

COVID-19 AND THE MARK OF THE BEAST IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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Introduction

Is the coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccine the mark of the beast? This is one of the frequently asked questions that this writer has met many times. The reason for this question is that there are claims on social media platforms that indeed the COVID-19 vaccine does fulfil the prophecy of John in the Book of Revelation concerning the ‘mark of the beast’ introduced in Rev 13:16-18. However, such interpretations tend to flow from conspiracy theories rather than from the biblical text or tradition. Therefore, this article seeks to provide a meaningful exegetical interpretation of the ‘mark of the beast’ relating to the time of the first century A.D. itself when the Book of Revelation was written. The intention is to help the Christian reader to have a better grasp of what John intended to communicate to his primary audience so as to set aside some out-of-context speculations of the 21st century readers of the book.

Summary of John’s vision of the beast and its mark in Revelation 13

The whole chapter of Rev 13 recounts John’s vision about two beasts that he saw. The first beast described in vv. 1-8 emerged from the sea. Power was given to it by the dragon. It was wounded, but was healed, and people worshipped it in utter amazement. The beast uttered blasphemous statements against God and against his dwelling place. It had authority to fight those believed in God and bring them under its dominion. All non-believers worshipped it.

The second beast is described in Rev 13:11-18. Unlike the first, the second beast emerged from the earth, not from the sea. Yet it had power and authority just like the first beast and spoke like the dragon. Its mission was to ensure that all the inhabitants of the world should worship the first dragon; make a portrait of the first dragon. those who refused to worship the portrait would face death.

Then comes the cryptic verse: “It causes all, both small and great,

both rich and poor, both free and slaves to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that none can buy or sell who does not have the mark; that is, the image of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom, let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. Its number is six hundred and sixty-six” (Rev 13:16-18, NRSV).

From chapter 13 onwards, the phrase ‘mark of the beast’ continues to recur in the book in subsequent chapters. The texts are: Rev 14:9-11; 16:2; 19:20-21; 20:4. In all these references, John presumes that his readers have calculated and know what the mark of the beast in Rev 13:18 means. However, for the modern reader, meaning remains mysterious, giving room to numerous interpretations done in light of current experiences like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some Current Interpretations of the Mark of the Beast in Relation to COVID-19

One popular interpretation, trending on social media platforms is that the ‘mark of the beast’ is a prophecy that is being or will be fulfilled in the current pandemic of coronavirus. The argument is as follows. A COVID-19 vaccine is being or will be produced and everyone will be forced to take it by their governments. Everyone will be injected. Then there will also be some type of electronic chip or computer device (in connection with 5G technology) inserted into people’s bodies so as to track who has who has received the vaccine and who has not. Or a type of certificate will be issued.¹ And this electronic chip or certificate is the mark of the beast which the Book of Revelation prophesied. One writer who subscribes to this interpretation is Femi Fani-Kayode of Nigeria. In one of his Facebook posts, he writes:

They want to compel everyone to take a microchip in their body which will allow them to trade, work, go to hospital, buy food, travel, live and function and without which none of these things can be done. That microchip is what the Holy Bible describes as the ‘mark of the Beast’ in the Book of Revelation and once you take it, you are finished.”²

By ‘they’, Fani-Kayode is referring to the worldly powerful political

and economic leaders who are said to be behind the ‘manufacturing’ of coronavirus so as to control the people under one world government. He is arguing that, just as the second beast in Revelation, put a condition that no one buys or sells without the mark of the beast, so also these powerful leaders will do regarding the COVID-19 vaccine thereby perfectly fulfilling Rev 13:16-18. Perhaps, this is one of the interpretations that are adding to the suspicions surrounding the COVID-19 vaccines being introduced in different parts of the world.

The meaning of mark of the beast from an exegetical standpoint

From an exegetical point of view, the above sensationalist interpretations prove to be erroneous and unconvincing. Exegetically, it is not so difficult to figure out what the mark of the beast is and who is being represented by the number 666. What is the mark of the beast being referred to in Revelations? The text actually specifies that the mark of the beast is “the name of the beast or the number of its name... Its number is six hundred and sixty-six” (vv. 17-18). Therefore, the number 666 denotes the mark of the beast, which the second beast advocates to be marked on every member of the society regardless of their social status, in order to participate in the economic life of the state. It is marked on the forehead and on the right hand.

What is the meaning of the number 666? In spite of the many speculations that some commentators give to this number, from Hitler to the Pope (using Latin calculations), the meaning is not as evasive as it may appear. Some critical initial observations should be made in order to interpret the number correctly. First, the mark pertains to the first beast and not the second one. It is a mark that is caused to be marked on people by the second beast, but it represents the first beast in whose interest the second beast is acting. Second, the mark of the beast is meant to represent the name (to onoma) of the first beast. Third, most verbs in this passage in Greek as well as in English translations (e.g., in NRSV) are in the present tense not future. The text says the (second) beast causes (poiei) (v. 16) all people to be marked so that no one can (dunētai) buy or sell who does not have (mē echōn) that mark (v. 17). Fourth, the meaning of the mark of the beast should be arrived at by means of calculating (psēphizō). These

observations should guide our interpretation.

Most, if not all, New Testament critical exegesis are unanimous that what is at play in this text is the literary technique that was very common in the first century A.D. called gematria¹. It was a way of communicating a message using numbers as secret codes. In many ancient languages, the letters of the alphabet have numerical values. For example, in Greek, the letters had the following numeral values: A = 1; B = 2; E = 5; I = 10; N = 50; R = 100, etc. With regards to Latin, the numerical values of the letters were: I = 1; V = 5; X = 10; L = 50; C = 100, etc. Similarly, Hebrew followed the same practice: B = 2; W = 6; N = 50; Q = 100, etc.³

It was possible then to represent a person's name using a number. It is hardly questionable that the writer of the Book of Revelation wanted his readers to decipher the meaning of the number 666 by using this system of gematria since he mentions explicitly that the number represents a name that has to be calculated. It can also be taken for granted that the name that John's readers would arrive at, should have been a familiar name of a figure they knew very well. And that figure should have been reputed for his cruelty and blasphemy against God. He must have been persecuting the holy ones (i.e., the Christians) and must have been known for being worshipped by other people as a god. These are all the qualities of the first beast in Rev 13:1-8, whose name is represented by the number 666 (the mark of the beast) in v.18. It would be extremely awkward if John referred to a distant future figure unknown to his readers and yet instructing them to make a calculation of his name!

Using Hebrew gematria, it can be satisfactorily established that the number 666 which is the mark of the (first) beast, represents the name of Emperor Caesar Nero – the first Roman emperor to unleash severe persecution of Christians between 64 and 68 AD. His full name in Hebrew has a numerical value of 666. He is called Qsr Nrwn (i.e., Caesar Neron, written without vowels as was and is common in Hebrew language).

¹See for example, Williamson, p. 235; John C. Thomas & Frank, D. Macchia. *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), pp. 244-247; Barclay, William. *The Revelation of John: Volume 2 Chapters 6–22* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1983), 100-102.

Let us calculate with wisdom as John has instructed:

Q = 100

S = 60

R = 200

N = 50

R = 200

W = 6

N = 50.

Total = 666.

This should have been the original meaning of 666 in the context of the early Christians of the first century AD when John wrote his book. A confirmation of this interpretation comes from the fact that some early manuscripts state the number of the name of the beast as 616 not 666. The reason is that the name 'Neron' was pronounced at times without the final 'n' as 'Nero'. Now if we remove the final 'n' it means we subtract 50 from 666. We will produce 616 standing for 'Qsr Nrw' (Caesar Nero). This interpretation is very satisfactory because 'Caesar Neron' is the name (to onoma) of a man as the text states. And it can also be smartly and wisely calculated as John has recommended.

The reason for calculating this name using Hebrew, even if John wrote his book in Greek, is that it was Hebrew which would serve better his purpose than Greek gematria in this context. In Greek the name would be written as 'Kaisar Nerōn' and would be represented by the number 1, 336 following the Greek numerical values of the letters. This would have complicated John's symbolism. The number 666 is carefully chosen to symbolize 'perfect evil'⁴ or what one might call 'perfect imperfection' (i.e., absolute evil) as it is the number of a man and not a divine number. However, it must be observed that the Greek version of Caesar's name is exactly the one transliterated into Hebrew as Qsr Nrwn (with the vowels: a, i, a, e, having been excluded – typical of this language), giving us 666! In addition, the word 'beast' itself in Greek is thērion and gives the numerical value of 666 if transliterated to Hebrew letters.⁵

Admittedly, Latin gematria cannot be used to calculate the meaning of the number of the beast for a couple of reasons.⁶ One: the audience of John were mostly Jewish Christians who were conversant with Hebrew

and Greek but not with Latin. They could not have deciphered the meaning of 666 with a language they did not know. Two: John himself was a Jew and very unlikely that he was fluent in Latin to have used it to communicate his cryptic message. Three: “Latin language did not have the comprehensive numbering code that the Greek and Hebrew language made use of.”⁷ Four: 666 was meant to be secret code language that would not be understood by Roman powers of the time. If John were to use Latin, the language of the Romans, then he would have betrayed himself. Thus, Hebrew remained the best option that would work well for John and his audience in the first century A. D. context.

If the original referent of the number 666 was Nero’s name, then there are two possibilities regarding who literally was the first beast mentioned in Rev 13:1-8. The first possibility is that the beast should be identified exactly with Emperor Nero who persecuted Christians between 64 and 68 A.D. This is very possible because he indeed was known for promoting emperor worship in his empire even if he did not pronounce himself to be divine. He indeed blasphemed against God and his name. He indeed waged horrendous war against the saints (i.e., the Christians). It is on record that he had pitch poured on the Christians and used them as living torches.⁸ And most interestingly, Nero was once stabbed, but survived the stab. This could be what John was recalling when he writes that the first beast was wounded and got healed.

The other possibility, considering that John wrote his book around 95 A.D. when Nero was already dead twenty-five years earlier, is that the first beast for John might not have been Nero per se, but a Nero-like figure of his own day. In that case, the first beast could be referring to Emperor Domitian who also launched a severe persecution of Christians between 81 and 96 A.D. after the mould of Nero. He earned himself the nickname ‘Neron Redivivus’ (Nero coming back to life). He is also remembered for having proclaimed himself ‘master and god’ and demanded all people to swear an oath ‘by the genius of the emperor’ Thus, he does also fit the description of the first beast in Rev 13:1-8. In the last analysis there can be no doubt that the first beast represented by the number 666 was for John and his first century A.D. audience the Roman government (represented by Nero) persecuting them. And the second beast exercising the authority

of the first beast and in favour of it represent all those who were enforcing the oppressive laws of the emperor (false prophets and priests) at the time. This explains why most of the verbs used concerning the activities of the second beast are in the present tense as noted earlier.

We need now to ask what it practically meant for the early Christians to be marked by the mark of the beast, on the forehead and on the right hand. We must explore two contexts relating to the Christians of the first century A.D. in interpreting this part. The first context is the Greco-Roman one. The word used for 'mark' is *charagma* in Greek. There was a common practice in the Roman Empire of branding (i.e., putting a *charagma*) domestic slaves with a mark of their owner. If the mark of the beast is connected to this custom then its meaning is to say that those who worshipped the beast belonged to it as his property.

Secondly and most importantly, on every agreement of sale, there was a *charagma*, that is, a stamp, engraved device with the name of the emperor as well as the day's date. If the mark of the beast reflects this custom then it means that those worshipping the beast were those accepting his authority. Military men were engraved with their general's name as a way of expressing their loyalty to him. had a practice of branding themselves with the name of their general if they were devoted to him. The implication will be that those paying homage to the beast were his devoted followers. Overall, from the Greco-Roman Empire's context, being marked by the mark of the beast, for John's audience meant belonging to the beast and accepting his dominance over oneself. And it was actually happening that those who refused to accept the demands of the emperor were killed; if not killed, they would be economically disadvantaged. This could be what is reflected in John's vision as 'buying and selling' in connection with the mark of the beast. Christians had to make a public choice for Christ or for Caesar.

The second context to consider is the Jewish background of Rev 13:16-18. The indication that the second beast caused all, both great and small, rich and poor, to be marked on the forehead and on the right hand is best understood as a parody of the Jewish custom of wearing phylacteries⁹. The Jews had a custom of moving about, wearing phylacteries on the forehead and on the left arm close to the heart. Phylacteries were little

leather boxes which contained little scrolls of parchment. Some passages from the Torah (e.g. the Shema, Deut 6:4-9) were written in these scrolls. In short, the phylacteries contained the Word of God, his commandments. They reminded the people to obey God's Word and that should submit to his authority to receive his blessing. In this case, being branded by the mark of the beast would symbolically mean the exact reverse of obeying God's commandments. It meant idolatry – submitting to the authority of the beast, the embodiment of Satan called 'the dragon' who gave power to the beast according to the book. It meant disobedience of the Word of God in pursuit of pagan gods of the Romans. So, with the vision of the two beasts, John was encouraging his persecuted fellow Christians to remain faithful to God's Word and avoid emperor worship.

In the light of the above exposition, it can be ascertained with no shred of doubt that the 'mark of the beast' in Revelation has nothing to do with COVID-19 vaccine! The writer of Revelation had no idea that sometime, more than 2000 years later after his time, in 2019, a virus would emerge in China called coronavirus. It was not John's concern that in 2020/2021 some vaccines for COVID-19 would be produced and be given to people. It is crucial to remember that the Book of Revelation is an apocalypse rather than a prophecy, an apocalyptic literature rather than a prophetic book predicting the future.

One key feature of apocalyptic writings is to present, in the form of a revelation (apokalupsis in Greek) a past or present event as though it would happen in the future. Technically this is called *vaticinium ex eventu* (i.e., 'prediction out of an event') technique. Therefore, the interpretation of the mark of the beast in Rev 13:16-18 should refer primarily to what had happened or was happening during John's time in the first century A. D. and not to some far distant future. We have already noticed that the activity of the people being marked by the mark of the beast is written in the present tense to show that it happened then when John was writing. Therefore, there is no need to mix up issues: if one has reservations (legitimate or otherwise) on COVID-19 vaccines, Rev 13:16-18 should not be forced to legitimize one's opinion.

Nonetheless, as 21st century Christians, living in the era of COVID-19, we can still ask ourselves if Rev 13 has relevance for us. The answer

is affirmative. The mark of the beast for us today need not be any physical or literal mark on our bodies like the proposed electronic microchip or certificate of COVID-19 vaccination of some sort. The mark of the beast for today's Christians means anything we do that goes against God or Christ and would show our allegiance to Satan and his human cohorts.

To say 'no' to the mark of the beast is to obey God's Word, keeping it close to our hearts, and allowing it to direct our thoughts and decisions in our entire life, public and private. If one lives a life contrary to God's Word – one is already embodying in oneself, the 'mark of the beast'. Thus, if those behind the manufacturing and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines do so in a manner contrary to God's Law, they will also be branding unto themselves, the mark of the beast! Consequently, it makes no sense for a Christian to fear COVID-19 vaccine as the mark of the beast, if at the same time, one is leading a life contrary to Christ.

Conclusion

This paper has offered a detailed exegetical exposition of the meaning of the mark of the beast referred to in the Book of Revelation (13:16-18). It has been argued that the text should be interpreted taking cognizance of its historical context of the first century A.D. when it was written. In that context, the mark of the beast (i.e., the number 666) meant the name of Emperor Nero who arguably is used to represent the evil Roman religious and political system of the time which was persecuting Christians. The mark of the beast has nothing to do with COVID-19 vaccine of the 21st century which was unknown to John and his audience.

¹ Williamson, S. Peter. *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015.) 238

² Fani-Kayode, Femi. 'Covid-19 and the Mark of the Beast', https://m.facebook.com/ffaniKayode/posts/10158287115637210?locale2=pl_PL. Accessed: on 31 August 2020.

³ Thomas, J. Christopher & Macchia, D. Frank. *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016.) 244-47.

⁴ Farley, J. Roland. *Apocalypse Then and Now: A Companion to the Book of Revelation* (New York, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999.) 117.

- ⁵ Thomas & Macchia, 246.
- ⁶ John M. Phiri *The Crazy Catholic Talks About the Number 666*, (Ndola: Mission Press 2004.) 172.
- ⁶ *he Crazy Catholic Talks About the Number 666*, 172.
- ⁷ *The Crazy Catholic Talks About the Number 666*, 172.
- ⁸ Norbert Brockman & Umberto Pescantini. *A History of the Catholic Church* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa) 28.
- ⁹ Barclay, William. *The Revelation of John: Volume 2 Chapters 6–22* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1983) 235.