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The Number of the Beast in Revelation 13 in Light of Papyri, Graffiti, and Inscriptions

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ABSTRACT

Revelation's portrayal of a tyrannical beast concludes with a riddle, which identifies the beast's number as six hundred sixty-six (Rev 13:18). Among the factors that complicate the interpretation of the riddle are first, there is a notable textual variant that reads 616 instead of 666. Second, there are differences over the appropriate method of interpretation. Third, even those who agree about method may reach different conclusions. Many scholars find the most plausible interpretation to be that the number summarizes the numerical value of 'Nero Caesar' written in Hebrew characters, while others find this proposal unpersuasive. This article provides fresh support for the 'Nero Caesar' interpretation examining recently published graffiti from the agora at Smyrna, papyri from Oxyrhynchus, Ketef Jericho, and Murabba'at, and inscriptions from the synagogues at Sardis and Dura Europos

Keywords: Revelation, beast, gematria, riddle, six hundred sixty-six, inscriptions, Dead Sea Scrolls

1. INTRODUCTION

Revelation's portrayal of a tyrannical seven-headed beast concludes with a riddle: 'This calls for wisdom. Let the one who understands calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six' (Rev 13:18). Readers from antiquity to the present have found the riddle intriguing and yet challenging to interpret.² The issues have at least three dimensions: First, there is a notable textual variant that reads 616 instead of 666. Second, there are questions about what method should be used to interpret the number. Third, even when interpreters agree on the text and the method, they may reach different conclusions about the solution to the riddle.

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² On the history of interpretation see David Brady, *The Contribution of British Writers Between 1560 and 1830 to the Interpretation of Revelation 13:16-18* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983); Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYB 38A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 538-540.

In current scholarship, the most prevalent view is that the best reading is 666 rather than 616. The preferred method is gematria, which means finding a name in which the numerical values of the letters yield a total of 666. The most common conclusion is that the number equals the sum of the letters in ‘Nero Caesar’ when the words are transliterated into Hebrew characters. Yet on each of these points there are dissenting voices, and their questions invite continued investigation into the problem with special attention to two aspects: One is widening the range of ancient sources to include texts that have been overlooked or have only become available rather recently. These include graffiti from the agora at Smyrna, papyri from Oxyrhynchus, Ketef Jericho, and Murabba‘at, and inscriptions from the synagogues at Sardis and Dura Europos. The other aspect involves identifying the social factors that affect the interpretation of the riddle and the transmission of the text in its various forms. Consideration of these factors will show that the most common interpretation of the riddle remains plausible, while enhancing our understanding of how the riddle functioned in different ancient contexts.

2. ON THE TEXT CRITICAL PROBLEM

Forms of the number 666 are well-attested in many textual witnesses and across the various text types.³ Codex Alexandrinus (A) is generally understood to preserve the best text of Revelation, and it spells out the number six hundred-sixty six. That reading also appears in the text used in the commentary by Oecumenius, which dates from the early sixth century. Next in importance is the text type that includes Sinaiticus (Ⲙ), which dates from the fourth century and spells out six hundred six six, as well as Papyrus 47 (Ⲡ⁴⁷), which is from the late third century and uses the letters chi, xi, stigma (ϠϠϠ) to signify 666. The vast majority of Greek manuscripts have some form of this reading, and it is widely attested in the Latin, Coptic, and Syriac versions. For Irenaeus, who wrote at the end of the second century, six hundred sixty-six was the preferred reading (*Haer.* 5.30.1), and it was used by Hippolytus (*Antichr.* 48), Andreas of Caesarea, and most other ancient writers.

The alternative reading ‘six hundred sixteen’ has only limited attestation in ancient manuscripts, but it does appear in Codex Ephraemi (C), which dates from the fifth century and is generally ranked along with Alexandrinus as one of the best textual witnesses. The discovery of Oxyrhynchus papyrus 4499, which dates from the late third or early fourth century, adds support for the alternative reading. Now labeled New Testament papyrus 115 (Ⲡ¹¹⁵), the Oxyrhynchus text uses the letters chi, iota, stigma (ϠιϠ) to signify 616. The papyrus is noteworthy because it seems to belong to the high quality text type represented by Alexandrinus and Ephraemi, which has prompted some text critics to raise again the question of which reading should be preferred in Rev 13:18.⁴

³ For Ⲡ¹¹⁵ see N. Gonis et al., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (vol. 66; London: The Egypt Exploration Society, 1999), 10-37. On textual criticism and Revelation see Josef Schmid, *Studien zur Geschichte des griechischen Apokalypse-Textes* (2 vols.; Munich: Zink, 1955-56), 2:146-147; David E. Aune, *Revelation* (WBC 52; 3 vols.; Dallas: Word, 1997-98), 1:xxxiv-clx; Tobias Nicklas, ‘The Early Text of Revelation’ in *The Early Text of the New Testament* (ed. Charles E. Hill and Michael J. Kruger; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 225-238; Koester, *Revelation*, 144-150.

⁴ David C. Parker, ‘A New Oxyrhynchus Papyrus of Revelation: P¹¹⁵ (P. Oxy. 4499),’ *NTS* 46 (2000): 159-174. In the body of the article he expresses his preference for the reading 666, which appears in A, but in fn. 54 he comments that

Papyrus 115 calls attention to the fact that in the second century the reading 616 was used more widely than extant manuscripts would suggest. Irenaeus insisted that ‘the most approved and ancient copies’ of Revelation said the beast’s number was six hundred sixty-six, yet he said ‘some have erred following the ordinary mode of speech, and have vitiated the middle number in the name, deducting fifty from it, so that instead of six decads they will have it that there is but one’ (*Haer.* 5.30.1). By the time Irenaeus wrote, the reading six hundred sixteen had circulated widely enough that certain unnamed ‘others’ considered the ‘erroneous and spurious number’ to be authentic. He could excuse those who unwittingly accepted the alternative reading if they truly did not know any better, but he was critical of those who ‘for the sake of vainglory’ used the alternative reading to promote their own theories about the name of the beast, who was understood to be the Antichrist (*Haer.* 5.30.1).

Irenaeus depicts a social context in which he thinks the original reading 666 was changed to 616 through an error in copying. But once the text was changed, the variant was preserved and disseminated by people who had theories about the name signified by the number. The popularity of the alternative text was linked to the plausibility of its interpretation. Irenaeus noted that 666 could signify various names. As examples he noted Euanthas, Lateinos, and Teitan, but he could not commend any of the names with certainty (*Haer.* 5.30.3). By way of contrast, he said that those who favored 616 would ‘lay down for certain that names containing the spurious number are to be accepted’ (*Haer.* 5.30.1). In the categories of textual criticism, Irenaeus wrote in a social context where 666 was the more difficult reading, because he was not sure what name would yield that total. The variant 616 was apparently the easier reading because some people had definite theories about its meaning.

The number 616 survived in some Latin and Armenian versions, and seems to have been popular in North Africa.⁵ The *Liber genealogus* is a chronology that stems from North African Donatist circles in the fifth century and it does offer a definite interpretation of 616. In the section on Nero the writer says that the kind of persecution that happened in the past under Nero will happen again through the Antichrist. He then shows how the numerical values of the letters in *antichristus* can equal 154, and if that number is multiplied by four—because there are four letters in the name Nero—it equals 616, which he takes to be the authentic reading of Rev 13:18. He discusses the proposals of other writers, whose theories yield the alternative total of 666, but he insists that 616 is the superior reading of the passage in Revelation, in part because he could see how the number fit a theory that linked the Antichrist to Nero.⁶

One of the Donatist Christians who assumed that 616 was the correct reading was Tyconius, whose commentary on Revelation was widely used in antiquity. Later writers who drew from Tyconius usually adjusted the reading to the more common 666, but the alternative still appears in Caesarius of Arles (ca. 540), who made it the basis of his interpretation. He said that when Rev 13:18 referred to the number six hundred sixteen as ‘the number of a man,’ it meant that it was the number of Christ, the Son of Man. He pointed out that in Greek the number 616 was

he should perhaps give further consideration to 616. Arguments in favor of 616 were made by J. Neville Birdsall, ‘Irenaeus and the Number of the Beast: Revelation 13,18,’ in *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis. Festschrift J. Delobel* (ed. A. Denaux; BETL 161; Leuven: Leuven University Press and Peeters, 2002), 349-359.

⁵ Birdsall. ‘Irenaeus and the Number of the Beast,’ 350-353.

⁶ On the *Liber genealogus* see Francis X. Gumerlock, ‘Nero and Antichrist: Patristic Evidence for the Use of Nero’s Naming in Calculating the Number of the Beast (Rev 13:18),’ *WTJ* 68 (2006): 347-360.

signified by the letters $\chi\iota\varsigma$, which he took as a monogram of Christ's name. He apparently mistook the final stigma (ς) for a final sigma (ζ), which gave the impression that the three letters corresponded to the first, middle, and last letters in 'Christos' ($\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$). According to Caesarius, the church rightly held Christ's name in reverence, but the heretics—who were followers of the beast—also invoked Christ's name for their own false teachings. That is why he thought Revelation depicted Christ's number 616 being used for the beast.⁷ The preservation and interpretation of the text were interrelated.

In weighing the evidence for various forms of the text, it seems plausible to think that the variation arose accidentally in the process of copying. In manuscripts where the number was written in alphabetical signs, a copyist could have inadvertently changed the middle letter xi to an iota or it could have been vice versa: $\chi\xi\varsigma$ for 666 versus $\chi\iota\varsigma$ for 616. It could also be that a change was made intentionally. Some textual critics take 616 to be the more difficult reading. They note that the author of Revelation had a penchant for symmetrical figures like 144,000, which is based on twelve squared, so a copyist could have changed the original 616 to 666 in order to make the number fit that pattern. But since one can find names and titles that yield the total of 616 using gematria, the number could be considered authentic.⁸

Nevertheless, a stronger case can be made that 666 is the preferred reading. As noted above, Irenaeus wrote in a context where 666 seemed to be the more difficult reading, since he was not sure what the number meant whereas others had theories that fit the variant 616. In the literary context in Revelation itself, there is a clear contrast between the followers of the beast and the followers of the Lamb. In the immediate context, the followers of the beast receive the mark with the number of its name on their foreheads or right hands (13:18), while in the next verse readers are reminded that the followers of the Lamb have his name and his Father's name on their foreheads (14:1). The Lamb's followers number 144,000, which is twelve squared times a thousand (14:1; cf. 7:4-8). By way of contrast, the beast's number is 666. It is based on twelve halved, which is six, and the sixes are multiplied by ten and a hundred, not by a thousand. The impression is that being marked with the beast's 666 is a debased alternative to belonging to the Lamb's 144,000.⁹ Given the author's strong preference for symmetrical numbers, it seems most probable that 666 was original, and this is supported by the breadth of its attestation across the text types. If the variant was due to an intentional and not an accidental change, it may have come from a copyist who could not think of a name that equaled 666 but could think of one that yielded 616, which led to altering the text to support the theory concerning the name.

⁷ See William C. Weinrich, ed. and trans., *Latin Commentaries on Revelation: Victorinus of Petovium, Apringius of Beja, Caesarius of Arles, and Bede the Venerable* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 88-89. A similar approach is taken in an anonymous Latin work from the sixth century, which argues that the first and last letters in the number correspond to the first and last letters of Christ's name, while the iota in the middle signals the Antichrist's perversion of Christ's name (CCL 107:149-151). A version of this theory is advocated by P. J. Williams, 'Ϟ¹¹⁵ and the Number of the Beast,' *TynB* 58 (2007): 151-153.

⁸ See Birdsall, 'Irenaeus.' He proposes that 616 signifies Gaius Caesar ($\Gamma = 3$, $\alpha = 1$, $\iota = 10$, $\omicron = 70$, $\sigma = 200$, $\kappa = 20$, $\alpha = 1$, $\iota = 10$, $\sigma = 200$, $\alpha = 1$, $\rho = 100$). Another option is that 616 could signify Caesar God ($\kappa = 20$, $\alpha = 1$, $\iota = 10$, $\sigma = 200$, $\alpha = 1$, $\rho = 100$, $\theta = 9$, $\epsilon = 5$, $\omicron = 70$, $\sigma = 200$). See Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts from the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910) 278 n. 3.

⁹ Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), 398-399

3. ON THE METHOD OF GEMATRIA

Investigation into the various forms of the number in the textual tradition leads to questions about the literary function of the number in its context in Revelation. The writer refers to the number of the beast as the key to a riddle. John challenges ‘those who understand’ or literally ‘have a mind’ to calculate the number (13:18b). Riddles were used in Scripture, in Greek drama, and as games at Greek and Latin social gatherings.¹⁰ A riddle challenges people to see something the way the author sees it. The person who poses the riddle is initially in the position of having superior knowledge; he knows something the others do not. Accordingly, those who take up the challenge seek to demonstrate that they are equally knowledgeable by solving the riddle. The subject matter of the riddle needs to be familiar enough for the hearer or reader to have a chance of guessing the solution, yet the riddle maker poses the question in a manner that requires people to see the familiar in an unexpected way.

3.1 The Use of Gematria in Riddles

The riddle in Revelation 13 appears at the end of a vision depicting a tyrannical beast rising from the sea to rule the world. A second beast rises from the land and forces people to receive a mark with the sea beast’s name or number if they want to engage in commerce. The vision makes use of satirical imagery to shape the readers’ perspectives on the dominant powers in political, religious, and economic life. The riddle is part of this effort. A riddle piques curiosity, making readers want to know what the author sees. When John says that those who have a mind (νοῦς) should be able to solve the riddle (Rev 13:18), he issues a challenge that readers will want to accept, since they will want to show that they have understanding. This challenge also assumes that at least some of the readers will be able to guess the solution if they come to see what the author sees. Revelation later suggests something similar, when the author assumes that readers will have the mind (νοῦς) needed to connect the beast’s seven heads with the hills and kings of Rome if they are given enough information (17:9).

Playing on the numerical values of words was a known practice within riddles (*Greek Anthology* 14.20, 105). What is essential is that the riddle does not reveal new information; rather, it challenges readers to make connections between things they already know. When gematria is used, there are three steps in the process: First, readers must discern the traits of a person from some wider context. Second, they must think of a name of a person who might fit the traits. Third, they must see whether they can make the name fit the number. Although some assume that John used a numerical code to conceal his meaning from outsiders, this is not the case.¹¹ Revelation

¹⁰ For examples see Judg 14:14; Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 10.448b-459b; *Greek Anthology* 14.1-64, 101-11. On the function of riddles see Hans Armin Gärtner, ‘Riddles,’ in *Brill’s New Pauly* vol. 12 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 587-591.

¹¹ On the theory that the number in Rev 13:18 was designed to conceal meaning see J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 38; New York: Doubleday, 1975), 227; Robert H.

follows the practice of other ancient writers who provided enough information to help readers make the connections suggested by the gematria.

One example is an apocalyptic text that lists Roman rulers by noting well-known aspects of their reigns and then giving the numerical values of their first initials: One has a first initial of ten (alpha for Augustus), and he hands power to another with an initial of three hundred (tau for Tiberius), and so on. (*Sib. Or.* 5:1-51). The satirist Lucian creates a parody of an oracle about Alexander the false prophet by noting the place of the prophet's birth, giving the numerical values of the first four letters as clues to his name and indicating that the name was also that of a valiant defender, enabling them to think of 'Alexander' (Lucian, *Alex.* 11). An early Christian text says, 'the son of the great God will come, incarnate, likened to mortal men on earth,' with a name equaling 888. The author assumes that the clues will enable readers to recognize that the Greek letters in the name Jesus (Ἰησοῦς) add up to 888 (*Sib. Or.* 1:324-29).

3.2 Gematria in Graffiti at Smyrna

The popularity of gematria has long been known from graffiti found at Pompeii and other places in the ancient world. In 2003 graffiti using gematria was found in the agora of ancient Smyrna. The examples come from a portion of a Roman-style basilica that collapsed during an earthquake in 178 C.E. Although the structures were soon rebuilt, the section with the graffiti was apparently not used after the earthquake. Initial analysis of the graffiti has been done by Roger Bagnall. He concludes that the oldest graffiti in the agora come from the late first or early second century C.E. and the latest came from sometime before basilica collapsed in 178 C.E.¹²

Socially graffiti has a subversive quality. The large structures in the agora and elsewhere in the city were created by people of means, whose names were formally inscribed in dedicatory inscriptions. Graffiti runs counter that sense of propriety. Those who create the graffiti assert their views in a manner and place of their own choosing. The subject matter is sometimes crude and the sketches and sayings may be grotesque. Graffiti reflects a sense of non-compliance toward the more dignified ordering of society.

A similar refusal to conform is reflected in Revelation's use of satirical images for those with political and economic power in the Roman Empire. Satire works by taking familiar aspects of a subject and altering their appearance into something absurd or grotesque. In chapter 13 the writer shows the general public standing in awe of imperial rule because of its apparent invincibility, its ability to conquer, and its domination of many nations (13:4, 7). The empire is supported by those who dominate the marketplace, where people buy and sell (13:17). The public spaces in Asia Minor included many inscriptions honoring the benefactions of Rome and its supporters. But instead of conforming to public respect for Rome, the writer of Revelation engages in satirical critique. Like a satirical graffiti artist, he depicts Roman rule as a savage and grotesque

Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 262-263.

¹² Roger S. Bagnall, 'Informal Writing in a Public Place: The Graffiti of Smyrna,' in *Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 7-26. I owe this reference to Mark Wilson, who also arranged a visit to view the graffiti.

seven-headed monster (13:1-10), and caricatures the influential supporters of Rome an insidious a subordinate beast (13:11-18).¹³ It is in this broader context of satire that he includes gematria to help undercut the pretensions of those in authority. It fits the approach of non-compliance, and like the graffiti in the agora at Smyrna, Revelation's gematria appears in a context dealing with commerce and public life.

To some extent the use of gematria at Smyrna is similar to that in Revelation, because it involves names. One example is: φιλω ἥς ὀριθμὸς Ατη, which means 'I love her whose name is 1308.' Another example is: φιλω ἥς ἀριθμὸ[σ] ψλα, 'I love her whose name is 731.' Similar examples have been found at Pompeii.¹⁴ Revelation follows the practice by stating that the beast's number corresponds to its name. The difference is that the examples of graffiti have no literary context. Anyone attempting to decipher them would have to supply the context based on familiarity with popular feminine names of the time. By following that approach, Bagnall proposes that the number 1308 signifies Tyche, which was a common name (τ = 300, υ = 400, χ = 600, η = 8). He also suggests that 731 might be the name Anthousa, which was not as common, but he cannot think of other possibilities. To facilitate interpretation, Revelation does what the graffiti artists do not do by providing a literary context in which the traits of the beast are more clearly identified.

Another instance of gematria is found in a graffito that links words by pointing out their equivalent numerical value. It reads:

ισόψηφα	Equal calculation
κύριος ω	lord, 800
πίστις ω	faith, 800

The initial expression 'equal calculation' (ισόψηφα) is related to the verb for 'calculate' (ψηφίζω), which is used for the number of the beast's name in Rev 13:18. As we will see below, some interpreters question whether Revelation expects readers to use gematria, but the graffito makes that objection unlikely. When one adds up the values of the letters of a word the result is its 'calculation' (ψηφός, *T. Sol.* 15:11). When different letter combinations yielded the same total, it was an 'equal calculation' (ισόψηφος; *Greek Anthology* 11.334; Artemidorus, *Onir.* 4.24). The idea is that pointing out the equivalent numerical value suggested a relationship between the words. For example, Suetonius records a 'new calculation' (νεόψηφον) in which the Greek the name 'Nero' is shown to have the same numerical value as the words 'he killed his own mother.' The equation underscored that being a matricide defined Nero's character (Suetonius, *Nero* 39).¹⁵ The language used in the graffito at Smyrna and in Revelation fit that common understanding of what it means to 'calculate' the value of a word.

¹³ On satire in Revelation 13 see Koester, *Revelation*, 278-280.

¹⁴ The examples from Pompeii are: 'I love her whose number is 545,' and 'Amerimnus thought upon his lady Harmonia for good. The number of her honorable name is 45.' In that second graffito the writing is not entirely clear and the number 45 could also be 1035 (Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 277).

¹⁵ For other instances see Artemidorus, *Onir.* 4.24; Lucian, *Alex.* 11; *Greek Anthology* 11.334; *y. Ber.* 5a

What Bagnall finds intriguing is that correlating the values of ‘lord’ and ‘faith’ might have a Christian character. He does not elaborate the case for this interpretation, but apparently assumes that the ‘lord’ would be God or Christ and that ‘faith’ would be the way people relate to God or Christ. Based on the location of the plaster layer in which the graffito was etched, Bagnall thinks it dates from sometime before 125 C.E. Further research is needed to bolster the likelihood of this being a distinctly Christian graffito from such an early date. But it does seem clear that the technique of equating words based on numerical value was known in Smyrna in the second century, and that this technique could be used to assert a connection between faith and lordship. Revelation makes an analogous connection, but with a critical edge: the author’s polemical portrayal of the beast calls the faithful to resist complying with certain forms of Roman lordship.

3.3 Interpreting the Riddle in Rev 13:18

The literary setting in Revelation 13 gives readers basic information about the traits of the beast, whose name is the solution to the riddle. The beast has seven heads and ten horns, like the satanic dragon he serves (12:3; 13:1). The similarity shows that the beast is the embodiment of evil. Like the beasts in Daniel 7, the beast in Revelation resembles a lion, bear, and leopard; it exercises authority for forty-two months, blasphemes heaven, and makes war on the saints (Rev 13:2, 5-7). The blasphemous names on the beast’s heads seem to recall the Roman practice of giving emperors titles like ‘god,’ ‘son of god,’ and ‘lord and god,’ while portraying the public worshiping the beast is suggestive of the imperial cult, which was common in Asia Minor throughout the first century C.E. (13:1, 8).

Much of what is said about the beast can be applied to various Roman emperors, who were said to wield authority over every people and nation (13:7), but some aspects are especially reminiscent of Nero. The beast is said to have been slain with the sword and yet to be alive (13:3, 12, 14). Interpreters often note that Nero was said to have committed suicide by placing a dagger to his throat, yet rumors arose that he was still alive and would return.¹⁶ Of all the first-century emperors, Nero was remembered for his brutal persecution of Christians (13:7; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44).¹⁷ He was called a ‘beast’ (*Sib. Or.* 8:157; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 4.38), and some thought he would come back as the embodiment of Satan (*Sib. Or.* 3:63-74; *Mart. Asc. Isa.* 4:2-8). According to Rev 17:9, the beast’s seven heads represented the seven hills on which the city that rules the world is built, an allusion to Rome. Yet the beast also burns that city with fire, a charge that was uniquely leveled against Nero, who was implicated in a fire that destroyed much of Rome (17:16; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.38, 44).

The literary description of the beast gives readers the clues needed to theorize that its name has some connection to Nero. When the writer challenges them to ‘calculate’ the number of the beast’s name, readers must look for some way of spelling Nero’s name that will have the letters

¹⁶ See Koester, *Revelation*, 568-587.

¹⁷ Some have questioned whether historically Nero actually engaged in violent action against Christians at Rome in about 64 C. E. as Tacitus says he did. See Brent D. Shaw, ‘The Myth of the Neronian Persecution,’ *JRS* 105 (2015): 73-100. For our purposes what is important is how Nero was remembered at the time Revelation was composed. The writer of Revelation draws on the memories of Nero as a violent figure.

needed to yield the correct numerical total. The most natural move would be to use Greek letters, but in Greek the name Nero has a numerical value of 1005. When Nero Caesar is written in Hebrew letters נרון קסר, however, it does equal the requisite 666. This approach has many proponents.¹⁸ Some find added support for the Nero Caesar hypothesis in that in Latin the name is written Nero rather than Neron as in Greek, so that it lacks the final n. In Hebrew transliteration a nun has the value of fifty, and when that is subtracted from 666 it yields 616. So forms of Nero Caesar actually work for both 666 and 616.¹⁹ The point is that readers must form a hypothesis about the name from the literary context, and the riddle is a challenge to see if readers can find a name with a numerical total that fits the context.

By weaving traits of Nero into the portrayal of the beast, the writer of Revelation asserts that in the violent practices of Nero, the Roman Empire shows its true character. Nero's reign ended in 68 C.E. and Revelation was probably composed some years later, perhaps 80-100 C.E..²⁰ Recent studies of Revelation have emphasized that the author wrote in a context where many of his readers regarded Roman rule as benign. The messages to the churches refer to some who were prospering in the Roman era economy (3:17) and others who were ready to accommodate Roman religious practices (2:14, 20).²¹ To challenge the readers' complacency, the writer draws on traditions about Nero's brutality in order to show that the imperial political and economic order is not benign but threatening. Weaving the memory of Nero into the portrayal of the beast by means of a riddle is part of the writer's challenge to the readers.

It is notable that one graffito at Smyrna noted that two different words had equal numerical value, in that case κύριος and πίστις. Interpreters have noted that this technique also works in Revelation. If the Greek word for 'beast' (θηρίον) is transliterated into Hebrew letters as תריון its value is 666 (ת = 400, ר = 200, י = 10, ו = 6, נ = 50). Revelation explains that this number corresponds to a man's name. Since the Hebrew forms of 'beast' and 'Nero Caesar' both equal 666, the calculation might underscore that the two are the same: the beast is a Nero-like figure. The genitive form of 'beast' (θηρίου) in Hebrew letters is תריו, which is 616, a number that fits the shorter form of Nero's name.²²

3.4 The Problem of Finding Alternatives

Those who do not find it plausible to see Nero Caesar as the solution to the riddle have had difficulty developing convincing alternatives. Some agree that gematria is a suitable method, but

¹⁸ The calculation is: נ = 50, ר = 200, ו = 6, נ = 50 and ק = 100, ס = 60, ר = 200. See e.g., Aune, *Revelation*, 2:722; Heinz Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (RNT; Regensburg: Pustet, 1997), 315-318; Jürgen Roloff, *Revelation* (CC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 164-167; Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 387-388

¹⁹ See Aune, *Revelation*, 2:722; Michael George Michael, '666 or 616 (Rev 13:18), *Deltion biblikon meleton* 19 (2000): 77-83.

²⁰ On the date and social setting see Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2001), 135-151; Koester, *Revelation*, 71-79.

²¹ See Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John*, 147-151; Craig R. Koester, 'Revelation's Visionary Challenge to Ordinary Empire,' *Int* 63 (2009): 5-18.

²² Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 389; Hans-Josef Klauck, 'Do They Never Come Back? Nero Redivivus and the Apocalypse of John,' *CBQ* 63 (2001): 683-698, esp. 693.

suggest that the riddle points to Claudius (41-54 C.E.), whose name can be made to equal 666 by adjusting the spelling and using Roman numerals.²³ Another proposal is that the titles of Vespasian (69-79 C.E.), who helped to crush the Jewish revolt against Rome, could yield the required total if abbreviated and transliterated into Hebrew.²⁴ Both of these solutions seem forced. Domitian (81-96 C.E.) was said to have been a Nero figure, but he fits the number only when one uses a complex series of abbreviations for his name and titles.²⁵ His successor Nerva (96-98 C.E.) has a name that can be made to fit the number, but Nerva does not seem to have been particularly beastlike.²⁶

Other interpreters question whether the author expected readers to use gematria when interpreting the riddle. They propose that referring to the beast's number as 'the number of a person' (ἀριθμὸς ἀνθρώπου) should be understood generically as 'a human number' (RSV). In 21:17, the word ἀνθρώπου does have the generic sense of something 'human' rather than indicating a specific 'person' or 'man,' and that same connotation could also work in 13:18.²⁷ Interpreters who follow the generic interpretation propose that 666 is used to signify humanity in general, since people were created on the sixth day (Gen 1:26-31). In antiquity, Irenaeus developed this idea by arguing that all of human history would last for a total of six thousand years, and that 666 summarized the whole of human apostasy during that period (*Haer.* 5.28.2).

In a variation of this approach, some interpreters relate the number six to notions of imperfection. The assumption is that seven is the number of completeness. In Revelation, some series of visions are arranged in groups of seven with the seventh vision signaling the completion of God's purposes (Rev 8:1; 11:5; 16:17). By way of contrast, the sixth seal, trumpet, and bowl show divine judgment (6:12-17; 9:13-21; 16:12-16). If seven is the number of God's completeness, then six always fall short. The beast may aspire to become a divine seven, but it remains a human six.²⁸ A problem with the generic approach is that ancient authors did not generally regard six as an imperfect number.²⁹ In Revelation itself, both the beast and dragon in Revelation have the perfect number of seven heads (12:3; 13:1). By way of contrast, the creatures around God's throne have only six wings (4:8).

Alternatively, some propose that the directive to 'calculate' the number of the beast must involve some more specific combination of numbers. They note that 666 is the sum of all the numbers from one to thirty-six and that thirty-six is the sum of the numbers from one to eight. The

²³ Josef Schmidt, 'Die Rätselzahl 666 in Off 13:18: Ein Lösungsversuch auf der Basis Lateinischer Gematrie,' *NovT* 44 (2002): 35-54.

²⁴ W. G. Baines, 'The Number of the Beast in Revelation 13:18,' *Heythrop Journal* 16 (1975): 195-196.

²⁵ E. Stauffer, '666,' *ConBNT* 11 (1947): 237-44. On Domitian as a Nero figure see Juvenal, *Sat.* 4.37-38; Pliny the Younger, *Pan.* 53.

²⁶ Heinrich Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (HNT 16a; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1974), 222.

²⁷ The original translation in the New International Version (NIV) of 1973 was 'man's number,' reflecting the more generic understanding of expression. Later the NIV was revised so that 13:18 reads 'the number of a man.'

²⁸ Christopher Rowland, *Revelation* (NIB 12; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 659; Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 352-353; David L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 1998), 108; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 718-726. For additional critique of any theories using gematria see Corrado Marucci, 'Gematrie und Isopsephie im Neuen Testament – eine wirkliche Hilfe zum Verständnis?' *SNTU* 27 (2002): 179-197.

²⁹ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 118

eight is deemed significant because the beast of Rev 13 is identified with the eighth king in 17:11.³⁰ The problem is that this merely links the beast in Rev 13 with a king in Rev 17 without revealing anything more about it.

The more plausible approach is based on the idea that the verb ‘calculate’ (ψηφίζω) was commonly used for adding up the numerical values of letters in words, as noted above. Note that the most important factor is that the context must provide enough information for the readers to guess the answer, and only then find ways for the number to equal that answer. A helpful comparison is a text that refers to the ‘the one who is,’ a being who is said to have the earth under his feet, the stars around him, and a name that equals 353. The context makes clear that the number refers to God, even though no one has been able to determine *how* it refers to God (*Sib. Or.* 1:137-46). Similarly, Revelation 13 weaves together images from Scripture, Jewish tradition, and Roman culture, and among these are elements reminiscent of Nero. It is the literary context that makes the connection with Nero’s name plausible. The challenge is finding a specific way to link his name to the number.

4. ON THE METHOD OF TRANSLITERATION

Transliterating Nero’s name and title into Hebrew characters has been a way to connect Nero to the beast’s number. A major question is whether some of Revelation’s early readers would be able to do the calculation in Hebrew letters, since the book itself is written in Greek. It is important that on two occasions the author does make explicit reference to Hebrew, and in both cases he transliterates Hebrew names into Greek characters. The names are Abaddon (Rev 9:11) and Harmageddon (16:16). The issue is whether the author could actually expect a select group of readers, who had ‘understanding,’ to do that in reverse, by transliterating Greek names into Hebrew characters (13:18). There were Jewish communities in most if not all of the cities in which Revelation’s intended readers lived, and at least some of the readers were probably of Jewish background.³¹ Therefore, it is helpful to ask how Jewish inscriptions and papyri might contribute to our understanding of the possibility that some readers might have been able to do the necessary calculation using Hebrew letters.

4.1 Inscriptions from the Synagogue at Sardis

The most important collection of material comes from the city of Sardis, which was home to a large Jewish community. Josephus says that in the first century C.E. the Jews at Sardis asserted their right to have a place of worship, to adjudicate their own affairs, and to have a supply of

³⁰ Harald Ulland, *Die Vision als Radikalisierung der Wirklichkeit in der Apokalypse des Johannes: Das Verhältnis der sieben Sendschreiben zu Apokalypse 12-13* (TANZ 21; Tübingen: Franke, 1997), 309-14; cf. Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 390-397.

³¹ On the ethnic composition of the communities addressed by Revelation and issues of the author’s familiarity with Hebrew see Koester, *Revelation*, 86-93, 123-124, 139-141.

ritually clean food.³² Inscriptions have been found in the remains of the city's large synagogue, which was built in the third century C.E. Most of the inscriptions are in Greek, which was the dominant language.³³ But there are a few Hebrew inscriptions from the late third and early fourth centuries C.E., which show that even in that period the community retained some familiarity with the language. Little weight can be given to the use of the word 'peace' (שלום), which was a formulaic expression. The same is true of 'vow' (נדָר), an expression that has its counterpart in the many Greek inscriptions that identify a donor who contributed something to the synagogue in fulfillment of a vow.

What is more interesting is the use of Hebrew characters for names. One of these is apparently the traditional Hebrew name Yoḥanan, which is well-attested in Jewish inscriptions from the Persian period to Roman times. But another is a Hebrew transliteration of the Latin name Severus (ס[ב]ירוס).³⁴ Frank Moore Cross notes that the emperor Alexander Severus (222-235 C.E.) was known for his favorable treatment of Jews, and that contributed to the popular use of the name Severus in Jewish communities, as reflected in Jewish inscriptions from the third and fourth centuries. Although the Sardis inscription could refer to an emperor in the Severan dynasty, it seems more likely that it refers to a Jewish patron named Severus, who made a donation to the synagogue. What is helpful for our work is that it shows how a Latin name was transliterated into Hebrew characters at Sardis at a time when Greek was the dominant language of the community.

Another notable example is the use of Hebrew in graffiti. The letters appear on a stone that was not found in the synagogue but in a hill some distance away. The chiseling is rough, although the letters are formed fairly well. The graffito reads: 'I, Shemaryah son of (E)lijah—I wrote this.' Initial studies proposed that the inscription referred to a son of 'Leho,' corresponding to the Latin name Leo, but Cross makes a good case that it should be read 'Elijah.'³⁵ What is intriguing is that the graffito shows Hebrew being used outside of formal synagogue dedications as a form of self-assertion. Together, the inscriptions noted above show that Hebrew characters were used for traditional Jewish names and for transliterated Latin names in the Jewish community at Sardis. It is at least possible that some of Revelation's early readers would have been familiar with this practice.

4.2 An Inscription from the Synagogue at Dura Europos

Another objection to the use of Hebrew transliteration for the solution to the riddle in Rev 13:18 concerns the spelling of the title 'Caesar.' The number 666 requires that the title be transliterated as קסר but in the Talmud it is spelled קיסר with an additional yod.³⁶ That longer spelling has a value

³² Josephus, *Ant.* 14.232, 235, 259-61; 16.171. See Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, 37-54, 183-185.

³³ See John H. Krull, 'The Greek Inscriptions of the Sardis Synagogue,' *HTR* 94 (2001): 5-127

³⁴ On all the Hebrew inscriptions see Frank Moore Cross, 'The Hebrew Inscriptions from Sardis,' *HTR* 95 (2002): 3-19.

³⁵ On reading the name as Elijah see Cross, 'The Hebrew Inscriptions from Sardis,' 15. For the earlier view that the inscription referred to 'Leho' see A. Thomas Kraabel, 'The Impact of the Discovery of the Sardis Synagogue,' in *Sardis from Prehistoric to Roman Times: Results of the Exploration of Sardis 1958-1975* (ed. G.M.A. Hanfmann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 178-190, esp. 184-185.

³⁶ E.g., *y. Ber.* 9 [12d]; *b. Git.* 56a. See Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 719.

of 676 and would not fit the number of the beast in Revelation. Yet the shorter spelling of the title is better attested in ancient sources than has usually been recognized.

An example that has been overlooked is an inscription from the synagogue at Dura-Europos.³⁷ The synagogue includes tiles that recorded the names of those who had contributed to the renovation in the building in both Greek and Aramaic, which shows that the community was familiar with both languages. The inscription of interest is written in Aramaic and dates from 244 or 245 C.E.. The transliteration of ‘Caesar’ is found in the opening section where the date of the renovation is given: ‘This building was erected in the year five hundred and fifty-six, which is the second year of Philip Julius Caesar (קסר), during the presbyterate of Samuel the priest, son of Yedaya the archon.’ The lines that follow tell of the work that was done and express good wishes toward those who made it possible. This example shows how the shorter spelling was used to transliterate the imperial title in a diaspora synagogue where both Greek and Aramaic were known. It also shows how the transliterated title was used in giving dates. That usage is also apparent in a number of documentary papyri from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

4.3 Papyri from Murabba‘at and Ketef Jericho

Four texts are of special interest for the study of transliteration of the imperial title and all of them seem to involve matters of commerce or finance. Interpreters have regularly noted that in Rev 13:16-18 people must receive the mark with the beast’s name and number if they want to buy and sell. So it is helpful to consider how the imperial title was spelled in texts that deal with repayment of a loan, transactions related to property, and the sale of crops.

The first text is a promissory note from Murabba‘at that dates from the reign of Nero (ca. 55-56 C.E.). The text is written in Aramaic and uses the full name and title Nero Caesar in the form גרון קסר, which would correspond to the number 666 in Revelation (Mur XVIII,1).³⁸ Although interpreters have sometimes noted the relevance of the spelling for interpretation of Rev 13:18, almost nothing has been said about the nature of the text, which concerns repayment of a loan:

... in the second year of Nero Caesar [גרון קסר] ... at Şiwaya, Absalom son of Ḥanin from Şiwaya has declared in my presence, that he borrowed from me, Zechariah son of Yoḥannan son of H... a resident of Keslon, twenty denarii [which I will give ba]ck ... and if I do not repay by the end of the appointed time, I will pay you one fifth interest and will repay you fully, even if it is a sabbatical year. And if I do not do it, restitution will be made to you from my property, and you will have the right of seizure on anything I acquire. [Signatures follow.]

³⁷ *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, Volume III: *Syria and Cyprus* (ed. David Noy and Hanswulf Bloedhorn; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 139-146. See inscription 84A, line 4.

³⁸ For the text and notes see P. Benoit, J. T. Milik, and R. de Vaux, eds., *Les grottes de Murabba‘at* (DJD 2; Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 100-104. I am indebted to Jonathan Paradise, Michael Chan, and Dirk Lange for help in producing the English translation. On the value of this text for interpreting Rev 13:18 see Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 388

Jewish promissory notes like this have been found at Elephantine and elsewhere among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and they are mentioned in rabbinic texts. The basic form seems to have changed little over time.³⁹ Typical elements include: the date, the debtor's declaration that he has received the money, the obligation to repay on time, the statement that the debtor's possessions will serve as surety, and the signatures. What is helpful for our work is that giving the date of a financial transaction was a common feature in such texts, and in the Roman period the dates often stated the name and title of the emperor.

A second text is from Ketef Jericho and it shows a similar pattern.⁴⁰ It is among the last of the Dead Sea Scrolls to be published, and it expands our evidence for the shorter spelling of the imperial title in commercial documents from the late first and early second century C.E. The opening line reads, '[On the (__ day of the month), year ten] and eight of Traianus Caesa[r].' The text is very fragmentary but the name Traianus is certain. In the title 'Caesar' there is a lacuna after the samek, but it is clear that the word is spelled קסר and that it does not use the additional yod that we find in the Talmudic spelling. The date seems to be the eighteenth year of Trajan's reign, which would be 116 C.E. The contents of the document are difficult to discern, but the editors suggest that it had to do with something written, a garden, and perhaps buying or selling.

Our third text is a Hebrew deed from Ketef Jericho. The papyrus dates from the late first century C.E.⁴¹ The text is poorly preserved, but the lower section of the recto side seems to preserve a date. The title 'Caesar' seems to be discernable with the spelling קסר. The letters earlier on that same line apparently correspond to part of Domitian's name. The editors propose that the expression be read 'Domitianus Caesar,' which would fit in the space available. As a deed, the text presumably dealt with payments and property ownership, although the details of the transaction can no longer be determined.

A fourth document is an Aramaic bill of sale from the late first century C.E.. It outlines transactions pertaining to the sale of crops. Portions of both the upper and lower sections of the document have been preserved.⁴²

³⁹ On the form see Magen Broshi and Elisha Qimron, 'A Hebrew I.O.U. Note from the Second Year of the Bar Kochba Revolt,' *JJS* 45 (1994), 286-294. I owe this reference to Jonathan Paradise.

⁴⁰ Jericho 13 papUnclassified Text ar. For the text and notes see James Charlesworth et al., eds, *Miscellaneous Texts from the Judaean Desert* (DJD 38; Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 79-80.

⁴¹ Jericho 9 papDeed A. For the text and notes see Charlesworth et al., eds, *Miscellaneous Texts from the Judaean Desert*, 67-69.

⁴² Jericho 7 papSale of Date Crop ar. For the text and notes see Charlesworth et al., eds, *Miscellaneous Texts from the Judaean Desert*, 55-61.

On the twenty-fifth of Tevet, year three (of) [our] lor[d] ... twenty-five full-weight zuzein (of) silver ... to be harvested for you, baskets of dates to be given ...

On the twenty-fifth of Tevet, [yea]r three (of) Domitianus Cae[sar...], Yehoseph son of Yehoḥanan from [...] sold [to Yehoḥanan son of] Yehosef, [...] son of Yehoḥanan, [...] of date[s...] four talents, to be given to as, as before, [...Yehoḥanan son(?)] of Yehoseph, with purchase money [...], 20 silver (money) of the purchase, out of which the money of the orphans (will be given), to be paid as (agreed) before, palm orchard (of) four talents...that you will pick for yourself five baskets of dates...this document, and to pick (it) without payment [...] to the legal guardian...the orphan is allowed to sell everything that has already come into existence (for) the value equal to the market price of [...]

The document was written in the third year of Domitian's reign, which was 84 C.E.. The initial line of the upper section apparently refers to him as [מר] or 'lord.' In first line of the lower section his name is given and that is apparently followed by the title 'Caesar.' Only the initial qof is visible, but the editors reconstruct the word using the spelling קסר as in the other documents from Ketef Jericho. The contents relate to business arrangements involving the harvesting and sale of dates.

As a collection, these Dead Sea texts show that the shorter spelling of the transliterated word 'Caesar' was used in Hebrew and Aramaic commercial documents from the late first and early second centuries, the period when Revelation was composed. Like the inscription from the synagogue at Dura Europos, they show that it is plausible to think that readers able to transliterate 'Caesar' into Hebrew characters could have used the shorter spelling rather than the longer spelling found in the Talmud. They also show that a common way for the emperor's name and title to be used in formal business transactions was in the dating of documents.

These observations suggest that a riddle involving an emperor's name and title would be appropriate in a context where people are buying and selling, as in Rev 13:16-18. At the same time, there is no reason to make a one-to-one correlation of the beast's mark with the practice of using the emperor's name to date commercial documents. The imagery in Revelation is evocative. Some interpreters relate the mark to coins bearing the emperor's name and image or to the imperial seals used on official texts.⁴³ Others relate it to a wider social pressure to participate in trade associations, which sometimes publicly affirmed their respect for the emperor.⁴⁴ The use of the imperial name and title in Jewish commercial texts is simply one element within a larger social context in which the author of Revelation was calling people to recognize how thoroughly commerce was interlinked with Roman rule.⁴⁵

⁴³ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 126-127; J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse* (JSNTSup 132; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 138-139; Deborah Furlan Taylor, 'The Monetary Crisis in Revelation 13:17 and the Provenance of the Book of Revelation,' *CBQ* 71 (2009): 580-596.

⁴⁴ See Aune, *Revelation*, 2:768; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung*, 314-19; Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 135-141.

⁴⁵ Koester, *Revelation*, 595-96, 604-605.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The riddle in Rev 13:18 challenges readers to formulate a theory about the name signified by the number 666 based on the clues given in the context. As we have seen, the context portrays a beast-like tyrant using imagery from biblical sources, later Jewish tradition, and themes from imperial Rome. Some of the elements recall traditions about Nero, which should prompt readers to see whether a form of Nero's name will fit the number using the technique of gematria. The riddle challenges readers to see something as the author sees it. In this case, the goal is to shape their perspective so they see how that in the brutal practices associated with memories about Nero, the Roman Empire of the author's own time shows its true character. The sources noted above show gematria being used in graffiti in the agora at Smyrna. Those who inscribe the names and numbers on the walls assert an attitude of non-compliance, and the author of Revelation does the same. His gematria is part of a larger satirical portrait that undercuts the pretensions of imperial rule and those who support it.

The dominant language in Asia Minor was Greek, but inscriptions from Sardis show that Hebrew continued to be used for names, including transliterated Latin names. Hebrew was also used in graffiti, which allowed the person doing it to use language from the Jewish subculture as a means of self-assertion. If the author of Revelation expected some of his readers to use Hebrew characters to determine the name of the beast, he would have been appealing to those who could associate with that Jewish subculture. To discern the meaning of the riddle, they would need to move outside the language of the dominant culture and use letters from the language of a subgroup. That approach fits the countercultural perspective of the writer's message. In practical terms, the imperial title 'Caesar' was transliterated into Hebrew and Aramaic characters as קסר in a dedication in the synagogue at Dura Europos, as well as on commercial documents from the Dead Sea area. Readers able to use transliteration to discern the answer to the riddle could have been familiar with that spelling. In terms of social function, the ability to solve the riddle in this way would have fostered a bond between the author and the readers, while differentiating them from those who lacked this ability.

The social function of riddles may have played a role in the early dissemination of the alternative reading 616. From a literary perspective it seems probable that 666 is the original reading. Then, as Revelation circulated in the second century, the number was altered to 616, either through an error in copying or intentionally to make the number fit a particular theory about the name. Irenaeus considered 666 to be authentic and indicates that for him it was the most difficult reading, since he was not certain what name the number signified. In his context 616 seems to have become popular because some found it easier to equate with a theory about the name of the Antichrist. Socially, riddles challenge people to solve a puzzle and thereby show that they are as wise as the riddle-maker. Those who succeed gain a degree of prestige, while those who cannot do so seem lacking. In Irenaeus's context there were people who claimed they could solve the riddle if it was based on 616, and that suggests that whatever the origin of the variant, it may have been preserved and disseminated because some found it easier to solve, and that was socially more appealing than acknowledging an inability to determine the meaning of 666.

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