

## Gematria

The practice of *gematria* consists of assigning a numerical value to a word or phrase by adding together the values of the individual letters. This works in Hebrew and in Greek, where the letters of the alphabet can also serve as numerals. In Greek, the mark signifying 6 was not used as a letter in New Testament times.

### Hebrew Letters

|       |       |        |        |         |         |
|-------|-------|--------|--------|---------|---------|
| א = 1 | ה = 5 | ט = 9  | מ = 40 | פ = 80  | ש = 300 |
| ב = 2 | ו = 6 | י = 10 | נ = 50 | צ = 90  | ת = 400 |
| ג = 3 | ז = 7 | כ = 20 | ס = 60 | ק = 100 |         |
| ד = 4 | ח = 8 | ל = 30 | ע = 70 | ר = 200 |         |

### Greek Letters

|         |          |          |           |           |           |
|---------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Α α = 1 | Φ φ = 6  | Κ κ = 20 | Ο ο = 70  | Τ τ = 300 | Ω ω = 800 |
| Β β = 2 | Ζ ζ = 7  | Λ λ = 30 | Π π = 80  | Υ υ = 400 |           |
| Γ γ = 3 | Η η = 8  | Μ μ = 40 | Ρ ρ = 90  | Φ φ = 500 |           |
| Δ δ = 4 | Θ θ = 9  | Ν ν = 50 | Σ σ = 100 | Χ χ = 600 |           |
| Ε ε = 5 | Ι ι = 10 | Ξ ξ = 60 | Ψ ψ = 200 | Ψ ψ = 700 |           |

In the Roman world, gematria became a basis for riddles, jokes, and games:

- Graffiti on a wall in Pompeii reads, “I love her whose number is 545.”
- As a political joke, Suetonius (*Nero* 39) indicates that the name “Nero” (Νέρων) and the phrase “killed his own mother” (ἰδίαν μητέρα ἀπέκτεινε) have the same numerical value (1,005) when written in Greek. This was pertinent because the emperor was rumored to have murdered his mother.

In Christianity and Judaism, gematria could provide a basis for religious symbolism:

- Rabbis noted that “Eliezer” (אליעזר), the name of Abraham’s favored servant (Gen. 15:2), has a numerical value of 318, which is the total number of servants mentioned in Genesis 14:14. Thus, Eliezer was the equal of all the rest of the servants combined.

- The Hebrew letters in the name “David” (דוד) add up to 14, so that number could be accorded messianic significance: the messiah was to be the Son of David. This is probably why Matthew’s Gospel emphasizes that the genealogy of Jesus can be divided into three sets of fourteen generations (Matt. 1:17).
- The Greek letters in the name “Jesus” (Ἰησοῦς) add to 888, which some early Christians found significant: eight surpasses seven (the number for perfection) and heralds a “new creation” beyond what God did in the first seven days (Gen. 1:1–2:3).

Many scholars think that gematria holds the clue to resolving the puzzle of 666, the number attributed to the beast in Revelation 13:18.

- A popular spelling for the name of the emperor Nero adds up to 666 when written in Hebrew (קסר נרון = Caesar Neron). An alternative spelling (קסר נרו) = Caesar Nero) adds up to 616, a variant reading for the number of the beast found in some manuscripts of Revelation.
- A designation for the emperor Domitian that sometimes appeared on Greek coins also adds to 666: *A. Kai. Domet. Seb. Ge.* (an abbreviation for *Autokratōr Kaisar Dometianos Sebastos Germanikos* = Emperor Caesar Domitian Augustus Germanicus).

Over time, most Jewish and Christian groups abandoned the practice of gematria, perhaps because certain groups used numerology in occult and magical connections. The practice still features prominently in kabbalah and other mystical traditions.