

The Mark of the Beast

By Kenneth J. Davies

Many have wondered about Rev. 13:16-17; 14:9-11, etc. regarding what is usually called "the mark of the beast." Sad to say, most Christians are woefully unfamiliar with the Old Testament. Therefore, when they approach the book of Revelation, they do so with literalistic, 20th century "interpretations." The first thing one must acknowledge about Revelation is that it is a book composed almost entirely of symbols—symbols that a first century Jew would have found immediately recognizable. These symbols were used before in such books as Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah.

If I wrote to you that a friend of mine had "kicked the bucket," you would understand that it meant he had died. However, 2000 years from now, a person reading my letter may not understand this usage and wonder why my friend kicked a bucket. He might assume my friend was angry! His assumption, of course, would be wrong, because he would be taking a figurative (symbolic) statement literally.

The same is true of the language of the Revelation. When a "mark" is spoken of, it should bring to mind a previous reference to a mark, found in Ezek. 9:3-6. In that context, Jerusalem was also about to be besieged and destroyed (by the Babylonians). The Lord commanded an angel to place "a mark on the foreheads" of those that lamented the wickedness of the city. This angel is described as having "a writer's inkhorn at his side" (9:3), with which he was to mark the righteous. It is clear from the context that this was not to be taken literally, as if an angel needed to carry a pen around with him and an inkhorn in which to dip it. This was a symbolic way of showing that there was a specific class of people within the doomed city that were being set apart for preservation (9:6). The mark is an emblem of ownership. In Revelation, a similar "mark" is placed on those whom God wishes to preserve (14:1). A "mark" is also received by those loyal to the beast, one which sets them apart for destruction (14:9-11).

We must allow Scripture to interpret itself whenever possible. Whether or not it or its fulfillment conforms to our ideas of what it should be like, is irrelevant! Most people today jump into the book of Revelation with the brazen assumption that it speaks of our times or a time yet future. This ignores the book's clear statements regarding the time of its fulfillment. To the readers of the first century, not the 20th, it was written that these were "things which must shortly come to pass" (Rev. 1:1), and that the time for its fulfillment was "at hand" (Rev. 1:3). And just in case they missed the point, it was reiterated at the end of the book that these were "things which must shortly be done" (Rev. 22:6). Christ said to them, "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every man according to his works" (Rev. 22:12). Compare this to Matt. 16:27-28, in which Jesus stated that some of those listening to Him at that time would not die before seeing the fulfillment of His prophecy. "For the Son of man shall come ... and then He shall reward every man according to his works."

Let us be careful to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches" and allow God's Word to guide our interpretation, not vice-versa!