

## 666 and the Mark of the Beast<sup>1</sup>

If you are a futurist and believe that the beast of Revelation 13 is not connected to the Roman empire of the first century and remains yet to be revealed at the end of the age (i.e., during the seven-year tribulation period, as dispensationalists teach), then you will not look at the mark of the beast through the lens of the New Testament and the historical situation when John was given his vision. Instead, you will understand this mysterious mark as something still hidden in the future. And given the breakneck pace of the advance being made in all forms of technology, it is only natural that futurists would see John's reference to the mark of the beast as somehow connected to the technological advantage by which the beast and false prophet will enslave the inhabitants of the world and deceive them into worshipping the Antichrist.

As futurists see it, when John speaks of the Mark of the Beast, he's essentially predicting that some future form of technology will be utilized by Antichrist to dominate and control the world's population. According to Peter and Paul Lalonde, "The Bible says that the mark of the beast and its accompanying technology will be installed by the antichrist—not as an end in itself, but as a means of managing the new world order that is even now being created" (Peter LaLonde and Paul LaLonde, Racing Toward the Mark of the Beast, Harvest House Publishers, 1994, 148).

The futurist approach to Revelation is misguided because it pushes off into the distant future what was already a serious threat to Christians in the first century (emperor worship), by ignoring the historical context for the visions of Revelation 13 and 17. Instead, John's comments about the mark of the beast should be seen against the backdrop of the imperial cult and the worship of the Roman emperor. The emperor's blasphemous image was everywhere in John's world (Asia Minor), from coins to statues identifying various emperors as deities in most major cities ( cf. S. R. F. Price, Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor, Cambridge University Press, 1984).

John's reference to the mark being placed upon the back of the hand or the forehead makes perfect sense in light of the wide-spread first century practice of branding or tattooing slaves—a mark of shame and subjugation (Caird, The Revelation of St. John, 173).

The theological significance of this practice of marking slaves is simply that those who have this mark of the imperial cult are property of the beast—followers and servants who do his will. In other words, this mark (*charagma*) identifies those who worship and serve the beast. That such a *charagma* specifically refers to the imperial stamp on official documents (Sweet, Revelation, 217), indicates that whatever John means by this mark is directly tied to the state's usurpation of that authority and honor which belong to God alone. John has already exhorted the persecuted Smyrnans in the second chapter of Revelation, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10)." Surely, this exhortation extends beyond the Smyrnans to Christians in every age.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the Riddleblog@kimriddlebarger.com

As for the number of the beast (666), some historical background would be helpful here as well. The Greco-Roman world did not use Arabic numbers as do we, so instead, letters were assigned numeric value. Using the sum totals of the numerical equivalent of letters to identify words or persons is commonly known as *gematria* (Beale, *Revelation*, 718-728). The most obvious candidate derived from the sum total of the numbers 6-6-6 is Nero Caesar, since the Greek form of Nero's name when transliterated into Hebrew may indeed total 666. This is not an unreasonable conclusion and is widely accepted (See the discussions in: Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 384-452; Caird, *The Revelation of St. John*, 174-177; Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell*, 193-219).

This attempt to calculate the identity of the beast with this degree of specificity is disputed on a number of grounds. This does not involve the exact use of Hebrew letters and Caesar is not the only title for Nero. None of the church fathers, apparently, were aware of this connection (Beale, *Revelation*, 720). In fact, it was not until 1831 that the specific identification of these numbers with Nero using *gematria* was first suggested by four German scholars (Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 387). And then, finally, as John says, this requires wisdom, not knowledge, to calculate. In other words, spiritual insight is required, not cleverness or skill in math.

The attempt to calculate the number of the beast using *gematria* can also be problematic because this kind of methodology can be manipulated to refer to almost anyone, in what has come to be known in certain circles as the "pin the tail" on the Antichrist game. Ronald Wilson Reagan was once identified as the Beast because his three names each have six letters (Robert Fuller, *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession*, Oxford University Press, 1995, 28). So have a host of others.

Another problem with *gematria* is that from our vantage point two thousand years after the fact, it is relatively easy to turn a particular name into a number, but it is far more difficult to work from the number back to a specific name, which is what the text seems to imply— "This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666" (Revelation 13:18—cf. Beale, *Revelation*, 724-725).

While these objections are not sufficient to overturn what appears to be an obvious connection of some sort between the number 666 and Nero, these points do urge us to be a bit cautious about identifying Nero as that one to whom John was referring and then simply leaving the matter there.

In fact, the preoccupation with identifying just who it is, exactly, to whom this number refers creates an unfortunate tendency to downplay (or even ignore) the theological significance of this number. What the number 666 represents is at least as significant as the beast's human identity. When John tells us that this is "man's number," he may even mean that this number does not refer to a specific individual such as Nero, but to a series of individuals who behave as Nero did.

As Beale points out, "The omission of the article in 13:18 indicates the general idea of humanity, not some special individual who can be discerned only through an esoteric method of

calculation. Therefore, in both verses *anthropou* [man] is a descriptive or qualitative genitive, so that the phrase here should be rendered 'a human number' (so RSV) or 'a number of humanity.' It is a number common to fallen humanity." (Beale, Revelation, 724).

In light of the beast's attempt to parody the redemptive work of Christ so as to receive the worship of the nations, the idea that this number is to be understood as the number of fallen humanity makes a great deal of sense. If seven is the number of perfection, the number six comes close, but never reaches the goal.

As Beale points out, "The beast is the supreme representative of unregenerate humanity, separated from God and unable to achieve divine likeness, but always trying. Humanity was created on the sixth day, but without the seventh day of rest Adam and Eve would have been imperfect and incomplete. The triple six emphasizes that the beast and his followers fall short of God's creative purposes for humanity" (Beale, Revelation, 725).

If Beale is correct, and I think he is, this does not mean that John does not have Nero in mind at all. In fact, some have argued that Nero is indeed the individual who first bears the number 666, but the number also has symbolic meaning as well.

According to Beale, "Some believe both that John had Nero in mind and also that the number had a symbolic meaning, which is quite possible. . . . Bauckham has argued that John used the Nero legend not to focus on an individual but to construct a history of a succession of emperors paralleling the death, resurrection and final return of Christ; accordingly, Nero, and the imperial power, are symbols for any state power that overreaches its proper limits by trying to grasp what properly belongs only to Christ and God" (Beale, Revelation, 725. See the discussion in Bauckham, Climax of Prophecy, 384-452). This, it seems to me, fits well within the scenario we have set forth above.

What, then, is the mark of the beast? It may indeed be directly tied to Nero as indicative of his personal wickedness and hatred for God's people, but Nero does not exhaust what is implied by taking the number—worshipping the state or its leader, in order to avoid persecution for confessing that Christ is Lord. The beast is manifest to some degree throughout the inter-advental period, but is restrained until the time of the end through the preaching of the gospel or the providence of God (cf. Revelation 20:1-10; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12).

The meaning of the number is at least as significant as identifying to whom it applies. The number of man "666" is "perfectly imperfect" in contrast to the number of perfection—seven. The thrice repeated number "6" implies endless work without rest. The created order was for man to work for six days and then rest on the seventh as did the creator. But in this case, those who take the mark work endlessly and never do enter the hoped-for Sabbath rest.

When placed in the larger context of the New Testament, Christians are said to be "sealed" unto Christ in their baptism (Romans 4:11 with Romans 6:1-11). The mark of the beast may be the theological equivalent of the rejection of baptism (in the case of apostasy) or the rejection of

Christ's Lordship through the confession that Caesar (or any other political figure) is Lord. This comports with the New Testament's repeated warnings about apostasy being connected to the final manifestation of the beast (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; Revelation 20:7-10).

Even as the image of godless Nero lurks in the background, this phenomena reoccurs throughout the course of the present age whenever someone confesses that "Caesar is Lord." I'll never forget the gasp that went through the room when a video on Nazi Germany was shown in an Academy class at our church. German school children in an old newsreel sang with glee, "Hitler is our Savior. Hitler is our Lord." That is as clear an image of what it means to "take the mark" as anything I can imagine.

Surely, Nero is the forerunner or type of all those wicked and godless leaders who come after him, and who take that which belongs to God unto themselves and who then mock the natural order of things. Such men reject all conventional norms of morality and use power for personal gain and pleasure. This explains why Christians have frequently spoken of a Nero redivivus in connection to the Beast. It is not that Nero comes back to life, but that what Nero represented will be a fact of life until the end of the age. For it is not until the seventh trumpet sounds that "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15).

Although the various manifestations of the beast and the false prophet throughout the interadvental age may utilize technological advances to further the cause of the beast and false prophet in their persecution of God's people, the mark of the beast cannot be tied specifically to new advances in technology apart from a proper theological context. John is not speaking of an event isolated to the time of the end as dispensationalists teach. He is warning the faithful across the ages of the cost of following Christ. There are indeed times when the confession "Jesus is Lord" will enrage some tyrannical leader.

Attempts by historicists to tie the ceremonies of the Roman Church to the mark of the beast have merit, in so far as the Roman Church has, at times, prevented those who denied its authority from buying and selling. The Roman church's relationship to a number of governments (monarchies), especially those of the late-middle ages (the Holy Roman Empire and its remnants), may well serve as a model of sorts for an end-times marriage between heresy and the state, as in those grotesque instances where the church takes up the sword and the state imposes false religion. Reformed Protestants were keenly aware of the story of the relentless persecution of the faithful in the Netherlands at the hand of Spanish armies in the name of the pope and the Roman Catholic Church during the Council of Troubles in the 1570's. This is one of the main reasons why Reformed Christians have believed the papacy to be the seat of Antichrist and the subject of John's visions.

Of course, such persecution of Christians could also occur in a thoroughly secular nation (such as the former Soviet Union), or a nation with no real Christian history (China), or even a nation which previously had been largely Protestant (Nazi Germany), or a nation dominated by pluralistic civil religion (the United States), where its leaders have in the past or may in the future

manifest beast-like characteristics by taking unto themselves what rightfully belongs to God and waging war upon the saints, only to be crushed by the Lamb.

Taken from my book, Man of Sin: Uncovering the Truth About Antichrist (Baker, 2006).