I will soon conclude this thread dealing with the ancient use of letters of the alphabet for numerals by discussing the most famous instance of them all, the “number of the beast” in the Book of Revelation: 666. What is this number referring to?

I’ve decided that to make sense of this intriguing number, I need first to say a brief word about how the symbolism of the book works more generally. My students usually think of the book of Revelation as an amazing one-of-a-kind book, unlike anything ever written, a blueprint for the future of earth. What they learn in class is that in fact it is a lot one-of-a-kind, but instead is like a number of ancient books, both Jewish and Christian, that are called “apocalypses.” The term “apocalypse,” in this context, refers to a literary genre. Like all genres, apocalypses had set literary features. The reason Revelation seems so weird and unusual to readers today is that they are not familiar with the genre. But there were numerous other books like the book of Revelation (also called the Apocalypse of John), in which a human prophet was shown the heavenly secrets that can make sense of earthly realities.

For most of these apocalypses, the reality here on earth is that the world is controlled by forces of evil. The secrets of heaven are that the days are numbered for these forces. For the book of Revelation, God is soon going to intervene to destroy this wicked world and replace it with a perfect utopian kingdom in which there will be no more pain, misery, or suffering. But first, all hell has to break out.

The author was not writing for those of us living 2000 years later. He was writing for Christians of his own day, telling them to HOLD ON! – for just a little while longer. They needed to remain faithful, despite their suffering, because God was soon going to bring history, and this world, to a crashing halt, in a cataclysmic show of power in which all that is opposed to God will be obliterated and God will create a new heavens and a new earth for his people.

The enemies of God were the ones living at the time of the author – not those who would arise two millennia later. God would take care of these enemies once and for all, before giving his people their eternal rest.

To explain this view, the author of the Apocalypse...