Book of Seven Seals

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

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The ‘Number of the Beast’

Revelation 13:18 and Early Christian Isopsephyies

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 χζζ (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. τη = 300 + 10 + 8.1 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.2 From the surviving evidence it appears that Christian abbreviations of sacred names, in part,

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follow the traditional practice of noting numbers in Greek literary works. 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.

Important to this inquiry are the presence of isopsephy 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. 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.’ It therefore seems prudent to take another look at the earliest Christian isopsephy, 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 (ἱσόψηφος), 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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3 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 (τῇ = 18) and that later other names were abbreviated in similar fashion modeled on the name Jesus, which was originally contracted through suspension.

4 E. Turner, Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World. Second edition revised and enlarged by P.J. Parsons. London 1987, 15. NA²⁸ lists Ψ¹⁸ 046 0151 1611 2329 2377 as abbreviating the number while the greater number of witnesses write out the number (with variants) in full.


6 Bovon, Names (n. 5), 281.
(either a name, word, or phrase) that shared the same numeric value. Thus an arithmetic association, and often even a deeper, even esoteric association, was sometimes established between the two words or phrases. 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’ (νεόψηφος Νέρων ἰδίαν μητέρα ἀπέκτεινε). As the name ‘Nero’ carried the numeric value 1005 (Νέρων = ν = 50 + ε = 5 + ρ = 100 ω = 800 + ν = 50), as did the phrase ‘his mother slew’ (ἰδίαν = 75 + μητέρα = 454 + απέκτεινε = 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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7 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.


8 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.

9 Suetonius, Nero 39.2. The MSS νεόψηφος should be corrected to ιςόψηφον.

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Table 1: Table of Greek Numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>α = 1</td>
<td>κ = 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>β = 2</td>
<td>λ = 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>γ = 3</td>
<td>μ = 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>δ = 4</td>
<td>ν = 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ε = 5</td>
<td>ζ = 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ζ = 6</td>
<td>ο = 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ζ = 7</td>
<td>π = 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>η = 8</td>
<td>ρ or η = 90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>θ = 9</td>
<td>ρ = 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>τ = 10</td>
<td>σ = 200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E.g. γγ = 53; ρπη = 188; λθζ = 996; Βφλδ = 2534

As is evident 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 isosephies 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 isosephies 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 isosephy was employed to surreptitiously veil a referent and it was used explicitly as a cipher. In various graffiti from Smyrna to Pompeii, which formulaically parallel the isosephy 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: φιλῶ ής ὁ ἀριθμὸς (ὁ ἀριθμὸς) ἸΑΤΙ ‘I love her whose number is 1,308’ and φιλῶ ἸΗ ὁ ἀριθμὸς [τε] ψΙΑ ‘I love her whose number is 731.’ Likewise, in an epitaph from Mylasa in Asia Minor, a husband identifies his wife through the use of an isosephy: […] γρ(αμματικῶς) Απολλόνιος Πτολεμαιοῦ ἐμφύλιος τῆς συνθίου ἩΙ ὁ ἀριθμὸς ἈΞΕ ‘ […] The scribe Apollonius, son of Ptolemy, commemorates his wife whose number is 1,065.’

10 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.

11 The two examples are taken from R.S. BAGNALL, Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2011, 14. For the first isosephy 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.

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

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 ἐξιδῆς ἀνήρ) both equaled 861 (ωζη). 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. Similarly, in an inscription from Hiera Sykaminos, Sarapis and Isis ‘all beautiful’ are inextricably linked because both names equal 662.

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’, it has since been identified as a table, in alphabetical order, of isopsephies.

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

14 Historia Alexandri Magni 1.33.11: πείσω δὲ Αλέξανδρε τίς πέφυκ’ ἐγώ· δίς ἐκατόν ἡδὴ καὶ μίαν ψήφων σύνθες, ἐθ’ ἐκατόν ἄλλας καὶ μίαν, τετράκις εἴκοσι καὶ δέκα, λαβὼν δὲ πρώτον γράμμα ποιήσαν ἐσχατον· καὶ τότε νοήσας, 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.

15 There is certainly a play on the name Κάλλιστος with this isopsephy because the name literally means “most beautiful” or “most seemly.”

16 *Aeth. 9.22.6:* […] εἶναι τὸν Νεῖλον, τότο καὶ τῆς προσηγορίας ἐκβεβαιωμένης (τῶν γονών κατὰ τόνομα στοιχείων ἐξ ψήφων μεταλαμβανόμενων, πέντε καὶ ἔξι λέξεσιν καὶ τριακόσιαι μονάδες, ὡσα καὶ τὸν ἑτὸν ἡμέρα, 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 Ἀβράαμ) is 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 (τζβ); cf. Hippolytus, Haer. 7.26.6.

17 SB V 8539.1–2 (Hiera Sykaminos; date ?): ὁ Σάραπις χζβ’ | Ἰσ(ις) πάνωκαλος χζβ’ (“Sarapis equals 662; Isis(is) all beautiful equals 662”).

18 P.Oxy XLV p. 90.

The isopsephyes 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. In a later table of isopsephyes from the fifth century, where Christian authorship can be easily established since some of the isopsephyes are derived from the numeric values of ‘God,’ ‘Paul,’ ‘Menas,’ and ‘Passover,’ it is interesting that a couple of the isopsephyes from the earlier table of the second century are employed. 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. 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 (daleth = 4, vav = 6, daleth = 4), it is not entirely certain for what purpose he did so. A

20 P.Oxy XLV 3239: i.1, ἄμπελος αἰεί οἶνος (426); i.8, βοῦς ἄρουρα (672); i.11, Διόνυσιος ἡδονὴ θεόν (1004); i.21, Ἡσίς μεγάλη ἐλπὶς (420); ii.31, ὁ Σαράπις Ἀλεξάνδρειαν κοσμεῖ (662).

21 T.C. SKEAT, A Greek Mathematical Tablet, in: Mizraim 3 (1936), 23–25; cf. SKEAT, Isopsephyisms, 56–48: 1.1, θέος-ἄγιος. εἰσόψηθον (284); 1.2, Παύλος-σοφία. εἰσόψηθον (781); 1.5, Μηνᾶ-ἀμήν. εἰσόψηθον (99); 1.13, Πάσχα-ἡ καλὴ ἐοι. εἰσόψηθον (882).

22 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.

The 'Number of the Beast'

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.\(^{24}\) 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.\(^{25}\)

With the number of the beast recorded in Rev 13:18, Christian use of isopsophsy is more overt. In Rev 13:18, the author connects ‘a man’ with a specific number ‘666.’\(^{26}\) 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.\(^{27}\) 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 τ and ξ.\(^{28}\) 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 τ to ξ, it seems unlikely that a visual error could account for the difference.\(^{29}\) The majority of early manuscripts confirm the reading 666 (𝔓 47, Ω, Α, 104, Σα).\(^{30}\)

For the purposes of this study, the manuscript evidence is less important than the function of isopsophsy, 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

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\(^{24}\) 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. WAEIJEN, Genealogy (n. 23), 210.

\(^{25}\) O. RÜHLE, “ἀραθμόνα, ἀρσιμός,” in: TDNT I, 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).


\(^{27}\) 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 έξακόσια δέκα έξ.\(^{28}\)

\(^{28}\) Irenaeus, Haer. 5.30.1.


\(^{30}\) Ψ and Sa 42 contain the abbreviated number Εξάκοσιοι Εξήκοντα Εξ.
number of the beast in Revelation.\textsuperscript{31} 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 (Εὐάνθος), Lateinos (Λατέινος), and Teitan (Τείταν) could all reasonably explain what the author of Revelation had in mind because the numeric equivalent of each is 666.\textsuperscript{32} 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.\textsuperscript{33} What seems to matter to Hippolytus is that the isosephy has potentially been unraveled.\textsuperscript{34} This in turn suggests that in the isosephy he saw a literal interpretation in a person (Euanthas or Teitan) or in an entity (Lateinos).\textsuperscript{35} Hippolytus was followed by and expanded upon by subsequent Christian authors who sought an explanation to the isosephy.\textsuperscript{36}

Victorinus of Petavium, writing in the second half of the third century, represents another strand of Christian thinking on the isosephy 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 Antemnos and Genserikos.\textsuperscript{37} Victorinus may have


\textsuperscript{32} Hippolytus, Antichr. 50. Hippolytus specifically referred to the number (666) as an isosephy (πολλὰ γάρ εὐρίσκομεν ὀνόματα τούτω τῷ ἀριθμῷ ἰδιώτη ἡμεῖς περιεχόμενα). Andreas is obviously dependent on Hippolytus (Comm. Apos. 38.13, 18.12). Neophytus Inclusus (Pan. Biblos 9.563) adds Benedictos to the list of possible candidates (Ἐρμηνεύει: Εὐάνθος, Τείταν, Λατείνος, Βενεδικτός· ἐκαστὸν τούτων τῶν ὀνομάτων ἀποσώφιζε τὸ ψήφος τῶν ἐξαικεσίων ξ’). Bagnall’s anecdotal discussion of Christian isosephy contains an interesting account of deciphering two different isosephies, “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.

\textsuperscript{33} The name Εὐάνθος and Εὐάνθος are attested but would not add up to the required 666.

\textsuperscript{34} 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 (7–9 September 30 CE).

\textsuperscript{35} 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.

\textsuperscript{36} Nicetas David, Orations ii de fine mundi 2.8 τοῦ τοῦ θηρίου ὄνομα ἐν τέτρας ἐρμήνευσεν μεταβολαῖς· Βενεδικτός, Λεατίνος, Τείταν, Σαράπιδος, ὃ ἐστὶν ἀρνοῦμαι· ὅν ὁ ἀριθμός ψήφον ἔχει χξζ’· Occumenius, Comm. Apocalypse 158.1 ἀλλά μὲν πολλὰ κύρια τε καὶ προειρημικὰ ὀνόματα, σημαίνει δέ καὶ ταῦτα· κύρια μὲν Λαμπέτης, Βενεδικτός, Τείταν. τὸ μὲν γὰρ Τείταν διὰ τοῦ ἐν γράφεται, ἐνὶ δὲ καὶ δίψυχον αὐτὸ γράφει. εἰ γὰρ ἀπὸ τῆς τείσεως ὁ Τείταν, ἔστι δὲ τὸ ῥῆμα, τεῖνο.

\textsuperscript{37} In Apocalypsin 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. Likewise, Sulpicius Severus and Commodian both present the Nero *redivivus* myth in terminology reminiscent of Rev 13:3, 14–15.

Fascination with the Nero interpretation can be seen in the proliferation of studies dedicated to Nero as 666 or to the *redivivus* myth. 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: μέτρῳ καὶ ἀριθμῷ καὶ στάθμῳ), which may have encouraged Christian authors to find numerical connections in literary texts that would explain the numbering of the universe. 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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38 Cf. Jerome, Commentarium on Daniel II. 28/30; Epistulae 121.11, who comments on Nero’s impact on Christianity.


41 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. John Bowker interprets the Christian speculation of Gen 14:14 as a response to an already established Jewish tradition of interpreting the number 318. Indeed, there is a significant tradition of interpreting Gen 14:14 and the number 318 in Jewish literature. 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. 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. 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, thus one might conclude that the practice was not exclusive to a single Christian tradition.

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42 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.
45 Cf. Irenaeus, Haer. 1.14–16; 2.20–8.
46 Bovon, Names (n. 5), 270.
47 Sib. Or. 1.324–330: δὴ τότε καὶ μεγάλου θεοῦ παῖς ἄνθρωποις ἔξει σαρκοφύρος θυσίτις ὁμοιόμενος ἐν γῇ, τέσσαρα φωνῆται φέρων, τὸ δ’ ἄφωνον ἐν αὐτῷ δισσόν· ἔγω δὲ κέ τι άρθρον γ’ ὀλον ἐξομήνυον· ὁκτὼ γὰρ μονάς, τόσας δεκάδας δ’ ἐπὶ ταύτας ἕκατον τάξεως ὡς ἐπὶ αυτόκοροις ἀνθρώποις ὑστομα δηλώσει· σύ δ’ ἐνι φρεσκή σήσῃ νόσον ἀθανάτου θεοῦ Χριστοῦ παῖδ’ υψίστου. (“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. 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.

3 Early Christian Isopsephies

Moving beyond the New Testament, the earliest example of a Christian graffito 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). It reads: ἰσόψηφα | κύριος ὦ | πίστις ὦ. This declared isopsephy presents the riddle ‘Isopsephy, Lord = 800; faith =800.’ Such a declaration is certainly Christian, and it also appears apparent that the author of the graffito has rendered 2 Thess 3:3 as an isopsephy: πιστός δὲ ἔστιν ὁ κύριος, ‘the Lord is faithful.’ 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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49 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.

50 For the text see Bagnall, Everyday Writing (n. 11), 22.

51 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.

52 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. 53 Markus had a preoccupation with scriptural names and the deeper, and often numerical, meaning behind them. Thus, Markus argued that the name Jesus (Ἰησοῦς), 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. 54

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. 55 Sticking with alpha and omega Markus similarly found a connection with the ‘dove’ (περισσερά; Cf. Mt 3:16; Mk 1:10; Lk 3:22; John 1:32) since both ΛΩ (numeri
cally written ωα) and dove total 801. 56 For Markus, therefore, isopsephy served foremost as a legitimate tool for scriptural exegesis and for both understand
ing 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, 57 in which they subsequently

53 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.
54 Irenaeus, Haer. 1.15.2. Translation adapted from ANF 1.339.
56 Irenaeus, Haer. 1.14.6; 1.15.1.
57 Irenaeus counters (Haer. 2.24.6) that the Marcosians’ method of obtaining the numer 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’ (ἅμα) carried the same numeric value.

In the same way they oracularly declare, that one power having departed also from Duodecim, 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. 58

It is interesting to note, that whereas the numerology employed by the Marcionians 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. 59 For example, in the papyri beginning in the third century the isopsephy 99, typically written ϕθ 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. 60 It is therefore clear that this isopsephy, which may well have been first conceived by the Marcionians 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. 61

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60 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 greca elementa significat ἅμα” (Decretum 6, 163); taken from Luijendijk, Greetings (n. 59), 220 (esp. n. 117).
61 P.Oxy XXXI p. 171 n. 34.
In the third century another Christian isopsephy that is attested, albeit once, is σῶ 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. ⁶² 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’ (εἰρηνικό) since it also adds up to 204. ⁶³ It is interesting to note that isopsephies (particularly φθ) 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. ⁶⁴ 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 (Γάιος), which has the numerical value 284, with the adjectives ‘holy’ (ἁγιος) and ‘good’ (ἀγαθός) because they are quantitatively the same: ἵσ(ό)ψισθος δύσι τούτος, Γάιος ὥς ἁγιος, ὥς ἀγαθός ‘an isopsephy by these two: Gaius is like holy; is like good.’ ⁶⁵ 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’

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


⁶⁴ K. TREU, Christliche Empfehlungs-Schemabriefe auf Papyrus, in: Zetesis. Album amicorum door Vrienden en collega’s aangeboden aan Prof. Dr. E. de Strrycker, 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.”

⁶⁵ IGR IV 743.A,1.1–3. Gaius (Γάιος), holy (ἁγιος), 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. Consequently, an isopsephic connection was also made between ‘God’ and ‘good’ (ἀγαθός) because it too had the value of 284.

As one moves beyond the third century into the fourth and subsequent centuries Christian isopsephiases multiply as new combinations and numeric connections were established. The letter combination XΜΓ, which begins to appear in the later fourth century and became extremely popular, was often understood as an acrostic for ‘Mary begot Christ’ Χ(ριστόν) Μ(αρία) γ(εννα), but was also polysematic 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. Perhaps the most common isopsephiases 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). Likewise, the isopsephy 484 (υπδ) begins to be used in place of the genitive form of ‘God’ (θεοῦ). At

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67 Cf. Iphilaie II 240: ἤσύψηφος | θέος σπ[ῦ]itatingus | ἄγιος σπα’ | ἄγαθός σπα’ (“Isopsephy: God equals 284; Holy equals 284; Good equals 284”). Parisinus gr. 1630 (XIV cent.) fol. 101 v contains the isopsephiases θεός σπα ἄγιος σπα ἄγαθός σπα (‘God 284, Holy 284, Good 284’); A. Lautar, 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 CXXII 840) argues that the adjective “good” (ἀγαθός), which has a numerical equivalent of 284, equals “God” (θεός) and interprets Μτ 19:17 εἷς ἐστιν ὁ ἀγαθός as numerically signifying “God”; thus he employs isopsephy in his scriptural exegesis.

68 Blumell, Lettered (n. 59), 47–48; Choot, Belief (n. 59), 114–116; S.R. Lewelyn, Symbol (n. 7), 156–168; P.Hamb. IV p. 145; G. Robinson, KMΓ and ΘΜΓ for XΜΓ, in: Tyche 1 (1986), 175–177. The phrase θεος βοηθος appears in LXX Ps 61:9 and 77:35.P contains an interesting introduction prior to the beginning of Mt 1:1 which reads εγενν[ | παρ[ | μηθ. P.W. Comfort/D.P. Barrett, The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts, Wheaton 2001, 39–40 have reconstructed the beginning as εγενν[νεθη (sic!)] παρ[α] μηθ[ρος αυτου] or εγεννηθη παρα μηθρος αυτου, which although it does not preserve precisely the same structure it is quite similar in meaning to the acrostic XΜΓ (“he was born by his mother”).


70 This isopsephy ιπδ (484) appears in the following inscriptions: SB I 1984b, 1984e, and 1984f (Oxyrhynchus); Inv. 2006 [29] Spa 1 (Ὁ 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 (τεμάχιον) begins to be used for the phrase ‘Jesus is the Christ’ (Ἰησοῦς ὁ Χριστός) although it is based on the spelling Χριστός instead of Χρειστός. 71 Furthermore, there are cases where individual Christians rendered their personal name as isopsephies. 72 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 ‘isopsephic encomium’ (ἰσόψηφα ἐγκόμια) on St. Senas where every line of text totals 5,680. 73

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. 74 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

14; VI). Cf. T. DERDA, Inscriptions with the Formula θεοῦ χάρις κέρδος on Late Roman Amphorae, in: ZPE 94 (1992), 137 n. 11.
72 A. LAJTAR, 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 Αττας (1326).
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 ϕθ and XMΓ 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.