



Part 29 – The Prophet of a False Faith

Revelation 13:11-18

As we move on through Revelation the beast from the sea will be referred to simply as “the beast.” The beast from the land will be referred to on three separate occasions as “the false prophet.” What John sees is a blasphemous false trinity: The dragon (Satan), the beast, and the false prophet. The first beast represents the satanic perversion of the civil or political sphere. The second beast represents the perversion of religion as it directs worship to the first beast. Again, as so often in Revelation, it seems best to take this beast or false prophet as a power at work in the world throughout history. However, that does not preclude the possibility that a particular figure will arise at the end of the age who sums up all the wickedness of the beast.

The Deceptive Power of the False Prophet

Vs. 11 – “I saw another beast rising out of the earth...” – As we saw with the first beast, the second beast engages in a wicked parody of Christ. This second beast is likened to a lamb with horns, as was Christ himself (5:6). His description also fits the Lord’s warning against false prophets in Matthew 7:15: “they come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” His two horns, rather than the first beast’s ten horns, may indicate his subordinate position to the first beast. This description also calls to mind the evil ruler described in Daniel 8 as “a ram which had two horns” (vs. 3). The second beast speaks as a dragon, that is, with the authority of Satan. This beast will later be referred to as “the false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). For John’s original readers, the second beast would have easily been perceived as the imperial cult that promoted the worship of Caesar.¹

Vs. 12 – “It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence...” – The second beast uses his delegated authority and counterfeit miracles to make “the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed.” This was precisely the situation for John’s original readers: “This matches the social situation in Asia, where both cities and individuals vied for the right to build imperial temples and give the emperor honors in a more extravagant way than further west in the empire.”²

Vs. 13 – “It performs great signs...” – The religious nature of the second beast becomes clear in its use of counterfeit miracles. The second beast is a religious minister of propaganda for the first beast. It means to capture the people through what at least seem to be miraculous signs and wonders. This should serve as a warning that power is never neutral. This is true of claims to spiritual power. In the case of the second beast, great signs of power are used to influence people away from Christ. The reference to fire reminds us of the many ways that fire is connected to the speech of God whose word is like a fire. “Therefore, the fire represents the speaking of God’s true word which judges sinners, and here the beast poses as a spokesman for truth but is a false prophet and false teacher.”³ Jesus warned: “False Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matthew 24:24; see also Matthew 7:15; 24:5, 11; 2 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Peter 2:1-3).

The False Faith Promoted by the False Prophet

Vs. 14 – “And by the signs...it deceives those who dwell on earth...” – In another parody of Christ, the second beast performs (or at least seems to perform) miracles by which it convinces men to worship the beast. False prophets and false teachers typically try to validate their words in ways similar to the Old Testament prophets, though by counterfeit means. Fire coming down from heaven is an allusion to the miracles of Elijah. As a false Elijah, it prepares the people to receive a false Messiah.⁴

“...telling them to make an image of the beast that was wounded...” – Images have always been a hallmark of false worship whether that of the pagan religions of ancient Mesopotamia or 20th century dictators. John’s original readers lived in cities that were filled with images of the gods and of the Caesar. False religion always promotes the use of images as a violation of holy worship and an on ramp to idolatry.

¹ Barclay, 293; Beasley-Murray; Yarbrow Collins, 301; Baukham, 446-47; Aune

² Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018) p. 235

³ G.K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) p. 281

⁴ G.B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Harper & Row, 1966) p. 172

Vs. 15 – “And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast...” – Since God alone gives life, it is likely that this is a figurative way of saying that this beast was persuasive in convincing people that the beast was really a god, worthy of their worship.⁵ Remember that this beast is the corruption of religious faith and is therefore persuasive to the deceived who will believe its false claims. It is not entirely clear whether John regards the second beast’s signs as actual deeds of supernatural power or the tricks with which people then, as now, are easily impressed.

The first century was an age of sorcerers and magicians. Ventriloquism was practiced by the pagan priests of the Ancient Near East in a ruse of breathing life into statues. Simon the Magician, the power-hungry convert of Acts 8, is said to have brought statues to life.⁶ There were many magical tricks seeming to animate the idols in order to get them to speak and so tell the worshipper what he needed to know.⁷ John perhaps is referring to these tricks to develop the metaphor of a deceiving false prophet. One wonders what modern technology could accomplish to counterfeit the power of God.

In the first century, this meant the religious establishment convinced people that they should worship statues and images of Caesar. The worship of Caesar was increasingly becoming an empire-wide expectation which placed Christians in a precarious situation. The provinces in Asia Minor were especially jealous to curry favor with the Caesars in order to secure financial reward and military protection. In Ephesus, for instance, a colossal statue of Domitian had been built. The coins of the realm bore the image of Caesar with titles such as: “The Son of God,” “The Lord,” “Savior of the World,” and “The One Come Down From Heaven To Earth.” The second beast animates falsehoods and blasphemies in people’s imaginations such that the beast seems god-like. Even in our day, we see the work of the second beast in every assertion that happiness and fulfillment can be had only in offering allegiance to something or someone other than Christ.

The Coercive Malice of the False Prophet

Vv. 16-17 – “And it causes all...to be marked on the right hand or the forehead...” – In the later decades of the 20th century onward there has been a great deal of unhelpful speculation about the mark John sees in his vision. It’s best not to think of the mark as a barcode, credit card, or implant, none of which would have made any sense to John’s original readers (or any other readers prior to the late 20th century).

So, what is the mark? Here, once again, is where we must understand the Old Testament background. In Deuteronomy, for instance, the Lord called his people to bind his Law to their hands and foreheads (Deuteronomy 6:8), the forehead representing the mind and the right hand representing volition. In Exodus, God told Israel that the Torah was to “serve as a sign to you on your hand, and as a reminder on your forehead” in order to keep continually before them their loyalty to the Lord (13:9). It is a classic case of the relationship between *orthodoxy* (right belief) with *orthopraxy* (right actions). Therefore, the mark of the beast is Satan’s wicked parody of God’s command to fix his law upon the right hand and forehead.

The mark of the beast may also be understood as Satan’s counterfeit of the seal of the Holy Spirit which John describes in chapter seven where he sees the people of God bearing God’s seal upon their forehead (7:3). In chapter nine, the demonic hoard could not destroy those who bore God’s mark upon their forehead. In the vision in chapter 14, God’s people depicted as 144,000 men assembled for battle all bear the name of God upon their foreheads (14:1).

The mark is symbolic of what we believe and how we live. Christians bear the seal of the Holy Spirit. They are marked, as it were, by God’s seal of ownership. In this life we either we trust in God and seek to live in his ways or we reject the faith and, either knowingly or in ignorance, give our loyalty to the beast. Those are the only two options in this life. What John is describing is not a prediction regarding 21st century technology about barcodes or implants but, rather, the age-old antithesis between God and Satan.

“Every person John saw in these visions bore a mark on their forehead – either the mark of the beast or the seal of God. Either we serve Jesus, or we follow the way of the beast that is heading for damnation...The Bible differentiates between those who are children of wrath (Eph. 2:3) and those who are children of God (John 1:12). Either you trust and serve Jesus, or you trust and serve the beastly way of the world, which has no love for Christ, no pursuit of living for him, and consequently no hope of escaping judgment.”⁸

⁵ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) p. 711

⁶ Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) p. 261

⁷ Grant Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) p. 516

⁸ Brent Lauder, *Apocalypse Then, Now, and Soon* (Storied Publishing, 2023) p. 208

The second beast “causes” people from every nation and social strata to bear the mark. It does this through economic and social coercion. For John’s original readers, this condition was easily discernable. By the late first century, every church addressed by John in chapters two and three resided in a city with a temple to the Caesar. The demand was that all people were expected to offer acts of worship (a sacrifice, a pinch of incense, attendance at a pagan feast) in those temples. If not, then the powerful trade guilds (all pagan) would keep them from practicing their trade and providing for their families. Not only that, such dissenters would also be labeled as enemies of Rome, heretics, and haters of humanity. John’s first readers would have understood that the mark of the beast is the use of false religion to prop up and gain followers of the first beast. “It enforces the metaphorical idea that the mark...alludes to the state’s political and economic ‘stamp of approval,’ given only to those who go along with its religious demands...The mark may also connote that the followers of Christ and the beast both are stamped with the ‘image’ (character) of their respective leader.”⁹

Church, be wise...

Vs. 18 – “This calls for wisdom...” – Don’t be taken in by the deceit of the beast. Christians must have the wisdom to see through the corruption of religious faith in service to tyranny. Christians should be able to discern the many false christs on constant offer from the world and, sadly, even within the church.

“Let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast...” – Every generation of Christians must have discernment to know the difference between what is true and what is false. By calling us to “calculate the number of the beast,” John is saying that we must be wise. We must be able to do the math, as it were, by recognizing falsehood. And yet Christians belonging to every generation throughout the world are led astray by false prophets and false faiths to serve false christs. Whether small regional cults or world-wide religions like Islam or Mormonism, the mark of the beast encompasses these false faiths and false christs. To avoid such damning error we must be able to discern wisely the difference between Jesus, the eternal Son of God and false prophets peddling a false faith.

“...for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.” – In the Greek, the word translated “man” (*Anthropos*) is not accompanied by a definite article. When this happens, the word is almost always a reference to humanity in general. So it may just as easily read, “for it is the number of humanity.” The number of the beast is the number of fallen humanity.

As we have seen so often, numbers function symbolically in the Book of Revelation. The practice of gematria, in which numeric value is assigned to the letters of the alphabet, has been used to suggest that the names of such men as Nero, Domitian, Mohammed, Martin Luther, Ronald Reagan, and even Billy Graham can all be made to result in 666. Such efforts to use 666 as a code tend only to confuse and distract.

Consistent with the rest of the Book of Revelation, the number 666 ought to be taken symbolically. The number 666 is not a code designed and adopted by the beast. Rather it is one of the ways in which God has labeled the beast as false and sinful. It is an act of judgment upon the beast whose “number” classifies it as sinful and false.

We have seen how John favors the number seven as the number of perfection and completion (remember how he writes to seven churches, depicts the Lamb as having seven eyes, and sees “the seven spirits of God” indicating the fullness of the one Holy Spirit). The number six, therefore “represents the inadequate and temporal empire of Satan and those in league with him. This number represents God’s verdict upon the foolish and unholy alliance that was against the Lord and his church.”¹⁰

“John is offering us the anatomy of human totalitarian rule and its defiance of the sovereignty of God, drawing, as ever, on biblical images as his symbolic vocabulary...John is here not just heightening the significance of the decisions of loyalty that those described in the seven messages must face; he is raising the stakes for all subsequent readers who must also examine their loyalties, their compromises and the question of faithfulness.”¹¹

⁹ G.K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, p. 283

¹⁰ Brent Lauder, p. 211

¹¹ Ian Paul, p. 242