

## **Revelation: The Number of The Beast**

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*Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is 666. (Rev. 13:18)*

Of the many views presented regarding this number, we can be sure that the proper interpretation has relevance to the first century, fits the character of the beast, the Roman Empire, and does not contradict other passages of Scripture (cf. Dan. 2; 7; Rev. 13). That said, we will now focus upon three interpretations that fit the bill. While one is the more precise meaning, all three tie together nicely to enhance the picture.

It should be noted that the purpose for mentioning the number 666 was not to trick anybody, but to emphasize that one who has wisdom will be able to identify those who seem to be Christians, but really have secret allegiance to the empire. When times got tough, they would forsake the Lord (cf. Rev. 13:15-17). It would be important for Christians not to associate with such people as it would likely weaken their own faith (cf. Rev. 2:20).

### **Symbolic**

This view holds that the number symbolizes imperfection, a high power of 6 that does not measure up to the perfect number 7. "It had the ability to be great but failed to measure up" (Summers, p. 24). It represents evil, imperfection, and failure, upon failure, upon failure.

Christians during the early centuries AD were tempted and persecuted beyond what we can even imagine. Their lives and that of their families were threatened unless they would deny Christ and worship Rome or its emperor. Among those persecuted, some remained strong and faithful (cf. 2:10), whereas others would give in, deny Christ, and give up the faith. It is saddening to think of how close they came, yet lost that precious crown. This is echoed in the words of the Hebrew writer, to "fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into His rest, any of you should seem to come short of it" (Heb. 4:1). Certainly, "almost" is but to fail.

### **Calculating a Name**

While the symbolic view accords well with Revelation, it does not directly address the admonition to "calculate" the number. From history, we can see that using numerical equivalents of names was a common practice in ancient times, as it is today. Gentry cites an ancient cryptogram dated around 79 AD that says "I love her whose number is 545." The practice of substituting numbers for names is called *gematria*, derived from a Hebrew word meaning "mathematical" (Gentry, pp. 193-194).

Numbers are calculated from names by giving numerical values to the letters of a given alphabet. Of course, one might say that a variety of names could match a given number, which is true. However, like the example cited by Gentry, this does not mean that a specific person is not in view. In our case, only a name with relevance to the book as a whole, and at that, a name likely in Hebrew or Greek will do (cf. Rev. 9:11). The following two views use *gematria* to arrive at a name that fits the context. For more thoughts on the interpretation of this number, see Gentry, pp. 193-219 and Schaff pp. 508-517.

### ***Lateinos***

A view held even since the time of Irenaeus (c. 185 AD), *Lateinos* is still popular today. The word means “Latin man” or “Latin-speaking man,” and therefore has relevance to the Roman Empire, in which Latin was the language of law and literature (cf. Lk. 23:38; Jn. 19:20; Ferguson, pp. 113-117). Schaff claims this is the oldest interpretation known, and represents the Latin/Roman Empire (pp. 510-511). Irenaeus said “Lateinos has the number six hundred and sixty-six; and it is a very probable [solution], this being the name of the last kingdom [of the four seen by Daniel]. For the Latins are they who at present bear rule” (Against Heresies 5.30.3, quoted from Schaff). Others step outside the first century and apply it to the Latin/Catholic Church that arose from the empire (Jackson, pp. 82-84).

Greek Letter	Transliteration (English)	Number
λ	L	30
α	a	1
τ	t	300
ε	e	5
ι	i	10
ν	n	50
ο	o	70
σ	s	200

### ***Nero Caesar***

In light of the early date interpretation of Revelation, Nero is the foe pictured as the mouth of the beast (Rev. 13:5), and the Caesar presently ruling (cf. Rev. 17:10). Therefore, it is logical to conclude that it is his name being represented. For his name to match it must be transliterated from Greek to Hebrew, which makes sense only in such a book as this (cf. Rev. 9:11). Many point out from the unusual Greek style of the book that while John wrote in Greek, he thought in Hebrew. From the Greek (Neron Kaisar), we get the Hebrew *Nrwn Qsr*, pronounced Neron Kesar.

Hebrew Letter	Transliteration (English)	Number
נ	N	50
ר	r	200
ו	w	6
נ	n	50
ק	Q	100
ס	s	60
ר	r	200

An interesting thing about this view is that the Latin form of his name (Nero Caesar) transliterated to Hebrew, *Nrw Qsr* (pronounced Nero Kesar), calculates to 616, which has been found in some manuscripts. This variant is by no means a new discovery, for Irenaeus discusses this (c. 185 AD), and assures that 666 is the proper number and is contained in “all the most approved and ancient copies” (Against Heresies 5.30.1). Some contend that this variant was translated as such intentionally by copyists who knew the meaning of the number, and wanted to make it more clear (Gentry, pp. 201-203).

This view is the most precise because it attempts to both calculate a number from a name, and also match the number to a specific man. All future persecuting emperors would bear the number of Nero because they followed his lead, and Christians were to recognize that his first persecution would not be the last.

### **Conclusion**

Taken together, these three interpretations give a warning to Christians to beware of those who put their faith in the power of the Roman Empire, and look to its ruler for protection. Such faith is misplaced, and will result in ultimate failure (cf. Rev. 14:11).

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