

THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST.

BY A. KAMPMEIER.

IN the very interesting article "The Necromancy of Numbers,"¹ the opinion is expressed that the Apocalypse of John is a treatise on the esoteric doctrine of the Cabala especially in regard to the number 666, Rev. xiii, 18. Yet both the Apocalypse and this number may have another meaning. We must not forget that in the first place Revelation is a Judaic-Christian, or we might say religious-political, secret pamphlet, designated for primitive Christian circles and dealing with matters of great importance to them, pertaining to the immediate time in which they were living. The Jewish Apocalyptic literature, making its beginning with the Book of Daniel in the second century B. C. to be followed when Christianity arose, by the Christian Apocalyptic literature, consisting in the Revelations of John and extracanonical Revelations, deals mainly with the final fate of God's people and their enemies. The chosen people on the one side, or rather the faithful part of it, will reign finally with the Messiah, and their enemies, the world-powers, rising from the empire of Alexander the Great or the Roman power, will be destroyed; likewise the faithful Christian believers will reign gloriously with Christ, and their persecuting enemies, the worldly Roman power, will be destroyed. This kind of literature was mainly written for the purpose of comforting and admonishing the faithful in the times of persecution and oppression. It was naturally of a mystical character, couched in hidden language, partly for the reason of giving it an oracular occult color, partly also to conceal the meaning of the language from uninitiated ears, in case such writings should fall into the hands of enemies. For this reason such writings frequently made use of what the rabbis called *Gematria* or the numerical indications of names, something also practiced among Greeks under the name of *Isopsephia*. Sometimes even only the number

¹ By Mr. H. R. Evans in the February *Open Court*.

which the initial of a name stood for, was used to designate names. Thus in the apocalyptic literature called the Sibyllines, Nero is described as the emperor whose sign is 50, "a fearful serpent who shall cause a grievous war,"—this phrase referring probably to the stories of the serpent which had crawled from Nero's cradle and his serpent-amulet. This made the meaning of the Greek letter N = 50 more certain. Other strange symbolic devices were the following. In the Sibyllines viii a ruler is described as "having a name like a sea" and "the wretched one." This is of course Aelius Hadrianus, the Greek *elceinos*, "wretched," pointing to Aelius, the sea (the Adriatic) to Hadrian.

It was the Roman empire upon which all the hatred of the Palestinian Jews was centered and later also the Christians saw in Rome their greatest enemy. The Roman empire was considered to be the last of the empires symbolized in the image in Dan. ii, according to the wrong interpretation of the times, after which would come the kingdom from heaven symbolized in the stone smashing the image. So Josephus even understood the passage according to Ant. x, 4 and xi, 7, but he was careful not to explain the meaning of the stone. Likewise the writer of Revelation was careful. Therefore he uses the number 666. Now this number can mean according to the most plausible interpretation either *Lateinos*, "the Latin one," the sum of the Greek letters of this word according to their numerical value being 666, an interpretation introduced already by Irenæus; or *Neron Cæsar*, the sum of the Hebrew letters of the latter words according to their numerical value also being 666, an interpretation held by a number of modern expositors. As Revelation is very Hebraic in spirit and language, the Jewish-Christian readers might easily hit upon the value of the Hebrew characters. That a proper name or adjective is meant, can be inferred from an analogy in the Sibylline books where the word Jesus is indicated by saying that it has four vowels and two consonants and that the whole number is = 888, i. e., of course according to Greek writing. *Lateinos* would simply denote the beast of Rev. xiii as some man arising from the Roman empire as the Antichrist, while *Neron Cæsar* would point to the belief current in Christian circles for centuries after the death of Nero, that he would arise again and appear as the incarnate Evil One. This belief had its source in the false rumors arising right after Nero's death, that he was not dead, but had escaped to the Parthians and would return to take vengeance on his enemies, a report chronicled by such writers as Tacitus and Suetonius. A false Nero had even found a following among the Parthians. Sibyl-

lines viii. 71 express this belief very plainly in the words: "When the matricide fugitive returns from the opposite part of the earth."

That Rome is meant from which the Antichrist was expected to come is plain to any historical student of the Apocalypse. In chapter xiii the beast comes from the sea, just as in the Sibylline books the beast rises from the western sea and in the fourth book of Esra the eagle also, both referring to Rome. In verse 3 this beast is referred to "as though one of his heads [seven] had been smitten unto death and his death-stroke was healed." If we compare these words with chapter xvii. 9-11, which gives an explanation of the woman sitting on a scarlet-colored beast with seven heads represented in that chapter and plainly referring to Rome, the idea of a Nero Redivivus seems quite plausible. The words are: "Here is understanding which has wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. And these are seven kings. Five have fallen, the one is, the other has not yet come. And when he comes he must remain a little while. And the beast which was and is not [designated in verse 8 preceding as about to come from the abyss] is himself eight and is of the seven and goes into perdition." Counting from Augustus, with Nero's death five heads had fallen. Cutting out the usurpers Otho, Galba, Vitellius, who followed each other in rapid succession and in fact not reigning, and then taking the longer reign of Vespasian and the very short one of Titus we arrive at Domitian as eighth. At this time the writer must have expected the incarnate Antichrist. Whether he believed in a literal Nero redivivus or the reappearance of the spirit of Nero in another Roman emperor we don't know. If he shared the latter view he might have taken Domitian as the second reappearance of Nero, who, as Juvenal says, (*Sat.* iv. 34) "was rending as the last Flavius the half-dead world, Rome being enslaved to the bald Nero," the common nickname by which Domitian was called in Rome, from comparison with the previous Nero, while Pliny (*Panegy.* 48) called him "the most savage beast," and Tacitus in his parallel between Nero and Domitian speaks of the former to the disadvantage of the latter. (*Agric.* 45.)

Whether the interpretations of 666, *Lateinos* and *Neron Caesar*, shared by many, are correct we will not affirm, but this much is sure that the number has an eschatological meaning.