

Answers to Questions on the Mark of the Beast and End Time Events

Biblical Research Institute

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Questions have come to the Biblical Research Institute regarding the Seventh-day Adventist position on the Mark of the Beast in relation to Sunday observance, the conditionality of prophecy, and pertinent statements by Ellen G. White. The following questions summarize the main concerns that have been brought to our attention, which have been answered briefly.

1. Since neither Sabbath nor Sunday are specifically mentioned in the book of Revelation, how can the mark of the beast involve a day of worship or a law requiring the observance of Sunday?

The mark of the beast is mentioned seven times in Revelation (13:16, 17; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). Four of these appear in its central vision (Rev 12-14), which is introduced by a view of the ark of the covenant containing the ten commandments (Rev 11:19). God's remnant people are identified as those who "keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev 12:17). Immediately after this, John describes two beasts which persecute God's church: (1) "a beast rising up out of the sea" (Rev 13:1) and (2) "another beast coming up out of the earth" (Rev 13:11). The first beast commands false worship and his persecuting activity resembles that of the "little horn" of Daniel 7 that would "intend to change times and law" (Dan 7:25) and persecutes God's people for 1260 days (Rev 13:4, 8). The connection with Daniel's prophecy shows that the false worship involves an attempt to change God's "times" and His ten commandment law. The one commandment of the ten dealing with time is the fourth—to keep the seventh-day Sabbath holy. Historically, the attempt to change the day of worship has been perpetrated by the papacy of Rome which reveres Sunday as the day of rest instead of Saturday, the biblical Sabbath. The fact that the second beast in Revelation 13, representing the United States of America, exercises the same authority as the first beast (Rev 13:12) and cooperates with the first beast to enforce false worship shows that Sunday will be an important distinguishing mark of those who worship the beast and his image in contrast to God's remnant people who "keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev 14:12). Their obedience includes keeping the seventh day holy because they heed the call to "worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water" (Rev 14:7; see Exod 20:11). These will receive the seal of God (Rev 7:4; 14:1) while those who reject this call and reverence Sunday, the mark of the beast's authority, are described as part of Babylon and receive the mark of the beast (Rev 14:8-11). The final test, then, is over true or false worship based either on obedience to God's law, including the Sabbath, or a man-made day of worship, Sunday.

2. What is the number of the beast and how does it relate to the mark of the beast?

In the Bible the number of the beast is mentioned in Revelation 13:17-18: "No one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man [*anthrōpou* = of a human being]: His number is 666."

The Seventh-day Adventist Church does not have an official position on this question but there are two major views among us on the number of the beast, 666, in Revelation 13:17, 18.¹ Some interpret it as a cryptic reference to the papal title *Vicarius Filii Dei*, but we are not told that 666 is the added numerical value of the letters in such a designation. Others view it as a triple six indicative of a Satanic trinity. They point out that the phrase "it is the number of a man" (Rev. 13:18, NIV) could be translated "it is the number of humanity," that is, of humans separated from God. This number (six used three times) would then symbolize intense rebellion and total independence from God. The Greek text, however, is literally 600 + 60 + 6, not three sixes or a triple six. Recognizing this, many Seventh-day Adventists continue to associate the number of the beast with the Papal title *Vicarius Filii Dei*, and recent research provides good historical evidence for connecting 666 with that title than was previously recognized. In any case, there are many evidences from the text and from history to identify the first beast of Revelation 13 with the papacy regardless of how 666 is understood.

3. In the Bible are conditional and unconditional prophecies. How could Ellen G. White's writings be understood in light of this? Can the interpretation be conditional if the apocalyptic prophecy is unconditional?

The Old Testament classical prophecies focus primarily on the prophet's own time and historical context, though they may also include a wider, cosmic perspective that reaches to the end-time "day of the Lord" (see, for example, Isa 2:12; 13:9; Joel 2:21). Classical prophecies, given as they were in the context of God's covenant with Israel may contain conditional elements whose fulfillment depended on Israel's response (see Deut 28). Similar to canonical prophets, Ellen G. White's testimonies regarding individuals and institutions may have only a local, conditional application since their fulfillment often depended on the response or decision of those involved. Nevertheless, as with Scripture, the underlying principles are of continuing application. Ellen White's end-time descriptions, on the other hand, should be understood in an eschatological context based as they are on biblical apocalyptic prophecy as well as on visions she herself received from God. These prophetic messages interpret apocalyptic prophecy, which is by its very nature unconditional and focuses on the resolution of the great controversy. Since Ellen G. White's prophetic messages reflect this end-time context and not the local context at the time of

¹ For a detailed discussion of what 666 means, including a thorough overview of the various interpretations through history, see Edwin de Kock, "The Number of the Beast," in the *Encyclopedia of Seventhday Adventists*, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=5FP8> (accessed May 22, 2021), from which much of this material is drawn.

writing, they should be understood as unconditional prophecies—like the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation that ground her prophetic outlook.

4. Did Ellen G. White's views on the Papacy and Protestantism in connection with the mark of the beast change through the years?

There is no real change in Ellen G. White's views on the Papacy and Protestantism and their enforcement of the mark of the beast. In order to appreciate her later statements, it is helpful to notice her earlier ones. The earliest statement of Ellen G. White regarding Catholics and Protestants as persecuting powers comes from 1850, in which, based on Revelation 13 and 17, the papacy is described as "the mother of harlots" and Protestants as "her daughters." Several phases of persecution are described: 1) the papacy's "day . . . is past" refers to the 1,260 years of papal supremacy when she persecuted God's people; 2) Protestants, in harmony with the second angel's message (Rev 14:8), would begin to persecute them also. That Ellen White did not consider the papacy's persecuting work to be over is made clear in succeeding paragraphs, which indicate additional phases of persecution: 3) Protestant churches, together with the Catholic church, would come against those who "keep the Sabbath and disregard Sunday," and 4) the Catholic church would lend its influence to Protestants in the United States to destroy God's people.² Clearly, according to Ellen White, Catholics and Protestants will be colluding together over a considerable period of time in persecuting God's people.

The next major statement, published in 1884, elaborates on this initial 1850 statement, and makes clear that the focus on the papacy's time being "past" is to show that the second angel's message of Babylon being fallen refers specifically to apostate Protestantism: "The word of God teaches that these scenes [of persecution during the period of papal supremacy] are to be repeated as papists and Protestants shall unite for the exaltation of the Sunday."³

In conclusion, Ellen G. White's position regarding the papacy and its promotion of Sunday sacredness remained consistent. Later statements, including those published in the various editions of *The Great Controversy*, are an elaboration of her earliest statement, not a change of position. For example, in 1900, she wrote, "When the test comes, it will be clearly shown what the mark of the beast is. It is the keeping of Sunday."⁴

² Ellen G. White, Ms 15, 1850, pars. 5-7, <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/2893.1#10> (accessed June 24, 2021).

³ Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, 233, <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/140.913#926> (accessed June 24, 2021), 396, <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/140.1513#1582> (accessed June 24, 2021). For a more detailed biblical explanation of these statements, see "Appendix," n. 8 (ibid., 501-504), <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/140.1968#2014> (accessed June 24, 2021).

⁴ Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events*, 224, <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/39.1390#1458> (accessed June 24, 2021).

5. Do Seventh-day Adventists continue to affirm the end-time scenario found within the writings of Ellen G. White?

In harmony with the reference to the testimony of Jesus functioning at the end of world history (Rev 12:17), Seventh-day Adventists recognize Ellen G. White as a messenger of the Lord and continue to affirm that her writings are given to the remnant church as an inspired guide for these last days and are especially helpful in understanding Bible prophecies concerning final events. As answers to these questions show, we believe that her interpretations of prophecy are sound and remain relevant and instructive for the church.

6. Is the Adventist interpretation of Revelation 13 anti-Catholic?

Ellen G. White recognizes that God's children are present in all denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church. In Manuscript 14, 1887, par. 4, she says: "We should not create a prejudice in their [Catholics'] minds unnecessarily, by making a raid upon them. . . . From that which God has shown me, a great number will be saved from among the Catholics." And in another statement reported in *Testimonies*, vol. 9, 243, she says: "Among the Catholics there are many who are most conscientious Christians, and who walk in all the light that shines upon them, and God will work in their behalf." Such statements make it very clear that Ellen G. White was not by any means anti-Catholic. That said, it bears noting that she stood in the line of the Reformation. She viewed the Catholic doctrinal system—the Mass and other sacraments—as inconsistent with faith in Christ and the *Sola Scriptura* principle. Besides this, she understood that the authority structure of the Roman Catholic Church stands in direct opposition to the Bible and its authority. Her understanding of Revelation 13 is consistent with Adventist theology and with the historicist interpretation of other apocalyptic prophecies in Daniel and Revelation.

7. Some have conjectured that the Bible and Ellen G. White do not really support the Seventh-day Adventist understanding that Sabbath versus Sunday worship will be an issue in the end times. Is there recent evidence that would support the Adventist understanding?

First of all, we should be very cautious when dealing with unfulfilled Bible prophecy and resist the temptation to interpret Scripture through the lens of the latest newspaper headlines. We should follow sound principles of Biblical interpretation and give careful attention to the Biblical text.⁵ The suggestion that statements by Ellen G. White about the Roman Catholic Church do not reflect the reality after Vatican II, that they were conditioned by the circumstances of her time and inapplicable to our present situation, requires closer scrutiny.

⁵ See the chapters in Frank M. Hasel, ed., *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute/Review & Herald Academic, 2020).

While Vatican II has led to more openness by the Roman Church toward other religious groups,⁶ there has been no change of doctrinal substance, including its position on the importance of Sunday worship. In fact, the Adventist interpretation of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation and the statements of Ellen G. White in this regard appear increasingly plausible. For example, Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, section 67, states that: “Christians will naturally strive to ensure that civil legislation respects their duty to keep Sunday holy” and indicates they will refrain “from work and activities which are incompatible with the sanctification of the Lord’s Day.”⁷ More recently, Pope Francis has stated in his Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’*, section 13, “the urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change.” This development, according to Pope Francis, includes the restoration of spiritual life, having the Eucharist at its center and Sunday as a universal day to rest and experience that restoration. The importance of Sunday worship and the obligation to participate in the Mass on Sunday are also emphasized in the most recent Catholic catechism: “Every Christian should avoid making unnecessary demands on others that would hinder them from observing the Lord’s Day. . . . In spite of economic constraints, public authorities should ensure citizens a time intended for rest and divine worship. Employers have a similar obligation toward their employees” (sec. 2187).⁸ The unifying role of Sunday is recognized also by Orthodox leaders. In a recent issue of *Sunday Magazine* (Spring 2015), the Orthodox Rev. Dr. Demetrios E. Tonias, described “Sunday as a Mark of Christian Unity” (pp. 6-7). It is therefore not surprising that politicians urge some of these ideas and have even called for mandatory church attendance on Sunday and stricter Sunday laws and not only in the United States. The powerful European Sunday Alliance is pushing for stricter Sunday laws in the countries of the European Union.⁹ While these developments are signs of the times and deserve our careful attention, they might not be the final fulfillment of the end-time scenario that is provided in Scripture and the writings of Ellen White. However, they certainly provide a framework in which these things can credibly take place in a relatively short time.

⁶ For a careful and well documented historical and theological analysis of the recent developments of the Roman Catholic Church see the two articles by Hans Heinz, “Roman Catholicism: Continuity and Change” *Reflections: The BRI Newsletter* vol. 59 (July 2017): 1-11 and Hans Heinz, “The Roman Catholic Church – Continuity and Change: The Pontificate of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis” *Reflections: The BRI Newsletter*, vol. 64 (October 2018): 1-7.

⁷ https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/la/apost_letters/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_05071998_dies-domini.html (accessed: 05-22-2021).

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, section 2187. See also sections 2176, 2177, 2182, and 2184.

⁹ <http://www.europeansundayalliance.eu/site/home> (accessed: 05-22-2021). According to their self-description “The European Sunday Alliance is a network of national Sunday Alliances, trade unions, civil society organizations, and religious communities, committed to raise awareness of the unique value of synchronized free time for our European societies. Sunday and, more general, decent working hours, are the focus of our campaigns.” Associated with the European Sunday Alliance are some 83-member organizations all over Europe as well as 25 supporting organizations. On the increasing influence of the Papacy in Europe, see Giuliana Chamedes, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade: The Vatican's Battle to Remake Christian Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

Conclusion

As Seventh-day Adventists, our mission is to preach the everlasting gospel to the world, which centers in Christ's once-for-all sacrifice on the cross, the free gift of His righteousness, and His intercessory and judgment ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. Our special, end time task focuses on the proclamation of the three angels' messages to prepare people for His soon coming. Integral to these messages is our prophetic understanding of last day events. While we must not become entangled in speculations that distract us from that mission, current events do tend to confirm our understanding. We are convinced that God's prophetic messages, as revealed in the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White, are correct and provide an increasingly plausible scenario as we approach final events that have been divinely revealed, even if we cannot determine precisely how soon those events will come. Our focus should remain on the mission of the church, strengthening the family, becoming involved in outreach, and reflecting Jesus in our life. As world conditions develop and we continue to study the prophecies of the Bible for guidance, especially the books of Daniel and Revelation, our understanding of last day events will become clearer. The writings of Ellen G. White are also an important resource that shed light on these prophecies.

For more information on these and other important subjects, the reader may find the section on materials at the BRI website helpful: <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org>