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11 – The Riddle of 666

Samson said to them,
"Let me pose a riddle to you
"Out of the eater came something to eat,
And out of the strong came something sweet".
…So the men of the city said to him…
"What is sweeter than honey?
And what is stronger than a lion?"
(Judges 14:14, 18)

Riddles! A favorite pastime in days gone by. And not surprisingly, the Bible has a few – one of which is found in that mysterious passage of Revelation 13:18.

> **This calls for wisdom: Let the one who has insight calculate the beast's number, for it is man's number, and his number is 666. (NET)**

Even today we enjoy guessing games, but in ancient times such games were played with peculiar intensity, sometimes with life-and-death consequences. Samson's riddle to his Philistine guests is a good example. Likely then, this verse about the 666-number was meant as a riddle,

styled somewhat along the lines of those of ancient times.

It sounds like it anyway, judging by how John expresses it. He is challenging us: *"Let the one who has insight calculate the beast's number."* At least one Bible translation expresses it this way: *"solve a riddle: Put your heads together and figure out the meaning of the number of the Beast. It's a human number: 666."* (The Message Bible) The answers to such riddles were simple enough, yet at the same time they were difficult to figure out. In the example of Samson, his guests were baffled by the riddle until they cheated – forcing Samson's bride-to-be to give them the answer.

By definition, a riddle is "an obscure description of something"; riddles often lead one to think the answer is something different to what it really is. For example in the riddle, "What invention lets you look right through a wall?" the word "invention" misleads the hearer towards thinking of some kind of advanced technology; it might be difficult to come up with the simple answer – "a window" – because we don't normally think of the window as an "invention".

The riddle of "how do you calculate the 666-number?" is similar. Because of the wording, we may think it is something extremely complicated or mysterious, but the answer, like the "window", appears to be rather ordinary: look in the barcodes.

Here is a rather silly one: "What has 4 eyes but can't see?" The answer is "Mississippi". In this riddle the word "eye" only sounds like the letter "i", and according to dictionary rules, they're not the same thing. But according to the flexible rules of riddle-telling, it is permissible to overlook those normal boundaries.

Similarly, the 6-6-6 pattern in the barcodes are not real 6's (according to a point-of-sale computer). But, in the riddle genre that doesn't matter; to our eyes they look like 6's (just as the "i" in Mississippi sounds like "eye"). Maybe it's just a case of *"the foolishness of God"* being *"wiser than men."* (1Corinthians 1:25, KJV)

Then there is the famous legendary riddle of the sphinx from ancient Greek mythology: "What goes on four legs at dawn, two legs at noon, and

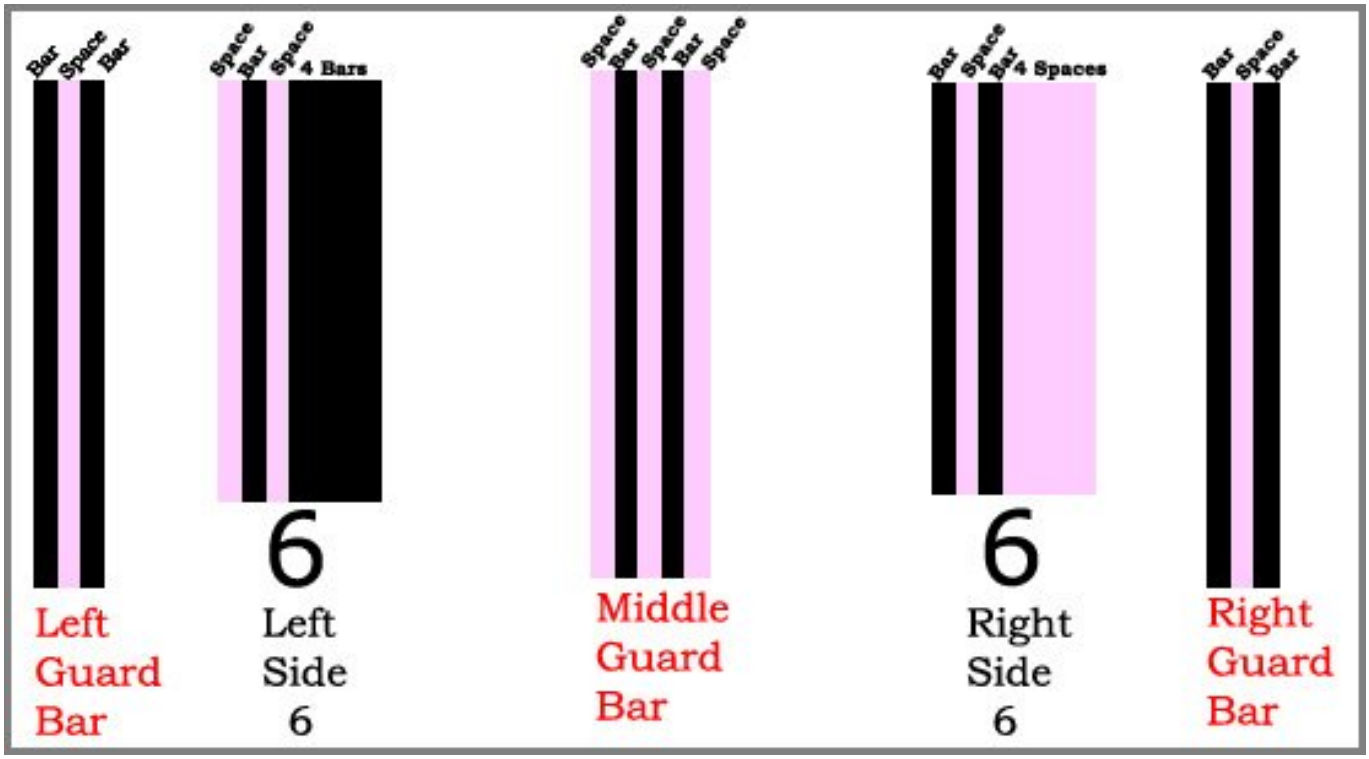
three legs in the evening?" Travelers on their way to Thebes in ancient Greece would, according to the legend, be killed by the sphinx monster if they couldn't answer. One person, Oedipus, solved the riddle: "Man, who as a baby crawls on four legs, then walks on two legs as an adult, and in old age walks with a cane as his third leg."

Like our riddle of the *"666-number"*, there are a few conditions that the answer has to meet. One might argue that the sphinx's riddle is misleading because dawn, noon, and evening are spread over a day only, not a lifetime. But that is part of the nature of riddles; especially the ancient ones seem to make more use of these misleading metaphors.

And finally this riddle: "A man leaves home and turns left three times, only to return home facing two men wearing masks. Who are those two men?" The answer here is "a catcher and umpire". A riddle like this, however, is limited to a certain culture (American) where baseball is a popular sport; to guess or even understand the answer, would be too difficult for most people from a different culture.

And similarly, we could imagine that the *"666-number"* riddle, coming as it does out of a vastly different culture, might be difficult to grasp for us who come from a modern, scientifically oriented culture. So if the 6-6-6 pattern in the barcode seems to us to be an inaccurate way of explaining the number of the Beast's name, we could probably allow for that, knowing that John was writing in this "riddle" style. And riddles, as we know, tend to use flexible boundaries for the rules of reality, rather than strict adherence to them.

So now, let's analyze John the Apostle's riddle more closely. In Chapter 9 "Birth of the Barcode", it was mentioned that a store's computer does not read the unmarked lines as 6-6-6. Only the left and right side 6 (marked as a 6) are read by the computer as a 6.



What our eyes actually notice in the unmarked Guard Bars is the bar-space-bar pattern of the Right Side 6. Thus, the barcode appears to be "book-ended" by three sets of guard bars resembling the code for a 6

The right-side 6 (marked) displays as
"bar-space-bar-space-space-space-space."
(This is the true 6 as far as the computer is concerned.)
The beginning and ending guard-bars (unmarked) are patterned differently:
"bar-space-bar" on the left,
"bar-space-bar" on the right.
The middle guard-bar (unmarked) is patterned
"space-bar-space-bar-space".

The thing to keep in mind here is that, out of the 20 possible patterns for the numbers 0 to 9 (10 for the left side and 10 for the right side), there is only one number that contains bar-space-bar pattern, and that is the number 6 on the right side. So to our human eyes (not the computer's), these three unmarked "guard-bars" (on the left, middle, right) look like they are representing 6-6-6, even though the computer reads them in a different way (as transition markers).

Why was this particular pattern for the guard-bars selected, or why was the number 6 attached to this pattern, we may wonder? Mr. Laurer could have chosen a different pattern or different number for this pattern. Well, maybe that's just how God wanted it – not only to fulfill what was revealed so long ago, but also because the number 666 is usually acknowledged as *"man's number"*; it is even the *"number of the beast"*.

In the Beginning both man and the beasts were created on the *"sixth day"*. (Genesis 1:24-31) So the number 6 has come to be associated with the world of humans and their governments, which the Bible symbolizes as *"beasts"*.

The number 7, on the other hand, is considered to be God's number of completion; on the 7th day His creation of our environment was completed. In the Book of Revelation the completion of the present Age of human history follows a 7-step pattern: the 7 *"seals"* of the Book of the Future; the 7 *"trumpets"* of the Tribulation period, and the final 7 *"bowls"* of destruction. Once these 7's are completed, the present Age will be finished, the false utopia of its final empire ushered out, and the Kingdom of God will be ushered in.

The world of humankind without God is incomplete. And so it is associated with the number 6. The number serves also as a signpost, coming before the number 7. It signals the End of the Age era and alerts us to where we are in the long journey of human history… which is coming to a close, while God's history moves on, taking with it those who have been trying to follow His plans for their lives and for the future of humankind.

And that's about all the numerology you need to know.

Let us review then the different aspects/conditions of John the apostle's "riddle" and see where it will lead us:

1) First of all, this "*number of man*" phrase seems to point to the fact that the *"number"* belongs to the earthly realm, the world of humankind, and not some other-dimensional spiritual realm. In the very next verse and chapter, God's "video camera" makes an abrupt scene change, and John gets a dramatic view of those in the Heavenly

Realm who have received God's *"name"* in their *"foreheads"*. So, by way of contrast, this phrase – *"for it is man's number"* – is like a way of categorizing the number, emphasizing the fact that it (and by extension, the rest of the system) belongs merely to the earthly realm of humankind.

And since it's in our realm, the number can therefore be calculated or computed. Even if it's a bit mysterious, it's not unknowable. If the *Number* were not a human number, then presumably, one would not be able to figure it out since it would be existing in a different realm, the spirit world – beyond the reach of our earthly senses. So the passage reads, *"Calculate the number of the beast for it is man's number."*

2) As for the word *"calculate", o*lder translations have written, "Count the number". But in most newer translations, it is written, "Calculate the number". In the NLT translation, "Solve the meaning of the number". In the GW translation, "Figure out the number". In the GN translation, "Figure out the meaning of the number". In other words, the challenge is being given to exercise our mental capacity to search and figure out how to find this Number 6-6-6. The definition for the original Greek word – *psephizo* – is interesting:

> ***Psephizo*: *to count with pebbles, to compute, calculate, reckon… TO EXPLAIN BY COMPUTING* (from *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* by Joseph H. Thayer, first published in 1901 – long before the computer age!)**

3) As mentioned earlier (in Post 7), the *"name of the beast"* from verse 17 is an intangible reality and stands for the Beast's domain of influence. It is not an actual proper name; technically, it cannot be "added" to form a number. How do you attach a number to a nebulous thing like the Beast's authority, reputation, etc.? But this is a riddle, so that technicality can be overlooked. So, instead of trying to think of a name that adds up to 666, if we understand the *"name of the beast"* as meaning his power, influence, and authority in the earthly realm, then it could be assigned a symbolic number, a number that even does double duty.

- **Firstly, 666 is a good number to symbolically designate**

the Beast's Name (underlining the fact that the Beast's power exists in the earthly realm only and is therefore incomplete); secondly, the Number has its practical application in a device (the barcode) that accesses the Antichrist and False Prophet's system by enabling the sale of merchandise. And the *"mark"* works in a similar way; it also is a practical device to access the system by enabling the purchase of merchandise.

- **In this passage the focus is more on the "system" than on the man who heads the system. In the Book of Revelation the word *"beast"* refers both to the empire and to the head of the empire. (See Appendix in Post 6 for full explanation.) The term *"beast"* symbolizes a compound reality – the empire (which includes the economic system) and its emperor (the Antichrist).**
- **In Greek the word for *"beast"* is in the neuter gender, which is why the Beast is often referred to by the word *"it"* in many translations: *"it causes all… number of its name"*. (13:16-17 in several Bible versions) This neuter gender puts some emphasis on the *"beast"* as an impersonal entity – like a system of commerce or government.**

4) For some peculiar reason the *Number*, which is supposed to be *"man's number"*, is given in the form of three sixes – not two sixes, not one six, but three. If it is *"man's number"*, then one six would have been sufficient, but somehow it has to be three sixes. And of course, this directs our attention to the three unmarked bars that look like the number six in the barcodes found on all the merchandise sold in our world today.

From the above points we see that the 666-number satisfies the two main requirements: Firstly, from the practical point of view, it is needed to facilitate the selling side of commercial transactions. Secondly, from a figurative point of view, it symbolically "adds up" to the *Name of the Beast* (his power and influence), simply because 6 is *"man's number"* and represents the earthly domain that is incomplete without having God as its ruler.

One odd thing about John's statement in verse 18 is that he first

challenges the reader to *"calculate the number of the beast"* but then seems to give the answer: *"his number is 666."* So what is he really getting at here? A helpful hint can be found in the definition of the Greek word *"calculate"* (*psephizo*). As mentioned earlier, the fine-tuned meaning for the Revelation 13:18 version of it is "explain by computing". How uncanny this definition given long before the dawn of the computer age. So, in this riddle John is not challenging the reader to find out what the number is; rather the challenge is, how do you find the number?

To re-word this "riddle" then, it might go like this: how do you explain or find (by reckoning or calculating) a number that satisfies the following conditions?

> **1) It shows up or appears as 666. (*"His number is 666."*)**
> **2) It belongs in the human or earthly realm. (*"it is man's number."*)**
> **3) Although *"it is man's number"*, it is not listed as 6, but rather 666.**
> **4) It represents and accesses the Beast's name/authority. (*"the number of his name"*)**
> **5) It must be used for shopping activity, especially in the selling side of commercial transactions. (*"No one could… sell unless he had… the number."*)**

Well, in the old days it was premature trying to figure out how 666 could satisfy those conditions (although many tried to anyway). But now we have a lot more information at our disposal – a knowledge of new methods of commercial exchange, unheard of in olden days.

Former scholars tended to put too much emphasis on a numeralogical connection to a literal, proper name and ignored the connection to the buying and selling system. In those days, before the advent of modern technology, no one could see any connection between 666 and commercial exchanges, so translators were tempted to emphasize something that seemed to make more sense, such as finding a 666 numeralogical equivalent for the Beast's *"name"*.

But now that we know about the modern market system, that diminishes somewhat the importance of trying to tie in the number to some proper name of the Antichrist. And of course, now we can find where

the *Number* does connect… in the barcodes that sellers print on their merchandise.

It has taken many centuries for the historical conditions to arrive that would give us an easier-to-grip handle onto this baffling riddle passed down to us from ancient times.

Despite this crucial technological information we have now, our modern cultural mindset still experiences some difficulty in understanding what is meant by this ancient passage of Scripture, for a few reasons:

1. **The custom of riddle-telling is not as intense now as it was in ancient times. So we're not geared to thinking in that way about this passage. We feel it has to be totally accurate, and that doesn't help much in the business of figuring out riddles. The answer is simple enough; but the description for it is expressed in terms that can mislead us in our thinking.**
2. **The custom of using letters for numbers, which in turn meant you could use numbers in place of names, doesn't exist in modern languages (except Roman numerals), so we find it difficult to relate to this aspect of the riddle. Furthermore, we don't realize that a *"name"* could mean a lot more than a person's literal proper name. Applying the number 666 to a nebulous thing like the Beast's power and authority is not the same as applying it to a literal name, but it is a possibility that we in the modern day are not likely to consider.**
3. **Most translations are a little inaccurate because they were made before the advent of modern technology and tended to place undue emphasis on connecting the Number to a literal *"name"* of the Beast. This seemed the only sensible option since it was difficult to see how the Number could have anything to do with commercial transactions. Sometimes also, translators felt obliged to slant the wording slightly so the passage could relate in some way to their current historical situation. (See Post 10 for more details.)**

Since the number is supposed to tie in with the buying and selling system (according to the previous verse 17), then the best answer to the riddle appears to be the barcodes found on the world's merchandise, in which are hidden the 666-numbers.

And already, without the barcode and its 666-number, it is difficult in many countries to buy or sell in their market places. Perhaps something else will come along that better fulfills what is said about the *"number"*, but if it doesn't, we can understand that the 666 number encoded in all our barcoded merchandise would fit nicely as the final, ultimate fulfillment of what verses 17 and 18 say about the *"number of the beast".*

It may take a little *"wisdom"* and *"insight"* to detect this number. It won't be too obvious; one has to *"calculate"* it, figure out how it works; the thing is a bit hidden. And according to how the bar codes work, it is indeed true that these numbers are rather hidden. But they're there and can be found with a little "reckoning" (as some translations put it).

Earlier it was mentioned that the apostle John, because of his ignorance of modern technology, attributed magical powers to certain features of the False Prophet's ministry, regarding the *"image"* especially. (This subject is explored in more depth in Post 5 of *Unraveling the Mystery of the Image* series.) Similar to his description of the *"image"*, John can't help but embellish the description of the 666-number according to the cultural milieu of his time: 1) the ancient custom of representing names by numbers and 2) their predilection for telling riddles.

Neither of those customs is followed much nowadays. But that was John's "style", suited for an ancient time. And of course, we have to understand that God was revealing and speaking here to someone from an ancient time; so it was God's style also. And sometimes it seems He likes to tease us a bit – just as we like to tease our friends sometimes with guessing games and riddles.

***"The foolishness of God is wiser than men."* (1Corinthians 1:25) From time to time God likes to be lighthearted with us. He doesn't want to be "heavy", as we say, or gravely serious, all the time. So, instead of having this "heavy" idea about a sinister 666 Number, maybe we're supposed to see the 666-number mystery from a more lighthearted point of view – as something very ordinary that God is teasing us with. But of course, it is an important signpost to tell us where we are in history – awfully close to the End.**

The Lord had revealed to John that this number had a useful function in

the False Prophet's buying and selling system. It's a feature or highlight in the system that the Lord chose to reveal and use as a "sign of the times". And it's an important sign, for this number 6, in addition to its practical value in point-of-sale selling of goods, also carries tremendous symbolic significance.

In reality, the *Number* is nothing more than a convenient number we use in computerized shopping activity – something that has become part of our everyday life. But for John that everyday aspect of the number was lost to his mind and way of thinking. John couldn't see it in a mundane fashion. And so, he can't help but embellish the description, which may lead us to think there's more to this *"number"* business than meets the eye.

And that is, after all, how riddles are designed – worded in a complicated way to make us think the answer is something ESTRAORDINARY when it's actually something ORDINARY – in this case, a modern day convenience to make shopping easier. But because of the way riddles are expressed, that ordinary solution escapes our thoughts. (Remember the "window" riddle?)

As a result there has arisen much speculation, interpreting the 666-number as something dreadfully sinister or in terms of a numeralogical puzzle of some sort or another.



True, it is the *"number of the beast"*, which makes it sound a little terrifying. But the word *"beast"* includes the infrastructure over which the Antichrist and False Prophet are ruling. That system uses the number 666, in conjunction with the Mark, to expedite buying and selling operations. And that's it.

It is also be called *"man's number"*, that is, it exists in the human, earthly realm. Having been created on the 6th day, the world of human beings is often associated with the number 6. (But interestingly, the

number is not just 6, but 666.)

So, what John is saying is not wrong, but perhaps, because of that extra "spin", his words have given rise to much speculation about the numerology of the Antichrist's name. As a result we in our day may struggle to realize that the number has, in fact, become an ordinary feature of modern life. Ordinary to us, but to John the Apostle, it was something extraordinary. And his viewpoint translates a bit into his description of the *"number"*.

The *"number"* is coded in the barcodes on the goods that we buy, and they help to make shopping more efficient. But the Scripture, as a "riddle", indulges in some exaggeration, calling it *"the number of the beast"* and *"man's number"*. These statements are true enough, but they do make a somewhat embellished description of something that, in reality, is quite ordinary. But that's just how riddles are framed.

As a "sign", the 666 in the barcode is quite startling. Everyone has heard of this famous, or infamous, number. But few know that it is already here, an indispensable part of our everyday living. And it was foretold 2,000 years ago in the Book of Revelation. And that, of course, is EXTRAORDINARY, and a difficult-to-ignore "sign" to point us towards realizing how close we are to the end of our present Age.

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Continue to Part 12 – Symbolic Significance of the *"Number"*