

666: The Number of the Beast

by Jimmy Akin

We are all familiar with the famous “Beast” of Revelation and its infamous number, 666. In Revelation, we read:

This calls for wisdom: let him who has understanding reckon the number of the beast, for it is a human number, its number is six hundred and sixty-six [Rev. 13:18].

Throughout the years, there have been numerous proposals about how this number should be interpreted. Today, however, there is one proposal that deserves to be taken very seriously.

Clues to the Beast and His Number

Just from the verse quoted above, we can get a couple of clues about the Beast and his number:

- It’s something that can be figured out with some effort and knowledge (wisdom), for John invites the reader to calculate it.
- It’s the number of a man. (The translation above says that it’s a “human number,” but this is not a very good translation. What the Greek says is that it’s the number “of man” or “of a man.”)

Today men have all kinds of numbers associated with them—telephone numbers, Social Security Numbers, etc.—but in the ancient world, John’s readers would have thought of the number associated with a man’s name.

This is because, at the time, they did not have a separate alphabet and number system. Instead, the letters of the alphabet doubled as numbers. This was true in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and even Latin.

Scholars today are very familiar with how these letter/number systems worked. For example, here is the one for the alphabet that was used in Hebrew and Aramaic:

Hebrew/Aramaic Letters and Numbers

א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	י	כ
<i>Alef</i>	<i>Bet</i>	<i>Gimel</i>	<i>Dalet</i>	<i>He</i>	<i>Vav</i>	<i>Zayin</i>	<i>Het</i>	<i>Tet</i>	<i>Yod</i>	<i>Kaf</i>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	20
ל	מ	נ	ס	ע	פ	צ	ק	ר	ש	ת
<i>Lamed</i>	<i>Mem</i>	<i>Nun</i>	<i>Samekh</i>	<i>Ayin</i>	<i>Pe</i>	<i>Tsadi</i>	<i>Qof</i>	<i>Resh</i>	<i>Shin</i>	<i>Tav</i>
30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	200	300	400

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Basically, the first nine letters of the alphabet are numbered 1-9, the next as 10-90, and so on. The same basic system was used for the Greek alphabet:

Greek Letters and Numbers

A	B	Γ	Δ	E	F	Z	H	Θ	I
<i>Alpha</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Gamma</i>	<i>Delta</i>	<i>Epsilon</i>	<i>Digamma</i>	<i>Zeta</i>	<i>Eta</i>	<i>Theta</i>	<i>Iota</i>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
K	Λ	M	N	Ξ	O	Π	Ϟ	P	Σ
<i>Kappa</i>	<i>Lambda</i>	<i>Mu</i>	<i>Nu</i>	<i>Xi</i>	<i>Omicron</i>	<i>Pi</i>	<i>Koppa</i>	<i>Rho</i>	<i>Sigma</i>
20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	200
T	Υ	Φ	X	Ψ	Ω	Ϸ			
<i>Tau</i>	<i>Upsilon</i>	<i>Phi</i>	<i>Chi</i>	<i>Psi</i>	<i>Omega</i>	<i>Sampi</i>			
300	400	500	600	700	800	900			

If you’ve learned the Greek alphabet before, three of these letters—Digamma, Qop, and Sampi—may be unfamiliar. They were used at one time in Greek, but eventually they fell out of use. They did, however, leave their mark on the numbering system, which again uses multiples of one, ten, and a hundred as we move through the letters.

More Clues to the Beast

If all we had was a knowledge of these ancient letter/number systems, it would be almost impossible to calculate who “666” might refer to. There would be too many candidates! But Revelation gives us several more clues about the Beast:

- He’s someone who was alive in John’s day or who would live soon. (This is because Revelation 1:1 and 22:6 both say that the vision John sees describes “what must soon take place,” suggesting that at least most of the events in the vision apply to John’s day.)
- The Beast has seven heads, which are identified in Revelation 17:9 as seven hills. This immediately suggest the ancient city of Rome, which was built on seven hills.
- The Beast’s heads are also identified in Revelation 17:10 as seven kings, “five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain only a little while.” This immediately suggests the line of first century Roman emperors (it also suggests that John was writing during the reign of the sixth Roman emperor, Galba, who reigned in late A.D. 68 and early 69).
- The Beast is associated with a figure known as the Whore of Babylon, who John sees “drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (Rev. 17:6). This suggest that the Beast, together with the Whore, was complicit in the persecution and martyrdom of Christians, which the Roman Empire certainly was.

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- We are also told that people worshipped the Beast, which had great military might (“They worshiped the beast, saying, ‘Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?’” Rev. 13:4). The Roman Empire was the dominant military power in the first century world, and people did worship the emperor by the Roman imperial cult.

All of this lets us narrow down the field of who the Beast might be. It seems to be identified in various ways with the Roman Empire, the city of Rome, and the line of first century Roman emperors.

But what about the number 666? Did any of the Roman emperors have names that added up to that? Yes!

The Beast Revealed

As a Palestinian Jew, John would be familiar with the numbering system used in Hebrew and Aramaic. As someone who wrote in Greek, he would have been familiar with the Greek numbering system also, so either could be involved in calculating the number of the Beast.

It turns out that, if you use the Hebrew/Aramaic numbering system, the Emperor Nero’s name adds up to 666.

According to one ancient Aramaic document, “Nero Caesar” was spelled like this:

נ	ר	ו	נ		ק	ס	ר
<i>Nun</i>	<i>Resh</i>	<i>Vav</i>	<i>Nun</i>		<i>Qof</i>	<i>Samekh</i>	<i>Resh</i>
50	200	6	50		100	60	200

This is based on the Greek way of pronouncing Nero’s name. Aramaic speakers usually didn’t know Latin, but they often knew Greek, and Greek wants to add an *-n* to the end of Nero’s name so that it doesn’t end in a bare *-o*.

The result would have been pronounced something like *Neron Qaisar*, but they didn’t spell it that way, because Aramaic didn’t have a developed system of vowels yet. (It did have the beginning of one, though, because the *vav* sometimes doubled as the sound of the letter “o,” as it does here.)

If you add up the numerical values in the name, you get 666!

There are other ways you could spell “Nero Caesar” in Hebrew or Aramaic. For example, you could leave off the second *nun* in *Neron* and just have *Nero*. If you did that, the name would add up to 616, and—guess what!—some Greek manuscripts said 616 instead of 666.

Given that Nero was a first century Roman emperor, that he was worshipped, that he persecuted Christians, and that his name adds up to 666 (or 616), it seems that the Beast of Revelation is linked in a special way with Nero.

The Number of Our Lord

The book of Revelation does not assign a number to the name of Our Lord, but once you learn about the way the ancient numbering systems worked, it's natural to wonder what you would have gotten if you added up "Jesus."

It turns out that, if you do that in Greek, you get a very startling result:

I	H	Σ	O	Υ	Σ
<i>Iota</i>	<i>Eta</i>	<i>Sigma</i>	<i>Omicron</i>	<i>Upsilon</i>	<i>Sigma</i>
10	8	200	70	400	200

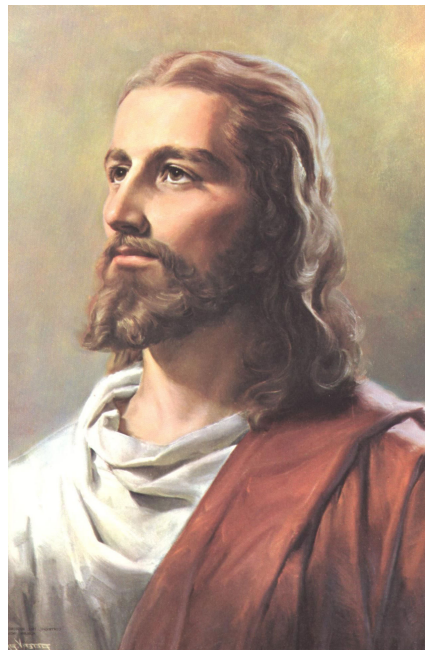
Totaling the numbers for each letter of the Greek word for "Jesus," you get 888!

It's hard not to imagine early readers of John's Gospel sitting down, trying to figure out what 666 meant, and then idly wondering, "Just for contrast, I wonder what Our Lord's name adds up to?"

What a surprise some of them must have had as soon as they reflected on it!



Nero Caesar
666



Jesus
888

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