

The Mark of the Beast

Terry Mabery

Terry was baptized at the age of 13 in 1958. As a teenager he preached monthly for two rural congregations. He was married in 1965 to Mary Herbst. They have two grown children, Shelley (married with four sons) and Brett (still single). Terry graduated in 1967 from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale with a bachelor's degree in education and also has post graduate work in physics. He taught mathematics and physics in public schools in St. Louis County from 1967 to 1977. During that time he became a deacon at the Lemay church of Christ in St. Louis County, working with evangelism and youth. He was hired in 1975 to work more in depth with the youth and evangelism. In 1977 he was hired to work full time with the church and began full time preaching there in 1979. In 1997 began working with the Collinsville church of Christ in Collinsville, Illinois where he now preaches. In 1999 he was appointed as an elder of the congregation there. Terry has preached in youth rallies and gospel meetings in Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, Virginia, and West Virginia. He has preached in and directed crusades to Jamaica, West Indies. He has also preached and participated in work in Murmansk, Russia, the largest city in the world above the Arctic Circle and has taught in the Murmansk Bible College.

Fanciful have been the ideas regarding the mark of the beast of Revelation 13:16-18. Imaginations have run wild for centuries, and written commentaries go back at least as far as the third century. One of the more popular theories presently is that of the premillennialists. They teach that there will be a seven year period of tribulation prior to the establishment of a one thousand year reign in which our Lord will reign in Jerusalem over a physical kingdom on earth. According to these theories, about midway through that period of tribulation, the "beast" of Revelation thirteen will require all men and women to bow down before his image and worship him. Those who do so will receive a "mark" on their right hands and on their foreheads. That mark will be necessary for commerce, buying and selling. Those without the mark which indicates that one has yielded and worshiped the beast will not be allowed to buy or sell. The beast, they say, is the "Anti-Christ." The mark will be his symbol.

The ideas regarding this "mark" have been many. Some have said the mark will be invisibly imprinted upon the body. Others have said that it will be a physical, visible mark. In years past some thought this mark would be branded upon one, or it could be a physical tattoo. Others have connected it to social security numbers or the European Currency Unit of a few years ago. As technology has increased with scanners, magnetic readers, and now computers, imaginations have run wild. The mark has been connected with credit cards, UPC bar codes and invisible laser tattoos. The most recent concept that has become quite popular is that the mark will be part of an identifying number that will be stored on a micro chip that can be embedded under the skin of the right hand and/or forehead. Such a chip could enable all sorts of information about an individual to be stored. It would also enable the person to be tracked so that their whereabouts could always be known.

There are other views of the mark of the beast that are not nearly so fanciful. All of these views come out of the approach one takes in reading and understanding the *Revelation*. In addition to the above view, three other views will be considered. Before that is done, however, it will be profitable to consider some other matters. First, the background and context of the "mark" (Revelation 13:16-18) will be observed. Second, there will be a search to see what the Bible specifically says about the

“mark.” Finally, some of the explanations of the beast and his mark will be considered in view of what is learned about the mark itself and the background and context of the mark.

Background and Context of the “Mark”

In considering the background and context of the “mark,” one must consider the background and context of Revelation 13:16-18. Stafford North wrote of seven keys to understanding *Revelation*. Several of those keys are directly related to the understanding of Revelation 13:16-18. One of those keys is that *Revelation* is written in symbols (2)

In [Revelation] 1:1, John even uses a word translated “signified” or “showed by signs” that suggests in the text itself that the book will use “signs” or symbols. Apocalyptic writings generally (1) use symbols or figures to express their meaning, (2) predict historical events, (3) use numbers figuratively, and (4) are based on visions...In apocalyptic writing such as Revelation...we assume that the writer is speaking in symbols and figures unless the context demands that a passage be taken literally (North 3).

Another key, according to North, is that “Revelation is written primarily about events which will ‘shortly come to pass.’” Passages such as 1:1; 1:3; 3:11; and 22:6, 7, 10, 12 and 20 are cited to show this (3-4).

While we should not necessarily conclude that everything the book describes was to happen immediately, reason would demand that we look for its major emphasis on events which would happen soon and which had an immediate application to those who first received the message (4).

A third key is that *Revelation* is of a spiritual, not a physical kingdom. John wrote that God had made him and those to whom he wrote a kingdom of priests. Therefore, the kingdom existed already (Revelation 1:9) and was spiritual in nature, for its citizens were priests. This is in agreement with Jesus’ claim that His kingdom was not of this world (John 13:35) (North 12).

Also, one must consider the close context of the passage. In chapter twelve of Revelation, John saw a dragon trying to sabotage God’s plan for man, but it could not do so. At the end of the chapter, the dragon, identified as the Devil and Satan (12:9), is making war with those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus (12:17). In chapter thirteen, John saw a beast coming out of the sea which was given the authority of the dragon and was worshiped. The beast blasphemed God and made war with the saints, to overcome them. John then saw another beast coming out of the earth, existing at the same time as the first beast. This beast was given the authority to require all people to worship the first beast with the threat of death to those who would not. Those who worshiped the beast were to receive the mark of the beast.

What Does the Bible Say?

The term “mark” is from the Greek word, *charagma*, which means, according to Thayer, “a stamp, an imprinted mark” (665). It is found at least seven times in *Revelation* (13:16, 17; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; and 20:4). In some manuscripts, it is also found in 15:2. What, then, is the mark? What does the Bible say? Most of the information about the “mark” can be found in Revelation 13:15-18.

And it was given (unto him) to give breath to it, (even) to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as should not worship the image of the beast should be killed. 16 And he causeth all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free and the bond, that there be given them a mark on their right hand, or upon their forehead; 17 and that no man should be able to buy or to sell, save he that hath the mark, (even) the name of the beast or the number of his name. 18 Here is wisdom. He that hath understanding, let him count the number of the beast; for it is the number of a man: and his number is Six hundred and sixty and six (Revelation 13:15-18 - ASV)

The mark would be received on the right hand or upon the forehead (v. 16). This does not mean there would be an actual, physical mark imprinted or stamped upon one’s right hand or forehead. As already mentioned, *Revelation* is highly figurative, written in signs or symbols. The context is written in symbols, speaking of the dragon and two beasts. The description of the first beast is unlike any actual beast known to man. There is nothing, therefore, to indicate a literal mark that would be placed upon one’s right hand or forehead. Jackson said that allusion to the right hand may signify one extending the “right hand of fellowship” to error, indicating the participation of the marked person in the beast’s teaching and practices. He goes on to say that receiving the mark on the forehead suggests an identifying sign, such as those identified with the names of God and Christ written on their foreheads (Revelation 14:1) (48-49). Kachelman stated that the right hand and forehead symbolized the acting and thinking capabilities of man, referring to the deeds and thoughts identifying one as a willing follower of the dragon. He went on to say, “There is no room for the fantasies of modern error which try to make 666 a visible mark” (76). Any view of the mark which demands a literal mark placed upon the forehead and/or right hand is highly speculative and not consistent with the context of Revelation thirteen.

John tells us that those who did not receive the mark would not be able to buy or sell (v. 17), indicating some sort of economic persecution. He goes on to say the mark is the name of the beast, the first beast, or the number of his name (v. 17). That number is “666” and is the number of a man (v. 18). In order for one to understand, one must count the number (v. 18). According to Thayer, the Greek word translated “count” means “to count with pebbles, to compute, calculate, reckon” (676). Luke used the word to indicate counting or calculating the cost of building a tower (Luke 14:28). The implication is that the mark, or the name, is determined by counting the numbers. Vincent wrote of this process, “The method of reading generally adopted is that known as the ‘Ghematria’ of the Rabbins, or in Greek, [isopseefia] ‘numerical equality,’ which assigns each letter of a name its usual numerical value, and gives the sum of such numbers as the equivalent of the name” (625). Therefore, the name was in code which would be difficult to decode without wisdom or insight. Since the things of *Revelation* were to come to pass shortly, this name was possibly coded so the Romans would not

readily determine what John was writing of, but the understanding Christian would determine the meaning. According to Revelation 14:9-11, those who worship the beast would receive the mark. In Revelation 16:2 one learns that God's wrath would be poured out upon them. This indicates that they were involved in some sort of false religion. Those who refused to worship the beast, those who were faithful to God, did not receive the mark (Revelation 19:20; Revelation 20:4). The mark, therefore, must have something to do with the man who was calculated to be "666."

What Is the Mark of the Beast?

To determine the mark of the beast is to determine the name of the beast itself. For John wrote that the mark of the beast is his name or the number of his name, which is 666 (Revelation 13:17). Therefore, consideration will be given to possible explanations of the beast.

A very popular view today is that of the premillennialists, which was described above at the beginning of this lesson. There are several problems with this view. For one thing, the premillennial view of the kingdom is that of a physical kingdom that Jesus will establish in Jerusalem when He returns. However, as has been demonstrated, Jesus has already established a spiritual kingdom, which was His intended purpose. Second, it has been demonstrated that the things John wrote about in *Revelation* were to "shortly come to pass." He was primarily describing events that would take place in the near future, events that would immediately apply to those to whom John wrote. Third, the premillennial view of the "Anti-Christ" is not a Biblical view. The only New Testament writer that mentions specifically the antichrist is John. He uses the term four times. He indicated that already, as he wrote, many antichrists had arisen (1 John 2:18). He even defined the antichrist as one who denied the Father and the Son (1 John 2:22), would not confess Jesus was of God (1 John 4:3), and was a deceiver who would not confess that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh (2 John 7). Those who read into other passages of the Bible their "Anti-Christ" are doing so without true evidence. They do so by their own bias. Such a view of the beast and his mark cannot be correct. It is based upon an incorrect view of the kingdom, and incorrect view of when the events of *Revelation* would take place, and an incorrect view of the antichrist.

Another view of the mark of the beast arises primarily out of the approach that *Revelation* is to be viewed as suggesting philosophical principles or truths that apply for all time and is not predicting specific events or persons. The argument is that the *Revelation* was written with general principles for Christians for all time and should not be viewed merely through the eyes of the early Christian. In this view, the number "666" does not symbolize a particular man, but man in general. The reasoning is that "7" symbolizes perfection or the divine. The number "6" is one less than seven, symbolizing less than perfection, thus man or humanity. The triple six indicates ultimate or complete failure, repeated failure. With this in mind, the number "666" represents any evil power during any period of time that would bring great persecution against the church.

It is correct that the general theme of the book is one of comfort for Christians, for the Christians of the period and Christians of all ages who come under persecution. That theme is that God, His plan, and His people will overcome the evil forces of Satan and prevail. Such a theme does give hope and comfort to all Christians. Yet, if that were the primary thrust of the book without a specific message

of comfort to those early Christians living under the persecution of the Roman Empire, why was it written in the way it was written? Why did the Holy Spirit not inspire John to write a general epistle like Peter's, or one of Paul's specific epistles? They, too, contain principles for all ages, though they were written to the people of their age. In fact, Peter wrote his first epistle during the persecution of Nero, and it contained a specific message of hope for those to whom he wrote. Christians today can still apply the principles of his message.

One must wonder about the purpose of writing the *Revelation* in the apocalyptic style if it were not written for the specific benefit of those to whom it was written. It seems that such a style was appropriate for a book of comfort and hope for Christians written in such a way as to not arouse suspicion during a time in which Christians were already under great suspicion and persecution. It would give them specific information for their day. It would give them strength and courage to continue under such severe persecution. Yet, it would be non-threatening to the very ones that were being written about. It seems, therefore, that there is a better explanation of the mark of the beast.

A third view of the mark of the beast has the number "666" representing "the ancient name, *Lateinos*, a Latin king, who was reputed to be the founder of the Latin empire" (Jackson 69). The Greek letters for the name *Lateinos* calculate to 666. This corresponds quite well with one of the most popular views of the second beast, that it represents the apostate Roman Catholic church and the Roman Papacy. It is true that the second beast represents a religious power related to a false religion. It is also true that Roman Catholicism and the Papacy has claimed powers deceitfully and have brought great persecution against believers throughout the ages. This, of course, is all consistent with the view of Revelation thirteen.

There are, also, objections that can be risen to this view. Again, there is the objection that the *Revelation* was written for those early Christians and the things therein were to come to pass shortly. Roman Catholicism and the papacy were several centuries in developing. The persecution that came from this apostate religion did not develop immediately, either. Jackson argues quite well, however, that not all of the *Revelation* was fulfilled in the first century and that prophecy which is not fulfilled for hundreds of years can still have relevance to the people contemporary with the prophecy (70). Second, the mark of the beast was not the name or number of a church or group of men. The mark of the beast was the name or number of a man. Neither the papacy nor the Roman Catholic Church is a man. This does seem to be a rather weak argument, however.

A fourth view is that the "666," that mark of the beast, refers to Nero. Using the Hebrew alphabet, the name Nero Caesar can be calculated to "666." Nero certainly was a great persecutor and a very wicked man. Some have even indicated that there was the beginning of emperor worship during his reign.

One of the greatest objections to this view is the dating of the *Revelation* and of Nero's life. Since Nero died in 68 A.D., the book of *Revelation* would have to be dated much earlier than many believe, or it would be looking back to Nero rather than prophesying what was to take place in the future. Barclay explains this problem by referring to one of the heads of the beast that was smitten unto death

and whose death stroke was healed (Revelation 13:3). He points out that a legend grew that Nero was not really dead, but that he had gone to Parthia and would return with armies of Parthians to reclaim his throne (115-116). Being such a wicked man, this legend struck great fear into many. Thus, many believe that John used this legend of Nero to represent, in general, the Caesars of Rome. Domitian (81-96) revived both the persecution of Nero with a vengeance and brought Caesar worship to a new height. Other emperors followed over the next two centuries that wrought great atrocities against Christians. It has been learned that certificates were given to those who bowed in worship to the emperor that certified one to be a worshiper. Such a certificate allowed one to buy and sell, as is described in Revelation thirteen.

Conclusion

The first view, that the beast is the “Anti-Christ,” is based upon error and a misconception of the kingdom. There is no evidence at all to support such a view. The second view, that the beast refers to evil powers in general is very vague and leaves one with too many unanswered questions. It is the opinion of this author that both of these views should be rejected. Each of the last two views have some credibility, yet leave some questions. Many agree that the prophecy of Daniel seven is connected to Revelation thirteen. Certainly there are many similarities. Jackson, in fact, argues that the little horn of Daniel seven refers to the papacy and, hence, the beast of Revelation thirteen represents the papacy (55-63). However, to do so, leaves no explanation of the three horns that were “plucked up” by the little horn (Daniel 7:8). On the other hand, the prophecy of Daniel seven certainly has to do with the four great kingdoms of political power, the last of which is Rome. It appears that the beast of *Revelation* thirteen is the same as Daniel’s fourth beast, representing the Roman Empire. Taking into consideration the legend of Nero and the fact that Nero would have been seen by the Christians of John’s day as the symbol of the evil Caesars in general, it seems most likely that the last view is the most probable. Therefore, it is concluded that the “mark of the beast” has to do with those Caesars that brought great persecution against Christianity. It looked back at Nero (64-68), but it looked at the present situation with Domitian (81-96), and it looked to the future with other wicked Caesars, such as Trajan (98-117), Marcus Aurelius, and others leading up to and ending with the great evils of Diocletian (303-311). The idea of Caesar worship got its beginnings during the reign of Nero, but it became a much greater entity during the reign of Domitian, and it continued for a little over two centuries. Many have written of the examples of Caesar worship and how certificates were given to affirm that the individual had bowed the knee to worship the Caesar. As already mentioned, these were used at times to bring persecution against those who refused to do so by denying privileges to those without the official certificate. Thus, the “mark of the beast.”

Works Consulted

Barclay, William (1959). *The Revelation of John, Volume 2*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press

Barnes, Albert (Reprinted 1998). *Barnes Notes*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books

- Bright, Tom, L. (Who Is the Beast Represented by “666”?) in *Studies in the Revelation*, edited by Dub McClish (1984). Denton, TX: Valid Publications
- Deffenbaugh, Don (The Beast from the Sea and the Beast from the Earth) in *The Book of Revelation*, edited by Jim Laws (1998). Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications
- Jackson, Wayne (1995). *Select Studies from the Book of Revelation*. Stockton, CA: Courier Publications
- Kachelman, John L., Jr. (1989). *Studies in the Book of Revelation*. Abilene, TX: Quality Publications
- McCord, Hugo (The Number 666; The Mark of the Beast) in *Difficult Texts of the New Testament Explained*, edited by Wendell Winkler (1981). Hurst, TX: Winkler Publications
- North, Stafford (No Date). *Seven Keys Which Unlock the Book of Revelation* (Tract). Edmond, OK: Landmark Books
- Thayer, Joseph Henry (1974). *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House
- Turner, Rex A., Sr. (1993). *Daniel: A Prophet of God*. Montgomery, AL: Southern Christian University
- Vincent, M. R. (No Date). *Word Studies in the New Testament*. McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Company
- West, W.B. (1997). *Revelation Through First-Century Glasses*. Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Company