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What is the meaning of the number 666 in Revelations 13:18?

From Hr.Vad, Prometheus Grotto and Satanic Red

This article explains the prevalent Christian interpretation of the number 666. For an alternative, esoteric explanation of the meaning of 666 buy Tani Jantsang's Package of Doctrines.

A: The first major persecutor of Christians is often considered to be Caesar Nero and the Christians used the underground code 666 to refer to him. This makes sense, because when "Caesar Nero" is translated into hebrew and is "coded" -- using the traditional Hebrew numerical values assigned to the letters of the alphabet -- the numbers sum to 666. This would have been rather obvious to Christians living at the time, but concealed enough so as to avoid being thrown to the lions. As can be seen, some meaning would be lost in the translation from latin to hebrew, which perhaps accounts for the "mystery" that seem to gather around "666". A Christian at the time would probably consider the matter subtle, but probably not mysterious.

In this interpretation the Bible is shown not to be a prophecy of things to come but rather a social or political commentary. Revelations thus refer to the fall of Rome and Nero.

Is this then the true explanation? Well, the explanation is boring, simple and not really surprising, so it probably is."

This answer is rather short and deals only with the answer that seems to be most commonly accepted among Bible scholars -- I've seen a number of writers who seem to agree on this one. It is of course possible to give a more detailed answer to this question as there is room for speculation for those who're interested. Those interested in doing their own research can be referred to the section at their library dealing with exegetic theology.

In the following paragraphs you'll find some familiar as well as some alternative explanations of the famous "666". The quotes you'll see here are all taken from the book Revelation by John Massyngberde Ford, Chapter X. Comments are by me.

"The mark of the monster is either identified with or closely associated with his number. Here our author uses the method of gematria (from Heb. gimatriya), that is, the process of adding up the numerical value of the letters that make up a proper name, e.g. a=1; b=2; d=4, etc. (It was called isopsephia in Greek.) It is a cryptogram and special insight is necessary to decipher it. Barclay gives several examples of other uses of gematria. There is a very simple one on the walls of Pompeii: "I love her whose number is 545" (A. Deissman in Barclay, p. 276). The lover conceals the name of his loved one by giving the numerical value of the letters of her name."

"Pagan gods were known by the numerical value of their names, e.g. Jupiter, or Zeus, was known as 717. One of the most interesting examples of gematria found is one contemporary with Nero. People apparently wrote on the walls what they were afraid to say concerning him. One such graffito is reported by Suetonius Nero 30: "A calculation new. Nero his mother slew." The numerical value of the letters in the name Nero is equal to that of the letters in the rest of the sentence."

Barclay, W. "Revelation 13, Great Themes of the N.T." ET 70 (1958/59), 260-64, 292-96.

"Many and various have been the attempts to decipher the cryptogram 666. Barclay's comprehensive article gathers up most of the suggestions prior to the date of his writing. Three names for 666 were suggested by Irenaeus: Euantas, but this is meaningless; Teitian, which could

be a reference either to the Titans who rebelled against the gods or to the emperor Titus although he was not a persecutor; and Lateinos, which would stand for the Roman (Latin) empire and for the Roman church. Primasius suggested Arnoune which could be connected with the Greek verb arneisthai, "to deny" or "apostatize." Barclay himself suggests that we use Hebrew letters to represent Neron Caesar; if the final n in Neron is dropped, the word is brought into line with its Latin form and the result is 616. The writer of Revelation saw emperor worship as satanic power, and he saw the power culminating in the return of Nero, the antichrist."

"Hillers, commenting on the identification of Nero with 666 if it is spelled Nrwn Qsr, says: "it may now be pointed out that in an Aramaic document from Murabba'at (DJD, II, 18, plate 29), dated to the 'second year of the Emperor Nero,' the name is spelled Nrwn Wsr, as required by the theory. The last two consonants of Wsr are damaged, but enough is preserved to show that no vowel letter was written between the W and the s." Thus there would be no need to use the variant reading 616."

"Another variant is 606, which would be the sum of Gaios Kaisar, known as Caligula. Christian readers would have noticed the contrast between the number of the beast, 666, and the number of Jesus, 888 (the sum of the Greek letters Jesous). In 888 could be seen superabundant perfection, the three-fold 7+1. On the other hand 666 indicates the three-fold failure to reach perfection, 7-1. This showed how precarious and how doomed to failure the reign of the beast must be."

" Examples of Gematria*

Hebrew:

Q=100

S= 60

R=200

N= 50

R=200

W= 6

N= 50

666

Hebrew:

I = 10

E= 8

S=200

O= 70

U=400

S=200

888

Greek:

K= 20

A= 1

I= 10

S= 200

A= 1

R= 100

Th= 9

E= 5

O= 70

S= 200

616

*Fr. Edward Siegman's notes."

"Perhaps the most interesting suggestion has been made by Bruston. He believes that one needs to search not for a Roman name but rather for a Babylonian one. The founder of the empire of Babylon was Nimrod, who according to Gen 10:8 was the son of Kush. The true name of the Roman emperor is Nimrod, which means "rebellious." Bruston observes that it is a question of the Roman emperor past and present, not the future Roman emperor or the Antichrist."

"In rabbinic literature Nimrod threw Abraham into a fiery furnace because he would not worship idols; Gen R 38:13."

"Why should "John" have spoken so cryptically. It would seem that in time of persecution or war the faithful should be warned. However, the warning had to be given in such a way as to obscure its meaning for the pagans into whose hands the Book of Revelation might fall. If it violated the sacrosanct majesty of Rome, the faithful might be charged with treason. Hence the gematria was a measure of prudence."

There is also a long and difficult argument that the 666 may refer to someone called Flavius Josephus, but I refer the interested reader to Ford's book. I'll merely end with the last words in chapter X.

"Although one may not take Rev 13:11-18 literally, it might be that, with poetic license, the author of Revelation has depicted the monstrous behavior of Josephus and others like him who led his countrymen to submit to and honor Rome."

Then, perhaps, it is safe to say that Revelation refers to a number of different people. This may account for the difficulties in establishing full consistency in the different theories concerning this question.

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