

Ancient Voices on the Social Context of an Apocalyptic Riddle: A Neglected Element in the Hermeneutics of Revelation 13:18

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Received: Dec. 10, 2025

Revised: Dec. 27, 2025

Accepted: Dec. 27, 2025

Abstract

The mysterious number in Revelation 13:18 acts as a riddle for interpreters to solve in a book that is filled with ambiguities. The desire to solve the riddle was true for ancient readers of Revelation no less than for modern ones. This article illustrates how the interpretations of both modern and ancient readers have hermeneutical assumptions that undergird them and that too often go unstated. After briefly highlighting modern hermeneutical assumptions in both popular and scholarly work on the number, the article turns to ancient readers in order to examine interpretations set in different contexts from that of a twenty-first-century interpreter. This choice enables critical distance to be obtained to better appreciate the role of assumptions. Working chronologically through interpretations of the number from the second through fifth centuries, this article illustrates that, even amidst the stunning variety of interpretive options, ancient interpreters share assumptions that remain unstated. Each interpreter takes the method for solving the riddle, the question of whether it can be solved, and the background against which solutions should be sought as givens. The conclusion of the article places modern scholarship in dialogue with these ancient assumptions and urges contemporary scholarship toward increasingly self-conscious methodological reflection.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Isophephy, Numerical Symbolism, Revelation, Riddle

1. Introduction

The mysterious use of the number 666 to identify the beast of the earth in Rev 13:18 has left interpreters scratching their heads for nearly two millennia. Gematria and isophephy have been widely utilised as the means to a solution when attempting to ascertain to whom John the Seer may have referred with this number, but interpreters have not agreed about what solution answers the isophephic puzzle.¹ This article examines hermeneutical assumptions about the social context in which the number should be understood by looking at ancient commentators on the verse in order to spur twenty-first-century interpreters to deeper methodological reflection. For both ancient and modern interpreters, these assumptions often go unstated. To shed light on such tacit beliefs is thus a valuable exercise.

To be sure, researchers must first reckon with the uncertain state of the Greek text in Rev 13:18. The Text und Textwert volume on the Apocalypse lists approximately twenty variants regarding the number alone.² When differences in spelling and abbreviations are removed, five primary variants come into focus, 616, 660, 665, 666, and the omission of the number. The numbers 616 and 666 are attested in the transmission of the text prior to ca. 500 CE. Adding to the complexity of this problem are citations of Rev 13:18 in Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and the *Liber genealogus* that demonstrate awareness of differences in the textual tradition from the late second century.³ These differences are evident in contemporary scholarship. After the publication of

¹ For helpful studies of the phenomenon of early Christian isophephy in a broader range of texts, see F. Bovon, “Names and Numbers in Early Christianity,” *NTS* 47 (2001): 267–288; C. K. Rothschild, “Abraham’s 318 Circumcised Men and the Figure of Eliezer (Lazarus) in Barnabas 9.8,” in *The Teaching of These Words: Intertextuality, Social Identity, and Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Clayton N. Jefford*, ed. J. A. Draper, N. D. Pardee, and S. J. Wilhite, BAC 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 269–293.

² M. Lembke, D. Müller, U. B. Schmid, and M. Karrer, *Die Apokalypse: Teststellenkollation und Auswertungen*, Text und Textwert der Griechischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments 6; ANTF 49 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 130–133. The approximation comes as a result of discrepancies that might occur based on how one counts subdivisions within certain options (e.g. 3-A, 3-B, and 3-C as well as 9-A and 9-b).

³ See the discussion in sections 2–4 of this article.

P. Oxy. 4499 (P¹¹⁵),⁴ David Parker and J. Neville Birdsall argued that 616 was the earliest reading.⁵ Nevertheless, 666 remains the majority selection among scholars seeking the earliest text of Rev 13:18.

Determining the meaning of the number in Rev 13:18 has proven to be of both popular and scholarly interest. Popularly, Hal Lindsey's interpretation of 666 as the symbol of humanisation in its fallen state was combined with late-twentieth-century fears in American evangelicalism about a totalising system of economic and political control.⁶ While growing out of assumptions and worries characteristic of American evangelicalism, Lindsey's interpretation and other similar interpretations have had long-lasting influences that have reached beyond the United States. The adaptation of Lindsey's view of the eschaton in a 1978 film by the same title fanned the flames of his interpretation of the number.⁷ The sixteen-volume *Left Behind* series of Christian novels envisioned the mark as a symbol of loyalty to Nicolae Carpathia, the antichrist figure.⁸ It takes the form of both a biochip implanted in the right hand or forehead and a tattoo of Carpathia's name. Whatever one makes of the correctness or profitability of such interpretations, the social context out of which these readings come is embedded in twentieth-century American evangelicalism. These popular interpretations of Rev 13:18 share an unexamined assumption, namely that the number is to be identified with a specific individual, who is the antichrist, and who embodies the traits most feared by their interpreters.

⁴ The papyrus was edited by Juan Chapa and published in N. Gonis, ed., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri LXVI* (London: British Academy, 1999), 10–35. See also J. Chapa, "Il Papiro 115: Qualcosa in più del numero della bestia," in *Apokalypsis: Percorsi nell'Apocalisse in onore di Ugo Vanni*, ed. E. Bosetti and A. Colacrai (Assisi: Cittadella, 2005), 311–333.

⁵ D. C. Parker, "A New Oxyrhynchus Papyrus of Revelation: P¹¹⁵ (P. Oxy. 4499)," *NTS* 46 (2000): 159–174; J. N. Birdsall, "Irenaeus and the Number of the Beast: Revelation 13:18," in *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis: Festschrift J. Delobel*, ed. A. Denaux, BETL 161 (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 349–359.

⁶ H. Lindsey with C.C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 113.

⁷ *The Late Great Planet Earth*, directed by R. Amram (RCR Productions, 1978).

⁸ T. LaHaye and J. B. Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 16 vols. (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 1995–2007).

Although one may grant that popular books and works of fiction are not ideal venues for interrogating hermeneutical assumptions at length, scholarly treatments of the number sometimes fail to consider how one might know if the riddle of Rev 13:18 can be solved. The unidentified hermeneutical assumption arises not in conjunction with the interpretive identification of the figure represented by the number. The argument in favour of a particular interpretation often goes on at length. Rather, what is too often unstated is the specific form of isophephy that is assumed to be the method by which the riddle should be solved as well as the importance attributed to Roman imperial influence in the imagination of current New Testament scholarship. While isophephy is attested in Roman graffiti and discussed in commentaries on Revelation, there is often a tacit assumption that it is the correct method to use. The discussions of ancient graffiti are then used to confirm what is already assumed. Likewise, Roman imperial power has played an important role in the imagination of recent New Testament scholars.⁹ It may not be surprising, then, that the name associated with the number is often understood with reference to Roman emperors. Many have identified Nero as the most likely reference of 666.¹⁰ This identification benefits from interpreting 666 by means of

⁹ To be sure, this attention to Rome has led to many insightful readings of New Testament passages. The point here is that this attention to Rome can lead one to presume that the background for interpretations of the number must come from a particular context. Empire studies have been particularly prominent in Anglophone scholarship. For an orientation, see W. Carter, *Empire and the New Testament: The Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006); S. E. Porter and C. L. Westfall, *Empire in the New Testament* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2011).

¹⁰ W. Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, KEK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1906), 372–373; H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indices* (London: MacMillan, 1906), 172–173; R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), 1.367; H.-J. Klauck, “Das Sendschreiben nach Pergamon und der Kaiserkult in der Johannesoffenbarung,” *Bib* 73 (1992): 172 n. 65; R. Bauckham, “Nero and the Beast,” in *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 384–452; H. Giesen, “Das römische Reich im Spiegel der Johannes-Apokalypse,” *ANRW* 26.3:2580–2582; H. Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, RNT (Regensburg: Pustet, 1997), 315–316; D. E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, WBC 52B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 722; C. R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 38 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 604–606; C. R. Koester, “The Number of the Beast in Revelation 13 in Light of Papyri, Graffiti, and Inscriptions,” *Journal of Early Christian History* 6.3 (2016): 1–21.

Hebrew isophephy (קסר נרון),¹¹ which may have lost its final *nun* and at least one strand of the transmission (קסר נרו).¹² Other options are also available, including Gaius Caesar¹³ and Domitian.¹⁴ To be sure, these are not the only possible references. Other proposals for the number of the beast include an unknown regional figure in Asia Minor¹⁵ or a symbolic reference to the fallen human world.¹⁶ This list of interpretive options is by no means exhaustive.¹⁷ However, the dominant assumption that the number signifies a specific Roman emperor whose name is to be found by simple isophephy is often left unexamined. Even if a Roman emperor is indeed the best solution to the riddle, the assumption should be interrogated.

A large swath of both popular and scholarly interpretations has in common a belief that the mysterious number in Rev 13:18 should be identified with a specific person or as a symbol for fallen humanity. In other words, these

¹¹ This transliteration would correspond to the Greek spelling, Καῖσαρ Νέρων.

¹² This transliteration would correspond to the Latin spelling, *Caesar Nero*. See further C. C. Rowland, “The Book of Revelation,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 12 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 659. See also Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 770–771; Koester, “Number,” 9–11.

¹³ Birdsall, “Irenaeus and the Number,” 358.

¹⁴ E. Stauffer, “666,” in *In honorem Antonii Fridrichsen sexagenarii*, ConNT 11 (Lund: Gleerup, 1947), 237–241. See also R. Beile, *Zwischenruf aus Patmos: Eine neue Gesamteinschätzung der Apokalypse des Johannes von Ephesus*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: VR Unipress, 2005), 238–242.

¹⁵ S. Alkier, “Die Johannesapokalypse als ‘einzusammenhängendes und vollständiges Ganzes,’” in *Die Johannesoffenbarung: Ihr Text und ihre Auslegung*, ed. M. Labahn and M. Karrer, *Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte* 38 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012), 147–171.

¹⁶ G. E. Ladd *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 188–189; E. F. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse*, trans. M. P. Johnson and A. Kamesar (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 214–218.

¹⁷ See further K. Bodner and B. A. Strawn, “Solomon and 666 (Revelation 13.18),” *NTS* 66 (2020): 299–312; H. Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, HNT 16a (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1974), 222; P. J. Leithart, *Revelation*, 2 vols., International Theological Commentary (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2019), 2.74–81; M. Oberweis, “Die Bedeutung der neutestamentlichen ‘Rätselzahlen’ 666 (Apk 13, 18) und 153 (Joh 21, 11),” *ZNW* 77 (1986), 226–241; P. Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, trans. W. Pradels (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 426–428.

interpretations share a belief that, however mysterious the number in Rev 13:18 may be, the riddle it poses within the text is indeed solvable. There is little, if any, hint in such interpretations that the number was intended to remain opaque to readers. While there are occasional voices of dissent who argue that the meaning of the number was not intended to be recognised much beyond the author and his immediate associates,¹⁸ a survey of recent scholarship on the number quickly reveals some tacit assumptions dominating scholarship. These includes assumptions that the number would have been recognisable to readers, that it refers to a political figure, and that the most likely referent was a Roman emperor.

Such views may indeed be correct. However, since these hermeneutical suppositions are so widely accepted but almost universally unstated, it is important to query their veracity and to urge clearer articulations of the hermeneutical assumptions undergirding the interpretation of Rev 13:18. This paper takes up the issue by exploring what ancient voices can reveal for modern interpreters of the number in Rev 13. Ancient voices allow for critical distance between the subject studied and the interpreter. After studying these ancient hermeneutical assumptions, the paper can then return to raise questions for modern interpreters to consider. The article will proceed with a chronological survey of early interpreters of the number from the second-century Irenaeus to the fifth-century *Liber genealogus*. This chronological range matches the major papyri and uncials that form the basis of the critical Greek text of Revelation printed in NA²⁸. The survey will pay particular attention to the degree to which ancient readers thought the riddle was solvable and the exegetical means they employed to make this decision. The article will conclude by elevating submerged issues in ancient interpretations and providing synthetic considerations of what they reveal for twenty-first-century interpreters. By noting hermeneutical questions about matters which are often assumed, this article thereby lays the groundwork for a clearer articulation of how hermeneutical assumptions and social contexts intersect with one another in the interpretation of Rev 13:18.

¹⁸ E.g. J. M. Ford, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 38 (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 227; R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 262–263.

2. The Number and Its Identification in Irenaeus

Near the end of his five-volume *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus reflects on the recapitulation of all things so that they will be like they were at the first.¹⁹ Within this section, he describes the appearance of the antichrist at the end of time (*Haer.* 5.25.1–5.30.4).²⁰ His interpretation of the beast’s number is thus located within a larger eschatological discussion. He insists that “reason teaches” (τοῦ λόγου διδάσκοντος; *ratione docente*) that the number must be calculated based on Greek letters (*Haer.* 5.30.1). Irenaeus thus favours isophephy as the means by which to solve the riddle posed by the number in Rev 13:18.²¹ His use of isophephy deploys Greek letters as numerical signs. The letters in a name would then need to add up to the correct sum to fit the puzzle. Irenaeus’s method thus assumes that the Apocalypse provides the sum and readers are left to determine which name best fits the sum.

Although Irenaeus takes the method to be used in solving the middle to be clear, he remains somewhat tentative when it comes to the interpretation of the number. He argues that 666 reveals “the recapitulation of all apostasy” (ἀνακεφαλαίωσιν πάσης ἀποστασίας; *recapitulationem universae apostasiae*) across time (*Haer.* 5.30.1).²² Such an interpretation suggests that the number

¹⁹ On Irenaeus’s doctrine of recapitulation, see J. Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 136–141; T. Holsinger-Friesen, *Irenaeus and Genesis: A Study of Competition in Early Christian Hermeneutics* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 1–26; E. Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 97–140.

²⁰ For more on Irenaeus’s treatment of Revelation, see D. J. Bingham, “Apocalyptic and Social Identity in the Second Century: Irenaeus’s Reading of John’s Apocalypse,” in *The Teaching of These Words: Intertextuality, Social Identity, and Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Clayton N. Jefford*, ed. J. A. Draper, N. D. Pardee, and S. J. Willhite, BAC 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 341–371.

²¹ For further discussion, see A. Rousseau, L. Doutreleau, and C. Mercier, *Irénée de Lyon, Contre les hérésies: Livre V*, 2 vols., SC 152–153 (Paris: Cerf, 1969), 1.331–333.

²² See also Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.28.2; 5.29.2. Irenaeus observes that the flood, which happened when Noah was 600 years old, swept away the world’s rebellion to that point. The antichrist, symbolised by 666, will thus recapitulate all the idolatry injustice and deaths of the prophets that have happened since then (*Haer.* 5.29.2). See further Rousseau, Doutreleau, and Mercier,

symbolises a particular kind of evil, namely, that of apostasy. Yet Irenaeus elsewhere suggests names that might be applied to specific human figures (*Haer.* 5.30.3). He proposes names but refrains from suggesting ordinary human names. He includes Euanthas (Εὐάνθας), Lateinos (Λατεῖνος), and Teitan (Τειτάν). The letters in each name add up to 666. Irenaeus refrains from commenting much about Euanthas, but he holds that Lateinos is possible because it is the name of “the last kingdom” (ἡ ἐσχάτη βασιλεία; *novissimum regnum*). Irenaeus alludes here to the four kingdoms in Dan 2:36–43, and he interprets 666 in light of the power that Rome held at the end of the second century.²³ However, Irenaeus tentatively prefers Teitan as the most likely name, since it also has six letters and fits the cosmic context in which Irenaeus appears to understand Rev 13:18.²⁴ It is an ancient name (ἀρχαῖον; *vetus*) that befits a tyrant (τυραννικόν; *tyrranicum*; *Haer.* 5.30.3). In addition, Irenaeus asserts that the cosmic origins of Teitan provide a more fitting way to understand the number than calculations which use the names of individual officials. “For if it was necessary that his name be proclaimed openly at the present time, it would have been stated by the one who saw the apocalypse” (εἰ ἔδει ἀναφανδὸν ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ κηρύττεσθαι τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, δι’ ἐκείνου ἂν ἐρρήθη τοῦ καὶ τὴν ἀποκάλυψιν ἐωρακότος; *si oporteret manifeste praesenti tempore praeconari nomen eius, per ipsum utique dictum fuisset qui et apocalypsim viderat*; *Haer.* 5.30.3). The name is thus kept quiet (ἐσιώπησεν; *tacuit*), while the number is revealed (ἐδήλωσεν; *ostendit*) so that future generations can confirm the Antichrist’s identity when he comes (*Haer.* 5.30.4).²⁵

Irenaeus’s solution thus has some tensions, which he allows to remain, albeit in an unexpressed form, throughout his discussion of the number (*Haer.*

Contre les hérésies, 1.330–331; S. O. Presley, *The Intertextual Reception of Genesis 1–3 in Irenaeus of Lyons*, *The Bible in Ancient Christianity* 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 225–227.

²³ See also Dan 7:3–7; 8:8. Earlier in his discussion of the beast’s number, Irenaeus also links Rev 13:18 to Gen 2:2–3 and Ps 89:4 (MT 90:4), on which, see Presley, *Intertextual Reception*, 225–227.

²⁴ The six letters in Τειτάν also enhance the weight of the thrice-repeated six.

²⁵ Irenaeus links Rev 13:18 to 17:8 as further support. He argues that the name of the one who currently is not (οὐκ ἔστιν; Rev 17:8) will be revealed, instead, when he comes up from the abyss (*Haer.* 5.30.4).

5.30.1–4). On the one hand, he is clear that the number 666 represents the summation of evil. He gives this evil a name. For Irenaeus, the number symbolizes apostasy, a withdrawal from Christ. On the other hand, Irenaeus suggests names that might be applied to a particular figure. Yet these are not ordinary personal names but resonate with larger mythological currents that Irenaeus expected his readers to recognize.

Yet Irenaeus is aware that some manuscripts read 616 (*Haer.* 5.30.1). His analysis of social factors leads him to divide those who accept 616 into two groups.²⁶ The first group has accepted the number “without enquiry” (ἀνεξετάστως; *sine exquisitione*) or because they are simple (ἀπλῶς; *simpliciter*; *Haer.* 5.30.1). Irenaeus thinks that God will forgive their mistake because they have not acted with malicious intent. He has harsher words for the second group, which identifies specific names with the number 616. Unfortunately for later interpreters, Irenaeus does not offer any clues about what these names might have been. Instead, he accuses his opponents of acting “in accordance with their vanity” (κατὰ κενοδοξίαν; *secundum inanem gloriam*). He objects to the certainty of their interpretations because they are based on a calculation from the wrong number. Three consequences will come upon such people: 1) the loss that results in wandering from the truth; 2) the punishment that awaits those who add or subtract from scripture;²⁷ 3) the increased likelihood that they will be misled by the antichrist, since their calculation is mistaken. Because of what Irenaeus sees as their corrupt interpretation, he argues that this second group may well end up following the

²⁶ Irenaeus makes a similar bipartite distinction among those who reject chiliasm (*Haer.* 5.30.4). Some hold right beliefs about other things but are mistaken with regard to the millennium due to their ignorance. Others reject the millennium because they are heretics. See further C. E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 11–20; C. R. Smith, “Chiliasm and Recapitulation in the Theology of Irenaeus,” *VC* 48 (1994): 313–331.

²⁷ Irenaeus’s language is reminiscent of another verse in the Apocalypse, namely, Rev 22:18–19. On the use of such colophons in Greek manuscripts, see K. Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of the Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 105–127.

antichrist along with other apostates.²⁸

Irenaeus declares that isophephy using Greek letters is the correct means by which to solve the riddle of 666 in Rev 13:18. Although he holds open a broader symbolic interpretation wherein the number represents the recapitulation of apostasy, Irenaeus suggests three names that could be applied to the antichrist and ultimately opts for Teitan as the most likely. Despite restrained hope for a solution, his strongest warnings are reserved for those who interpret the wrong number in ways that Irenaeus deems as being for their own gain. They have not only come to the wrong solution but also risk finding themselves on the side of the antichrist in the future due to their flawed calculations. By making this connection, Irenaeus analyses not only the implications of a faulty textual interpretation but also the social context of his opponents in ways that suggest the text, interpretation and social significance of Rev 13:18 are intertwined.

3. The Number and Its Identification in Hippolytus and Victorinus

As one comes to the third century, two works take up the number in Rev 13:18: Hippolytus in his *De Christo et Antichristo* and Victorinus of Poetovio in his *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*.

Hippolytus follows a similar method to Irenaeus in his *De Christo et Antichristo* and is heavily indebted to Irenaeus's interpretation of 666.²⁹ He quotes Rev 13:11–18 in *Antichr.* 48 before arguing that the beast from the earth should be identified as the antichrist (*Antichr.* 49). Hippolytus draws a connection between this figure and historical persons such as Augustus and Antiochus Epiphanes. Yet the link is made for the sake of comparison, not identification. There is no suggestion in Hippolytus's treatise that any historical figures are set to return in *redivivus* form. Hippolytus offers no

²⁸ In *Haer.* 5.30.2, he portrays them as false prophets and associates them with the tribe of Dan, which is not listed among the twelve tribes in Rev 7:5–7.

²⁹ The text of Hippolytus's *De Christo et Antichristo* is found in G. N. Bonwetsch and H. Achelis, *Hippolytus Werke I*, 2 vols., GCS 1 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1897), 2.1–47. Translations of Hippolytus are my own.

comment about the reading 616. Nor does he offer anything like Irenaeus's comments about false prophets who mislead based on their interpretation of the number. Hippolytus, then, says little about the textual problem or the social situations of those who interpret Rev 13:18.

Hippolytus's similarity to Irenaeus comes instead in the interpretation of 666. Like Irenaeus, Hippolytus takes on a posture of humility when approaching this text. "It is not in us to explain about his name exactly, as the blessed John thought and taught about it, but only to conjecture about it" (περὶ μὲν τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ, οὐκ ἐν ἡμῖν τοσοῦτον ἀκριβὲς ἐξεπεῖν, ὥς ἐνενόησε καὶ ἐδιδάχθη περὶ αὐτοῦ ὁ μακάριος Ἰωάννης, ὅσον μόνον ὑπονοῆσαι; *Antichr.* 50). God will clarify the meaning of the number when the beast appears. Hippolytus then lists the three names that Irenaeus had already suggested, albeit in a different order: Teitan, Euanthas, and Lateinos.³⁰ This allows Hippolytus to end with his preferred interpretive choice. While Irenaeus held a slight preference for Teitan (*Haer.* 5.30.3), Hippolytus interprets 666 with reference to Lateinos. Since the Romans, whom Hippolytus describes here as the Latins, have power, he reasons that Lateinos is most likely the right understanding of the number (*Antichr.* 50). Yet he allows that the Antichrist may have another name. His advice, then, is to keep what the prophets said in order to be prepared when matters become clear. In the case of Rev 13:18, this suggests that one should remember the number 666 but hold one's interpretation of it lightly until the name is revealed plainly. For Hippolytus, the interpretation of 666 should give way to obedience of the prophetic word, but the social situation of the. Number does not allow for a certain identification (*Antichr.* 50).

Writing in the third quarter of the third century, Victorinus of Poetovio (Pettau) authored the first commentary on Revelation to survive. In this work, he offers additional third-century support for the reading 666 in his

³⁰ On the expansion of this list of names attributed to Hippolytus of Rome in Dionysius Barsalibi's commentary, see P. Prigent and R. Stehly, "La fragments du *De Apocalypsi* d'Hippolyte," *TZ* 29 (1973): 313–333; A. Brent, *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century: Communities in Tension before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop*, VCSup 31 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 155–156.

Commentarius in Apocalypsin.³¹ Differently from the surviving works of Irenaeus and Hippolytus, Victorinus's commentary follows a format that resembles the scholia that may be better known from some of Origen's writings. When he comes to the beast's number in Rev 13:18, Victorinus notes, "The Holy Spirit says, 'his number is six hundred and sixty-six'" (*ait Spiritus Sanctus: numerus illius est DCLXVI; Comm. Apoc. 13.3*).³² He specifies that the way to explain this number is to interpret it according to Greek letters. He thus follows Irenaeus and Hippolytus in preferring Greek isophephy as the means by which to solve the riddle.

A textual critical issue arises in the manuscript tradition of Victorinus's commentary at this point.³³ Victorinus seems not to have said anything else about the number at this point in his commentary. Elsewhere, he identifies Nero *redivivus* as the antichrist, but he makes this interpretation based on Rev 13:3; 17:8–11 (*Comm. apoc. 13.1–2*). The number does not factor into Victorinus's identification of the antichrist. The solution to the riddle posed by the number is thus unaddressed in his *Commentarius*. While he does not say more about the issue, the effect is to comment on the Apocalypse as if the mystery of 666 cannot be solved. Whereas Irenaeus and Hippolytus were skeptical about coming to a positive identification but nonetheless felt capable of making suggestions, Victorinus leaves the riddle open, moving instead to the other beast (*Comm. Apoc. 13.4*).

Yet the text of Victorinus was reworked at the end of the fourth century by Jerome and again by other editors throughout late antiquity.³⁴ Late antique

³¹ For a different view, see R. Gryson, *Victorini Poetovionensis: Opera quae supersunt*, CCSL (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 289–290.

³² This text follows M. Dulaey, *Victorin de Poetovio: Sur l'Apocalypse et autres écrits*, SC 423 (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 108. Translation from W. C. Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries on Revelation: Victorinus of Petovium, Apringius of Beja, Caesarius of Arles, and Bede the Venerable* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 18. There is, however, a major textual difficulty at this point in the manuscript tradition, leading R. Gryson (*Victorini Poetovionensis*, 236) to leave the number blank in his edition.

³³ For a detailed study of the textual tradition in Victorinus's *Commentarius*, see Gryson, *Victorini Poetovionensis*, 10–98.

³⁴ On the recensions of Victorinus's commentary, see M. Dulaey, "Jérôme 'éditeur' du *Commentaire sur l'Apocalypse* de Victorin de Poetovio," *REAug* 37 (1991): 199–236; R. Gryson, "Les commentaires patristiques latins de l'Apocalypse," *Revue théologique de*

editors added names where Victorinus's *Commentarius* appeared not to have any. For example, Recension Y includes the names Anthemius (Ἀνθέμιος) and Gaiseric (Γαϊσέρικος). These names add up to 666 when using Greek isophephy, the means that Victorinus suggested should be used to solve the riddle. However, the names suggest a fifth-century date when Anthemius was emperor (467–472) and Gaiseric, who died in 477, was active in Vandal North Africa. Recension Y understands the number with reference to an antichrist figure and attributes it to political authorities in the editor's fifth-century context. Recension Φ, on the other hand, offers a more mythical interpretation. In keeping with the earlier work of Irenaeus and Hippolytus, the name Teitan (Τεϊτάν) is included. Φ then clarifies that Teitan is known to the nations as *Sol Phoebus*. The editor then offers a loosely corresponding Latin term that adds up to 666 and which can accompany the Greek Teitan: *Diclux*.

While a third and still later recension, S, combines the four names listed in the work of the two earlier recensions, what is important to note here is that Victorinus and his editors take different stances about the solvability of the riddle in Rev 13:18.³⁵ Although Victorinus does not comment on the matter directly, his *Commentarius* suggests that he did not believe the number could be solved. The mystery of the number must remain even when the antichrist was thought to be a Nero *redivivus* figure. Victorinus's later editors did not accept his tacit position when transmitting his work. They instead added names to the commentary on Rev 13:18, thereby indicating their belief that the number had a solution. While all agree that isophephy using Greek numbers provided a way in which to eventually resolve the matter, Victorinus's interpretation suggests that he believed the number could not be identified with certainty.

Louvain 28 (1997), 305-337, 484-502; H. A. G. Houghton, *The Latin New Testament: A Guide to Its Early History, Texts, and Manuscripts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³⁵ J. Lookadoo, "A Mystery Divergently Interpreted: Revelation 13:18 in Victorinus of Poetovio's *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*," *Journal of Biblical Text Research* 56 (2025): 235–252.

4. The Number and Its Interpretation in Tyconius of Carthage and the *Liber genealogus*

Writing near the end of the fourth century, Tyconius of Carthage is perhaps best known for his *Book of Rules* and his place in Augustine's anti-Donatist arguments.³⁶ Yet his commentary on the Apocalypse had a significant impact on early medieval commentaries on Revelation.³⁷ Although its manuscript preservation is far from straightforward, Tyconius is significant for this essay because he records the number of the beast as 616 (*In Apoc.* 13.18).³⁸ He makes no comment that shows awareness of the textual critical problems in Rev 13:18. The interpretation proceeds unabated with 616 in the text. Like the interpreters who preceded him, Tyconius argues that the number must be interpreted according to Greek numerical practices. He offers two reasons in support of this claim. First, John wrote to an audience in Asia where Greek was the language that was used (Tyconius, *In Apoc.* 4.46). Second, Revelation refers to God as the alpha and the omega (τὰ ἄλφα καὶ τὸ ὦ; Rev 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).³⁹ Since God is referred to explicitly with reference to Greek letters, Tyconius extends this Greek reference to God to his solution to the number. His fourth-century discussion about the solution to the riddle appears to be the most extensive and most direct comments about how to interpret the number to this point.

Tyconius moves on from this discussion of how to solve the riddle to

³⁶ The *Book of Rules* has been published in a critical edition by J.-M. Vercruysse (*Le livre des Règles*, SC 488 [Paris: Cerf, 2005]).

³⁷ K. Poole, "The Western Apocalypse Commentary Tradition of the Early Middle Ages," in *A Companion to the Premodern Apocalypse*, ed. M. A. Ryan (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 106–107.

³⁸ The text of Tyconius's commentary can be found in R. Gryson, *Tyconii Afri expositio Apocalypseos*, CCSL 107A (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011). English translations in this article are from F. X. Gumerlock and D. C. Robinson, *Tyconius: Exposition of the Apocalypse*, FC 134 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2017). See also R. Gryson, *Tyconius: Commentaire de l'Apocalypse*, Corpus Christianorum in Translation 10 (Turnhout: Brepols 2011). For histories of scholarship on the text of Tyconius's commentary, see Gumerlock and Robinson, *Tyconius*, 5–6; Gryson, "Les commentaires patristiques latins," 311–317.

³⁹ Gryson, *Tyconius*, 167 n. 17.

contemplate the significance of 616 in its Greek abbreviation: χις. He observes that the three letters can be combined into a figure that is visually appealing. This way of interpreting differs from the isophephic practices of Irenaeus and Hippolytus. Moreover, Tyconius appears to confuse the digamma (ς) for a final sigma (ς), he interprets χις with reference to Christ.⁴⁰ According to Tyconius, the first middle, and last letters of Χριστός are found in the numerical abbreviation. The letters can be combined into a visual sign either of Christ's name or of Christ on the cross.⁴¹ The interpretation of the beast's identity thus relates to Christ, because the power of adversity will make himself similar to the messiah. The antichrist reveals the pre-eminence of the true messiah by way of its imitation. However, the exposition that Tyconius draws from 616 in his manuscript of Rev 13:18 illustrate that the beast will be a false messiah.

By following the tradition of Irenaeus and Victorinus in interpreting the number of the beast with a view to Greek letters, Tyconius views the number as decipherable. He exhorts his readers to join him in calculating "the number that he said is received, so that in the number we may find the name or mark" (*In apoc.* 13.18). For those who have wisdom, the riddle of the beast may have a solution. Yet Tyconius's own interpretation does not attempt to link the number of the beast to a name via gematria. Rather, it works on a visual exegesis of the numerical monogram. By interpreting the number in this way, the beast's identity is found solely in its opposition to Christ. The riddle of the beast can be solved as a visual puzzle by which the antichrist is shown to be an imitation of the real messiah. Tyconius's solution is not to be predictive, but it may aid his readers in *post facto* identification of the beast.

Tyconius's fourth-century commentary continued to be influential in late

⁴⁰ Whether this confusion was a matter of ignorance or convenience can be left open for this essay. However, the presence of such a confusion may caution interpreters from too quickly accepting Kenneth Steinhauser's suggestion that Tyconius was an ethnic Greek who moved to Carthage. See K. B. Steinhauser, "Tyconius: Was He Greek?" *StPatr* 27 (1993): 394–399.

⁴¹ For visual representations of Tyconius's figure, see Gryson, *Tyconius*, 167; Gumerlock and Robinson, *Tyconius*, 139; M. Kusio, *The Antichrist Tradition in Antiquity: Antimessianism in Second Temple and Early Christian Literature*, WUNT 2.532 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 207.

antiquity despite his associations with the Donatist movement.⁴² Caesarius of Arles likewise receives the number in Rev 13:18 as 616 and makes no mention of 666. He appeals to references to Jesus as Alpha and Omega to substantiate his interpretation of the number with attention to Greek numerical symbolism. He then follows Tyconius in understanding the letters as a visual monogram of Christ's name. While Christians hold this name in reverence, "the heretics make something similar to this sign for themselves" (*Hom. Apoc.* 11).⁴³ The anonymous *De Monogramma* follows a similar interpretive path in the late sixth or seventh century, demonstrating Tyconius's influence well into late antiquity. The number 616 is preferred, despite the author's awareness of an alternative (666). For the author of *De Monogramma*, the number six exhibits perfections that suit it well to the role of being the numerical sign associated with the beast.

While Jesse Hoover has rightly illustrated Tyconius's continued influence accounts for many of the references to 616 in the Latin commentary tradition, one work stands as an independent witness to 616 and provides an alternative means of solving the riddle.⁴⁴ A fifth-century chronicle known as the *Liber genealogus* narrates the history of the world in brief paragraphs from Adam and Eve to the end of time.⁴⁵ The chronology stems from North Africa and was originally composed during the early fifth century. However, it is preserved in four slightly different versions that were edited in the years 427, 438, 455, and 463.⁴⁶ In the edition from 438, the chronicler records the number of the beast

⁴² J. Hoover, "The Apocalyptic Number 616 and the Donatist Church," *JEH* 72 (2021): 711-715; K. B. Steinhauser, *The Apocalypse Commentary of Tyconius: A History of Its Reception and Influence* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987). A visual stemma attempting to trace Tyconius's influence in association with other Latin commentators can be found in Gryson, "Les commentaires patristiques latins," 306.

⁴³ Translation from Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries*, 89.

⁴⁴ Hoover, "Apocalyptic Number," 709-725.

⁴⁵ The text of *Liber genealogus* can be found in T. Mommsen, *Chronica Minora Saec. IV. V. VI. VII*, *Monumenta germaniae historica* 9 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1892), 160-196.

⁴⁶ See further Mommsen, *Chronica Minora*, 154-159; P. Fredriksen, "Apocalypse and Redemption in Early Christianity: From John of Patmost to Augustine of Hippo," *VC* 45 (1991): 182 n. 86; F. X. Gumerlock, "Nero Antichrist: Patristic Evidence for the Use of Nero's Naming in Calculating the Number of the Beast (Rev 13:18)," *WTJ* 68 (2006): 350-351.

as 616 (DCXVI; *Liber* 615). Although the text does not quote Rev 13:18 fully as in some commentaries already explored, the author signals that the verse is in view by writing, “Here wisdom is overturned” (*hic sapientia vertitur*; *Liber* 615).⁴⁷ No mention is made of other manuscripts with the reading 666 (DCLXVI). The author simply insists that the wisdom is required to compute the number and thereby signals a belief about the social context for the riddle, namely, that readers can solve it. The author concludes that 616 is a reference to Nero by utilising isophephy. The Latin transliteration *antichristus* is employed as the basis for the calculation. The numerical value of the letters in this word comes to 154. When this number is multiplied by four “according to the four letters of the name Nero” (*secundum litteras IIII nominis Neronis*), the product is 616.

More can be said about the arguments for the interpretation put forward in the *Liber genealogus*. The author also attributes the number 616 to the commentary of Victorinus (*Liber* 616). The reading of Victorinus accepted earlier in this article along with the remainder of the author’s engagement with Victorinus suggest that this claim is mistaken.⁴⁸ The *Liber* notes that Victorinus ascribed two names to the Antichrist: Anthemius and Gaiseric. Although these come from later recensions rather than Victorinus’s pen, both names add up to 666 when written with Greek letters (*Liber* 616, 618). The same is also true for the calculation of Teitan (*Liber* 617). Yet the author does not use these names because they “do not match to the beast’s number” (*ad numerum bestie non conveniebat*; *Liber* 619). In this fifth-century chronicle from North Africa, the number should be read as 616. On this basis, Nero is thus the correct identification of the beast’s number, despite the awareness of the chronicler or an early editor of other numbers and interpretive options in the textual tradition.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ The author plays with the language of Rev 13:18, which in the Vulgate of Rev 13:18 reads, *hic sapiential est* (here is wisdom).

⁴⁸ But see Gryson, *Victorini Poetovionensis*, 289–290.

⁴⁹ “*Liber genealogus* attests that the name of Nero was being used by early Christians in the calculation of the number of the beast, which was 616 in their version of Rev 13:18” (Gumerlock, “Nero Antichrist,” 360).

5. Conclusion

This examination of ancient interpretations of the number in Rev 13:18 through the fifth century has brought several issues to the fore. The number to be read in Rev 13:18 differs among early interpreters. However, this issue has been discussed extensively in commentaries.⁵⁰ The conclusion will thus focus on other hermeneutical assumptions that have a bearing on interpretation.

First, this article has demonstrated that different methods for solving the riddle are evident among early commentators. Isophephy is the most widely attested means to provide solutions to the riddle. Differently from some modern commentators, the interpreters surveyed here insisted that Greek letters should be used as the basis for any isophephic calculations.⁵¹ Yet the precise steps by which one should undertake such calculations differs among ancient interpreters. While Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and the editors who compiled recensions of Victorinus's commentary employ simple addition, the author of *Liber genealogus* utilises another mathematical operation in its quest for a solution. Altogether differently from these interpretations, Tyconius and those influenced by him found visual exegesis of the riddle to be more profitable. While each interpreter shows how their selected method works in practice, none argue in favour of deploying it instead of another method. Rather, they interpret the text using their selected method without further discussion.⁵²

Second, surveying early interpreters reveals differences of opinion concerning whether the riddle can be solved. For Tyconius, the exegetes that

⁵⁰ See the works cited in the introduction for such discussions.

⁵¹ The sole exception is the editor behind the Φ recension of Victorinus's commentary.

⁵² The closest one comes to a methodological statement about how the number should be solved among early commentators is in the sixth-century commentary of Oecumenius, who declares that isophephy is "a well-worn method of reckoning known to people" (ψηφον ἐντριβὴ καὶ ἐγνωσαμένην ἀνθρώποις; *Comm. apoc.* 8.5.5). The English translation of Oecumenius's commentary can be found in J. N. Suggit, *Oecumenius: Commentary on the Apocalypse*, FC 112 (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006). The Greek text was first published in H. C. Hoskier, *The Complete Commentary of Oecumenius on the Apocalypse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1928). See also M. de Groote, *Oecumenii commenatiur in Apocalypsin* (Leuven: Peeters, 1999).

followed in his stream, the author of *Liber genealogus*, and the editors involved in the recensions of Victorinus's commentary, the answer to the question of whether there is a solution to the riddle was a resounding yes. Although reading variant texts, deploying alternative methods, and reaching different conclusions, each interpreter presumes that an answer can be found. Irenaeus and Hippolytus stand in contrast to these interpreters. Both indicate that the name of the figure will not be known until after the figure symbolised by the beast makes himself known. Irenaeus even worries that those who interpret the wrong number and come to incorrect solutions as a result will be more prone to being misled by the beast. Even so, there is a tension in their exegesis as well, for Irenaeus and Hippolytus proffer suggestions and even prefer solutions despite their professed agnosticism about the present ability to find a solution to the riddle. One thing that is shared among these interpreters is the conviction that there is a single solution to the riddle, or at least there will be once the figure is made known.⁵³

A third and final issue that arises concerns the background from which these interpretations arise. While popular exegetes may reflexively interpret the number based on their own background and contemporary New Testament scholarship often assumes Roman emperors are in view, early interpretations widen the available social background from which to draw. Other Greek names are suggested. Teitan, one of the most commonly proposed names, has mythological overtones, which some editors of Victorinus strengthened by referring to Sol Phoebus with the Latin term, *Diclux*. Not until the fifth century is the name of an imperial figure suggested as the solution to the riddle posed by the number. The *Liber genealogus* proposes Nero, while some of Victorinus's editors suggest Anthemius. Admittedly, Lateinos has political overtones, but the term refers to a people group rather than a specific individual. In addition, the line of interpreters following Tyconius introduce a

⁵³ Oecumenius again provides an intriguing voice to consider alongside earlier interpreters. He suggests that the riddle can be solved but that people can apply whichever name is most appropriate and adds up to the correct number (*Comm. Apoc.* 8.5.9). There is thus an openness to Oecumenius's solution that is missing from his predecessors. Writing in the seventh century, Andreas regards a solution as possible only after the antichrist appears. Nevertheless, he follows early precedence in suggesting possible names (*Comm. Apoc.* 38). For the translation of Andreas's commentary, see E. S. Constantinou, *Andrew of Caesarea: Commentary on the Apocalypse*, FC 123 (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

visual mode of exegesis into the numerical symbolism in which the numerical characters are interpreted as a monogram.⁵⁴ In each case, the background is left unstated. Yet the critical distance provided by reading ancient interpreters allows these alternative hermeneutical backgrounds to come into view with increasing clarity.

In most ancient comments on Rev 13:18, these issues are left unstated. Authors proceed with opinions that are already formed and proffer their interpretations without additional comment. Reading ancient commentators and noticing where they differ provides an opportunity for twenty-first-century readers to return to more recent studies of the number with a critical eye. Modern commentators, for example, rarely stop to remark on the methodology that should be used to solve the riddle but instead assume a particular method at the outset. This method is typically isophephy. While descriptions of illustrative examples of isophephy are collected in commentaries on Rev 13:18, there are fewer discussions of whether the riddle can be solved or against which background solutions should be sought. One helpful set of works on the number that runs contrary to these tendencies comes from Craig Koester, who has argued on the basis of inscriptional evidence that there are good grounds to expect a Jewish circle of believers in Asia Minor to be able to use Hebrew letters in their calculations. He thus argues for isophephy using Hebrew letters to solve the riddle.⁵⁵ Additionally, he proposes on the basis of other studies of ancient riddles that the social status gained from solving such problems provides strong indication that the riddle in Rev 13:18 was intended to be solved.⁵⁶ The solution that he opts for, Nero Caesar, draws on the background of individual Roman emperors that is common in New Testament studies without further comment. This may indeed be the best solution, but future studies may push beyond a list of Roman emperors to consider alternatives from other ancient backgrounds.

The self-conscious methodological reflections evident in Koester's

⁵⁴ In the aftermath of the publication of P¹¹⁵, P. J. Williams ("P¹¹⁵ and the Number of the Beast," *TynBul* 58 [2007]: 151–153) has offered a somewhat similar suggestion that draws attention to "the visual resemblance" of $\chi\iota\varsigma$ to *nomina sacra* such as $\chi\rho\varsigma$, $\chi\varsigma$, $\iota\eta\varsigma$, and $\iota\varsigma$.

⁵⁵ Koester, "Number," 13–18.

⁵⁶ Koester, "Number," 6–7.

argument should be expanded among commentators who take up John the Seer's imperative to "calculate" (ψηφισάτω) the number in Rev 13:18. By what method should this calculation be done? Can the riddle be solved? If so, is only a single solution permissible or might multiple answers to the riddle be permitted? Finally, from what conceptual background should the answers come? While the declaration of hermeneutical assumptions may not solve the riddle with certainty, it will at least allow current studies to proceed along clearer methodological lines and will reveal the social contexts that interpreters have taken into account in their exegesis.

Received: Dec 10, 2025; Revised: Dec 27, 2025; Accepted: Dec 27, 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23364/JBAS.2025.1.1.55816>

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