Rise of the Authoritarians:

The Mark of the Beast Signifying Compliance

Revelation 13

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, April 22, 2020

In the midst of the global pandemic of Provid--19 things are starting to feel apocalyptic. Monday the price of crude oil dropped to 1 cent for a 42 gallon barrel. At that rate if a person earns $25 an hour, a day’s wages would buy 840,000 gallons of crude oil. It is getting beyond “a quart of wheat for a day’s wages” as Revelation earlier described it.

We are also seeing the rise of authoritarianism. Every single state as well as the federal government have declared an “emergency” appropriating to themselves enormous powers which they can exercise without any else’s approval. They are doing this so that the health care system does not get overwhelmed without the capacity to meet the needs. Yet the government controls the number of health care facilities that exist and the size of current health care services. They do this by requiring “certificates of need” which are granted by the states before any facility can be built or expanded. So the government controls the number of beds and health services which are available then forces everyone to stay at home because there are not sufficient. Rather than market decisions guiding the process we have increasing centralized control.

With these restrictions the government is saying you cannot buy or sell without their permission. Unless the governor says you can operate your business you must stay closed. It sounds remarkably like the last verse of this chapter: “*16 He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, 17 so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name…*” If we are required to show we either have the antibodies or we don’t currently have the virus then the scheme of Revelation will have a clear antecedent.

The present crisis is not the fulfillment of Revelation 13 but it shows us what it will look like and how easily it can be implemented.

This chapter describes a malevolent power controlling the entire earth both politically and economically. It will involve successful attacks against those who follow God.

Revelation 13 does not give us any information about the timing of such things. Indeed the book of Revelation is not set up chronologically. If you remember the symmetrical, chiastic structure of John’s presentation of Revelation you can see multiple chapters that cover the same ground. So the victory of chapter 12 actually follows the challenges of chapters 11 and 13.

It’s not about the chronology of demonic attacks against God’s people but about the nature of those attacks. While Revelation isn’t really all that helpful in figuring out sequences of end time events, it does show recurrent themes and patterns. I have never tried to figure out who the beast is or who the anti-Christ might be. I find it more helpful to identify behavior and values of the evil one and fight back against those things.

This chapter has captured the popular imagination because it gives the mark of the beast as 666. A day is coming when you must take the mark on your right hand or your forehead or experience the wrath of the beast.

# The Dragon and the Beast

1 And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name.

From the last chapter the dragon was described in almost exactly these same terms. In that case it was “*an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads*.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The virtual exactness of the descriptions suggests that the dragon and the Beast are almost interchangeable. From chapter 12 we know the dragon is the devil or Satan. In the next verses we see that the dragon gives his power to the beast.

# The Power and Authority of the Beast

2 The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. 3 One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast.

John describes a sphinx of some sort. These kinds of creatures were often described in ancient times. This one is somewhat different from the usual cherubim varieties. The beast is empowered by the dragon. Interestingly, the dragon gave the beast his throne. That is, his political position came from the devil himself. In addition to his position, he also received great power and authority.

Much has been made of the fatal wound. The text actually says it seemed to be fatal. We cannot determine if the wound only appeared to be fatal or if it actually was fatal. In either case, the healing (or resurrection) was quite dramatic because it resulted in people following the beast. People seem to be very impressed with miracles and use it to determine truth.

# The Beast and the Dragon’s mutual support

*4 Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?"*

There is a significant dynamic between these two. The dragon is worshipped because he is the source of the power. The power behind the power also has plenty who want some of it. The success of the beast becomes part of what people worship. This is the cult of success.

# Power and Blasphemy of the Beast

5 The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. 6 He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. 7 He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. 8 All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast-- all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.

Here we learn some of the details of the activity of the Beast. First, he demonstrates an anti-Christian attitude. He speaks against God. He has personal pride in who he is. He is arrogant. The slander of the name of God is criticism of what God has done. Maybe the devastation from the Rapture is so great that it becomes the basis of criticism of what God has done. The slander even applies to the people who are already in heaven. Just how they will be slandered, it does not say.

This beast is given power against the people of God. It says “He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them.” The question is, who gave this power? It cannot be the devil because he does not have that authority in the first place. This passage is an illustration of what I call the “hedge.” The hedge defines what the devil can and cannot do. In this case, for reasons and purposes that God knows, the usual hedge of protection around believers is lifted.

This power is not limited to one small area such as Israel. It is a universal power that covers “every tribe, people, language and nation.” As a result, “All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast.” Although John lets us know that the Beast’s influence and power is global, there are restraints on his power even here. Those whose names are written in the book of life were not under the jurisdiction of the Beast. How are we to compare these two ideas of being conquered but still separate? Even though believers are conquered, they still refused to worship.

There is a significant description of the Lamb in verse 8. There, Jesus is labeled the “Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.” Neither sin nor redemption were surprises to God. This was something he knew about from the beginning of time and before.

# The Suffering of Resisters to the Beast

9 He who has an ear, let him hear. 10 If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.

The language of this passage is familiar. In Jeremiah 43:10-11 we have something similar.

Then say to them, 'This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I will send for my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and I will set his throne over these stones I have buried here; he will spread his royal canopy above them. He will come and attack Egypt, bringing death to those destined for death, captivity to those destined for captivity, and the sword to those destined for the sword.

John lets the suffering people know they will experience captivity and death. Especially for those who were, at that very moment, suffering difficulties, this must have been a very encouraging verse. No doubt they interpreted these words for their times even as we do for ourselves. The Christian answer is patient endurance and faithfulness.

Rather than being discouraged and giving up, we are to endure. We must remain faithful. The presence of problems should never determine what we are going to do. Especially when it is difficult, we must have faithfulness and endurance.

**The Second Beast, Enforcer of evil**

11 Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. 12 He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. 13 And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. 14 Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. 15 He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed.

The second beast has apparent similarities with a lamb until he speaks. Then it is clear where he originated. The transference of power continues. This second beast has the same power from the dragon as the first beast. (In an election year we need to remind ourselves that it is not how a politician looks but how they act that matters.) This second beast is the enforcer of worship. He goes after people to make sure they do what is demanded. The second beast is able to do all sorts of great miracles and signs. He is even able to copy some of the great miracles of the Bible. This is not done secretly, but very publicly.

Idolatry is going to become the state religion. There will be an image of the first beast that must be honored as God. In John’s time, the people were already being exposed to the Imperial cults and the worship of the Caesars. In fact, in Ephesus there was a temple to Diocletian. Just two decades after John wrote Revelation, another temple would be built to Hadrian. This passage had great meaning for those in Asia Minor who would read it. Indeed, for the next three hundred years they would face these realities.

We understand this passage to have a future fulfillment as well. As with most prophecy, it can be given more than one interpretation. So many of the demonic themes are repeated again and again in history. It is not surprising that it could be fulfilled more than once. On the other hand, John may have thought he understood what he wrote but the Holy Spirit was inspiring him beyond what he knew.

In the final fulfillment, there would be the death penalty for those who refused to worship the first beast. To some degree, this happened in the early church persecutions. Many Christians were killed because they would not bend the knee. (As an aside, this is one reason the early church did not favor the death penalty. They had too frequently been the victims of its injustices to be very enthusiastic about it.)

**The Mark of the Beast**

16 He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, 17 so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. 18 This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666.

The second beast institutes a mark to indicate participation. That mark in the right hand or forehead was proof of cooperation with the system. The mark could be either the name itself or its number.

It had economic enforcement. Without the mark you could not engage in business of any kind.

Much has been written toward the end of identifying the significance of that number. For example, Hippolytus wrote “If, then, we take the name as the name of a single man, it becomes Latinus.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Since then, fools have rushed in by the hundreds to announce the revelations they have received to identify the anti-christ. Virtually every terrible figure in the last century, including a few who were not so terrible have gained the title from some “scholar” of prophecy.

Maybe that is why John says understanding this will require wisdom. The number is plain. It is 666. The last verse is an interesting comment about insight. John says, “If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number.” What is so hard about calculating the number when he gives us the number? Man’s number speaks of man’s alternative to God. The chapter began by telling us how proud the first beast is. He slanders God. He criticizes those who are in heaven. Although he is a man, he wants to be honored as God. The number of his name may be as simple as the fact that his name has man’s number written all over it rather than God’s.

1. Rev 12:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hippolytus, “Treatise on Christ and Antichrist, #50”, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Alexander Roberts, D.D., and James Donaldson, LL.D., eds., (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson), Vol. 5, pg. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)