

## **Covid-19, Vaccine Roll-out and the Mark of the Beast: Eliminating Fears in the Church through a Correct Interpretation of Apocalyptic Genre**

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### **Abstract**

*The recent vaccine roll-out has led many people, in general, to question their efficacy against Covid-19 with its variants. A compounding problem, particularly in Christian circles, is the unceasing conspiracy theories that are making their rounds in this quick information age. For many Christians, this is a theological issue which centres on the belief that COVID-19 is an engineered virus and the vaccine roll-out is the Mark of the Beast mentioned in Revelation 13:18. These views stem mainly from a strictly literal approach to the Book of Revelation, popularised by the “Left Behind” series. It is against this backdrop of genuine fears, eschatological questions, and a literal reading of the Book of Revelation, that the Church is called to present biblically sound and theologically derived answers. In keeping with proper hermeneutics and application, the mark of the Beast must be considered from the perspective of the apocalyptic genre and within the macro-text (or over-arching narrative) of the Book of Revelation. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to eliminate fears of the Covid-19 vaccine roll-out through a correct interpretation of Apocalyptic literature in general and of the macro-textual message of the Book of Revelation in particular. A canonical approach to the meaning and interpretation of the text is applied to serve as an apologetic against the current fears within the Church.*

### **1. Introduction**

The Book of Revelation has received varied interpretations. Much has been written with varied interpretations on identifying the mark of the Beast in Revelation 13. A strict literal reading will yield false interpretations as is currently the case with the COVID-19 vaccines. Dispensationalism, the youngest of the millennial positions, fosters strict futuristic and literal readings of the text (Beale 1999:47). Due to western influences through missionary activity and the fictional *Left Behind* series of books and movies, the dispensational interpretation became the popular understanding of Revelation’s content among the laity. From an application perspective,

many believers have approached me and ask the same two questions: “Is the vaccine the mark of the Beast?” and “Should I take the vaccine?” in view of the many conspiracy theories and misinterpretations of Biblical texts that are circulating via social media. Our intention in this article is to challenge these misinterpretations of the content within the Book of Revelation by employing a correct approach to its interpretation and application.

Pereira (2015:1) suggests that a canonical approach to Scripture “brings out the theological significance of the text because it allows several windows to illuminate the exegetical task.” Even though Pereira’s article focuses on applying the canonical approach to Old Testament Theology, it can also apply to interpreting New Testament texts. The canonical approach considers the uniqueness of each type of literature within the canon of Scripture. It calls for an interpretation that demonstrates an understanding in accordance with the specified genre/s intended and employed by the writer, as is with the Book of Revelation.

Revelation is unique, in that it employs at least four genres (or styles of literature): viz. apocalyptic, prophetic, epistolary, and narrative which overlap and are generally interdependent in relation to each other. This will mean that Revelation must be approached at uniquely since it utilises four genres. The exegete cannot adopt four separate hermeneutical principles for the Book of Revelation. Neither can the exegete focus on one or some of the genres with the exclusion of others. The exegete must consider all four genres simultaneously to obtain a correct reading and understanding of the book. The prophetic, epistolary and narrative genres are easily identifiable and interpreted individually as we consider other canonical books with similar genres. However, apocalyptic as a genre, needs to be approached differently and considered interdependently with the other three.

In this article, I shall examine, first, the apocalyptic genre and its contribution towards a theological interpretation of the mark of the Beast within the other genres employed. Second, consideration will be given to the macro-narrative of the Book of Revelation to derive its theological message centering around the Trinity and the anti-Trinity, and the Bride and Prostitute that are connected to them respectively. Finally, the theological message is applied to the Church within the context of its questions and fears of the Covid-19 vaccine roll-out.

## **2. Genres of the Book of Revelation**

The reader of any text has the initial task of distinguishing its genres. There are different rules applied to interpreting the various genres of literature. Bauckham (1993:1) argues that the misinterpretations of the Book of Revelation often result from a misconception of its genre/s. Conversely, beginning with an informed understanding of the genres lead to a better interpretation. An examination of the internal evidence of the Book of Revelation and its self-revealed classifications show John employing various genres. At least four classifications emerge, viz. apocalyptic in function, prophetic in content, epistolary and narrative in form, which operate as a unity to outline the book's message (Manikam 2010:11).

Internal evidence of the Book of Revelation support claims of all four genres utilised interdependently to communicate God's message to His people. First, is the prophetic genre (Rv 1:3; 22:18). Prophetic literature is generally identified through shared common features of content e.g., fore-telling future events and forth-telling of coming judgement or salvation through prophets who communicate words from God to His people (Fee & Stuart 1993:235). Revelation shares these characteristics (Rv 1:1-3, 19). Second, the characteristics of the epistolary genre follow a predictable pattern and may include, date, author, addressees, salutation, body, closing, and signature communicating a specific message to the addressees (*cf.* Rv 1:4-7; 2:1-3:22; 22:21) (Fee & Stuart 1993:46; Diraditsile 2015:4). Revelation is unique in that it is addressed simultaneously to seven churches (Rv 1:4-7) and independently to each church (Rv 2:1-3:22). Consequently, both general and specific messages are shared with the churches. The entire book of Revelation has an epistolary framework. Third is the narrative genre. Narratives are stories that have a plot and characters and development. The purpose of narratives is to show God at work in His creation and among His people (Fee & Stuart 1993:79). Finally, the apocalyptic genre is more complex and will therefore require an expanded discussion.

The opening verse of Revelation classifies the book as "the revelation of Jesus Christ" (Rv 1:1). The word *Apokalupsis*, meaning "revelation" or "apocalypse" suggests, first, that the book belongs to the genre of ancient Jewish and Christian literature (Bauckham 1993:1). These flourished from 200 BC to AD 100 (De Smidt 1994:230). Second, the content of the book comes as a *prophecy* intended for the churches in the province of Asia. The idea that the content is prophetic in nature is used seven times,

both directly and indirectly, within the Apocalypse (1:3; 11:6; 19:10; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). Third, the method of communication of the content of the apocalyptic prophecy by John, is composed using the written means of an epistolary format (*cf.* Rv 1:4-5a), making the entire book one circular letter which is addressed to seven specific churches. Finally, the entire Book of Revelation is one narrative or story that is understandable to John's original audience – which contemporary readers must rightly interpret.

To summarise, the book of Revelation may be classified as an apocalyptic-prophecy in the form of a narrative-letter, sent to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (*cf.* Bauckham 1993:2). When viewed as a narrative or epistolary genre, it is generally interpreted as literal, but the prophetic-apocalyptic may demand figurative (symbolic) interpretation. The converse is also true of a prophetic or apocalyptic perspective only. It is of utmost importance that the genres of the Book of Revelation be understood to interpret its content and establish its relevance for the current crisis – especially the over-arching apocalyptic genre. The apocalyptic genre greatly influences the book's interpretation – for even its prophetic content is framed within the themes of the apocalyptic genre. For the purposes of this article, our foci are primarily on the apocalyptic genre and the macro-textual message within the narrative as it pertains to the mark of the beast. I shall begin by examining apocalyptic genre.

### **3. The Apocalyptic Genre**

The Book of Revelation is classified as a Christian Apocalypse, written within the tradition of Jewish apocalyptic writings. This will mean that the generic term “apocalypse” is derived from the first sentence of the Book of Revelation “the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Rv 1:1). Aune (2006:2; 1987:226) credits Lücke (1852) as the first scholar to use the term “apocalypse” as a generic designation for works that are like the Book of Revelation that contains experiences with a revelatory character – and not of the literary work itself. These works exhibit similar characteristics as well as differences which are discussed next.

#### ***Similar Characteristics found in the Apocalyptic Genre as Compared with Revelation***

There are peculiar distinctives between Jewish and Christian Apocalypses. Slater (1999:16-17) lists five similar general characteristics that ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses share. Some share all five, whilst others share less. These characteristics will be compared with the Book

of Revelation to demonstrate the uniqueness of the Book of Revelation at certain points.

First; Jewish and Christian apocalypses reflect *crises* where the oppressed look to God for deliverance. The book of Daniel, the Apocalypse of Ezra (4Ezr) and the Syrian Apocalypse of Baruch (2Bar) are examples of writings that were written after an intense crisis for the Jewish people (Du Rand 1994:235). However, the apocalyptic writing of 1 Enoch was written for a crisis in a future generation which is explained as: “a remote one which is to come” (1 Enoch 1:3). The Book of Revelation was intended for the people of God in Asia Minor when they needed it during the Roman persecution - which is hinted at in Revelation 2:13; 3:10. John also undergoes persecution as is explained by his banishment to Patmos (Rv 1:9). Yet, it is also applicable for God’s people experiencing crises throughout Church history (Rv 1:19) since Christ’s return is portrayed as imminent (Rv 22:7, 12, 20).

Second; Jewish and Christian apocalypses are generally *pseudonymous*. The main feature of this classification views the writer presenting his material using the name of a famous character of the past, to give the writing a standard of prestige and influence. Well known biblical figures such as Adam, Enoch, Moses, Noah, and Abraham are used. However, Revelation does not fall into the category of a pseudonymity thereby negating a false impression of its source. John is a person who was personally known to the seven churches, which is suggested using his first name only. Also, he is well-aware of the condition of the churches in Asia Minor that exist in specified and known locations.

Third; Jewish and Christian apocalypses are often *apocryphal*, in that they were hidden in meaning and application, and would be found immediately before the fulfilment of their final prophecies. Here also, Revelation differs, for it was available to God’s people as a letter circulating among the churches of Asia Minor.

Fourth; these writings *divide time into two epochs*. Evil forces ruled the first period and God rules the second. In Revelation, this truth is clearly outlined with the temporal rule of evil forces (Rv 12:12b; 13; 17-18); and God’s ultimate and Sovereign rule (Rv 11:15; 21-22) as is discovered in the narrative.

Finally; most apocalypses contain an *otherworldly journey to survey history* (e.g., 1 Enoch 1-36; 85-90). Apocalypses present a transcendent view of reality and attempt to encourage the reader to accept it and to live according to it (Collins 2000:8). Revelation witnesses John being “in the Spirit,” where he is allowed to view reality and history from a transcendent, heavenly perspective as God providentially moves history to His intended climactic and utopian reality. The consistent “looking up” (Rv 4-5; 7; 14; 19; 21-22) and “looking down” (Rv 6; 8-13; 16; 17-18) scenes focus on the twin themes of *salvation* for the righteous and *judgment* for the wicked. It encourages believers to persevere on earth, for no matter how bad things may seem, God is Sovereign and in control. He will providentially guide all things towards His purpose and plan.

### ***Differences in Characteristics found in the Apocalyptic Genre as Compared with Revelation***

While there may be similarities between the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses, differences need to be examined which is with be compared to the Book of Revelation.

An obvious example is in the terms themselves (i.e., “Jewish” and “Christian” Apocalypses). Aune (2006:4) observes the distinction between the terms ‘Christian Apocalypse’ and ‘Jewish Apocalypse’ as largely anachronistic for the first century AD, before hard and fast boundaries were drawn between Judaism and Christianity. Aune (2006:4) explains:

The so-called ‘parting of ways’ between Judaism and Christianity which supposedly occurred ca. 85 CE, was not a single event but rather the result of a series of unconnected conflicts which occurred over a relatively wide geographical area and which unfolded from ca. 90-130 CE.

As Christianity separates from Judaism of its day through the conflict between the synagogue and the Church, there emerged a distinctly “Christian” Apocalypse which remained immersed in its Jewish heritage. It is important to note that the Book of Revelation as Apocalyptic literature lacks some of the ‘similar’ apocalyptic characteristics mentioned above to demonstrate its uniqueness. The following are some of the distinctive characteristics in the Book of Revelation that give it the designation “Christian Apocalypse” compared with other Apocalypses.

First, the Book of Revelation is a Christian apocalypse which bears more generic similarities to early Jewish apocalypses than other Christian apocalypses (e.g., the Shepherd of Hermas and the Apocalypses of Peter and Paul).

Second, unlike all other Jewish and Christian apocalypses – with the single exception of the Shepherd of Hermas – the Book of Revelation is not pseudepigraphal. It is written in the name of its actual author. John's role is initially stated as *witness* “to everything he saw – that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rv 1:1-2). Osborne (2002:56) explains that witness (*martyria*) in Revelation, “refers to fearless public proclamation and authentication, usually in the face of tremendous opposition, of divine realities in word and life.” John also functions as a prophet in the tradition of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Enoch, and others (cf. Rv 1:3; 22:7-10) (Slater 1999:17). As prophet, John plays a mediatory role in that, the authority and reliability of his message is linked to Jesus Christ. Jesus received the message from God and gave it to John by the mediation of an angel (Du Rand 1994:209). Revelation presents John in such a way as standing in a particular relationship to the congregations and therefore uses the letter form and conclusion to express this personal link (*ibid.*).

Third, the Book of Revelation was composed in the Roman province of Asia. However, the Jewish apocalypses with which it has the closest generic affinities were almost certainly written in Palestine. No Jewish apocalypse appears to have originated in the Jewish Diaspora.

Fourth, Revelation's view of history differs from apocalypses in general – especially Jewish apocalypses (Du Rand 1994:208). Du Rand (1994:208-209) explains that for some apocalyptic writers, the present era is evil and merely a countdown to the future when true salvation will dawn. Therefore, insignificant present should be endured as preparation in anticipation of the future. The Book of Revelation takes a contrasting view. The Person and Work of Christ is viewed as the focal point in history and is celebrated as such (Rv 5). Therefore, Revelation's eschatology is Christologically determined. This will mean that history is not merely God's preparation for Christ's end-time Parousia; it is already a part of the end-time events. The faithful already experience their salvation brought about by the Lamb's sacrifice, and in which the ungodly are already experiencing God's judgments. The historical orientation of Revelation is the Christ-

events which initiated God's process of judgment and salvation.

The danger that may be experienced here is that God's people unnecessarily limit the prophet's hope as only realised in history. The reader must understand that Revelation's eschatology is in some real sense both present and future. The Synoptic Gospels present the basic structure of Jesus' teachings of the expectation of the eschatological act of God to bring history to its end and establish the Kingdom of God in the Age to Come (Ladd 1993:252). This structure is that of Jewish Apocalyptic. The dualism is a temporal-eschatological dualism of the two ages, with its constant contrast between the present and the future. Typical of Johannine dualism, as recorded in the Gospel of John, Revelation presents a dualism that not so much explains the tension between the present and future (horizontal). It highlights the tension between the above and below, heaven and earth, the sphere of God and the world (vertical). This is John's realised eschatology as is attested above by Du Rand (1994:208-209).

Thus, the Jewish apocalyptic understanding of the present versus the future and Revelation's realised apocalyptic understanding, should not be viewed as "either/or." Instead, it should be viewed as "both/and" in that, Revelation presents an eschatology that appears already to be a part of the end-time events in which the faithful experience their salvation brought about by the sacrifice of the Lamb, and in which the ungodly are already experiencing God's judgments. Inherent in Revelation's description is also a consummatory awaiting of a final moment in history - which will usher humanity beyond history into eternity with Christ's return. This includes a consummatory salvation for the people of God (Rv 7:9-17; 14:1-5; 19:1-9; 21-22; *cf.* Mk 13:13), and a consummatory judgment for the unrighteous (Rv 14:6-20; 19:11-21; 20:7-15; *cf.* Mt 12:36; Jn 5:22; Rm 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10; Heb 9:27; 10:27).

Fifth, Revelation seems to be the only letter in the apocalyptic genre from early Jewish and Christian times, which point to the fact that other apocalyptic material may assist in our investigation of John's Apocalypse; but the book must also be studied on its own terms.

Finally, a working definition and explanation, borrowed from Du Rand, of what is to be understood by the term "apocalypse" is necessary for an application to the Revelation of John. An apocalypse, as defined by Du Rand (1994:199):



Is a text with a narrative that contains a message of God through a messenger from another world to a well-known figure. It is made known in a situation of crisis and rapid change. The message is revealed in the form of visions with rich and complicated symbolism. The message deals with a world on the other side of existing reality that has been created and maintained by God and/or about the end of time when God is going to terminate the present chaotic conditions. The function of apocalypses is to interpret the temporal situation of the readers in the light of the transcendent world and the future and to determine the insight and the actions of the readers by divine authority. With this a relevant character is given to the traditional message in an apocalypse.

In other words, an apocalypse symbolically narrates God's message through a messenger in a crisis. It reminds God's people to persevere towards the promised greater utopian reality to be attained when God redeems them from their situation, and He judges evil, for God is Sovereign. The prophetic message is also woven into the apocalyptic genre, thus creating an apocalyptic-prophetic narrative for God's people to theologically absorb for application.

#### **4. Sketching the Macro-narrative of the Book of Revelation**

Narrative, as a genre, functionally provides a framework wherein the other genres converge (viz. apocalyptic, prophetic, and epistolary) "weaving God's design for history down to its conclusion, thereby providing a sense of an ending, the rounded rationale of history" (Vanhoozer 2005:686). In Revelation, the apocalyptic-prophetic message consists of a macro-narrative (i.e., the unifying narrative) and is written primarily to seven specific churches, and secondarily to the universal Church. There is also the meta-narrative i.e., the underlying narrative of the book (e.g. the battle between good and evil within apocalyptic with good always triumphing). In it the realm of good is viewed from the perspective of the Trinity and the Bride attached to Christ. The contrasting picture in the narrative consists of the realm of evil and is viewed from the perspective of the anti-trinity and the prostitute attached to the Beast. It is within this context that the "666" is mentioned. An examination of the macro-narrative becomes necessary to lay a foundation for a correct interpretation of the "666" or "mark of the Beast."

One of the important doctrines when confronted with Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology relates to the Trinity. This doctrine also demonstrates a sense of mystery in God's nature - for humans cannot fully comprehend it. Even though the term "Trinity" (from *tri-unity*) does not occur, the Book of Revelation certainly teaches it. The doctrine is interwoven and revealed within soteriology – which becomes a tangible reality that enhances our understanding of the nature of the unseen God. The Bible, therefore, presents a monotheistic understanding of God; but the One God revealed in Three Persons: Father (God for us), Son (God with us) and Holy Spirit (God in us). This revelation of God is engrained in the Book of Revelation within the apocalyptic themes of salvation and judgment. Also, the Apocalypse uniquely goes further in presenting the kingdom of Satan using trinitarian language as an anti-image. It is taught from a judgment perspective with God as the Sovereign Judge of evil. Revelation reveals two kingdoms with one belonging to the Holy Trinity and the other to the unholy trinity.

***An Examination is Warranted of Revelation's Portrayal of the Kingdom of God and the Bride.***

The Holy Trinity and the Bride: Sealed for Salvation

From the outset in the Book of Revelation, God is depicted using three-fold terminology (Rv 1:4b-5a). Bauckham (1993:23-4) recognises that the form presented in these opening verses is of considerable theological significance, in that it:

Places Jesus Christ with God on the divine side of the distinction between the divine Giver of blessings and the creaturely recipients of blessings. It shows how naturally early Christians implicitly included Jesus in the divine because he was the source of the salvation that comes from God to humans, even if they had no way of conceptualising in ontological terms this relation of Jesus to God.

The Trinitarian blessing of Revelation 1:4b-5a also includes the Third Person of the Trinity, described as "the seven Spirits (or sevenfold Spirit) who are before his throne." In Revelation 4-5, the One who was, who is and who is to come; the Lion/Lamb and the Seven Spirits operate from the throne, signifying their sovereignty. This forms the central scene in the book. The imagery of the *one* throne unites the three Persons of the Trinity as the Godhead. However, emphasis is placed on the Person and Work of Christ and culminates with Him – which is the content of much of the book

(*cf.* Col 1:15-17). As Bauckham (1993:164) concludes his theological reflections on the Apocalypse, he notes that the Book of Revelation has the most developed trinitarian theology in the New Testament (except for the Gospel of John). Yet, this is not surprising if the same author wrote both books – John, the apostle - which is our perspective as per the internal evidence (Manikam 2010:73-78).

In Revelation 14:1, the one hundred and forty-four thousand (144,000) have the Lamb's name and his Father's name written on their foreheads signifying that they trusted in the sacrifice of Christ, for "They were purchased from among mankind and offered as first-fruits to God and the Lamb" (Rv 14:4). Therefore, "they follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (Rv 14:4). The inscriptions are consistent to the seal placed on the foreheads of the 144,000 in Revelation 7:1-8 whilst on earth. The imprinted names that the 144,000 have on their foreheads signify their permanent belonging to the two members of the Trinity (*cf.* Rv 7:2-4; 14:1). The tribal representation has theological significance and suggests a symbolic utilisation of the Old Testament's doctrine of election, thus further reiterating their sealing for belonging and salvation. Also, the 144,000 are said to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, and they were purchased from among men and "... offered as first-fruits to God and the Lamb" (Rv 14:4). This 'belonging' and 'offering' of the 144,000 to the Father and the Son is John's way of subtly developing his Trinitarian theology within the framework of the narrative depicting the unity of God's people. The seal serves a theological function as a contrast to the "'mark/name/number of its name' of the Beast" which is "666" (Rv 13:16). Before the Beast's followers are sealed, God's people are sealed on their foreheads, referring to their security in salvation by employing apocalyptic imagery.

The 144,000 belong to God and are His "servants". They are linked back to the martyrs in Revelation 6:10-11. They are the first-fruits of God's people. In employing the first-fruits metaphor, the 144,000 functions as a symbolic representation of the "full number" of believers in Christ that live in the great tribulation (Rv 7:2-3, 13-14), who are also martyred saints – made up of both Jews (Rv 7:4-8) and Gentiles (Rv 7:9, 14). They are like the Old Testament Levites who are an extraction *from* the whole and represent the whole as a priesthood who participate in God's salvation (Rv 7:9; *cf.* Nm 8:5-18) (Manikam 2010:115).

In Revelation 14:12-13, the saints' obedience to the commandments of God and the practice of having the faith of Jesus results in rest from their labour as they patiently endure in their labour. The angel points the believer to "the faith of Jesus." The genitive is an objective genitive and has the sense of "faith in Jesus" (Rienecker 1980:499). Beale (1999:766) believes that it could also be interpreted as a "genitive of source", thus with the idea "faith from Jesus." Whatever the rendering of the phrase, it is witnessed that the objective, written Word is demonstrated empirically in history through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (Jn 1:1-5, 14, 17-18). God gives substance to theoretical knowledge – which is validated in Jesus Christ, through whom He confirms the authority (cf. Matt 28:18), eternity (cf. Jn 1:1, 14, 18) and centrality (cf. Col 1:15-23) of His Word. After that the believer is called to place faith in Christ and imitate a similar substance of faith found in Christ (Heb 11:1). So, it can be evidenced, that the genitive can be interpreted as a genitive of source and an objective genitive. The working together of the Father and the Son in the lives of the faithful believers is highlighted as the Son becomes the perfect standard and image of God that believers should reflect (2 Cor 3:18).

In Christ, the twin metaphors of Lamb and Lion (Rv 5) converge in His redeeming work and ability to charter the course of history through His finished work (Rv 5:9). In so doing, He purchases with His blood people from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rv 5:9). These become the people of God who are "a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (Rv 5:10). One of the consistent metaphors applied to God's people in Scripture is that of Bride (Rv 19:7-9; 21:9; cf. Mt 25:1-46; Jn 14:1-4). Revelation 19:7b describes believers collectively as the Bride of the Lamb. John employs the marriage metaphor as a metaphor for the covenant (McIlraith 1999:523). In Revelation 19:8, McIlraith (1999:523) views the metaphor as the new covenant of the church with the risen Christ, in which Christ is presented as the covenant partner or Bridegroom.

Heavenly truths are being revealed here, and the only way these truths can be communicated and understood, is by using familiar human analogies. Hence the use of marriage describes the intimacy of the believer's eternal relationship with God. This picture is in direct contrast with the adulterous prostitute (Rv 18:3). The Bride's purity demonstrated through her clothing described in Rv 19:8 is contrasted with the prostitute's alluring clothing

in Revelation 17:3-4. The prostitute is linked to the Beast and is described as sitting on the Beast – because she belongs to the Beast and serves his purposes (Rv 17:3, 15-18). The Bride belongs to the Lamb (Rv 20:11). The Bride is in a state of spotlessness, for the Lamb has made her perfect through His sacrifice (Rv 7:14b; 19:8).

The Bride's earthly existence is viewed as a time of preparation for the wedding (Rv 19:7b), which is made possible when the prostitute is finally destroyed (Rv 18). This earthly existence for the believers can be interpreted as their engagement (*cf.* Jn 14:1-6; Eph 1:13-14). During this time love, loyalty and devotion must only be given to the Bridegroom (*cf.* Eph 2:10). Anything else results in prostitution, which has terrible consequences, as evidenced in Revelation 17-18.

In the throne-room scene of Revelation 4, it is recorded that before the throne, seven lamps were blazing, which is then interpreted by John as the “seven spirits of God” (Rv 4:5). This symbolises the divine Spirit, which John has chosen based on his exegesis of Zechariah 4:1-14 (especially verse 6) (*cf.* Ex 40:25) (Bauckham 1993:110). The seven spirits of God are the ministering agents of the Lamb. Bauckham (1993:110-111) explains, The question to which the message of Revelation is the answer was: given the apparently irresistible might and worldwide power of the Beast, how is God going to establish his rule on earth? Zechariah 4:6 indicates that it will be not by worldly power like the Beast's, but by the divine Spirit.

The Spirit's role in Revelation is revelatory (Rv 1:9-20) and to provide the visionary experience which enables John to receive the revelation and in certain points in the revelation to confirm what is communicated (e.g., Rv 14:13a) (Bauckham 1993:116). In so doing, the presence of the Spirit reinforces the claim of divine authority (*cf.* Rv 22:18-19) and the culmination of biblical prophecy. In the following argument, Bauckham (1993:118-119) draws a distinction between the phrases “the seven Spirits” (Rv 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6) and “the Spirit” (Rv 1:10; 2:7, 11,17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 4:2; 14:13; 17:3; 19:10; 21:10; 22:17) that are used in the Apocalypse and thereafter shows how they unite:

The distinction between ‘the seven Spirits’ and ‘the Spirit’ is that the former represents the fullness of the divine Spirit, sent out from the presence of God, through Christ's victory, in a mission to the whole world which is the prophetic witness of the churches to the

world, whereas ‘the Spirit’ refers to Christian prophecy within the churches. ‘The Spirit’ speaks through the prophets to the churches; ‘the seven Spirits’ address the whole world through the churches. However, this does not mean that the two are unconnected. The union of prophecy connects them. Prophecy as the Spirit’s message through prophets to the churches is designed to prepare and to enable the churches to bear their prophetic witness to the world, inspired by the Spirit.

Hence, it is the Spirit’s activity in the believer to actualise salvation for those who are sealed and have a relationship with the Holy Trinity. On the other hand, the mark of the Beast actualises the judgment due to the ungodly belonging to the unholy trinity.

***The Unholy anti-Trinity and the Prostitute: Sealed for Judgement***

In Revelation, the Satanic trinity or anti-trinity comprises of the Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet (Rv 12-13; 16:13).

The Dragon is described as “... that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray” (Rv 12:9). Satan pursues the pregnant woman to destroy her child at birth. Thereafter a battle ensues in the heavenlies between Michael and his angels and the Dragon and his angels. The Dragon and his angels lose the battle and are thrown out of heaven to the earth (Rv 12:9). Bauckham (1993:89-90) explains this section:

The initial confrontation between the serpent and the woman who bears the child who will defeat him in the end (12:1-5) takes the story back to the garden of Eden (*cf.* Gn 3:15), and, since the woman is not only Eve but also Zion, from whom the Messiah is born (*cf.* Is 66:7-9), also takes in the history of pre-Christian Israel. Some of the oldest mythological images of the divine Warrior’s victory over the monsters of chaos are revived. The dragon is Leviathan, the seven-headed serpent whom the Lord with his great sword will punish on the last day (Is 27:1), while the ancestry of the Beast also goes back (via the monsters of Daniel 7:2-8) to Leviathan, since he rises out of the sea. Moreover, the conjunction of the sea-monster and the earth-monster (13:1,11) echoes the traditional pair of monsters, Leviathan and Behemoth, rulers respectively of sea and land. Thus, the bestial figures are essentially primeval forces of evil, destined for ultimate

defeat by the divine Warrior at the last day.

In Revelation, Christ as the Second Person in the Trinity is described by His salvific work as the sacrificed Lamb and the reigning Lion – who holds all authority (Rv 5:12-13; 7:12; 11:15; 12:10; cf. Mt 28:18). The twin metaphors merge into one and describes Christ. The contrasting picture in Rv 13 is of the Beast (or anti-Christ). The sea-Beast resembles a leopard, a bear, and a lion (Rv 13:1-10), and the land-Beast is a combination of a lamb and a dragon (Rv 13:11-18). Without explanation, but with many clues, it becomes apparent that this is a “copy” pattern utilised as a contrasting description from Christ. For example, the part-lion and the part-lamb resemblance will allow the masquerading of a messiah-like figure to deceive the inhabitants of the earth whose names are not written in the Lamb’s book of life (Rv 13:8, 14). However, for its followers, this is not a love relationship. Partly mirroring Nebuchadnezzar’s threat in Daniel 3, it forces people to worship its image and “receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the Beast or the number of its name” (Rv 13:16-17).

In discussing the identity of the Beast, Mounce (1998:310) identifies it as, “the great persecuting power that rules by brute force and is the supreme enemy of Christ and the church.” The Beast’s identity must be understood from an Old Testament perspective, for it is quoted extensively in the Apocalypse, and its prophetic symbolism repeated often. In Revelation 13, the Beast’s influence is discussed. To ascertain the identify the Beast, John writes, “This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the Beast, for it is man’s number. His number is 666” (Rv 13:18).

The first clue in the mention of “wisdom” points to Israel’s wisest king, Solomon. Second, the only instance of using “666” in the Old Testament, is found in 1 Kings 10:14 and 2 Chronicles 9:13, both describing the weight of gold that Solomon received annually. We read in 1 Kings 11:3 of Solomon’s downfall where he took for himself seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines. These marriages were political in nature in that these marriages helped him develop *commercial* ties with the rest of the world. 1 Kings 11:4 reminds us that these wives turned *Solomon’s heart after many gods*. Solomon’s downfall was, therefore, two-fold: (i) his links with the rest of the world was for *commercial*

benefit; (ii) those links soon led him into *idolatry*. These influences soon spread among the people of God which ended in the splitting of the nation after Solomon's death.

John uses Solomon's downfall to help his readers identify the Beast – not as a person, but a system that he offers in contrast to Christ. The Beast of Revelation 13 is further described in Revelation 17 as the one who leads the earth's inhabitants into idolatry through the unholy prostitute – which forms an anti-image to the Bride of Christ. In chapter 18, the Beast is portrayed as the one who seduces people into commercialism through the prostitute, who is a city, Babylon (*cf.* Rv 17:5). The Prostitute is a contrasting picture of the Bride of the Lamb - who is both the promised wife and a city – the New Jerusalem (Rv 19:7; 21:1-4, 9-27). The seducing of humanity into *idolatry* through the current mood of pluralism and *commercialism* through secularism is still the “beast” of modern times.

The goal of the Beast is to prevent humanity from acknowledging God as the only One to be worshipped and who will provide for His people all temporal provisions. For those who follow the Beast and are aligned to the prostitute, the Beast turns against her in hate, for there is no love here as with the Bridegroom and the Bride (Rv 17:16). This is just a relationship of temporal convenience. John records, “They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire” (Rv 17:16). The prostitute, as a woman (Rv 17:16; *cf.* 20:15) and a city (Rv 18), and the Beast (together with the False Prophet) in Rv 19:20 are headed toward eternal destruction in the lake of fire.

The False Prophet (Rv 16:13-14) functions in contrast to the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth (Jn 14:16-17) and leads God's people into all truth (Jn 16:13) by pointing them to Jesus and His teachings. Hence Christ says to each of the seven churches: “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rv 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Not much is said about the False Prophet in the Book of Revelation. However, as an anti-image to the Holy Spirit, we can broadly understand his work in being the seal and influence for the ungodly (*cf.* Eph 1:13-14). His influence is evidenced in enticing people towards pluralism and commercialism, which surrenders to the will of Satan (*cf.* Eph 2:2; 1 Jn 2:16). The ungodly are sealed for eternal judgment.

Finally, the dragon's judgment is described in Revelation 20:1-3. Here,



he is bound and confined to a pit for a thousand years. Collins (2000:84) explains the events following the dragon's confinement:

While he is bound, a judgment, the first resurrection, and the messianic reign take place (vs 4-6). Then Satan is loosed from his prison (vs 7). He comes forth to deceive the nations whom he gathers for battle (vs 8). They are defeated, and then Satan is confined in a place of eternal punishment (vs 9-10).

As demonstrated above, through a correct interpretation of the apocalyptic genre and within the macro-narrative of the Book of Revelation, that God is Sovereign over good and evil and is providentially guiding history towards His good end. At the end of the ages, those that follow Christ will be rewarded. Those who are aligned with evil, and more specifically the Beast, will be judged by God. They are those who bear the mark (or seal) of the beast and are destined for eternal punishment. The people of God are sealed for their marriage with Christ. However, they are called to triumph (Rv 12:11), patiently endure and be faithful (Rv 13:10b; 14:12) through all the influences and persecutions from the evil kingdom. This becomes the test of love to the Bridegroom, for He is coming back for a pure Bride (Rv 19:7-8).

So, can the worldwide vaccine roll-out in view of Covid-19 be associated with the mark of the Beast?

## **5. A Theological Response to the COVID-19 Vaccine and the Mark of the Beast**

The indicated findings above show that there is no theological basis for interpreting the vaccine roll-out with the mark of the Beast. Once a correct interpretation of the apocalyptic genre with its apocalyptic message and a correct interpretation and understanding of the macro-narrative of the Book of Revelation is applied, it becomes clear that the mark of the Beast is simply a symbolic *sealing* of the ungodly for judgment. The sealing is with the "False Prophet" – who motivates them toward works associated with idolatry (forced worship in Rv 13:12-14; *cf.* chap. 17; Eph 1:20-21) and *commercialism* (no buying or selling without the mark of the Beast in 13:17; *cf.* chap 18; Eph 2:2-3); thus, fulfilling the work of the Beast and ultimately, Satan. Similar to the people of God who are sealed with the Holy Spirit in salvation as a guarantee of adoption into sonship for the benefit of inheritance "in Christ," the sealing with the mark of the Beast is

a theological positioning of the ungodly for eternal separation from God and eternal judgment. Hence, it is not possible for those sealed in Christ to be simultaneously sealed with the mark of the Beast. It is an ‘either/or’ sealing; not ‘both/and.’ Either one is sealed in Christ or with the mark of the Beast.

Hence, as per a correct interpretation of Apocalyptic genre with its macro-textual understanding of the mark of the Beast, it is our conviction that the Church not become fearful to take the mass roll-out of the vaccine to combat or reduce Covid-19. We also respect individuals’ decision *not* to take the vaccine for medical and ethical reasons beyond the scope of this paper. The COVID-19 vaccines have nothing to do with the mark of the Beast.

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### **Author's Declaration**

The author declares that there is no financial gain or personal relationship(s) that inappropriately influenced him in the writing of this article.

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