

OpenTheo

Q&A#71 The Mark of the Beast!!

October 14, 2018



Alastair Roberts

Today's question: "What does the mark of the beast in Revelation refer to historically?"

Within my discussion, I reference Peter Leithart's Revelation commentary (<https://amzn.to/2Cl0ERY> and <https://amzn.to/2CGKB3u>).

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

If you have enjoyed these talks, please tell your friends and consider supporting me on Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>.

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Welcome back. Today I'm continuing the theme of my previous video and answering the question, what does the Mark of the Beast in Revelation refer to historically? Obviously, this has been a cause of great curiosity and speculation over the years. Many have seen it as a reference to Napoleon or Hitler or some other figure from history.

Others have seen it as a reference to some anti-Christ figure that's about to appear at the end of history and that Christ will defeat this person who will bring about a new world order, whatever it is. And so there have been all sorts of speculations, particularly in dispensationalist circles. But I think when we look at the book of Revelation in its original context against the background of the first century AD and in the context of the book, we will have a pretty good sense of what the Mark of the Beast refers to.

When you're looking at this, I highly recommend reading this book, which I've found incredibly helpful in answering this question. And I will largely be following Peter

Lightheart's reading of this text. So if you want to have a better reading of this text than the one I give here, read Peter Lightheart's treatment of it in his commentary.

I am dealing with it from memory of my reading of it. But if you want to go back to the source, I recommend reading that. When you read the surrounding chapters, it will give you a bit more of a grounding upon which to understand what the beast in question is.

So there are a number of figures in play. In the previous chapter, we see the woman who's giving birth to the son, and then the son ascends into heaven. There's a battle between Michael and his angels against the dragon.

And then the dragon is cast down to earth. He pursues the woman and her children. And then at the beginning of this, or just before the start of this chapter, chapter 13, and the dragon was enraged with the woman and went to make war with the rest of her offspring who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

And then it leads into what happens next, that the dragon stands on the shore of the sea. And then he summons this beast from the sea. And so the dragon is standing on the shore of the sea.

The dragon has been described in the previous chapter. He's a great fiery red dragon having seven heads and 10 horns and seven diadems on his heads. And then when we see the beast first arising, it's a beast from the sea.

And the beast that arises from the sea has seven heads and 10 horns and on his horns, 10 crowns or diadems and on his heads, a blasphemous name. Looking at this then, this suggests that there is a relationship, a strong relationship between the dragon and the sea beast. The dragon summons the sea beast, but this sea beast is also a reflection of the dragon.

Later on, if you get to Revelation 17, we have another description of the beast. The beast is now a scarlet beast on which the harlot is riding. So the scarlet beast, again associated with the sea beast here, with seven heads and 10 horns, is a beast that reflects the red dragon.

The red dragon that has seven heads and 10 horns. And then later on in verse 11 of chapter 13, then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon. And he exercises all of the authority of the first beast in his presence and causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast whose deadly wound was healed.

So we have a third figure here. We have the dragon first, then we have the sea beast, which the dragon standing on the shore of the sea summons from the sea, and then we have the land beast, which has the authority of the sea beast and speaks with the voice of the dragon. So there are three figures that are associated with each other.

And then the dragon and then the land beast is granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. And this is associated with the first beast. He exercises all of the authority of the first beast.

He deceives those who dwell on the earth by the signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived. So you have the dragon who summons the sea beast and then the sea beast is a reflection or an image of the dragon. And then you have this other beast that's called forth from the land and the land beast does things in the name of the sea beast with the voice of the dragon and the land beast is able to give life to this image of the beast.

And so there are four things here. Stepping back a bit further, if we look in the wider context of scripture, we see in Daniel chapter 7 a very important background for this where we have descriptions of four great beasts came up from the sea, each different from the other. The first was like a lion and had eagle's wings.

I watched till its wings were plucked off and it was lifted up from the earth and made to stand on two feet like a man and a man's heart was given to it. And suddenly another beast, a second like a bear, it was raised up on one side and had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth and they said thus to it, arise thou that devour much flesh. After this I looked and there was another like a leopard which had on its back four wings of a bird and the beast had also four heads and dominion was given to it.

After this I saw in the night visions and behold a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, exceedingly strong. It had huge iron teeth. It was devouring, breaking in pieces and trampling the residue with its feet.

It was different from all the beasts that were before it and it had ten horns. I was considering the horns and there was another horn, a little one, coming up among them before whom three of the first horns were plucked out by the roots and there in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth speaking pompous words. So that's Daniel 7 which provides background for this prophecy of John.

When you read that prophecy in Daniel 7 what you see reference to ten horns and you also see reference to seven heads. You see a reference to three heads for the first, second and fourth beasts and then the third beast has four heads. So together it sums up to seven heads and ten horns.

This again is significant. The fourth beast of the prophecy of Daniel is a beast beyond description. It's unlike the previous beasts but here what we see is what probably is the fourth beast of Daniel's vision, an amalgam of the previous beasts.

If you remember in Daniel's vision there is the first one like a lion, the second is like a bear and the third is like a leopard and so the description of the beast here, the beast which I saw was like a leopard. His feet were like the feet of a bear and his mouth like the mouth of a lion and the dragon gave him his power, his throne and his great authority. So there are three different images here that are composite within this beast which I believe as Peter Lighthouse argues is probably the fourth beast of the vision of Daniel, an amalgam of the previous three beasts in a monstrous form.

So these previous three beasts are then brought together in this greater beast. This lion, this bear and this leopard become this fourth great beast and this beast is described in the beginning of chapter 13. The dragon gives power, authority and a throne.

So the throne might be connected with the diadems or the crowns, the power with the horns and the authority with the heads. Now as we look through Daniel's vision and as we look through the wider context of the book of Daniel, Peter Lighthouse argues again that the heads are not individual kings but kingdoms and so the king of a particular place is the kingdom of a particular place. It's not a specific figure but it's the throne, it's the authority figure.

So it's the office not so much a particular man and that helps us to understand that the seven heads are not seven different kings as many people have argued and as you read in chapter 17 it describes the seven kings. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits. There are also seven kings.

Five have fallen, one is and the other has not yet come and when he comes he must continue a short time. So the kings here are not individual monarchs, they are kings as in kings representing a kingdom, they're the office of the king of a particular and so they represent whole kingdoms and that's something that we see within the book of Daniel that the kings are not just individual persons but they represent the whole kingdom and so we see a number of kingdoms, some of these heads have fallen and that's the end of a kingdom not just the death of a king, it's the end of a kingdom and fallen is a far better way of talking about the end of a kingdom than the end of a king and then one now is and then one will come for a short period of time and then there's going to be let's see five have fallen, one is and the other has not yet come and when he comes he must continue a short time and the beast that was and is not is himself also the eighth and is of the seven and is going to perdition. This I think helps us to understand what's going on here.

Within the prophecy of Daniel you see a succession of kingdoms and so you start off with the Babylonians and then you have a movement towards Greece and Rome and Rome is the final kingdom and here I think that's what we see and that Greece represents the four heads and those are four different iterations of the kingdom of Greece and so the beast is a singular beast, it's the leopard, the fast moving leopard and later associated

with the ram but it is also a composite of four different stages of that of that empire and then the final beast is Rome and Rome brings together these different things in this more monstrous form and so the beast represents is associated with the dragon and the beast is a bringing together of these four different empires. Now these empires as they appear within the book of Daniel are not necessarily bad things, they can be defending cherubim-like figures, empires that protect Israel and God and like the cherubim that you see on God's throne there is a guarding beast that comes up from the sea. Now the sea is significant as well, the contrast between sea and land is the contrast between Israel and the nations.

The nations are represented by the sea, Israel by the land. We see this in many different ways in scripture so for instance the people of the land are associated with sheep and then their leaders are shepherds. In the New Testament suddenly everything is about fish and this fish emphasis is associated with the Gentiles in much the same way as we see in the case of the Old Testament where we do see fish it's in something like the story of Jonah, this great fish which is associated with the ministry to Assyria and Nineveh and this then helps us to understand the location of the different beasts.

So the dragon comes to the land, summons a beast from the sea to rise out in the sea and then that corresponds to a land beast that acts in the authority of the sea beast. So the sea beast is associated with the four empires or the four empires and the seven different kingdoms of the story of Daniel. Then it brings these together as an image of the dragon and it describes, I saw one of its heads as if it had been mortally wounded and his deadly wound was healed and all the world marveled and followed the beast.

So they worshipped the dragon who gave authority to the beast and they worshipped the beast saying who is like the beast and who is able to make war with him. This again is interesting, there's a sort of death and resurrection here and if we think again of the heads as kingdoms then I think it helps us to understand that the death and resurrection here as Peter Lyotard argues again is a death and resurrection of a kingdom. So a crisis event for a kingdom, it seems it's gone and then it rises again from the ashes and that I think is the empire of Rome, the Roman empire after the death of Caesar and it seems like the Caesars have gone but there's no one to succeed after him in that way but it rises again and then Rome seems unstoppable.

Who is able to battle with Rome? Who is able to oppose this great monstrous beast? And so that head is associated with the death and resurrection that has previously occurred and this following of the figure that has died and raised again, been raised again, is of course a parody of Christ in various ways, the lamb that has died and been raised again. And again you see within the three figures there is another sort of parody, a parody of the trinity. There's the parrot, the dragon and the image of the dragon in the figure of the sea beast and then the sea beast who in his authority sends out the land beast to act in his name and the land beast can give life through his breath to the image of the beast,

the image of the sea beast and so there's a sort of a distorted trinity here.

So the dragon is like the father who sends forth his true image in the sun and that corresponds with the sea beast and then the monstrous land beast is like the spirit that gives breath to the image of the sun and that's in the church and so there's a parody of the trinity within the figures of the dragon, the sea beast, the land beast and the image of the beast, the second beast created by the third beast and that I think again helps us to see some of the bigger things that are taking place here. There are parallels between the sea beast and the land beast as we read this description of the sea beast, what we've already seen, we can see many figures, many features of this that are corresponding in the land beast and there's a similar introduction to their description, the and I saw the beast rising up and then he exercises the authority performing the signs and he's worshipped these sorts of things. What is the identity then of the first, the sea beast? The sea beast I believe is associated with the Roman Empire.

It's the fourth of the beasts of Daniel's vision and it's an amalgam of all the previous beasts and it's associated with the dragon and it's something that's become monstrous. It's not just in original form, it could be a potentially good thing but it becomes evil and so it's given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies and given authority to continue for 42 months. Then he opened his mouth and blasphemy against God to blaspheme his name, his tabernacle and those who dwell in heaven and it was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them and authority was given to him over every tribe, tongue and nation and all who dwell on earth will worship him whose names have not been written in the book of life of the lamb slain from the foundation of the earth.

So here I think what we see is there is the Empire of Rome which is originally it need not be a negative thing then there's this death and resurrection. Everyone follows it and says who is like this beast, who is able to make war with this beast and then the beast starts to speak blasphemies. Blasphemies against God, his name, his tabernacle, those who dwell in heaven.

Again there's a sort of threefold thing here. God, his name associated with Christ and his tabernacle, the tabernacle of the Holy Spirit and so is associated with the Holy Spirit and God's dwelling and here then I think we see again these threes and this counterfeit trinity and the conflict with the true God that's taking place. He continues for 42 months.

42 months is a time, times and half a time. It's 1260 days, it's three and a half years and it's this significant period of time which is a period of testing, of trial, it's a broken seven, it's a half a week, it's all these different things and for that period of time there is a period of intense and successful persecution against the church where the church is really is really damaged by this persecution and that I believe is associated with Nero. Nero has not yet come in this time but it's associated with neurotic persecution and that

power is very much exercised against the saints and it's associated also with the worship, worship of this divine emperor and the emperor worship that really arose within the Asian provinces and was focused within that in that context and then developed from there that that is an important part of this picture that the empire is starting to take on, assume the status of a deity to claim for itself blasphemous things, to claim authority and divine status that does not belong to it.

So the beast from the sea is a Roman beast arising out of Gentile world and then this corresponds with a land beast and the land beast is associated with Israel. This land beast could be a number of different things but I think the most likely is it's a reference to the herods. The herods are associated with Edom, with Esau, this opponent to Jacob, this brother who's an enemy at the same time, the brother who's associated with the Malachites, the brother who's the the Aegeanians of the herods and the herods are associated with and loyal to Rome and they bolster the power of Rome over the land of Israel and there's two horns.

The two horns are probably associated with king and priest, they're associated with Yacon and Boaz, the two pillars of the temple, these two figures that represent the anointed ones within, you'll see that in Zechariah, the anointed ones within the life of Israel as a nation. So actually the land beast is not just the herods, it's this order of an unfaithful Israel. An unfaithful Israel that's represented on the one hand by a rebellious priesthood and on the other hand, and priestly system, and on the other hand by the Edomian kings, Herod and his dynasty and both of those are allied with the power of the first beast.

They act in the name of the, they speak with the voice of the dragon and they act in the name and the authority of the first beast. So they're aligned with Rome and we have no king but Caesar. This is the alliance that has been made by the Jews that have rejected Christ and sought to destroy him.

And so this threefold entity of the dragon, the sea beast and the land beast work in a progression. The dragon summons forth the sea beast, the sea beast is then gives authority to the land beast who speaks with the voice of the dragon, performs great signs, he deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs that he's given power to do and this is associated with, I think, this system of rebellious Judaism. A Judaism that is not just Judaism as it has existed before but this is Judaism that is built upon the rejection and persecution of the church and the continuation of that which led the Jews to crucify Christ.

This is not then just the continuation of the Judaism that existed beforehand. This is a radical apostasy, a rejection of what was truly a faithful religion. He's granted power to give breath to the image of the beast that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.

He causes all both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave to receive a mark on their right hands and on their foreheads and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the number of the or the name of the beast or the number of his name. Here is wisdom, let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast for it is the number of a man, his number is 666 or 666. Looking at this there is the beast gives rise, the land beast give rise to an idolatrous sort of faith, an idolatrous sort of religion and this is associated with the buying and selling, this formation of a new community that's galvanized in idolatry and in rebellion.

It's a mutation of what was once the what was once true worship of God into a service of the empire, a service of Satan ultimately, the dragon that lies behind Rome, that lies behind the rebellious form of Rome and that lies behind the rule of Herod and the priests that have allied themselves with Rome and this giving image to the giving breath to the image and causing people to worship this and the image of the beast, this is a whole system that is formed ultimately around alliance with Rome. Now whether they realize this or not this is what it has become, this is what the temple becomes when Christ is rejected, when God is rejected as he comes to his people, the temple and the whole system around that becomes an idolatrous system and this I think is what is referred to in the description of the mark on the right hand and the foreheads. The right hand and the forehead were associated, the hand and the forehead were associated with the phylacteries, the places where people bore marks of the Torah that declared their allegiance to God, their commitment to the law and now there's a, as it were, perversion, a parody of this law that people with marks on their foreheads, people with marks on their hands and that the whole system is built around this and if you're not participating in that, if you've not bought into this whole system then you're cast out, you're not allowed to participate and so the buying and selling is this participation within this wider religious economy, within this wider religious world that has become so allied with Rome and behind that with the dragon itself.

The name of the beast, there's threefold mention to the mark, the name and the number of the name and then in verse 18 there's a reference to the number itself. The number itself is 666. Now when I first said this I said 666, this is familiar to us, we tend to say 666 whereas it is actually 666, that is the number.

It could be associated as a sort of parody of the gematria for Jesus in Greek, that that's 888 and so gematria is a way of the letters of alphabets also serve as numbers and so when you take the number, the letters of a name and work out the corresponding numbers and top those all up you will get the gematria, a sort of numerical significance for that name and we see this in various occasions within scripture. Here I think there is probably something of that taking place and so the gematria of Jesus in Greek is 888. Some have suggested that here the number of the beast is the number of the man and it's 666 and that some have suggested, Kaird and others have suggested that's associated with Caesar it's Nero Caesar in Greek then that's transliterated into

Hebrew and that's the gematria of it.

Now that's a bit, that's a stretch if that's all we're working with then there are some other versions that have 616 and that's the Latin form transliterated into Hebrew and then the gematria of that which would suggest possibly there is a connection with Nero here. Other things to notice though is that 666 is the triangular number of 36 and it's something that is two-thirds of a thousand, a thousand minus a third and that might be associated with one of the judgments that previously occurred. It is also significant that we can think of it as 666 that 666 is associated with the sixth day of creation it's a threefold repetition of that associated with man, a falling short of the Sabbath and we see this on certain occasions as well in numerology that they're that cutting off or that for instance 42 months that period of persecution which is associated with most likely with the neurotic persecution which lasted for about 42 months that there is this period of time that is six by seven that is a time times and half a time it's something that is associated with falling short in some way falling short of the seventh seven of the association with jubilee or with Pentecost whatever it is and also associated with the sixth day the day of mankind's creation whereas Jesus his name is associated with the first day of a new creation 888 this new creation brought in.

What else could be said and here I think it's helpful to go back as Lighthouse does to 1st Kings 10. In 1st Kings 10 verse 14 we read the weight of gold that came to Solomon yearly was 666 talents of gold besides that from the traveling merchants from the income of traders from all the kings of Arabia and from the governors of the country. Now what is the significance of this verse it would seem to be just an isolated number within the text but yet if we read the text of 1st Kings what we notice is that there is a gradual building up of the riches and the greatness of Solomon's reign and at this very climax the woman comes to the man who's developed this new Edenic in this new sort of Edenic situation the temple is associated with Eden and then we see these other images that are associated with Eden with the greatness that is built up this fulfillment of all the purposes this giving of wisdom the enjoyment of the knowledge of good and evil all these things that occur and then the woman comes the queen of Sheba and it's as if we reach that climax of chapter 2 of Genesis and then there's a shift and the shift is the fall of Solomon and that occurs in that verse that is the fulcrum upon which it shifts and from that moment onwards we hear just a litany of things that Solomon does that break with the rule of the king and the rule of the king in Deuteronomy is threefold not to multiply gold not to multiply wives and not to multiply horses and chariots now we've already seen references in the story of 1st Kings that show that Solomon was already starting to do these things but here in this passage that follows we hear him do every single one of those he goes to Egypt for chariots and horses he's trading with all these surrounding nations and building up incredible wealth and then he's also multiplying wives beyond imagining and in each of these respects he has categorically broken the law of the king it's a turning away from the true kingdom of Israel and a reversion to a sort of idolatry

and by the end of Solomon's reign what we see is this whole system that's very similar to what we see described of Israel in slavery in Egypt and by the time Rehoboam comes on the scene as Solomon's son the people are asking for relief from bondage and Rehoboam just increases it but there is this deep problem there and the deep problem is associated with Solomon's rebellion and the rebellion that comes in this particular verse is the key point where it starts to unravel and it's 666 talents of gold and it's not just a random fact that this 666 is associated with gold the gold was a sign of rebellion against God's law the law concerning the king that he should not multiply gold and here what we see is in revelation that 666 is associated again with buying and selling it's associated with participating in a wider economy an economy that is loyal to the beast the sea beast and ultimately to the dragon and this is what we see in the story of Solomon as well Solomon fails as he enters into this broader economy and the economy is seen in this great sum of talents that comes in from these other nations and as he takes part in this larger economy whether taking wives seeking for horses and chariots from the land of Egypt or whether he's collecting money and wealth in each of these cases he becomes part of this corrupt world order and here the beast the association with 666 is I believe some sort of at least in part an association with that corrupt world order now I would go farther than Peter Lighthouse in the association with Caesar and Nero I think that there is an association with Nero intended here and that association can help us to fill out the picture a bit more that there is an association between the rule of Israel with the kings and the priests and the whole system of the temple and its worship and that becomes associated with loyalty to Rome and rebellion against Christ and it's a false lamb here as well that the beast from the earth has two horns like a lamb we've already seen the lamb we've already seen the lamb that has died and rose that has died and risen again and here we have a sea beast that has died and risen again and we have a land beast that is like a lamb in certain respects so again parodies of the true thing so putting everything together I think that we have a corrupt system of worship that is associated with the symbols of Israel's identity the law on the forehead and the law on the hand and the worship of the temple the image and all these other things of the beast that ultimately become associated with those things and the land beast gives life and power to those and acts as a sort of prophetic force for the sea beast and works speaks in the name of the dragon and that whole system that corrupt system is allied to this wider world order associated with the Roman empire that's gone and that's become evil under Nero and others and then associated ultimately with the dragon behind it the beast after the demise of Nero will turn upon the land beast if the sea beast will turn upon the land beast in the figure of the harlot the harlot that once rose upon rode upon the beast will be devoured by the beast and destroyed by it and this is associated with the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome these people who have said we have no king but Caesar these people that have built their whole system with the idiomian heralds or with the system of the king of the priests of the temple they've allied themselves with Rome and now they face their doom when we get chapter 14 I think we have a corresponding or contrasting juxtaposed image because there we see I looked and behold a lamb standing on mount

Zion and with him 144 000 having his father's name written on their foreheads and I heard a voice from heaven like the voice of many waters and the voice of loud thunders and I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps and then these are described as those who are marked out by the lamb and for the lamb these faithful of Israel and then these are described as people from the wider world that are brought together with them so there is a an original group that's associated with Israel then there's a wider group from the the world and these correspond with the land and the sea beast and with the false worship is then contrasted with true worship those who are marked out by the beast are associated with those who are marked out by the lamb and this I think helps us to put a lot of things together and when we look through the book of revelation more generally having things like this more clearly in place seeing the connections between these figures and those of Daniel and elsewhere in scripture so for instance the references to the different weeks in Daniel 9 or something like the references to the abomination of desolation in the gospels these sorts of things will help us fill out the picture the man of sin in Thessalonians is associated I believe with this land beast in one of its expressions presumably with one of the wicked priests the when we're talking about antichrist I don't believe that's a particular figure if you're looking at John's first epistle and there I think it's more generally a movement a movement contrary to Christ so I don't believe that the beast is antichrist the beast in this case is the mark of the beast the name of the beast is associated with the sea beast with a system imposed by the land beast and then that's ultimately grounded upon the dragon I've said more and more than enough on this I highly recommend that you read Peter Lighthouse's commentary lots lots lots more there and I found it so worthwhile to get into if you have any further questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account if you would like to support this and future videos please do so using my Patreon account and lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow god bless and thank you for listening