

# Book of Seven Seals

The Peculiarity of Revelation, its Manuscripts,  
Attestation, and Transmission

Edited by

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## Table of Contents

Preface .....	V
---------------	---

*Thomas J. Kraus*

Introduction .....	1
--------------------	---

### Part One

#### The Peculiarity of Majuscules and Minuscules

*Giovanni Bazzana*

“Write in a Book What You See and Send It to the Seven Assemblies”. Ancient Reading Practices and the Earliest Papyri of Revelation.....	11
---	----

*Jeff Cate*

The Curious Case of Ϟ <sup>43</sup> . Another New Testament Opisthograph?.....	33
--	----

*Thomas J. Kraus*

‘When symbols and figures become physical objects’. Critical notes about some of the “consistently cited witnesses” to the text of Revelation.....	51
--	----

*Jeff Cate*

Sisters Separated from Birth. An Examination of 792 and 2643 as Private Miniature Manuscripts.....	71
---	----

### Part Two

#### The Peculiarity of Reception

*Tobias Nicklas*

Christliche Apokalypsen in Ägypten vor Konstantin. Kanon, Autorität, kontextuelle Funktion .....	95
---	----

*Lincoln H. Blumell and Thomas A. Wayment*

The ‘Number of the Beast’. Revelation 13:18 and Early Christian Isopsephies .....	119
--	-----

*Martin Meiser*

Before Canonisation. Early Attestation of Revelation ..... 137

*Michael J. Kruger*

The Reception of the Book of Revelation in the Early Church ..... 159

*Michael Sommer*

What do Revelation's handwritings tell us about its post-canonical role and function in the Bible? 'Work in progress' ..... 175

### Part Three

### The Peculiarities and Miscellaneous

*Markus Lembke*

Besonderheiten der griechischen Überlieferung der Offenbarung und ihre Auswirkungen auf die Textkritik ..... 201

*Ulrich B. Schmid*

Editing the Apocalypse in the twenty-first century ..... 231

*Scott Charlesworth*

The Heavenly Jesus Reinterprets Daniel. The Apocalypse as Corrective for the Olivet Discourse ..... 241

Primary Sources ..... 263

Subject Index ..... 271

# The 'Number of the Beast'

## Revelation 13:18 and Early Christian Isopsephies

*Lincoln H. Blumell and Thomas A. Wayment*

The Book of Revelation contains a single example of a Christian isopsephy at Rev 13:18 where the author warns, 'it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.' The verse preserves what appears to be a loosely adaptable formula 'ὁ ἀριθμὸς αὐτοῦ' that is present in a number of other examples of isopsephy, both Christian and non-Christian. In mentioning that the isopsephy is a 'number' (ἀριθμὸς) the author has emphasized what in literary and documentary texts is achieved simply by writing a line above a letter combination, and thus has attempted to obviate what was already quite apparent. A supralinear stroke above the three letters would clarify the fact that χξξ (Rev 13:18) was intentionally a number, while the reliance upon an introductory formula for expressing isopsephy raises the question of purpose regarding why an isopsephy was utilized rather than the author openly expressing the intended name.

In Christian literary works, numerals are typically abbreviated with a supralinear stroke to indicate to the reader that a number was intended rather than a contracted noun while *nomina sacra* are written in identical fashion, the primary difference is that numbers usually appear in proper order: the largest number first followed by the next largest and so on, e.g. τμη = 300 + 10 + 8.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Christian 'sacred names' and terms, the *nomina sacra*, were also abbreviated in the first couple centuries by suspension where the first two letters were preserved and then later by contraction where the first letter and the case endings were preserved and marked with a supralinear stroke in the same way a number would be indicated.<sup>2</sup> From the surviving evidence it appears that Christian abbreviations of sacred names, in part,

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<sup>1</sup> A. BLANCHARD, Sigles et abbreviations dans les papyrus documentaires grecs. Recherches de paléographie, Bulletin of the Institute for Classical Studies Supplement 30, London 1974, 3 notes differences between numbers and abbreviations listed by supralinear stroke.

<sup>2</sup> M. AVI-YONAH, Abbreviations in Greek. Inscriptions, Papyri, Manuscripts and Early Printed Books, Chicago 1974, 29–39 for a list of abbreviations noted by supralinear stroke; repr. of Abbreviations in Greek Inscriptions (The Near East, 200 B.C.–A.D. 1100, London 1940).

follow the traditional practice of noting numbers in Greek literary works.<sup>3</sup> However, Eric Turner has noted one difference that Christian literary practice seems to prefer abbreviation of larger numbers whereas non-Christian literary texts frequently prefer to write out the entire number.<sup>4</sup>

Important to this inquiry are the presence of isopsephies in Christian literary and documentary texts. François Bovon's intriguing study of biblical names and numbers seeks to both encourage the conversation regarding the function of Christian isopsephy as a means of spiritual or community self-actualization and a call to reconsider this medium as an alternate means of in-group communication.<sup>5</sup> One aspect of Bovon's study that is particularly relevant, especially in light of the recent discovery of an early Christian isopsephy in a graffito at Smyrna (discussed below), is his contention that: 'The mystical or symbolic use of numbers probably did not belong to the elementary doctrinal and ethical teaching of the first Christian communities.'<sup>6</sup> It therefore seems prudent to take another look at the earliest Christian isopsephies, particularly from the first few centuries, with a particular emphasis on the function that this form of communication achieved in various Christian communities.

## 1 Isopsephy

To begin, an isopsephy (ισόψηφος), which literally means 'equal number of votes' or 'equal in numerical value' (derived from the Greek ψῆφος: 'pebble' or 'vote' and ἴσος 'equal') was a term used to describe the ancient practice of calculating the numerical value of a name, word, or short phrase based on the values of the constituent letters and finding another letter combination

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<sup>3</sup> L.W. HURTADO, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts. Manuscripts and Christian Origins*, Grand Rapids 2006, 112–116. Hurtado offers the interesting thesis that the supralinear stroke indicates the origin of the *nomina sacra* as a numeric notation to convey the name Jesus (Ιη̅=18) and that later other names were abbreviated in similar fashion modeled on the name Jesus, which was originally contracted through suspension.

<sup>4</sup> E. TURNER, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World*. Second edition revised and enlarged by P.J. Parsons. London 1987, 15. NA<sup>28</sup> lists Ϡ<sup>47</sup> 046 0151 1611 2329 2377 as abbreviating the number while the greater number of witnesses write out the number (with variants) in full.

<sup>5</sup> F. BOVON, *Names and Numbers in Early Christianity*, in: NTS 47 (2001), 267–88; repr. *New Testament and Christian Apocrypha. Collected Studies II*, WUNT I 237, Tübingen 2009, 16–36. The article was originally delivered as the Presidential address of SNTS Tel Aviv, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> BOVON, *Names* (n. 5), 281.

(either a name, word, or phrase) that shared the same numeric value.<sup>7</sup> Thus an arithmetic association, and often even an deeper, even esoteric association, was sometimes established between the two words or phrases.<sup>8</sup> Aside from Rev 13:18, quite possibly the most famous ancient example of isopsephy from the first century is found in Suetonius where he reports that the following 'new calculation' (νεόψηφος) began to circulate in Rome during Nero's reign: 'A calculation new: Nero his mother slew' (νεόψηφον Νέρων ἰδίαν μητέρα ἀπέκτεινε).<sup>9</sup> As the name 'Nero' carried the numeric value 1005 (Νερω̅ν = ν = 50 + ε = 5 + ρ = 100 ω = 800 + ν = 50), as did the phrase 'his mother slew' (ἰδίαν = 75 + μητέρα = 454 + ἀπέκτεινε = 476), this 'new' isopsephy had the effect that it lent credence to the popular belief that Nero was actually responsible for his mother's death.

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<sup>7</sup> The numeric system with the widest usage among Greeks of the first few centuries CE was the Milesian number system where each letter was assigned a numeric value. Individual letters represented numeric values from the ones, tens, and hundreds and because Greek only had twenty-four letters three additional letters were employed to complete the system; there was no letter for zero. While it was typical for a number to be written in descending order, since this numeric system was not positional (as is our present system) the same number could be written in different ways. For an in-depth explanation of the Milesian system see T. L. HEATH, *A Manual of Greek Mathematics*, Oxford 1932.

For useful surveys of the phenomenon of isopsephy in antiquity see: P. PERDRIZERT, *Isopsépie*, in: REG 17 (1904), 350–360; F. DORNSEIFF, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*, Leipzig 1922, 96–106; H. LECLERCQ, *Isopsépie*, in: DACL 7.1 (1926), 1603–1606; S.R. LLEWELYN, *The Christian Symbol ΧΜΓ. An Acrostic or an Isopsephism?*, in: NewDocs 8 (1998), 156–168; D.K. PSYCHOYOS, *The Forgotten Art of Isopsephy and the Magic Number KZ*, in: *Semiotica* 154 (2005), 157–224. Also useful is S. ANDRZEJ, *L'isopsépie des abréviations Byzantines, une solution pour une inscription de Kh. 'Aïn Fattir*, in: RB 102 (1995), 242–254. But in this article the author seemingly conflates the phenomenon of isopsephy with that of acrostics as he refers to the letter combination εμ, for which he gives the interpretation Ἰ(ησοῦς) Ἐ(μμανουήλ) Μ(αριας) ("Jesus, Immanuel of Mary"), as an isopsephy. But it is clearly an acrostic and the letter combination εμ prohibits it from being taken as a number, and thus an isopsephy.

<sup>8</sup> Today this is often associated, or even called, "gematria," but the Hebrew word that serves as the basis for this term was not coined until the sixth or seventh century. See J. KALVESMAKI, *The Theology of Arithmetic. Number Symbolism in Platonism and Early Christianity*, Cambridge/London 2013, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Suetonius, Nero 39.2. The MSS νεόψηφον should be corrected to ισόψηφον.

Table 1: Table of Greek Numbers

$\alpha = 1$	$\kappa = 20$	$\tau = 300$	'Δ = 4000
$\beta = 2$	$\lambda = 30$	$\upsilon = 400$	'Ε = 5000
$\gamma = 3$	$\mu = 40$	$\varphi = 500$	Etc.
$\delta = 4$	$\nu = 50$	$\chi = 600$	
$\epsilon = 5$	$\xi = 60$	$\psi = 700$	
$\zeta = 6$	$\omicron = 70$	$\omega = 800$	*ζ – στίγμα
$\zeta = 7$	$\pi = 80$	$\aleph = 900$	*ρ or ζ – κόππα
$\eta = 8$	*ρ or ζ = 90	'Α = 1000	*λ – σαμπῖ
$\theta = 9$	$\rho = 100$	'Β = 2000	
$\iota = 10$	$\sigma = 200$	'Γ = 3000	

Eg. νγ = 53; ρπη = 188; λρζ = 996; 'Βφλδ = 2534

As is evidenced by this reference in Suetonius the practice of equating two different terms or phrases based on their numerical equivalent existed before Christians first employed this device. In the first few centuries non-Christian isopsephies are attested in a wide variety of contexts from graffiti, to formal inscriptions, to literary examples like the kind preserved by Suetonius, to papyrological examples. Though these isopsephies were employed for a variety of purposes that ranged from an erudite play on words to a legitimate exegetical tool to uncover the deeper meaning of a passage to an instrument in divination, in many cases isopsephy was employed to surreptitiously veil a referent and it was used explicitly as a cipher.<sup>10</sup> In various graffiti from Smyrna to Pompeii, which formulaically parallel the isopsephy of Rev 13:18 (ὁ ἀριθμὸς αὐτοῦ), are examples in which an individual refers to his lover, or simply a loved one, by a cryptic reference to the quantitative total of the person's name: φιλω ἧς ὀριθμὸς (l. ἀριθμὸς) 'Ατη 'I love her whose number is 1,308' and φιλω ἧς ὁ ἀριθμὸς[ζ] 'ψλα 'I love her whose number is 731.'<sup>11</sup> Likewise, in an epitaph from Mylasa in Asia Minor, a husband identifies his wife through the use of an isopsephy: [...] γρ(αμματεὺς) Ἀπολλώνιος Πτολεμαίου ἐμνήσθη τῆς συνβίου ἧς ὁ ἀριθμὸς 'Αξε ' [...] The scribe Apollonius, son of Ptolemy, commemorates his wife whose number is 1,065.'<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For a useful discussion of word/number encryption see A. MENCHETTI, Words in Cipher in the Ostraka from Medinet Madi, in: EVO 28 (2005), 237–243.

<sup>11</sup> The two examples are taken from R.S. BAGNALL, *Everyday Writing in the Græco-Roman East*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2011, 14. For the first isopsephy Bagnall notes that the name of the woman, whose name equals 1,308, is almost certainly Tyche since, it was a common woman's name and readily lends itself as the only possibility. In the second example Bagnall suspects that the name that equals 731 is Anthousa. Cf. J. ROBERT/L. ROBERT, *Bulletin Épigraphique*, in: REG 89 (1976), 592 no. 813 with examples from Pompeii.

<sup>12</sup> I.Mylasa 227.6–9; cf. J. ROBERT/L. ROBERT, *Bulletin Épigraphique*, in: REG 77 (1964), 255 no. 618.



Along these lines the *Life of Alexander the Great*<sup>13</sup> preserves an account of an oracle given to Alexander while in Egypt where the god Sarapis only makes himself known through the isopsephy 592.<sup>14</sup>

Continuing with the subject of names and isopsephies, there are also instances where isopsephies were used to create a comparison between a particular name and an epithet that carried the same numeric value. In O.Claud. II 414.1–2, from the second or third century CE, a man named Kallistos is called 'the comeliest man' because his name (Κάλλιστος) and the phrase (ὁ εὐειδῆς ἀνὴρ) both equaled 861 (ὠξα).<sup>15</sup> Even the names of divinities and more abstract entities were sometimes linked to a particular attribute because their name shared an isopsephic equivalent. Thus, there is a report in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* that Egyptian priests in Seyene equated the 'Nile' (Νεῖλος) with the regulation of the annual year since the name was numerically equivalent to 365.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in an inscription from Hieria Sykaminos, Sarapis and Isis 'all beautiful' are inextricably linked because both names equal 662.<sup>17</sup>

On this front, the evidence of P.Oxy XLV 3239 from the second century CE is intriguing. Originally identified as some kind of 'alphabetic glossar',<sup>18</sup> it has since been identified as a table, in alphabetical order, of isopsephies.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Both the authorship and date of this work are uncertain. Periodically the author is referred to as Pseudo-Callisthenes.

<sup>14</sup> *Historia Alexandri Magni* 1.33.11: πείσω δὲ Ἀλέξανδρε τίς πέφυκ' ἐγώ· δις ἑκατὸν ἤδη καὶ μίαν ψῆφον σύνθεος, εἴθ' ἑκατὸν ἄλλας καὶ μίαν, τετράκις εἴκοσι καὶ δέκα, λαβὼν δὲ πρῶτον γράμμα ποιήσον ἔσχατον· καὶ τότε νοήσεις, τίς πέφυκ' ἐγὼ θεός. ("Hear, Alexander, who I am: two times one hundred and a one put together, then another hundred and one, four times twenty and ten, then take the first letter and put it last, and then you will know what god I am"). I.e. ΣΑΡΑΠΙΣ = 592. Greek text taken from G. KROLL, *Historia Alexandri Magni*. Pseudo-Callisthenes, vol. I recensio vetusta, Berlin 1926.

<sup>15</sup> There is certainly a play on the name Κάλλιστος with this isopsephy because the name literally means "most beautiful" or "most seemly."

<sup>16</sup> Aeth. 9.22.6: [...] εἶναι τὸν Νεῖλον, τοῦτο καὶ τῆς προσηγορίας ἐκβεβαιουμένης (τῶν γοῶν κατὰ τοῦνομα στοιχείων εἰς ψήφους μεταλαμβανομένων, πέντε καὶ ἐξήκοντα καὶ τριακόσιαι μονάδες, ὅσαι καὶ τοῦ ἔτους ἡμέραι, συναχθήσονται) ("... the Nile, they said, is actually the year incarnate, as is confirmed by its name – for if the letters in its name are converted to numerals, they will total 365, the number of the days in the year"). It may also be noted here that the name Abrasax, or Abraxas, (sp. Ἀβρασάξ and Ἀβράξας), a popular name of power among Gnostics, was associated with the days of the year, and consequently regarded as a power encompassing the universe, because the name had the numeric value 365. In PGM 8.61 Abrasax is simply referred to by the number 365 (τξε); cf. Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.26.6.

<sup>17</sup> SB V 8539.1–2 (Hieria Sykaminos; date ?): ὁ Σάραπισ χξβ' | Ἴσ(ις) πάνκαλος χξβ' ("Sarapis equals 662; Is(is) all beautiful equals 662").

<sup>18</sup> P.Oxy XLV p. 90.

<sup>19</sup> T.C. SKEAT, A Table of Isopsephisms. P. Oxy XLV. 3239, in: ZPE 31 (1978), 45–54.

The isopsephies on the table range from the banal and seemingly antiquarian where it is simply noted that two terms, related or otherwise, carry the same numeric value, to the more religious where a god or goddess is equated with a divine attribute that bears the same numerical equivalent as their name.<sup>20</sup> In a later table of isopsephies from the fifth century, where Christian authorship can be easily established since some of the isopsephies are derived from the numeric values of ‘God,’ ‘Paul,’ ‘Menas,’ and ‘Passover,’ it is interesting that a couple of the isopsephies from the earlier table of the second century are employed.<sup>21</sup> This is not to imply that the Christian author of this table was directly reliant upon the earlier table but that the author was aware of the wider phenomenon of isopsephy and was influenced by it. Therefore, as one turns to the earliest Christian examples of isopsephy, it should come as no surprise to see Christians employing this device in similar ways as their non-Christian counterparts and to see it often used as a form of cryptic communication for those in the ‘know’ or to understand it as a source of authoritative legitimization. With this broader context in mind, it is now possible to consider the isopsephy of Rev 13:18 and some other early Christian examples.

## 2 The case of Revelation 13:18

The New Testament preserves a single overt instance of Christian isopsephy as well as an example of what later came to be called gematria: the structuring of Matthew’s genealogy based on the numeric value of David’s name in Hebrew is an example of gematria (Mt 1:1, 17), the numbering/naming of the beast in Rev 13:18 is an example of isopsephy.<sup>22</sup> Although the author of the Gospel of Matthew appears to offer a fairly transparent structuring of Jesus’ genealogy based on the numerical value of David’s name (*dalet* = 4, *vav* = 6, *dalet* = 4), it is not entirely certain for what purpose he did so.<sup>23</sup> A

<sup>20</sup> P.Oxy XLV 3239: i.1, ἄμπελος αἰεὶ οἶνος (426); i.8, βουὴς ἄρουρα (672); i.11, Διόνυσος ἡδονὴ θεῶν (1004); ii.21, Ἰσὶς μεγάλη ἐλπὶς (420); ii.31, ὁ Σαρᾶπις Ἀλεξάνδρειαν κοσμεῖ (662).

<sup>21</sup> T. C. SKEAT, A Greek Mathematical Tablet, in: Mizraim 3 (1936), 23–25; cf. SKEAT, Isopsephisms, 56–48: 1.1, θεός· ἄγιος· εἰσόψηφον (284); 1.2, Παῦλος· σοφία· εἰσόψηφον (781); 1.5, Μηνᾶ· ἀμὴν· εἰσόψηφον (99); 1.13, Πάσχα· ἡ καλὴ ζωὴ· εἰσόψηφον (882).

<sup>22</sup> The use of David’s name in structuring Matthew’s genealogy is more properly a gematria, where the number of a noun, either within the text or external to it, is the key to understanding its structure or meaning. An isopsephy is more properly understood as an encoded phrase, name, or idea that is conveyed numerically rather than literarily.

<sup>23</sup> G. L. BOX, The Gospel Narratives of the Nativity and the Alleged Influences of Heathen Ideas, in: ZNW 6 (1905), 80–81; H. C. WAETJEN, Genealogy as the Key to the Gospel according to Matthew, in: JBL 95 (1976), 209–10.

number of exegetes have suggested that gematria played a role in the use of the number fourteen, but there is some doubt, for example, as to why the final grouping of fourteen names consists of only thirteen.<sup>24</sup> Despite the differences in opinion as to both the origin of the number fourteen as a symbolic structuring element and the reason for selecting it, it is certain that the numeric value of David's name has shaped the way that the author of Matthew has presented the genealogy.<sup>25</sup>

With the number of the beast recorded in Rev 13:18, Christian use of isopsephy is more overt. In Rev 13:18, the author connects 'a man' with a specific number '666.'<sup>26</sup> A variant of the number 666 in P.Oxy LXVI 4499, which reads 616, raises questions regarding whether the variant text preserves an earlier reading or whether it arose as a result of Christians attempting to decipher precisely who or what was intended with 666.<sup>27</sup> Irenaeus, already in the second century CE, knew of the variant 616 and conjectured the origin of the variant 616 as a visual scribal confusion between the letters ι and ξ.<sup>28</sup> A visual copying error would, perhaps, account for the reading of miniscule 2344 (665), where a Greek scribe would have confused ε for ζ, i.e. proximate numbers, but in the case of 616 and 666 and the shift from ι to ξ, it seems unlikely that a visual error could account for the difference.<sup>29</sup> The majority of early manuscripts confirm the reading 666 (Ⲣ<sup>47</sup>, Ⲙ, A, 104, Sa).<sup>30</sup>

For the purposes of this study, the manuscript evidence is less important than the function of isopsephy, particularly in cases where Christians were the intended audience and where there is clear evidence of continued usage by Christians. O.H. Lehmann's thesis, that Christian number speculation became a means of community differentiation from Jews and perhaps even from other Christian communities, characterizes the evidence relating to the

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the matter, see R.E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Garden City 1977, 74–81, esp. 80 n. 38. Cf. WAETJEN, *Genealogy* (n. 23), 210.

<sup>25</sup> O. RÜHLE, "ἀριθμῶ, ἀριθμός," in: TDNT 1, 461 sees the only instance of "gematria" in the New Testament as Rev 22:18. Given Rühle's interpretation of gematria as a means of re-describing a past event with Christian significance, and Christianity as a community that saw itself as the fulfillment of Old Testament expectation, one would expect that Mt 1:1–17 would be included. Mt 1:1–17 in Rühle's estimation likely fails to qualify because it is not a "predominantly formal" symbol (1.462).

<sup>26</sup> See A. DEISSMANN, *Light from the Ancient East*. rev. ed., Londin 1927, repr. Grand Rapids 1978, 277.

<sup>27</sup> J. CHAPA, 4499. *Revelation*, in: N. Gonis et al. (ed.), *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri LXVI*, London 1999, 10–34; Ephraemi Rescriptus (C) and 11 also contain the reading 616 ἐξακόσια δέκα ἕξ.

<sup>28</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.30.1.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of the manuscript evidence, see R. BAUCKHAM, *The Climax of Prophecy*. *Studies on the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh 1993, 384–88.

<sup>30</sup> Ⲣ<sup>47</sup> and Sa 42 contain the abbreviated number ⲭⲗⲗⲥ; Ⲙ, A, and Sahidic manuscripts 654, 656, 658 and 659 spell out the complete number ἐξακόσιοι ἑξήκοντα ἕξ.

number of the beast in Revelation.<sup>31</sup> To discern the ways Christians used and speculated concerning 666 in Rev 13:18, Hippolytus' discussion is both characteristic and instructive. He argues that the names Euanthas (Εὐάνθαζ), Lateinos (Λατεινος), and Teitan (Τειτάν) could all reasonably explain what the author of Revelation had in mind because the numeric equivalent of each is 666.<sup>32</sup> Two of the names (Lateinos and Euanthas) given are unattested in Greek literature (aside from Hippolytus), and Hippolytus does not provide any context wherein the reader might understand how he had arrived at his calculations for discovering the identity of the 666 figure.<sup>33</sup> What seems to matter to Hippolytus is that the isopsephy has potentially been unraveled.<sup>34</sup> This in turn suggests that in the isopsephy he saw a literal interpretation in a person (Euanthas or Teitan) or in an entity (Lateinos).<sup>35</sup> Hippolytus was followed by and expanded upon by subsequent Christian authors who sought an explanation to the isopsephy.<sup>36</sup>

Victorinus of Poetovio, writing in the second half of the third century, represents another strand of Christian thinking on the isopsephy 666. In his commentary on the apocalypse, he asserts that the emperor Nero is the beast of Revelation and also mentions the name Teitan following Hippolytus in addition to suggesting Antemos and Genserikos.<sup>37</sup> Victorinus may have

<sup>31</sup> O.H. LEHMANN, *Number-Symbolism as a Vehicle of Religious Experience in the Gospels, Contemporary Rabbinic Literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, in: SP IV (1961), 125–35.

<sup>32</sup> Hippolytus, *Antichr.* 50. Hippolytus specifically referred to the number (666) as an isopsephy (πολλά γὰρ εὐρίσκομεν ὀνόματα τούτω τῷ ἀριθμῷ ἰσόψηφα περιεχόμενα). Andreas is obviously dependent on Hippolytus (*Comm. Apoc.* 38.13,18.12). Neophytus Inklusos (*Pan. Biblos* 9.563) adds Benedictos to the list of possible candidates (Ἐρμηνεῖα· Εὐανθάς, Τειτάν, Λατεινος, Βενέδικτος· ἕκαστον τούτων τῶν ὀνομάτων ἀποσφάζει τὸ ψῆφος τῶν ἑξακοσίων ξξ'). Bagnall's anecdotal discussion of Christian isopsephy contains an interesting account of deciphering two different isopsephies, "How hard were these names to figure out? Not very, I would guess. Tyche I deduced easily.... Anthousa was quite a bit harder; it came to me lying in bed in the morning in Izmir, halfway between sleep and wakefulness." *Everyday Writing*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> The name Εὐάνθηζ and Εὐάνθος are attested but would not add up to the required 666.

<sup>34</sup> The name Teitan is attested in the first century: P.Mich XV 694 (48 CE); P.Alex. 9 (first century CE); P.Oxy LVIII 3915 (7–8 September 30 CE).

<sup>35</sup> C.H. ROBERTS, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt*. The Schweich Lectures 1977, London 1979, 37 discusses number symbolism as one reason for the development of the *nomina sacra*.

<sup>36</sup> Nicetas David, *Orations ii de fine mundi* 2.8 τὸ τοῦ θηρίου ὄνομα ἐν τέτρασιν ἐρμῆνευσαν μεταβολαῖς· Βενεδίκτος, Λεατῖνος, Τειτάν, Σαράπιδος, ὃ ἐστὶν ἀρνοῦμαι· ὃν ὁ ἀριθμὸς ψῆφον ἔχει χξξ'; Oecumenius, *Comm. Apocalypse* 158.1 ἄλλα μὲν πολλὰ κύρια τε καὶ προσηγορικὰ ὀνόματα, σημαίνει δὲ καὶ ταῦτα· κύρια μὲν Λαμπέτις, Βενέδικτος, Τιτάν. τὸ μὲν γὰρ Τιτάν διὰ τοῦ ἰ γράφεται, ἐνὶ δὲ καὶ δίφθογγον αὐτὸ γράψαι. εἰ γὰρ ἀπὸ τῆς τεύσεως ὁ Τειτάν, ἔστι δὲ τὸ ῥῆμα, τείνω.

<sup>37</sup> In *Apoclypsin* 13.2, 3; PL Suppl. 1, 110 (dated to 330 CE).

been encouraged to see Nero as the decipherment of 666 because Roman authors described Nero in ways that were reminiscent of the way the beast is depicted in Revelation 13.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Sulpicius Severus and Commodian both present the Nero *redivivus* myth in terminology reminiscent of Rev 13:3, 14–15.<sup>39</sup>

Fascination with the Nero interpretation can be seen in the proliferation of studies dedicated to Nero as 666 or to the *redivivus* myth.<sup>40</sup> Even though the explanation of Nero as 666 seems more credible than the identifications of Hippolytus and his successors, the purpose of the isopsephy in Rev 13:18 is maintained with either explanation. Returning to Bovon's study, he argues that passages such as Wisdom of Solomon 11:20 interpret and elucidate Christian number speculation in ways that encourage practices similar to what occurs in Rev 13:18. In the Wisdom of Solomon, the anonymous author advocates the ideal that God ordered the universe according to 'measure, number, and weight' (Wis 11:20: μέτρον καὶ ἀριθμῶ καὶ σταθμῶ), which may have encouraged Christian authors to find numerical connections in literary texts that would explain the numbering of the universe.<sup>41</sup> In the case of Rev 13:18, Christian authors sought to explain the deeper meaning of the person or entity who opposed God's creation: whether that was a person like Nero or some other hidden word like *Lateinos*. It is clear enough that later Christian authors thought the number communicated something of importance to them, something that could and should be understood, and that while the original meaning may have been lost, it was incumbent upon them to unravel the isopsephy. This explanation accounts well for second-century

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Jerome, *Commentarium on Daniel II. 28/30; Epistulae* 121.11, who comments on Nero's impact on Christianity.

<sup>39</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *Chronica* 28–29; *Dialogi* 2.14; Commodian, *Instructiones* 41; *Carmen de duobus populis* 823–936. Discussed in B. MCGINN, *Antichrist. Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*, New York 1994, 65–66. Cf. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 4.38 who describes Nero as a "beast" (θηρίον).

<sup>40</sup> F. BENARY, *Interpretation of the Number 666 (χξξ) in the Apocalypse (13:18) and the Various Reading (χις)*, in: *BSTR* 1 (1844), 84–86; G.A. VAN DEN BERGH VAN EYSINGA, *Die in der Apokalypse bekämpfte Gnosis*, in: *ZNW* 13 (1912), 293–305; R. H. CHARLES, *The Antichrist, Beliar, and Neronic Myths, and Their Ultimate Fusion in Early Christian Literature*, in: *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols., London 1920; E. STAUFFER, 666, in: *ConNT* 11 (1947), 237–241; J. GAGÉ, *Commodien et le moment millénariste du IIIe siècle. 258–262 ap. J.-C.*, in: *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 41 (1961), 355–378; D. R. HILLERS, *Revelation 13:18 and a Scroll from Murabba'at*, in: *BASOR* 170 (1963), 65; W. C. WATT, 666, in: *Semiotica* 77 (1989), 369–392; J.-M. POINSOTTE, *Un Nero Redivivus chez un poète apocalyptique du IIIe siècle. Commodien*, in: *Neronia V* (1999), 210–213; discussed in E. CHAMPLIN, *Nero*, Cambridge/London 2003, 19–21; A. VALDEZ, *El Número 666 y Las Doce Tribus de Israel*, in: *RevBib* 68 (2006), 191–214.

<sup>41</sup> BOVON, *Names* (n. 5), 276–280.

and later Christian number speculation when Christians began to seek to explain the number of the beast of Revelation.

The principal example of second-century Christian literary isopsephy is perhaps *Epistle of Barnabas* 9.7–8, where the pseudonymous author sees in Gen 14:14 and the number of servants in Abram’s household (318) a type of Jesus Christ.<sup>42</sup> John Bowker interprets the Christian speculation of Gen 14:14 as a response to an already established Jewish tradition of interpreting the number 318.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, there is a significant tradition of interpreting Gen 14:14 and the number 318 in Jewish literature.<sup>44</sup> While Bowker sees a Jewish explanation for the developing tradition of Christian number speculation with respect to Genesis in particular, others have seen Gnosticism as a source of explaining other Christian isopsephies.<sup>45</sup> For example, a thriving tradition surrounding the name of Jesus (=888) arose already in the second century, which Bovon attributes to the Valentinian Markus the Magician.<sup>46</sup> Jesus’ name was also the subject of interest to other Christians besides the Valentinians. For example, the number is mentioned several times in Book One of the Sibylline Oracles,<sup>47</sup> thus one might conclude that the practice was not exclusive to a single Christian tradition.

<sup>42</sup> See also Clement, *Strom.* 6.278. For a different opinion, see R. HVALVIK, *Barnabas* 9.7–9 and the Author’s Supposed Use of Gematria, in: *NTS* 33 (1987), 276–282.

<sup>43</sup> J. BOWKER, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature. An Introduction to Jewish Interpretation of Scripture*, Cambridge 1969, 195.

<sup>44</sup> *bNed* 32a; *GenR* 43,2; 44,9; *LevR* 28,4. The story of Papyrus Yale 1 (c. 90 CE and containing Gen 14:5–8, 12–15) is insightful in this respect. The codex may have been copied by a Christian scribe, a hypothesis that is based on the presence of abbreviated numbers in the text. The fragment has been of some interest because it perhaps preserves an artifact associated with the interpretation of the number 318. See C. BRADFORD WELLES, *The Yale Genesis Fragment*, in: *YULG* 39 (1964), 1.1–8; C.H. ROBERTS, *P. Yale 1 and the early Christian Book*, in: R. O. Fink et al (ed.), *Essays in Honor of C. Bradford Welles, American Studies in Papyrology* 1, New Haven/Toronto 1966, 25–28; J.F. OATES/A.E. SAMUEL/C. BRADFORD WELLES (eds.), *Yale Papyri in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, American Studies in Papyrology*, New Haven 1967, 1:3–8; T.E. SCHMIDT, *The Letter Tau as the Cross. Ornament and Content in Hebrews 2.14*, in: *Bib* 76 (1995), 75–84.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.14–16; 2.20–8.

<sup>46</sup> BOVON, *Names* (n. 5), 270.

<sup>47</sup> *Sib. Or.* 1.324–330: δὴ τότε καὶ μέγαλοιο θεοῦ παῖς ἀνθρώποισιν ἤξει σαρκοφόρος θνητοῖς ὁμοιούμενος ἐν γῆ, τέσσαρα φωνήεντα φέρων, τὸ δ’ ἄφωνον ἐν αὐτῷ δισσόν· ἐγὼ δὲ κέ τοι ἀριθμόν γ’ ὅλον ἐξονομήνω· ὀκτῶ γὰρ μονάδας, τόσσας δεκάδας δ’ ἐπὶ ταύταις ἠδ’ ἑκατοντάδας ὀκτῶ ἀπιστοκόροις ἀνθρώποις οὖνομα δηλώσει· σὺ δ’ ἐνὶ φρεσὶ σῆσι νόησον ἀθανάτοιο θεοῦ Χριστὸν παῖδ’ ὑψίστοιο. (“Then indeed the son of the great God will come, incarnate, likened to mortal men on earth, bearing four vowels, and the consonants in him are two. I will state explicitly the entire number for you. For eight units, and equal number of tens in addition to these, And eight hundreds will reveal the name to men who are sated with faithlessness”). Translation taken from J. J. COLLINS, *Sibylline Oracles*, in: *OTP* 1.342. Cf. *Sib. Or.* 5.12–15; 7.139–40; 8.145, 218–50.

The purpose in surveying these examples and traditions is not to attempt to trace their origins to a single source, whether it be Gnostic, as a response to Judaism, or mainstream Christian thinkers. Rather it is to demonstrate the widespread practice of encoding numbers or discovering encoded numbers in the body of Christian literary texts.<sup>48</sup> In each of these examples of Christian isopsephy, the author appears to intentionally convey a concept that is at first hidden but then ultimately discernable to those within the tradition. Not long after the writing of Revelation, Christians began to convey their own discoveries as to the meaning of 666. Similarly, the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* shared his own interpretation of number symbolism in Genesis, conveying a type of in-group mentality that both differentiates his own thinking from Judaism, and re-presents the stories in a new light.<sup>49</sup>

### 3 Early Christian Isopsephies

Moving beyond the New Testament, the earliest example of a Christian grafitto written as an isopsephy comes from Smyrna at the beginning of the second century (c. 125 CE) where a numerological equivalent is made between 'Lord' (κύριος) and 'faith' (πίστις).<sup>50</sup> It reads: ἰσόψηφα | κύριος ω | πίστις ω. This declared isopsephy presents the riddle 'Isopsephy, Lord = 800; faith = 800.'<sup>51</sup> Such a declaration is certainly Christian, and it also seems apparent that the author of the grafitto has rendered 2 Thess 3:3 as an isopsephy: πιστός δέ ἐστιν ὁ κύριος, 'the Lord is faithful.'<sup>52</sup> This declaration is in apposition to the preceding verse that declares, οὐ γὰρ πάντων ἡ πίστις 'for not all have faith.' Such an overt reference to a rather ordinary and perhaps even unremarkable passage from the New Testament encourages the interpretation that already in the early second century Christians were communicating their identity to one another in rather simple terms, while at the same time advocating their rather unique views of Jesus as Lord.

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<sup>48</sup> K. Derry's study looks at the word "stone" in the Epistle of Barnabas and therein sees a Christian author attempting to define his own beliefs of Messiah in light of established Jewish thinking on the matter: K. DERRY, One Stone on Another. Towards an Understanding of Symbolism in the Epistle of Barnabas, in: JECS 4 (1996), 515–28.

<sup>49</sup> In a similar line of thinking, Artemidorus (Onir. 4.24) recommends the use of isopsephy for dream interpretation because it can unlock the deeper meaning.

<sup>50</sup> For the text see BAGNALL, *Everyday Writing* (n. 11), 22.

<sup>51</sup> Besides the number 800, Christians also associated the number 535 with Lord, but in the vocative form κύριε: φλε' μνήσθητι τοῦ δούλου σου [...] "O Lord [535] remember your servant [...]" See DACL 7.1.1605. The phrase κύριε μνήσθητι τοῦ δούλου σου [...] is well attested in Christian inscriptions. Two later Christian inscriptions from Smyrna employ the same formula but without the isopsephy: IGC 66.1–2; 73.3.

<sup>52</sup> The adverb πιστός = 860 whereas the noun πίστις = 800 and thus the author of the isopsephy has not created a perfect rendering of 2 Thess 3:3.

In the second century there are yet other examples of the Christian use of isopsephy to surreptitiously convey a message through the use of numerical equivalents. Irenaeus gives a few examples of how various Christian groups he is criticizing employ isopsephy to interpret scripture and apprehend the 'deeper' meanings. In particular he alleges that a Valentinian named Markus, whom he gives the significant epithet '*magus*,' had created a very elaborate, though misguided in Irenaeus' estimation, numerical interpretation of the scriptures.<sup>53</sup> Markus had a preoccupation with scriptural names and the deeper, and often numerical, meaning behind them. Thus, Markus argued that the name Jesus (Ιησοῦς), which has the numerical value of 888, equaled the multiplication of the Tetrad, Ogdoade, and the Decad:

But Jesus, he affirms, has the following unspeakable origin. From the mother of all things, that is, the first Tetrad, there came forth the second Tetrad, after the manner of a daughter; and thus an Ogdoad was formed, from which, again, a Decad proceeded: thus was produced a Decad and an Ogdoad. The Decad, then, being joined with the Ogdoad, and multiplying it ten times, gave rise to the number eighty; and, again, multiplying eighty ten times, produced the number eight hundred. Thus, then, the whole number of the letters proceeding from the Ogdoad [multiplied] into the Decad, is eight hundred and eighty eight. This is the name of Jesus; for this name, if you reckon up the numerical value of the letters, amounts to eight hundred and eighty-eight.<sup>54</sup>

Markus also noted that because the number 888 included all numbers he went even further and made the connection that Jesus was appropriately the alpha (α) and omega (ω) because his very name implied a totality.<sup>55</sup> Sticking with alpha and omega Markus similarly found a connection with the 'dove' (περιστερά; Cf. Mt 3:16; Mk 1:10; Lk 3:22; John 1:32) since both ΑΩ (numerically written ωα) and dove total 801.<sup>56</sup> For Markus, therefore, isopsephy served foremost as a legitimate tool for scriptural exegesis and for both understanding and expanding its deeper meanings.

As Irenaeus proceeds he reports that the followers of Markus, whom he pejoratively dubs the 'Marcosians,' applied yet additional isopsephies in their scriptural interpretations. Their reading of the parable of the lost sheep (Lk 15: 4–7) and the parable of the lost coin (Lk 15:8–9) led them to make a numerical association with the number 99,<sup>57</sup> in which they subsequently

<sup>53</sup> For two informative and recent studies of Markus' number symbolism see: J. KALVESMAKI, *Theology* (n. 8), 61–83; N. FÖRSTER, *Marcus Magus. Kult, Lehre und Gemeindeleben einer valentinianischen Gnostikergruppe. Sammlung der Quellen und Kommentar*, Tübingen 1999.

<sup>54</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.15.2. Translation adapted from ANF 1.339.

<sup>55</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.15.2; cf. *Rev* 1:8, 11; 21:6; 22:13.

<sup>56</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.14.6; 1.15.1.

<sup>57</sup> Irenaeus counters (*Haer.* 2.24.6) that the Marcosians' method of obtaining the number 99 is both contrived and inconsistent and will offer some isopsephies of his own to make this case. He begins by pointing out that the Marcosians' preoccupation with the finding of the one lost sheep so that the flock goes from 99 to 100 and therefore goes from



found that the auspicious word 'amen' (ἀμήν) carried the same numeric value.

In the same way they oracularly declare, that one power having departed also from Duodecad, has perished; and this was represented by the woman who lost the drachma, and, lightening the lamp, again found it. Thus, therefore, the numbers that were left, viz., nine, as respects the pieces of money, and eleven in regard to the sheep, when multiplied together, give birth to the number ninety-nine, for nine times are ninety-nine. Wherefore also they maintain the word 'amen' contains this number.<sup>58</sup>

It is interesting to note, that whereas the numerology employed by the Marcosians seems to have been with few exceptions not generally accepted in wider Christian circles, the isopsephy 99 for 'amen' becomes exceptionally popular in later Christian writings: literary, epigraphic, and in the documentary papyri.<sup>59</sup> For example, in the papyri beginning in the third century the isopsephy 99, typically written ϩθ with a supralinear stroke, will appear at the end of letters as a fitting conclusion; and in the fourth century it appears in a number of different contexts and will be attested in inscriptions from North Africa to Palestine and from Egypt to Gaul.<sup>60</sup> It is therefore clear that this isopsephy, which may well have been first conceived by the Marcosians as Irenaeus reports, became accepted in wider Christianity and came to be used as a kind of profession of the faith and a sign of zeal.<sup>61</sup>

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the left hand to the right and thus from negative to positive, or material to eternal, lacks some consistency. In the Greek and Roman worlds counting from 1 to 99 was performed on the left hand, the negative side, whereas 100 onward was counted on the right hand, the positive side (see Juvenal, Sat. 10. 248–49; Jerome, Hom. Ezech. 17; Augustine, Serm. 175.1; John Cassian, Conf. 24.26.7; cf. Artemidorus, Onir. 2.70, 3.34). Thus, Irenaeus points out that the word "love" (Ἀγάπε), which only has a numerical equivalent of 93, and "truth" (Ἀλήθεια), whose equivalent is 64, exist only on the left hand and, by analogy, must necessarily be negative and material according to the reasoning of the Marcosians. Cf. Gos. Truth 31:35 – 32.17 (NHC I,3 and XII,2) where the parable of the lost sheep is similarly interpreted numerically and the movement from 99 to 100 is viewed as a significant shift from left to right.

<sup>58</sup> Irenaeus, Haer. 1.16.1. Translation adapted from ANF 1.341. Cf. Epiphanius, Pan. 34.12.6.

<sup>59</sup> DORNSEIFF, Alphabet (n. 7), 112; L. ROBERT, Pas de date 109, mais le chiffre 99, isopsephie de Amen, in: Hellenica 11 (1960), 310–11; L. VIDMAN, Koppa Theta = Amen in Athen, in: ZPE 16 (1975), 215–16; M. CHOAT, Belief and Cult in Fourth-Century Papyri, Turnhout 2006, 114–15; A. M. LUIJENDIJK, Greetings in the Lord. Early Christians and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri, Cambridge 2008, 219–220; L.H. BLUMELL, Lettered Christians. Christians, Letters, and Late Antique Oxyrhynchus, Leiden 2012, 46–47.

<sup>60</sup> Ivo of Chartres (c. 1040–1116) even alleges that the 318 fathers at the Council of Nicaea recommended the use of the isopsephy in letters: "Addat praeterea separatim in epistola etiam nonagenarium et novem numeros, qui secundum graeca elementa significant ἀμήν" (Decretum 6, 163); taken from LUIJENDIJK, Greetings (n. 59), 220 (esp. n. 117).

<sup>61</sup> P.Oxy XXXI p. 171 n. 34.

In the third century another Christian isopsephy that is attested, albeit once, is σδ that carries the numerical value of 204. It is only attested once in P.Oxy XXXVI 2785.15 (mid III) at the conclusion of a letter of recommendation.<sup>62</sup> While this numeric combination is unattested and it is uncertain what word or phrase is being surreptitiously conveyed, one fairly convincing proposal is that it is the word ‘peace’ (εἰρηνικά) since it also adds up to 204.<sup>63</sup> It is interesting to note that isopsephies (particularly ϑθ) appear with some frequency in third and fourth-century Christian letters of recommendation. This has given rise to the belief that isopsephies are employed in such texts as a way of esoteric legitimization, in particular cases where the sender and addressee were unknown to each other, in order to add credibility to the recommendation since it showed that the recommending (and receiving) party was privy to a shared Christian identity.<sup>64</sup> Thus, it served in one sense as communication in code.

One other third-century Christian isopsephy worth mentioning comes from a memorial in Phrygia by an individual named Gaius who dedicated a tomb for his family and friends. The long inscription on the tomb records various accomplishments and benefactions performed by Gaius for his family and friends. At one point in the inscription Gaius employs an isopsephy wherein he equates his name (Γάϊος), which has the numerical value 284, with the adjectives ‘holy’ (ἅγιος) and ‘good’ (ἀγαθός) because they are quantitatively the same: ἰσ(δ)ψηφος δυσι τούτοις, Γάϊος ὡς ἅγιος, ὡς ἀγαθός ‘an isopsephy by these two: Gaius is like holy; is like good.’<sup>65</sup> On the one hand we might say that Gaius was certainly pretentious, equating his name with ‘holy,’ but as noted previously there was non-Christian precedent for the isopsephic convention of equating a name with a befitting attribute that shared the same numerical value. With the case of ‘holy,’ Christians of subsequent centuries most often found the isopsephic connection with ‘God’

<sup>62</sup> For a useful re-edition of this papyrus see LUIJENDIJK, Greetings (n. 59), 85–86; cf. BLUMELL, Lettered (n. 59), 115–116.

<sup>63</sup> S.R. LLEWELYN, ΣΔ, a Christian Isopsephism?, in: ZPE 109 (1995), 125–127; S. R. LLEWELYN, A Christian Letter of Recommendation, in: NewDocs 8 (1998), 172. In PGM 28a (= P.Oxy XVI 2061), an amulet against scorpions, and in PGM Chr. 315, an amulet against the evil eye and sickness, the isopsephy 315 (τιε) is invoked. However, at present there are no satisfactory interpretations for this isopsephy. See W. BRASHEAR, βαινχωωωχ = 3663. No Palindrome, in: ZPE 78 (1989), 124 (esp. n. 6).

<sup>64</sup> K. TREU, Christliche Empfehlungs-Schemabriefe auf Papyrus, in: Zetesis. Album amicorum door Vrienden en collega’s aangeboden aan Prof. Dr. E. de Strycker, Antwerpen 1973, 634; cf. LLEWELYN, Letter (n. 63), 172 who notes that isopsephies in letters of recommendation were not merely “an encoded salutation but an esoteric legitimization characterizing the class of letter.”

<sup>65</sup> IGR IV 743.A.I.1–3. Gaius (Γάϊος), holy (ἅγιος), and good (ἀγαθός) all add up to 284. On this isopsephy see L. ROBERT, Hellenica XI–XII, Paris 1960, 428–429.

(θεός) because both bore the numerical value 284.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, an isopsephic connection was also made between 'God' and 'good' (ἀγαθός) because it too had the value of 284.<sup>67</sup>

As one moves beyond the third century into the fourth and subsequent centuries Christian isopsephies multiply as new combinations and numeric connections were established. The letter combination ΧΜΓ, which begins to appear in the later fourth century and became extremely popular, was often understood as an acrostic for 'Mary begot Christ' Χ(ριστὸν) Μ(αρία) γ(εννῆ), but was also polysemantic since it had the numeric value 643 and was used as an isopsephy for 'God the Helper' (θεὸς βοηθός) which had the same numeric value.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps the most common isopsephies to emerge were those relating to 'God' and 'Jesus Christ.' One isopsephy that begins to appear in inscriptions and graffiti is υρθ (499) where the corresponding isopsephic phrase is 'God is one' (εἷς θεός).<sup>69</sup> Likewise, the isopsephy 484 (υπδ) begins to be used in place of the genitive form of 'God' (θεοῦ).<sup>70</sup> At

<sup>66</sup> T.C. SKEAT, A Table of Isopsephisms (P.Oxy XLV. 3239), in: ZPE 31 (1978), 46, θεός ἅγιος εἰσόψηφον (God, Holy: isopsephy).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Iphilaie II 240: ἰσόψηφος | θεός σπ[δ'] | ἅγιος σπδ' | ἀγαθός σπδ' ("Isopsephy: God equals 284; Holy equals 284; Good equals 284"). Parisinus gr. 1630 (XIV cent.) fol. 101 v contains the isopsephies θεός σπδ ἅγιος σπδ ἀγαθός σπδ ("God 284, Holy 284, Good 284"); A. ŁAJTAR, Bemerkungen zu drei kürzlich veröffentlichten. Griechischen Inschriften aus der Spätantike, in: ZPE 114 (1996), 142–43. It has even been suggested that 284 also has an allusion to year 284 CE, the first year of Diocletian and era of the martyrs: J.-L. FOURNET, Quelques remarques sur des inscriptions grecques des Kellia (Égypte) récemment éditées, in: ZPE 117 (1997), 165, peut-être s'agit il d'une allusion à l'année 284 ap. J.-C., début du règne de Dioclétien, an 1 de l'ère des Martyrs. Cf. DORNSEIFF, Alphabet (n. 7), 96. Theophane Kerameus, Homily XLIV (PG CXXXII 840) argues that the adjective "good" (ἀγαθός), which has a numerical equivalent of 284, equals "God" (θεός) and interprets Mt 19:17 εἷς ἐστὶν ὁ ἀγαθός as numerically signifying "God"; thus he employs isopsephy in his scriptural exegesis.

<sup>68</sup> BLUMELL, Lettered (n. 59), 47–48; CHOAT, Belief (n. 59), 114–116; S.R. LLEWELYN, Symbol (n. 7), 156–168; P.Hamb. IV p. 145; G. ROBINSON, ΚΜΓ and ΘΜΓ for ΧΜΓ, in: Tyche 1 (1986), 175–177. The phrase θεός βοηθός appears in LXX Ps 61:9 and 77:35.P<sup>1</sup> contains an interesting introduction prior to the beginning of Mt 1:1 which reads εγεν[ | παρ[ | μητ[. P.W. COMFORT/D.P. BARRETT, The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts, Wheaton 2001, 39–40 have reconstructed the beginning as εγεν[νεθ( sic!)] παρ[α] μητ[ρος αυτου] or εγεννηθη παρὰ μητρὸς αὐτοῦ, which although it does not preserve precisely the same structure it is quite similar in meaning to the acrostic ΧΜΓ ("he was born by his mother").

<sup>69</sup> A. ŁAJTAR, Isopsephy in a Greek Inscription from Wadi Haggag, Sinai, in: CE 67 (1992), 332–334; E. PETERSON, Εἷς θεός. Epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen, Göttingen 1926.

<sup>70</sup> This isopsephy υπδ (484) appears in the following inscriptions: SB I 1984b, 1984e, and 1984f (Oxyrhynchus); Inv. 2006 [29] Spa 1 (Ø 11,3 cm) Surface (Deir el-Sambath); see J.-L. FOURNET, Les Depinti Amphoriques D'Antinoopolis, in : R. Pintaudi (ed.), Antinoopolis I, Firenze 2008, 176–216. It might also occur in SB XX 15196.4 (= P.Naqlun I

this time the isopsephy 2,443 (Ἰησοῦς ὁ Χρῆστὸς) begins to be used for the phrase ‘Jesus is the Christ’ (Ἰησοῦς ὁ Χρῆστὸς) although it is based on the spelling Χρῆστὸς instead of Χριστός.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, there are cases where individual Christians rendered their personal name as isopsephies.<sup>72</sup> But perhaps the most complex isopsephies of this period can be found in the mid-sixth-century writings of Dioscorus of Aphrodito who writes a complex ‘isopsephistic encomium’ (ισόψηφα ἐγκώμια) on St. Senas where every line of text totals 5,680.<sup>73</sup>

## 4 Conclusion

The practice of using isopsephy in the first few centuries of the Christian movement is both well attested and culturally similar to the ways isopsephy was used in non-Christian literary and documentary texts. In looking broadly at the evidence, it is apparent that several trends emerge that have broader ramifications for understanding both the Book of Revelation and other early Christian writings, particularly documentary texts that employ isopsephy. For the Book of Revelation, the use of a single isopsephy suggests that the author was overtly communicating to a group of fellow believers and at the same time drawing attention to the isopsephy as an item of interest that needed decipherment.

If the author of Revelation intended 666 or 616 to refer to the Emperor Nero as the emerging scholarly consensus suggests, then the isopsephy also has implications for the dating of the writing of the book.

It would make little sense for an author to encode Nero’s name as an isopsephy several generations after his death.<sup>74</sup> The usage of isopsephy in Christian texts can be categorized in several ways. First, earlier isopsephies tend to be unique in their meaning and are attested in single instances. Those

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14; VI). Cf. T. DERDA, Inscriptions with the Formula θεοῦ χάρις κέρδος on Late Roman Amphorae, in: ZPE 94 (1992), 137 n. 11.

<sup>71</sup> IGL Syr IX 1403 where the inscription is replete with Ἰησοῦς ὁ Χρῆστὸς and then the number Βῠμγ’ (2443). On the interchange of η > ει in the spelling of Christ see W. SHANDRUK, “The Interchange of ι and η in Spelling χριστ- in Documentary Papyri,” in: BASP 47 (2010), 205–219.

<sup>72</sup> A. ŁAJTAR, A Note on a Greek Graffito from Deir El-Medina, in: JJP (2004), 95–96, where it is noted that the name Στέφανος is rendered as the isopsephy Ἰατκς (1326).

<sup>73</sup> L.S.B. MACCOULL, An Isopsephistic Encomium on Saint Senas by Dioscorus of Aphrodito, in: ZPE 62 (1986), 51–53.

<sup>74</sup> On the implications of the interpretation of the isopsephy in Rev 13:18 for the dating of the Book of Revelation see J. MARSHALL, Parables of War. Reading John’s Jewish Apocalypse, ESCJ Studies in Christianity and Judaism/Études sur le Christianisme et le Judaïsme, Waterloo 2001, 93–94.

isopsephies also betray the Christian identity of the author to other Christians. Specifically, 666 and the Smyrna isopsephies reflect on authors who gave few internal clues as to the precise meaning of the text they had created. Second, Markus and the so-called Marcosians used isopsephy in a more foundational way of ascertaining the deeper meaning of widely used literary texts. Their efforts show that the usage of isopsephy went beyond the desire to communicate identity; rather, their usage shows a group who was interested in reconsidering doctrines, teachings, and intrinsic meaning. Isopsephy was one gateway to that greater meaning. Unfortunately, this conclusion is largely based on the evidence of hostile patristic authors who may have drawn on this different usage of isopsephy to call attention to a certain type of abuse of standard isopsephic practice. Third, documentary texts show a standardization of the practice as well as a simplification in usage. Simple isopsephies like ϩθ and ΧΜΓ became commonplace identifiers in documentary texts. Finally, Christians were willing to speculate openly regarding the meaning of the Book of Revelation isopsephy, suggesting that there was not a single dominant tradition of interpretation regarding the identity of 666 in the first few centuries.