

# Accounting for 616: Thinking with Irenaeus, Craig Koester, and Interpreters from Late Antiquity

Jonathon Lookadoo\*

## 1. Introduction

Although the existence of variant readings for the number in Revelation 13:18 has long roots in the transmission history of Revelation, the publication of P. Oxy. 4499 in 1999 has revived debate about both the earliest recoverable reading of the number and led to new proposals for how the two earliest attested numbers, 616 and 666, might be accounted for.<sup>1)</sup> Both D. C. Parker and J. Neville Birdsall have suggested that 616 should be adopted as the earliest reading.<sup>2)</sup> Others have defended 666 as the earliest text, including Craig R. Koester, Keith Bodner, and Brent Strawn.<sup>3)</sup> Over the last decade, Koester has

---

\* Ph.D. in Theology at the University of Otago. Associate Professor at the Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary. [jonathon.lookadoo@puts.ac.kr](mailto:jonathon.lookadoo@puts.ac.kr). This article has been generously supported by the Research Fund of the Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary, 2024.

1) N. Gonis, et al., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, vol. 66 (London: Egyptian Exploration Society, 1999), 10-37.

2) D. C. Parker, "A New Oxyrhynchus Papyrus of Revelation: P<sup>115</sup> (P. Oxy. 4499)", *NTS* 46 (2000), 159-174; J. N. Birdsall, "Irenaeus and the Number of the Beast: Revelation 13:18", A. Denaux, ed., *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis: Festschrift J. Delobel*, BETL 161 (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 349-359.

3) C. R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 38A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 596-599; 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; K. Bodner and B. A. Strawn, "Solomon and 666 (Revelation 13.18)",

followed Irenaeus's suggestion for how the variant may have come into existence, namely, because some in the second century found it easier to interpret 616 than to interpret 666.<sup>4)</sup> This article engages with Koester, Irenaeus, and other late antique interpreters of the number to consider how 616 might have entered the textual tradition.

The article follows Koester in positing that 666 is the earliest recoverable reading. While Koester argues the point at some length, this article accepts 666 as a tentative starting point for the purpose of testing another element in Koester's discussion. Despite the ongoing text-critical debate over whether 666 or 616 might be earlier, the purpose of this article is to consider Koester's arguments about Irenaeus's treatment of the number, not to establish the earliest reading outright.<sup>5)</sup> After introducing both Irenaeus and Koester's recent work on the number in Revelation 13:18, the article gives more extensive consideration to how 616 may have been incorporated into some manuscripts. Although Irenaeus suggests that a scribal error may account for the entry of 616 into the manuscript tradition, he accuses some of his opponents of knowingly maintaining the wrong number in the text of Revelation 13:18 in order to suit their interpretive agenda. Koester argues that this provides evidence that at least some in the second century found 616 an easier text to exegete when interpreting the text by means of gematria. The article examines other interpretations of 616 in the Roman imperial period as a way to test Koester's hypothesis. While intriguing, this article argues instead that another Irenaeian suggestion, namely, scribal error, is more likely to account for how two numbers already entered into the textual tradition of Revelation 13:18 in the second century.

---

*NTS* 66 (2020), 299-312. I am aware of the recent publication of the new ECM volumes on Revelation and am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out its importance for this article. The ECM prefers 666 as its reading. The text and apparatus can be found here: <https://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/ecm> (accessed August 28, 2024). Unfortunately, I did not have access to the printed volumes during the writing of this article and thus have not been able to consult the editors' notes to consider their rationale.

- 4) C. R. Koester, "The Number of the Beast in Revelation 13 in Light of Papyri, Graffiti, and Inscriptions", 3-4, 19.
- 5) Irenaeus knew both 666 and 616 in the textual tradition at the end of the second century (*Haer.* 5.30.1). 616 is found in P<sup>115</sup> and C, while 666 is found (with variant spellings) in P<sup>47</sup>, X, A, P, and 046. For further manuscript evidence and additional variant readings, readers are urged to consult, M. Lembke, et al., *Die Apokalypse: Teststellenkollation und Auswertungen*, Text und Textwert der griechischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments 6, ANTF 49 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 130-133.

## 2. Craig Koester and Irenaeus: 616 as an Easier Reading?

As part of his argument that the number in Revelation 13:18 should be understood as Nero, Craig Koester has appealed to Irenaeus of Lyons to show that the uncertainty about which number is earliest has roots that go back to the second century. Irenaeus was a second-century Christian writer who is best remembered for his collection of anti-heretical writings opposing Valentinus and others who might now be classified as “gnostics.”<sup>6)</sup> Book 5 of Irenaeus’s *Adversus Haereses* contains the earliest reference to the number in Revelation 13:18 (*Haer.* 5.30.1-4).<sup>7)</sup> Irenaeus cites the number as part of a discussion of the antichrist that fits within his larger section on the end of all things.<sup>8)</sup> Already in the last quarter of the second century, Irenaeus is aware of alternative versions of the number. He insists that 666 is the best reading because it is found “in all the approved and oldest copies” (ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς σπουδαίοις καὶ ἀρχαίοις ἀντιγράφοις; *in omnibus antiquis et probatissimis et ueteribus scripturis*) of the Apocalypse (*Haer.* 5.30.1).<sup>9)</sup> Although Irenaeus does not know (οὐκ οἶδα; *ignoro*), how 616 entered some manuscripts of Revelation, he indicates that some teachers were interpreting the name of the antichrist according to a text that included 616 instead of 666. Irenaeus warns that those who interpret 616 “in accordance with their vanity” (κατὰ κενοδοξίαν; *secundum inanem gloriam*) open themselves to judgment due to their error. They are at fault due to the false nature of their interpretations, the wrong biblical

---

6) For concise biographical accounts of Irenaeus, see D. Minns, *Irenaeus: An Introduction* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 1-13; R. A. Norris, “Irenaeus of Lyons”, F. Young, L. Ayres, and A. Louth, eds., *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 45-52; E. Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1-7.

7) P. C. Almond, *The Antichrist: A New Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 44-46.

8) Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.25.1-5.30.4. See also B. McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 58-59.

9) For the text of Irenaeus’s *Adversus Haereses*, see A. Rousseau, L. Doutreleau, and C. Mercier, *Irénée de Lyon: Contres des Hérésies, Livre V, SC 153* (Paris: Cerf, 1969). Most of Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.30.1 is preserved in a fragment from the *Sacra Parallela* attributed to John of Damascus. For details, see A. Rousseau, L. Doutreleau, and C. Mercier, *Irénée de Lyon*, 364. However, the Greek text cited in this article is the critical reconstruction by the editors in A. Rousseau, L. Doutreleau, and C. Mercier, *Irénée de Lyon*, 365.

texts that they have used, and because they are more prone to be led astray by the antichrist due to their ignorance (*Haer.* 5.30.1).

Koester reasons from Irenaeus's account that one possible explanation for why 616 gained popularity within the textual tradition was due to the fact that some teachers found it easier to build interpretations around 616 than around 666.<sup>10)</sup> After all, despite Irenaeus's suggestion of three interpretive options for 666, he remains circumspect about which option might be most likely to describe the antichrist (*Haer.* 5.30.3). Koester thinks that Irenaeus regards his opponents as using an easier interpretation because of Irenaeus's reference to their vanity (*Haer.* 5.30.1). "Irenaeus considered 666 to be authentic and indicates that for him it was the more difficult reading, since he was not certain what name the number signified. In his context, 616 seems to have become popular because some found it easier to equate with a theory about the name of the Antichrist."<sup>11)</sup> In other words, 616 may have provided early Christian readers with a riddle that was easier to solve than 666.

Koester's hypothesis is briefly mentioned as part of a larger discussion about the nature of the numerical riddle in 13:18 and the Roman imperial social context in which twenty-first-century interpreters should place it. The remark about Irenaeus is not elaborated and is not central to his argument. Yet it is an important idea to explore further due to Irenaeus's early date and Koester's well-deserved prominence as a commentator on Revelation. The Irenaeian suggestion that 616 was easier for some teachers to interpret is thus worthy of consideration as a possible reason for why it entered into the textual tradition.<sup>12)</sup> What interpretation might Irenaeus's opponents have employed to explain the meaning of the number? How

---

10) C. R. Koester, "The Number of the Beast in Revelation 13 in Light of Papyri, Graffiti, and Inscriptions", 3-4. Koester writes, for example, "In the categories of textual criticism, Irenaeus wrote in a social context where 666 was the more difficult reading, because he was not sure what name would yield that total. The variant 616 was apparently the easier reading because some people had definite theories about its meaning." C. R. Koester, "The Number of the Beast in Revelation 13 in Light of Papyri, Graffiti, and Inscriptions", 4.

11) *Ibid.*, 19.

12) Naturally, the previous sentence presumes that 666 is the earliest recoverable reading, a point that not everyone will concede. See again D. C. Parker, "A New Oxyrhynchus Papyrus of Revelation: P<sup>115</sup> (P. Oxy. 4499)", 159-174; J. N. Birdsall, "Irenaeus and the Number of the Beast: Revelation 13:18", 349-359, both of whom have argued that 616 is earlier than 666.

would these interpretations have been easier than Irenaeus's suggestion? To answer questions like these, an investigation into how other early Christian readers interpreted the number 616 would aid Koester's proposed acceptance of Irenaeus's explanation.

### 3. The Interpretation of 616 in Late Antiquity

Unfortunately for twenty-first-century scholars, no second-century interpretations of 616 remain. Irenaeus provides the only extant discussion of the number from the second century. In the third-century, Hippolytus (*Antichr.* 50) and Victorinus of Poetovio (*Comm. Apoc.* 13.4) both accept 666 as the text of Revelation 13:18. It is thus difficult to know for certain how Irenaeus's opponents may have identified the antichrist based on 616. Yet there are early Christian interpretations of 616 that are in circulation from the fourth century. Since interpreters during the Roman imperial and late antiquity made use of interpretations that preceded them, later interpretations of 616 can be explored to determine, if possible, whether these later interpretations utilized earlier material that may have been known to Irenaeus. For example, Hippolytus knows Irenaeus's interpretation of Revelation 13:18 and utilizes the same names in his third-century discussion of the number (*Antichr.* 50).<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, this section examines the interpretations of Tyconius of Carthage and the *Liber geneologus* — both of which accept 616 in their texts of Revelation 13:18 — to explore how they make sense of the number along with possible precedents to each interpretation.

#### 3.1. Tyconius

Little is known for certain about Tyconius of Carthage. What is known comes from the fifth-century author Genadius of Marseilles, who wrote in his *De uiris illustribus* that Tyconius was from Africa and obtained

---

13) 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.

sufficient learning in the scriptures (Gennadius, *Vir. ill.* 18).<sup>14)</sup> Gennadius lists four books composed by Tyconius.<sup>15)</sup> However, only one of these books, the *Book of Rules* (*Liber regularum*) has survived fully intact.<sup>16)</sup> While Tyconius's *Book of Rules* was an important text which was cited by Augustine (*Doc. Chr.* 3.30.42),<sup>17)</sup> arguably his most influential work was his commentary on the Apocalypse.<sup>18)</sup>

Tyconius's *Commentary* is no longer extant in a complete form, but it was quoted by Latin commentators on the Apocalypse including, among others, Caesarius of Arles, Primasius, and Bede.<sup>19)</sup> Johannes Haussleiter first proposed that Tyconius's commentary might be reconstructed on the basis of later sources.<sup>20)</sup> Much twentieth-century scholarship on Tyconius was dedicated to reconstructing his commentary.<sup>21)</sup> As late as 1997, Roger Gryson asked whether it was possible to reconstruct Tyconius's

14) References to Gennadius's *De viris illustribus* come from J. -P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 58 (Paris: Ateliers catholiques, 1862).

15) These are *On Internal War* (*De bello intestino*), *Expositions of Various Causes* (*Expositiones diversarum causarum*), the *Book of Rules* (*Liber regularum*), and *On the Apocalypse* (*In Apocalypsin*). The last two books have proven most influential, while the first two are no longer extant.

16) For critical edition and translation, see J. -M. Vercruyse, *Le livre des Règles*, SC 488 (Paris: Cerf, 2005).

17) Citations of Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*, come from R. P. H. Green, *Augustine: De doctrina christiana*, OECT (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Tyconius may also have influenced Augustine's doctrine of the two cities, although the degree and manner of this influence is disputed among recent scholars. For a recent account that contextualizes the debate and considers recent scholarship on Tyconius, see J. v. Oort, "Tyconius' Apocalypse Commentary, Its Reconstruction, and Its Significance for Augustine's Doctrine of the Two Cities", *VC* 72 (2018), 513-532.

18) J. Hoover, "The Apocalyptic Number 616 and the Donatist Church", *JEH* 72 (2021), 711-715, who traces well the impact of Tyconius's interpretation of the number in Rev 13:18 through late antiquity and into the early medieval period. See further K. Poole, "The Western Apocalypse Commentary Tradition of the Early Middle Ages", M. A. Ryan, ed., *A Companion to the Premodern Apocalypse* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 106-107.

19) On the Latin commentary tradition on the Apocalypse, see R. Gryson, "Les commentaires patristiques latin de l'Apocalypse", *Revue théologique de Louvain* 28 (1997), 305-337, 484-502.

20) J. Haussleiter, "Die Kommentare des Victorinus, Tichonius und Hieronymus zur Apokalypse", *Zeitschrift für kirchliche Wissenschaft und kirchliches Leben* 7 (1886), 239-257.

21) For reviews of the history of scholarship, see R. Gryson, *Tyconii Afri Expositio Apocalypseos*, CCSL 107A (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 13-19; F. S. Gumerlock and D. C. Robinson, *Tyconius: Exposition of the Apocalypse*, Fathers of the Church 134 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 5-6.

commentary, answering, “Ce n’est pas sûr.”<sup>22)</sup> Nevertheless, scholarship on Tyconius reached a turning point 2011 when Gryson published a critical reconstruction of Tyconius’s commentary.<sup>23)</sup> A few years later Francis Gumerlock and David Robinson published an English translation, expanding the potential readership of this important fourth-century commentary.<sup>24)</sup>

Turning to Revelation 13:18, Tyconius’s text of Revelation is notable for its inclusion of 616. Unlike Irenaeus, Tyconius offers no comment to indicate awareness of alternative readings. However, he agrees with his Lyonese predecessor in believing that the number must be calculated according to Greek, since Greek was the language in which Revelation was composed and John the Seer wrote his work to believers in Asia (Tyconius, *In apoc.* 4.46). Tyconius appeals to presentations of the divine in terms of the Alpha and the Omega (Rev 1:8; 21:6; 22:13) as further evidence that the number must be understood with reference to a Greek way of counting. Tyconius thus writes the number with Greek letters as XIC, that is, Chi-Iota-Digamma.<sup>25)</sup> Tyconius either misreads the digamma (Ϛ) as a final sigma (ς) or treats it as such for the sake of convenience. On this basis, he treats the χ as the first letter of Christ (Χριστός), and the Ϛ is interpreted as the last letter. The ι takes its place in the middle. Tyconius concludes that the beast in Revelation 13:18 is portrayed in terms of Jesus. “Christ is understood, and a likeness is shown of him whom the church worships in truth, and to whom Adversity makes himself similar” (Tyconius, *In apoc.* 4.46).<sup>26)</sup>

Tyconius incorporates another noteworthy element into his interpretation

---

22) R. Gryson, “Les commentaires patristiques latin de l’Apocalypse”, 316.

23) R. Gryson, *Tyconii Afri Expositio Apocalypseos*. All citations of the Latin text of Tyconius’s work come from Gryson’s edition. Gryson’s Latin edition was accompanied by the publication of a French translation: R. Gryson, *Tyconius: Commentaire de l’Apocalypse*, Corpus Christianorum in Translation 10 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

24) F. S. Gumerlock and D. C. Robinson, *Tyconius*. All English translations of Tyconius’s work come from Gumerlock and Robinson’s edition.

25) Chi (X) can be used to represent the number 600. Iota (I) is used in Greek as a shorthand representation for the number 10. Finally, digamma (Ϛ) stands for the number 6.

26) See similarly the suggestion of P. J. Williams, “P<sup>115</sup> and the Number of the Beast”, *TynBul* 58 (2007), 151-153, who notes “the visual resemblance” of χις to *nomina sacra* such as χρς, ρς, ης, and ις.

of the number in Revelation 13:18. He does not interpret the riddle of the number in terms of gematria, as Irenaeus did at the end of the second century. Instead, Tyconius understands the number as a visual puzzle to be understood as a monogram.<sup>27)</sup> For those who have the wisdom which the author of Revelation sets out as a prerequisite in Revelation 13:18, the number and name can be interpreted as a visual mark by which the people of the antichrist would be identified.<sup>28)</sup> This way of understanding of Revelation 13:18 was important for later Latin interpreters of the Apocalypse. In the early sixth century, for example, Caesarius of Arles refers to the numerical letters XIC and notes that “when they are rendered as a monogram, they are a symbol and a name and a number.”<sup>29)</sup>

One may think, *prima facie*, that there is good reason to suspect that Tyconius was drawing on earlier traditions by interpreting the number visually. If so, this would constitute potential evidence for Koester’s hypothesis, following Irenaeus, that the variant 616 entered the tradition due to interpreters who found the number easier to exegete. While such a proposal cannot be definitively ruled out, Tyconius’s visual interpretation of the number is unlikely to have been the occasion for Irenaeus’s suggestion that some interpreters found it easier to interpret 616 (*Haer.* 5.30.1). Irenaeus consistently assumes that gematria is the means by which the riddle in Revelation 13:18 is to be solved. He makes no allowance for another method and is thus unlikely to have known the sort of visual exegesis to which Tyconius appeals, even among his second-century opponents.

Since the solution proposed by Tyconius is unlikely to have given rise to the appearance of 616 in the manuscript tradition, Koester’s desire to follow Irenaeus in thinking that interpretive ease accounts for the spread

---

27) For attempts to envision what this monogram might have looked like, see R. Gryson, *Tyconius*, 167; F. S. Gumerlock and D. C. 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.

28) See further R. Gryson, *Tyconii Afri Expositio Apocalypseos*, 310-311.

29) Caesarius of Arles, *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, Ancient Christian Texts, W. C. Weinrich, trans. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 89; Caesarius of Arles, *Homilies on the Apocalypse* 11.

of 616 must be further tested.

### 3.2. *Liber genealogus*

Another witness to how the number 616 was interpreted by some readers of Revelation can be found in the fifth-century *Liber genealogus*. The composition history of *Liber* is complex, but it may be concisely summarized in terms of three recensions.<sup>30)</sup> The earliest recension of *Liber* was written in 427 CE. The work expresses a Donatist view of history and stands opposite to earlier Catholic attempts to sketch a complete history.<sup>31)</sup> The Donatists, for example, are identified with Abel in the retelling of biblical history, while the Catholics are the descendants of Cain, the first murderer.<sup>32)</sup> In 438 CE, another editor took up *Liber* and rewrote it for a new audience.<sup>33)</sup> The final recension had a more complicated period of gestation, with an initial update being completed in 455 and the final update finished only in 463. *Liber genealogus* may thus be understood as part of a larger Catholic-Donatist struggle over how Christians interpreted sacred history in a post-Constantinian world.<sup>34)</sup>

As the narration progresses through God's actions with God's people and the divine self-revelation in Jesus Christ, the story describes the

---

30) For further discussion of *Liber genealogus*, see J. Hoover, *The Donatist Church in an Apocalyptic Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 197-208; P. Monceaux, *Historire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne depuis les origines jusqu'à l'invasion arabe*, vol. 6 (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1922), 249-258; R. Rouse and C. McNelis, "North African Literary Activity: A Cyprian Fragment, the Stichometric Lists and a Donatist Compendium", *Revue d'histoire des textes* 30 (2000), 219-224.

31) See, for example, Eusebius of Caesarea, *Chronicon*, the text of which can be found in J. Karst, *Eusebius' Werke: Die Chronik*, GCS 20 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1911). On the open nature of early Christian attempts to trace their origins, see M. Vinzent, *Resetting the Origins of Christianity: A New Theory of Sources and Beginnings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 1-9.

32) R. Rouse and C. McNelis, "North African Literary Activity", 212. The relevant passage is *Liber* 18-23.

33) On the manuscripts of this and all recensions of *Liber*, see T. Mommsen, *Chronica Minora Saec. IV. V. VI. VII*, MGH 9 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1892), 154-159. The recension of 438 is unique in identifying the Vandal king Gaiseric as the antichrist (*Liber* 616). Further discussion may be found below.

34) A. Dearn, "Persecution and Donatist Identity in the *Liber genealogus*", H. Amir and B. t. H. Romeny, eds., *From Rome to Constantinople: Studies in Honor of Averil Cameron*, Late Antique History and Religion (Leuven: Peeters, 2007).

deaths of Peter and Paul under Nero.<sup>35)</sup> The reference to Nero leads to the claim that Nero will “again” (*iterum*) be involved in a future persecution (*Liber* 614).<sup>36)</sup> *Liber geneologus* thus attests a renewed interest in a Nero *redivivus* legend during the late fourth and early fifth centuries.<sup>37)</sup> The narrator diverges from the story at this point to offer readers additional information about Nero as well as validation for the claim that Nero will come again. The author identifies Nero as the one whom John the Seer called 616 (DCXVI). The author of *Liber* then writes, “Here wisdom is overturned” (*hic sapientia uertitur*; *Liber* 615). The author thereby alludes to the connection between the number and wisdom in the Apocalypse: “This is wisdom” (ὧδε σοφία ἐστίν; Rev 13:18).<sup>38)</sup> Although the author has identified Nero as the antichrist by appealing to the number in Revelation 13:18, this association is little more than a bald assertion. What is required is some form of exegesis that confirms the author’s interpretation of the riddle in Revelation. For *Liber*, the mode by which the riddle is to be solved is gematria. Whereas Tyconius appealed to a visual form of exegesis, *Liber* takes the letters in *antichristus* and adds them up according to their numeric values.<sup>39)</sup> The resulting sum comes to 154 (CLIII). The author then multiplies 154 “by the four letters of Nero’s name” (*secundum litteras IIII nominis Neronis*; *Liber* 615). When 154 is multiplied by 4, the product is 616, that is, the number of the beast in the text of Revelation known to the author of *Liber*.

The multiple recensions of *Liber* mean that there are small differences in the precise wording of some manuscripts. Nevertheless, the identification with Nero and the solution to the number of 616 by means

35) On the various narrative portrayals of the deaths of Peter and Paul in early Christianity, see D. L. Eastman, *The Many Deaths of Peter and Paul*, OECS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

36) All citations from the text of *Liber* come from T. Mommsen, *Chronica Minora Saec. IV. V. VI. VII*, 160-196.

37) E.g. Commodian, *Instructiones* 41. See further J. Hoover, “The Apocalyptic Number 616 and the Donatist Church”, 717.

38) The Vulgate of the relevant clause in Rev 13:18 reads *hic sapientia est*.

39) A (1) N (13) T (19) I (9) C (3) R (17) H (8) I (9) S (18) T (19) U (20) S (18). See *Liber* 615. The manuscript St. Gall Stiftsbibliothek 133 (G) inverts the letters *r* and *h*. This reading is accepted by T. Mommsen, *Chronica Minora Saec. IV. V. VI. VII*, 194 and has been followed in this footnote. The resulting sum is not, of course, dependent on any transposition of the letters.

of a gematria involving the multiplication of 154 (*antichristus*) by the four letters in Nero's name hold steady across the recensions. Yet the recension of 438 CE, known as the Florentine recension (F), contains four additional paragraphs not found in any other recensions. The editor of F is aware of an alternative number in the interpretive tradition, namely, 666. F notes that in Victorinus of Poetovio's *Commentary on the Apocalypse* the number of the antichrist is 666 (*Liber* 616). The editor of F then adds a series of names that can be added via gematria to come to the sum of 666. These include Procopius Anthemius, Teitan, Diclux, and Gaiseric (*Liber* 616-618). Recent scholarship on Victorinus of Poetovio, however, suggests that these names come not from Victorinus's third-century commentary but instead from later recensions.<sup>40</sup> Although it remains uncertain precisely how or in what form the editor of F may have known Victorinus's *Commentary*, he records names found in the later recensions of Victorinus's work that are at odds with the text of Revelation utilized in *Liber*. Such a development is remarkable in the textual and interpretive history of Revelation and may indicate, as Hoover suggests, the editor suspected "that something is wrong with the simple 616 calculation proposed by his predecessor."<sup>41</sup>

The interpretation of the number in *Liber* is remarkable because it offers insight into another way in which the number 616 could be understood by readers of the New Testament Apocalypse. It is also important because it provides patristic support for identifying Nero as the answer to the riddle posed by Revelation 13:18.<sup>42</sup> Although the author of *Liber* may be indebted to an earlier source and the Florentine editor explicitly names his additional source as some version of Victorinus's

---

40) The text comes from Victorinus of Poetovio, *Comm. apoc.* 13.3. On this Victorinian text, see M. Dulaey, *Victorin de Poetovio: Sur l'Apocalypse et autres écrits*, SC 423 (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 108; R. Gryson, "Les commentaires patristiques latin de l'Apocalypse", 308.

41) J. Hoover, "The Apocalyptic Number 616 and the Donatist Church", 717.

42) F. X. Gumerlock, "Nero Antichrist: Patristic Evidence for the Use of Nero's Naming in Calculating the Number of the Beast", *Westminster Theological Journal* 68 (2006), 347-360. This point has not always been recognized by recent New Testament scholars. For example, R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 262: "the name of Nero was apparently never suggested by the ancient commentators even though his persecution zeal made him a model of the Antichrist."

commentary, it is unclear whether this interpretation of 616 as Nero can be traced back to the second century. On the whole, it is unlikely that anything like the fifth-century interpretation of 616 was known to Irenaeus. His mode of gematria differs from the calculation in *Liber*, the latter of which includes multiplication. Irenaeus knows no such means of calculation.<sup>43)</sup>

#### 4. Another Irenaean Suggestion

After examining the earliest extant interpretations of 616, this study has found it unlikely that the specific interpretations of Tyconius and *Liber genealogus* have roots that extend back to the second century. Neither the visual mode of exegeting the number suggested by Tyconius nor the additional step of multiplying the value of one name by another are hinted at in Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses*. Although it cannot be definitively ruled out that Irenaeus may have known a mode of interpreting 616 along the lines of those suggested by Tyconius or *Liber*, the current state of the evidence suggests it was unlikely. While Tyconius and *Liber genealogus* made use of earlier interpretive traditions, interact with preceding interpretations of the New Testament Apocalypse, and thus offer vital insight into how Revelation 13:18 was understood by believers in the fourth and fifth century, there is no sign that these interpretations can substantially enhance our understanding of Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.30.1.

What, then, is to be made of the Irenaean suggestion that Koester makes so much of, namely, that the popularity of 616 came from the comparative ease that some teachers found in interpreting the smaller number? Two matters are important to note in response.

First, Koester's belief that 616 was popular because it was easier to interpret fails to account adequately for the polemical nature of Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses*. To be sure, the main point of Koester's discussions of

---

43) Additional support in second-century literature may be found in Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.15.2; Sib. Or. 1.324-331. The authors utilize gematria without multiplication. For further discussion of the theological significance of numerical symbolism, see F. Bovon, "Names and Numbers in Early Christianity", *NTS* 47 (2001), 267-288.

666 lies on how twenty-first-century interpreters should understand Revelation 13:18, not on how Irenaeus understood the text.<sup>44)</sup> Irenaeus is merely a dialogue partner and an early witness to the state of the text in the second century. Yet to understand Irenaeus fully demands that readers take seriously the polemical tone of the work in which he wrote. Irenaeus is at pains throughout *Adversus Haereses* to put forward a vision of the rule of faith (*regula fidei*) that guides his readers into right understanding over and against the erroneous beliefs proffered by figures like Valentinus. Irenaeus is unlikely to allow that the teachers to whom he is opposed have any positive motives for interpreting 616. He instead insists that the teachers act “in accordance with their vanity” (κατὰ κευδοξίαν; *secundum inanem gloriam*; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.30.1). Such an assertion fits second-century polemic well but need not be accepted as a wholly accurate account of Irenaeus’s opponents. These teachers may have accepted 616 because they thought that it was the better reading on text-critical grounds or because they believed, like Irenaeus about 666, that 616 could be found “in all the approved and oldest copies” (ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς σπουδαίοις καὶ ἀρχαίοις ἀντιγράφοις; *in omnibus antiquis et probatissimis et ueteribus scripturis*). To read Irenaeus’s polemic in *Haer.* 5.30.1 does not demand that his opponents regard 616 as an easier number to interpret. Rather, Irenaeus objects to both his opponents’ attempts to define the term with certainty and their dissemination of the erroneous number and interpretations through their teachings. Although Irenaeus attributes these mistaken attempts to his opponents’ desire for self-promotion, such psychologizing interpretations of the Irenaeian opponents must be understood within the confines of Second Sophistic rhetoric.<sup>45)</sup>

Second, Irenaeus suggests an alternative reason for why 616 entered the textual tradition. Irenaeus is inclined to think that this happened through

---

44) C. R. Koester, *Revelation*, 534-538, 596-599, 605-606; C. R. Koester, “The Number of the Beast in Revelation 13 in Light of Papyri, Graffiti, and Inscriptions”, 1-21. See also C. R. Koester, “The Antichrist Theme in the Johannine Epistles and Its Role in Christian Tradition”, R. A. Culpepper and P. N. Anderson, eds., *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 189.

45) See further K. Eshelman, *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire: Sophists, Philosophers, and Christians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 104.

scribal error as the middle term in 666 (χξς), ξ (60), was “unfolded” (ἐξαπλουμένου; *expansa*) into ι (10) as in χις (616; *Haer.* 5.30.1). In other words, the root cause of the term’s entry into the textual tradition was due to a scribal error caused by a confusion in the middle term. Irenaeus recognizes that a majuscule Ξ may be easily confused with a capital I when written quickly by hand, particularly in light of the need sometimes to write concisely to fit material within the confines of a particular manuscript. Although Koester acknowledges this explanation for why 616 may have entered the textual tradition, he attributes its preservation and dissemination to the comparative ease that Irenaeus’s opponents had in interpreting 616.<sup>46)</sup> In light of recent scholarship on scribal habits in general and scribes’ activity on Revelation in particular, Irenaeus’s suggestion about confusion deserves more attention.<sup>47)</sup> By appealing to the possibility of a scribal error (γραφικὸν ἁμάρτημα; *scriptorum peccatum*; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.30.1), Irenaeus offers a stronger possibility for how the numerical variant in Revelation 13:18 entered the textual tradition. After two numbers were in the textual tradition, it would be difficult to eradicate the variation. Both readings would continue to spread as scribes copied manuscripts in response to their patrons. If Irenaeus is correct that 666 is earlier than 616, the dissemination of 616 may be due in part to the continued use of teachers, but there is no evidence that indicates 616 was easier to interpret than 666.

## 5. Conclusion

This article has taken up the way in which Irenaeus’s treatment of the variant in Revelation 13:18 has been utilized by Craig Koester in his

46) C. R. Koester, “The Number of the Beast in Revelation 13 in Light of Papyri, Graffiti, and Inscriptions”, 3.

47) On scribal tendencies in the Apocalypse, see J. Hernández, *Scribal Habits and Theological Influences in the Apocalypse: The Singular Readings of Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, and Ephraemi*, WUNT 2.218 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); E. Hixson, *Scribal Habits in Sixth-Century Greek Purple Codices*, NTTSD 61 (Leiden: Brill, 2019); P. Malik, *P. Beatty III (P<sup>17</sup>): The Codex, Its Scribe, and Its Text*, NTTSD 52 (Leiden: Brill, 2017); J. R. Royse, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri*, NTTSD 36 (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

recent scholarship on the number. Koester's commitment to engaging the interpretive history of Revelation 13:18 is to be applauded as is his knowledge of numerical symbolism in the ancient world. Yet his suggestion that Irenaeus's opponents interpreted 616 instead of 666 because they found the former to be easier to interpret does not have a great deal of evidence in its favor. The reception history reveals two examples of how 616 was interpreted. Tyconius interprets 616 visually with reference to how the numerical letters appear to be an abbreviation of the name of Christ. *Liber genealogus* adds the isophenic value of the Latin word, *antichristus*, before multiplying it by four for the number of letters in Nero's name. Both texts draw on earlier sources from within the history of interpretation of Revelation and thereby offer fascinating insights into how Revelation was understood from the Roman imperial period into late antiquity. Yet there is little to suggest that anything like these interpretations are known to Irenaeus at the end of the second century. Irenaeus's mode of calculation is an act of simple addition by gematria. While Irenaeus asserts that some of his opponents preferred 616 because it allowed them to come to an interpretation that they liked, such an assertion psychologizes his opponents and is better understood with reference to ancient polemic instead of textual criticism.

Rather than appealing to the possibility that 616 may have been easier to interpret, contemporary scholars of the text of Revelation would be better served by acknowledging the polemical nature of Irenaeus's work and his concomitant depictions of his opponents. They should instead value the suggestion in *Haer.* 5.30.1 that a scribal error provides a likely reason for the early appearance of the variants 666 and 616, since  $\Xi$  and I might be visually confused by scribes quickly reading manuscripts that contained no spacing between letters. Alongside Irenaeus's well-earned reputation as a biblical theologian and scriptural synthesizer, his grounding in the realities of the textual world of his day reveals knowledge that contemporary scholars of Revelation 13:18 should take seriously. In so doing, textual critics of the New Testament may find that the history of interpretation can shed light on the history of the text as it was known during the Roman imperial and late antique periods.

<Keywords>

History of Interpretation, Irenaeus of Lyons, Craig R. Koester, Number of the Beast, Revelation.

(투고 일자: 2024년 7월 31일, 심사 일자: 2024년 8월 20일, 게재 확정 일자: 2024년 10월 15일)

## &lt;References&gt;

- Almond, P. C., *The Antichrist: A New Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Birdsall, J. N., "Irenaeus and the Number of the Beast: Revelation 13:18", A. Denaux, ed., *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis: Festschrift J. Delobel*, BETL 161, Leuven: Peeters, 2002, 349-359.
- Bodner, K. and Strawn, B. A., "Solomon and 666 (Revelation 13.18)", *NTS* 66 (2020), 299-312.
- Bonwetsch, G. N. and Achelis, H., *Hippolytus Werke I*, 2 vols., GCS 1, Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1897.
- Bovon, F., "Names and Numbers in Early Christianity", *NTS* 47 (2001), 267-288.
- Dearn, A., "Persecution and Donatist Identity in the *Liber genealogus*", H. Amir and B. t. H. Romeny, eds., *From Rome to Constantinople: Studies in Honor of Averil Cameron*, Late Antique History and Religion, Leuven: Peeters, 2007.
- Dulaey, M., *Victorin de Poetovio: Sur l'Apocalypse et autres écrits*, SC 423, Paris: Cerf, 1997.
- Eastman, D. L., *The Many Deaths of Peter and Paul*, OECS, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Eshelman, K., *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire: Sophists, Philosophers, and Christians*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Gonis, N., et al., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, vol. 66, London: Egyptian Exploration Society, 1999.
- Green, R. P. H., *Augustine: De doctrina christiana*, OECT, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Gryson, R., "Les commentaires patristiques latin de l'Apocalypse", *Revue théologique de Louvain* 28 (1997), 305-337, 484-502.
- Gryson, R., *Tyconii Afri Expositio Apocalypseos*, CCSL 107A, Turnhout: Brepols, 2011.
- Gryson, R., *Tyconius: Commentaire de l'Apocalypse*, Corpus Christianorum in Translation 10, Turnhout: Brepols, 2011.
- Gumerlock, F. X., "Nero Antichrist: Patristic Evidence for the Use of Nero's Naming in Calculating the Number of the Beast", *Westminster Theological Journal* 68 (2006), 347-360.

- Gumerlock, F. and Robinson, D. C., *Tyconius: Exposition of the Apocalypse*, Fathers of the Church 134, Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017.
- Hausleiter, J., “Die Kommentare des Victorinus, Tichonius und Hieronymus zur Apokalypse”, *Zeitschrift für kirchliche Wissenschaft und kirchliches Leben* 7 (1886), 239-257.
- Hernández, J., *Scribal Habits and Theological Influences in the Apocalypse: The Singular Readings of Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, and Ephraemi*, WUNT 2.218, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006.
- Hixson, E., *Scribal Habits in Sixth-Century Greek Purple Codices*, NTTSD 61, Leiden: Brill, 2019.
- Hoover, J., “The Apocalyptic Number 616 and the Donatist Church”, *JEH* 72 (2021), 709-725.
- Hoover, J., *The Donatist Church in an Apocalyptic Age*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Karst, J., *Eusebius' Werke: Die Chronik*, GCS 20, Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1911.
- Koester, C. R., *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 38A, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.
- Koester, C. R., “The Antichrist Theme in the Johannine Epistles and Its Role in Christian Tradition”, R. A. Culpepper and P. N. Anderson, eds., *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014, 187-196.
- Koester, C. R., “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.
- Kusio, M., *The Antichrist Tradition in Antiquity: Antimesianism in Second Temple and Early Christian Literature*, WUNT 2.532, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020.
- Lembke, M., et al., *Die Apokalypse: Teststellenkollation und Auswertungen*, Text und Textwert der griechischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments 6, ANTF 49, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017.
- Malik, P., *P. Beatty III (P<sup>47</sup>): The Codex, Its Scribe, and Its Text*, NTTSD 52, Leiden: Brill, 2017.
- McGinn, B., *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- Migne, J. -P., *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 58, Paris: Ateliers catholiques, 1862.

- Minns, D., *Irenaeus: An Introduction*, London: T&T Clark International, 2010.
- Mommsen, T., *Chronica Minora Saec. IV. V. VI. VII*, MGH 9, Berlin: Weidmann, 1892.
- Monceaux, P., *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne depuis les origines jusqu'à l'invasion arabe*, vol. 6, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1922.
- Mounce, R. H., *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., NICNT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Norris, R. A., "Irenaeus of Lyons", F. Young, L. Ayres, and A. Louth, eds., *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 45-52.
- Oort, J. v., "Tyconius' Apocalypse Commentary, Its Reconstruction, and Its Significance for Augustine's Doctrine of the Two Cities", *VC* 72 (2018), 513-532.
- Osborn, E., *Irenaeus of Lyons*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Parker, D. C., "A New Oxyrhynchus Papyrus of Revelation: P<sup>115</sup> (P. Oxy. 4499)", *NTS* 46 (2000), 159-174.
- Poole, K., "The Western Apocalypse Commentary Tradition of the Early Middle Ages", M. A. Ryan, ed., *A Companion to the Premodern Apocalypse*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 103-143.
- Rouse, R. and McNelis, C., "North African Literary Activity: A Cyprian Fragment, the Stichometric Lists and a Donatist Compendium", *Revue d'histoire des textes* 30 (2000), 189-238.
- Rousseau, A., Doutreleau, L., and Mercier, C., *Irénée de Lyon: Contres des Hérésies, Livre V*, SC 153, Paris: Cerf, 1969.
- Royse, J. R., *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri*, NTTSD 36, Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- Vercruyse, J. -M., *Le livre des Règles*, SC 488, Paris: Cerf, 2005.
- Vinzent, M., *Resetting the Origins of Christianity: A New Theory of Sources and Beginnings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.
- Weinrich, W. C., *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, Ancient Christian Texts, Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011.
- Williams, P. J., "P<sup>115</sup> and the Number of the Beast", *TynBul* 58 (2007), 151-153.

<Abstract>

**Accounting for 616:  
Thinking with Irenaeus, Craig Koester, and  
Interpreters from Late Antiquity**

Jonathon Lookadoo  
(Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary)

This article explores one element of the history of interpretation for the number of the beast in Revelation 13:18. Although most manuscripts have accepted 666 as the number written by John the Seer, the number 616 was in circulation as a variant by at least the late second century. Irenaeus of Lyons knew the variant and insisted that 666 was the reading accepted by the best manuscripts of the day. In the last decade, Craig Koester has utilized Irenaeus's comments in his analysis of the history of interpretation, consideration of what the earliest number might be, and reflection on how the number came into existence. This article engages with the last point, namely, Koester's use of Irenaeus as a way to think about how 616 entered into the textual tradition of Revelation.

Koester understands Irenaeus's claim that some of his second-century opponents wrongly interpreted the number as 616 to provide evidence that at least some in the second century found 616 to be the easier of the two readings. 666 would thus be the *lectio difficilior*. By engaging other interpretations of 616 evident in late antiquity, this article casts doubt on such an interpretation. Tyconius of Carthage employs visual exegesis to interpret a numerical abbreviation of 616 as a pictogram for the antichrist. The fifth-century *Liber genealogus* utilizes gematria, but the calculations in the *Liber* involve a step of multiplication that is unlikely to have been known to Irenaeus. While these two readings do not rule out the possibility that some second-century interpreters found 616 to be easier to interpret, they cast doubt on the likelihood that Irenaeus knew the methodologies found therein.

A better interpretation of Irenaeus's words recognizes the polemical nature of Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses*. The requirements of polemic in

the Second Sophistic do not necessitate a positive evaluation of one's opponents' motives. In addition, Irenaeus makes another claim for how 616 may have entered the textual tradition that is too often overlooked by interpreters, namely, that a scribal error in the middle term of the numerical abbreviation may be to blame for the discrepancy between 666 and 616. While Irenaeus asserts that 666 is earlier reading — something that remains disputed — this exploration of the history of interpretation maintains the plausibility of Irenaeus's text-critical suggestion while also demonstrating the value of careful attention to the interpretive history of a text when considering how variants came into existence.