

# *The Mark or the Seal?*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

7<sup>th</sup> in a nine-part series

July 22, 2012

©2012 Scott L. Engle

*Revelation 13:11–18 (NIV)*

<sup>11</sup>Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. <sup>12</sup>It exercised all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. <sup>13</sup>And it performed great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people. <sup>14</sup>Because of the signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast, it deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. <sup>15</sup>The second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. <sup>16</sup>It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, <sup>17</sup>so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name.

<sup>18</sup>This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666.

*1 Peter 2:9-12 (NRSV)*

<sup>9</sup>But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

<sup>10</sup>Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

<sup>11</sup>Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. <sup>12</sup>Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

*Again, the choice is presented to us. Will we belong to the world or to God?*

In the last scene, we saw Michael and his angel army defeat the dragon, Satan, and cast him to the earth, where he would be confined but still free to work his evil ways on our small planet. When the scene came to a close, the dragon was standing on the shore gazing malevolently out at the sea, which was, for the Jews, a symbol of chaos. It was the place from which the monsters came.

Then, in horror, John sees a great beast rising from the sea. It has ten horns and seven heads. A crown hangs on each horn. John's description of this beast draws on the monsters in Daniel 7, in which there are four beasts symbolizing four empires which rise one after the other to threaten and persecute God's people until, at last, they are defeated by God.

Here, in John's vision, the four empires/beasts are rolled into a single horror that emerges from the waves and the meaning is clear. This beast is the Roman empire. Worse, as John describes the scene it is clear that the beast is a sickening parody of the Lamb. For example, the beast from the sea has a fatal wound on its head, the Greek word for which is exactly the same word as used to describe the "slaughtered" Lamb. As the Lamb shares the throne, power, and authority of God (5:6, 12, 13; 12:5, 10), so the beast shares the throne, power, and authority of Satan the dragon (13:2).

The crowds follow the beast and worship its master, the dragon, swooning at the power they seem to wield and their aura of invincibility. Yet, we know the dragon has already been defeated and John's visions will show us the rot that lies at the heart of the Roman empire. It may look good from a distance, but up close – all hideous distortion and

### Ancient "Gematria"?

(by E. Boring)

The mark of the beast is a number, "a man's name" (13:18, NEB, TEV), which is to be explained by the ancient practice of gematria, common in John's setting. In contrast to modern English, all the languages used in John's time and place represented numbers by letters of the alphabet (cf. "Roman numerals"). In Greek, Hebrew, and Latin, every letter was thus also a number. This means that every word is also a numerical sum obtained by totaling all its letters. It is thus easy to go from a word to its number; there is only one possibility, which anyone who can spell and add can readily compute.

The opposite process, however, is not easy at all. Given a number, there are many possible words whose letters might add up to that number. This means that gematria functions only for those who know the word it designates in advance. The number does not serve to identify the name, *but to say something about its significance*. When Revelation was read aloud in the churches, the call for wisdom to calculate the number of the beast (13:18) was not a challenge to identify *who* the beast, the persecuting authority was—they knew that well enough already—but to recognize *what* it was, that it was in fact the beast empowered by Satan, not the cultural savior it claimed to be.

corruption. Sadly, we are told that all the inhabitants of the earth whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of life will worship the beast. There is no twilight here; only the light of the Lamb and the darkness of the beast. Choose! Choose!

Let's be clear here: The dragon represents Satan. The beast from the sea is Rome. John wants us to see that though the Christians may struggle against the empire, the larger struggle, the spiritual warfare, is against Satan the dragon – who has already lost but is not quite yet finished off.

#### *The demonic trinity*

The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. The dragon, the beast from the sea, the beast from the land.

Yes, a second beast comes into view, one that has arisen from the earth. This beast brings people to the first beast. It performs mighty signs. And it makes the people build a giant image of the first beast, a bit like a large puppet, to which the second beast "gives breath." The people are deceived by this image and are wooed to the adoration of the first beast. How strong! How rich! How invincible! They cannot see the truth. This second beast is a false prophet

#### *The mark of the beast*

Finally, all the inhabitants of the earth are marked as belonging to the beast, in contrast with the great multitude of Revelation 7, who bear the seal of the LORD God.

The mark they bear is "666." This is the mark of the beast. Without it, the people could neither buy nor sell anything.

Over the years, much has been made of this mark. We are told by John that it is the number of the beast. And he tells us that those who have insight can calculate this number.

All three text boxes in this study will help you to see what is going.<sup>1</sup> Basically, ancient cultures used letters from their alphabet as numbers, much like the Roman numerals we all learned in elementary school ("v" = 5). For example, in Pompeii there is graffiti that reads "I love her whose number is 545." When you work through the "666" it becomes clear to most scholars that the person John has in view is Nero. This makes sense, as Nero was so hated and feared that he came to symbolize persecution and terror.

Thus, the imagery becomes pretty clear. The question to the reader of Revelation is this: Will you bear the mark of the beast/Nero/Rome/Satan or will you bear the seal of God? Will

<sup>1</sup>The material in all three text boxes is taken from Eugene Boring's commentary on Revelation in the *Interpretation* series. A copy is in the St. Andrew library.

you embrace the world that has chosen against God or will you embrace the LORD God and his ways? Will you remain in the darkness/dragon or will you choose the light/Lamb?

The point about the mark being required to buy and sell is that choosing the Lamb may well require us to make what seem like tough choices. In John's day, engaging in trade pretty much meant buying into the Roman system. How far will we go in making our way in this world? Will we know when we have embraced oppression and injustice in order to get by or to achieve "success"? John wants us to grasp that these choices are real and ever-present, even if much of the time we are blinded to them.

### The Mystery that is "666"

(by E. Boring)

The number 666 has a generic significance that made it particularly appropriate for John's purpose. John shares the broad apocalyptic tradition in which seven is the complete number, and has used it as such throughout. The seventh seal, trumpet, and bowl is always the last, that represents the coming of God and his kingdom. But six is often the penultimate number, the number of lack and incompleteness. It is also the number of judgment. As the kingdom of God comes in the seventh and last of each series, the judgment of God comes in the sixth seal, trumpet, and bowl (6:12-17; 9:13-21; 16:12-16)—and John himself and his parishioners live in the time of the sixth emperor, the time of idolatry and eschatological plagues (17:10). "Six-six-six" is thus the intensive symbolic expression of incompleteness, idolatry, judgment, non-fulfillment, evil itself raised to the third power. The number communicated as symbol, not by analysis.

There is an element of evocative mystery in the symbol that functions whether or not a particular referent is also in mind. Thus the symbol of the beast and his mysterious number can continue to have evocative power in situations where the original reference has long since been forgotten. Since the symbolic meaning of John's imagery is clear whether or not we can identify the particular meaning evoked in the imaginations of John's audience, we do well to be wary of the "obsession with decoding 666," against which Paul Minear warns us (*I Saw a New Earth*, p. 123). The exhortation of verse 18, "It is the moment to have discernment" (Ellul's translation), challenges the modern interpreter not to historical decoding but to discerning where in our own time propaganda is used to idolize political power.

So . . . if we step back from John's vision for a moment, the question posed to us becomes evident: Will we bear the mark of the beast or will we bear the seal of our LORD God? The truth is that there is no other choice. There is darkness and there is light. There is the beast and there is the Lamb. Choose.

Finally, if we embrace God, desiring to bear his seal on our foreheads, we must stand ready to proclaim God's mighty acts to the world. A seal is meant to be seen.

### *A People Who Proclaim*

In 1 Peter, he writes to Christians who feel like aliens and exiles in their own lands, as does John the Seer in Revelation. Echoing God's word brought by Moses, Peter encourages the believers by reminding them of their place among God's people. Like the ancient Israelites, these Christians *are* a "royal priesthood" and a "holy nation" upon whom worldly power and holy purpose converge. They have been called out of the darkness for a reason, a purpose. Peter states this purpose simply. Why has God formed us into his people? So that we may "proclaim God's mighty acts." This is the *end* to which we have been called. So that we might proclaim to others, in what we say and what we do, God's mighty acts of salvation. Note that God doesn't place on us the responsibility of "saving souls." That is his work. We are simply to proclaim.

Lest we think this proclaiming is all about speech, remember what I'm sure your Mom told you: actions speak louder than words. And if no one told you, you've discovered it for yourself. What we do in our interactions with others is a witness to Christ, especially if

the person knows that we are a self-professed Christian. We might wish that the practice of our faith weren't always on display, but that is just how it is. Thus, Peter is right when he tells the Christians, "Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds . . ." In Revelation, the mark of the beast and God's seal are both visible to all – placed on foreheads or hands.

And what kind of people does it take to proclaim God's mighty acts . . . to handle this convergence of worldly power and holy purpose . . . to build *for* God's kingdom?

Only a few verses before today's passage, Peter tells the Christians that they are to rid themselves of all malice and pretense, envy and hurtful talk. Like babies at their mothers' breasts, these Christians are to drink the milk of God's kindness so that they might grow to maturity and wholeness, having received a foretaste of God's full mercy. Peter urges them to be like "living stones" built into a spiritual house, a house of strength that rests upon Jesus Christ, the cornerstone and foundation of this house. Peter writes, "Therefore, prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you . . . love one another deeply from the heart" (1:13,22). Later in the letter Peter writes, "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received . . . whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies . . ." (4:10-11).

In much of his letter, Peter paints a picture of a people, God's people, who can do the work of the kingdom, who can "proclaim God's mighty acts." Christians are to be unified and disciplined. We are to love one another. We are to serve one another. We are to resist the siren call of the earthly powers and place our complete and abiding trust in the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1). The Lamb is worthy!

### Whose number is "666"? The Best Guess

(by E. Boring)

It is likely that John intended his readers to think of a particular individual, one already known to them, by this number which is designated as "a man's name" (13:18 NEB, TEV). Nero is by far the most likely candidate supported by the majority of historical scholars, since the letters "Neron Caesar" in the Hebrew spelling add up to precisely 666: Nun (50) + Resh (200) + Waw (6) and Nun (50) + Qof (100) + Samech (60) + Resh (200) = 666. There are two possible objections to this view, namely that (a) the calculation involves Hebrew and John is writing in Greek, and (b) the name must be spelled with an additional letter (Nun = 50) on the end of Nero ("Neron" above) to reach the correct total (666). But John, who probably came from Palestine, elsewhere makes wordplays involving the Hebrew language (9:11; 16:16), and the Hebrew spelling of Nero with the additional "Nun" has now been found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. That John expected his hearer-readers to think of Nero is supported by the fact that he uses the myth of the returning Nero elsewhere in Revelation (13:3; 17:9-11), and by the ancient interpretation as Nero, documented in the reading 616 in some manuscripts (Nero spelled in the normal Greek manner without the extra "nun" = 50).

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The beast in John's vision is the agent of Satan, the one who opposes God and all his purposes. What or who in our world work against the purposes of the LORD God? Try to get past easy targets. How are we complicit in the world's rebellion against God? How can we go about being God's agents, every day and in every way?
2. How does the word "witnessing" strike you? Have you tended to think of it as mostly what you say? Do you agree that witnessing to Christ encompasses all that we say or do? How would you feel if the statement, "I am a Christian," were stenciled on your forehead? How might it change your activities or your interactions with others? Do you see the problem that arises if you think that the stencil would necessitate big changes in your life? How could we come to live as if the stencil were always there?
3. In his commentary on 1 Peter, David Bartlett writes, "First Peter 2:1-10 reminds us that difference between Christians and non-Christians is not that we see different things but that we see the same things differently." What do you think he means? What sort of persons can see things differently? Bartlett writes that the difference between the two ways is faith. How does our faith in Jesus Christ shape our way of seeing? How does our faith help to shape us into the people of love, joy, discipline, humility, and courage that Peter urges Christians to be?

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Revelation 14</b> The Lamb and the 144,000; also the grapes of wrath!</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Revelation 15</b> Seven angels bring seven plagues. Will no one repent?</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Revelation 16</b> Seven bowls of God's wrath? Still, will no one repent?</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Revelation 17</b> The whore of Babylon: yet another depiction of the rot of Rome</p>
<p><b>Friday, Revelation 18</b> The fall of Babylon (Rome) and the lament of all those who had chosen to follow the beast/Babylon.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b></p>

