

Newsletter March 2020

In this Newsletter Article, we shall briefly discuss John's rather enigmatic use of the number 666 to refer to the first beast, the political Antichrist. More specifically, we may wonder why God would direct John to provide a cryptic numerical reference to this man, rather than simply naming him. In a futurist prophetic sense, 666 is viewed as a way of warning a future generation living in the last days of the Antichrist, whose name the number 666 will disclose. The text in question reads as follows:

“¹⁶And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: ¹⁷And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. ¹⁸Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore *and six*” (Re.13:16-18).

In verse 16, the pronoun “he” refers to the false prophet, who is exalting the first beast, the political Antichrist. Therefore, in verse 18 John describes the first beast as a man whose identity is represented by the number six-hundred threescore and six. John also said in this verse that working out the identity of this man would require wisdom as well as a certain amount of understanding. Indeed, we need wisdom to understand why a number was used, as well as an understanding of the method used in deriving that specific number. The word for “count” as it used in this verse 18 is *psēphizō* in the Greek which literally means to count using pebbles in enumeration, which in the genitive case means “to compute.” It must be assumed that it was entirely possible for the name of the man described in this verse to be determined by deciphering this number using a method that was known by at least a few of John's Hebrew readers of that day.

It was quite common in antiquity to calculate a number from the name of famous men. The general method in use in John's day was an alpha-to-numerical process known as Gemitra, from we get our modern English word Geometry. Geometry is a mathematical science of shapes and alignments of lines and angles with respect to each other so as to define a plane drawing or solid object. In that same sense, Gemitra only yields a general pattern or character of a man who is represented by a number.

Gemitra apparently had its origins in an Assyrian-Babylonian-Greek alphanumeric cipher or code. Following the Babylonian captivity, Gemitra was adopted by the returning Jews, such that it became a part of their Hebrew Etymology. It was therefore common for Jews to relate various words or phrases with other words or phrases when a similar calculation produced the same number. Those additional words and phrases were seen as further defining a person's character whose name had produced the same number. Men whose names yielded the same number were seen as being associated with a principal's name and person. Moreover, various words or phrases could also be shown to produce that same number. Some of those associated words and phrases could be complementary, while others could be quite derogatory..

A common Hebrew practice in John's day was to add together all of the numerical equivalents assigned to letters in a name to produce a final sum, which became the number of a person's name. After doing so, however, it could not be determined from the sum alone how many numbers representing letters had been added together to produce that sum, nor could the order of any of the letters they represented be determined. The possible letter combinations would be virtually limitless – unless, of course, the reader already understood the name that the number represented – or could determine by an identical process that it's numerical sum was the same. Even so, many other possible combinations of letters arranged in various order could yield the same number. For that reason, a digit was sometimes added on to the end of the calculated sum to indicate the number of words contained in a phrase, through which a more certain conclusion could be reached. This problem was further complicated by the fact that many different variations (at least a couple of dozen) encryption methods were in common use in that day.

It is entirely possible that this number was revealed to John by the Holy Spirit, and that he was not personally aware of the name of this future Antichrist. Be that as it may, John was born a Hebrew, and because Gemitra was in common use by the Jews of his day, it is not unreasonable to assume that the number 666 could have been calculated by John from the Hebrew Alphabet. The 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet were most commonly assigned numbers as follows: The first nine letters beginning with *Aleph* and ending with *Tet* were in order assigned the numerical values 1 through 9. The next nine letters from *Yud* to *Tzady* were

assigned 10 through 90, while the last four letters *Kuf* through *Taf* were numbered 100 through 400. Added to those were the final forms (*sofit*) of the five letters *Kaf*, *Mem*, *Nun*, *Peh*, and *Tzady*, which were assigned the numbers 500 through 900.

Hebrew vowels were commonly excluded from tabulation, but in other instances they were not. Some letters may also have been exchanged for other letters in a predetermined manner, such as, substituting adjacent letters, before their numerical value were tabulated. In addition, there were multiple methods in which those derived numbers, once determined, were altered before they were tabulated; in some methods, all zeros were truncated before adding. Therefore, without having prior knowledge of the precise method used in calculating the number, there is no rational way that a specific number could be decisively decoded. The sum 666 could yield any number of invalid results in addition to the correct one. To believe that we can decode an ancient number into a name accurately without any prior knowledge of the specific scheme used to produce it is pure foolishness.

Nevertheless, the preterist argues that 666 specifically refers to Nero whose name was so distasteful to John and his readers that John used this oblique method to identify him in order to avoid writing down his name, – or perhaps it was John’s way of referring to him without incurring additional punishment if the document were to be intercepted by Roman authorities. As we have previously stated, the Preterist is a specific Covenantal Historist who believes that all the events found in the Revelation have already been fulfilled in the early first century ending in the fall of Jerusalem. Therefore, the Preterist view is that the number 666 found in Revelation Chapter 13, verse 18 directly refers to the Roman Emperor Nero, who was ruling in Rome at the time John wrote the Revelation, not to some future individual. It is important to note, however, that Dispensationalists have established a later date between the years AD 81 to 96, during the reign of the emperor Domitian, for John’s imprisonment on the Isle of Patmos and his writing of the Revelation document. While that would indicate that Nero, having died years before in AD 68, could not have been the Antichrist; it is entirely possible that John was referring to Nero as being a type of the Antichrist to come.

Therefore, let us take a brief look at the life of Nero, who was the Emperor (Caesar) of Rome during the years AD 54-68. Nero was born Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, in the year AD 37. He was brought up by his influential and ruthless mother, Julia Agrippina, a great granddaughter of Rome’s first emperor Augustus. Agrippina had poisoned her first husband and then married her uncle, the fourth emperor, Claudius. It is suspected that Agrippina also later poisoned Claudius in AD 54 to make way for their young son to become Emperor. So it was that Nero, the stepson and heir of emperor Claudius, became Emperor at the immature age of 16; nevertheless, the real power behind the office was his mother, Agrippina.

Young Nero was a weak and ineffective ruler who was more interested in his own personal gratification than the affairs of state. While Agrippina and two of his close advisers, the prefect Burrus and the philosopher Seneca, saw to the affairs of state, Nero “played around in the role.” Soon, however, Seneca advised Nero to step away from the unwise influence of his mother and to take his own position more seriously. When Agrippina saw her influence over him slipping away, she became insanely jealous and began to promote her grandson Britannicus as the true heir to the throne. In AD 59, Nero had his own mother stabbed to death when it became certain that she was acting to depose him. Britannicus died soon after under very suspicious circumstances. Nero’s brutality did not stop there. In AD 62, Nero had his wife Octavia exiled and then put to death in order that he might marry Poppia Sabina, the wife of his “friend,” with whom he was having an ongoing affair. Three years later, while in a mad rage, Nero killed Poppia with a vicious kick to her abdomen.

Although given to great brutality, Nero fancied himself as a poet, an accomplished charioteer, and a talented player of the lyre (an ancient stringed harp), often performing in various Roman theaters. In AD 63 he also began to dabble in the occult practices of various Roman religious cults. His scandalous activities were seen by Rome’s elite class to have seriously degraded the exalted office of emperor that he occupied, and his popularity soon plummeted.

When in AD 64 a great fire broke out in Rome in one of the shops within the Circus Maximus, and it rapidly spread to consume nearly one-third of the city. Nero’s reputation was so low by then that there was great suspicion that he had set the fire himself to make way for him to exercise his aesthetic desires in rebuilding Rome according to his own tastes. He, in fact, did initiate that rebuilding project soon after,

beginning with the construction of a large palace complex upon Palatine Hill. Historical evidence would seem to verify that Nero was some 35 miles away from Rome in his villa at Antium when the great fire began; nevertheless, he was still thought to have been behind the arson – and that is entirely possible.

It was then that Nero decided to shift the blame away from himself onto Christians, who were already considered by the general populous as being a dangerous movement that engaged in all sorts of evil activities that were opposed to the state. Nero tortured and killed Christians as sport for the entertainment of his guests. Some Christians were dressed up in animal skins to be torn apart by dogs. Still others were burned to death in pyres that provided light for Nero's many nighttime garden parties. Not surprisingly, Nero's sadistic persecution of Christians soon earned him the nickname, "Antichrist," among the faithful Christians of that day.

Nero soon became a byword for debauchery and evil rule. As his popularity among Rome's elite class plummeted, Nero supposedly took his own life in AD 68. Exactly how this came about is somewhat questionable. Some said it was from a self-inflicted stab wound to his throat, while still others said he had "required assistance" in committing this final act. After Nero's death came a chaotic period of about one year during which three self-proclaimed Caesars, Galba, Otho, and Vitellius attempted to rule until each in turn was killed by their successors. Vespasian finally became established as emperor in AD 69.

Having briefly discussed the infamous Nero, we shall now turn to the text of the passage of the Revelation beginning in Revelation 13 verse 1 and ending in verse 18 to determine the context out of which this last verse was taken. We have already discussed the prophetic aspect of this entire chapter in detail in our commentary. Here, we shall digress from that dissertation to determine if John could have been referring to the emperor Nero as the Preterist dogmatically asserts. It must be noted that most Preterists believe that each 6 within the 666 Gematria actually represents one of three men: This supposed "unholy trinity" is comprised of the emperors "Nero Caesar," "Caesar Vespasian," and "Caesar Titus" all three of whose names when transliterated in this way into Hebrew can be calculated by Gematria to total 666. Nevertheless, verse 18 has informed us that 666 is the number of but one particular man, not three. Revelation 13:11 tells us that this a man is the first of but two beasts/men, whose names are not given, but the first is represented by this number. A "beast" as found in prophetic Scripture describes some kind of living creature having a physical form or body. In verse Revelation 13:12 we discover that this second beast/man exercises the same powers as the first beast, but he uses it to stir up religious fervor for the first, in the manner of a prophet. We must note that there is no third beast mentioned in this text.

This second beast/man is inexplicably interpreted by the Preterist to represent the Roman army. Actually, the text indicates that he is one man, a false prophet, who together with the first beast/man, the political dictator, constitutes the Antichrist of the last days. This second man, who in physical appearance looks to be humble and harmless as a lamb, inwardly has the mind of Satan. With his lips he boldly speaks out terrible blasphemies against God and his Christ. He points out that the first beast/man had suffered a deadly head wound that had been miraculously healed and resurrected through supernatural power. This second beast/man also has power to call down fire from out of the heavens and to perform still other false miracles, through which he is able to deceive men into returning to idolatry.

Under his specific direction, he induces men to create an idol representing first beast, the political dictator. He then imbues this idol with the power of speech and causes any who will not worship the world dictator through the worship of his idol to be killed. Moreover the false prophet demands that every man, woman, and child have the mark of the first beast placed either in their right hand or in their forehead. Without that mark none can buy or sell goods of any kind. This mark is a number, which has been derived from the name of the first beast, the political dictator. This provides the context for verse 18 in which John gave us the number of the first beast as 666.

We have provided an exposition of this entire text in our earlier commentary; here we shall only seek to determine if it is at all possible that this man could have been Nero, or an unholy trio as the Preterist insists. At the outset, it does not seem reasonable that John could have been informing his readers to beware of a man who had died in AD 68 some 25 years or so before this document was distributed. At the time of its writing, Domitian, who had banished John to the island of Patmos, was emperor of Rome (AD 81-96).

Nevertheless, the Preterist counters with an argument for an earlier writing of the Revelation document – during the reign of Nero (AD 54-68). This premise is largely based upon the first assumption that John was speaking of Nero, such that this entire argument amounts to reciprocal reasoning (i.e. either one is true only if the other is true). It is highly probable that John assumed leadership of the church in Ephesus after the Apostle Paul was beheaded in AD 68 and before Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70. Assuming for reasons previous stated, that the later authorship of the Revelation is accurate, one could at the very most assume that John was presenting Nero as a type of a future Antichrist, but even that seems unlikely given the alarming nature of this text wherein John described this Antichrist as a warning to those who would have already known all about Nero.

Finally, let us now undertake a brief analyses of the text pertaining to the first beast/man, the political Antichrist, to see how or if it could pertain to Nero or this unholy trio as it is commonly interpreted by the preterist:

“¹And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy. ²And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as *the feet* of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion: and the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority. ³And I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast. ⁴And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who *is* like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him? ⁵And there was given unto him a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies; and power was given unto him to continue forty *and* two months. ⁶And he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme his name, and his tabernacle, and them that dwell in heaven. ⁷And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations. ⁸And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Re.13:1-8).

The first beast, to which the number 666 refers, is described in verse 1. The Preterist puts forth that Nero was the seventh head – the seventh emperor of Rome. They consider the dictator Julius Caesar (100-44 BC) to have been the first emperor. The two horns are seen to refer to the Roman generals Vespasian and Titus, who later became emperors of Rome in turn. In fact, however, August (13 BC-AD 14) was the first true emperor of Rome, and he was succeeded in turn by Tiberius (AD 14-37), Caligula (AD 37-41), Claudius (AD 41-54), and then Nero (AD 54-68), who would have been the fifth emperor, not the seventh. He was then briefly followed by of a weak trioka of dictators, Antony, Lepidus and Octavian, ruling simultaneously.

In verse 2, Preterists envision the unholy trinity in which the emperor Nero is represented by the Leopard, the emperor Vespasian by the bear, and the emperor Titus by the Lion. In verse 3, Preterists believe that Nero was the one who had received the (self-inflicted) head-wound and had subsequently returned to rule as Vespasian, the sixth head (emperor) of Rome, as was discussed earlier. Preterists interpret verse 4 to say that it was Vespasian who was universally worshiped along with Satan.

In verse 5, the Antichrist’s blasphemous reign is stated as lasting 42 months (3 ½ years), while in fact Nero’s reign actually encompassed 14 years. It must be noted however that the Preterist would counter that the 3 ½ years refers only to the very end of Nero’s reign during which he had severely persecuted Christians. In verse 6 and 7, Nero did in fact speak blasphemous things against God, his saints, and Heaven, and he did make war with the saints as he persecuted Christians – but similarly had so many other rulers before and after him.

In verse 8, note the future tense is indicated by the Greek verb *proskuneō* translated “shall worship” (“will worship” in the ESV). This verb tense indicates that John is referring to a future Antichrist, not to the past emperor Nero – or Vespasian – as the preterist propose.

In conclusion, we find that all of this confusing discussion has lead us absolutely nowhere as far as revealing the name of the future Antichrist. Only when he appears on the scene at a future time that has been appointed unto him will his name become known. Until then, we must clearly understand that whereas we are living in the last times, many antichrists are already living among us whose names can be known, but one day the ultimate Antichrist will appear (cf. 1Jn 2:18). Only then will it be possible to accurately equate his name with the number 666. In that day, they will know him both by his number and his name. © Arthur J. Smith March 2020