

666: THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST

Guardians Class Resource | Revelation 13:18

The text. Revelation 13:18 calls for "wisdom" and tells the reader to "calculate the number of the beast," because it is "the number of a man." The dominant manuscript reading is 666, although an ancient variant reads 616.

1. Nero Caesar: a name encoded as a number

Ancient Greeks and Jews used letters as numerical values. In Greek this practice is often called isopsephy; the corresponding Hebrew practice is commonly called gematria. A first-century Pompeian graffito, CIL IV 4861, was recorded as saying, "I love her whose number is 545," showing that identifying a person by a calculated number was culturally plausible in John's world.

Neron Caesar transliterated into Hebrew/Aramaic letters as **NRWN QSR** gives: 50 + 200 + 6 + 50 + 100 + 60 + 200 = **666**. The complication is important: Revelation was written in Greek, so the Nero calculation requires the reader to transliterate the name into Hebrew/Aramaic. This makes the identification plausible, but not certain.

The 616 manuscript variant

Two important surviving early Greek witnesses read 616: Papyrus 115 (P115, third/fourth century) and Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (C, fifth century). Early witnesses reading 666 include Papyrus 47 (third century), Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century), and Codex Alexandrinus (fifth century). Around AD 180, Irenaeus already knew both readings and argued that 666 was the older and better-attested reading.

The variant is particularly interesting for the Nero theory because the Latin form Nero lacks the final N of Greek Neron. In Hebrew numerical values N = 50, so 666 - 50 = 616. Thus two forms of Nero's name can account for the two ancient readings. This is evidence in favor of the theory, but it does not prove John's intent.

2. Symbolic interpretation: six and seven

Revelation repeatedly uses seven in completed sets: seven churches, seals, trumpets, and bowls. Some interpreters therefore understand six as falling short of seven, with 666 representing human incompleteness or opposition to God intensified threefold. Caution is necessary: Scripture never explicitly defines six as 'the number of man' or 'the number of imperfection.' That meaning is an interpretive inference from biblical numerical patterns, not a stated biblical rule.

3. A future individual

Futurist interpretations emphasize the phrase "the number of a man" and understand 666 as identifying a future individual, commonly associated with the Antichrist or final Beast. Revelation says the number can be calculated but does not specify the alphabet or method. Modern attempts to make political leaders, organizations, barcodes, or technologies equal 666 are therefore weak unless an independently justified calculation method exists.

How the three views may relate

The interpretations need not be mutually exclusive. Nero could have supplied an immediate historical referent, while the beast represents a broader pattern of human imperial power demanding allegiance and worship, possibly culminating in a future individual. Nero reigned AD 54-68; Revelation is traditionally dated about AD 90-96, although a minority view dates it before AD 70.

What we can say with confidence

Revelation deliberately invites calculation; 666 is strongly attested; 616 is a genuine and very early variant; numerical encoding of names existed in the ancient world; and Nero Caesar provides an unusually coherent explanation for both 666 and 616. The identification remains an interpretation rather than an explicit statement in Revelation. The larger message of Revelation 13 concerns allegiance: the beast demands authority and worship that belong to God.