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# Observations on 666 in the Old Testament

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## Publication Details

This article was originally published as Michael, MG, Observations on 666 in the Old Testament, *Bulletin of Biblical Studies*, 18, January-June 1999, 33-39.

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## **Disciplines**

Physical Sciences and Mathematics

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# BULLETIN OF BIBLICAL STUDIES

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Vol. 18, January - June 1999, Year 28

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## CONTENTS

Prof. George Rigopoulos, Obituary for Oscar Cullmann .....	5
Prof. Savas Agourides, The Papables of Preparedness in Matthew's Gospel .....	18
Michael G. Michael, Observations on 666 in the Old Testament .....	33
Prof. George Rigopoulos, Jesus and the Greeks (Exegetical Approach of Jn. 12, 20-26) (Part B')...	40
Zoltan Hamar, Grace more immovable than the mountains .....	53
Raymond Goharghi, The land of Geshen in Egypt. The Ixos .....	99
Bookreviews: Prof. S. Agourides: Jose Saramagu, <i>The Gospel according to Jesus</i> - Karen Armstrong, <i>In the Beginning, A new Interpretation of the</i> <i>Book of Genesis</i> .....	132

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EDITIONS «ARTOS ZOES»  
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M. G. MICHAEL

## OBSERVATIONS ON 666 IN THE OLD TESTAMENT<sup>1</sup>

### *The Number Six Hundred and Sixty-Six*

The number of the beast, ἑξακόσια ἑξήκοντα ἕξ [six hundred and sixty-six] (Rev 13:18), appears just once in the Seer's work. The oldest fragment of Revelation which contains chapter 13 [P47] has the number in its abbreviated form, χξς.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless the number itself, through inference or association, is certainly prominent. This significant fact often escapes the attention of commentators. Whether through reference to the beast's name [τό ὄνομα τοῦ θηρίου] (13:17), to its number [τόν ἀριθμόν τοῦ θηρίου] (13:18), or to its mark [τό χάραγμα τοῦ θηρίου] (19:20), there are well over a dozen direct associations to the number. The number is a symbol in that it is *performative and referential*,<sup>3</sup> for it always falls short of the completeness and perfection of the mystic seven. Yet simultaneously it also functions as a cryptogram,<sup>4</sup> we are told by the author that there is here

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1. The author of this paper, an Orthodox theologian and historian, is a doctoral candidate with the ACU (Australian Catholic University). His current research explores the history of traditions of the Antichrist as *Cosmic Villain*.

2. Other significant witness for this reading are 051, the Majority text, and the Textus Receptus. On the other hand, *A*, *N*, *P*, and the Vulgate (*sescenti sexaginta sex*) have the number in standard written form: ἑξακόσια ἑξήκοντα ἕξ (*A*). These witnesses have some mirror differences in orthography (see NA26, p. 659).

3. Joseph R. Gusfield, Kenneth Burke On Symbols and Society, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 18.

4. Richard N. Soulen describes the cryptogram [Gk: hidden writing] very well, «[a] C. may be either a writing or a drawing which has a hidden or secret meaning. Cs are particularly characteristic of apocalyptic writings, and of oppressed peoples generally, among whom late Judaism and early Christianity must be remembered. The epigraph of Daniel 5 («Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin») and the mark of the beast (666) in Rev 13:16-18 are cryptograms. The identifying cryptogram for the early Christian was a

a hidden or secret meaning [ὁ ἔχων νοῦν ψηφισάτω] (13:18). Both hold true, and it accords with the *open-ended* and *polyvalent nature*<sup>5</sup> of John's symbolism.

### *Six Hundred and Sixty-Six in the Old Testament*

Commentators have shown almost no interest in the appearance of 666 in the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup> Even Nestle-Aland 26, in the *source and cross reference* notes in the outer margin to Rev 13:16-18, make no reference to either 1 Kings 10:14 nor 2 Chron 9:13. And here we have mention of the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year, «*six hundred and sixty-six talents of gold*». Apart from Rev 13:18, six hundred and sixty-six appears three other times in the Bible. These occurrences are all found in the Old Testament (see table 1).

- |  |
|--|
| <p>(i) Now the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was six hundred and sixty-six talents of gold (1 Kings 10:14)</p> <p>(ii) Now the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was six hundred and sixty-six talents of gold (2 Chron 9:13)</p> <p>(iii) The sons of Adonikam, six hundred and sixty-six (Ezra 2:13)</p> |
|--|

Table 1: Six Hundred and Sixty-Six in the Old Testament

simple line drawing of a fish, which name in Greek (*Ichthus*) is an acrostic for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour (see, e.g., the *colophon* in the Gospel of the Egyptians, Nag Hammadi Codex III 69, 14-15)» (Richard N. Soulen, Handbook of Biblical Criticism, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 50).

5. M. Eugene Boring, Revelation, (Kentucky: John Press, 1989), p. 55.

6. H. B. Swete notes in the prolegomena to his commentary (almost a century ago) that he «received an explanation of χξς which well deserves to be considered» (H. B. Swete, The Apocalypse of John, (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1922), p. cxxxviii). The note referred to the Kings pericope (1 Kings 10:14) sent to Swete by a Dr Barnes. This explanation however, revolves around the idea of «a round number» and does not take into account the particulars and background mentioned in this present writer's proposal. More recently the commentator who showed interest in the appearance of the number in the OT was Austin Farrer in A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St. John's Apocalypse, (published 1949), p. 256f. Farrer states that «St. John's use of Solomon's history as a source-book of numbers makes it virtually certain that he found the number of the beast here (1 Kings 10:14)».

## Six Hundred and Sixty-Six Talents of Gold

References (i) and (ii) are concerned with the same event. That is, the talents of gold brought to Solomon.<sup>7</sup> This amount signifies a peak of his income rather than a complete report of treasury,<sup>8</sup> there was much other revenue not yet registered in this total. Immediately following the report of the six hundred and sixty-six talents of gold (over 21 tons), we read, «besides that which came from the traders and from the traffic of the merchants, and from all the kings of Arabia and from the governors of the land» (1 Kings 10:15). The amount specified is the sum total of the 120 talents received from Hiram<sup>9</sup> (9:14), the 420 talents from Ophir (9:28),<sup>10</sup> and the 120 talents from the Queen of Sheba (10:10).<sup>11</sup> We can make a most interesting observation, which again is not noted by commentators: the total adds up to exactly 660 (120+420+120). The remaining six talents,

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7. For an illuminating study of Solomon's wealth, see Alan Millard, «Solomon In All His Glory», *Vox Evangelica*, 12, (1981), pp. 13-17. Comparing other ancient figures and ancient records of gold, Millard concludes «[t]here are no grounds for dismissing Solomon's glory as an exaggeration or legend in the history and culture of the ancient world. Solomon could have well ruled in Jerusalem exactly as 1 Kings describes him, seated on his ivory throne, worshipping at the golden Temple» (art. cit., p. 17).

8. Gene Rice is of the same opinion, *1 Kings: Nations Under God*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), p. 82.

9. Hiram the King of Tyre was a contemporary of both David and Solomon. Solomon had previously presented the king with twenty cities in the land of Galilee, the cities did not please the king which he called the land of Cabul, that is, *worth nothing* (1 Kings 9:13).

10. Ophir was a city which was synonymous with the fine gold, silver and precious stones which were its principal product (Isa 13:12, Job 22:24). The definite location of this place is still disputed. If it be located on the NE African coast, as some suggest, it would be the Ophir which was also a rich source of frankincense and myrrh.

11. For an illuminating discussion on the account of the Queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon (which has undergone [as the author notes], extensive Arabian, Ethiopian, Jewish, and other elaborations, see Edward Ullendorff, «The Queen of Sheba», *The John Rylands Library*, Vol. 45, (1963), pp. 486-504. Here we should note, that before the queen gave Solomon the gold and the precious stones and the abundance of spices, she tested him «with hard questions» (1 Kings 10:1). No doubt this included riddles, for contests of wisdom between heads of state «were a traditional part of court etiquette» (Gene Rice, *1 Kings*, (1990), p. 79).

that make up the 666, are not accounted for, they are *from an unnamed source*.<sup>12</sup> Which raises a question: is there in fact an unnamed source, or did the chronicler deliberately set out to complete this number? There is of course no way of being sure. The authorial intention of the original writer is beyond our scope. However, what can certainly be considered, is its potential for interpretation by the writer of the Revelation himself. This whole section (1 Kings 9:26-10:29) is dominated by gold,<sup>13</sup> trade, and the «hard questions» (10:1) of the queen who comes to Jerusalem «from the heart of Africa.»<sup>14</sup> It is none too irrelevant either that Solomon, after his meeting with the Queen of Sheba, broke «the law of kingship» as Austin Farrer properly notes, «clause by clause.»<sup>15</sup> The laws of kingship are those clearly set down in The Book of Deuteronomy (17:14-20). Does the Queen of Sheba herself, serve as one of the models for the Seer's 'great whore' (Rev 17) that «rules over the kings of the earth» (17:18)?

### Six Hundred and Sixty-Six Sons of Adonikam

The reference in Ezra, to the six hundred and sixty-six descendants of Adonikam (2:13), has been ignored. At first reading it does appear, apart from the sameness of the number, to be irrelevant to a commentator of the Apocalypse. In its historical context, the passage speaks of the first return (536 BC) under Zerubbabel the prince of Judah, to Jerusalem and Judah of the captive exiles, whom under King Nebuchadnezzar had been taken to Babylonia (2:1-70). Adonikam is mentioned without comment along with the many others whose descendants are enumerated in Ezra's chronicle. Of Adonikam we know little, but he could have been (from the identity of the associated names)<sup>16</sup> the *Adonijah* who joined in the religious covenant of Nehemiah (Neh 10:16). Adonikam means *the Lord of the enemy* and it is this association with 666 that makes the reference engaging. Nonetheless, as E. W. Bullinger says, «[t]his is suggestive, even though it may be vague».<sup>17</sup> But the name could also mean *whom the Lord sets up*. In

12. *ibid.*

13. «All of the original materials together with all of the expansions, even including the story of the Queen of Sheba, are held together by this single word [gold]...» (Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, (Texas: Word Books, 1985), p. 138).

14. *op. cit.* p. 139.

15. Austin Farrer, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

16. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 22.

17. Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Significance*, (Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1967), p. 286.

Nehemiah's account the number is six hundred sixty seven (7:18), this discrepancy may be accounted for by the inclusion of Adonikam himself.

### *Other Possible Influences*

#### **Goliath and Nebuchadnezzar**

There are two other OT passages which have to be mentioned as possible influences<sup>18</sup> behind John's creation of this notorious number (see table 2).

*(i) 1 Sam 17:4-7 (Goliath of Gath)*

4And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. 5He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail, and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. 6And he had greaves of bronze upon his legs, and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. 7And the shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him.

*(ii) Dan 3:1 (Nebuchadnezzar's golden image)*

1King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon.

Table 2: Further Influences (Goliath and Nebuchadnezzar)

*(i) Goliath had a height of 6 cubits and a span, (he had 6 pieces of armour), and his spear's head weighed 600 shekels of iron, (the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze), (1 Sam 17:4-8). We are told of another who is also «descended from the giants» (from Gath), who had «six fingers on each hand, and six toes on each foot» (2 Sam 21:20).*

18. Irenaeus also says it is fitting that Noah's age at the time of the Flood was 600, for the deluge «swept away the rebellious world». More importantly, he also associates 666 to the height and breadth of the image set up by Nebuchadnezzar (the 'sixness' in the measurement of the cubits). These are prefigurements of the coming of Antichrist (ὅλη γὰρ ἡ εἰκὼν ἐκείνη προτύπωσις ἦν τῆς τοῦ ἀντιχρίστου παρουσίας) *Adv. Haer.* 5. 29.2.

(ii) King Nebuchadnezzar we are told by the author of Daniel «made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits» (Dan 3:1).

Here as well, the intent of the original authors of these accounts and the history of interpretation,<sup>19</sup> is beyond the scope of this paper. What is of interest to us however, is the potential or the probability for use by John. The inclusion of these pericopes as possible sources for the Seer is justified when the context in which the factors of the number six appear is taken into consideration. Both accounts are concerned with an enemy of the people of God; this enemy is seeking to either destroy or to humiliate into submission the chosen of the Lord. In each narrative the number six figures prominently and represents either the unnatural strength and peculiarities of giants, or the towering might and creations of an ungodly ruler. Furthermore, in the latter example, this power is expressed in the making of an «image of gold» [εἰκόνα χρυσοῦν (LXX)] compare with the «image of the beast» [εἰκόνα τοῦ θηρίου (Rev 13:15)]. In both instances we have a dramatic confrontation and a description of contrasts between the power of righteousness and the apparent power of rebellion. Both narratives advance to a conclusion where the Lord and His chosen triumph over the supernatural enemy. The themes and motifs are not dissimilar from those employed by the Seer. The extra addition of the factor of six suggests that it cannot be ruled out that the author of the Apoc. found here useful material to configure and further complement his symbol.

The strong probability that the background to the number «666» can be more substantially located in the Old Testament allows for a much closer approximation of its meaning in the text of the Apoc. This has been almost completely overlooked by commentators of the Book of Revelation in

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19. For a good discussion on the *Samuel* passage, see Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 127-129. «In the moment of danger», writes Brueggemann, «Israel is inordinately and inappropriately intimidated by the 'giant'» (op. cit., p. 127); for the history of interpretation of the Danielic passage and detailed commentary, see John J. Collins, *Daniel [Hermeneia]*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 176-182. Collins cites Hippolytus, Jerome, and Chrysostom, who all accuse Nebuchadnezzar of desiring to be worshipped through the statue. Hippolytus says that the king «made a copy of this image, in order that he might be worshipped by all as a God" *Schol. Dan. 3.1*

20. This is largely a result of critical methodologies associated with literary approaches to biblical interpretation (see A. K. M. Adam, *What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 31).

recent decades (one reason being the *hyperbolically close reading of the text*).<sup>20</sup> This should not be the case as good evidence to the contrary has been presented, itself a critical recognition for it will influence the exegesis of the Seer's famous cryptogram.<sup>21</sup>

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21. For the history of the interpretation of the «number» (666) and for a critical review of past and recent discussion, see Michael George Michael's thesis: The Number of the Beast, 666 (Revelation 13:16-18): Background, Sources, and Interpretation, (Macquarie University, Sydney 1998), pp. 244-277; see also Σιώτης, Μάρκος Ἀντ., 666 (ΧΞΣΤ): Ὁ Ἀριθμὸς τῆς Ταυτότητος τοῦ Ἀντιχρίστου, (Ἀθήνα: Ὁ Ἅγιος Νικόδημος ὁ Ἄγιορείτης, 1987).