

Who Might Bear the Number 666?

Most Bible scholars think that the number of the beast, given as 666 in Revelation 13:18 (or 616 in some manuscripts), employed the system of gematria (see box 30.2) to designate a hostile Roman emperor:

- A popular spelling for the name of the emperor Nero adds up to 666 when written in Hebrew (קסר נרון = Caesar Neron). An alternative spelling (קסר נרו) = Caesar Nero) adds up to 616, a variant reading for the number of the beast found in some manuscripts of Revelation.
- A designation for the emperor Domitian that sometimes appeared on Greek coins also adds up to 666: *A. Kai. Domet. Seb. Ge.* (an abbreviation for *Autokratōr Kaisar Dometianos Sebastos Germanikos* = Emperor Caesar Domitian Augustus Germanicus).

But Bible readers throughout history have sought to determine if there might be anyone in their contemporary world who bears the number of the beast. In the second century, Bishop Irenaeus warned the church to be wary of anyone named “Evanthas,” “Lateinos,” or “Teitan,” because the letters of those names in Greek equaled the fateful sum. Later, in the thirteenth century, some Franciscans noted that the Greek name of Pope Benedict XI (*benediktos*) made him suspect for the same reason. Some Protestant Christians in the twenty-first century would likewise cast aspersions on Pope Benedict XVI.

But why would the name have to be in Hebrew or Greek? English systems of gematria also exist: it was noted in the 1960s that “Kissinger” (President Richard Nixon’s secretary of state) is a name that equals 666 in English gematria.

In recent years, beast hunters have set computers to work on this problem, and the pool of potential beasts now includes phenomena in addition to proper names. Words or phrases whose letters produce the ominous number (in accord with English gematria) include “computer,” “New York,” “US of America,” and “SS Number.”

Guesses can also be made without any appeal to gematria. Former US president Ronald Wilson Reagan was once identified as a candidate for the beast simply because he had six letters in each of his three names—and then after he left the presidency he moved to a house located at 666 St. Cloud Road (his wife later had the address changed to 668).

Finally, since an English “w” is equivalent to the Hebrew letter vav, which has a numerical value of six, some pundits have wondered whether “www” is not just another way of writing 666, in which case the beast could be the internet.