy trinity of the abyss*.

Thus, there is a sense in which just as the Devil seeks to imitate and take the place of God the Father, and the Beast imitates and seeks to usurp the role of God the Son, so the earth beast or the false prophet claims to fill the role of the Holy Spirit. Thus, we see in v. 12 that just as the true Holy Spirit empowers and sustains our worship of Jesus Christ, the false prophet of Revelation 13 empowers and directs unbelievers to worship the Beast.

False prophets and deceivers were prevalent throughout the early church as evidenced by the consistent apostolic (Peter, Paul, John) warning concerning their influence (see especially 1 John 4:1-6). The aim of false prophets is to mislead the people of God by diverting their devotion from Jesus to idols. They aim to make the claims of the first beast plausible and appealing and, as is especially the case in Revelation 2-3, to encourage ethical compromise with the culture’s idolatrous and blasphemous institutions (cf. the Nicolaitans, the false apostles, Jezebel, etc. in Revelation 2-3). Thus the “false prophet” or land-beast stands in immediate opposition to the true prophets of Christ symbolized by the two witnesses in Revelation 11.

It is clearly the purpose of the false religious systems of the world to seduce people into idolatry, into worshiping and devoting their lives to anything or anyone other than Jesus Christ. That is the point of John in v. 12.

Idolatry! (vv. 13-15)

So what does it mean when John says in v. 13 that the so-called “false prophet,” this beast from the earth, “performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven” and again in vv. 14-15 says that he even enables the image of the beast to speak? Clearly, this (these) false prophet (prophets) tries to mimic the ministries of both Moses and Elijah. As you will recall, it was Elijah who called down fire from heaven to destroy the prophets of Baal. Even in Exodus (7:11) Pharaoh’s court magicians, with their secret arts, performed many of the same “great signs” as did Moses (see also Matt. 7:22; 2 Thess. 2:9).

Jesus himself warned that “false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect” (Mark 13:22). We know from numerous sources that the priests of some cults in John’s day were experts in the magical arts and sleight of hand and were able to make it appear as if statues could talk and seemingly could produce thunder and lightning. Of course, we must never forget that most of what they do is energized by demonic

spirits. The Apostle Paul spoke of the coming “lawless one” as someone who by “the activity of Satan” would perform false signs and wonders (2 Thess. 2:9).

Verses 13-15 describe vividly and in highly figurative terms the idolatrous aims of the false prophet. The picture is clearly drawn from Daniel 3 and the command that all should worship the image of Nebuchadnezzar. Perhaps also the command to engage in idolatrous worship of the beast alludes in part to the pressure placed on the populace and the churches in Asia Minor to give homage to the image of Caesar as god.

To say that “it was allowed to give breath” to the image of the beast “is a metaphorical way of affirming that the second beast was persuasive in demonstrating that the image of the first beast (e.g., of Caesar) represented the true deity” (Beale, 711).

With the story of Daniel’s three friends still in mind, John portrays Christians of his day as being pressured by this latter-day Babylon (Rome) to worship the image of Caesar, i.e., the state (as inspired and energized by the dragon, from whom the state/beast receives its authority and power). Whereas the immediate idea in John’s mind may well be the attempts by the imperial priesthood to seduce the people of God into worshiping the image of a Roman ruler, Johnson reminds us that “the reality described is much larger and far more trans-historical than the mere worship of a bust of Caesar” (135). Using the well-known story of Nebuchadnezzar, “John describes the world-wide system of idolatry represented by the first beast and the false prophet(s) who promotes it. John describes this reality as a blasphemous and idolatrous system that produces a breach of the first two commandments (Exod. 20:3-5)” (135).

The “Mark” of the Beast (vv. 16-17)

I want to draw attention one more time to an issue that continues to inflame debate concerning the end times and contributes greatly to the overall hysteria that serves only to discredit the Christian community in the eyes of the world. I have in mind the belief by many that the “mark” of the Beast is a literal tattoo, or perhaps a chip implant, or imprint of sorts, or perhaps some other physiological branding by which his/its followers are visually identified. The popular notion among many Christians (usually of the dispensational, futurist school of interpretation) is that some such designation, whether “the name of the beast” or “the number [666] of its name” (Rev. 13:17) will be forcibly imposed on people living in the final few years prior to the coming of Christ. If one wishes to buy or sell and thus survive in the days ahead, he/she must submit to this means of identification.

Needless to say, this interpretation is entirely based on a futurist reading of Revelation, such that what John describes pertains largely, if not solely, to that last generation of humanity alive on the earth just preceding the second coming of Christ. If, on the other hand, as I have argued, the book of Revelation largely portrays events that occur throughout the entire course of church history, this view is seriously undermined. As I argued earlier in our study of Revelation 7, we should understand the “mark” of the Beast on the right hand or forehead of his/its followers to be

a Satanic parody (a religious rip-off, so to speak) of the “seal” that is placed on the foreheads of God’s people (Rev. 7:3-8; 14:1; cf. 22:4).

Many believe the reference to receiving a “mark” (*charagma*; found in 13:16, 17; 14:9,11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4) is an allusion to the ancient practice of branding or tattooing. David Aune (2:457-59) has documented several purposes for the latter:

- Barbarian tribes in antiquity practiced tattooing as a means of tribal identification.
- The Greeks used tattoos primarily as a way to punish both slaves and criminals. As such, it was a mark of disgrace and degradation, thus accounting for the methods of removal discussed in ancient medical literature.
- Tattooing could also be a mark of ownership, similar to the branding of cattle.
- In a number of ancient religions, tattooing indicated dedication and loyalty to a pagan deity.

That being said, I do not believe that the so-called “mark of the Beast” is a literal, physical mark on the bodies of unbelievers, either on their forehead or their right hand. ***All through Revelation we see Satan making every effort to copy whatever God does.*** So, for example, the three persons of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, find their evil counterpart in Satan, the Beast, and the False Prophet. Just as Jesus died and rose again from the dead, the Beast is portrayed as dying and rising to life again.

My point is simply that the so-called “mark” of the Beast that unbelievers receive on their forehead or their right hand is ***a demonic rip-off, a depraved parody, a counterfeit imitation*** of the “mark” that believers receive on their foreheads. Look at the texts where the people of God are “sealed” on their foreheads:

“Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads” (Rev. 7:3).

“They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads” (Rev. 9:4).

“Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion, stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads” (Rev. 14:1).

“They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (Rev. 22:4).

No one that I know of believes that all Christians will literally and physically have the name of Jesus Christ and the name of the Father tattooed on their foreheads. This is simply a way of

describing the fact that those who are born again and redeemed by the blood of Christ belong to him and to his Father and are preserved in faith by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

So when we read that the False Prophet causes everyone who isn't a Christian to have the mark of the Beast written on his/her forehead we are to understand this as a sign that they belong to the Beast and are loyal to him. This "mark" on their foreheads or on their right hand is simply ***Satan's way of mimicking the seal of God that is on the foreheads of God's people***. If you have the name of Jesus and God the Father written on your forehead it simply means ***they own you, you belong to them, you are loyal to the Lord God Almighty***. But if you have "the name of the beast" (Rev. 13:17) written on your forehead it signifies that *he* owns you, you belong to *him*, you are loyal to the Antichrist. ***My point is that if you don't argue that the name of Jesus and God the Father is literally tattooed on the foreheads of Christians you have no reason to argue that the name of the Antichrist (or his number, 666) is literally tattooed on the foreheads of non-Christians.***

Some have found the background for the "mark" of the beast in the Jewish practice of wearing *tephillim* or phylacteries. These were leather boxes containing Scripture passages (cf. Exod. 13:9,16; Deut. 6:8; 11:18; Mt. 23:5) that were worn either on the *left* arm (facing the heart) or the forehead. The mark of the beast, however, was to be placed on the *right* hand. Others have pointed out that the word "mark" was used of the emperor's seal on business contracts and the impress of the Roman ruler's head on coins. Perhaps, then, "the mark alludes to the state's political and economic 'stamp of approval,' given only to those who go along with its religious demands" (Beale, 715).

Thus it seems quite clear that the "mark" of the beast on his followers is the demonic counterpart and parody of the "seal" that is placed on the foreheads of the people of God (see 7:3-8; 14:1; 22:4). "Just as the seal and the divine name on believers connote God's ownership and spiritual protection of them, so the mark and Satanic name signify those who belong to the devil and will undergo perdition" (Beale, 716). Since the seal or name on the believer is obviously invisible, being symbolic of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, it seems certain that the mark of the beast is likewise a symbolic way of describing the loyalty of his followers and his ownership of them.

If you're wondering why the seal on God's people and the mark on the non-Christian is placed on the forehead of each, it may be that the forehead points to one's ideological commitment and the hand to the practical outworking or manifestation of that commitment.

666 (v. 18)

Two issues need to be addressed as a prelude to our study of the mark of the Beast. First, we need to be familiar with the legend of Nero's return, which was circulating in more than one form when John wrote his book. Second, we need to examine the meaning of the number 666

and its relation to the Beast. That these two matters are closely intertwined will become evident as we proceed.

The Legend of Nero's Return¹

Nero was the great, great grandson of Caesar Augustus. He was born on December 15, a.d. 37. Following the death of Nero's father, his mother married her paternal uncle who subsequently adopted Nero at the age of 12. In 53 a.d. he married Octavia, daughter of the emperor Claudius. The latter died on October 13, 54 a.d., leading to Nero's accession to the throne.

The first seven to eight years of Nero's reign were remarkably good and productive. Things began to change when in 62 a.d. he divorced Octavia (who had failed to bear him a child) and married Poppaea Sabina. In the early hours of June 19, 64 a.d., a devastating fire broke out around the Circus Maximus and spread north through the valley between the Palatine and the Esquiline. Unable to silence rumors that he himself had set the fire, Nero found a scapegoat in the emerging Christian community, which he persecuted with intense cruelty. It is generally believed that both Peter and Paul were martyred as a result of Nero's rage against the church. In addition to the numerous political murders for which he was responsible, Nero killed his own mother, bringing him the unwelcome title "The Matricide" (mother-killer). His dictatorial style of leadership, combined with his self-indulgent personality, provoked the opposition of the Roman senate and aristocracy, although he remained popular with the general population of Rome.

Suspicion was only intensified by Nero's love for the east and its cultural expressions. He toured Greece in 66-67 and was especially popular in Parthia. The Jewish War broke out during Nero's reign and he sent Vespasian to quell it (the latter's son, Titus, was responsible for the final destruction of both city and temple). Nero was declared a public enemy by the Senate in mid-68 a.d. and troops were sent to arrest him. On hearing this, he fled to the villa of his ex-slave where he committed suicide by thrusting a dagger into his throat.

As noted earlier, whereas the name "Nero" nowhere appears in Revelation, John most likely would have seen in this historical figure the perfect *prototypical embodiment* of that anti-Christ, anti-Christian spirit which is characteristic of the entire church age. I agree with Bauckham that "the impending confrontation between the beast and the followers of the Lamb would appear to John as an apocalyptic extension and intensification of the Neronian persecution" (412).

It may well be that the mysterious circumstances surrounding Nero's death gave rise to rumors that he was actually still alive and would soon return to seek revenge on his enemies. Several Nero impostors emerged. The first appeared one year after his death in July, 69. This one not only physically resembled Nero but was also, like the emperor, an accomplished musician. "He

¹ The best treatment of Nero is found in Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, on which I have relied for the following portrayal.

appeared in Greece, where he mustered some support, set sail for Syria, but was forced by a storm to put in at the island of Cythnos in the Cyclades, where he was captured and killed. His dead body was taken to Rome via Asia (Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.9)” (413). A second impostor by the name of Terentius Maximus, who also resembled Nero, appeared in 80 a.d. It is not known how he came to an end. At least one more pretender appeared during the reign of Domitian in 88-89 a.d. and must have been fresh in John’s mind as he wrote Revelation.

The legend of Nero’s return is first found in the Jewish Sibylline Oracles. One of the more important features is how Nero is portrayed as identified with the Parthians whose armies he will lead in an invasion of the Roman west. He is also portrayed as the eschatological adversary of the people of God who will destroy both them and the holy city.

As I said earlier, in conjunction with our study of Revelation 13:3, John has adapted the legend of Nero’s return to paint his portrait of the oppressive career of the Beast. Nero constituted the most obvious and ready-at-hand embodiment of that antichristian power which opposes and oppresses the people of God. Against the backdrop of Nero’s “death, alleged resurrection, and return” John is able to portray the Beast’s career of persistent persecution of the church. For the people of God in the first century, that “Beast” was the Roman imperial power. In subsequent centuries and in our own day as well it is seen in any and all attempts, whether by individuals, institutions, or movements, to thwart God’s kingdom in Christ. Whether or not this “Beast” is also to manifest itself at the end of the age in a single individual, popularly known as the Antichrist, is yet to be determined.

That John used the Nero legend to paint his portrait of the Beast is also evident from the reference in Revelation 13:16-18 to the “mark” of the Beast or the “number” of his name: 666. To that we now turn.

The Mark of the Beast

The meaning of the number 666 has puzzled students of the Scriptures ever since John first wrote Revelation 13:8. There are essentially three schools of thought on the problem.

First is the ***Chronological View***. Some have thought that the number refers to the duration of the life of the beast or his kingdom. Very few, if any, hold this view today.

Second is the ***Historical View***. According to this school of thought, the number is believed to refer to some historical individual, power, or kingdom. This is easily the most popular interpretation and is based on a practice in ancient times called **Gematria** (from the Greek *geomatria*, from which we derive our English word “geometry”). This practice, found in both pagan and Jewish circles, ***assigns a numerical value to each letter of the alphabet***.

For example, using the English alphabet, the first 9 letters would stand for numbers 1 through 9 (A = 1; B = 2; C = 3; etc.), the next 9 letters for numbers 10 through 90 (J = 10; K = 20; L = 30;

etc.) and so on. If one wished to write the number “23”, for example, it would appear as “KC” ($K = 20 + C = 3$). There is a well-known and oft-cited example from a bit of graffiti found in the city of Pompeii which reads: “I love the girl whose number is 545”. Apparently, the initials of her name were *phi* = 500; *mu* = 40; *epsilon* = 5.

Third is the ***Symbolic View***. Virtually all other numbers in the book of Revelation are figurative or symbolic of some spiritual or theological reality and give no indication that the calculations entailed by *gematria* are in view. Thus, according to this view, the number refers to the Beast as *the archetype man* who falls short of perfection in every respect. ***Triple sixes are merely a contrast with the divine sevens in Revelation and signify incompleteness and imperfection. 777 is the number of deity and 666 falls short in every digit.*** Again, “three sixes are a parody of the divine trinity of three sevens. That is, though the beast attempts to mimic God, Christ, and the prophetic Spirit of truth, he falls short of succeeding” (Beale, 722). Thus, the number does not identify the Beast, but ***describes*** him. It refers to his ***character***. It isn’t designed to tell us who he is but what he is like.

Furthermore, if a particular historical individual were in view, why didn’t John use the Greek *aner* / *andros* instead of *anthropos* / *anthropon*? The former means “man” as over against woman, child, etc. The latter, however, is generic, i.e., it speaks of “man” as a class over against, say, animals or angels (see also Rev. 21:17 for the use of the generic “man’s measure” / “angel’s measure”). Also, if a particular historical person were in view, John could have made that explicit by saying a “certain” (*tinou*) man or “one” (*henos*) man. If this view is correct, we should translate: “for it is *man’s* number.” This stresses the character or quality of man as apart from Christ forever short of perfection, completely epitomized in the Beast.

Having Fun with Gematria

People have tried to identify the Beast of Revelation by some form of Gematria. Here are some examples.

The name of Jesus is said to be 888, the sum of the Greek letters of the name Jesus (*Iesous*). It has then been pointed out that since 777 stands for completeness or perfection, 888 stands for more than perfection (i.e., Jesus), and thus 666 stands for imperfection, which is Antichrist.

In case you were wondering, the numerical equivalent of my name, Charles Samuel Storms is 1303. None of the other variations work either: Sam Storms = 740; C. Samuel Storms = 1069; Dr. Storms = 684 (we’re getting closer!), Pastor Sam = 662, and Pastor C. Sam = 665! Almost!

If we use English letters, such that A = 100, B = 101, C = 102, etc., we come up with some interesting discoveries. Take for example Adolph Hitler:

H = 107, I = 108, T = 119, L = 111, E = 104, R = 117. Add them up and you get 666!

If A = 6, B = 12 (i.e., 6x2), C = 18 (i.e., 6x3), and so on, and you apply that to the name of [Henry] Kissinger, Secretary of State under President Richard Nixon, you also get 666.

Someone has pointed out that there are six letters in former President Reagan's first, middle, and last names (Ronald Wilson Reagan), hence 6 6 6! This same individual also points to the fact that when Reagan moved to Los Angeles the address of his home had to be changed from 666 to 668 St. Cloud Drive! I wonder, since Reagan and I share the same birthday (February 6), could I be the False Prophet?!

Craig Keener points out that if one adds up the potential Roman numerals in "Cute Purple Dinosaur" (counting "U" as "V", hence as 5), one ends up with 100 + 5 + 5 + 50 + 500 + 1 + 5, for a total of 666! Poor Barney! Others who have been singled out as potential candidates for Antichrist, even if their names did not add up to 666 include: Benito Mussolini, Anwar Sadat, Yasser Arafat, Ayatollah Khomeini, King Juan Carlos of Spain, Pope John Paul II, Saddam Hussein, Mu'ammarr Gadhafi, Mikhail Gorbachev, Jimmy Carter, and other U.S. Presidents!

When one uses Hebrew letters there is an interesting result. Nero's name in Greek (*Neron Kaisar*) yields 1005. But his name in Hebrew letters adds up to 666! It should also be noted that the Greek word for "beast" (*therion*), when transliterated into Hebrew letters, also adds up to 666.

Recall that in Revelation 13:18 John said, "Let him who has intelligence calculate the number of the beast (*tou theriou*), for it is the number of a man." It may be that John is telling us that the number of the *word* "beast" is also the number of a man. If so, says Bauckham, "the gematria does not merely assert that Nero is the beast: it demonstrates that he is. Nero's very name identifies him by its numerical value as the apocalyptic beast of Daniel's prophecy" (389).

Conclusion

If there is one lesson we must learn from Revelation 13, it is the ever-present danger and threat of false teaching and the urgent need for Christians to be fully informed by God's Word. "But be on guard," said Jesus (Mark 13:23). Satan is ever seeking to devour and destroy us by sowing the seeds of heresy in our hearts. Stand firm, having "fastened on the belt of truth" (Eph. 6:14).