

Can We Solve the 666 Puzzle?



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Roman legionaries like these had conquered the known world. Christians were a challenge to the Roman emperor's authority because they claimed that instead of Caesar, another was Lord, King Jesus. In Revelation, John hints at this conflict by calling Jesus "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5) and calling Sunday "the Lord's day" (1:10). The adjective John uses for 'Lord's' is the same one the Romans used to mean 'imperial.'

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The Mystery of the Number

Perhaps no biblical passage has both confused and intrigued modern readers as much as Revelation chapter 13, verse 18: “This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is a man’s number. His number is 666.” Scholars have devoted many pages to it. Preachers have warned about it. Journalists have speculated as to its meaning. People who tend toward superstition have avoided license plates bearing the “triple hex”; they refuse to do business with a company with 666 in its address; they change their telephone number if three sixes occur together anywhere in it. Within popular culture, 666 has become an icon symbolizing Satan and evil.¹

Dooms-day religious literature refers to 666 as a vital part of its warnings. The following is typical, taken from a pamphlet that wrongly predicted the return of Christ for His saints would be in October of 1992:

A man called the **antichrist** will rise to power (the head of the E.C.C. or United Europe) who will destroy Christians and Israelites. (Dan. 9:27) He will put his mark (the 666 Mark, a ticket to Hell) on people. Friends, fear God and come to Him while there is time! ...**PLEASE DO NOT RECEIVE THE 666 MARK.** It is a **ticket to Hell!!**²

Is this identification correct, despite the error in predicting the time-table? Should we beware of any occurrence of the 666 number? Only a careful examination of the text can provide the answer.

Context is Important

In order to understand the true meaning of 666, we have to back up. We must back up, in fact, all the way back to the beginning of the Book of Revelation. This makes sense, doesn't it? If you wanted to understand a paragraph from any other book you wouldn't start in the middle of the book, would you? You have to start at the beginning of the book and understand how that paragraph fits into the whole—how it blends into the flow of thought. In other words, you would have to consider the *context*.

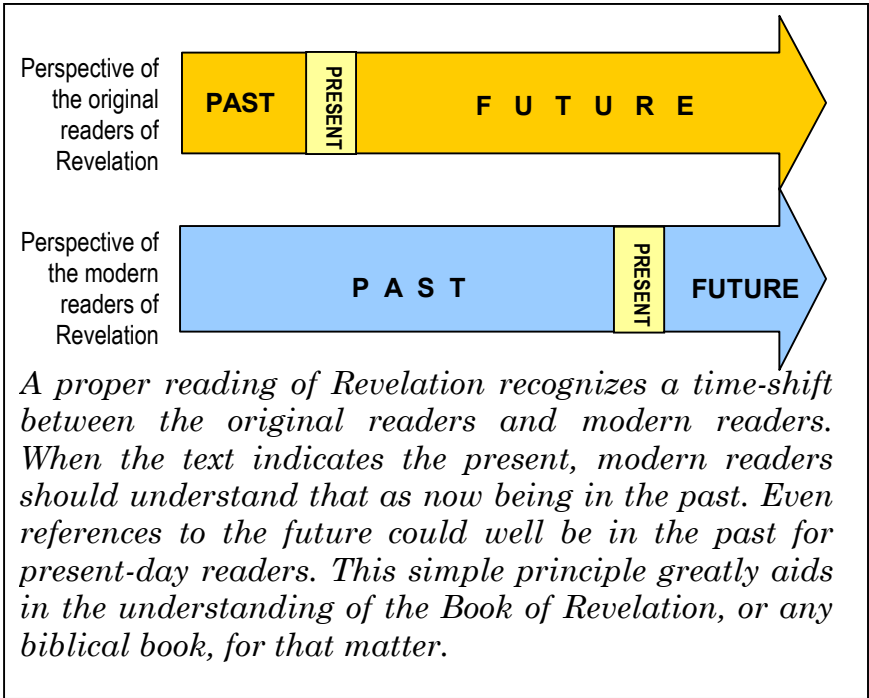
Context involves a lot more than just the words leading up to and following the passage that interests you. It also involves the time, place, circumstances, and audience of the document when it was originally written. Understanding the context also involves knowing about the author of the document—what his or her background was, what he or she assumed about the prospective readers, and what the purpose of the writing was.

The apostle John wrote Revelation toward the end of the first century A.D. to Christians in the Roman province of Asia (located in what is now western Turkey). These Christians were about to suffer a terrible persecution because of their commitment to follow Jesus Christ rather than the Roman emperor as the ultimate ruler of the universe. John wanted these Christians to get themselves ready so that when the persecution came they would not deny their Master. He makes this clear in the opening verses:

1The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. 3Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

Read these verses from the point of view of the original

readers, those Christians nearly 2000 years ago who were about to face arrest, imprisonment, loss of property, and perhaps martyrdom. What would these verses mean to them? They would mean that God cared about their predicament and had sent a message to reveal to them what was about to happen, what “must soon take place.” It was important for them to read this document carefully, “because the time is [or, from our perspective, ‘was’] near.”



An Overview of Revelation

Here’s a quick summary of the Book of Revelation from the perspective of the original readers. In chapter 1 Jesus reveals himself as the glorious, all powerful Son of Man predicted by the prophet Daniel (see Dan. 7). In the next two chapters he judges seven of the churches of the province—two are only praised, two are only rebuked, and the other three receive both praise and criticism. Chapter 4 reveals the scene in heaven in which the

Creator sits on a glorious throne receiving the worship due Him by thousands of angels and by representative human beings and creatures. In chapter 5 the Creator has a scroll, sealed with seven seals, containing predictions about what is about to happen on the earth. After a search is made through the universe, only the Lamb of God (Jesus Christ) is found worthy to open the scroll and reveal to the readers its contents.

In chapter 6, as the Lamb opens one seal after another, more and more of the scroll is unrolled, revealing various reasons why God's wrath is about to fall on His enemies (those about to persecute His people). A key passage is 6:9-11, in which the Christians about to be killed in the persecution are symbolically pictured as souls beneath the Altar of Burnt Offering. You wouldn't be under the altar unless you'd been sacrificed to God (in other words, martyred). The souls are crying to God, asking how long until their blood is avenged. They learn they have to wait a little while, until the full number of those who are to be slain is completed.

Chapter 7 reveals that number to be 144,000 Israelites, a symbolic portrayal of the faithful Christians about to be slain in the persecution. As they are killed, one by one, they come before God's heavenly throne, receiving a white robe and joining a numberless multitude in a great victory celebration. More and more of the predetermined number are being killed. Meanwhile, predicts chapter 8, Christians who have escaped death are praying for relief from the persecution. John pictures their prayers as fragrant incense burning on the golden Altar of Incense. At God's direction an angel takes coals from this altar and flings them to the earth, causing God's wrath against His enemies (the persecutors) to begin. The coming of this wrath is announced by seven trumpet blasts (described in chapters 8 and 9), each of which is accompanied by some preliminary calamity.

But before the main force of God's wrath arrives, chapters 10 through 12 provide a break in the action to show things from the Christians' perspective. In chapter 10 a giant angel appears, who

gives John a scroll to eat and commissions him to prophesy the woes written on the scroll. In chapter 11 the Christians are pictured as dwelling in God's temple in Jerusalem. They are then portrayed as two prophets with powers like Moses and Elijah who are unharmed until they deliver their message to the world. Then a diabolical beast kills them (the martyrdoms of the coming persecution again), causing the world to celebrate, until God resurrects them and calls them up to heaven. Immediately God's wrath falls upon the earth.

Chapter 12 provides an historical overview of the conflict between God and His enemies, starting with the birth of Christ. Satan is pictured as an enormous dragon ready to devour the baby (Jesus) about to be delivered by a glorious woman (another symbol of God's people). As soon as the baby is born, it is caught up to heaven unharmed. The dragon goes up to heaven in pursuit, but the archangel Michael with his army defeats the dragon and throws him back down to the earth. The dragon then turns on the woman, trying to devour her, but again and again she escapes. Finally, the dragon decides that if he can't kill the church entirely, at least he will go after individual Christians. He goes to the seashore to call in reinforcements.

So begins chapter 13. A seven-headed beast comes out of the sea with enough power so that everyone has to submit to it. Another beast joins it from the land, who causes everyone to

If we keep in mind the perspective of the original readers, these two beasts obviously symbolize the Roman empire and the religious cult that demanded worship of the emperor as a god.

worship the first beast. If we keep in mind the perspective of the original readers, these two beasts obviously symbolize the Roman empire and the Roman emperor cult that demanded worship of the emperor as a god. No one can buy or sell without the "mark" of the first beast, who is identified by the number 666. More on this later.

Finally, in chapter 14, the 144,000 all move from earth to heaven (their martyrdoms are completed), signalling that God’s wrath may at last fall on their tormentors. The last half of chapter 14 symbolizes this wrath as a wheat harvest and as the gathering and trampling of enough “grapes” to create a river five feet deep and over 200 miles long—a river of blood! Chapters 15 through 19 reveal the coming wrath from various angles. In chapters 15 and 16 this wrath is poured out from holy temple incense bowls. Terrible calamities including earthquake, hail, locust plagues, volcanic eruption, darkness, and drought symbolize God’s wrath against those who would persecute His saints.

Chapter 17, which closely parallels chapter 13 with its 666 puzzle, pictures a prostitute riding on the seven-headed beast (from chapter 13). The prostitute has the name ‘Babylon’ on her forehead, along with many blasphemous names. This chapter later identifies her as “the city that rules over the kings of the earth” (17:18). From the perspective of the original readers (notice it says “rules,” not “will rule,” meaning that at the time of writing it was in power), this could only be Rome. Her mount is not identified, but its heads are “seven hills on which the woman sits.” Even in ancient times Rome was known as “the City of Seven Hills.”³

The beast’s seven heads are also identified as seven kings. Once more, it is important to maintain the perspective of the

Christ’s church, the New Israel (composed of the faithful remnant from the Old Israel plus believing Gentiles) can survive any attack of Satan, no matter how hard he tries.

original readers: “five have fallen” (these five kings, really Roman emperors, have already past). “One now is” (the sixth king was currently ruling at the time Revelation was written). “One is about to come and remain a little while” (the seventh king, or emperor, was about to start his reign, but it would be a short one).

Then an eighth head (king or emperor) would come. This eighth ruler was to be the center of interest. With him the beast

that “once was and now is not” would return. In other words, Christians had suffered persecution from Rome before. At the time Revelation was written, under the sixth emperor and under his immediate successor, Romans were not persecuting Christians. But when the eighth emperor rose to power, a Roman persecution would begin again. Nevertheless, God would destroy this eighth emperor, and with his death would come an end to the persecution. The city of Rome itself would also suffer punishment because of its part in the persecution. The last part of chapter 17 describes the prostitute’s lovers shamefully stripping her and burning her to death.

Chapter 18 describes how heaven rejoices at her fall, while on earth, all made wealthy by Rome—kings, merchants, and sea captains—mourn. In chapter 19 Christ is revealed as a mighty warrior leading a heavenly army against the demonic forces behind Rome’s power. They defeat the beast and the false prophet of chapter 13, throwing them into the Lake of Fire. All their followers are killed.

In chapter 20 the dragon himself (Satan) does not escape capture, but is bound and locked up in an abyss for a thousand years. Those souls pictured in 6:9-11 as having been sacrificed on the Altar of Burnt Offering and crying out for vengeance are now raised to life and given thrones to rule with Christ for a thousand years. Their blood has been avenged by all of the wrath described in chapters 14 through 19. At the end of the thousand years the dragon is released for one last battle, where he is defeated and thrown into the Lake of Fire. All those slain in chapter 19 are raised to life for judgment, and then they also are thrown into the Lake of Fire.

In chapters 21 and 22 the condition of the saints after this persecution is portrayed by a golden city of fantastic dimensions and unspeakable beauty and costliness. Chapter 22 closes just as chapter 1 opens, with a clear statement concerning the time-frame of the entire prophecy:

*6The angel said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must **soon take place.**”*

7“Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.”

*. . . 10Then he told me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because **the time is near.** 11Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy.”*

When were the events of this prophecy to take place? The book’s own answer is: “soon... soon... the time is near.” From the perspective of the original readers we would have to assume that Revelation was written to predict events in their near future—theirs, not ours.⁴

The Immediate Context

Holding onto this truth that the book itself says it targets the near future for the original readers, let’s take a closer look at two sections: chapters 12 and 13, and chapter 17.

Chapter 12 opens with a vision of a woman. She is clothed with the sun, with the moon at her feet, and wearing a crown of twelve stars. The symbolism from Genesis 37:9-11 indicates this woman represents Israel, more particularly the faithful remnant of God’s people that became the core of the New Covenant church. This woman is about to give birth to a baby, identified in verse 5 as the one who would “rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” This is an obvious reference to Psalm 2’s prediction of the first coming of the Messiah.⁵

In front of the woman stands an enormous red dragon, replete with seven heads, ten horns, and ten crowns. Verse 9 tells us that this dragon represents the devil, or Satan. He is waiting to eat the baby as soon as it is born. But instead the baby is caught up to

heaven. This telescopes all of the conflict between Jesus and Satan into its final outcome: Satan was ultimately unable to prevent the Messiah from accomplishing His saving mission.

The dragon follows the baby into heaven to do battle there. But he loses and is thrown back down to the earth. This apparently represents the triumph Christ's death on the cross accomplished: Satan can no longer accuse God's people before the throne of heaven. Their sins are forgiven on the basis of the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

When the dragon lands back on earth, he starts pursuing the woman who gave birth to the Messiah. This represents the persecutions of the earliest church, such as those we read about in the Book of Acts. Yet God protects her, giving her eagle's wings, a special remote sanctuary, and having the earth swallow a river with which the dragon attempts to drown her. Christ's church, the New Israel (composed of the faithful remnant from the Old Israel plus believing Gentiles)⁶ can survive any attack of Satan no matter how hard he tries.

Having failed again and again to destroy the church, Satan now tries a different tactic. Now he goes after the woman's children, identified in 12:17 as: "those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus." Once more we must remember to see this from the perspective of the original readers. Notice the present tense in this explanation of the symbolism. The woman's offspring represent those who obey (not 'obeyed' or 'will obey,' but currently, right now—at the time the book was written—obey).

These are the people the dragon is trying to conquer. Because he is not able to defeat the Church as a whole, he now goes after individual Christians. He decides, however, that he needs help to accomplish this mission. And at the beginning of chapter 13, he summons from the sea a beast. This beast also has seven heads, ten horns, and ten crowns, just like Satan, which is another way of saying that Satan is behind this beast's power. Verse 2 says that the beast has characteristics of a leopard, a bear, and a lion. The

Old Testament background of this symbolism, the vision of Daniel 7, indicates that the beast stands for a kingdom.⁷

This beast receives a throne, power, and great authority from the dragon (Satan), so that “the whole world” follows the beast. Everyone asks, “Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?” This is the very question people in the first century were constantly asking about the Romans.⁸

This seven-headed beast arising from the sea can be none other than the first-century Roman government in its role as a persecutor of the people of God. Here are the reasons for concluding this:

- 1) Satan gives this beast his throne. Pergamum, the capital of the Roman province of Asia, Jesus identifies as the city “where Satan has his throne” (2:13).
- 2) People worshiped the beast and asked who could make war against it. In the first century, people of the empire worshiped the goddess Roma as the patron of the city of Rome and of the

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Roman Empire. They also came to worship the emperors themselves. This is why each of the heads of the beast has a blasphemous name, for the emperors were deified at their deaths, and some demanded worship as gods even while they were still alive.⁹

- 3) He rules over every people, tribe, language, and nation (13:7). Only the Romans would fit this for the original readers.
- 4) Chapter 17 pictures this beast once more, identifying its heads as seven hills as well as a succession of seven kings. It then goes through a counting of the kings: “five have fallen, one now is, and one is about to come and remain a little while.” Then an eighth king would arise, whose action would demand the full attention of the Asian Christians. (See a full

explanation of this below in the discussion on chapter 17).

The beast “once was and now is not.” In other words, there was a time in the past (“once was”) when the Roman government persecuted Christians. Tacitus¹⁰ tells us when that happened, during the reign of Nero, who pinned on the Christians the blame for the great fire of Rome in July of a.d. 64. But at least by the time of Nero’s death in June of 68 that persecution was over.¹¹ Under the next two emperors, Vespasian and Titus, the Romans left Christians alone (the beast “now is not”). Titus’ younger brother and successor, Domitian, however, renewed Roman persecution of Christians. With Domitian, in other words, the “beast” had returned; he had “come up out of the abyss” (17:8, 11).

Chapter 13’s first beast has emerged from the sea. The Roman imperial government was sometimes beastly toward Christians, sometimes not. John wrote Revelation in a time of no Roman persecution, predicting a severe persecution about to happen. The “beast” exercises his power for 42 months, a symbol of a time of distress for the saints.¹² The text says that he will conquer the saints (13:7).

In the second half of chapter 13 a beast from the earth follows

In a time of great persecution, the emperor cult would be the immediate threat for Christians who refused to worship any god but Jehovah and would call no one Lord but Jesus Christ.

the sea-beast. This beast causes all people to worship the sea-beast, even performing miracles to convince them that the sea-beast is a god. For the original readers this earth beast would symbolize the emperor cult, the religious arm of the Roman government that encouraged and at times demanded on pain of death the worship of the emperor as a god. The emperor cult was big in the province of Asia, and during a time of great persecution, it would be the immediate threat for Christians who refused to worship any god but Jehovah and would call no one Lord but

Jesus Christ.

Before we go further in chapter 13, we must gather more information from chapter 17, especially regarding the counting of the kings as the reality behind the seven heads of the sea-beast. Verse 10 says the heads stand for seven kings. When we list the first rulers of the Roman empire, we recognize the correspondence with verse 10. “Five have fallen” would refer to the five emperors whose reign was in the past for the original readers: Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. “One is” would refer to the next emperor,¹³ Vespasian, who ruled from 69 to 79. The one “yet to come” who would remain only “a little while” refers to Vespasian’s older son, Titus, who ruled from 79 to 81. The shortness of his rule, dove-tailing as it does with John’s prediction, helps to confirm that we’re on the right track in our interpretation.

Then the eighth king, the one in whom the “beast” returns, would be Vespasian’s younger son, Domitian, who ruled from 81 to 96. This is the emperor, according to early Christian writers, who demanded worship as a god while he was still alive and who initiated a great persecution against Christians. Eusebius says of him:

After Titus had reigned for two years and as many months Domitian, his brother, succeeded him. . . . When Domitian had given many proofs of his great cruelty and had put to death without any reasonable trial no small number of men distinguished at Rome by family and career, and had punished without a cause myriads of other notable men by banishment and confiscation of their property, he finally showed himself the successor of Nero’s campaign of hostility to God. He was the second to promote persecution against us, though his father, Vespasian, had planned no evil against us.¹⁴

Domitian, therefore, is the emperor the Christians first reading the Revelation were anticipating, forewarned to steel themselves against his reign of terror.

The Counting of the “Kings”
(Rev. 17:9-11)

Beast (Roman Persecution)	Number of Head	Name of Emperor	Years of Each Emperor’s Reign
“Once was...”	1	Augustus	27 B.C. – A.D. 14
	2	Tiberius	A.D. 14 – 37
	3	Gaius (Caligula)	A.D. 37 – 41
	4	Claudius	A.D. 41 – 54
	5	Nero	A.D. 54 – 68
(Omitted – Vespasian’s rivals) Galba, Otho, Vitellius			A.D. 68 – 69
“Now is not...”	6	Vespasian	A.D. 69 – 79
	7	Titus	A.D. 79 – 81
“Will come up out of the Abyss”	8	Domitian	A.D. 81 – 96

Lexical & Grammatical Considerations

Now back to Revelation, chapter 13:

16*He [that is, the earth-beast, the emperor-cult officials] also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, 17so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.*

What hints to we have here, from the perspective of the original readers, regarding what this “mark” was? People had to have a “mark” (consisting of the beast’s name or number) in order to buy or sell. Everyone was forced to receive it, regardless of economic status or reputation.

The Greek word translated “mark” is *charagma*, which the lexicon defines as:

1. a *mark* or *stamp* engraved, etched, branded, cut,

imprinted (...brands on horses... stamps on documents... the impression on coins...)... 2. *thing formed, image* in the representative arts... *an image formed by art*¹⁵

Another lexical dictionary is even more apropos:

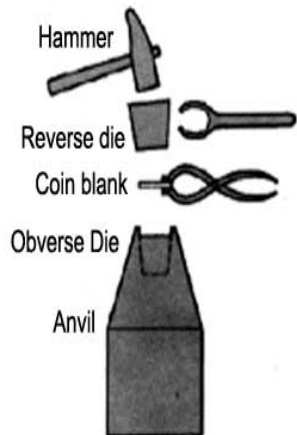
1. *charagma* is an engraved, etched, branded, or inscribed “mark” or “sign.” ...the term means an “inscription,” ...or anything written..., also the individual character..., and esp[ecially] the impressed or imprinted “stamp,” ...or often an official stamp on writings..., esp[ecially] the imperial stamp to attest the validity of decrees, etc. *charagma* can also mean the impress on coins.... Then it can mean “money” in gen[eral]...¹⁶

Given the context of buying and selling, the most natural way of taking *charagma* would be to assume it refers to the emperor’s image and inscription on coins.¹⁷

Another important indicator of how to approach 666 is the word translated “calculate” (*psēphizō*), which clearly means “to count (up), calculate, reckon.”¹⁸ The only other place this word occurs in the New Testament is Luke 14:28, where Jesus speaks of the wisdom of counting the cost before building a tower. John’s use of this word suggests that he intended us to identify the offending ruler by adding up the numerical values of the

Making their “Mark”

*In the first century a coin was made by punching the engraved die into a hot blank of metal as it lay against an anvil inset with a die for the other side. The dies, the coins struck from them, and the likeness created on the coins were each sometimes called **charagma**, a “mark.”*



letters in his name or title, a technique called gematria. (We will discuss gematria more later on.)

We should not render the next phrase as the NIV: “it is man’s number,” but as the NKJV: “it is the number of a man.”¹⁹ Whether we should add an indefinite article before Greek nouns lacking the definite article is always a matter of context.²⁰ Translators have supplied this very noun, *anthrōpos*, with the indefinite article in passage after passage.²¹

Once again, we must see these verses from the perspective of the original readers. Note John’s use of the present tense five times in verse 18:

This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is [a] man’s number. His number is 666.

“This calls for wisdom.” Not “will call” at some time in the future, but “calls”—right now, at the time the book was written and read by its original recipients. Likewise, “has insight”: some among the original readers, those with understanding, would be able to “calculate” the number and figure out the identity of the beast, “for it is”—not “will be”—a man’s number. “His number is”—not will be—“666.” In this last case, from the point of view of the original readers, the man who corresponded to 666 was still in the future, but his coming was so near that it could be described with a present-tense verb.²²

All of this can be summed up fairly well by the paraphrase of verse 18 found in the New English Bible:

(Here is the key; and anyone who has intelligence may work out the number of the beast. The number represents a man’s name, and the numerical value of its letters is six hundred and sixty-six.)

A Gematria Riddle the Best Possibility

Gematria (pronounced *geh-MAY-tree-ah*) is an ancient way of making name-riddles by adding up the numerical value of one