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3 - From the Ancient Point of View

To get an idea of what the Apostle, and people in those days, understood by these terms “*mark*” and “*name*”, it may help to consider some different ways that “marks” are being used nowadays: a brand, for example, is the symbol for the name of a rancher who owns some cattle; a tattoo could represent the name of the individual to whom a slave belongs, or the name of the religion a person has joined; a logo or trademark is the symbol for the name of a business enterprise or trading establishment.

For example,  = Nike Company

And just as we do now with brands, tattoos, logos, etc., in John’s day too it was normal to identify the “name” of something or someone with a “mark”. In fact, it was a lot more common to use symbols and marks for naming things in those days because so few people knew how to read or write.

The common Hebrew word *shem* means “name”; but it was derived from a root word that meant “mark”:

Shem. . . “I regard this word as primitive. . . kindred to it is the root. . . to mark with a sign, to designate. . . sign, stigma [a mark pricked in or branded upon the body], mark with which anyone is marked” (from

Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament, pg. 832, originally published in 1847).

So in ancient Hebrew the word for “mark” came to take on the meaning of “name” because marks were a common way for people to name themselves.

Now if we look closely at the passage (Revelation 13:16-18), in verse 16 John mentions only the “mark”; so it is natural that the next verse 17 should go on to explain what “name” the “mark” is supposed to represent. And, of course, it happens to be the “*name of the beast*”. The verse also explains another function of the mark - buying and selling. So, for those who have received it, the mark does two things: it enables people to carry out commercial transactions and also identifies whom they belong to.

The close link between the mark and the name of the beast is not so obvious in some translations, in which it sounds as if there are three alternatives: mark or name or number. But in fact, there just two alternatives: mark or number. And this is easy to see if we take a look at the original Greek:

τὸ χάραγμα τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ θηρίου ἢ τὸν ἀριθμὸν
The mark the name of the beast **or** the number
τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ
of the name of it

Note: In the initial phrase “*the mark the name of the beast*”, there is no word “or” between the words “mark” and “name”.

So, a useful translation might be,

The mark, which is the name of the beast (NIV, 1984 edition)
The mark, that is, the name of the beast (RSV, ESV)
The mark, (even) the name of the beast (ASV)
The mark, the name of the beast (WEB, Darby)
The mark, which is the beast’s name (ISV)
The mark of the name of The Beast (Aramaic Bible in Plain English)
The brand, which is the beast’s name (GW)

It is a minor mistranslation in some Bible versions to add some undue emphasis to the “*name*” by inserting the word “*or*” between “*mark*” and “*name*”:

“the mark, or the name of the beast” (KJV)

That makes it sound as if there are three aspects to a commercial exchange when there should be only 2 (the buyer and the seller). The result? Too much emphasis is attached to the “*name of the beast*”.

The next verse 18 tells us more about the “*number*”. It is 666. In days of old, no one could see any connection between 666 and commercial exchanges, so translators were tempted to emphasize something that seemed to make more sense, such as finding a 666 numerological equivalent for the Beast’s “*name*”. (And that could be why translators put too much emphasis on the “*name of the beast*”.) But today, we can find a connection to 666 in the world of commercial exchange. (That is a big subject that will be covered further ahead.)

Elsewhere, the King James Version translates other similar phrases without inserting the word “*or*”. For example, “*the name of the city of My God, which is New Jerusalem*”. (Revelation 3:12) In addition, in Revelation 14:11 there is the phrase “*mark of his name*”, showing that the “*name*” belongs to the “*mark*” and should not be treated as something separate from the “*mark*”. (There is a reason why translators in the past tended to favor the “*mark or name*” translation rather than the “*mark which is the name*” translation, and that will be discussed further on.)

To give a down-to-earth illustration about this translation issue, imagine if someone said, “We will choose a painter, whose name is Joe Blo, or a plasterer to finish the wall.” Saying it like this makes it clear that there are two alternatives - the painter or the plasterer; the painter just happens to have the name Joe Blo. But what if someone were to translate this to say, “We will choose a painter, or Joe Blo, or a plasterer to do the work”? This would convey the impression that there are three alternatives: the painter or the plasterer or somebody by the name of Joe Blo. It would place extra emphasis on the name Joe Blo.

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