**audio excerpt:** “Lot six-six-six, then, a chandelier in pieces. Some of you may recall the strange affair of the phantom of the Opera, a mystery never fully explained.” (Webber, Andrew Lloyd, Charles Hart, and Richard Stillgoe. “Prologue (The Stage of Paris Opéra House, 1905).” Recorded January 1987. Track 1 on *The Phantom of the Opera: Original Cast Recording.* The Really Useful Group Ltd., Apple Music.)

**presenter:** “Even those who are unacquainted with Christianity and/or the Bible probably know that ‘666’ is supposed to be: of the dark, of evil, of the infernal. Specifically, it’s said to be ‘*the number of the beast*’” (Rev 13:18, Brown, 2020).

**video excerpt:** “Let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person.Its number is six-six-six.” (Kosa, Frank, Scott Tiffany, and James Younger, writers. *The Story of God with Morgan Freeman*. Season 1, episode 2, “Apocalypse.” Aired April 10, 2016, in broadcast syndication. National Geographic Channel.)

**presenter:** “The concept of ‘666’ has figured in myriad works and compositions since its advent a little under two millennia ago. For example, the 1976 supernatural-horror film ‘The Omen,’ in which a man finds the number imprinted on the scalp of his adopted son Damien.”

**video excerpt:** [ominous music] (Desk, Video. “The Omen (1976) Haircut Scene.” Express.co.uk. Express.co.uk, December 22, 2020. https://www.express.co.uk/videos/4704218831001/The-Omen-1976-Haircut-scene.)

**presenter:** “Many have heard or read about ‘666,’ but far fewer people know what it actually meant in its literary and historical context. If you ask somebody what or who ‘the beast’ bearing the number 666 is, you’ll likely get the following interrelated assertions: ‘the beast’ is ‘the Antichrist’; ‘the Antichrist’ is the biological son of Satan; and therefore, ‘the beast’ is as well. The reality, though, is that the record regarding ‘the beast,’ its number 666 and ‘the Antichrist’ has long been falsified. These days, we might call it ‘fake news.’

Ground zero for ‘666’ is in chapter 13 of the New Testament’s book of Revelation: ‘*Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six*’(Rev 13:16–18, Brown, 2020).

(In that passage, the ‘it’ that causes people to be marked is another ‘beast,’ referred to as ‘*the false prophet*’ [Rev 16:13; 19:20; 20:10, Brown, 2020].)

The book of Revelation is a Greek-language composition written during the second half of the first century of the Common Era. Revelation is said to be the work of a man named John, exiled by the Roman authorities to the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. The book was written to give comfort and hope to devotees of Jesus of Nazareth, called ‘Jesus Christ’ by his followers.

(Jesus, it should be noted, was of Jewish birth, as were the vast majority of his earliest devotees, John almost certainly included. Eventually, all the followers of Jesus—whether Jewish-born or Gentile—would come to call themselves ‘Christians.’)

The book of Revelation includes a series of dramatic visions given to John on Patmos, many of which concern the cataclysmic end of the world.”

**video excerpt:** [dramatic music] (Dorff, Matt. “The Book of Revelation - A Graphic Novel.” Translated by Mark Arey, Philemon D. Sevastiades, and Chris Diamantopoulos. Illustrated by Chris Koelle. YouTube. YouTube, September 12, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfyrfBsFb-4.)

**presenter:** “As we’ve seen, one of John’s visions is of ‘the beast,’ a nightmarish creature conjured up from the sea by Satan and said to possess ‘*ten horns and seven heads*’ (Rev 13:1, Brown, 2020).

What has exercised such a hold over the human imagination is that the multi-headed ‘beast’ is designated by a seemingly mysterious number: ‘*the number of its name*’ is 666 (Rev 13:17, Brown, 2020). John writes that it will require ‘*wisdom*’ and ‘*understanding*’ to decipher his riddle (Rev 13:18, Brown, 2020). But actually, the majority of biblical scholars will tell you that all it requires is two pieces of rather basic information. First, you have to know that the Roman emperor, Nero, treated Christians viciously in the mid ’60s in Rome. (The next clip mentions Tacitus, a Roman historian and politician who wrote about Nero.)”

**video excerpt:** “In AD 64, a disastrous fire breaks out in Rome, devastating areas of the city. And Tacitus says that Nero fixed upon the Christians as those responsible. Christians were subjected to exquisite tortures, victims of elaborate execution and consumption by wild beasts and, of course, crucifixion.” (*Finding Jesus: Faith. Fact. Forgery*. Season 2, episode 5, “The Bones of St. Peter.” Featuring Mehdi Aissaoui, Steffan Boje, and Adam Bond. Aired April 2, 2017, in broadcast syndication. CNN.)

**presenter:** “The second thing you have to know about is the concept of numerology, in which alphabetic letters also have numerical values.”

**video excerpt:** “In ancient Greek, and Hebrew, every letter had a corresponding number. If you add up the letters of the name for Emperor Nero written in Hebrew—‘Kaisar Neron’—the total comes to six-six-six.” (Kosa, Frank, Scott Tiffany, and James Younger, writers. *The Story of God with Morgan Freeman*. Season 1, episode 2, “Apocalypse.” Aired April 10, 2016, in broadcast syndication. National Geographic Channel.)

**presenter:** “So, here are the Hebrew letters that flashed across your screen in that clip.

Most scholars believe that John expected his intended audience to recognize ‘*six hundred sixty-six*’ as being the total of the numerical values of the Hebrew letters ‘QSR NRWN’ (Rev 13:18, Brown, 2020).

Further proof of this would seem to be provided by the fact that there are manuscripts of the book of Revelation in which ‘the number of the beast’ isn’t 666 but rather 616.”

**video excerpt:** “We’ve got two different numbers. This one over here, we have a Chi Iota Sigma—six-one-six. This would be the number that we would get if we spelled ‘Nero’ according to the Latin spelling: ‘Nero Caesar.’ The letter N represented 50. So, six-six-six minus 50—six-one-six.” (Kosa, Frank, Scott Tiffany, and James Younger, writers. *The Story of God with Morgan Freeman*. Season 1, episode 2, “Apocalypse.” Aired April 10, 2016, in broadcast syndication. National Geographic Channel.)

**presenter:** “So, losing the last N, we subtract a value of 50: 616.

Finally, Revelation 13:3 strengthens the Nero correlation even more, as John says of ‘the beast’ that ‘[*o*]*ne of its heads seemed to have received a death blow, but its mortal wound had been healed*’(Brown, 2020). This is thought by most biblical scholars to reflect the fact that after Nero committed suicide in the year 68, there was disbelief that he was truly dead, and thus a fear that he might somehow regain power and resume his persecution of Jesus’s followers.

Finally, let’s return to the supposed equation between ‘the beast’ of Revelation and ‘the Antichrist.’ In the book of Revelation, and in Christianity generally, Jesus is inextricably connected to God. Thus, he may be said to have authority over the peoples of the world. By contrast, ‘the beast’ is an enemy of God and Jesus, and is said to ‘*utter blasphemies against God*,’ and to have been ‘*given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation*’(Rev 13:6, 7, Brown, 2020). It doesn’t require much of a leap to connect ‘the beast’ to ‘the Antichrist,’ a figure whose very title means either ‘against Christ’ or ‘instead of Christ.’

But the term ‘antichrist’ doesn’t appear at all in the book of Revelation. In the New Testament, it’s found only in the books 1 John and 2 John, where it’s attested four times in the singular and once in the plural. (This ‘John,’ it should be noted, is not John of Patmos.)

Here are the four antichrist verses (1 Jn 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 Jn 7, Brown, 2020).

In 1 John 2:18, ‘*the last hour*’ appears twice, revealing that, like ‘the beast,’ ‘*the antichrist*’ (or ‘*antichrists*’—plural) will come in the End Times, an apocalyptic association that also encouraged the equation of ‘beast’ with ‘antichrist’ (Brown, 2020). That the term appears in both the singular and the plural demonstrates that ‘antichrist’ was essentially a label for mortal rulers who would oppose the primacy of God and Jesus. Given that reality, it’s not surprising that there’s no evidence that early Christians interpreted ‘antichrist’ and ‘the beast’ of Revelation as being synonymous. And, neither ‘beast’ nor ‘antichrist’ is ever said to be the biological son of Satan. (although, as we saw earlier, ‘the beast’ can be taken to be an emanation of Satan.)

Ultimately, what we’re left with in chapter 13 of Revelation is a mortal man who’s being identified through numerology, rather than being explicitly named. He’s depicted as a supernatural, multi-headed monster because he terrorized early Christians as Roman emperor.

The two major takeaways from this are, then: #1) ‘*six hundred sixty-six*’ in Revelation 13:18 does not relate to the term ‘antichrist’; and #2) ‘*six hundred sixty-six*’ has nothing to do with Satan’s biological offspring, a concept for which there’s zero basis in the New Testament or other early Christian writings.

But this knowledge has remained confined to comparatively few people; small in number have been those with the requisite ‘*wisdom*’ and ‘*understanding*’ that John assumed his intended audience would possess. Still, given the fascination that ‘666’ has provoked in the human imagination for almost two millennia, maybe that’s ultimately for the best—this world might be a less interesting place if more of us knew ‘the four-one-one’ on ‘666.’”

**video excerpt:** “Six-six-six: the number of the beast. Six-six-six: the number of the beast.” (ironmaiden. “Iron Maiden - The Number of the Beast (Official Video).” YouTube. YouTube, August 7, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxnN05vOuSM.)