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WHO IS THE ANTICHRIST?

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For centuries Christians have speculated about the identity of the Antichrist. Likely candidates have included European monarchs and popes of the Roman Catholic Church. Major international crises of the twentieth century provided other prime suspects such as Adolf Hitler, Mikhail Gorbachev, Saddam Hussein, and Osama bin Laden. American president George W. Bush and British prime minister Tony Blair have also surfaced on the lists of prophecy pundits.

So, who is the Antichrist? Rather than joining in this sensationalistic game of pin-the-tail-on-the-Antichrist, Christians need only go to Scripture to find the answer. The apostle John exposed the identity of antichrist when he wrote, "Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also" (1 John 2:22–23 NIV). In his second epistle, John gives a similar warning: "Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist" (2 John 7 NIV). John did not reserve the title "antichrist" for any one particular individual; rather, he taught that anyone who denies the incarnation, messianic role, or deity of Jesus is the antichrist.

John did indicate in the book of Revelation, however, that one individual would personify evil in a unique way as the ultimate archetype of all the types of antichrist. Instead of referring to this individual as the Antichrist, John referred to him as "the Beast." So, who is the Beast of Revelation? Again we must properly interpret Scripture to find the answer.

First, John explains to his first-century readers that with "wisdom" and "insight" they could "calculate the number of the Beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666" (Rev. 13:18 NIV). It stands to reason, therefore, that the individual John had in mind must have been alive during the first century. No amount of wisdom or insight would have enabled first-century Christians to identify a far-future individual. It would have been cruel and dangerously misleading for John to suggest to first-century Christians that they could identify the Beast if in fact the Beast was a twenty-first-century institution or individual.

Furthermore, an examination of the historical context in which John was writing reveals that John was appealing to a widely used method of associating each letter of the alphabet with a corresponding numerical value. This process is known as *gematria*. According to *gematria*, six hundred sixty-six is the sum value of the Hebrew letters (not recognizable to the Roman authorities of John's day) that spell the name of the first-century Roman Emperor whom the great nineteenth-century biblical scholar Milton Terry called "the veriest incarnation of wickedness": Nero Caesar.

Ancient accounts of Nero's life, most notably that recorded in *The Twelve Caesars* by second-century Roman historian Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, identify Nero as a desperately wicked individual who grossly violated each of the Ten Commandments through a long litany of disgusting demonstrations of depravity. Included among his appalling atrocities were his castration of a young boy named Sporus whom he then married publicly, his persecution of the Christians whom he had dressed in tar jackets and put on stakes and then burned at night to light the streets, his demand to be worshiped as God, and the brutal murders of some of his closest family members, including his mother Agrippina, his wives Octavia and Poppaea, and Poppaea's young son, Rufrius Crispinius, whom Nero had drowned during a fishing trip for allegedly playing childhood games in which he pretended to be the Emperor.

Finally, Nero is rightly identified as the Beast of Revelation—the archetypal Antichrist—because of the unique and horrible *quality* of the “great tribulation” he ignited. The horror of the great tribulation included not only the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, but the persecution of the apostles and prophets who penned the Scriptures and formed the foundation of the Christian church of which Christ Himself was the chief cornerstone. Thus, Nero and the great tribulation he instigated are the archetypes for every antichrist and tribulation that follow before we experience the reality of our own resurrection at the second coming of Christ.

— *Hank Hanegraaff*