

## THE MARK OF THE BEAST AS A “SIGN COMMANDMENT” AND “ANTI-SABBATH” IN THE WORSHIP CRISIS OF REVELATION 12–14

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Explaining the “mark of the beast” (Rev 13:16; 14:9) has proven an elusive and difficult challenge to commentators. Some of the more popular futurist interpretations claim that John foresaw a future society where computer chips are literally placed in one’s right hand or forehead.<sup>1</sup> This extremely literal approach attracts few scholars. Many scholars restrict their commentary on the mark to surveying, without necessarily affirming, the different suggestions, and instead offer largely spiritual interpretations.<sup>2</sup> Revelation suggests the mark is quite concrete and knowable. It is enforced on the earth’s inhabitants; people can readily identify it and consequently accept it or reject it; whether one does or not is the difference between life and death.

### *Preterism and the Mark of the Beast*

Preterist interpreters seek to ground any fulfillment of Revelation in events in the history of the first or second century A.D. Such attempts have proven unsuccessful. Edwin A. Judge illustrates the preterist struggle to find historical and exegetically satisfying answers for Rev 13.<sup>3</sup> He searches the ancient Roman Empire for any potential practice that may qualify as the mark of the beast, concluding that “we may *imagine*, then, those who enter the market of Ephesus having first to make their sacrifice, and then receiving their mark in ink on wrist or forehead, just as in Ezekiel 9:2-6” (emphasis supplied).<sup>4</sup> This is followed by the telling admission that there “is *no evidence* that such a test was actually applied at this time” (emphasis supplied).<sup>5</sup> However, Judge continues to insist that there is “just enough miscellaneous information on comparable practices for us to say that this is what *might* have

<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., “The Mark of the Beast” (or the number “666”), <[www.evangelicaloutreach.org/markbeas.htm](http://www.evangelicaloutreach.org/markbeas.htm)>; and “The ‘Mark’ is Ready! Are You?” <[home.iae.nl/users/lightnet/world/mark.htm](http://home.iae.nl/users/lightnet/world/mark.htm)>.

<sup>2</sup>Philip E. Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 153; M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 161-164; Robert W. Wall, *Revelation*, NICNT (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 173.

<sup>3</sup>Edwin A. Judge, “The Mark of the Beast: Revelation 13:16,” *TynBul* 42/1 (1991): 158-160.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 160.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

sprung to mind for those listening to Revelation” (emphasis supplied).<sup>6</sup>

Judge’s honesty and tentativeness are appreciated, but the problems are apparent, and not only in his admission that no evidence exists for such a reconstruction. His scenario simply doesn’t sound like Rev 13, whether we take it literally or symbolically. An obscure local ban on entering the markets in Ephesus does not do justice to a crisis that involves “every tribe, people, language and nation” (v. 7), in which all the world will worship the beast, and those who refuse will be killed (vv. 12, 16). This worship crisis is followed by, and invokes, the seven last plagues, some of which specifically target those with the mark (cf. Rev 16:2, 10, 11). These plagues contain the complete, unmixed wrath of God (Rev 14:10; 15:1). Those bearing the beast’s mark are pictured as the final opponents of God (15:2; 16:2; 19:20). Even allowing for prophetic/poetic hyperbole, this preterist reading stumbles at the universal and cosmic focus of the passage, and in the case of the plagues, its future orientation.<sup>7</sup> Bans from participating in the Ephesus markets lack historical fulfillment and dramatically underplay the passage.<sup>8</sup>

While the straightforward features mentioned above are not taken literally by preterist scholars, other features that can better be read as symbolic are read literally, in a manner reminiscent of the more populist approaches mentioned earlier. The mark becomes a literal and visible ink mark on the hand, the second beast’s bringing of fire from heaven is actual “fireworks” (13:13), and the giving of the “image to the beast” power to speak is even suggested to be “ventriloquism” (13:15).<sup>9</sup> It is difficult to see how these highly literalistic readings are the apocalyptic events that deceive the nations, endanger the people of God, and call forth the extreme language and symbolism of Revelation.

This article will argue for a nonliteral, nonphysical reading of the mark itself (no ancient ink marks and no futuristic computer chips). At the same time, I want to suggest that the mark has a very concrete and tangible expression. It is not to be restricted to symbolic imagery that lacks any concrete

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>In the mind of John and his readers, this universality may or may not indicate the worldwide perspective of a modern reader. But it does appear to refer to the Roman Empire or the entire Mediterranean world, and not simply Ephesus or Asia Minor. This is a reasonable conclusion, even from a preterist perspective.

<sup>8</sup>George Eldon Ladd claims that no first-century practices fulfill these texts: “We know of no ancient practice which provides adequate background to explain the mark of the beast in historical terms.” “The mark of the beast served both a religious and an economic purpose. Again we have no historical situation associated with emperor worship which illustrates this prophecy” (*A Commentary on the Revelation of John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972], 185, 186).

<sup>9</sup>Judge, 160. Judge references S. J. Scherrer’s article “Signs and Wonders in the Imperial Cult: A New Look at a Roman Religious Institution in the Light of Rev 13:13-15,” *JBL* 103/4 (1984): 599-610; and S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 191-206.

referent, nor is it to be thought of in simply spiritual terms. I shall argue that the commandments of the Decalogue are the central issue in the controversy over the mark of the beast.<sup>10</sup> I will further argue that the mark of the beast is equivalent to what I term a “sign commandment,” and more specifically it is a parody of the Sabbath which I term an “anti-Sabbath.” This is based on an examination of the OT background to the mark of the beast and its relationship to the textual, thematic, and structural evidence within Rev 12–15.

*An Old Testament Background  
to the Mark of the Beast*

It is helpful to recognize that the language describing the mark of the beast is more rooted in the OT than in first-century conditions. This allows us to keep the exegesis of the text, rather than questionable historical reconstructions, as the controlling guide in our interpretations. John draws on the OT imagery and symbolism of what can be called “sign-commandments.” In the OT, several commandments are designated as “signs.” These include circumcision (Gen 17:11); the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the law of the firstborn, both of which are signs on the hand and forehead (Exod 13: 9, 16); and the Sabbath (Exod 31:13, 17; Ezek 20:12, 20). These are specific practices or commandments that God gives and identifies as “signs.” In companion passages in Deuteronomy, there is a shift of focus. Instead of specific individual commandments as signs, we find that the keeping of all of God’s regulations (in obedience to the great command to love God with the whole person [Deut 6:4; 10:12; 11:1, 13, 22]) is a sign on the hand and forehead (Deut 6:8; 11:18-21). Here stress is laid on the people’s actively binding the commandments as signs on their hands and foreheads. The context, however, is not simply dutiful commandment-keeping in general, but the people’s exclusive loyalty to the one true God.<sup>11</sup>

Examination of the passages in Genesis and Exodus reveals that specified sign commandments share the following characteristics: First, sign commandments are concerned about “remembering.” They commemorate an

<sup>10</sup>Rebellion against God’s commandments and the intensification of lawlessness are a common theme in biblical eschatology. Both Paul and Jesus single out increasing lawlessness as a mark of the last days (e.g., Matt 24:12; 2 Tim 3:1-5). The little horn of Daniel is notable for its attack on God’s times and laws. For example, G. K. Beale has shown that the first beast of Rev 13 is modeled on Dan 7 (*The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Revelation of St. John* [Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 1984], 247). Paul describes the Antichrist in terms borrowed from Dan 7, 8, and 11. The Antichrist, “the man of lawlessness” (v. 3) and the “lawless one” (v. 8), will “oppose and exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped” (2 Thess 2:4). Paul’s lawless one, like Revelation’s beast, which is aided by miracles, signs, and wonders, is finally destroyed by the splendor of the returning Christ (v. 8).

<sup>11</sup>Deut 4–12 highlight the need for exclusive obedience to YHWH. There is special focus on the Decalogue (Deut 5; 10:1-11) and the commandments to avoid other gods (Deut 6:13; 7:1-6, 25).

experience with God and remind the one observing them of this event. The feast of unleavened bread is described as a “reminder” on the forehead of the Exodus deliverance (Exod 13:9). It especially serves to remind the next generation (Exod 13:8, 14). Second, sign commandments are *identifying* signs or symbols of a special relationship between God and the keeper. They are a “sign of the covenant between me and you” (Gen 17:11); a “sign between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made the heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed” (Exod 31:21); and a sign that “with a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt” (Exod 13:9). They perform an important role in outwardly identifying “who” the worshiped God is and “who” the worshipers are. Third, sign commandments are “ceremonial” or “ritual” in nature. Unlike some “moral” commands that simply forbid an action (e.g., “You shall not steal”), sign commands entail some ritualized action of obedience and worship. One keeps the commandment by performing some act. This in particular enables them to function as observable signs. The sign-commandment passages in Deut 6 and 11 are also concerned about remembering God, identifying the relationship between YHWH and his people to the exclusion of other gods, and the active performance of laws specific to YHWH and not simply the prohibition of immoral conduct. How, then, does God place signs on his people’s hands and foreheads? The answer would not claim that God literally or physically marks people, but rather God gives his people a religious commandment or worship practice to keep.

This brief survey helps us understand how the Sabbath functions as the sign commandment for the whole Covenant (Exod 31:12, 17). First, in Exod 20:8-11, the Sabbath is about *remembering* God’s act of creation. Second, the Sabbath identifies the Israelite God as YHWH the Creator and the people as worshipers of this universal Creator God. Third, the Sabbath includes a “ritualized” element that involves setting apart the seventh day as a holy rest day for God.<sup>12</sup> The declaration of the Sabbath as a sign is the last thing God says to Moses before handing him the Decalogue (Exod 31:17, 18) and the first thing after giving a new copy of the Decalogue (Exod 35:1-3). The Sabbath is *the* sign commandment of the Covenant and appropriately sits in the heart of the Decalogue.

### *Mark of the Beast as a Sign Commandment*

The mark of the beast reveals several similarities to a sign commandment. First, the mark explicitly draws on the placement imagery of hands and forehead (Rev 13:16).<sup>13</sup> Second, as with sign commandments, the mark of the beast *identifies* that the wearer and keeper are in a relationship of obedience to the beast. This sense of identification is of great importance in Revelation, because

<sup>12</sup>This is not to say that the Sabbath is a “ceremonial” law, as in the traditional distinction between moral and ceremonial laws. Such a theological scheme should not be imposed on the Decalogue.

<sup>13</sup>The mark of the beast does not appear to “remember” or commemorate anything the beast has done, although it does remind wearers of where their allegiance now lies.

whoever is identified is also protected.<sup>14</sup> Those marked by the beast and worshipping him will not face his economic boycott and death threats (Rev 13:15-17). In parallel fashion, those sealed by God will be preserved from the wrath of God (Rev 7:1-3; 9:4).<sup>15</sup> Third, just as the essence of an OT sign commandment included obedience that involved a ceremonial element, so the mark appears to be a command that involves participation in some manner of ritualized worship. The mark is always connected with the worship of the beast and its image, and is the sign of this very worship (Rev 13:12-16; 14:9-11). Thus the beast marks people on the forehead and hand in the same way God does in the OT, by giving or enforcing a worship practice or commandment.

The visions of Rev 12–15 provide the context for the mark of the beast and contain three lines of evidence supporting the identification of the mark as a sign commandment. These chapters also narrow the focus on commandments to the first table of the Decalogue, and the Sabbath in particular. This is a strong foundation for the identification of the mark as a parody of the Sabbath. The first line of evidence looks at the significance of the heavenly scenes of 11:19 and 15:1-8, which form the boundaries of the vision discussing the mark. The second line of evidence looks at the language of “commandments” in chapters 12 and 14. The third line of evidence involves discerning two patterns within chapters 12 and 13 that further reinforce a focus on the Ten Commandments and sharpen this focus on the Sabbath sign commandment.

*The Ten Commandments and the Boundary  
Scenes of Revelation 12–15*

Kenneth A. Strand, in his investigation into the structure of Revelation, demonstrates that each new section of vision is introduced by what he calls

<sup>14</sup>The mark of the beast and the seal of God identify in order to protect, in the same way the Passover sign of blood protected the Israelites (Exod 12:7, 13, 14). There are parallels between sign commandments and the Passover sign of blood. The blood of the Passover was ritually placed on the doorpost and lintels of the house. In Deuteronomy, the commandments were to be ritually placed as signs not only on the hand and forehead, but also the doorposts and lintels. Placing the Passover blood on the doorposts protected the people from the plagues. In Revelation, those who resist the beast’s mark and receive the seal of God are protected from the seven last plagues.

<sup>15</sup>Revelation also draws on Ezekiel’s vision of the angel that places a mark on the forehead of those who sigh and cry over abominations (Ezek 8, 9). The worst of these abominations are described in Ezek 8; all of them relate to false worship and idolatry. It is the commandment-keepers who are given God’s protective mark, while the idolaters suffer God’s judgment. The focus on commandment-keeping, especially commandments connected to worship as a decisive element for marking, is exactly the point this article is making. In Revelation, the OT imagery and theology of sign commandments, the Passover sign, and the mark of Ezek 9 are brought together to create a composite picture of the mark of the beast as an identifying and protecting mark on those who worship and obey the beast power.

“victorious-introduction scenes.”<sup>16</sup> These scenes are usually based on the imagery of the sanctuary. Features of these victorious-introduction scenes reappear in the visions that follow and highlight their particular focus. For example, the features describing Jesus in Rev 1 reappear throughout subsequent letters to the churches, influencing both the structure and content. Another example is the vision of the trumpets, which is introduced by an angel ministering “in heaven” at the altar, “before the throne” (Rev 8:1, 3) and who casts a censer filled with incense and fire to earth (Rev 8:5). Consequently, the trumpets then feature repeated castings to the earth (Rev 8:7, 8, 10) and repeated mentions of the altar (vv. 3, 5). These introductory scenes also act as structural seams or boundaries between visions. Jon Paulien maintains that these boundaries or structural seams are *duodirectional*—that is, they both end one visionary unit and introduce another.<sup>17</sup>

The vision of the conflict between Christ and the dragon in Rev 12–15 is located between two clear structural units of Revelation, the seven trumpets (Rev 8–11) and the seven plagues (Rev 15–16).<sup>18</sup> The elements that provide transitions and boundaries between the trumpets, the vision of chapters 12–15, and the seven last plagues are the heavenly scenes or structural seams of 11:15-19 and 15:1-8. Both Paulien and J. Michael Ramsay identify 11:15-19 as a duodirectional structural seam that climaxes the trumpets but also provides an orderly summary of chapters 12–22.<sup>19</sup> Paulien’s evidence demonstrates that this duodirectionality

<sup>16</sup>See Kenneth A. Strand, “‘The Eight Basic Visions’ and ‘Victorious-introduction’ Scenes,” in *Symposium on Revelation*, Daniel and Revelation Committee, vol. 6, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1986), 35-72. Strand’s victorious-introduction scenes, 40-46, are 1:10-20; 4–5; 8:2-6; 11:19; 15:1–16:1; 16:18–17:3a; 19:1-10; 21:5-11a. I would disagree with Strand in his use of 16:18.

<sup>17</sup>Jon Paulien, “Looking Both Ways: A Study of the Duodirectionality of the Structural Seams in the Apocalypse” (paper presented to the Hebrews, General and Pastoral Epistles, Apocalypse Section of the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Chicago, November 19-22, 1988).

<sup>18</sup>William H. Shea and Ed Christian, “The Chiastic Structure of Rev 12:1–15:4: The Great Controversy Vision,” *AUSS* 38 (2000): 269-292. Shea and Christian follow Jon Paulien’s structure in his “Revisiting the Structure of Revelation” (paper presented at the yearly conference of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 20, 1997), where Paulien suggests the following structure: The Seven Churches (1:9–3:22); The Seven Seals (4:1–8:1); The Seven Trumpets (8:2–11:18); The Final Crisis (11:19–15:4); The Seven Bowls (15:5–18:24); The Millennium (19:1–20:15); and The New Jerusalem (21:1–22:5). What is crucial for this article is not a particular structure, but the relationship between the duodirectional heavenly scenes of 11:19 and 15:1-8 and the content of the vision in between.

<sup>19</sup>See Paulien, “Looking Both Ways,” 1, 2. The “nations were angry” parallels the dragon’s anger against the woman (12:17); “God’s wrath has come” is elaborated in the wrath of the plagues (14:10; 15:1); the “time to judge the dead” is fulfilled in the judgment of 20:11-15; the “time of rewards” parallels 22:12. J. Ramsey Michaels states: “The repetition of the words ‘appear’ and ‘in heaven’ accent the continuity between God’s self-disclosure in the temple and the disclosure of conflict and victory in the next four or five chapters (cf. 15:5). In this sense the seventh trumpet is open-ended,

is especially true of 11:18.<sup>20</sup> The same cannot be said directly of 11:19. This verse is more narrowly focused as the introductory scene for chapters 12–15.<sup>21</sup>

The structural seam of 15:1-8 is also duodirectional, with v. 5 being the pivot verse.<sup>22</sup> In v. 1, we are introduced to the plague angels, which will act in chapter 16 to follow; and in vv. 3-4, we see the saints who have triumphed over the beast, his image, and his mark of the previous chapters. Revelation 15:5-8 recalls the vision of the Most Holy Place in 11:19, with mention of the opening of the heavenly “tabernacle of the testimony,” as well as describing the preparing of the angels to administer the seven last plagues. William Shea and Ed Christian note that the heavenly scenes of 11:19 and 15:5-8 form a frame around chapters 12–14. Both passages are set in the Most Holy Place, and both include manifestations of the glory of God that recall the giving of the law at Mount Sinai.<sup>23</sup>

We should expect 11:19 and 15:5 (with their focus on the Ark of the Covenant and the heavenly Tent of the Testimony, which are both repeated and strong allusions to the Decalogue), in line with other introductory scenes, to influence and shape the content of the intervening vision to some degree.<sup>24</sup> There

encompassing all the rest of the Book in Revelation and announcing in advance the end of the story” (*Revelation* [Leicester: InterVarsity, 1997], 146-147).

<sup>20</sup>Paulien, “Looking Both Ways,” 1, 2.

<sup>21</sup>David Aune sees Rev 11:19 as both an introduction to 12:1-17 and a conclusion of 11:15-18 (*Revelation 6–16*, WBC [Dallas: Word, 1997], 661). See also Ekkehardt Mueller, “Recapitulation in Revelation 4–11,” *JATS* 9/1, 2 (1998): 260-277. Mueller, 275, demonstrates that 11:19 functions as the heavenly introductory scene to chaps. 12–14, just as chaps. 4 and 5 do for the seals and 8:2-6 for the trumpets. Rev 11:19 is clearly part of chap. 12, as it shares key formula expressions that are unique to these chapters alone, e.g., 11:19 (καὶ ὠφθη, ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ); 12:1 (ὠφθη, ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ), 12:3 (καὶ ὠφθη, καὶ ἴδου, ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ).

<sup>22</sup>Michael Willcock delineates the fourth vision as 11:19–15:4 (*I Saw Heaven Opened: The Message of Revelation* [London: InterVarsity, 1975], 110-116). Willcock, 112, argues that when something is opened in heaven, it indicates a new vision: “So there are four places [4:1; 11:19; 15:5; 19:11] where ‘openings’ of this kind mark the beginning of new Scenes.” An opening in heaven seems to indicate a new vision is commencing; however, we should not make the cut between visions so abrupt and precise that we forget the duodirectional nature of boundaries between visions. Therefore, 15:5 is part of 15:1-8, which looks back at chaps. 12–14, while intentionally recalling 11:19, as well as forward to chap. 16.

<sup>23</sup>Shea and Christian, 273. Concerning the flow of the overall vision, G. K. Beale observes that mercy is available in 11:19 because the temple is still accessible, but it becomes inaccessible in 15:8 due to smoke and the temple becomes a place of judgment (*The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 801-802).

<sup>24</sup>I believe the significance of the 11:19 vision of the ark includes, but definitely extends beyond, being a symbol of God’s steadfast love, the remembering of his people, or for Robert H. Mounce, “the symbol of God’s faithfulness in fulfilling his promises” (*The Book of Revelation*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 228). The essential repetition of the focus in 15:5 suggests something much more concrete is in order.

is much to commend J. Massyngbaerde Ford's view that the vision of the ark, which represents God's heavenly order, is linked to the war between God and the beasts.<sup>25</sup> The only shortcoming is that it fails to develop the deeper links present. Revelation highlights the "ark of his covenant" and the "tent of the testimony" in anticipation of the dragon's war on those same commandments. The Ark of the Covenant contains the Decalogue, and this Covenant is the particular set of commandments that are at issue in conflict over the mark of the beast.

In addition to the focus on the Decalogue in the enveloping heavenly scenes, there is, near the center of these chapters, a parallel description of the saints as "those who keep the commandments of God" (12:17; 14:12). The opposite of receiving the mark of the beast is keeping the commandments of God.<sup>26</sup> In 12:17, the description introduces and identifies the characteristics of those who stand against the dragon in the battle to follow. In 14:12, the description is of the same group, which steadfastly refuse to receive the mark of the beast. Both the visionary scenes (A, A') and the description of the saints as commandment keepers (F, F') form balanced pairs in a chiasmic structure advanced by Shea.<sup>27</sup>

- A 11:19 Ark of the Covenant: Sanctuary Scene Plus the Commandments
- B 12:1-2 The first Great Portent (Gr. σημείον): The Pure Woman
- C 12:3-4a The Second Great Portent (σημείον): The Great Dragon
- D 12:4b-5 The Male Child: The First Coming of Christ
- E 12:10-12 The Voice From Heaven: Blessing in Heaven but Curse on the Earth
- F 12:17 Keep the Commandments and Testimony of Jesus
- G 13:1-18 The Sea Beast and the Land Beast (*en bloc*)
- H 14:1-5 The Lamb and 144,000 on Mount Zion
- G' 14:6-11 The Three Angels' Messages (*en bloc*)
- F' 14:12 Keep the Commandments and the Faith of Jesus
- E' 14:13 The Voice from Heaven: Double Blessing on Earth
- D' 14:14-20 The Son of Man: The Second Coming of Christ
- C' 15:1 The Third Great Portent (Gr. σημείον): The 7 Plagues
- B' 15:2-4 The Remnant of the Woman's Seed in Heaven
- A' 15:5-8 The Temple of the Tent of the Testimony: Sanctuary Scene Plus the Commandments

<sup>25</sup>J. Massyngbaerde Ford states: "With 11:15-19 the first segment (chaps. 4–11) of Revelation ends in an epiphany, a vision of the heavenly order. Such an ending is appropriate, since the second segment (chs. 12–20) will be terrestrially oriented. *The heavenly war-ark of 11:19 is a fitting prelude to the Holy War against the fleshy beast which will be portrayed in the second segment*" (*Revelation*, AB [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975], 182, emphasis supplied).

<sup>26</sup>Klaus Bockmuehl makes the comment that "the book of Revelation even describes the keeping of the commandments as an *eschatological mark* of Christ's Church" ("Keeping His Commandments," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 6/1 [April 1982]: 98, emphasis supplied).

<sup>27</sup>Taken from William H. Shea, "The Controversy Over the Commandments in the Central Chiasm of Revelation," *JATS* 11/1, 2 (2000): 217.



In summary, the heavenly visions of 11:19 and 15:5 form an *inclusio* around chapters 12–14 that highlights the Decalogue as the particular set of commandments at issue in the conflict over the mark of the beast.

### *Identification of the Commandments of God*

We have noted strong evidence to suggest that these commandments should be equated especially with the Decalogue. David Aune is one of the few commentators to explore in detail the significance of “the commandments of God” in 12:17 and 14:12.<sup>28</sup> After surveying the NT, Aune concludes by stating that “for early Christian authors, the central part of the law was the second table of the Decalogue (i.e., the ethical commands) and the love command.”<sup>29</sup> He applies the same conclusion to both 12:17 and 14:12.<sup>30</sup> There are deficiencies with this application. It claims Revelation, in the midst of a life-and-death crisis over worship, is suddenly highlighting not the worship allegiance and practice, but the loving and ethical nature of the saints. While no one would argue that the saints are dishonoring mother and father, murdering, or committing adultery, this hardly functions to set them apart in the context of chapters 12–14. The special issue of these chapters is *correct worship*.<sup>31</sup> It is the correct worship of God, which is the central concern of the first table of the Decalogue, and not the second table, which focuses on right conduct to other human beings, that matters in overt religious crisis. During persecution, what is primarily at stake is the vertical question of “love to God” more than the horizontal issue of “love to neighbor.”

It seems Aune’s reliance on the distinction between moral laws and ceremonial laws causes him to restrict the commandments to ethical and not ceremonial possibilities, even though he is aware that it is usually ceremonial laws that are at issue in times of persecution. He states that “the phrase *terein*

<sup>28</sup>Beale observes that “‘The commandments of God’ is a holistic reference to the objective revelation of the old and new covenants, to which the faithful remain loyal” (*Revelation*, 766). The Decalogue is contained in such a view, but not highlighted.

<sup>29</sup>Aune, 710-712.

<sup>30</sup>Aune, 711-712, states: “It is in this context that ‘keeping the commandments of God’ in Rev 12:17 and 14:12 must be regarded as referring to the ethical requirements of the Torah.”

<sup>31</sup>The idea of correct worship constantly emerges as a central theme of Revelation, esp. 12–14. The word “worship” occurs fifteen times in Revelation (3:9; 4:10; 9:20; 11:1; 13:8, 12, 15; 14:7, 9, 11; 15:4; 19:10 [twice]; 22:8, 9), while the word “worshiped” occurs nine times (5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 13:4 [twice]; 16:2; 19:4, 20; 20:4). Of the twenty-four times that the words “worship” or “worshiped” occur, ten instances are directly related to worship of the dragon, beast, or image to the beast. R. J. Bauckham states that the whole theme of Revelation is the distinction between true and false worship (“Worship of Jesus in Apocalyptic Christianity,” *NTS* 27 [1981]: 332-341). See also Jon Paulien, who states: “The issue in the final crisis of earth’s history is clearly worship” (“Revisiting the Sabbath in the Book of Revelation,” *JATS* 9/1, 2 [1998]: 182).

*tas entolas*, 'keep the commandments,' certainly relates to obedience to Torah (understood primarily in an ethical sense), an important constituent motif in narratives concerning Jewish martyrdom (where the emphasis, however, is particularly on the ceremonial aspects of the Torah, such as circumcision, dietary laws, and Sabbath observance).<sup>32</sup> In reality, this restrictive ethical sense is secondary, and the religious or worship sense, here termed "ceremonial," is primary. Jews were martyred over worship or ceremonial laws precisely because these religious expressions of faith marked them as followers of YHWH, over and against all other religious or political claimants. The ethical commands (e.g., do not murder, do not steal, do not covet) are not the primary issue during persecution. Accordingly, the saints in the apocalypse are not persecuted because they are ethical to others, but because they hold to the faith of Jesus and keep the commandments of God.<sup>33</sup> That is, their "ethical" relationship to God identifies them as objects of persecution.

*Violation of the First Table of the  
Decalogue in Revelation 13*

We have noted, on the basis of structural and contextual features, the strong evidence for the Decalogue as the central issue in Rev 12–14. We can now proceed to see if the rebellious activity of the beast directly or indirectly violates the specific commandments of the Decalogue. Indeed, commentators have noted allusions to the first table of the Decalogue in the activity of the beast. Aune notes that "blaspheming God or the name of God suggests a violation of the third commandment, i.e., the warning against the wrongful use of the name of God (Exod 20:7 = Deut 5:11), a violation for which there was a capital penalty."<sup>34</sup> In regard to the image to the beast, J. Massyngbaerde Ford concludes that "the actual making of an image for the monster is a direct infringement of Exod 20:3-4 and possibly recalls the golden calf of Exod 32."<sup>35</sup> Alan F. Johnson observes that "[John describes this reality [i.e., beast's image and mark] as a blasphemous and idolatrous system that produces a breach of the first two commandments (Exod

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Aune, 837, and his discussion on pp. 710-712. The use of the ethical/ceremonial division of the law is best left out of our interpretation of Revelation. Narratives concerning Jewish martyrdom mention so-called "ceremonial" features because they are concerned with true worship versus false, idolatrous worship. Views that delimit or focus exclusively on "ethical" or "love" commands fail to take note of the strong allusions to the first table of the Decalogue in Rev 13.

<sup>33</sup>David Peterson states: "On the other hand, although it is not called worship as such, there is a clear alternative to the worship of the beast. In 14:12, following the portrayal of the judgment of God on all idolaters, John's call is for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus (cf. 13:10)" ("Worship in the Revelation to John," *RTR* 47 [1988]: 67-77).

<sup>34</sup>Aune, 744.

<sup>35</sup>Ford, 224.

20:3-5).<sup>36</sup> However, these commentators do not discern a more extensive or systematic violation, nor do they connect their observations with the introductory scenes of 11:19 or 15:1-8. The parallels are even more extensive and consistent than previously realized. Below is a diagram that depicts the extensive nature of the beast's attack on the Decalogue.<sup>37</sup>

**Table 1**  
**Parallels Between Revelation 13 and the Decalogue**  
*First Table of Decalogue in Exodus 20*                      *Attack on First Table of Decalogue in Revelation 13*

(1) "You shall have no other gods before me" (20:3).	(C <sub>1</sub> ) "they worshiped the dragon . . . beast" (13:4, 8).
(2) "You shall not make for yourself an idol . . . you shall not bow down or worship them" (20:4-5).	(C <sub>2</sub> ) "make an image of the beast . . . worship the image" (13:14, 15).
(3) "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God."	(C <sub>3</sub> ) "uttered blasphemies against God, to blaspheme his name" (13:1, 5-6).
(4) "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy . . . the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God." "Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day . . . you shall not do any work." "neither you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your town" (20:8-11).	(C <sub>4</sub> ) "the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name." "so that no one may buy or sell who does not have the mark." "it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked" (13:16-17).

Here we see why Revelation draws our attention to the ark and the commandments of God. There is a basic progression through the first table of the Decalogue.<sup>38</sup> The order of commandments is scattered in Rev 13, but the pattern is unmistakable. The evil trinity of the dragon, sea beast, and earth beast leads the world to rebel against God's covenant law. First, the evil trinity assumes the worship and position of a false god in violation of the first commandment.

<sup>36</sup>Alan F. Johnson, "Revelation," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaeblein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 12: 531.

<sup>37</sup>Inspiration for this diagram came from a seminar talk on Revelation by Ed Dickerson, given at Longburn College, New Zealand, in 1995. Dickerson, who suggested the parallel with the first table of the Decalogue in a more simplified manner, had not explored the Sabbath parallels.

<sup>38</sup>Ranko Stefanovic concludes that the sea beast's activities are well-planned attacks on the first four commandments of the Decalogue (*Revelation of Jesus Christ* [Berrien Springs: Andrews University, 2002], 415).

Second, they blaspheme God and his name. Third, they construct an idolatrous image that people must worship. And lastly, the evil trinity substitutes a Sabbath-like mark.<sup>39</sup> The mark is the culmination of the evil trinity's attempt at deceiving the world, receiving its worship, and establishing a kind of false "covenant."<sup>40</sup> The laws they enforce become sign commandments and tests of loyalty and allegiance, much the same as the commandments of God. Parodying, mimicking, imitating, and substituting or replacing describe well the overall characterization of the *anti-god* powers in Rev 12–20.<sup>41</sup>

### *Mark as Anti-Sabbath*

The "mark of the beast" is a parody or substitution of the Sabbath, the sign commandment of God's covenant. The mark both imitates and seeks to replace the Sabbath. Several interesting correspondences between the mark of the beast and the Sabbath emerge. The parallels in Table 1 between C<sub>4</sub> and the fourth commandment are largely parodies. These parallels, as with the rest of the beast's parodying of God in Revelation, contain similarities and dissimilarities. These are not wooden parallels and are often either allusions or conceptual in nature. In the first parallel, the mark of the beast is "the *name* of the beast or the *number* of its name" (13:17, emphasis supplied). The mark brings together name and number in a way reminiscent of the Sabbath, with its declaration of the name of God, YHWH, and God's "number," the seventh-day Sabbath. Both the mark and the Sabbath share a rare pattern of mark/sign, name, and number. In the second parallel, both the mark and the Sabbath are concerned with the economic regulation of people's life, rest, and work. Both restrict work, but for different reasons. The mark is punitive, stating "that no one may buy or sell who does not have the mark" (13:17), whereas the Sabbath is restorative and commands cessation from work in order that all may rest and be refreshed. In Scripture, to cease from work on the Sabbath is especially to "not buy or sell" (cf. Neh 10:31;

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 426, 427. Stefanovic, *ibid.*, notes that "as the Sabbath is the distinctive sign of obedience by God's faith people (cf. Exod. 31:12-17; Ezek. 20:12, 20), so the mark of the beast, the counterfeit Sabbath, is the sign of obedience to the beast. The mark of the beast thus functions as the substitution of God's commandments for human commandments (including the human-established false Sabbath, substituted for the seventh-day Sabbath, which is the distinctive sign of belonging and loyalty to God)."

<sup>40</sup>Concerning Rev 13, Gordon Campbell states: "[A] tandem of monsters will astonish earth-dwellers . . . and model an *anti-covenant* which is both derisory—with a sham god and idolatrous false worship—and also tragic, given the way people flock to enter this counterfeit pact" ("Finding Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls: Variation upon the Theme of Covenant Rupture and Restoration in the Book of Revelation," *WTJ* 66 [2004]: 71-96, emphasis supplied).

<sup>41</sup>Other examples include: the parodying of Jesus, who was dead but is now alive, by the beast, who receives a deadly wound but is healed; the parody of the false trinity (dragon, beast, and false prophet); the parodying of "the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come" (1:8) by the beast, which "was and is not and is to come" (17:8).

13:15-22). Here the mark directly parodies the Sabbath. The third parallel observes that both the mark and the Sabbath are universal in intent and extend to all classes of people. The mark “causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked” (13:16-17). The Sabbath offers universal rest to “you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your town” (20:8-11).<sup>42</sup>

Reflecting on the theological meaning of the parallels points to further similarities and important dissimilarities between God’s sign and the beast’s mark. The mark actually reverses what the Sabbath intends. In this way, the two reveal differences between the respective characters and reign of God and of the dragon. The Sabbath protects the vulnerable (e.g., servants, aliens, even animals), while the mark is oppressive. The Sabbath is about economic release, while the mark is about economic force, control, and marginalization. The Sabbath, as a sign commandment, expresses allegiance to the Creator, whereas the mark is the institution and product of creatures expressing allegiance to the beast.<sup>43</sup> The Sabbath is rest in the God who completes, while the mark is restless rebellion. The Sabbath is willing obedience to the Creator God, but the mark works by a coercive force that achieves obedience through fear and deception (Rev 13:13-17). Each one is a fitting sign, reflecting the nature of the giver. The mark is a sad and oppressive parody of the life-affirming gift of the Lord of the Sabbath.

In Shea’s chiasm, referred to earlier, the chiastic pair of G, G’ features the beast’s program of false worship and God’s call to true worship through the three angels. The false worship centers in the anti-Sabbath mark. Interestingly, the three angels’ singular response to the false worship of the beast contains a call to true worship, based on an allusion to the Sabbath commandment (14:7).<sup>44</sup> Considering

<sup>42</sup>Concerning the “mark of the beast,” Mounce, 259, notes that “the coupling of opposites (small, great; rich, poor; free, slave) is a rhetorical way of stressing the totality of human society (cf. 11:18; 19:5, 18; 20:12).” A similar coupling and totality is seen in the Sabbath commandment. Both the Sabbath and the beast’s mark are universal in intent.

<sup>43</sup>Because the Sabbath is a sign of one’s covenant relationship with the *Creator* God (Exod 31:12-18), it is often set in contrast to idolatry. In Ezekiel, it is a sign in the context of idolatry and false worship (Ezek 20:19, 20, 24). Both are themes that appear in Rev 12–15. The Sabbath functions as a “prophylactic” that protects against all forms of idolatry. Desmond Ford states: “These sabbath-idolatry oppositional references are so many in number that their combination cannot be simply ignored as accidental” (*Crisis: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation* [Newcastle, Australia: Desmond Ford Publications, 1982], 2: 522-523). Ford is referring to the study by Gnana Robinson, *The Origin and Development of the Old Testament Sabbath* (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Hamburg, 1975), 304-305.

<sup>44</sup>Jon Paulien shows that the first angel’s message (14:6, 7), which carries God’s single and specific response to pressure to worship the beast, consists of an allusion to the Sabbath command of the Decalogue in Exod 20:8-11. In opposition to the false worship of dragon and beast comes the call to “*worship him who made the heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.*” Paulien demonstrates verbal, thematic, and structural parallels to the fourth commandment. One counters the mark of the beast by keeping

the extensive focus on commandments in chapters 12 and 15, this allusion appears deliberate and suggests that one resists the beast and follows God by keeping God's mark or sign commandment.<sup>45</sup> This paralleling of creature worship, based on the anti-Sabbath mark, and Creator worship, based on an allusion to the Sabbath, neatly balance each other. Before moving on, we may note with other scholars that the mark is a parody of the seal of God.<sup>46</sup> This realization, with our discussion above, implies a possible link between the seal of God and the Sabbath. External evidence exists for just such a link.<sup>47</sup>

*Genesis 1, 2 and the Reversal of Creation  
in Revelation 12–14*

So far we have examined the Decalogue pattern and its Sabbath commandment in relation to the beast's activity in Rev 12–14. John appears to have incorporated another complementary pattern that serves to strengthen this article's thesis. John uses Gen 1 and 2 as an architectural-like backdrop to further highlight the nature of the beast's rebellion against the Sabbath-

the Sabbath ("Revisiting the Sabbath," 179-186). The editors of the fourth edition of the UBS Greek New Testament note in the margin that Rev 14:7b is an allusion to Exod 20:11 (cf. Stefanovic, 416).

<sup>45</sup>Stefanovic, 416, argues that "the urging of the people to worship the true God in relation to the Sabbath commandment and warning them not to worship the beast and receive his mark strongly suggests that the mark of the beast functions as the counterfeit to the Sabbath commandment."

<sup>46</sup>Mounce, 260, states: "Whatever the background of the word ['mark,' χάραγμα], its significance in the present passage is to parody the sealing of the servants of God in chapter 7." Beale, 716, notes that the mark is "the parody and opposite of the seal."

<sup>47</sup>The making of a link between the mark, the Sabbath, and the seal of God would be a powerful reinforcement of the thesis of this article. Interestingly, work on the Hittite suzerainty treaties led Meredith Kline to link the Sabbath with the seal of God. Kline writes: "As a further detail in the parallelism of external appearances [between suzerainty treaties and the Decalogue] it is tempting to see in the sabbath sign presented in the midst of the ten words *the equivalent of the suzerain's dynastic seal* found in the midst of the obverse of the international treaty document. Since in the case of the Decalogue the suzerain is Yahweh, there will be no representation of him on his seal, but the sabbath is declared to be his 'sign of the covenant' (Ex 31:13-17). By means of his sabbath-keeping, the image-bearer of God images the pattern of that divine act of creation which proclaims *God's absolute sovereignty over man, and thereby he pledges his covenant consecration to his Maker*. The Creator has stamped on world history the *sign of the sabbath as his seal of ownership and authority*. That is precisely what the pictures on the dynastic seals symbolise and their captions claim in behalf of the treaty gods and their representatives, the suzerain" (*The Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Studies and Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963], 18-19, emphasis supplied). The relevance to Rev 13 and 14 is striking.

instituting Creator God.<sup>48</sup> The imagery of Rev 12 and 14 picks up on the configuration of the creation story, especially the final half of creation week, to tell the story of the dragon's attack on God. The parallels are consistent in their order and suggestive in nature.

On the fourth day of the creation story, various lights in the heavens are created to rule day and night. The location is the heavens in which we find the occupants—sun, moon, and stars. Revelation 12 and 13 incorporate a symbolic reworking of this Genesis account. John sees a portent, located in heaven, of a woman. This woman is surrounded with the creations of day four. She is clothed with the sun, the moon is below her, and she is adorned with twelve stars. All is in order, until the dragon intrudes into this heavenly scene and seeks to destroy the woman. Unlike the sun, moon, and stars on the woman, this dragon has no parallel in Gen 1. But like the serpent of Gen 2, the dragon is clearly disrupting God's order of creation. He is consequently cast out of the heavenly realms and proceeds to turn the earthly realms into chaos. John informs us that this dragon is the primal serpent that disrupted God's original order (Rev 12:9).<sup>49</sup>

As Genesis shifts location from the heavens to the earth on day five, so a corresponding shift occurs in Revelation. On day five, God creates both birds and "great sea creatures," declaring: "Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures" (Gen 1:20, 21). The creatures are to produce after their own kind in harmony with God's purposes. In Rev 13, the dragon calls up his own beast from the sea. This sea beast, with its composite and hybrid appearance, is a hideous warping of the divine will that creation would produce after its own kind.

On day six, God makes various animals that live on the earth: "Let the earth bring forth the living creature according to its kind: cattle and creeping thing and the beast of the earth." After this God creates in his image: "Let us make man in our own image, according to our likeness" (Gen 1:26). To this image is given dominion over all the earth and everything in it. God exercises his rule through his image (Gen 1:26-30). Later, in Gen 2:7, we learn that God forms his image and gives it life by breathing into his nostrils "the breath of life." God then allows his image to name the rest of creation. This naming of the animals is most likely an act expressing his authority and dominion. The location is the earth and it is filled with, among other things, the beasts of the earth and by God's own special image exercising dominion over the earth.

At the end of the Genesis account, God sees the world he has created—an order in harmony with him—and declares it very good. This leads him to cease from his work and rest on the seventh day. He also blesses this day and sets it

<sup>48</sup>The comparisons between Gen 1–2 and Rev 12–13 are drawn from Shea, "Controversy Over the Commandments," 227, 228.

<sup>49</sup>The attacks by both the dragon and the serpent focus on commandments. The serpent attacks the command to refrain from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The dragon attacks the commandments of God.

apart (Gen 2:1-3). The Sabbath is the crowning climax of the divine action. This numbered day, the seventh, is God's special, sanctified day in contrast with the other days, which are associated with various parts of the created order. The Sabbath signifies that God has finished a perfect work and that he is the Creator God, who is the true end, goal, and meaning of all creation. The Sabbath is his seal of approval on his work.

Continuing the parallel to the sixth and seventh days, the dragon and sea beast are joined by a beast from the earth. This beast is given power to give breath to "the image to the beast" (Rev 13:15). Through this image, the evil trinity exercises dominion over all the earth. They attempt to place their name upon all the inhabitants of the earth. This is done through the mark of the beast, which is the climax of their activity, and includes receiving the beast's number. The mark of the beast signifies that all of creation is under the beast. However, God's messages in Rev 14 specifically mention that those who receive this mark will know no rest. Contextually, this can now be seen as an appropriate punishment for such anti-Sabbath activity. In contrast, those who keep the Sabbath of God's commanding receive a Sabbath-like blessing. Rev 14:13 contains a Sabbath-like allusion that includes a "blessing" to those who die and a promise to the saints of "rest from their labors."<sup>50</sup> The fullness of Sabbath rest for these commandment-keepers transcends death. These allusions are based in God's original *blessing* of Sabbath and *rest from his labor* (Gen 2:1-3). The Sabbath God, who brings forth creation and gives life in the beginning, is present with his faithful saints, who labor for God and face death for him in the end. The Sabbath points us not to creation and the creature, but to God himself. It is the climax of God's work, for Sabbath declares God as both the originator and sustainer, and the goal and completion of creation. Biblically, there is no creation account without Sabbath. The mark of the beast functions in a pseudo Sabbath-like manner. The mark is clearly the climax of the evil trinity's work. It is the expression of its attempt to establish sovereignty over the earth and becomes the sign of participating in its refilling of the cosmos with rebellion. The parallels are summarized below in Table 2.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Shea and Christian, 289, also note the Sabbath allusion here in this verse.

<sup>51</sup>Concerning the symbolic number 666, and Revelation's use of numbers as symbols, this study sides with commentators who suggest that the use of the number 6 is rooted in the Genesis Creation account (cf. e.g., Stefanovic, 417-418). It is the symbolic value of 6, and not its bare numeric quantity, which is important. Days 6 and 7 have deep symbolic meaning in Scripture. I see the number 6 as symbolizing the creature stopping with itself. It is the creation of day 6, humanity, without day 7, the Sabbath of the Lord God. It is human refusal of God three times over (666), an incurable rebellion. It is refusing to enter into the Sabbath rest of God that is rooted in both creation and salvation. In the light of Gen 1 and 2, the anti-Sabbath nature of the mark and its symbolic number 666 become more than coincidental data.



**Table 2**  
**Relevant Parallels Between the Creation**  
**Accounts and Revelation 12–14**

	<i>Genesis 1, 2</i>	<i>Revelation 12–14</i>
Day 4	Heavens Sun, moon, and stars (Serpent intrudes later)	Heavens Woman with sun, moon, stars (Dragon intrudes)
Day 5	Sea Great sea creatures produce after own kind	Sea Beast from the sea (hybrid beast)
Day 6	Earth Beasts of the earth Image of God (given life by breath of God) Dominion (names all of creation)	Earth Beast from the earth Image to the beast (given life by breath of earth-beast) Dominion (marks all with beasts' names)
Day 7	God blesses and sets apart the Sabbath day for creation. God rests from all his work that he had done.	Commandment-keeping saints who die in Lord are blessed. Saints "will rest from their labors." Those who receive the mark of the beast's name have "no rest."

### *Conclusion*

The key to understanding the mark of the beast is to examine its imagery, based in the language of OT sign commandments, the Decalogue, and the Sabbath in the light of the thematic, theological, and structural features of the vision it is embedded within. When all is taken together, a consistent pattern emerges. The first table of the Decalogue and the Sabbath are the objects of the dragon's attack. The mark of the beast functions like a sign commandment and a direct parody of the Sabbath. The last rebellion of the dragon is an attempt to simultaneously draw the whole world into a unified rebellion against the Creator God. The rebellion's climax comes when a counterfeit Sabbath-like or anti-Sabbath mark is enforced upon all the earth. Not all join in this rebellion. God's people are commandment-keepers, who trust in Jesus and keep his Decalogue commandments. In the crisis of Rev 12–15, faith in Jesus, combined with obedience to the Decalogue commandments, including the Sabbath, are the eschatological sign and seal of covenant loyalty to the God of creation and redemption. In contrast, the mark of the beast stands as the eschatological sign of rebellion against God.