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666
OR
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The Number of the Beast

SOME MODERN VERSIONS OF THE BIBLE AS WELL AS RECENT NEWS ARTICLES CALL THE ACCEPTED READING OF REVELATION 13:18 INTO QUESTION. DO THESE CLAIMS HAVE MERIT?

Pick up almost any English version of the Bible, and turn to Revelation 13:18. It will read something like, "Here 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." While this Biblical verse may not be the best known, the number six hundred and sixty six contained within it is recognized by most. This number's association with the last

days' character known as the antichrist has caused it to be popularized, sometimes glamorized, and often feared by religious and non-religious people alike. However, some have cast doubt on the authenticity of this reading, and

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asked the question, “Is 666 really the number of the beast?” For example, the margin of the New Revised Standard Version reads, “Other ancient authorities read six hundred sixteen.” The notes in the New American Standard Bible say, “One early manuscript reads 616.” Furthermore, news articles have appeared with such ominous titles as, “Beast’s Real Mark Devalued to ‘616’” and “666 Wrong Number of Prophetic Beast?” All of these things raise the question, “What is the real number of the beast as recorded in Revelation 13:18?”

Answering this question accurately is of great importance for two reasons. First, this verse was not penned in a casual work of literature. Its origin is the Bible, God’s Word. How important is the Bible? Deuteronomy 8:3 states clearly that, “Man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD.” The Book of Revelation gives clear warning that its words are precious, and are not to be tampered with. In Revelation’s closing verses, we find Jesus saying, “For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which

are written in this book.” - Revelation 22:18-19. Knowing the number of the beast as given to John by God and not changing it is essential, if we are to please the Lord. The second reason for seeking an answer to this question is found in Revelation 13:18, the verse under discussion. It begins, “Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast.” It is God’s will that mankind gain wisdom and understanding from His Word with respect to end time Bible prophecy and the signs given therein – including the number of the beast. Only by having an accurate understanding of the number of the beast can mankind successfully interpret Bible prophecy as it relates to the person of the antichrist. Given that we live in the last days, where many of these prophecies are now being fulfilled, this understanding is essential. Because Revelation 13:18 is found in God’s unchanging Word, and because we know that God wants us to understand Bible prophecy, let’s look at the evidence and answer the question, “The number of the beast – 666 or 616?”

New Testament Manuscripts

Understanding why some question the reading “666” in Revelation 13:18 as well as determining the correct reading of this verse requires an investigation into the area of New Testament studies known as textual criticism. Textual crit-

icism is a branch of philology that studies manuscripts or printings to determine the original form of a text. New Testament textual criticism seeks to study the large body of manuscripts, early quotations, lectionaries (readings used for church services), and translations in an effort to ascertain the accurate reading of the New Testament. Some would ask, “Why is this necessary? Don’t we have the original manuscripts, as penned by their authors?” The answer unfortunately is no. No original New Testament writings exist today. However, we do have an abundance of New Testament manuscripts written in the original Greek language. In addition we have many citations of the New Testament contained in quotations from early church writers and lectionaries, as well as numerous ancient translations into other languages such as Latin, Coptic, and Syriac. With such a large number of documents spanning such a long period of time, it is no surprise that some differences have emerged between manuscripts, including those of the book of Revelation. New Testament textual criticism seeks to understand and resolve these differences. Textual criticism is an area of study that is very deep and very wide. In fact, some scholars are dedicated to nothing but the study of New Testament textual criticism. In light of that, it is impossible to present a complete treatment of the textual factors that go into determining the number of the beast in this article. In addition, research in this field contin-



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ues and new discoveries are continually made. However, what follows is an overview of key factors that help to explain the questions and seek to provide reasonable answers.

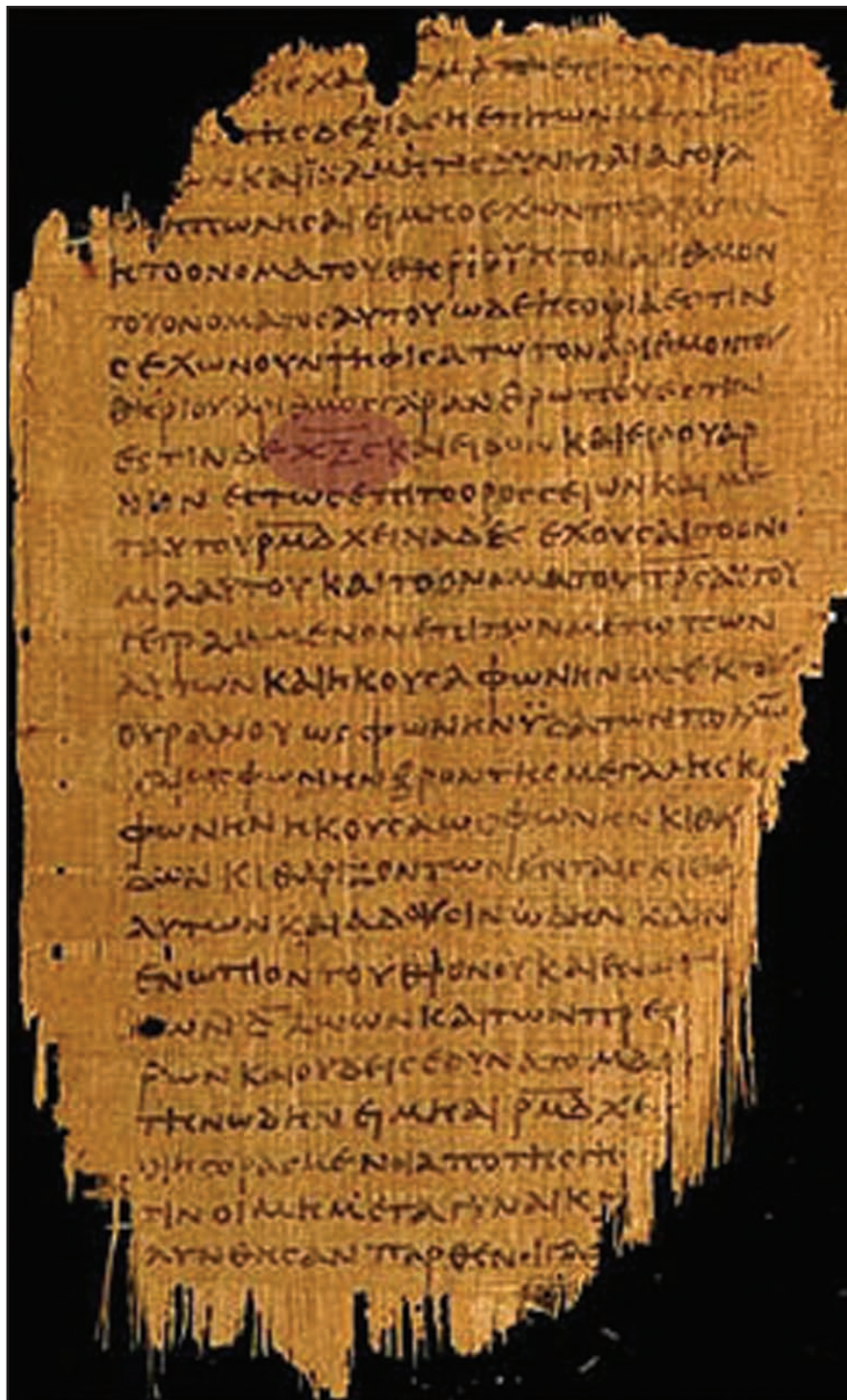
Textual Witnesses

According to Aland's "The Text of the New Testament", a well known text on New Testament textual criticism, over 2300 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament exist today [Aland, "Text of NT" 83]. Of these manuscripts, more than 280 contain some or all of the Book of Revelation. Examining Revelation 13:18 in these manuscripts reveals that there are differences between them. Some manuscripts spell out the number using Greek words, some use letters to represent numbers (similar to Roman numerals). Although the vast majority of manuscripts give the number of the beast as six hundred sixty six, four (two pre-sixth century and two no longer existent post-eighth century) are known to state 616 as the number and one 11th century manuscript gives 665. This explains why the question about 666 vs. 616 has been raised. Although one could argue that the fact that the majority of manuscripts contain 666 closes the question, textual criticism acknowledges that not all manuscripts are created equal. Some are more reliable than others, based on numerous factors, including age, condition, and history. So, let's look at some of the oldest and most respected Greek manuscripts that contain this passage.

Much of the recent stir about 616 has arisen due to renewed studies of a group of very old manuscripts originally discovered in 1895 by archaeologists at the site of an ancient garbage dump in Oxyrhynchus in Egypt. Many of the Oxyrhynchus manuscripts consist of New Testament papyri, and are very old when compared to other manuscripts. One of them named P¹¹⁵ (also called P. Oxy. 4499), dates from around 300 AD and contains some or all of 12 chapters from the Book of Revelation, including Revelation 13:18. It records 616 as the number of the beast using Greek letters (see figure 1). Because of this manuscript's age, some have jumped to the conclusion that this must be the original reading. However, this conclusion cannot be made. Other evidence must be considered. For example, three manuscripts from the Chester Beatty Papyri include portions of the New Testament. One of these named P⁴⁷, dates from the 3rd century and contains chapters 9-17 of Revelation. In its reading of Revelation 13:18, it states that the number of the beast is 666, using Greek letters (see figure 2). So, two equally old papyri have both readings – 666 and 616.

Other ancient manuscripts contain similar differences. The uncial manuscripts consist of those written with Greek capital letters. Around 100 of these date from before the 7th century. Six uncial manuscripts are known to contain Revelation 13 [Aland, "Text of NT" Chart 6K] and are noteworthy in this discussion. Codex \aleph (Aleph – the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet), also known as Sinaiticus, was discovered by Constantin von Tischendorf in St. Catherine's Monastery

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on Mt. Sinai in 1859. It dates from the fourth century and is one of the most revered NT manuscripts, due to its age as well as the fact that it contains all of the New Testament. Its reading of Revelation 13:18 denotes 666 as the number of the beast, spelled out with Greek words. Codex Alexandrinus (A/02), a fifth century uncial as well as Codex P/025 of the ninth century, and codices 046 and Codex 051 of the 10th century all agree with Codex Σ in their reading of 666 (with slight spelling differences). However, Codex C/04 of the fifth century has 616 spelled out with Greek letters as the number of the beast. So, it agrees with P¹⁵ as the only other ancient witness of this alternate text.

In summary, of the almost 300 Greek manuscripts containing Revelation, almost all of them state 666 as the number of the beast. The two oldest papyri are evenly divided in their reading, and over 80% of uncial manuscripts hold the reading of 666.

Early Church Writings and Translations

In addition to the evidence of Greek manuscripts, we can also look to Biblical quotations found in early church writings, as well as ancient translations of the New Testament. One early church writer by the name of Tyconius recognized 616 as the number of the beast in his 4th century Latin version. In contrast, the writings of Origen and Hippolytus (both of the 3rd century) attest strongly to the value of 666 as the correct reading [Burgon 136]. Most noteworthy however are the statements of Irenaeus, the 2nd century bishop of Lyon, known to be a disciple of Polycarp. Polycarp is believed to have been a disciple of John, the author of Revelation. In his treatise, "Against Heresies," Irenaeus deals with the subject of Revelation 13 and the number of the beast. In Book 5, Chapter 28 of this work, he states that the number of the beast is 666. In addition, Chapter 30 of the same work makes the following statement regarding the number 666:

"Such, then, being the state of the case, and this number being found in all the most approved and ancient copies [of the Apocalypse], and those men who saw John face to face bearing their testimony [to it]; while reason also leads us to conclude that the number of the name of the beast, [if reckoned] according to the Greek mode of calculation by the [value of] the letters contained in it, will amount to six hundred and sixty and six... (*portion elided*)... I do not know how it is that some have erred following the ordinary mode of speech, and have vitiated the middle number in the name, deducting the amount of fifty from it, so that instead of six decads (*author's note: a decad is 10*) they will have it that there is but one. [I am inclined to think that this occurred through the fault of the copyists, as is wont to happen, since numbers also are ex-

pressed by letters; so that the Greek letter which expresses the number sixty was easily expanded into the letter Iota of the Greeks.] Others then received this reading without examination; some in their simplicity, and upon their own responsibility, making use of this number expressing one decad; while some, in their inexperience, have ventured to seek out a name which should contain the erroneous and spurious number." [Roberts 558]

In this illuminating passage, Irenaeus states that 616 is the reading found in the most reliable copies of Revelation, including those copied by men who saw John. In addition, he acknowledges the existence of the 616 reading, but considers it erroneous, attributing it to copying errors and the failure of some to properly examine the authenticity of the alternate reading.

As the knowledge of Greek decreased in the ancient world, many translations of the Greek New Testament into the common languages of the people were created. These early translations agree in their readings of Revelation 13:18. The 5th century Armenian, the Syriac of the 6th century, the Old Latin of the 13th century, the Coptic, and the Latin Vulgate all agree that the number of the beast is 666.

Providence of God

While New Testament textual criticism seeks to understand and resolve differences among versions of the Greek New Testament, our confidence in the text of the Bible is not reliant upon the intellect of men or the tools of science. Most importantly, we have a promise from God that He will always preserve the integrity of His Word. Psalm 100:5 states that, "His truth endureth to all generations." With this promise, we can rest, knowing that God has carefully watched over the transmission of the New Testament from its original writing to the present day. Whereas 666 has always been the dominant reading of Revelation 13:18, it seems clear through faith in God's promises that this is the original reading of the verse as penned by John on Patmos.

Conclusion

"And his number is Six hundred threescore and six." This statement from the last days' prophecy of Revelation 13 gives a clue to the identity of the antichrist. God's stated purpose in this verse is that we understand it correctly. This is especially true for those of us who live in the days immediately preceding the coming of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, some have questioned the accuracy of 666 as the number of the beast. Some have suggested that 616 is the real number. However, the majority of almost 300 Greek manuscripts, including the oldest and most valued, along with the evidence of early church writings and translations,

all stand together as a great witness to the authenticity of 666 against a rather small set of four manuscripts and one early writer that make their claim for 616. *e*

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