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THE MARK OF THE BEAST

by Dr. Thomas Ice

The mark of the beast has been the focal point of more rhetoric, ridicule, argumentation, and speculation than possibly any other single item in the Bible. Christians and non-Christians alike have argued between each other and among themselves about its numerical nomenclature. But what does the text of Scripture say and not say?

THE TRIBULATION TRADEMARK: 666?

The core issue of the tribulation is: *Who has the right to rule – God or Satan?* God will demonstrate that He has the right to rule. For the only time in history people will have a deadline for declaring their allegiance to the gospel. Throughout the past 2000 years, people have been at different stages in deciding for or against acceptance of the gospel. People accept or reject this message at various points of their lives: some in childhood, some as young adults, some at middle age or as seniors. On this occasion the process will be accelerated or forced because of the mark of the beast, so that all humanity will be consciously divided into two segments. The polarizing issue is the mark of the beast.

The Bible teaches that it will be the false prophet, who is related to false religion, who will head up the campaign of the mark of the beast (Rev. 13:11-18). Revelation 13:15 makes it clear that the key issue in all of this is "worship of the image of the beast." The mark of the beast is simply a vehicle to force people to declare their allegiance—to the Antichrist or Jesus Christ. All people will be polarized into two camps. It will be impossible to take a position of neutrality or indecision on this matter. Scripture is very clear that those who do not receive the mark will be killed.

All classes of humanity will be forced to take sides: "the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves" (Rev. 13:15). Dr. Robert Thomas notes that this language "extends to all people of every civic rank, . . . all classes ranked according to wealth, . . . covers every cultural category, . . . The three expressions are a formula for universality."¹ Scripture is very specific. The false prophet will require a "mark" of loyalty and devotion to the beast and it will be "on their right hand," not the left, "or on their forehead" (Rev. 13:16).

Throughout the Bible the word "mark" is employed. For example, it is used many times in Leviticus as a reference to a mark that renders the subject ceremonially unclean, usually related to leprosy. Interestingly, Ezekiel 9:4 uses "mark" similarly to the way it is used in Revelation: "And the LORD said to him, 'Go through the midst of the city, even through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a *mark on the foreheads* of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst.'" Here the mark was one of preservation, similar to the way the blood on the doorposts spared those in the Exodus from the death angel. In Ezekiel, the mark is placed on the forehead, which anticipates Revelation's use of the term. All seven instances of the word for "mark" or "sign," *charagma*, in the Greek New Testament appear in Revelation and all refer to "the mark of the beast" (Rev. 13:16,17; 14:9,11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). Dr.

Thomas explains how the word was used in ancient times:

The mark must be some sort of branding similar to that given soldiers, slaves, and temple devotees in John's day. In Asia Minor, devotees of pagan religions delighted in the display of such a tattoo as an emblem of ownership by a certain god. In Egypt, Ptolemy Philopator I branded Jews, who submitted to registration, with an ivy leaf in recognition of their Dionysian worship (cf. 3 *Macc.* 2:29). This meaning resembles the long-time practice of carrying signs to advertise religious loyalties (cf. Isa. 44:5) and follows the habit of branding slaves with the name or special mark of their owners (cf. Gal. 6:17). *Charagma* ("Mark") was a term for the images or names of emperors on Roman coins, so it fittingly could apply to the beast's emblem put on people. ²

Some wonder why an exclusive term—"mark"—is used to designate Antichrist's mark. Antichrist's mark appears to be a parody of the plan of God, especially God's "sealing" of the 144,000 witnesses of Revelation 7. God's seal of His witnesses most likely is invisible and for the purpose of protection from the Antichrist. On the other hand, Antichrist offers protection from the wrath of God—a promise he cannot deliver—and his mark is visible and external. Since those receiving the mark of the beast take it willingly, it must be a point of pride to have, in essence, Satan as one's owner. Dr. Thomas says, "It will be visible and the point of recognition for all in subjection to the beast."³

The Treacherous Ticket

In addition to serving as a visible indicator of devotion to Antichrist, the mark will be one's ticket required for commercial transaction during the last half of the tribulation (Rev. 13:17). This has been the dream of every tyrant down through history—to so totally control his subject that he alone decides who can buy or sell. Historian Sir William Ramsay notes that first century Roman Emperor "Domitian carried the theory of Imperial Divinity and the encouragement of 'delation' to the most extravagant point; . . . that in one way or another every Asian must stamp himself overtly and visibly as loyal, or be forthwith disqualified from participation in ordinary social life and trading."⁴ A future Antichrist will perfect such a practice with the aid of modern technology.

Many have tried down through history to mark certain groups of people for death. Yet, there have always been ways for a certain number to escape. As technology becomes more advanced, it seems that greater potential will exist to close up virtually every means of escape. Just such a picture is supported by the Greek word *dunétai* "provides" (Rev. 13:17), which is used to convey an idea of what "can" or "cannot" be done. The Antichrist will not allow anyone to buy or sell without the mark, and the coming cashless society will be the means that he will use to enact such a policy. Control of the economy at the individual level through the mark fits hand and glove with the Biblical picture of Antichrist's control of global commerce as outlined in Revelation 17 and 18.

The second half of verse 17 describes the mark as "either the name of the beast or

the number of his name.” Precisely this means that the “number of the beast's name is one and the same with the name, . . . The equivalence means that as a name, it is written in letters, but as a number, the name's equivalent is in numbers.”⁵ The Antichrist's name will be expressed numerically as “666.”

Calculating the Number

The Apostle John at this point in the prophecy (Rev. 13:18) shifts from one who is recording what he sees to one who now advises his readers in how to interpret what has been reported. A reading of Revelation demonstrates clearly that the wicked will not understand, because of their rejection of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In contrast, wisdom and understanding will be given to those during the tribulation as to who the Antichrist is, so that they will not take his mark. The Bible makes it clear that anyone taking the mark of the beast cannot be saved (Rev. 14:9,11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4) and will spend eternity in the lake of fire. The fact that John provides wisdom and understanding to believers at this crucial point, relating to a matter of eternal importance, shows that God will provide the knowledge His people need to follow Him faithfully.

What does this wisdom and understanding allow the believer to do? The passage says he will be able to “calculate.” Calculate what? He will be able to calculate the number of the beast.

The primary purpose for warning believers about the mark is to let them know that when it is in the form of numbers the “name” of the beast will be 666. Thus, believers who are going through the sequence of events of the tribulation, when offered the number 666 for their forehead or right hand are to reject it, even if it means death. This also means that anything prior to this future time period is not the mark of the beast that is to be avoided.

Thus, Christians in our own day do not need to act superstitiously about the number. If our address, phone number, or zip code includes this number, we do not need to be afraid that some satanic or mystical power will impact us. On the other hand, we do recognize that many occultists and satanists are attracted to the number because of its relation to future evil. However, the number does not contain mystical powers. To believe that it does would mean that a believer has fallen prey to superstition. The Bible teaches that there is no basis for attaching any superstitious powers to the number 666.

Jumping the Gun

Many have tried to figure out the identity of the Antichrist through numerical calculations. Such approaches will always fail and should not be attempted. Phone books are full of names that might add up. The wisdom of “counting the name” is not to be applied in our day, for that would be jumping the gun. Instead, it is to be applied by believers during the tribulation.

In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul teaches that during the current church age the Antichrist is being restrained (v. 6). Antichrist will not be “revealed” until “his time.” The Holy Spirit's selection of the word “revealed” indicates that the identity of the Antichrist will be concealed until the time of his revelation at some point after the rapture. Thus, it is not

possible to know before “his time” the identity of the Antichrist. Revelation makes it clear that when the time comes the identity of the Antichrist will be clear to believers.

As noted above, Revelation makes it clear that every believer during the tribulation will know that to receive the mark of the beast means the rejection of Christ. This will be universally understood by Christians at that time. None of the suggestions of the past or any before the tribulation have merit.

Revelation 13:17,18 clearly says that the number 666 will be the mark proposed for the right hand or forehead. No one in history has even proposed such a number in anything like tribulation conditions, so past guesses as to his identity can be nullified on this basis.

The better part of wisdom is to be content that the identification is not yet available, but will be when the future false Christ ascends to his throne. The person to whom 666 applies must have been future to John's time, because John clearly meant the number to be recognizable to someone. If it was not discernible to his generation and those immediately following him—and it was not—the generation to whom it will be discernible must have lain (and still lies) in the future. Past generations have provided many illustrations of this future personage, but all past candidates have proven inadequate as fulfillments.⁶

Technology and the Mark

Some have suggested that the mark of the beast will be the universal product code, a chip implanted under the skin, or an invisible mark requiring scanning technology to recognize it. Such applications do not align with what the Bible actually says. The mark of the beast—666—is not cashless technology or biometrics. The Bible speaks precisely about what the mark will be. It will be:

- the Antichrist's mark, identified with his person
- the actual number 666, not a representation
- a mark, like a tattoo
- visible to the naked eye
- on you, not in you
- recognized, not questioned
- voluntary, not involuntary, thus not given through deception
- used after the rapture, not before
- used in the second half of the tribulation
- needed to buy and sell
- universally received by non-Christians, but universally rejected by Christians
- show worship and allegiance to the Antichrist
- promoted by the false prophet
- the destiny of all receiving the mark will be eternal punishment in the lake of fire

Probably no other number in history or in Biblical studies has captivated the minds of both Christians and non-Christians as "666." Even those who know nothing of the future plan of God as revealed in the Bible know there is significance to this number. Secular and religious writers, filmmakers, artists, and cultural critics allude to, portray, and expound upon it. It has been used and abused by evangelicals as well as others and has been the subject of much fruitless speculation. Too often sincere students of prophecy have tied the number to contemporary technology and its potential in an effort to demonstrate the relevance of their interpretation. Yet to do so is to put the "cart before the horse," for prophecy and the Bible do not gain authority or legitimacy because of culture or technology.

CONCLUSION

The coming cashless society will be used by the Antichrist, but it will not be used as the identifying mark of 666. Whatever technology is available at the time of the Antichrist's ascent will be used for evil purposes. It will be used by the Antichrist, in conjunction with the mark, to control the buying and selling (as mentioned in Revelation 13:17) and it is likely that chip implants, scan technology, and biometrics will be used to implement the Antichrist's cashless society as a tool to enforce his policy that one cannot buy or sell without the mark. As with other developments in our day, we see many trends setting the stage that will facilitate the future career of the Antichrist. Maranatha!

¹ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), pp. 179-80.

² Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, p. 181.

³ Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, p. 181.

⁴ Sir William Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1904), p. 107).

⁵ Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, p. 182.

⁶ Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, p. 185.