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666 in the old testament

Watching the news a few days ago, I saw photos and videos of those protesting the COVID-19 quarantine on full display. I’m growing weary of how certain biblical texts are attached to certain political movements and demonstrations—texts that are, quite frankly, misused and misunderstood. Sadly, Christianity ends up getting misrepresented in the process. At the prodding of my wife (who thinks I should be a bit more vocal about these sorts of things), let me offer a few thoughts that might be helpful to keep in mind when you see pictures like this float around the news and social media. See also Dr. Halsted’s follow-up article, The Covid Vaccine has 666 Written All Over It...and Why that Doesn’t Matter According to Revelation. The Mark of the Beast I know of no reputable biblical scholar or theologian who would endorse that the COVID-19 quarantine or a vaccine is related to the “mark of the beast”. For starters, in Revelation, the “mark of the beast” is by no means a medical procedure. Most likely, it’s not even a physical or visible mark at all. Contrary to some of the more fear-inducing theories that have in the past gained steam in some evangelical circles, the “mark” is not at all something that could be accidentally taken either. Why? Because the mark of the beast (Rev. 13:16-18) is a mark that is closely tied to the worship of the beast (13:12, 15; cf. 19:20; 20:4). Thus, the mark of the beast is a mark of loyalty and devotion to the beast. Moreover, when you compare those passages where the mark of the beast is discussed with passages like Rev. 7 and 14, it is plausible to think that the mark of the beast is most likely a sign that identifies you as something you already are—namely wicked and evil, a person of the dragon. I say this because when you read Rev. 7:1-8 and 14:1 (where the mark of the Lamb is discussed), you’ll notice it is a mark given to God’s people, God’s servants, in order to identify them as such and, of course, to protect them. They get the mark of the Lamb because they are already united with the Lamb. It seems pretty evident that all of this is the case because these two marks—the mark of the beast and the mark of the Lamb—are meant to be seen as two polar realities, two opposite signs, marking out as it were two different types of people, namely, the wicked on the one hand and the righteous on the other. What all this means is that the “mark of the beast” is most likely a spiritual, non-visible mark; it’s a mark of loyalty and worship and is not, therefore, something you could accidentally accept. So you don’t need to fear getting the beast’s mark by taking a vaccine—unless, of course, you plan to treat the vaccine as a sort of symbolic expression or “unholy sacrament” (sorry for the oxymoron!) of your wilful and public rejection of the Christian faith that you despise. If that’s you and if that’s your plan, then it’s not the vaccine that’s the problem. About that Beast.... Any interpretation of Revelation that results in “the beast” becoming the central focus (and dreaded fear) of your eschatology most definitely suggests that you’ve completely misunderstood the book entirely. The Neronic phantom would love the attention you’re giving him, but quite frankly, he doesn’t deserve it. Proof that we give too much attention to him is perhaps clear when we make the following observation: most Christians are only familiar with those texts that talk about the “mark of the beast” (e.g., Rev 13:16-18) and not about those texts that talk about the “mark of the Lamb” (e.g., Rev. 14:1). That’s interesting to me. I mean, it’s all understandable, I suppose. In popular culture, after all, the “mark of the beast” has received way more attention, becoming quite the obsession for many. (Beasts are loud and attention-grabbing; lambs could go more unnoticed and ignored.) I think, though, that it might be better to get one’s theology from places other than pop culture’s sensationalized films and best-selling fictional books. A mere suggestion. Speaking of sensationalism, it is interesting how things cycle in and out the way they do. Even in our own lifetimes, for example, the “mark” was first attached to social security numbers, then to credit cards. Now, apparently, certain interpretations of the COVID-19 quarantine are making their own contributions to evangelical lore. Much of this sensationalism not only reveals ignorance about the biblical text, not least with respect to its historical context, but as a pastor I should also add that what particularly angers me is how such ignorance serves to spread needless fear among God’s people—a good reminder that theology has consequences. Whose Revelation Is It? Popular interpretations of “Revelation” are often forgetful (negligent?) of the fact that this book is “The revelation of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:1). Many people (not least on social media) treat it as if it were the revelation of the dragon and the spirit. The sillier teachers of eschatology focus so much of their attention on endless speculations concerning the Antichrist, the “mark of the beast,” etc., that I truly wonder if they think Revelation is primarily about revealing the satanic. Two things to say about this: (1) Such assumptions about Revelation treat Satan as the star of end-times speculations, breeding, once again, unnecessary fear in good folks. And (2), such views are simply wrong: Neither the dragon nor the beast are the stars of the show; thus, they shouldn’t be the focus of our obsessions. To the contrary, the point of Revelation is to reveal and uncover the victory of the Lamb and the victory the Lamb shares with his people. Jesus is the focus. This, quite frankly, is rather old news. In fact, it’s 2,000-year-old news. It’s basic theology. And yet, it’s ignored. I suspect, though, that much of the misguided eschatological hype has very little to do with theology per se and much more to do with certain political ambitions that could be obtained by weaponizing key biblical texts (e.g., Rev 13) to their own ends—a sort of neronic/beastly thing to do, really. Such is the politics of our time, though. Let’s Play the Game Let’s pretend that the beast and his mark were, in fact, associated with the COVID-19 quarantine or with some related vaccine, as this sign insinuates. (PSA: It’s not, but just pretend with me for a minute.) Even so, if it were the case, it makes very little biblical sense to fight against the beast with things like the American flag and the 2nd Amendment (you may be interested to know that I saw one protester with a gun; what’s the point in protesting with a gun?). At any rate, protesting “the beast” and his “mark” with threats of this world’s weapons is to fight the enemy with ways of the enemy. But you can’t advance God’s agenda with violence or with threats of violence. If you live by the sword, well, you know... In many ways, then, when a person tries to advance the Kingdom of God by means of violence, ironically, they show themselves to have more in common with the beast and the dragon than with the Lamb. We are taught that, to the contrary, as Christians we overcome the enemy “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of [our] testimony” (Rev. 12:11). In other words, we overcome by the ways of Christ, not by the ways of Caesar. So, if and/or when you see silly signs like these, don’t let them induce fear or panic in your heart or mind. I’d honestly not give them any more credence than a quick roll of the eye. The Theologian’s Burden If you are a Christian biblical scholar or theologian, now is the time to help others navigate the slew of information out there. Perhaps you could seek ways to provide biblically-based guidance and theologically-coherent direction to those who are either uninformed or misinformed when it comes to eschatology—not least as it is being understood in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. If you are a pastor or local church leader, I encourage you to take advantage of reputable resources on eschatology to pass onto your congregation. There are highly-respectable scholars writing on the subject—scholars who are committed to careful research, meticulous reflection, and timely application. Digging into these resources will be time well-spent. Dr. Halsted has published a follow-up article, The Covid Vaccine has 666 Written All Over It...and Why that Doesn’t Matter According to Revelation. Looking for resources to help interpret the book of Revelation? Start with a few of these great offerings from Logos: Mobile Ed, AR271 The Seven Cities of Revelation - course taught by David deSilva, a noted expert in NT backgrounds Revelation: A Video Study - taught by world-renowned scholar Craig Keener Revelation: Four Views, by Steve Gregg Revelation, International Theological Commentary, by Peter Leithart by Matthew L. Halsted, PhD In an article published last week on theLAB, COVID-19 and The Mark of the Beast, I claimed that the mark of the beast (666) is most likely not a physical or visible mark (Rev. 13:16). The biggest objection I received from readers had to do with this very point: how could the mark be non-physical and invisible if having the mark was what allowed people to “buy or sell” things (Rev. 13:17)? Wouldn’t the mark need to be visible in order to do that? Furthermore, isn’t there enough evidence that the vaccine is the “number” of the beast, including a bill currently before the House of Representatives (6666) and the very letters “C-O-R-O-N-A” themselves? These are good questions, and I think a response would be helpful. But first, we need to start from square one and do some background work. Letter to the Churches First, we must remember that Revelation is a first-century letter to seven churches in Asia Minor (Rev. 1:4, 11). Letters in antiquity are much like modern letters—situational, personal, and contextual. To understand a letter between two people (or groups of people), you really need to know a thing or two about what necessitated the sending of the letter in the first place. In other words, you need context. In order to rightly interpret the letter of Revelation, we need to investigate these churches’ historical situation. Many evangelicals tend to skip over this step and jump straight to application. This is a grave mistake. If we completely detach our modern-day applications from a text’s original, historical context, we risk misapplying the text—sometimes in embarrassing ways. Revelation 13:17 (“no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name,” ESV) is one such text. In order to interpret it rightly, we need to know its context. We need some historical data from the letter’s time period in order to gain clarity into its meaning. Is there any such data that might shed some light on this passage? As it turns out, there is. Worshipping the Emperor If you want to reconstruct the historical context of Christian people living in first-century Asia Minor, you must take into account the Roman imperial cult. There’s simply no way around it. The cult itself presented clear challenges to early Christians. But what do I mean by “imperial cult”? For starters, Roman emperors were often deified after they died, becoming “gods” for Roman citizens to worship. For example, after Julius Caesar died, he was deified. His adopted son, Augustus, took for himself the title “son of god.” The logic was simple. If his father became “god,” then he got to be called, well, you guessed it, “son of god.” Though it was true an emperor would be deified after he died, many Greeks living in various cities throughout the eastern parts of the empire jumped the gun; they would worship the Roman emperor while he was still alive. It is interesting to note that this was true of Ephesus (just like the letter to the Ephesians). The city of Pergamum, too, had long been a hotbed for imperial worship. Smyrna needs to be thrown into the mix as well. The list goes on. In fact, this was also true of the other four cities to which John directed his letter. The more despotic emperors of the first century sought to be recognized as gods while they were still living. Nero was one such emperor; Domitian was another. Suetonius, the well-known ancient historian, says Domitian demanded to be addressed as both “Lord and God” (Suetonius, Dom. 13). The situation was such that Domitian was “everywhere hated and feared” (Dom. 14). Keep in mind that most scholars believe Revelation was written during the reign of one of these two tyrants. Either way, if you were a Christian, you very well might have been plagued with angst, fear, and uncertainty. After all, Nero was infamous for murdering his own mother, as well as killing innocent Christians by turning them into tar-covered human candles to light up the night. Suetonius tells a story of how Domitian once wineed and dined his palace steward, lavishing on him kindness and generosity. Then the next day Domitian had him crucified. Why? Simply because he could (Dom. 11). It is perhaps understandable, then, why other ancient texts came to refer to Nero and Domitian as a “beast.” This is documented in places like Pliny’s Panegyricus, the Sybilline Oracles, and Vita Apollonii. I’d say the shoe fits. “666”: The Number of the Beast Years ago, I remember hearing how some had taken President Reagan to be the end times “beast.” The reasoning went like this: When you take his full name, Ronald Wilson Reagan, you can see how each name contains exactly six letters. No wave of the wand or hat-trick was needed to see how that dreaded, mysterious number was embedded in the president’s name. To say this is silly is an understatement. (How odd that John wrote in such a way that only a person who was familiar with both the English language and modern American politics could rightly interpret his message!) In order to avoid embarrassing interpretations like this one (and similar ones that seem to prevail in 2020), we must deal with the text’s original context. Again, you can’t simply jump to modern application without dealing with the historical context. Scholars often associate “the number of the beast” with Nero Caesar. There’s actually good reason for doing so. For instance, we know from Suetonius that many people were at the time toying with the numerical values of Nero’s name (Nero 39). This practice, known as gematria, took a letter of the alphabet and assigned it an equivalent number. So, for example, in the case of Greek, the first letter alpha would be given the number one. The second letter beta would be understood as two, and so on. When you take Nero’s name (Neron Kaiser) and transliterate it into Hebrew, the result is the number of the beast: 666. The Image of the Beast Recall that in Revelation “the mark of the beast” is tied closely to the worship of the beast’s image (Rev. 13:15; 20:4). Since we have a pretty good idea about the identity of the beast, is there any other historical data we could look to that would link the worship of the beast’s image with the worship of Caesar’s image? Again, the answer is yes. From the writings of Pliny, for example, we learn how professing Christians’ faith were put to the test by having them worship the image of Caesar (Pliny, Letters, 10:96-97). The emperor’s image was everywhere, especially on coins. Modern folks are used to this. In my country, images of former national leaders are on our money. But Rome was slightly different. Caesar’s image would be on coins along with his claim to divinity. Quite literally, the emperor’s boast that he was in some way “divine” was etched (dare I say marked?) on money, decrees, and the like. One scholar observes that, “One could do little in commerce . . . without handling such a mark,” because allusions to the emperor’s divinity appeared on many coins and other documents.” During this time period, involvement in local economies would have often required some sort of participation in pagan worship. For example, trade guilds often had feasts that centered around the worship of idols. If you were part of the guild, then your participation in these feasts would have been compulsory—that is, only if you wanted to be able to buy and sell. Buying and Selling What, then, can we conclude about that “buy/sell passage”? When it comes to the beast, his mark, and the worship of the beast’s image, the historical data seems to be pointing us in one direction: It’s simply a reference to how the imperial cult impacted one’s participation in the local economy. If the “mark” is an allusion to the emperor’s claim to divinity (symbolized on Roman coins, statues, images, etc.), then a person in the first century could genuinely be said to “take the mark of the beast” by participating in the economy at the expense of their faith in Jesus. That last part is key. In other words, at certain times and in certain locations in the empire, the only way to be a good-standing citizen would have been to simply curse Christ and worship Caesar’s image (see again Pliny, Letters, 10:96-97). Again, this would have been a particular problem for Christians in Asia Minor. They would often find it impossible to make a living and worship Christ exclusively. Of course, a person could respond by saying, “Yes, but the text says the ‘mark’ is placed on the ‘right hand or the forehead.’ Does this not therefore necessarily imply a physical mark?” The answer is no. Craig Keener offers helpful thoughts on this point. He notes how “the mark of the beast” in Rev. 13 acts as a parallel to the “seal” that is placed on the foreheads of Christians in Rev. 7:3-4. This “seal” actually has an Old Testament basis, namely, in Ezekiel 9, where a “mark” was said to have been placed on the foreheads of God’s people (Ez. 9:1-6). Keener also points to another Jewish text of the period (known as the Psalms of Solomon) that describes a mark placed on evil people. He observes how the two marks in Ezekiel and the Psalms of Solomon are clearly “symbolic . . . visible only to God and his angels, not to people.” And so it is quite reasonable to conclude that the mark of the beast, like the seal of the Lamb, is also symbolic. So is the Vaccine the 666 Mark of the Beast? Growing up, I never heard any of this stuff. I reckon that most people in my evangelical tradition haven’t either. But without all the background information, people are being tossed to and fro by endless speculations and fears. Sadly, some people—many of them sincere Christians—are terrified that they will be forced to take the mark of the beast (no, it’s not Bill Gates) in the near future. Could it be the vaccine? Is it a computer chip? What if I get tricked into taking it? With these questions in mind, let me offer a few remarks about modern-day application. First, the historical data does not permit us to think the “mark of the beast” is something you can accidentally take. It’s a mark of loyalty and worship, which requires full cognitive and heart-felt awareness of what you are doing (otherwise it’s not worship). If there is some future mark imposed on people by some nefarious person, then to take that mark, you’ll know exactly what you are doing—namely, cursing Christ and pledging devotion to his enemy, Scripture and other ancient writings from that timeperiod point us in this direction and, quite frankly, there isn’t much leeway on this point (although you can debate me in the comments, if you wish). Second, be careful and wise with how you apply these texts. Let me give an example. Right now, in my own country (and it’s been this way for a long time), a person might find it very tricky and difficult to operate within our local economies without a government-issued social security number. Let me be as clear as I possibly can about this: There is no biblical reason to think that accepting government-mandated social security numbers is the equivalent of taking the mark of the beast. Whatever the current issue may be (vaccines, SSN, chip implants, SIM cards, etc), we need to be careful about confusing our personal and/or political convictions with the meaning of a biblical text. Some public policy ideas are good; some are terrible. But either way, unless “They” require you to forsake your faith in Jesus as the exclusive object of your worship, They have no relation to the mark of the beast. Again, given what we know about the historical context of these biblical texts, the “mark of the beast” must be tied back into worship if it is to be applied properly. To take all of these things into account allows a much-needed moratorium on all the pointless anxiety and fear-mongering. The message of Revelation beckons us away from angst and worry. It bids us to gaze upon the slain Lamb—to worship him with loyalty, devotion, and commitment. Let’s make Christ our focus, not endless speculations that, at the end of the day, have very little to do with the message of Revelation. *Correction: An earlier version of this post stated that the Senate had a bill before it, when it is the House of Representatives. Comments? Leave them below. Also be sure to read Dr. Halsted’s earlier article, Covid-19 and the Mark of the Beast.

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