

What You Need to Know About the Number of the Beast

If there's one part of the Bible virtually everyone has heard of, it's 666—the “number of the beast.” And if there's one thing no one can agree upon, it's what that number stands for. We find the number in Revelation 13:18, “Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast. It is the number of a man. His number is six hundred and sixty-six.” The wording here is important: John tells readers that the number needs to be “calculated,” which means there must be a hidden meaning behind it. But how do we calculate it?

Calculating Symbolism

One option for solving this biblical riddle is *gematria*, the idea that numbers have symbolic meaning. While some have called *gematria* a tool for speculation, it actually derives from an ancient convention in languages like Greek and Hebrew where letters of the alphabet are used to represent numbers.

But *gematria* is not limited to just Revelation; the New Testament contains several other symbolic figures. The 153 fish of John 21:11 could be interpreted as ancient symbolism for the church, the body of Christ and the Old Testament sons of God as analogous to believers in the church. The Greek word for “dove,” like the dove that descends on Jesus at His baptism, has a numerical value equivalent to the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, thus symbolizing the Alpha and Omega (Rev 1:8).

Calculating 666

When it comes to 666, one *gematria* explanation is that the number represents Nero Caesar. The Greek *Neron Kaisar* adds up to 1,005, but when the name is transliterated into the Hebrew letters *nrwn qsr*, the sum is 666. Nero Caesar also would

explain the variant number of the Beast (616) found in some New Testament manuscripts. Transliterating the Latin Nero Caesar into Hebrew, *nrv qsr*, yields 616, suggesting John may have been thinking of the well-known Nero Redivivus myth when writing about the beast (i.e., that Nero would rise from the dead to destroy Christians).

The *gematria* solution presents three major problems: it could be viewed as cheating with the spellings (the usual Hebrew spelling for Caesar is *q'st*, not *qsr*, although the *qsr* form does exist). It assumes that readers knew Hebrew well enough to do the transliteration from Greek back into Hebrew. And, perhaps most tellingly, the early Christian commentators who knew of the Nero Redivivus myth never identified 666 with Nero.

Ancient Sudoku

There is another possibility: 666 is a magic square. From very ancient times, philosophers and mathematicians were fascinated that the numbers 1–36 could be arranged in squares so that each row and diagonal would add up to the same sum (the same principle as modern Sudoku). One magic square has four rows and two diagonals that each add up to 111. The six lines of $111 = 666$. Each magic square in ancient Jewish and Greek tradition was also associated with a celestial body. In the case of the 666 square that body was the sun, which was associated with Zeus, the highest god in the Greek pantheon.

Zeus was often associated with Baal and the mythological north (*tsaphon*) of Canaanite religion. Most relevant to the Beast of Revelation is Baal's (and Zeus') title, "lord of heaven" (*Baal-shamem*). It is possible that the "abomination of desolation" (*shiqquts-shamem*) in Daniel 9:27 is a play on *Baal-shamem*, since the Old Testament writers sometimes substituted words that meant "shame" or "abomination" into proper names that formerly contained "Baal" (e.g., Mephibosheth, Ish-Bosheth). This would mean 666 is a symbol

for the abominable Baal, the dark lord of the Old Testament world—satanic power in New Testament thinking. {eo}

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