

A Hypothesis of Solution to the Riddle of Revelation on the Number 666 (in Connection with an Enigmatic Verse from Dante's Inferno)

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The article presents the results of a study aimed at finding a logical solution to a famous riddle from the Book of Revelation: "Here is wisdom. He that has understanding, let him count the number of the beast. For it is the number of a man: and the number of him is six hundred sixty-six". Revelation proposes this riddle at the conclusion of an episode in which a great, evil dragon appears in the sky and persecutes a pregnant woman, but is thrown to Earth by Michael, then two demonic beasts appear. Here it is proposed that the solution to the riddle is "Apophis", the name of the gigantic evil serpent which in Egyptian mythology is the enemy of the solar god Ra. The plausibility of this hypothesis is based on the correspondence with the sum of the numbers associated with the Greek letters that make up this name, also considering the analogy of this story with the Greek myth of Leto, persecuted by a dragon before giving birth to the solar god Apollo. It is also corroborated by the fact that the proposed solution in turn allows to immediately resolve another enigma, contained in Dante's Inferno, where a demonic character, Plutus, pronounces a seemingly senseless phrase: "Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe". It can be deduced that Dante knew the solution to the riddle of Revelation and used it to make his enigma, which has remained unsolved until now. The proposed solutions of the two puzzles, therefore, corroborate each other, strengthening their reliability.

Keywords: *six hundred sixty-six, Revelation, Apophis, Plutus, Pape Satàn.*

In this article we will first examine a famous riddle proposed in the Revelation of John, which we will try to solve using a methodology consisting of a new critical examination of sources not only biblical and classical, but also from other literary contexts; subsequently, as a confirmation of the validity of the reasoning and the solution found, by making use of the latter we will also be able to discover the true meaning, so far uncertain and controversial, of an enigmatic verse from Dante's Inferno.

So now we will examine the episode from Revelation, spanning two chapters, where a great dragon appears in the sky that persecutes a woman about to give birth, then it tries to kill her newborn son, but is opposed by Michael with his angelic hosts, who throw it to Earth. The episode continues by recounting other events in which two beasts linked to the dragon appear, and then ends with a riddle for which a convincing solution has never been found until now¹: "He that has

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¹Cf. M.G. Michael, *The Number of the Beast, 666 (Revelation 13:16-18): Background, Sources and Interpretation*, Sydney 1998.

understanding, let him count the number of the beast. For it is the number of a man: and the number of him is six hundred sixty-six”².

In order to find an acceptable solution to the riddle, which is the purpose of this article, it is useful to first read the episode carefully. Here are the highlights of the narrative of Revelation:

“And a great sign appeared in heaven: A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. And being with child, she cried travailing in birth, and was in pain to be delivered. And there was seen another sign in heaven: and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads, and ten horns: and on his head seven diadems. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to be delivered; that, when she should be delivered, he might devour her son. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with an iron rod: and her son was taken up to God, and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she had a place prepared by God, that there they should feed her a thousand two hundred sixty days. And there was a great battle in heaven, Michael and his angels fought with the dragon, and the dragon fought and his angels. And they prevailed not, neither was their place found any more in heaven. And that great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, who seduceth the whole world; and he was cast unto the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. [...] And I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten diadems, and upon his heads names of blasphemy. [...] And the dragon gave him his own strength, and great power. And I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death: and his death's wound was healed. And all the earth was in admiration after the beast. And they adored the dragon, which gave power to the beast: and they adored the beast, saying: Who is like to the beast? [...] And there was given to him a mouth speaking great things, and blasphemies: and power was given to him to do two and forty months. And he opened his mouth unto blasphemies against God, to blaspheme his name, and his tabernacle, and them that dwell in heaven. [...] And I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns, like a lamb, and he spoke as a dragon. And he executed all the power of the former beast in his sight; and he caused the earth, and them that dwell therein, to adore the first beast, whose wound to death was healed. And he did great signs, so that he made also fire to come down from heaven unto the earth in the sight of men. [...] Here is wisdom. He that has understanding, let him count the number of the beast. For it is the number of a man: and the number of him is six hundred sixty-six”³.

The riddle of Revelation, therefore, refers to an "old serpent", an abject incarnation of Evil to the point of being called "devil and Satan", which, after being "cast unto the earth", reappears in the guise of the two beasts. Here one immediately thinks of Apep (Ἄποφις in Greek), the great serpent of Egyptian mythology, image of the forces of darkness as well as bitter enemy of the sun god Ra (it is no coincidence that its epithet was "enemy of Ra")⁴. At the beginning of

²Rev. 13:18.

³Rev. 12:1-9; 13:1; 13:3-6; 13:11-13; 13:18.

⁴Cf. G. Hart, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses*, London, 1986.

each day Apep-Apophis tried to prevent the rising of the Sun, threatening him as he sailed on his boat through the Duat, the Egyptian afterlife.

Here we will try to demonstrate that it is precisely Apep-Apophis, the sworn enemy of the sun god, that the riddle that concludes the episode of Revelation could allude to. In fact, the sum of the numbers corresponding to the Greek letters (*A-P-O-PH-I-S*) that make up that name is equal to 667 ($A = 1, P = 80, O = 70, PH = 500, I = 10, S = 6$), from which, however, 1 (the number of the initial *A*) must be subtracted because, according to Revelation, "I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death"⁵, which in Egyptian mythology corresponds to an account in which Apophis is defeated by Ra in the form of a cat: "the Great Tom Cat, a form of Ra, cut off the head of Apophis under the sacred *ished* tree"⁶. It follows that the sum is 666.

We also point out that on this crucial aspect of the beheading of Apophis by Ra we also have a slightly different version, which does not change the substance of the story at all: "Apophis, O Enemy of Ra! Turn your face away! Ra hates the very sight of you'. The head is then cut off, hacked in pieces and thrown away"⁷.

As for that initial *A*, in the Greek numerical system of the Hellenistic age, the letter alpha was used to indicate the number 1; it derived from the Phoenician letter *aleph* (also corresponding to the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet), indicating "ox".⁸ Therefore the *A* in Apophis represented its "head", because it was the initial letter of the name and it was the first in the Greek alphabet. On the other hand, its very shape recalls the stylized representation of an ox head, precisely *aleph-alpha*, **A**, with the horns pointing downwards.

On the other hand, Greek mythology tells a very similar story: we are referring to the dragon Python who persecutes⁹ the goddess Leto, pregnant and about to give birth to Apollo (the solar god who corresponds to the Egyptian Ra, also due to the fact that then Apollo killed Python¹⁰) and his twin Artemis. Incidentally, here a suggestive supposition arises (which however cannot be proven): given that Saint John, traditionally considered the author of Revelation, would have lived in Ephesus, where there was the Artemision, i.e. the great temple of Artemis – whose remains still exist (it was considered by the ancients one of the seven wonders of the world) – at this point it would be natural to wonder whether the image of the great red dragon that "stood before the woman who was ready to be delivered"¹¹ could have been inspired by one of decorations of the Artemision.

What corroborates the plausibility of this solution to the riddle, that is, that the name of Apophis is hidden behind the number 666, is the fact that it in turn could give us the key to solving another age-old literary enigma. We are referring to the debated meaning of the opening verse of the VII canto of Dante's *Inferno*: "*Pape*

⁵Rev. 13:3.

⁶G. Pinch, *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology*, Santa Barbara, Calif., 2002, pp. 107-108. The image of Apophis beheaded by Ra in the form of a cat is also found in the Papyrus of Hunefer (ca. 13th-12th cent. BC).

⁷R. T. Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt*, New York 1960, p. 211.

⁸Cf. G. Roskam, *Plutarch on the alpha*, in "Les Etudes Classiques", 99 (2020), pp. 285-300.

⁹Ps.-Hyginus, *Fabulae* 140.

¹⁰Ovid. *Met. I*, 438-444.

¹¹Rev. 12:4.

Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe”, an apparently senseless phrase that Plutus, a demonic being – expressly defined as “the great enemy”¹² – says when he meets Dante and Virgil.

Over the centuries, exegetes have tried their hand at those incomprehensible words of Plutus, giving the most disparate interpretations¹³, starting with Pietro, Dante’s son, without however ever reaching shared conclusions¹⁴.

But at this point, before checking whether Plutus's words can be related to the riddle of the number 666, to justify this singular comparison it must be said that Dante is considered the last great medieval interpreter of Revelation¹⁵. Furthermore, “the Comedy is configured as a great eschatological plan, centered on the theme of the final battle”¹⁶, perfectly in line with the spirit and the text of Revelation, which in fact the poet cites on several occasions, such as in this one:

The Evangelist you Pastors had in mind,
When she who sitteth upon many waters
To fornicate with kings by him was seen;

The same who with the seven heads was born,
And power and strength from the ten horns received,
So long as virtue to her spouse was pleasing.¹⁷

These verses by Dante, in which the Evangelist (John) is explicitly mentioned, are evidently inspired by a famous passage from Revelation (where “seven heads and ten horns” appear):

“Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns”¹⁸.

Having said all this, thus justifying the reasonableness of the comparison between Dante's verses and the world of John's Revelation, the time has now come to cite the entire context in which Plutus pronounces his enigmatic words:

“Pape Satàn, Pape Satàn, Aleppe!”
Thus Plutus with his clucking voice began;
And that benignant Sage, who all things knew,

¹²Inf. VI, 115.

¹³Cf. G. Sasso, *L'enigma di Dante: il significato di Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe* (Dante's Enigma: The Meaning of Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe). Bologna 2021.

¹⁴For a detailed summary of the interpretative proposals see E. Caccia, *Pape Satàn, Pape Satàn, Aleppe*, in *Enciclopedia dantesca* IV, Rome 1973, pp. 280-282.

¹⁵G. Nuvoli, *Dante lettore dell'Apocalisse* (Dante reader of the Revelation), in EADEM, *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona. Leggere, interpretare, rappresentare Dante*, Milan 2015, p. 53.

¹⁶B. Martinelli, *Dante. Genesis della Commedia: dal 'vetus infernus' al 'novus infernus'* (Dante. Genesis of the Comedy: from the 'vetus infernus' to the 'novus infernus'), in *Studi danteschi*, 57 (2012), p. 119.

¹⁷Inf. XIX, 106-111 (Transl. by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow).

¹⁸Rev. 17:3.

Said, to encourage me: "Let not thy fear
Harm thee; for any power that he may have
Shall not prevent thy going down this crag."

Then he turned round unto that bloated lip,
And said: "Be silent, thou accursed wolf;
Consume within thyself with thine own rage.

Not causeless is this journey to the abyss;
Thus is it willed on high, where Michael wrought
Vengeance upon the proud adultery."

Even as the sails inflated by the wind
Together fall involved when snaps the mast,
So fell the cruel monster to the earth.¹⁹

From these verses one can immediately deduce that:

- Plutus has only begun a speech, which is immediately cut short by Virgil (*Thus Plutus with his clucking voice began*);
- Virgil perfectly understands the true meaning of Plutus' words (*that benignant Sage, who all things knew*). This is very important, because it indicates that the sentence said by Plutus is not at all meaningless;
- what Plutus expresses is a strong feeling of anger (*Consume within thyself with thine own rage*);
- the demon's anger scares Dante (*Let not thy fear/harm thee*).

At this point, recalling what emerged earlier about the dragon and the diabolical beasts in Revelation, it is revealing that here the poet, in saying that "Michael wrought/vengeance upon the proud adultery", makes an explicit allusion to that episode, with particular regard to Michael and his victorious fight with the dragon.

Not only that: it is precisely in listening to those words, with which Virgil recalls the defeat of the devil, that Plutus also feels defeated, to the point of immediately overturning his aggressive attitude: "So fell the cruel monster to the earth". Here we find a perfect parallel with the image of the fall of the devil in Revelation: "He was cast unto the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him"²⁰.

On the other hand, perfectly consistent with the picture just outlined is also the expression, already mentioned a little while ago, with which Dante, in the last verse of the canto preceding the one we are examining, had presented the character of Plutus: "the great enemy". It fits well with the image of the Rebel Angel, whose dimension as a sworn enemy of God and men is reiterated several times in the episode of Revelation that we previously examined.

At this point, considering both the attitude of Dante's Plutus, with his obvious references to that episode, and what previously emerged regarding the solution to

¹⁹Inf. VII, 1-15 (Transl. by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow).

²⁰Rev. 12:9.

the riddle of the number 666, in this light it is not difficult to decipher the hidden meaning of the expression “Pape Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe”, which the poet attributes to his diabolical character: it wants to express the identification, repeated twice, of Apophis (“Pape”) with Satan, proclaiming at the same time his glorification (“Pape Satàn is the alpha, *aleppe*, that is, the first, the number one”).

Not only that: in reality the most important concept hidden by Dante in that sentence is the detachment of the “head” (*aleppe*, i.e. “alpha”, A) from the rest of the body di A-pophis (“pape”, i.e. *pophis*). But this is precisely the key that had allowed us to solve the enigma of Revelation, since this is how the name "Apophis", deprived of the initial A, corresponds exactly to the number 666.

On the basis of this interpretation, corroborated by the verses following Plutus' strange words, which until now had appeared incomprehensible (but which Virgil had instead perfectly understood), we can now affirm that Dante knew the solution to the riddle of Revelation on the number of the beast's name and he ingeniously proposed it again – still in enigmatic form! – in that line of his Comedy.

On the other hand, the poet often loved to express himself through riddles and word games – just like Shakespeare a few centuries later – and in this case he even plays at building his enigma starting from the solution of another much older one (here you almost have the impression that Dante is winking at the one who rereads Plutus' strange words after having finally understood their true meaning...).

This also explains why the meaning of Plutus' words has never been clarified until now: to solve it, it is necessary to have first solved the riddle of the number 666 in Revelation, and therefore the very fact that both problems have been solved together – or rather, one immediately after the other – constitutes in itself a further indication of the validity of the reasoning developed here.

In conclusion, we have tried to find a logical solution to the riddle of Revelation by comparing the demonic images of the dragon and the evil beasts appearing therein with Apophis, the diabolical serpent enemy of Ra, the sun god in Egyptian mythology, and then verifying that the sum of the numbers corresponding to the Greek letters of its name correspond to the number 666. To make the numbers add up, we excluded the initial A from the addition, because the head of the Beast of the Revelation was "wounded to death", which indeed corresponds to the fact that Apophis according to Egyptian mythology was beheaded by Ra.

A further confirmation of the reliability of this solution lies in the fact that it in turn gives us the key to solving another age-old problem: it has in fact allowed us to give a complete meaning to the words, considered incomprehensible until now, pronounced by Plutus, a demonic character of Dante's *Inferno*. In short, the proposed solutions to the two enigmas confirm each other, strengthening their plausibility (while keeping in mind that these fascinating arguments require further confirmation, research and investigation by future scholars).

Still regarding the enigma of the words spoken by Plutus, which as we have just seen is closely connected to the previous one, if future studies were to confirm the plausibility of the solution proposed here for the riddle of the Revelation, it will be necessary to clarify whether Dante himself was the first to understand that the name hidden behind the number 666 was Apophis, or whether someone else had told him (and, in the latter case, how and from whom he received this

information). This is an extremely difficult problem (which in some ways recalls, for example, that of the sources he drew on to construct the enigmatic character of the "heavenly Messenger" in the IX canto of the Inferno²¹, as well as the character of Geryon in the XVII canto²²), but it seemed right to propose it to remind us that in every field of human knowledge the solution to any problem often involves having to face new ones.

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