

# Can We Solve the 666 Puzzle?



**Steve Singleton**

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the  
NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION and are used by  
permission.

Copyright © 2003 by Steve Singleton. All rights reserved.



*Roman legionnaires 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.'*

# *Can We Solve the 666 Puzzle?*

## *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.<sup>1</sup>

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!!**<sup>2</sup>

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*.

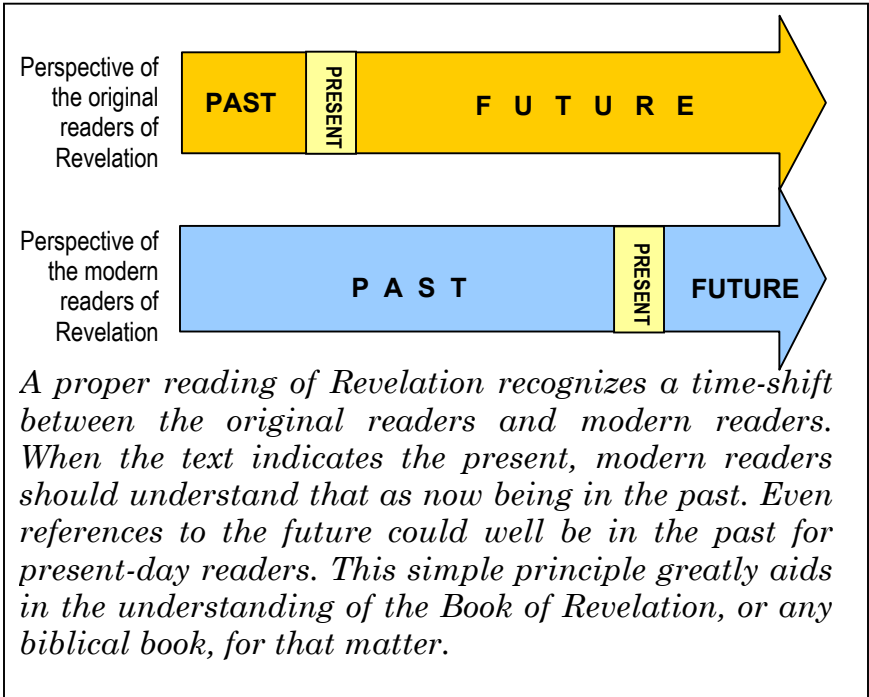
Context involves a lot more than just the words leading up to and following the passage that interests you. It also involves the time, place, circumstances, and audience of the document when it was originally written. Understanding the context also involves knowing about the author of the document—what 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

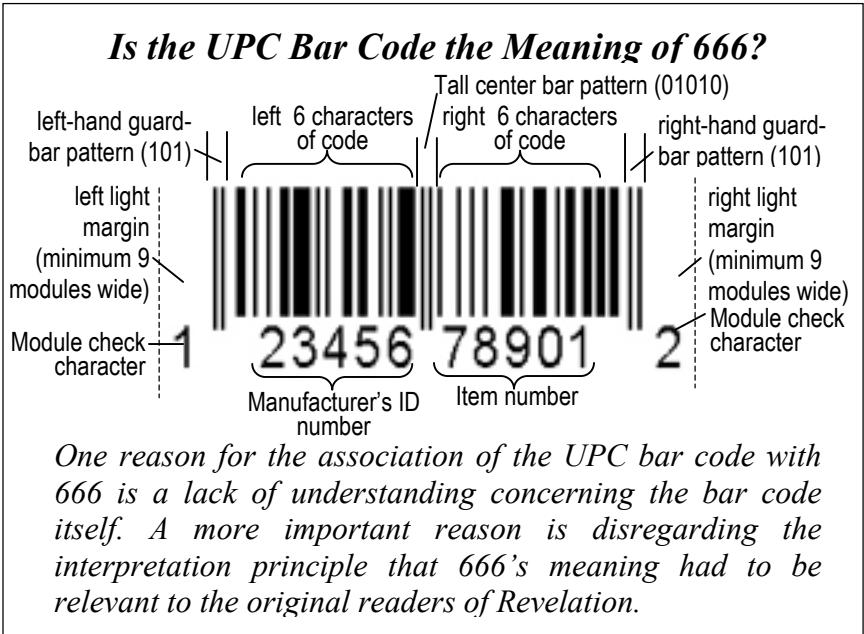
creatures. In chapter 5 the Creator has a scroll, sealed with seven seals, containing predictions about what is about to happen on the earth. After a search is made through the universe, only the Lamb of God (Jesus Christ) is found worthy to open the scroll and reveal to the readers its contents.

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

666. Putting them side by side (leaving out the manufacturer's code and the item code) would make 10101010101 (1+0+4+0+16+0+64+0+256+0+1024=1365). No amount of juggling can turn this into 666.<sup>61</sup> It just doesn't add up.



***Beware of Our True Enemy***

Perhaps we do not yet have the solution to the 666 riddle. Perhaps we never will, given how much information regarding the first century has been lost in the intervening years. But the principle of original intent can help us to eliminate the vast majority of candidates, while the remote and immediate contexts serve to eliminate still more. The handful that remain all point to a man in the late first century, probably the Roman emperor, Domitian. We need not fear him; he has long since turned to dust. His number is no more a threat to us than the number 13 or black cats.

Let us beware of our real enemy, “that ancient serpent,”<sup>62</sup> Satan. He would distract us, divert us, confuse us, disarm us, and ultimately, destroy us. Revelation predicts his end will come,