

The Mark of the Beast – What does it mean? (Revelation 13:11-14:5)

Introduction:-

During these difficult times of the Covid-19 pandemic, many people have suffered and reacted in many different ways to the world effort to try and combat this common deadly virus. This has included the rise of many different conspiracy theories, as well as a reaction from some quarters of the Christian church, that have even been prepared to associate the vaccination effort with “the mark of the beast” only found in Scripture at Revelation 13:16-18. And so, in order to substantiate this claim, it is most important to examine the meaning of this claim within the context of the passage where it is found in the book of Revelation. After all, Saint Paul at 1 Thessalonians 5:19 exhorts us to “test” all words of prophecy against the Apostolic tradition of God’s Word itself. Only then are we in the position to endorse the authenticity and correctness of any use that we might make of even Scripture itself. This reminds me of a cartoon caption taken from Robert Short’s book entitled “The Gospel of Peanuts”, where Lucy in the first frame says, “Boy, look at it rain ... what if it floods the whole world?” To which Linus replies in the second frame, “It will never do that ... In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow.” To which Lucy replies in the third frame, “You’ve taken a great load off my mind”... To which Linus finally replies in the fourth and last frame, “Sound theology has a way of doing that!” And so likewise, as we seek to examine a little more closely the meaning of the biblical phrase “the mark of the beast”, may our examination of this phrase within its biblical context, not only prove to be an exercise in “sound theology”, but with Lucy in our cartoon, may this in turn take a great load off our minds at this time.

1. Background

First, it may be helpful to trace some background within the Bible itself, with regard to the practice of sealing or marking people for a specific purpose. Here, we may begin with the earliest example of this practice in the Bible, with the mark that God had placed upon Cain, soon after the killing of his brother Abel at Genesis 4:15. We do not know exactly what this mark involved, but clearly its purpose was one of God’s undeserving grace toward Cain, preventing him from being killed by any possible avenger of blood. Then further on in history, the names of the tribes of Israel were engraved on precious stones, and fastened to the ephod and shoulder straps of the high priest, as a memorial before God (Exodus 28:6-14). Later, in Isaiah’s day, the Lord reminded Israel that they could never be forgotten, because they were engraved on the Palms of His hands (Isaiah 49:16). But the image that comes closest to the book of Revelation, is found at Ezekiel 9:1-11, where a heavenly messenger is commanded by the Lord to go throughout the city of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it, especially in the light of Ezekiel Chapter 8 before it. And as the Lord begins His judgment, which begins at the sanctuary of the Lord, only those displaying the mark of the Lord would be saved from the judgment of death. This defining mark reminds us of the great exodus event itself, where at Exodus 12:7 the people were to take some of the blood of the unblemished lamb, and apply it to the sides and tops of the door frames of the houses where they were living, and when

the angel of death would see the sign or mark of the blood, he would pass over that house, with no death coming to it (Exodus 12:13). Some of these examples will now provide helpful background for our discussion working up to the mark of the beast in Revelation 13.

2. Revelation chapter 7.

But before we get to Revelation 13, it is important for the structure and argument of the book of Revelation, that we make a pause at Revelation chapter 7. After a vision of the throne in Heaven in chapters 4-5, from where all things happen, in chapter 6 the Lamb progressively begins to open the seven seals, initiating judgments on the earth. But when we get to the opening of the sixth seal at Revelation 6:12-17, which heralds the end of history with the coming of God and Lamb, one expects the seventh seal to be opened now, and the kingdom of glory to be revealed. Instead, John provides an interlude in chapter 7, between seals 6 and 7, which recounts two visions of God's people in the last days. The first vision (vv. 1-8) relates to the period prior to the judgments of chapter 6, and the second vision (vv. 9-17) relates to the redeemed in glory that follows them. Their purpose is to assure his Christian readers (and listeners!) that they have no need to fear the judgments of the last times since God will protect and keep them. Note then that within the structure and argument of this book, that the sealing and marking of the foreheads of God's servants in verse 3 of this chapter, symbolizes God's ownership and protection of God's people from the coming judgments. And further, the detail here of the marking of the foreheads of God's people, not only alludes to our previous example from Ezekiel 9: 1-11, but is also meant to provide a contrast to the mark of the beast at Revelation 13:16, before we finally arrive at this point. Therefore, at this point, in the words of Paul at 2 Timothy 2:19, God's solid foundation of the church stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows who are his, and everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness." Thus the priority of the perfect number of the redeemed, symbolized here with the 144,000, stands secure against those who belong to the mark of the beast at Revelation 13:16. The final section of this chapter in verses 9-17, speak of the final salvation of God's elect people, who have come out of the great tribulation, on the basis that they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb (symbolizing cleansing, purity, and victory). And so, on the basis of this chapter, God's own people have been "sealed" or marked in three ways, which will ensure that they will not in fact experience the final fate of those who receive the mark of the beast in chapter 13, and follow his ways. In the ancient world, the seal was the authenticating mark and guarantee of royal authority, royal power, and royal possession. In the early church, this picture of "sealing" was connected to (1) Baptism. Baptism was regularly described as "sealing." It is as if, when a person was baptized, a mark was put upon him/her, to show that they had become the property and possession of the new king. Further, a line was drawn in the sand, in order to show that they had left allegiance to one king and way of life, for another. (2) The Holy Spirit. Paul often spoke about a Christian being sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. "He anointed us, and set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). (3) Thirdly, every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, with the symbols of the bread and the wine, we acknowledge that we are covered and saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, as the exodus Passover Lamb, for when the angel of death sees the blood, he will pass over us (Exodus 12:7,13). And so we are sealed or marked by Water, Spirit, and Blood.

3. Revelation 13:11-14:5

Like chapter 7, chapters 12-14 are also an interlude in the book of Revelation. And since the seven trumpets followed on the seven seals, it would be natural to assume that the seven cups of wrath would immediately be poured out, so completing the birth pangs of the kingdom of God. However, after the seventh trumpet, at the end of chapter 11, a lengthy parenthesis intervenes extending from chapter 12, through to chapter 14. What purpose does this seek to serve? An answer to this question will also help us to understand the introduction of "the mark of the beast" at Revelation 13:16, and what this also stands for. In short, what these chapters seek to achieve is that it is necessary to reveal the nature of the conflict which Christ will bring to an end at his appearing. It ends up being the age - old conflict between the Devil and the purposes of God. The Dragon, beast, and false prophet persecute God's people, but God promises to spiritually protect and gloriously vindicate them. According to John Stott (*The Message of Thessalonians 1991, pp. 164-65*) the most satisfactory explanation of the two "beasts", which appear in Revelation 13 as allies of the Dragon (the Devil), is that both represent the Roman empire under Domitian (who desired to be called "Our Lord and God"), with the monster emerging from the sea symbolizing its persecuting power, and the monster emerging from the earth (later called "the false prophet") symbolizing the emperor cult and its priesthood. It was this second beast that forced all people to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark (suggesting social and economic ostracism and warfare between church and state). This mark was the name of the beast or the number of its name. John then continues in verse 18 that this calls for wisdom, with the number 666 representing the number of a man. For example, on a wall in Pompeii there is a piece of graffiti which reads, "I love her whose name is 545". Doubtless the young lady concerned knew whose name that was. Thus a form of *secret code* may be suggested by this. Many ancient languages did not have figures for numbers, but used instead the letters of the alphabet. And so despite the many possibilities that the number 666 yields, it is virtually certain that the individual referred to here was known in all the churches addressed by John, and probably far wider. The name Nero Caesar (the supreme example of beastly character, who even though he died in 68 AD, was thought to come back again more powerful than before at the head of a Parthian army) transliterated into Hebrew from Greek, yields the number 666, but if put into Hebrew from Latin, gives the number 616, which is read in some early manuscripts of Revelation. For Christians, the number 666 was an eminently suitable number for the anti-Christ, for it could be seen as a parody or falling short of the divine perfection suggested by 777, whereas the name Jesus in Greek totals 888! Thus in line with Apocalyptic literature, a form of *symbolism* through numbers may also be suggested here, although in the end, both secret code as well as symbolism may be in play here. Herein lies one major difference between the Devil's Christ, and the Christ of God (Matthew 7:15; 24:23-24). The pseudo-Christ falls as far short of being the deliverer of the world as the Christ of God exceeds all the hopes of humankind for a Saviour (George Beasley - Murray (*New Bible Commentary IVP 1994, p. 1443*)). Finally, in Revelation 14:1-5, the alternative is presented in terms of the totality of God's redeemed people, who now have the Lamb's and Father's names written on their foreheads. This explains the nature of the seal spoken of in 7:1-8, in contrast to the name or number of the beast on the hand or forehead of his followers! But God's people can also sing a new song, for they have been redeemed from the earth by the blood of the lamb. And only God himself could give them this new song, for it was only made possible through their

redemption purchased by the blood of the lamb. And so, what “mark” do we wear today? Can we sing a “new song” of the soul set free? Our eternity depends upon it!!

Conclusion.

Thus, in this way, the book of Revelation presents its readers and listeners with a choice. If we bear the mark and seal of God made possible through the blood of the lamb, then we cannot at the same time bear the mark of the beast, for John gives priority to the mark of the lamb and the Father, as early as chapter 7. But if John was writing in the time of Domitian, when Caesar worship began, then the introduction of the mark of the beast at chapter 13:16-18 was not unexpected, and even most appropriate, for at this point it related to the much larger issue of “who is truly God, and what God do you acknowledge and worship – Caesar or God.” Certificates were even issued at the shrines of Caesar, if people offered their pinch of incense to Caesar. This was no doubt part of what it meant to bear “the mark of the beast.” Of course, there were other implications as well to such state devotion, such as social ostracism and economic hardship, if such worship was not given to Caesar. But this is a far cry from the issue of the world Covid-19 pandemic today, whose worldwide concern is not primarily a question of deity identification and worship, but rather a question of the health and physical well-being of its citizens throughout the world. In fact, may I say that the current Covid-19 vaccination effort worldwide can be better interpreted as “the way of love”, as the Pope himself has recently put it, rather than “the mark of the beast! “ And those who bear the mark of the Father and of the Lamb, will display “the way of love” and “salvation” as the chief witness of God’s work within them. Amen