

“MISSING THE MARK”:
IS SUNDAY OBSERVANCE THE MARK OF THE BEAST?

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Few elements of Revelation’s prophecies attract as much speculation as the identity of the “seal of God” and the “mark of the beast.” Fortunately, Revelation provides keys to identifying both. According to the apocalypse, the “seal of God” is placed on the foreheads of the righteous (Rev 7:3). Analogously, the wicked receive the mark of the beast upon their right hands and foreheads (Rev 13:16-17).

Elsewhere, the names of God the Father and Christ are inscribed on the “foreheads” of the of the faithful (i.e., the “144,000” [14:1] and the “servants” of God [22:3-4]—both appellations used of the sealed in 7:3-4). The inscription of these divine names upon the forehead is the seal of God. Analogously, the counterpart to the seal of God is referred to as “the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of his name” (13:17); the third angel explicitly calls the “mark” placed on the “foreheads” of unbelievers (14:9) “the mark of its [the beast’s] name” (14:11). Thus, the wicked bear the name of the beast (or number thereof) upon their foreheads.

This arrangement evokes the ancient practice of marking slaves on the forehead with their owner’s name;¹ indeed, the sealed are “servants/slaves” of God (7:3-4; 22:3-4). Thus, the seal and mark serve as signs of possession or ownership. Every human pledges loyalty to one or the other party in thought, words, and deeds; the seal or mark symbolize the spiritual claims of that party upon the individual.

Through these indications, the apocalypse provides a simple and certain interpretation of both the seal of God and the mark of the beast. The solid exegetical footing of this view stands in marked contrast to the speculative interpretations posed by some groups, including the Seventh-day Adventists, who claim:

1. Beale, G. K., *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 411; Betz, Otto, στήριζω, TNDT VII, ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1971), 659-660; Wiedemann, Thomas, *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University, 1981), 193-4.

The Sabbath of the fourth commandment is the seal of the living God.²

The mark of the beast is the opposite of this,—the observance of the first day of the week as the sabbath enforced by human law.³

One may group the arguments offered in favor of this interpretation into at least three categories:

1. Old Testament Precedents for the Sabbath as “Seal”

Modern Adventist interpreters defend these propositions with difficulty. Many cite the fact that Ex 31:13,16 designates the Sabbath as “a sign” in his favor (cf. Ex. 20:12,20)⁴; but God also instituted circumcision as “a sign” (Gen 17:11). Attempts to discount circumcision’s applicability to the present discussion on the grounds that the sign was particular to the Jewish people⁵ ignore the fact that Yahweh explicitly establishes the Sabbath as “a sign. . . between me and the people of Israel” (Ex 31:13,17, cf. 16). By contrast, Paul identifies the Holy Spirit as the “seal” of salvation resting upon Christians (Ep 1:13; 4:30; 2 Cor 1:22). Adventist commentators attempt to bolster the identification Sabbath as a seal, by claiming that it alone contains the (allegedly necessary) constituent parts of a seal: the name of the person thereby indicated, his title, and an indication of his jurisdiction.⁶ This argument has several flaws in and of itself.⁷

2. White, Ellen G., *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1950), 640

3. White, Ellen G., “The Sign of Loyalty,” *Signs of the Times*, 22 March 1910, par. 5; cf. White, *Great Controversy*, 448: “What then is the change of the Sabbath, but the sign, or mark, of the authority of the Roman Church—“the mark of the beast”?”

4. Maxwell, C. Mervyn, “The Mark of the Beast,” *Symposium on Revelation – Book II*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 7, 59.

5. Maxwell, 59.

6. “In the fourth commandment is found the seal of God's law. This only, of all the ten, brings to view the name and the title of the Law-giver. It declares Him to be the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and thus shows His claim to reverence and worship above all others. Aside from this precept, there is nothing in the Decalogue to show by whose authority the law was given” (White, “The Sign of Loyalty”, par. 2).

Critical, however, is the recognition that all these “signs” or “seals” (i.e., Sabbath, circumcision, Holy Spirit) appear in foreign texts. The principles of exegesis dictate that one must seek, and favor, an interpretation provided by the text itself. The apocalypse defines its usage of the phrase “seal of God” as a reference to the “name of God.” Interpreters must protect the integrity of each usage of the phrase “seal of God” in scripture, refusing to impose the definition of one upon another.

This observation precludes drawing in other still more passages into the discussion: for instance, the ambiguous “binding” of “the testimony” and “sealing” of “the law” among Isaiah’s disciples (Is 8:14). It is unfortunate that many misguided Adventist evangelists read unrelated texts side-by-side, divorced from their contexts, and apply their purported insights directly to Rev 7.

If, however, one would associate any Old Testament “sign” with the “seal” of Rev 7, priority would rest on the Festival of Unleavened Bread, which God established to “serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips” (Ex 13:9). Revelation clearly alludes to this sign: those who receive it are protected from “plagues” (cf. Ex 12:13; Rev 7:3), and they bear it upon their forehead (7:3) and hand (cf. Rev 13:16). Of course, the apocalypse’s clarity in identifying the “seal of God” with the name of God undermines the former’s *direct* identification with the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Still, the evocation of Ex 13 is illuminating in other respects: perhaps the purpose of sealing in Revelation is to solidify the righteous’ remembrance of “the teaching of the Lord.”

2. Echoes of the Sabbath in Revelation

Alleged allusions to the Sabbath in other visions of the apocalypse also form a weak rationale for the Adventist position. Adventists cite the appearance of the Ark of the Covenant in 11:19 in their favor, noting that the ark contained the tablets of stone bearing the Ten Commandments, including the Sabbath commandment (1 Kings 8:9)—an argumentative stretch. Additionally, the first angel’s message (Rev 14:7) seems reminis-

7. On the one hand, many ancient Israelite seals never listed jurisdiction, so that the contention relies on a false, even anachronistic, premise. (examples of such seals are presented in: Hoerth, Alfred J., *Archaeology of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998], 331). Furthermore, White’s claim that the fourth commandment “only, of all the ten, brings to view the name and the title of the Lawgiver” (White, “The Sign of Loyalty,” par. 2) overlooks the fact that the true identification of the Lawgiver occurs in the preface to the Law (Ex 20:2). By noting that Yahweh has delivered Israel, that preface provides also a rationale for the observance of the commandments (Friedman, Richard Elliot, *Commentary on the Torah* [San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003], 234-5).

cent of the Sabbath commandment (Ex 20:11) in its catalogue of the creations of God. (Of course, one would expect regularity in such catalogues; several Psalms use the same formula as Ex 20:11 [Pss 69:34; 146:6], which is slightly different from that in Rev 14:7.) Neither of these two texts, however, has a direct bearing on the identity of the “seal of God.” Located in visions that do not reference the “seal”, it is impossible to establish such a connection.

Others recognize Revelation’s association of the “seal” of God with “name” of God, but relate this fact to appearance of the name of God in the Sabbath commandment.⁸ This approach unjustifiably integrates the simpler solution (that equates the “seal of God” with the inscription of God’s “name”), and integrates it into a more complicated (and thus weaker) solution. Occam’s razor suggests that the interpreter favor the former. Furthermore, in Revelation, not one, but two names are in view: the individual name of Christ and that of the Father (14:1); both do not appear as such in the Sabbath commandment.⁹ Most glaring, however, is the fact that this argument (like those before it) relies upon a foreign text with no clear connection to Rev 7; mere mention of the name of God is as common, and thus weak, a link as can exist between scriptures.

3. Righteousness of the Sealed Presupposes Sabbath Observance

Others note that the inscription of the name of God upon the righteous suggests the imprinting of God’s character upon them, following the biblical connection between name and character—a view that has significant merits.¹⁰ The sealed are thus distinguished by their righteousness, which in *Adventist* moral theology, would include the observation of the seventh-day Sabbath. One might as well frame the latter part of this argument independently. Whatever the seal of God is, the righteous who receive it are those who “keep the commandments of God,” including, presumably, the Sabbath commandment (14:12). In either case, the sealing of an individual remains intimately related to his observation of the seventh-day Sabbath.

8. Smith, Uriah, *Daniel and the Revelation* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald), 456.

9. The likelihood that the Father and Christ are not subsumed under a single name finds support in their consistent double invocation by the sealed (7:10), and throughout the apocalypse (5:13; 15:3; 21:22,23; 22:1,3).

10. LaRondelle, Hans K., “The Remnant and the Three Angels’ Messages,” *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary Series 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 879.

In its favor, this argument provides a viable platform for associating the Sabbath with the seal of God; unfortunately, it is impotent to prove Adventism's historic claim: namely, that the Sabbath actually *is* the “seal of the living God.” Ellen White may assert that: “the seal of the living God will be placed upon those only who bear a likeness to Christ in character.”¹¹ She also states, “those who would have the seal of God in their foreheads must keep the Sabbath of the fourth commandment.”¹² But she does within the context of a more direct thesis, namely that the Sabbath actually *is* that seal¹³:

The Sabbath is the great test question. It is the line of demarcation between the loyal and true and the disloyal and transgressor. . . . It is the seal of the living God.¹⁴

Now is the time for the law of God to be in our minds (foreheads), and written in our hearts. . . . In these things I saw great danger; for if the mind is filled with other things, present truth is shut out, and there is no place in our foreheads for the seal of the living God. This seal is the Sabbath.”¹⁵

Adventists must therefore defend that thesis in its entirety—an unenviable challenge.

11. 7BC 970 (1895).

12. 7BC 970 (1899)

13. In support of this theory, White cites the scriptures that identify the Sabbath as a “sign,” and the fact that the Sabbath ostensibly contains the constituent parts of a seal (White, Ellen G., *Faith I Live By* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 285 [p. 287 in other editions]). Adventists cannot simply abandon these arguments or the conclusion she extracts from them. Thus, attempts to associate the Sabbath with the seal of God that do not actually assert that the Sabbath *is* that seal deviate from, and contradict, her perceived prophetic insights.

14. White, Ellen G., *Selected Messages*, Book 3 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1980), 423.

15. White, Ellen G., “To Those Who are Receiving the Seal of the Living God,” Broadside2, January 31, 1849, par. 11.

Mark of the Beast

Perhaps the most unenviable difficulty presented to an Adventist interpreter is a defense of the historic Adventist position on the “mark of the beast,” since it is almost entirely dependent on their identification of the seal of God with the Sabbath. Adventists surmise that the mark of the beast is Sunday primarily because its opposite, the seal of God, is the Sabbath. Few other lines of evidence exist in favor of this view. White provides quotes from Catholic authors who claim the Sabbath as a “mark” of the Church’s authority, but this data is taken from outside the biblical text.¹⁶

Surprisingly, most Adventists commentators never address the equivalency of the “mark of the beast” with the beast’s “name” or “number” (13:17; cf. 14:11)—a glaring omission. What is the connection between Sunday observance and the name calculated as 666, if any? A solution proves all the more difficult in view of the general abandonment of the traditional identification of the name and number of the beast with the papal title “Vicarius Filii Dei” in recent years.¹⁷ A consensus no longer exists as to the proper interpretation of the name and number, let alone their relation to Sunday observation. These facts only compound the difficulties facing the Adventist position.

Conclusion

I became painfully aware of the weaknesses in the Adventist view when pressed to defend the view against similar counterarguments. Unfortunately, persuasive evidence in favor of that view is lacking; I was forced to abandon it. Other Adventists will remain locked in the same interpretive quagmire until they acknowledge the failings of their historic prophetic scheme. The simple principles of biblical exegesis are intended to protect Christians from such dilemmas.

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16. White, *Great Controversy*, 448.

17. Bacchiocchi chronicles this increasing abandonment in: Bacchiocchi, Samuele, “The Saga of the Adventist Papal Tiara, Part 2,” *End-times Issues Newsletter* 146.