

# The Number of the Beast

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Building on different interpretative traditions, there have been two major views among Seventh-day Adventists on the number of the beast (the number 666) in Revelation 13:17, 18. While there are valid reasons to interpret it as the papal title *Vicarius Filii Dei*, as several Seventh-day Adventist writers have done over the years, others have viewed it as a triple six indicative of a Satanic trinity.

## Introduction

Seventh-day Adventists inherited much of what they believe about biblical prophecy from their theological predecessors. Most of those predecessors, though not all, were Protestants.

Over the centuries, many writers tried to interpret the riddle presented by Revelation 13:17, 18 (NKJV): “No one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man [ *anthr? pou* = of a human being]: His number is 666.”

For some researchers, the number 666 itself has been problematic as a few Greek manuscripts contain the number 616 and one has 615. Most ancient manuscripts nevertheless have 666, including a very early Chester Beatty papyrus from the third century A.D. That papyrus contains the reading *arithmos gar anthr? pou estin estin de ch xi S* (for it is the number of a human being and it is 666).<sup>1</sup> This is a minority reading because most manuscripts have the numbers written out in full as *hexakosioi hex?konta hex* (six-hundred sixty six). The great antiquity of the Chester Beatty papyrus is nevertheless of compelling importance as evidence for the early use of the abbreviation *ch xi S*. Moreover, the *Novum Testamentum Graece* (28th ed.) refers to it as a variant reading.<sup>2</sup>

The ancients did not possess a special script for writing numerals. Letters of the Semitic *alefbet*, used in the writing system of the Jews, also served as numerals. They had derived it from the linguistically related Phoenicians, who called it the *?lep bet*. The ancient Greeks also adopted it, modifying it to produce their *alpha-beta*, the first “true” alphabet. For them too, its letters represented numerals. Inherited by their Roman

conquerors, it also became the basis for Roman numerals, which are sometimes still used today. People who lived in New Testament times knew nothing about the Hindu-Arabic system that we now possess, which was introduced during the Middle Ages. "The earliest European manuscript known to contain Hindu numerals was written in Spain in 976."<sup>3</sup>

## From the Church Fathers to the High Middle Ages

Calculating the number of a name through letter-number equivalence is known as *gematria*. One of the first Christian writers to apply it to Revelation 13:18 was Irenaeus (c. A.D. 130-c. 202), bishop at Lyon in Gaul. In *Against Heresies*, he wrote, "Although certain as to the number of the name of the Antichrist, yet we should come to no rash conclusions as to the name itself, because this number is capable of being fitted to many names." He favored the word *teitan*, a variant of *titan*, among other reasons because it "is composed of six letters, each syllable containing three letters." But he also suggested *Lateinos*, which likewise "has the number six hundred and sixty-six; and it is a very probable [solution], this being the name of the last kingdom [of the four seen by Daniel]. For the Latins are they who at present bear rule."<sup>4</sup>

"The earliest continuous or consecutive commentary on the Apocalypse now extant" was by Victorinus, bishop of Pettau in Upper Pannonia, near present-day Vienna. He died in A.D. 303 or 304, a martyr under Diocletian.<sup>5</sup> Froom states concerning Victorinus' explanation of the leopard beast of Revelation 13: "'This signifies the kingdom of that time of Antichrist.' The 666 of verse 18 is first reckoned by the Greek *gematria*, suggesting *teitan* and *antemos*, the letters of each of which comprise the equivalent number. Then, turning to Latin, he suggested the 'antiphrase *diclux*,' as standing for Antichrist."<sup>6</sup> That antiphrase means "say light" and in Roman numerals has a numeric value of 666.

An antiphrase (*antiphrasis*) is an "ironic or humorous use of words in senses opposite to the generally accepted meanings."<sup>7</sup> Victorinus noted concerning the antiphrase *diclux*: "We understand antichrist, who—though cut off from and deprived of heavenly light—still transforms himself into an angel of light, daring to assert that he is light."<sup>8</sup> This is clearly a reference to 2 Corinthians 11:14, which speaks thus of Satan.

Also using *gematria*, later writers would detect that a papal title, *Vicarius Filii Dei* (Vicar of the Son of God), had a numeric value of 666 too. Irenaeus and Victorinus did not yet make reference to that title because it did not come into use until A.D. 754 through the so-called Donation of Constantine (see below).

Beatus of Liébana (A.D. c. 730-c. 800), "a monk, theologian and geographer from the Kingdom of Asturias, in northern Spain,"<sup>9</sup> utilized earlier sources in compiling a commentary on the Book of Revelation. To identify the Antichrist through his name, he also used the antiphrase *diclux*.<sup>10</sup>

During the twelfth century, other early prophetic expositors, such as Walafid Strabo (A.D. c. 809-849) and Haymo/Haimo (A.D. d. 853), as well as Bruno Astensis (1045-1123), Rupert of Deutz (1075-1129), and Garnerius

Lingonensis, also pondered over the significance of the antiphrase *diclux* and reflected Victorinus' ideas.

## The Protestant Reformers on the Number 666 as Years

Setting gematria aside, Martin Luther had quite a different idea, enshrined in one of the marginal notes accompanying his German Bible translation, as contained in his 1530 New Testament, as well as his 1534, 1541, 1545, and 1546 editions of the entire Bible. In all of them, he wrote, "Those are six hundred and sixty and six years. So long the earthly papacy stands."<sup>11</sup>

Calvinists came to adopt the same interpretation. David Brady notes that in 1557 "the Swiss Reformer Heinrich Bullinger [utilized it] in his commentary *In Apocalypsim Jesu Christi . . . Conciones Centum*. If, as was usual, the Book of Revelation was dated roughly within the reign of Domitian, one could add another 666 years and arrive at another European ruler whose name in the years of Protestants at least, was written in the hall of infamy—Pepin III (c. 714–768, king from 751). ... What Protestants found most distasteful about Pepin was his use in 754 of the spurious Donation of Constantine in opposition to the Lombard attacks of King Aistulf in order to grant to the papacy certain lands previously held by the Lombards together with the Exarchate of Ravenna."<sup>12</sup>

A similar idea appeared in the Geneva Bible (New Testament 1557, Old Testament 1560). The publishers did not only translate it into English but they also used marginal notes to explain it to their readers. The note on Revelation 13:18 "suggested that the number of 666 indicated so many years after the date of John's vision, when the Pope or Antichrist began to be manifest in the world."<sup>13</sup> For two centuries, this idea remained very influential.

"The interpretation of the number 666 as indicating so many years from John's vision achieved enduring currency throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries among a variety of commentators. It was amongst others adopted by William Whitaker, Master of St. John's College, Cambridge, who made use of Rev. 13:18 in a disputation at commencement, conducted in 1582. His thesis was 'Pontifex Romanus est ille Antichristus, quem futurum Scriptura praedixit' [The Roman Pontiff is that Antichrist, whom Scripture foretells as being future]." Another work that followed this interpretation was by "the Hungarian Reformer, Stephanus Kis, in a work published in London in 1593."<sup>14</sup>

Rather peculiar was the attempt of seventeenth-century prophetic expositors to merge the number 666 from Revelation 13:18 with the year 1666. James Hilton deals with that phenomenon in relation to the writings of Johannes Praetorius from Zetlingen, Germany. The Lutheran Praetorius was a "Master of Philosophy' at the University of Leipzig, and imperial poet laureate," and wrote largely on mystical subjects.<sup>15</sup>

Like Luther and Calvin, these later Protestant writers identified the beast of Revelation 13 with the pope. They also assumed that the notorious number referred to a period of time. They all failed to consider that Revelation 13:18 clearly concerned the "name" of the beast and suggested the use of gematria when saying that the

number should be calculated. If applied over longer periods of time, it could necessarily not be limited to a single individual but has to refer to the name or title of an office.

## Andreas Helwig on Vicarius Filii Dei as Having a Numerical Value of 666

Living about fifty to a hundred years after Luther, Andreas Helwig (1572–1643), a brilliant scholar well-versed in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, reintroduced gematria with a brand-new interpretation. He pointed out that *Vicarius Filii Dei* (Vicar of the Son of God), which was one of the pope's titles, had a numerical value of 666. His treatise *Antichristus Romanus* (The Roman Antichrist) appeared first in 1600. Better known is the reprint of the book that appeared twelve years later in Rostock, Germany. In 1630, he published the third, definitive version of the book in Stralsund, Germany. Here, and throughout this article, the word “vicar” actually means “representative of” and “substitute for.”

The Västerås City Library (west of Stockholm, Sweden) seems to own the only surviving copy of Helwig's book. It was placed there apparently by Carl Frederik Muhrbeck in 1772, and thus prior to the American Revolution. Most notable about that edition of the book is the fact that Helwig included *Vicarius Filii Dei* on the title page.<sup>16</sup>

Helwig also “cites certain Hebrew names, such as *Romith'* [*sic*], which yield 666, as various writers applied them to the pope. He also cites five Greek names, some reaching back to the third century, such as *Lateinos*, each similarly yielding 666. He then cites certain Latin names, used by, or applied by others to, the pope. These are (a) *Vicarius Filii Dei*, (b) *Ordinarius Ovilis Christi Pastor*, (c) *Dux Cleri*, and (d) *Dic Lux*—each likewise yielding 666.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas other writers had already used the latter names, Helwig's calculation of the numerical value of *Vicarius Filii Dei* was his own discovery.

## *Vicarius Filii Dei* and the Donation of Constantine

The title *Vicarius Filii Dei* first occurs in the so-called Donation of Constantine, a papal forgery that has had an immense impact on the history of Europe, both religious and secular. It was a fraudulent claim to supremacy over all the other archbishops of the medieval Christian world as well as sovereignty over large territories, especially in Italy. It was deliberately invented with the knowledge, and probably under the personal supervision, of the supreme pontiff.

The eighth-century Pope Stephen II (reign from A.D. 752–757) not only headed the Roman Church but also ruled, to a limited extent, over a part of Italy. This was a duchy that he held on behalf of the emperor in Constantinople, who was, however, effectively an absentee landlord. When King Aistulf of the Lombards invaded Italy, the Byzantines were unable to provide help. As he controlled large parts of Italy, Aistulf also claimed sovereignty over the pontiff and the territories under him, demanding a poll tax of one gold *solidus* (1/72 of a

pound or 4.5 grams) for every inhabitant.<sup>18</sup> The pope was unwilling to agree with that demand, starting negotiations with Pepin/Pippin III (A.D. c. 714–768), king of the Franks. Pope Stephen II first secured that monarch's protection and then crossed the Alps, accompanied by two Frankish nobles<sup>19</sup> and some of his clerics. An anonymous chronicle, reviewed in the *Journal Historique et Littéraire* on February 15, 1784,<sup>20</sup> describes how the pontiff—who was not well—began this journey on October 14, 753, and made his way over the Great Saint Bernard Pass.

He was welcomed by a sympathetic king, queen, princes, and the whole court, as well as many people from all over France. They came on, “having been informed that the successor of the Apostles, the *Vicaire du Fils de Dieu* [vicar of the Son of God], the high priest of the Christian world, afflicted with age and infirmities, pursued by his adversaries, had, during the rigors of winter, crossed the high Alps, to see the territories of the Franks, and to ask their help for the defense of the tombs and patrimony of the Apostles.”<sup>21</sup>

The upshot of the deliberations between Pope Stephen II and King Pepin was that the latter came to the pontiff's aid in A.D. 754 or 755, and once again in A.D. 756. Pope Stephen II was able to persuade Pepin to take Ravenna and other Italian towns from the Lombards because a letter, purporting to have been written by Emperor Constantine four centuries earlier, stated that those territories belonged to the papacy. After defeating the Lombards, Pepin turned over the conquered territories to the *pope*, which is how—for the first time ever—the pontiff became a totally independent potentate and the Papal States were created.

Cheetham notes that the so-called Donation of Constantine was “reputed to have been fabricated in the papal Chancery during the feverish weeks when Stephen was preparing to leave for France.”<sup>22</sup> Emperor Constantine had purportedly written it to Pope Sylvester I (A.D. 314–335) on March 30, 315.

The donation allegedly bestowed upon the pope “supremacy over the sees of Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, and Jerusalem and all the world's churches.” Constantine also supposedly gave the pope control of the imperial palace in Rome and all the regions of the Western Empire and the right to appoint secular rulers in the West.<sup>23</sup>

In the European Middle Ages, forgeries were a common device employed by the Roman Church to further its own ends. Such also were the False Decretals, concocted between A.D. 775 and 785, “in Rome itself under the pontificate of Adrian [I].”<sup>24</sup> It was a collection of laws pretending to be “the decrees of councils and decretals of popes (letters that formulate decisions in ecclesiastical law of the Catholic Church) of the first seven centuries.”<sup>25</sup> Those documents subtly blended genuine material with blatant falsehoods. Besides the Donation of Constantine, the collection of the False Decretals “contains some five hundred forged legal texts.”<sup>26</sup>

A dramatic example of the use of the Donation of Constantine is seen in the quarrel between Pope Leo IX and Michael Cerularius (c. 1000–1059), patriarch of Constantinople. Cardinal Humbert of Silva Candida, who conducted the negotiations between them, “attacked the Patriarch in a vitriolic and passionate manner by arguing the case for Roman primacy and also quoting extensively from the forged ‘Donation of Constantine.’”

“On July 16, 1054, in the full view of the congregation, Humbert put the papal bull of excommunication—already prepared before the legation left Rome—on the altar of the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.” Michael Cerularius reciprocated by excommunicating the legation and its supporters.<sup>27</sup> This exchange began a schism between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church that lasts now already for almost a thousand years. Apparently, “Leo IX (1049–1054) was the first pope to cite the Donation as an authority in an official act, and subsequent popes used it in their struggles with the Holy Roman emperors and other secular leaders.”<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, the title *Vicarius Filii Dei* was not only used in Gratian’s *Decretum* but also in at least two other early documents. The first of these was a document by Anselm II (1036–1086), Bishop of Lucca in Italy, cardinal and papal legate. Anselm II “spent his last years assembling a collection of ecclesiastical law canons in thirteen books, which formed the earliest of the collections of canons (*Collectio canonum*) supporting the Gregorian reforms, which afterwards were incorporated into the well-known *Decretum* of the jurist Gratian.”<sup>29</sup> A second important early work that made use of the title was the *Collectio canonum* of Deusdedit (d. between 1097 and 1100), a friend and intimate counselor of Pope Gregory VII, who made him a cardinal. Deusdedit’s writings, a compilation from earlier sources—partly found in “the archives and the library of the Lateran palace”—are “concerned with the rights and liberty of the Church and the authority of the Holy See.” This *Collectio* was completed in 1087, two years after Gregory’s death.<sup>30</sup>

When Lorenzo Valla demonstrated in 1440 that the Donation was a forgery,<sup>31</sup> it did not deter the popes from persisting in their claims to supremacy. To admit that the Donation of Constantine was fraudulent would have endangered their possession of the Papal States. Catholic historian Lord Acton (1834–1902), known for his dictum “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” suggested that the institution of the Inquisition was not intended to combat sin, “unless accompanied by [theological] error. ... The gravest sin was pardoned, but it was death to deny the donation [*sic*] of Constantine. ... The Donation was put on a level with God’s own law.”<sup>32</sup> This suggestion is corroborated by Pierre Claude François Daunou (1761–1840) who stated that the Donation “obtained belief so long, that in 1478 [thirty-eight years after Valla’s work], Christians were burnt at Strasburg for having dared to doubt its authenticity!”<sup>33</sup>

In 1443, three years after the appearance of Valla’s work, Enea Silvio Piccolomini (1405–1464), a poet, playwright, and secretary of Frederick III, recommended that a general church council be held to deal with the issue, inciting the emperor to confiscate all the territories concerned.<sup>34</sup> Frederick III lost his struggle against the pontiff and the efforts had no further effects. Fifteen years after his radical proposal, Piccolomini purchased the papacy for himself by securing a block of votes controlled by his friend Rodrigo de Borja (1431–1503)<sup>35</sup> in the conclave for the election of the next pope. This usually went through several voting stages. Cardinals who realized that they were not going to be elected would often allocate the votes that they had received to the most likely candidate, in exchange for lucrative positions. Cash could be involved.

In April 1459, an anonymous Italian poem honored the Duke of Milan with his entourage and celebrated Piccolomini as the new pontiff. In lines 134 and 136, the poem calls Piccolomini the “vicario del Figliuol di Dio” (vicar of the Son of God) and “Capo de’ Cristian santo papa Pio” (head of the Christians, holy pope Pius).<sup>36</sup> As Pius II, Piccolomini deliberately rejected Valla’s findings and his own previous ideas on a general church council because he desired to validate his own sovereignty as a temporal ruler over much of the Italian peninsula. He set about regaining control over the Papal States, some of which had already slipped from pontifical rule, “and on January 17, 1460, he issued a bull condemning appeals from a pope to a general (ecumenical) council of the church.”<sup>37</sup>

Both the Donation of Constantine and the title *Vicarius Filii Dei* were also enshrined in the *Decretum Gratiani* (Gratian’s Decretum), which first appeared in AD 1140 and became the basis for teaching Catholic canon law.<sup>38</sup> Gratian’s Decretum was frequently copied for hundreds of years and also printed multiple times after Gutenberg had invented the printing press. Together with other church legislation, it became an important part of Canon Law. The *Decretum* was first printed in 1500 and from 1586 onward it was part of the *Corpus Iuris Canonici* (Collection of Canon Law), which continuously remained in force for more than another three hundred years. The Donation of Constantine is clearly a forgery, yet it was a genuine Catholic document created to acquire the Papal State in Italy as well as dominion over the kings and emperors of Europe. The fraudulent title *Vicarius Filii Dei* proclaimed both ecclesiastical supremacy and secular sovereignty.

## Many Protestant Writers Referring to *Vicarius Filii Dei*

Other prominent Protestants did not immediately accept Helwig’s interpretation of the numeral 666. For instance, there is no reference to him in Sir Isaac Newton’s writings on biblical prophecy. Through much of his life, Newton studied the biblical prophecies, especially the books of Daniel and the Revelation.<sup>39</sup> Instead, like others before him, he said that the numeral 666 in Revelation 13:18 was referring to *Lateinos* as already mentioned by Irenaeus.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, from 1715 to 1896, more than ninety non-Catholic writers referred to or discussed the title *Vicarius Filii Dei*. Most of them applied that title to the papacy and showed that it had a numeric value of 666.<sup>41</sup> For instance, in 1759, James Ferguson (1710–1776), a famous Scottish astronomer, portraitist, and polymath, who delighted in figures while also studying prophecy, clearly mentioned the name-number equivalence. He worked out three tables establishing the numerical value of *Romiith* in Hebrew, *Lateinos* in Greek, and *Vicarius Filii Dei* in Latin. He pointed out that in his time, the latter name was a title recognized by Catholics: “The Papists call the Pope *Vicarivs Filii Dei* (*The Vicar of the Son of God*). And, if we take the sum of all the numeral letters in these three words, we shall find it also to be 666.”<sup>42</sup>

## Emanuel Swedenborg on the Triple Six

In 1766, the *Apocalypsis Revelata* (Apocalypse Revealed) came up with an entirely different method of interpretation. Its author, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), formerly a brilliant, multifaceted scientist, had begun to have visions and to communicate with so-called spirits of the dead and beings from other planets in April 1745. A “spiritual Man appeared to Swedenborg ... in a strong shining light and said, I am God the Lord, the Creator and Redeemer; I have chosen thee to explain to men the interior and spiritual sense of the sacred writings: I will dictate unto thee what thou oughtest to write.”<sup>43</sup> Since Swedenborg did not believe in the Trinity, he perceived that Being as Jesus. Those who reject Spiritualism nevertheless view it as a demonic manifestation. This “spiritual sense” according to which the Bible, including the book of Revelation, had to be interpreted was largely non-historical and idealistic, closely resembling the third-century allegorical method of Origen (A.D. c. 185–254), with its Neoplatonic overtones. Kevin Baxter explained the method as follows: “Swedenborg tells us that the Philistines correspond to a belief in God, but without loving the neighbor. Armies, in general, correspond to the doctrines or teachings of the church—those troops assembled to engage in spiritual struggle. The armies of Israel represent the true teachings of the church, whereas the armies of the Philistines are false teachings of a church.”<sup>44</sup>

Swedenborg perceived the beasts of Revelation 13 not only as a symbol of Catholicism but also for the Reformed churches. In an earlier book, *The Heavenly Doctrines* (1758), he sharply rejected the idea of Luther and other Protestant Reformers that people are saved through faith and God’s grace alone without a need for good works.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, in his view, the mark of the beast received on the forehead or on the right hand (Revelation 13:16) “signifies the acknowledgement of being a Reformed Christian, and confession that he is so” and “the name of the beast signifies the quality of the doctrine.”<sup>46</sup>

He thought that numbers also have symbolic meanings as is evident from his interpretation of Revelation 13:18: “*And his number is six hundred and sixty six*, signifies this quality, that all the truth of the Word is falsified by them [Reformed Christians]. The number of the beast signifies the quality of the confirmation of doctrine and faith from the Word among them (nn. 608, 609); six hundred and sixty six signifies every truth of good, and as this is said of the Word, it signifies every truth of good in the Word, here the same falsified, because it is the number of the beast. ... The number six hundred and sixty six is used, because that number six is tripled, and triplication completes.”<sup>47</sup>

The Swedenborgian Foundation later expressed it as follows: “One of the best known uses of six is its place in the number of the beast: 666—Because six appears three times, this number represents all falsities and all evils—it has the completeness of *three*, but it also has negative connotations from the negative meaning of *six*.”<sup>48</sup>

## The Triple Six Interpretation among Protestant Interpreters

Swedenborg’s interpretation and the numerology of the so-called triple sixes in 666 became very influential among Protestant writers. A few examples will be given here to illustrate its reception.



In 1848, the Preterist writer David Thom (1795–1862) wrote: “I might, for instance, suggest that for anything peculiar in an Apocalyptic number, an Apocalyptic reason alone should be sought for and obtained. Now, in the Book of Revelation itself, is not such a reason presented to us? One of its most remarkable pieces of machinery is the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven vials or bowls. That is, the number *seven thrice* told. . . . Now, by the generality of commentators, in the seven seals [seventh seal,] are the seven trumpets understood to be involved; and in the seven trumpets, [seventh trumpet,] the seven vials. The application of this clearly is—may not the use of *three sixes* by the inspired writers have had some sort of reference to the *three sevens* just mentioned? These three sevens imply perfection. It is done. May not the corresponding three sixes, as coming short of seven, imply imperfection?”<sup>49</sup> But in Revelation there are not only three sevens. What about the seven lampstands, seven stars, seven horns, seven eyes, seven spirits, seven thunders, etc.?

The Christian writer Frederic William Farrar (1831–1903), well known for his extremely popular *Life of Christ* (1874) which ran through thirty editions in as many years, also wrote about prophecy from a Preterist point of view. In his book *The Early Days of Christianity*, he tried to explain what Revelation 13:18 meant by saying, “The whole formed a triple repetition of 6, the essential number of toil and imperfection; and this numerical symbol of the Antichrist, 666, stood in terrible opposition to 888—the three perfect 8’s of the name of Jesus.”<sup>50</sup>

In his book *The Apocalypse*, Lectures on the Book of Revelation, the Dispensationalist writer Joseph A. Seiss wrote, “Six is the Satanic number” and “Antichrist’s number is three sixes: six units, six tens, and six hundreds—666—the individual completion of everything evil.” He noted, “Seven is the number of dispensational fullness” and “eight is the number of new beginning and resurrection.” To this he added, “Our Sunday, which celebrates the new creation which began in the Saviour’s resurrection, is the eighth day, the first of the new week.”<sup>51</sup>

Thom, Farrar, and Seiss, as well as other authors like them, who thought that 6 was an imperfect or evil number and interpreted 666 as a triple six displayed a tendency toward Idealism, which denies a historicist interpretation because it does not regard the book of Revelation as predictive prophecy. This view they blended with numerology. At the same time, they favored Preterism or Dispensationalist Futurism. The idea that 666 means *Vicarius Filii Dei* and identifies the Papacy is tied to Historicism. It finds its validation in Roman Catholic documents attributing the title to the papal authority, and in the fact that they claimed ecclesiastical supremacy together with territorial sovereignty in Italy as well as other countries.

## Excursus: The Triple Six Interpretation Versus the Greek New Testament Text

Swedenborg and some Protestant writers assumed that there were three sixes in 666, overlooking that the 666 in the Greek New Testament text does not consist of three sixes or a triple six. The original Greek text did not use Hindu-Arabic numerals with 6’s optically adjacent to one another. It is either *hexakosioi hex?konta hex* (six

hundred sixty six) written in full, or the abbreviation *ch xi S* = *chi xi stigma* as in some texts such as the Chester Beatty Papyrus (P47).<sup>52</sup> Used to the Hindu-Arabic system and positional writing, modern readers will simply add 600, 60, and 6, and see only three 6's as if there are no 0's. Modern readers may therefore overlook the fact that the Greek text contains 600 + 60 + 6. In the Hindu-Arabic system, three sixes added together actually total only 18 (6 + 6 + 6 = 18).

People in the ancient Mediterranean world, including the Apostle John who wrote the Apocalypse, had no separate symbols for indicating numbers but used letters of the alphabet. Unlike modern readers, they also did not have a sign to indicate zero. Therefore, they either wrote out *six hundred and sixty-six* in full or abbreviated the number as *ch xi S*, that is *ch* = 600, *xi* = 60, *S* = 6, which are obviously also not three sixes (triple six).

The *S* (*stigma*) should, incidentally, not be confused with *s* (*sigma*), the visually similar letter for *s*, making the *es* sound (a pure sibilant). *S* (*stigma*) came to replace the *F* (*digamma*) as a numeral equivalent for six. It was used in ancient Greek as a ligature for *sigma* and *tau* but later was discontinued, except to indicate the numeral 6. *Stigma* (= *st*) was a remnant of a symbol in the Phoenician *?lep bet*, though it was never used as a letter of the Greek *alpha-beta* (alphabet). It was derived from the Greek word for a tattoo placed on disgraced persons and thus brought over into English as something that marks a person of bad reputation. Many modern scholars remain aware of this fact.

In 1967, the United Bible Society published a New Testament at Athens with parallel texts in Koine and Modern Greek<sup>53</sup> that clearly illustrate the relationship between the alphabet and the numerical system. For the last part of Revelation 13:18, the former has: *arithmos gar anthr?pou esti, kai ho arithmos autou ch xi S* = for it is the number of a human being, and his number is *ch xi S* (*chi xi stigma*). The translation into modern Greek is similar, but with a significant difference in how it indicates the numerals: *einai arithmos anthr?pou kai arithmos tou einai ch xi S* (666) = it is the number of a human being, and his number is *ch xi S* (666). Normally present-day Greeks would use Hindu-Arabic symbols rather than letters of the alphabet to indicate numbers. Placing *ch xi S* and 666 beside each other nevertheless illustrates that the original text does not contain three sixes or a triple six.

Like the United Bible Society common text, the 28th revised edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament (2012) has *hexakosioi hex?konta hex* written in full rather than as *ch xi S*. The latter three-letter abbreviation for six hundred sixty-six does feature in the Chester Beatty Papyrus from the third century A.D, which the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament gives as a legitimate variant reading. This illustrates again that the proper abbreviation of this number in ancient Greek is those three different letters (*ch xi S*), each representing a different number (600 + 60 + 6) and not three sixes.

## Catholic Acknowledgements and Denials of *Vicarius Filii Dei* as a Papal Title

Catholic speakers and writers have identified *Vicarius Filii Dei* as a title of the pope. They repeatedly and emphatically referred to the pope as such in Latin and other European languages (Italian, Spanish, German, French, and English) for several centuries until 1870 when a united Italy annexed the Papal States. High dignitaries of the Roman Catholic Church—theologians, bishops, archbishops, even cardinals—at times employed *Vicarius Filii Dei* as a title or valid description of the pontiff.<sup>54</sup> That designation was published also at least four times in Latin reprints from 1844 to 1890, mostly of Gratian's *Decretum*.<sup>55</sup>

Since 1870, various Catholic writers have nevertheless denied that the supreme pontiff was ever called vicar of the Son of God. At that time, a unified Italy swallowed up the Papal States and the latter ceased to exist. The title had not only become superfluous but also a theological embarrassment since many Protestants were pointing out that *Vicarius Filii Dei* had a numerical value of 666, pointing to the Papacy as the Antichrist. For centuries, the *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, which contained Gratian's *Decretum* and the title *Vicarius Filii Dei*, had been the source of Catholic canon law. On May 27, 1917, the Roman Catholic Church discontinued the *Corpus* and replaced it with the *Codex Iuris Canonici*, omitting both the *Decretum* and the title *Vicarius Filii Dei*.<sup>56</sup> The *Codex Iuris Canonici* nevertheless still rests largely on the foundations laid by the *Corpus Iuris Canonici*.

## William Miller on the Number 666 as Years

Like Martin Luther and John Calvin before him, William Miller (1782–1849), founder of the Second Advent movement of the late 1830s and early 1840s, believed the apocalyptic numeral 666 referred to a period of time. Whether he was aware of Andreas Helwig's *Vicarius Filii Dei* interpretation remains unclear. He wrote for instance: "And shall take away the daily sacrifice.' The angel is giving us a history of what these kings would do, when Rome should be divided into its ten toes, or when the ten horns should arise, which the angel has heretofore explained to mean ten kings, Daniel vii.24. ... To 'take away the daily sacrifice,' means to destroy Paganism out of the kingdom. This was done by those ten kings who now ruled the Roman Empire, and would for a little season, until they should give their power to the image beast." Miller added that these kings were "all Pagans" who supported "Paganism," yet "they were converted to the Christian faith, which happened within the space of twenty years; Clovis, the king of France, having been converted and baptized in the year AD 496. By the year AD 508, the remainder of the kings was brought over and embraced the Christian religion, which closes the history of the Pagan beast, whose number was 666; which, beginning 158 years BC, would end the beast's reign in AD 508."<sup>57</sup>

## Early Sabbatarian Adventists on the Number 666 as the Sum of Protestant Churches

Miller's followers either did not accept or ignored his 666-year interpretation. Perhaps they simply considered it an insignificant matter. After the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844, the same was true of one of the

remnants of the Millerite movement, the Sabbatarian Adventists, who called themselves “Seventh-day Adventists” sixteen years later.

Initially, Sabbatarian Adventists applied the numeral 666 to the denominations that had expelled or ill-treated Millerites. They reasoned that the first beast of Revelation 13 was the papacy. Their view of the second, two-horned beast differs in some respects from the present-day Seventh-day Adventist perspective. This is apparent from the first Sabbatarian Adventist prophetic chart, designed by Samuel W. Rhodes (1813–1883) and engraved by Otis Nichols (1798–1876) in 1850. It amalgamates the two beasts, displaying a leopard-like creature that has the paws of a bear, a lion’s head, two lamblike horns, and a horrible open snout with fangs and a dragon tongue in it. Below the image are the words: “The two lamb like [*sic*] horns, the papist and protestant, whose names number 666, become united in action, speak like a DRAGON, and controll [*sic*] the civil legislature, and cause it to make themselves the IMAGE of papacy which received a deadly wound and was healed.”<sup>58</sup>

Sabbatarian Adventists also believed that the Protestant churches, which had rejected the First Angel’s Message of Revelation 14:6, 7 as preached by the Millerites, constituted the Babylon referred to in Revelation 14:8. Rome, they said, was the mother of harlots (Revelation 17:5) and those Protestant churches were the harlot daughters, to which the number 666 applied. From 1851 to 1860, three of the Sabbatarian Adventist leaders—John N. Andrews (1829–1883), John N. Loughborough (1832–1924), and James White (1821–1881)—expressed that idea, particularly in their articles in the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*.

Thus, in 1851, Andrews wrote:

The Protestant church may, if taken as a whole, be considered as a unit; but how near its different sects number six hundred three score and six, may be a matter of interest to determine.” He noted concerning those denominations: “That they are oppressive when possessed of civil power; let the case of the Puritans, themselves fugitives from oppression, bear testimony. Witness their persecution of the Quakers, even unto death. Witness also the martyrdom of Michael Servetus under the sanction of John Calvin.”<sup>59</sup>

Three years later, on March 28, 1854, Loughborough mentioned the “man of sin” (2 Thessalonians 2:3) and added: “That this man represents the Papal Antichristian church, we all believe. And he will represent that church until the revelation of Christ. Verses 8, 9. The church represented by this man, continued a unit nearly a thousand years after its foundation, when it commenced breaking up under Luther and Calvin, and these divisions have continued dividing and subdividing until, according to the *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, they now number about six hundred three score and six.”<sup>60</sup>

On April 26, 1860, James White observed, a little ironically: “The Protestant sects are fully represented by the harlot daughters of the Woman of Rev. xvii, 4, 5.” He nevertheless conceded, “We confess our lack of wisdom, and decline attempting an exposition to the matter” because “fifteen years since some declared the number 666 to be full—that there was that number of legally organized bodies. Since that time there have been almost

numberless divisions, and new associations, and still the number is just 666!<sup>61</sup> Thus, sixteen years after the Great Disappointment, Sabbatarian Adventists still lacked clarity on this topic.

## Uriah Smith on *Vicarius Filii Dei* as the Number 666

Just five years later, in 1865, Uriah Smith (1832–1903) published the work *Thoughts, Critical and Practical*, on the Book of Revelation that would swiftly change the understanding of the number 666 among Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>62</sup> Throughout his writings, Smith consistently declared that the six hundred threescore and six mentioned in Revelation 13:18 referred to "Vicarius Filii Dei."

In the 1872 revision of *The Three Messages of Revelation XIV*, John N. Andrews abandoned his previously held view about 666 and referred readers to Smith's "extended remarks concerning the image, mark, and number of the name, [in Smith's book] The United States in Prophecy."<sup>63</sup>

Smith was ultimately indebted to Andreas Helwig for his *Vicarius Filii Dei* interpretation, yet he likely was not aware of Helwig because he did not mention him. Instead, he referred to *The Reformation: A True Tale of the Sixteenth Century (1832)*, by Anne Tuttle Jones Bullard (1808–1896).<sup>64</sup> Bullard identified *Vicarius Filii Dei* as a title of the papal Antichrist, with a numerical value of 666, an explanation that she acquired from other Protestant writers who had consulted Helwig's work. Seventh-day Adventists accepted Smith's interpretation more or less unquestioned until his death in the early twentieth century. Soon afterwards, voices, both outside and inside the Seventh-day Adventist Church, arose to question the correctness of his interpretation.

## "Vicarius Filii Dei" an Inscription on Papal Miter?

Anne Bullard, among others, had asserted that the title *Vicarius Filii Dei* was written on a papal miter, and through Smith's writings, that idea had spread among Seventh-day Adventists. On June 18, 1910, Ernest R. Hull, an influential Jesuit author and editor of the Catholic weekly periodical *The Examiner* in Bombay (Mumbai), India, tried to laugh off the equation of *Vicarius Filii Dei* with the number 666 when the following inquiry arrived on his desk.

Sir,—I shall be much obliged if you could give me an answer to this argument which has been put before me by a Protestant friend. I am a convert myself, and this is why some of my acquaintances bring forward arguments to try and convince me that the Catholic Faith is not the true one. The point in question is as follows:—"We read in the 13th Chapter of the Book of Revelations [sic] in the 18th verse that the anti-Christ and man of perdition is the man whose name spells 666. The title of the Pope of Rome is Vicarius Filii Dei.' This is inscribed on his mitre; and if you take the letters of the title which represent Latin numerals [printed large] and add them together they come to 666."<sup>65</sup>

To this, Hull replied as follows, showing his own name would yield 666 too: “Does not our correspondent see how extremely silly this sort of thing is? The only sensible answer to a Protestant friend who brings up such an argument is to laugh at him till he is ashamed of himself. For centuries people have been playing the game of *hunting for the number of the beast*, and it has been found already times out of number. Judging from results, instead of one beast (or Antichrist) there must have been about fifty thousand. Almost every eminent man in Christendom, who has enjoyed the privilege of possessing enemies, has had his name turned and twisted till they could get the number 666 out of it. In past history there have been numberless beasts or Anti-Christ, all of whose names counted up to 666. I fancy that my own name, especially in Latin form, might give the number of the beast. ... Let us try just for fun—following the same principle, viz., of taking the value of all the Roman numerals:—ERNESTVS REGINALDVS HVLL.”<sup>66</sup>

Hull’s article drew the attention of Arthur Preuss (1871-1934), a German-American who edited the *Catholic Review* (later, *Catholic Fortnightly Review*). Shortly afterwards, he reprinted Hull’s reply in abbreviated form, added his own introductory note, and made several editorial changes. As he neglected to use quotation marks to set apart the material quoted in Hull’s article (“We read in the 13th Chapter of the Book of Revelations [sic] ...”), readers could easily think that material constituted Preuss’ own thoughts.<sup>67</sup>

Four years later, *Our Sunday Visitor* reprinted Preuss’ version as follows: “The title of the Pope of Rome is *Vicarius Filii Dei*, and if you take the letters of his title which represent Latin numerals (printed large) and add them together, they come to 666.”<sup>68</sup> *Our Sunday Visitor* subsequently repudiated this statement when they discovered that it had been a mistake. Despite the fact that Protestants in general and Seventh-day Adventists in particular continued to utilize that statement, there is no actual evidence for *Vicarius Filii Dei* ever being on the miter (or the tiara) of the pontiff.<sup>69</sup> But regardless of whether or not *Vicarius Filii Dei* ever appeared on the headgear of any pope, it was for centuries an important title used by the pontiffs themselves or imputed to them as shown above.

## Denials of Papal Title “Vicarius Filii Dei”

Subsequently, numerous Roman Catholic writers asserted that either *Vicarius Filii Dei* has never been a title of the pope or it has never been his official title.

David Goldstein (1870–1958), a Jewish convert to Catholicism, was one of those writers who turned against Seventh-day Adventist historicists for applying the title to the papacy. On August 16, 1935, he argued that *Vicarius Filii Dei* was not the official title of the pope and “does not total 666 according to a proper tabulation of Roman numerical values.” He concluded it was 665 because “when an I appears before an L, it does not total, as Seventh Day Adventism [sic] says, 1 and 50. It totals 1 minus 50, which is 49.”<sup>70</sup> Goldstein himself nevertheless miscalculated the numbers for two reasons. First, he overlooked the fact that as Latin used a V for the U too, the same reasoning could be applied to I and V in *Vicarius*, which would be 4. Second, by avoiding to simply add the I

and L in *Filii* (1 + 50 = 51) and placing them together as IL, the correct result would be 49. The total of Goldstein's calculation would be 662 rather than 665. One could also argue that there are similarly good reasons to have the L go together with II (*Filii* = 1 + 52) rather than the first I (*Filii* = 49 + 2). Unlike ordinary Roman numerals, gematria uses a simple encoding when applied to names to avoid such issues.

A decade later, Goldstein repeated the same argument in the book *What Say You?*, fitting his argument to the reigning pontiff: "*Vicarius Filii Dei* (Vicar of the Son of God) is a title and not a name. ... The name of the present Pope is Pius XII and not *Vicarius Filii Dei*."<sup>71</sup> Goldstein nevertheless neglected that since the number was valid over 1,260 years, according to the 42 prophetic months of Revelation 13:5, it must refer to a title rather than a particular individual, as all historicist interpreters have recognized.

## Seventh-day Adventist Tensions over the Number 666 from 1936 to 1946

A few months after David Goldstein first contradicted and taunted Seventh-day Adventists for claiming that the apocalyptic 666 symbolized *Vicarius Filii Dei*, a meeting was held on April 16, 1936 in the office of General Conference president C. H. Watson (1877–1962). Others in attendance included leading scholars of the church such as LeRoy Edwin Froom (1890–1974), Francis D. Nichol (1897–1966), and F. M. Wilcox (1865–1951).<sup>72</sup> Also present was W. W. Prescott (1855–1944), a very influential Seventh-day Adventist scholar, at whose insistence this meeting had been called and which he largely dominated. Prescott was likely unaware of the fact that *Vicarius Filii Dei* had been copiously used in Latin and other languages for hundreds of years, which is shown elsewhere in this article. As a result, as his biographer Gilbert Valentine notes, Prescott "felt deeply disturbed that people would put the credibility of the church at stake by continuing to apply 666" to *Vicarius Filii Dei*, which he regarded as "a nonexistent title of the pope." Instead, he argued that "the actual title of the pope was *Vicarius Christi*."<sup>73</sup> Thus, he maintained that the pontiffs had only one official title, namely *Vicarius Christi*, adopted at the Council of Florence in 1439. While admitting the existence of the expression *Vicarius Filii Dei*, he denied it had ever been an official title. It should be noted, however, that Revelation 13 simply identifies the beast through the number 666 but says nothing about the official status of its title.

Another issue that arose was the origin of *Vicarius Filii Dei*, which Froom took up. Two years later, despite extensive research in Rome, Vienna, Geneva, Paris, London, and Berlin, with the assistance of good Latinists and other experts, he concluded, "I have never found an authentic use of the title by a papal leader, save in the forged Donation of Constantine [mentioned] in the Decretum of Gratian."<sup>74</sup> He was mistaken in concluding that the title *Vicarius Filii Dei* occurred only in Gratian's Decretum. The emergence of the internet has brought to light multiple primary sources that Froom and other early researchers were unable to find.

After the 1936 meeting, J. L. McElhany (1880–1959) became the new president of the General Conference, and a Committee on 666 was eventually set up. The committee began its work on August 30, 1939. After much

research and background activity, it met again on January 17, 1943. Its acting chairman was William Henry Branson (1887-1961), who would succeed McElhany as General Conference president in 1950. Here is an extract from the committee minutes:

A document entitled "the Number of the Beast" had been prepared by the Secretary by way of a suggestive deduction from the material in a 42-page document making a report on the findings in research work on 666 as read to a group of 24 [on] August 30, 1939, the group including the editors present in an editorial council as recorded in the minutes of that date. In the document read in the present meeting the position was taken that we are not dependent upon the title VICARIUS FILII DEI being inscribed on the Pope's tiara or its having been adopted by an official enactment as the or a title of the Pope, but that the practice of the Roman Catholic Church, including nine of the popes, and many Catholic writers in using the Donation of Constantine containing the title as applied first to Peter and then his successors, for more than seven hundred years as a valid document, affords a substantial basis for our interpretation of 666 as the number of the beast. The Donation of Constantine has been preserved unchanged from the eighth century to the present hour in the canon laws and ecclesiastical documents of the Church.<sup>75</sup>

The last sentence failed to note that in 1917 the *Codex Iuris Canonici* replaced the *Corpus Iuris Canonici* and, as a result, omitted the Donation of Constantine. The words "as applied first to Peter and then his successors" may be misunderstood and should have read, "allegedly applied first to Peter and then his successors." Most importantly, the committee did not content itself with mere argumentation but also focused on the *practice* of the papacy over so many centuries. The use and significance of *Vicarius Filii Dei*, and its translations into other languages, must be tested by incontrovertible historical facts rather than mere documents that people can contradict or reason about. The minutes conclude with the following resolution:

AGREED, That a committee of three with power to act be appointed by the General Conference Committee to edit and publish the larger document of 42 pages, adding to it some directive summarizing of the evidence found, to be put out in a pamphlet and distributed to our workers by the General Conference gratis, so as to afford our workers opportunity to examine the evidence available and thereby draw their own conclusions.<sup>76</sup>

The next day, H. T. Elliot, secretary of the General Conference, sent a memorandum to Professor W. E. Howell to relay the important fact that on January 18, 1943, the General Conference Committee had received the report from the Committee on 666, with its suggestion "that this material be printed in a large leaflet, containing all the documents collected, and a smaller leaflet summarizing the documents, these leaflets to be made available at General Conference expense to all workers; but that before publication the material be carefully edited by a committee of editors to be appointed by this General Conference Committee, these editors to report to the large committee that has worked on this matter." The memorandum ends with the decision, "Voted, That M. L. Andreasen, W. E. Howell and T. M. French be appointed to edit the material that has been collected on interpretations of '666'."<sup>77</sup>



The subsequent work on this project is indicated by a handwritten note at the bottom of the January 17, 1943 minutes of the Committee on 666: "Com[mittee] of 3 met Jan[uary] 27, received the 42 p[age] document and appointed W. E. Howell to revamp it. Met again Feb[ruary] 10, [19]43 and approved revamped copy, to be manifolded and distributed to G[eneral] C[onference] Com[mittee] for authorization to publish. Distributed Feb[ruary] 22."<sup>78</sup>

General Conference President J. L. McElhany added a foreword to the final manuscript (43 pages).<sup>79</sup> However, the manuscript was never published because Merwin R. Thurber, book editor of the Review and Herald Publishing Association, prevented its publication.

First, it lingered on Thurber's desk for three years, which prompted McElhany to talk with him personally. The content of their conversation remains unknown, yet it may have caused Thurber to return the manuscript and the accompanying material on November 15, 1946. In the accompanying letter he wrote, "I realize the manuscript was read by the members of the General Conference Committee and voted to be published at a regular meeting of the committee. However, my conscience will not allow me to pass for publication any manuscript about which I have a question without consulting those who may have authority to settle the questions."<sup>80</sup>

He was disappointed that in its study of "The Number of the Beast," the Committee had not included "certain usable material," gathered by Froom for his "history of prophetic interpretation." In his view, "the manuscript as a whole has not been examined *critically* by anyone not in direct connection with the Committee." Thurber further thought the document was too long, too repetitive, and perhaps too complicated. Thus, he noted, "I do not believe the average preacher in this denomination would know how to present the number of the beast any more efficiently and carefully after reading this document than before."<sup>81</sup> Thurber asserted that the committee had leaned too much on Jean Vuilleumier's material. He disliked the inclusion of "a long list of editions of Gratian's Decretum in the Paris National Library. It seems to me that if such lists are to be given, books in other national libraries should also be listed—at least the lists in the British Museum and Library of Congress should be included."<sup>82</sup> This critique is surprising because directly below the editions of Gratian's Decretum in the National Museum at Paris, Vuilleumier listed the seven "editions of Corpus Juris Canonici found in the British Museum, with the passage from the Donation of Constantine containing *Vicarius Filii Dei* as it appears in each."<sup>83</sup> Thurber added, "Brother Vuilleumier approached the subject with his background in the French language. Most of his sources are French books and other publications. I have no quarrel with the use of sources in various languages, but since the Seventh-day Adventist denomination started with the English language and since this document is being published in English, it seems to me we should use the English language sources at least as much as we use other modern European languages."<sup>84</sup> Finally, Thurber concluded that those supposed defects had to be improved as follows: "I humbly suggest that a group of men be appointed to go over the manuscript critically and either recommend or do this work that needs to be done."<sup>85</sup>

However, not even a revised version of the work of those able researchers, who had toiled from 1936 to 1943 in both North America and abroad, was published because of the decision of one individual. Even the involvement and contributions by C. H. Watson, J. L. McElhany, and W. H. Branson, three successive General Conference presidents (1930–1936, 1936–1950, 1950–1954) who were deeply concerned with discovering the significance of the number 666 in Revelation 13:18, did not prevent the burying of the manuscript in the archives.

## Catholic Use of *Vicarius Filii Dei* during the Twentieth Century

Although some Catholic writers, such as David Goldstein, were rejecting the idea that *Vicarius Filii Dei* was a papal title and Seventh-day Adventist writers struggled with the same question, Catholic writers did not entirely discontinue its use.

Soon after World War I erupted in 1914, Léon Bloy (1846–1917), a French novelist, essayist, pamphleteer, and poet, poured out his hatred for the German invaders in his highly popular work *Au Seuil de l'Apocalypse* (On the Threshold of the Apocalypse). As a devout Roman Catholic, he was appalled because Pope Benedict XV, whom he called the *Vicaire du Fils de Dieu* (vicar of the Son of God), had declared absolute neutrality.<sup>86</sup> In the book *Dans les Ténèbres* (In the Darkness), published posthumously at the end of World War I, Bloy wrote: "As for the pontiff, the 260th successor of Saint Peter, we do not know whether he casts or is himself just a shadow. Yet he is the only one among the *vicaire du Fils de Dieu* who in *urbi et orbi* proclaimed the neutrality of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is a mere phantasm of a pope, like the emperors, kings, or republics crowding toward the red portal of the Apocalypse, which is going to open wide on the abomination of hell."<sup>87</sup>

From March 12 to 19, 1934, Isidro Gomá y Tomás (1869–1940), Archbishop of Toledo and Primate of the Roman Catholic Church in Spain, accompanied a thousand young people mobilized by Catholic Action for a pilgrimage to Rome. After his return, he wrote an account to describe high mass in St. Peter's Cathedral. He referred to "the most special presence of God in that place, the altar where the sacrifice of Jesus Christ the Redeemer was being repeated over and over again, the sepulcher of Saint Peter, on which the immortal edifice of the Catholic Church is established: You are Peter . . . and the dwelling place of the vicar of the Son of God [*Vicario del Hijo de Dios*], the historical personification of the magisterium, of the priesthood, and of the power of the same Jesus Christ in the world."<sup>88</sup> The reigning pontiff Gomá referred to was Pope Pius XI, who died in 1939.

Eighteen years later, he was hailed with that title once again. On May 5, 1957, *La Nación* of Mexico City printed the article "En el Centenario de Pío XI" (On the centenary of Pius XI) by the Italian cleric Giovanni Decio. He said, "This month marks the completion of the first centenary of the birth of the 261st Successor of the Fisherman from Galilee, His Holiness Pius XI. Many titles have been used to designate him, and not without a well-merited reason. It is certainly no small thing to be the Vicar of the Son of God [*Vicario del Hijo de Dios*] on earth, to be helped by the Spirit from on High and also to rely on the illuminated precedent of a tradition with a centenary repeated twenty times."<sup>89</sup>

What Bloy and Gomá had written was evidently unknown to the Number of the Beast Committee whose 43-page manuscript was not printed by the Review and Herald Publishing Association. Neither Prescott nor the members of the committee were aware of these utterances in French and Spanish.

## Seventh-day Adventist Writers Supporting the Triple Six Interpretation

Seventh-day Adventist evangelists kept on preaching that the 666 of Revelation 13:18 represents *Vicarius Filii Dei*, a papal title, but a number of Seventh-day Adventist writers dissented from that interpretation beginning in the 1930s.

In 1933, for example, Prescott declared in *The Spade and the Bible*: "Those who interpret the beast as representing the Roman papacy, have taken from the Latin phrase *Vicarius Filii Dei* (the Vicar of the Son of God) the letters which have a numerical value, and find that their total is 666. They therefore conclude that this phrase indicates who the beast is." He countered this explanation because it resorted "to another language than the Greek, while the people of John's time employed the Greek *gematria*.' A satisfactory solution of this concealed name would be recognized if a personal name written in Greek could be found whose *gematria*' would be 666, and whose character and work would fulfill the specifications of the prophecy." What chiefly mattered in his opinion was the viewpoint of the first readers of the Apocalypse. One might reply that Prescott overlooked two important aspects: first, his assumption ignores the prophetic (future) character of the beast that would arise later in the Roman world where Latin (not Greek) would be the *lingua franca*; and second, first-century readers did not need to interpret all prophecies from their own perspective (cf. Daniel 8:17). To his explanation, Prescott added: "While it throws no particular light upon the question under discussion, yet it is worth noting that the numerical value of the name Jesus, written in Greek, is 888. If, as seems clear from the connection, the beast whose number is 666 is an opposer of Jesus the conquering Lamb of the book of Revelation, we are justified in declaring that the triple eight is the irresistible answer to the triple six."<sup>90</sup>

In 1939, Henry F. Brown (1892–1987), a Seventh-day Adventist missionary and minister, presented his 49-page manuscript "Vicarius Filii Dei: An Examination Into the Use of This Title" to the Committee on 666.<sup>91</sup> Among other things, he briefly summarized the conclusions reached by Prescott, French, and Froom. He reasoned that there was evidence for still maintaining that the name in Revelation 13:18 might refer to *Vicarius Filii Dei*, yet he suggested that this should be done guardedly because through Ellen G. White "we are distinctly told that all on this subject is not understood."<sup>92</sup> In his opinion, 666 was probably a title of Satan, a view that he supported by referring to Joseph A. Seiss' aforementioned work *The Apocalypse, Lectures on the Book of Revelation*.

The interpretation of the number of the beast as a triple six became increasingly common among Seventh-day Adventist scholars by the 1980s.

In 1983, Beatrice S. Neall (1929–2019), then associate professor of religion at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska and a member of the Daniel and Revelation Committee, published her doctoral dissertation *The Concept of Character in the Apocalypse, with Implications for Character Education*.<sup>93</sup> Concerning Revelation 13:18, she noted: “Six hundred sixty-six, the number of the beast. Irenaeus was the first who attempted to ‘reckon the number of the beast’ through the process of gematria, that is, assigning numerical values to the letters in a name. The methods used since then have been so devious and the suggestions so bizarre that it is more likely the meaning is to be found in the symbolic value of the number six itself. Since seven is the perfect number, six, being one short of seven, is the symbol of sin.”<sup>94</sup> She added, “It demonstrates that unregenerate man is persistently evil. The beasts of Rev[elation] 13 represent man exercising his sovereignty apart from God, man conformed to the image of the beast rather than to the image of God. ... Man apart from God becomes bestial, demonic.”<sup>95</sup> Like Brown, Neall’s argumentation hinged on the idea that the number 6 could be equated with 666, supposing three sixes in 666.

Two years later, C. Mervyn Maxwell (1925–1999), then professor of church history and chair of the Church History Department in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, published *God Cares: The Message of Revelation for You and Your Family*, volume 2. Maxwell outlined different interpretations of the 666 in Revelation 13, and showed how in Roman numerals it can represent *Vicarius Filii Dei*. He noted with reservations, however: “Here may be the true meaning of 666. But inasmuch as (a) there is some uncertainty about the official status of this title, and (b) the Bible doesn’t actually state that 666 is to be calculated on the basis of the numeric value of the letters in a name, let us look for other possibilities.”<sup>96</sup> Echoing the ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg in 1766 and David Thom in 1848, Maxwell stated: “The most prominent number in Revelation is seven. There are seven churches, seven trumpets, and so on. Seven is also the number of God’s sabbath, the seventh day of the week. ... So seven is a number that honors God. The number 666 is a human’ number (R.S.V.). The underlying Greek can be translated fairly as the number of *man* or as the number of man [mankind].’ The sixth day, Friday, is the day when man was created. Does 666 then, with its triple sixes, point to man focused inward on himself?”<sup>97</sup> He may not have been aware of the similarity of those ideas with those of Swedenborg and Thom. Instead, he cited Beatrice S. Neall who had “discussed this interesting concept: Six is legitimate when it leads to seven; it represents man on the first evening of his existence entering into the celebration of God’s creative power. The glory of the creature is right if it leads to the glory of God. Six hundred sixty-six, however, represents the refusal of man to proceed to seven, to give glory to God as Creator and Redeemer.”<sup>98</sup>

The second volume of *Symposium on Revelation*, published as part of the Daniel and Revelation Study Committee Series in 1992, contains a chapter on “The Saints’ End-Time Victory over the Forces of Evil,” by William G. Johnsson, then editor of the *Adventist Review* and formerly a Professor of New Testament Studies at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. In his chapter, he stated: “The element of parody is heightened in Revelation 13. We see an unholy trinity emerging: the dragon, the sea monster, and the land monster. The

parallels are striking, particularly between the sea beast and the Lamb. Both receive a stroke ('deadly wound'—but the monster receives it in the head); both experience a 'resurrection'; both have followers; both elicit worship. Perhaps, even the cryptic number of the sea beast, 666, is designated to heighten the parody. The number 6 (in contrast with the number 7 and completeness) may represent imperfection, deception, and blasphemy tripled, raised to a heightened degree.<sup>99</sup> Two years later, the chapter was reprinted in abridged form as a supplement to the *Adventist Review*. In an additional note, Johnsson explained: "Any explanation of the cryptic number will have to be tentative. Many Seventh-day [Adventist] expositors have thought that the alleged inscription *vicarius filii dei* on the papal tiara is the name indicated by the prophecy; however, more than 80 years ago W. W. Prescott showed how flimsy is the historical evidence for this interpretation. In my view the text suggests that 666 is the code for the name of the sea monster, which is blasphemy. It points to a parody of perfection: imperfection upon imperfection, despite the beast's monstrous claims."<sup>100</sup>

In 1996, Roy C. Naden also employed numerology in his work *The Lamb Among the Beasts* in order to unlock the meaning of the symbols in Revelation. While recognizing the gematria theory of *Vicarius Filii Dei*, he dismissed it in favor of the view that 666 is "a symbol of unmitigated, ungodly restlessness and rebellion, and a falling short of the Sabbath rest of the Lamb."<sup>101</sup>

Six years later, in 2002, the Adult Bible Study Guide on "Great Apocalyptic Prophecies" offered a similar perspective on Revelation 13:18. Its principal contributor, Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, then director of the Biblical Research Institute, wrote: "

*Vicarius Filii Dei* (Vicar of the Son of God). Since the Reformation, this papal title has been used to calculate the number 666. But there are several questions that should make us cautious. First, it is not clear that this title is an official one. Second, there is no clear indication in Revelation 13 that the number is based on the numerical value of the letters of a name. The phrase 'it is the number of a man' (vs. 18, NIV) could be translated 'it is the number of [humanity]'; that is, of humans separated from God. Third, those who insist on counting the numerical value of letters confront the problem of deciding which language will be used. Because the text does not identify any language, the selection of a particular one will be somewhat arbitrary. At the present time, the symbolism of intensified rebellion, six used three times, and total independence from God seems to be the best option. Time will reveal the full meaning of the symbol.<sup>102</sup>

In the same year, Ranko Stefanović, then professor of New Testament in the College of Arts and Sciences at Andrews University, published the first edition of *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*.<sup>103</sup> In that book, he stated: "The number 666 of the beast from the earth is 'a human number' (or 'the number of a man'), thus having something to do with human rather than divine characteristics and qualities. It is the typical number of Babylon. Six symbolizes a falling short of the divine ideal symbolized in the number seven. It appears that the triple six stands for the satanic triumvirate in contrast to the triple seven of the Godhead in Revelation 1:4-6."<sup>104</sup> In other places, he refers to it also as "the satanic trinity."<sup>105</sup> He generally agreed with

Rodríguez, yet unlike him, Stefanović applies the number to the second beast of Revelation 13 rather than the first one.

From 2002 to 2006, Samuele Bacchiocchi, retired professor of church history in the College of Arts and Sciences at Andrews University, repeatedly discussed the number 666 in his *Endtime Issues Newsletter*. In 2002, he agreed with most Adventist interpreters when he noted, "Another distinctive characteristic of the Little Horn is the time of his domination given in Daniel 7:25 as 'a time, two times, and half a time.' This prophetic period of three and a half years, is also designated as 42 months, or 1260 days. The three designations refer to the same prophetic period of time, which sometimes is given in years, sometimes in months, and other times in days. In Daniel 7:25 and 12:7, the three and a half years are the time when the Antichrist power oppresses the saints of the Most High." Unlike other Adventist writers, he then added, "Why do Daniel and John the Revelator use the three and a half years period to represent the persecution and protection of God's people during the time of the Antichrist? Most likely because three and a half is half of seven, which is the number of God's completion and perfection. Half of seven suggests incompleteness and limitation."<sup>106</sup> Commenting positively on the remarks of Stefanović and Rodríguez, he claimed three years later: "The phrase, 'it is a human number,' is understood by Adventist scholars today as meaning that 666 is a human number in the sense that it comes short of the divine perfection symbolized by 777. In the context of the false worship promoted by the Beast and its image, the triple six stands for the total false worship enforced by the endtime triune Antichrist." He explicitly dismissed the *Vicarius Filii Dei* interpretation as, in his view, "it is amazing to see how many names can be so manipulated so that the numeric value adds up to 666."<sup>107</sup>

Countering Alberto Treiyer and Wendell Slattery, who advocated the view that the 666 of Revelation 13:18 referred to *Vicarius Filii Dei*, Bacchiocchi cited his former teacher Kenneth A. Strand who had written, "There is obviously an intentional play on the number 6, heightened by the triple repetition of it." Bacchiocchi admitted that Slattery's argument was documented well, summarizing the latter's argument by saying that "the number 666 in Revelation 13:18 is not written in Arabic numeral as triple six (6 6 6), but in the Greek numeral value of three letters of the alphabet CHI = 600, XI = 60, and SIGMA [sic] = 6." Bacchiocchi overlooked that Slattery had referred to the letter stigma (Σ) rather than sigma (σ). Dismissing Slattery's conclusions, he emphasized the alleged symbolic nature of numbers, including 666, in the Apocalypse and elsewhere in the Bible.<sup>108</sup> He added that "the key phrase 'it is a human number,' *arithmos anthropou* (Rev. 13:18), suggests that it is not the number of a name, but of a human condition of rebellion against God. The triple six suggests a determined effort of the beast to promote the worship of himself rather than of God."<sup>109</sup> He neglected the fact that the Greek text of Revelation 13:18 speaks of the "number of a man" (*arithmos anthrōpou*) rather than "a human number." The Apostle John used the noun *anthrōpos* (man, human being) and not one of the Greek adjectives (*anthrōpeios*, *anthrōpikos*, *anthrōpinos*) that derived from that noun.<sup>110</sup> Bacchiocchi further failed to pay attention to the injunction to "calculate the number of the beast" (Revelation 13:18, emphasis supplied).

## Historicist Research on the Number 666 and Occurrences of *Vicarius Filii Dei* from 2006 to 2011

On August 6-9, 2006, the Michigan Conference of Seventh-day Adventists held a Scripture Symposium during its annual ministerial retreat at Camp Au Sable, Michigan.<sup>111</sup> One of the presenters, pastor-evangelist Kenneth Jørgensen, then a Ph.D. candidate in Adventist Studies in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, presented the paper "A Case for *Vicarius Filii Dei*." Jørgensen stressed that 666 is a single number, which does not consist of three sixes. He said: "Contrary to some proponents of the so-called symbolic view, the number of the beast is *not* six six six (*hex hex hex*), but rather six hundred and sixty six' (*hexakosioi hex?konta hex*)."<sup>112</sup> He also argued against the idea that 666 symbolized "humanity, rebellion, and imperfection," emphasizing that nothing in the Bible sustains such ideas, and noted that "contrary to the claim of some symbolic interpreters, sixty rather than six is the foundational number in ancient Babylonian mathematics." He pointed out that each of the four living creatures in Revelation 4:8 has six wings, showing that "six is explicitly associated with something perfect and heavenly." Further, the Genesis creation narrative declares the six days of creation to be "very good."<sup>113</sup> Jørgensen spoke out against "the illegitimate 'transubstantiation' of 666 into 6 6 6,"<sup>114</sup> affirming that 666 is not 6 but a complete and singular number in its own right. He mentioned "several manuscripts, using the following Greek letters: *ch xi S*. Here the Greek letter *ch* corresponds to 600, *x* corresponds to 60, and *S* corresponds to 6. Thus, the number 666, that is, six hundred and sixty six, could either be written using three different letters, or written out with three words. Regardless of which of these readings is chosen, John's readers would certainly have understood this as six hundred and sixty six—not, of course, as three separated sixes."<sup>115</sup>

As a prophetic historicist Jørgensen defended the *Vicarius Filii Dei* interpretation of the number 666 in Revelation 13:17, 18. For him, it was indubitably a papal title. Referring to the Donation of Constantine, he wrote: "Interestingly, the fact that the document in which the title appears is a spurious fabrication actually strengthens the 'Vicarius Filii Dei' interpretation; in other words, the history of the document clearly reveals the spiritual corruptness of its creator(s). It also shows to what length its sponsoring institution was willing to go in order to reach its universal goal of spiritual and political power. Perhaps no name or title reveals papal ambitions clearer than 'Vicarius Filii Dei,' especially as fraudulently done through *The Donation of Constantine*. . . . Finally, and most amazingly, 'Vicarius Filii Dei' contains virtually the same meaning as that of the Greek compound word 'anti-christ' (*antichristos*)."<sup>116</sup> In an emphatic rejection of the symbolic interpretation espoused by Bacchiocchi and others, Jørgensen stated: "Meddling with the historic identification of the sea-beast is a clear challenge to the foundational Adventist apocalyptic interpretation. Not only is it contradicting Ellen G. White's teaching on the apocalyptic Antichrist, challenging the Adventist interpretation of Daniel 7 and 8, but it may also severely affect Adventism's overall outlook on Daniel and the Revelation. The correct historical identity of Antichrist is absolutely pivotal for understanding the war between good and evil, the war between the victorious Christ and

the defeated Antichrist. This, by the way, is Daniel and Revelation in a nutshell."<sup>117</sup>

From 2007 to 2011, Stephen D. Emse, Jerry A. Stevens,<sup>118</sup> Michael Scheifler, and Edwin de Kock, conducted thorough new research to determine whether, and to what extent, *Vicarius Filii Dei* had been used as a papal title. The results of their research were incorporated in the book *The Truth About 666 and the Story of the Great Apostasy* (2011, 2013), by Edwin de Kock.<sup>119</sup> Massive new evidence in Italian, Spanish, German, French, English, Portuguese, and Welsh sources revealed that for centuries, the title *Vicarius Filii Dei* was indeed ascribed to many popes. Besides many examples given above, De Kock shows that although *Vicarius Filii Dei* started as a forgery in the papal chancery and therefore as a fraudulent title, it was used to boost the pontiff's claims to both spiritual and territorial supremacy for more than a thousand years. The Pope was called *il papa re* (Italian: the pope-king) over the Papal State, which encompassed about a third of Italy. He also regarded and sought to treat the emperors and kings of Europe as his secular subordinates. When Michael Scheifler acquainted William G. Johnsson with those new findings in 2011, the latter responded, "I am delighted that Adventist scholars have taken up the challenge of finding stronger support for our position regarding the mysterious number 666. The new evidence [about the use of *Vicarius Filii Dei*], which you briefly shared with me, seems convincing."<sup>120</sup>

Subsequently Alberto Treiyer presented his ideas in a 21-page Spanish-language article, which is largely a very favorable review of Edwin de Kock's *The Truth About 666 and the Story of the Great Apostasy*. Treiyer emphatically rejected the skepticism about the *Vicarius Filii Dei* interpretation that began with William Warren Prescottt in the early twentieth century, as well as the symbolic approach of Rodríguez, Stefanović, and Jon Paulien. He also strongly disapproved of how Bacchiocchi maintained that the number, the name, and the mark of the beast are one and the same thing, just as Catholic writers and many Protestant interpreters deny that the mark of the beast refers to Sunday-keeping. Treiyer concludes with a warning: "Adventism must stand firm in the historicist legacy which it received from its Protestant ancestors in order to interpret the prophecies of Revelation. No symbol of any figure and number of the Apocalypse should be allowed to distract our attention from its concrete fulfillment in the history that God clearly anticipated. In connection with the number 666, we must exercise caution that we not lose sight of the beast's name in our search for a presumed numeric symbolism, which may not exist in biblical Greek."<sup>121</sup>

Wendell Slattery likewise followed up his criticism of Bacchiocchi's approach in a newsletter distributed to a number of readers. He showed how the Greek letters *chi*, *ksi*, and *stigma* represented 600, 60, and 6, but not three sixes. He stated, "The point of this is that the way people represent numbers to others in their society determines a great deal about how they perceive those numbers. We write things in a way that lends itself to seeing the number 666 as three sixes. The Greeks did not do that in their number system, and for this reason I do not see any reason to accept the Triple Six Theory as the correct explanation. There are other reasons I have for rejecting it, but this is one important reason."<sup>122</sup>



Several Seventh-day Adventist writers speak of three unholy entities as the devil's counterpart to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, yet De Kock sees a difficulty with that view as the particularly nasty image of the beast (v. 14-17) constitutes a fourth malignant power. Together with the two-horned beast, it unleashes an economic boycott and even a death decree against all those who refuse to receive the mark of the beast. Thus, he does not perceive a trinity but a quaternity of evil in Revelation 13. Whereas one might argue that the image to the beast is not an independent power but simply another representation of the sea beast—an alternative point of worship for those who do not want to worship the beast directly—one has to consider that this image also differs from the sea beast as it is an imitation of the papacy.

In 2019, the Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide commented on the number of the beast in Revelation 13:18 as follows: "Paul describes him as 'the man of sin' (2 Thess. 2:3). This designation points to the papal power symbolized by the sea beast, whose blasphemous name on its heads points to the divine title it claims for itself, supposedly standing in the place of the Son of God on earth."<sup>23</sup> Although the Study Guide does not elaborate further on the last remark, it is noteworthy that the phrase "standing in the place of the Son of God on earth" is virtually a translation of *in terris Vicarius Filii Dei* (vicar/representative of the Son of God on earth), a phrase from the Donation of Constantine. The decision of the editor and publication board to allude to *Vicarius Filii Dei*, which does have a numeric value of 666, may be indicative of their preference for the interpretation of Uriah Smith, Andreas Helwig, and other Protestant interpreters.

## Conclusion

Over the centuries, two main methods of interpreting the number 666 in the Apocalypse have become prominent. The first one employs gematria and follows the stipulation in Revelation 13:18 to "calculate the number of the beast." Following the historicist approach to prophetic interpretation, the prediction of the biblical text is linked to a historical entity and real events. Since Uriah Smith advocated the interpretation of the number 666 as *Vicarius Filii Dei*, the majority of Seventh-day Adventist writers have belonged to that school of prophetic interpretation. Using Roman numerals from the Latin alphanumeric system, in the official language of the Catholic Church, they have pointed out that a very significant papal title, *Vicarius Filii Dei*, has a numeric value of 666. The other method is numerological. Previously, Preterist, Futurist, and Swedenborgian writers had used that method. W. W. Prescott and other Seventh-day Adventist writers have not used it to calculate the number of the beast but advocated the meanings of 6 in relation to 7 as symbols, with the latter indicating completion or perfection, and the former to symbolize human imperfection. Among Seventh-day Adventist scholars there have been different interpretations on the number 666. Recent research has demonstrated, however, that there is greater historical evidence for the connection of that number with the title *Vicarius Filii Dei* than has been previously recognized by some.

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