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666 or 616 (Rev. 13,18)

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EDITIONS «ARTOS ZOES»
ATHENS

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666 OR 616 (REV. 13:18)

MSS of the Book of Revelation

It is an irony, given that the book is one of the most discussed and critically examined of the NT literature, that textual resources for recovering the autograph of Revelation are fewer than for any other part of the NT². There are more than a thousand minuscule MSS for each of most of the other books; on the other hand, the Apocalypse [Apoc] is represented only in a total of approximately two hundred and fifty³. The book is, however, included in three relatively early uncial MSS. Codex **Ⲛ** (Sinaiticus, fourth-century) and Codex **A** (Alexandrinus, fifth-century) have the whole book, Codex **C** (Ephraemi Rescriptus, fifth-century) is fragmentary. The earliest extant witness of the NT are the papyrus MSS, they are therefore of great significance for the early history and restoration of the original text. These MSS presently number around 100, each is denoted by the sign **P** plus a numerical identification. The oldest fragment is the famous **P52** which contains a small piece of John 18 and is dated early second-century⁴. But again the sources here for the Book of Revelation are very scant. Four papyrus MSS have some of the book, they date between the second half of the third-century to the early fifth. Only one of these MSS could be called significant (**P47**), the other three (**P18 P24 P85**)⁵ are fragmentary:

Name: **P¹⁸** (Pap. Oxy. 1079) **Content:** Revelation 1:4-7 **Date:** Third century

Textual character: Aland says **P¹⁸** has a "normal" text; Metzger says it agrees with **Ⲛ A C**, the best witnesses to Revelation. Schofield asserted that in ten of the most important variation units, **P¹⁸** concurs with **Ⲛ** seven times, **A** eight times, and **C** eight times.

Name: **P²⁴** (Pap. Oxy. 1230) **Content:** Revelation 5:5-8; 6:5-8 **Date:** Third century

Textual character: Grenfell and Hunt said that **P²⁴** does not follow any one MS or group of MSS rigidly, although its closest agreement is with **Ⲛ** and **A**. Actually, the papyrus departs from **A** only three times (all in 5:6). Schofield noted that the text was written on a large leaf—part of a church Bible—and that the penmanship was the work of an untrained scribe.

Name: P⁴⁷ (Chester Beatty Papyrus III) **Content:** Revelation 9:10-17:2

Date: Second half of the third century (the handwriting is similar to that of P⁵ and P¹⁸)

Textual character: When this MS was first examined by Kenyon, he said that «it is on the whole closest to **ℵ** and **C**, with **P** next, and **A** rather further away». In Metzger's handbook, he said that P⁴⁷ agrees with **A C** and **ℵ**. Aland, in his handbook, counters Metzger; he says that P⁴⁷ is allied to **ℵ**, but not to **A** and **C**, which are of a different text type. Actually, Metzger clarified the matter earlier in the same handbook; he wrote, «In general the text of P⁴⁷ agrees more often with that of Codex Sinaiticus than with any other, though it often shows a remarkable independence».

Name: P⁸⁵ **Content:** Revelation 9:19-10:1, 5-9 **Date:** Fourth century or perhaps fifth

Textual Character: P⁸⁵ displays remarkable agreement with P⁴⁷ and with **ℵ** as over against **A** and **C**. In the three variation units in which P⁸⁵ is cited in NA²⁶, P⁸⁵ agrees with P⁴⁷ in every instance— and twice also with **ℵ** against **A** and **C**.

Early Manuscripts Containing Portions of Revelation sourced from Philip Comfort, *Early Manuscripts & Modern Translations of the New Testament*, (1990), pp. 39, 41, 52, 66.

These sources are, however, supplemented from other manuscripts of the NT, for example that of **P** (Codex Porphyrianus, ninth century) and from other ancient Old Latin and Vulgate, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and Ethiopic versions of the Apoc⁶. We should note here that the Greek lectionaries have no readings from Revelation. Quotations from the early Fathers of the Church also supplement the sources. Hippolytus (c. AD 170-235), for instance, finds great favour with H. C. Hoskier, who considers the text of the Roman bishop a 'standard'. The commentary of Andreas of Caesarea, *Ἐρμηνεία εἰς τὴν Ἀποκάλυψιν*, which may be assigned to the second half of the sixth century⁸ is also important. The archbishop of that ancient see preserved the Greek text that he used. From the ninth century onwards his work was widely transcribed: nearly a third of the known minuscule MSS of the Apocalypse contain it. However, there is a problem with Andreas's textual witness as H. B. Swete warns, «[i]n the MSS of the commentary of Andreas the Greek text of the Apocalypse varies considerably»⁹. It should be noted at this point, that the available critical editions do not necessarily give a complete list of readings and witnesses, and that the Greek manuscript evidence is limited and incomplete¹⁰.

εξακόσιοι ἐξήκοντα ἕξ or εξακοσίοι δέκα ἕξ

I will now turn my attention specifically to the matter concerning the variant reading of the Seer's cryptogram, whether 666 is to be preferred over 616. This textual question has persisted for too long¹¹, and served only to

complicate an already intricate area in the study of the Apoc. This is primarily due to commentators reluctance to go into sufficient detail of the history of the early text. Therefore the belief that the latter number (616) is a contender as an alternative reading persists. The material has to be presented afresh.

To begin with, the number *six hundred and sixty-six* is witnessed by the 5th century *Codex Alexandrinus (A)*, it is considered by textual critics one of the best witnesses of the Book of Revelation¹². *A* is the witness for the reading of the number for both *NA26* and *UBSGNT3*. The number is also attested by the ancient fourth-century *Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲛ or S)*. To add to the weight of this testimony is the early piece of the Apoc **P47** (Rev 9:10-17:2); it dates to the second half of the third-century. Furthermore it is also the reading of *P* (9th century), 051 (10th century), the Vulgate, the Majority text, and the Textus Receptus. The other number, *six hundred and sixteen*, owes its prominence to the fact that it is the reading favoured by the 5th century palimpsest *Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (C)*¹³. Though also an ancient witness, this codex is not considered the most reliable, it contains a mixture of readings (Alexandrian, Western, and later readings of a Byzantine type), which do not make it the best for textual criticism. Six hundred and sixteen is rejected by the critical editions of the NT. On at least four grounds this reading (616) can be considered outside the realm of probability as the authentic reading:

- (i) The two most ancient and respected codices (*A* & *Ⲛ*) favour the reading of *six hundred and sixty-six*.
- (ii) The early large fragment of the Apoc **P47** also favours 666.
- (iii) The reading of *six hundred and sixteen* into the early textual tradition can be explained: *a.* the number gives the name Nero when the Latinized spelling is followed, allowing for the early tradition of the name in the West and the possible attempt of a scribe to remain faithful to this interpretation by representing it to the Latin readers with a number reflecting their own alphabet. *b.* it may also be a deliberate attempt to identify the beast with Caligula (AD 12-41), this would bring the number in line with the Greek alphabet. The name Γ'χιως Κχισζς totals six hundred and sixteen¹⁴.
- (iv) Six hundred and sixteen was known to Irenaeus who as early as his time (AD 130-200) was inclined to believe that the number was an error, occurring «through the fault of the copyists ... others then received this reading without examination» (*Adv. Haer.* 5.30).

χξξ' or εξακόσιοι εξήκοντα έξ

«666» is most probably the original intention of the Seer rather than the written form of six hundred and sixty-six. This leads us to the next important

question: which of the two readings is more likely to be the correct. The situation here differs greatly to that of the above question of six hundred and sixty-six versus six hundred and sixteen. Either reading in this present instance has strong credentials. In the earliest papyrus fragment of the Apoc P47¹⁵ we find the abbreviated form $\chi\xi\xi'$. Other significant witness for this reading are 051, the Majority text, and the Textus Receptus¹⁶. On the other hand, **A**, **N**, **P**, and the Vulgate (sescenti sexaginta sex) have the number in standard written form, $\epsilon\xi\alpha\kappa\acute{o}\sigma\iota\omicron\iota \epsilon\xi\acute{\eta}\kappa\omicron\nu\tau\alpha \acute{\epsilon}\xi$, (**A**)¹⁷. The variant reading (616) in **C** is also written out, $\epsilon\xi\alpha\kappa\omicron\sigma\iota\alpha\iota \delta\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\alpha \acute{\epsilon}\xi$. Ironically, this textual difference (between the notation and the written form) in itself, further diminishes the variant reading of 616. That there was time enough for two strong lines of both representations of 666 to be established by at least the fourth century, further demonstrates the widespread acceptance of that particular reading. Other variations to this number are of interest to the extent that they help to establish the authentic reading or explain the deviation¹⁸.

Appeals to the MS traditions of both representations are equally convincing. Disagreements among scholars and editors of critical texts still remain as to the relative value of the MSS, (even of the methods or the approaches employed in the science)¹⁹. Nonetheless, four reasons have swayed this present writer to accept the tradition of the alphabetic notation $\chi\xi\xi'$ (*chi xi stigma*) against that of the written form. On their own each point has a weakness, but together the evidence is strong:

- i. the earliest witness (P47) testifies to the notation
- ii. it is the reading of the Majority Text
- iii. this particular form appeals to a puzzle²⁰ [$\psi\eta\phi\iota\sigma\acute{\alpha}\tau\omega$] (Rev 13:18)
- iv. it fits in better with the image of a mark²¹ [$\chi\acute{\alpha}\rho\alpha\gamma\mu\alpha$] (Rev 13:16)

The textual difficulties in Revelation are so intricate and numerous that they could not possibly be discussed here, nor was this the place for a systematic discourse on the principles of the textual critical-method. Our attention was on the «666»²² question. Issues raised and materials discussed were those that were considered elemental for the aim of this paper: to consider the probable reading for the «number of the beast» [$\alpha\rho\iota\theta\mu\acute{o}\nu \tau\omicron\upsilon \theta\eta\rho\acute{\iota}\omicron\upsilon$]. Based on the evidence that has been presented our conclusions are: (i) overwhelming support for $\epsilon\xi\alpha\kappa\acute{o}\sigma\iota\omicron\iota \epsilon\xi\acute{\eta}\kappa\omicron\nu\tau\alpha \acute{\epsilon}\xi$ as against $\epsilon\xi\alpha\kappa\omicron\sigma\iota\alpha\iota \delta\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\alpha \acute{\epsilon}\xi$, and (ii) good support for $\chi\xi\xi'$ as against $\epsilon\xi\alpha\kappa\acute{o}\sigma\iota\omicron\iota \epsilon\xi\acute{\eta}\kappa\omicron\nu\tau\alpha \acute{\epsilon}\xi$.

1. M. G. Michael is an Eastern Orthodox theologian and historian, he is presently a doctoral candidate at the Australian Catholic University where he is researching the canonical adventure of the Book of Revelation. A previous dissertation MA(Hons) submitted to Macquarie University investigated the history of the interpretation of the number of the beast (Rev 13:18).

2. The most exhaustive study of the subject is the monumental work by H. C. Hoskier, *Concerning the Text of the Apocalypse: A Complete Conspectus of all Authorities*, 2 Vols., (1929). Cf. esp. the *Prolegomena*, pp. ix-lxx. He emphasizes, «[t]he documents to which attention should particularly be directed are those which have a history independent of Church "use", and which owe their freedom from Ecclesiastical standardization to their transmission apart from the documents collected as our "New Testament". They are found in collections of treatises on mystical subjects and are listed under many numbers, and include no less than forty of our manuscripts, among which are 35 36 38 58 81 122 140 143 148 152 170 174 176 200 222 233 240 251, all documents meriting attention» (p. xi); for a review of Hoskier's classifications, which are at times difficult to follow, see J. K. Elliot, *Journal of Theological Studies*, «Manuscripts of the Book of Revelation Collated by H. C. Hoskier», Vol. 40, (1989), p. 100f.; for an up to date review on the Greek MSS, see J. K. Elliot, «The Distinctiveness of the Greek Manuscripts of the Book of Revelation», *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 48/1, (1997), pp. 116-124.

3. For the textual scene of the Book of Revelation, see *The Text of The New Testament*, Kurt Aland & Barbara Aland, (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987), Part III, pp. 242f.

4. For the complete list of these important papyri, uncials (lettered and numbered), minuscules, and lectionaries, see *The Greek New Testament (UBS3)*, ed. Aland, Black, Martini, Metzger, and Wikgren, (1983), pp. xiii-xxxi.

5. Other scholars would add P43 (Wadi Sarga 12 = P. Lond. Lit 220. Revelation 2, 15-16. VI-VII. Wadi Sarga. Papyrus sheet) and P98 (P. IFAO II 31. Revelation 1:13-20. II or early III. Provenance unknown).

6. But this *versional evidence*, as Aland et al. point out, «...must always be employed with caution since the very process of translation frequently obscures its textual basis, and resemblances can be merely accidental, especially if a translation is relatively free» (UBS3 p. xxxii).

7. H. C. Hoskier, *Concerning the Text of the Apocalypse*, Vol. I, (1929), pp. xlv-xlvi; Hort disagrees (*ibid.*, p. xlvi).

8. Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1922), p. cxcix.

9. *Op. cit.*, p. cxevi.

10. I am grateful to Dr Stuart Pickering, Research Fellow at the School of History, Philosophy and Politics, at Macquarie University, for bringing to my attention major bibliography which serves to complement our critical editions on the text of the Apoc.

This includes: Aland, K. (ed.), *Repertorium der griechischen christlichen Papyri*, I: *Biblische Papyri. Altes Testament, Neues Testament, Varia, Apokryphen* (Patristische Texte und Studien, Band 18), Berlin - New York, de Gruyter, 1976; *Kurzgefäbte Liste der griechischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments*, 2nd ed., revised and enlarged (Arbeiten zur Neutestamentlichen Textforschung, 1), Berlin, de Gruyter, 1994; *Biblia Patristica. Index des citations et allusions bibliques dans la littérature patristique* (Publications du Centre d'Analyse et de Documentation Patristiques [Strasbourg], vol. 1, Paris, 1986; Haelst, J. van, *Catalogue des papyrus littéraires juifs et chrétiens* (Université de Paris IV Paris - Sorbonne: Série «Papyrologie», 1), Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1976; Kenyon, F. G., *The Text of the Greek Bible*, 3rd ed. revised and augmented by A. W. Adams, London, Duckworth, 1975; Metzger B. M., *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament. A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (4th ed.)*, 2nd ed., London - New York, United Bible Societies, 1994; Schmid, J., *Studien zur Geschichte des griechischen Apokalypse-Textes*, 3 vols., Munich, 1955-1956; Tischendorf, Constantin von, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 8th ed., Leipzig, 1869-72, repr., 2 vols., Graz, Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, 1965.

11. Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1919, p. 403) notes the problem, albeit briefly, but is impressed by the testimony of Iren. (*Haer.* v. 30) for the reading of 666. (cf. also Zahn *Ein.* II. 637, cited *idem*).

12. Aland & Aland, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

13. It should be mentioned that Metzger notes that according to Tischendorf's 8th ed., the number 616 was also read by two minuscule manuscripts which are no longer extant (nos. 5 and 11). Metzger himself is inclined to think that «the change was intentional, seeing that the Greek form Neron Caesar written in Hebrew characters is equivalent to 666, whereas the Latin form Nero Caesar is equivalent to 616» (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary On The Greek New Testament. A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament* (third edition), London: United Bible Societies, 1975, p. 749f.). For critical commentary on other variants in chapter thirteen of the Apoc rf. the same, pp. 746-750.

14. A scribal error is unlikely here. The ξ and ι are too distinct as characters (χξς 666 to χις 616).

15. A segment of P47 (13:16-14:4) is included in the *Text of the New Testament, op. cit.*, p. 90, [Plate 23]. It is, however, incorrectly assigned to the second century.

16. The sweeping judgement by some critics that the witness of the bulk of the Byzantine manuscripts is susceptible on the grounds that for the most part they «represent the relatively standardized, ecclesiastically approved, version used in the Orthodox Church» (Keith Elliot and Ian Moir, *Manuscripts and the Text of the New Testament*, (T & T Clark: Edinburgh, 1995), p. 30), is not wholly justified. The opposite could be argued: that the consensus is proof of an authentic reading and that the Church, cognizant of her awesome responsibility, took great care to locate and to preserve the integrity of the text.

17. There are some insignificant differences in orthography. See *NA26*, p. 659.

18. For a list of these corrupt readings (which includes 665 [2344]), see H. C. Hoskier, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 364.

19. Gordon H. Clark has voiced concern over the method and reasoning of some modern day textual critics, he argues that «textual criticism cannot claim immunity from logical analysis» (Gordon H. Clark, *Logical Criticisms of Textual Criticism*, (1986), pp. 1-16). Clark also strongly objects to the B rating given to 666 by Aland (p. 48).

20. Cf. F. B. Bond & T. S. Lea, *Gematria: A Preliminary Investigation of the Cabala contained in the Coptic Gnostic Books and of a similar Gematria in the Greek text of the New Testament*, (1977 edn.); of several examples that we possess consider also the graffito found in Pompeii which reads: I love the girl whose number is 545 (φιλώ της αριθμός 545), cited Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, (T & T Clark: Edinburgh, 1993), p. 385.

21. For the marking of persons in antiquity, see C. P. Jones, «Stigma: Tattooing and Branding in Graeco-Roman Antiquity», *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 77, (1987), pp. 139-154.

22. For an excellent overview and interpretation of «666» by an Eastern Orthodox scholar, see Μάρκος Αντ. Σιώτης, *666 (ΧΞΣΤ'): Ο Αριθμός της Ταυτότητος του Αντιχρίστου*. (Αθήνα: Ο Άγιος Νικόδημος ο Αγιορείτης, 1987); see also Richard Bauckham for a sober and comprehensive discussion, *op. cit.*, pp. 384-407.