

Can We Solve the 666 Puzzle?

Using Bible Interpretation Principles to Illuminate One of the Darkest Verses in the Bible

Steve C. Singleton



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The Mystery of the Number

Perhaps no biblical passage has both confused and intrigued modern readers as much as Revelation chapter 13, verse 18:

This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is a man's number. His number is 666.

Scholars have devoted many pages to it. Preachers have warned about it. Journalists have speculated as to its meaning. People who tend toward superstition have avoided license plates bearing the “triple hex”; they refuse to do business with a company with 666 in its address; they change their telephone number if three sixes occur together anywhere in it. Within popular culture, 666 has become an icon symbolizing Satan and evil. [\[1\]](#)

Dooms-day religious literature refers to 666 as a vital part of its warnings. The following is typical, taken from a pamphlet that wrongly predicted the return of Christ for His saints would be in October of 1992:

*A man called the **antichrist** will rise to power (the head of the E.C.C. or United Europe) who will destroy Christians and Israelites. (Dan. 9:27) He will put his mark (the 666 Mark, a ticket to Hell) on people. Friends, fear God and come to Him while there is time! . . . **PLEASE DO NOT RECEIVE THE 666 MARK.** It is a **ticket to Hell!!** [\[2\]](#)*

Is this identification correct, despite the error in predicting the time-table? Should we beware of any occurrence of the 666 number? Only a careful examination of the text can provide the answer.

As we make progress through this study, I will be laying out very clearly the rules of interpretation I plan to follow. Your job will be to evaluate those rules, first to determine if they make sense, and second to decide whether I apply them correctly. By following this careful procedure, I hope to provide you with explanations of 666 that are accurate and trustworthy, so that at our conclusion, you do *not* say, “Well, that’s just your opinion.”

Context is Important

In order to understand the true meaning of 666, we have to back up. We must back up, in fact, all the way back to the beginning of the Book of Revelation. This makes sense, doesn't it? If you wanted to understand a paragraph from any other book, you wouldn't start in the middle of the book, would you? You would have to start at the beginning of the book to understand how that paragraph fits into the whole—how it blends into the flow of thought. In other words, you would have to consider the *context*.

First rule of interpretation: *An understanding of a verse that fits its context is more likely correct than an understanding that demands a sharp break with its context.*

Context involves a lot more than just the words leading up to and following the passage that interests you. It also involves the time, place, circumstances, and audience of the document when it was originally written. Understanding the context also involves knowing about the author of the document—what the author's background was, what this person assumed about the prospective readers, and what the purpose of the writing was. Context extends beyond the entire contents of the biblical book containing the target text to include other writings by the same author, the rest of the books of the Bible, geographical and historical background, literary background, and cultural background (see [Figure 1](#)). Keep in mind, however, that the further away from the target text you move, the less certainty you can have about your inferences from the context

What do we take literally and what figuratively?

I am about to give you a quick summary of the entire Book of Revelation from the perspective of the original readers. Before I do that, however, I must explain to you another rule of interpretation. A major issue in interpreting the Apocalypse (another name for Revelation) is whether we should take it literally or figuratively. The answer is, both.

Whether to take a text literally depends upon its genre: parables, poetry, and in this case, visions, all employ a great deal of figurative language. Almost entirely literal language occurs in historical narratives, explanations of parables, and in this case, explanations of visions. In other words, we must sort the verses of the Apocalypse according to whether they are visions or explanations of visions, taking the visions figuratively and the explanations literally. In addition, at the very beginning and the very end, we find a short, autobiographical historical narrative and in chapters two and three, what scholars call *paraenesis*—the kind of admonishment that occurs regularly in the epistles. This genre is also mostly literal, but metaphors and similes are frequent in these chapters, with no explanation in the text to help us along.

Second rule of interpretation: *In the vision parts of the book, we should take the words figuratively unless we have a good reason not to do so. In the explanation parts of the book, we should take the words literally unless we have a good reason not to do so.*

How do we know that this is a valid rule of interpretation? The Book of Revelation itself guides us to adopt this principle. For example, in Revelation 1:20, Jesus says:

The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

In other words, Jesus is telling us that the vision has symbols. Other details of the vision (e.g., The Son of Man's golden sash, white hair, blazing eyes, glowing feet, and the sharp sword coming out of his mouth) appear to be symbolic, even though Jesus provides no explanation of their meaning. We can infer the meaning of these details from the Old Testament background, keeping in mind, however, that we cannot be quite as certain of the meaning of these symbols as we would be if an explanation occurred right in the text.

We can apply this same principle to the rest of the visions of the Apocalypse. Here and there throughout the text, we find explanations of the symbols. For example, the text identifies the dragon of chapter 12 as, "that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leaves the whole world astray" (v. 9). The woman the dragon is trying to kill has no explicit identification, but her children do. Her firstborn son, verse five says, "will rule the nations with an iron scepter" – a

clear allusion to the messianic prophecy in Psalm 2:9. [3] Revelation 12:17 identifies the rest of her offspring as, “those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

Several similar explanations occur in Revelation 5:8; 7:14; 17:9–12, 15, 18; 19:8; 20:2; and fortunately, in the verses leading up to the 666 verse in chapter 13. Too bad that these explanations of the symbols are so few and far between! For the most part, we must rely on the Old Testament background to supply the probable meaning of the figurative language in Revelation. With interpretation rule number two in place, we are ready to gain an overview of the Apocalypse.

An Overview of the Apocalypse

The apostle John [4] wrote the Book of Revelation toward the end of the first century C.E. to Christians in the Roman province of Asia (located in what is now western Turkey, see [Figure 2](#)). These Christians were about to suffer a terrible persecution because of their commitment to follow Jesus Christ rather than the Roman emperor as the ultimate ruler of the universe. John wanted these Christians to get themselves ready so that when the persecution came they would not deny their Master. He makes this clear in the opening verses (Rev. 1:1–3):

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

Should we take the time references in this statement figuratively or literally? Our second rule prompts us to ask, are we in the vision part of the book or the explanation part? The first vision does not start until verse 10, when John says, “On the Lord’s day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me. . . .” That means we should take the time references literally: ‘soon’ means right away, and “the time is near” means the events predicted will happen within the immediate future of the original readers. [5]

How much “wiggle room” do we have with these time references? It is true that the term ‘soon’ is flexible and in common usage has a range from a few minutes to a few years. You can agree, though, can’t you, that we should not stretch ‘soon’ to cover a range of, say, nearly 2,000 years—the time that has elapsed from the writing of the Book of Revelation until today?

But maybe you are thinking of Psalm 90, verse 4, which 2 Peter 3:8 paraphrases as, “With the Lord a day is like thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.” Certainly it is true that the “Ancient of Days” does not view time as we do. But in the opening verses of the Apocalypse, is He providing us with a divine view or a human one? Understanding ‘soon’ and “the time is near” as instances of “God-time” would mean we are not taking these words literally. The farthest I think we can stretch them is to say that John expected them to reach fulfillment within the lifetime of the original readers. Similar time-frames in other biblical prophecies confirm that we are on the right track. [6]

Read these verses from the point of view of the original readers, those Christians of the first century who were about to face arrest, loss of property, imprisonment, and perhaps martyrdom. What would these verses mean to them? They would mean that God cared about their predicament and had sent a message to reveal to them what was about to happen, what “must soon take place.” It was important for them to read this document carefully, “because the time is [or, from our perspective, ‘was’] near.”

In the opening vision of chapter 1 Jesus reveals himself as the glorious, all wise, and all powerful Son of Man predicted by the prophet Daniel (see Dan. 7:13). In the next two chapters he judges seven of the churches of the province (see Figure 2)—two of them receive only praise, two only rebuke, and the other three both praise and rebuke. Judgment begins with the household of God (1 Peter 4:17). After chapter 3, however, God no longer acts as the Judge of Christians, but as their Defender and Avenger.

Chapter 4 reveals a scene in heaven in which the Creator sits on His glorious throne receiving the worship of many thousands of angels and representative creatures and human beings. In chapter 5 the Creator holds a scroll, sealed up with seven seals, containing predictions about what is about to happen on the earth. At the end of a thorough search throughout the universe for someone worthy, the Lamb of God (Jesus Christ) steps up; He alone is qualified to open the scroll and reveal to the readers its contents.

With the opening of the scroll's seals, we move from a description of the original readers' present circumstances to a prediction of their future. At this point, we must realize that a time-shift exists between us and them (see [Figure 3](#)): their immediate past and their present is in our remote past, and much of what was future to them is in our more recent past.

Third rule of interpretation: *An understanding of the text that allows for a time-shift between the original readers and modern readers is more likely correct than one which ignores such a shift.*

This principle guards us against assuming that the predictive parts of the book of Revelation are wholly future for us. We must allow the possibility that at least some of them predict events that have already happened.

In chapter 6, as the Lamb opens one seal after another, more and more of the scroll unrolls, revealing various reasons why God's wrath is about to fall on His enemies (those about to persecute His people). We learn that they are bent on conquest, resulting in widespread war, famine, plague, and death. To top it all off, in a key passage, verses 9–11, they are about to kill some of God's chosen ones, pictured as souls beneath the altar of burnt offering. You wouldn't be under the altar unless God regards you as a holy sacrifice offered to Him (in other words, you are about to suffer martyrdom). The souls cry out to God, asking how long until their blood is avenged. They learn they have to wait a little while, until the full number of those who are to be slain is completed. The chapter closes with a brief glimpse of the coming wrath—the wrath of God and of the Lamb—from which all the ungodly want to hide in terror.

Chapter 7 reveals a number: 144,000 Israelites, a symbolic portrayal of the faithful Christians about to be slain in the persecution. As they die one by one, they come before God's heavenly throne, receiving a white robe and joining a numberless multitude in a great victory celebration. More and more of the predetermined number suffer martyrdom. Meanwhile, predicts chapter 8, prayers rise up to God, presumably from those Christians still alive. We assume they are petitioning God for relief from the persecution. John pictures their prayers as

Pages 7-26 are not a part of this sample.

Figure 1

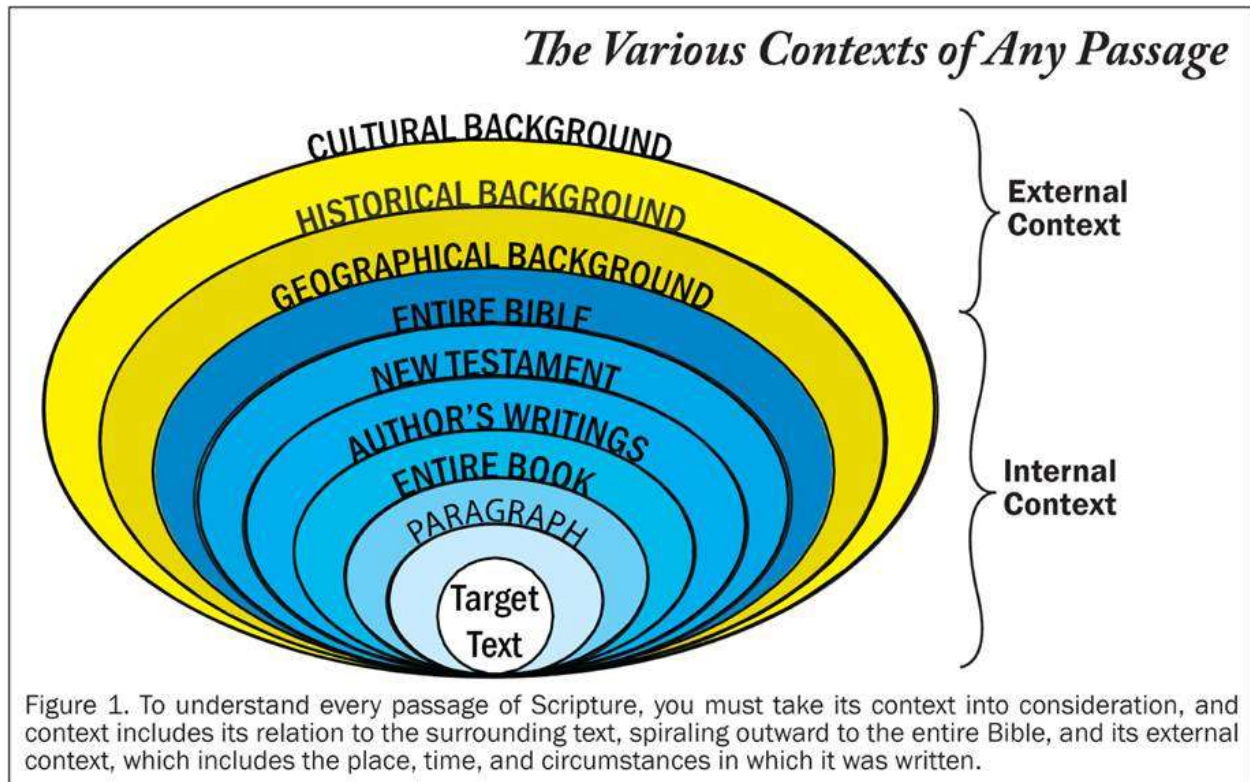
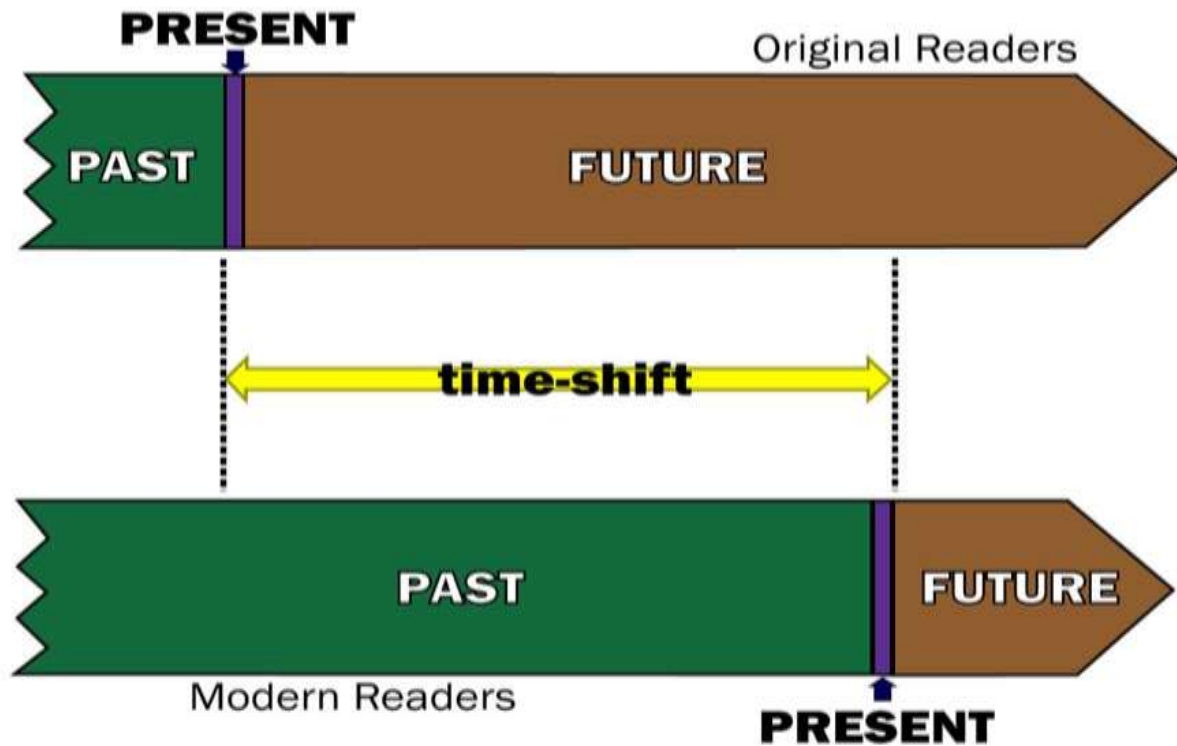


Figure 2

The churches of the Apocalypse were located in seven cities of the Roman province of Asia, which today is in western Turkey.

Page 30 is not a part of this sample.

Figure 3



For any piece of ancient literature, including the Bible, today's reader must recognize that a time shift has taken place: references to past, present, and future are displaced and may not mean the same now as they did when originally written. Their present is in our past. Their future may be past to us.

*Figure 5***Gematria Using the Greek Alphabet**

Name of Letter	Letter	Transliteration	Numerical Value
Alpha	α	a	1
Beta	β	b	2
Gamma	γ	g	3
Delta	δ	d	4
Epsilon	ε	e	5
Stigma	ς	st	6
Zeta	ζ	z	7
Eta	η	ē	8
Theta	θ	th	9
Iota	ι	i	10
Kappa	κ	k	20
Lamda	λ	l	30
Mu	μ	m	40
Nu	ν	n	50
Xi	ξ	x	60
Omicron	ο	o	70
Pi	π	p	80
Qoppa	Ϟ	q	90
Rho	ρ	r	100
Sigma	σ,ς	s	200
Tau	τ	t	300
Upsilon	υ	u, y	400
Phi	φ	ph	500
Chi	χ	ch	600
Psi	ψ	ps	700
Omega	ω	ō	800
Sampi	Ϡ	š	900

Because Greek assigns numerical value to each of the letters, people in the first century used the sum of the values of the letters of a word or name to stand in its place (a process called gematria). Because different combinations of letters could result in the same sum, Greek gematria has yielded several possible solutions to the 666 puzzle.

Figure 6

Gematria Using the Hebrew Alphabet			
Name of Letter	Letter	Transliteration	Numerical Value
Aleph	א	'	1
Bet	ב	b	2
Gimmel	ג	g	3
Dalet	ד	d	4
He	ה	h	5
Waw	ו	v	6
Zayin	ז	z	7
Heth	ח	ch	8
Tet	ט	t	9
Yod	י	y	10
Kaf	כ,ך	k	20
Lamed	ל	l	30
Mem	מ,ם	m	40
Nun	נ,ן	n	50
Samek	ס	s	60
Ayin	ע	'	70
Pe	פ,ף	p	80
Tsade	צ,ץ	ts	90
Qof	ק	q	100
Resh	ר	r	200
Sin, Shin	ש,שׂ	ś, sh	300
Taw	ת	t	500

Like Greek, Hebrew assigns numerical value to each of the letters, enabling people in the first century to use the sum of the values of the letters of a word or name to stand in its place (a process called gematria). Because different combinations of letters could result in the same sum, Hebrew gematria has yielded several possible solutions to the 666 puzzle.

Figure 7

Gematria Using the Latin Alphabet	
Letter	Numerical Value
A	-
B	-
C	100
D	500
E	-
F	-
G	-
H	-
I	1
K	-
L	50
M	1,000
N	-
O	-
P	-
Q	-
R	-
S	-
T	-
V	5
X	10
Y	-
Z	-

Unlike Greek and Hebrew, Latin assigns numerical values to only a handful of the letters of its alphabet. Those trying to use Latin gematria to provide a solution to the 666 puzzle often ignore the letters with no numerical value and assign the value of 'V' to any 'U's' that occur.

Page 34 is not a part of this sample.

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Notes

- [1]. An example of this icon use is in Marilyn Manson's song, "Misery Machine": "Man in the front got a sinister grin, careen down highway 666."
- [2]. Bang-Ik Ha, "Rapture!" (pamphlet published by Taberah World Mission), 3.
- [3]. We know this refers to Jesus Christ because Hebrews 1:5 clearly applies Psalm 2:7 to Him.
- [4]. Although many scholars deny that John the son of Zebedee is the author, mainly because of the differences in style and vocabulary between the Apocalypse and both the Fourth Gospel and First John, I accept the apostle John as the author for these reasons: 1) the author does not attempt to identify himself in a way that distinguishes him from *the* John; 2) the author's familiarity with Ephesus and the other cities of the province of Asia is compatible with early traditions that the apostle John spent his final few years living in Ephesus; 3) certain christological symbols (namely, 'lamb' and 'logos') are only found in Revelation and John's writings among the New Testament writings; 4) persons that apocalyptic writers selected to be their pseudonym were typically spiritual heroes of the past, not contemporaries or near-contemporaries as the apostle John would have been; and 5) the differences in style and vocabulary, as well as what some see as the author's grammatical slip-ups, may be due to having to write Revelation without the assistance of a secretary (*amanuensis*), compared to the other documents. For more on authorship of Revelation, see my book, *Overcoming: Guide to Understanding the Book of Revelation*, 5th ed. (Garland, Tex.: DeeperStudy, 2014), 73–75. For a different explanation, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, "Revelation, Book of," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 1031–1033.
- [5]. "The purpose of the revelation is to show 'what must soon take place.' Here the sense of 'must' is not the necessity imposed by Fate, but the sure fulfillment of the purpose of God. The word soon indicates that John intended his message for his own generation" (Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1993], 21).
- [6]. For the time-frames of short-range prophecies, see "soon" or "quickly" – Gen. 41:25, 28, 32; Exod. 8:29; Deut. 11:17; 31:16; Josh. 23:16; 1 Sam. 9:13; 1 Kings 20:36; 2 Chron. 12:7; Isa. 10:25; 51:14; 56:1; 58:8; Jer. 48:16; 51:33; Ezek. 36:8; Dan. 10:20; Hosea 1:4; Zeph. 1:14; Luke 18:8; Rom. 16:20; Heb. 8:13; 2 Peter 1:14; Rev. 2:16; 3:11; 11:14; 22:6, 7, 12, 20; "time is near" (or similar phrase) – Deut. 32:35; Isa. 13:6, 22; 56:1; Jer. 48:16; Ezek. 7:7; 12:23; 30:3; Hosea 9:7; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Zeph. 1:7; Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 26:18, 45; Matt. 24:33; Mark 1:15; 13:29; Luke 10:9, 11; 21:8, 28, 31; Rom. 13:12; Phil. 4:5; 2 Thess. 2:2; 2 Tim. 4:6; Heb. 10:25; James 5:9; 1 Peter 4:7; Rev. 3:20; 22:10. For the time-frames of longer-range prophecies, see "latter days" – Num. 24:14; Deut. 4:30; Isa. 2:2; Jer. 23:20; 30:24; 48:47; 49:39; Ezek. 38:16; Dan. 2:28, 45; Hosea 3:5; Micah 4:1; "last days" – Dan. 12:4, 9; Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; 2 Peter 3:3; and others, e.g., Num. 24:17. See also prophecies with more specific short-range and long-range time-frames, e.g., Gen. 15:13–16; 40:12–13, 18–19; Isa. 7:14–16; Jer. 25:11–12; 29:20; Matt. 24:34; Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32; and possibly Dan. 9:24.
- [7]. See Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.782; *Georgics* 2.535; Ovid, *Tristia* 1.5.69; Horace, *Carmen Saeculare*, line 7; Cicero, *To Atticus* 6.5 and 119.2; Propertius, *Elegies* 57–58; Martial, *Epigram* 64.11–12; *Sibylline Oracles* 2:18; 13:45; 14:108.
- [8]. See references to the cross as 'tree' (*xylon*) in Acts 5:30; 10:39; and 13:29, probably alluding to the cursed criminal of Deut. 21:22–23. Gal. 3:13 also refers to this passage in Deuteronomy. See Johannes Schneider, "*xylon* [tree]," 5:39–40 in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., Geoffrey Bromiley, trans. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964–1973), (hereafter cited as *TDNT*).



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Steve C. Singleton has a BA in Bible, magna cum laude, and an MA in Religion from Lubbock Christian University and Abilene Christian University, respectively. He has completed many additional graduate courses in Bible, Greek, Hermeneutics, Church History, Theological German, and Systematic Theology from Harding School of Theology, Abilene Christian University, and Southwestern Seminary.

Steve's 30-year career of preaching and teaching has been in 18 U.S. states, Russia, Mexico, and the Caribbean. For 9 years he taught Bible, New Testament Greek, and related topics at Northeast School of Biblical Studies. For 6 years he was on the Faculty of Religion at East Texas State University (now Texas A&M - Commerce). His seminars include "The Christian and the Money Trap," "The Hand and the Foot: Relationships in the Body of Christ," and "Understanding the Book of Revelation." Steve has written many articles, more than 20 e-books, and four books, most recently, [*Overcoming: Guide to Understanding the Book of Revelation*](#). His website, DeeperStudy.com, encourages all people to go deeper in their understanding of the Word of God, the Bible, and to become authentic, New Testament Christians who serve a risen Lord. He also has a [Youtube channel](#), and is on [Facebook](#), [Pinterest](#), and [Twitter](#). Subscribe to his [DeeperStudy Update](#).

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