

BIBLICAL NUMERICS

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The general purpose of this study is to ascertain the nature and use of numbers in the Scriptures. More specifically, it will be concerned with the employment of symbolic numbers by the Biblical writers and the hermeneutical principles by which we are to interpret them. The general scope of Biblical numerics is of vital importance to any consideration of Biblical hermeneutics. From the first chapter of the Scriptures through the last, one is confronted with numbers in every type or style of writing. Therefore, anyone contemplating a serious study of the Scriptures and the principles by which one interprets them must commit himself to a serious study of numerics.

The scope of this study will include the nature of conventional numbers as well as that of symbolic numbers. Consideration will be given to: (1) the nature and use of conventional numbers, (2) the rhetorical use of numbers, (3) the symbolic use of numbers and (4) Gematria in Scripture and its place in Biblical Hermeneutics.

The vital problem concerned with the handling of numbers is not whether they are used symbolically and conventionally, but when they are so used. The destructive-critical approach generally places little value on numbers in the Old Testament. The general trend is to consider the greater bulk of them as symbolic or ideal.¹ A similar error is committed by some conservative scholars when they attempt to discover some hidden or deep spiritual mystery behind every occurrence of a number. It will be shown that these extremes, as well as others, must be avoided if a sound approach to Bible numerics is to be established. There is a definite place for the study of symbolic numbers, but without certain limits the study becomes a hermeneutical monstrosity and worthless in the quest for theological truth.

THE CONVENTIONAL USE OF NUMBERS

The conventional use of a number is that use which is concerned only with the mathematical value of the number. In contrast to this is the symbolic number which is used not only for its mathematical value but also for its theological significance. Before entering into the study of the specific uses of numbers, it would be well to examine briefly the syntax of numbers as they appear in the Bible.

I. The Construction of Numbers

Israel, like Assyria, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, used the decimal system of counting. The numbers found in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament are always written out. The same is true for the text of the New Testament with one exception.² This is the case with other Northwest Semitic writing prior to the exile. At Ugarit, the numerals in the literary texts

are always spelled out, except in the administrative documents where they are written ideographically with the Sumero-Akkadian symbols.

M. H. Pope points out that:

The Old Aramaic inscriptions from Zenjirli, the Aramaic documents from Elephantine, and some Phoenician inscriptions spell out numerals and also use figures.³

He further notes that:

On the Aramaic lion weights from Nineveh (8th - 7th cent. B.C.) the numbers are doubly represented in words and figures.⁴

It appears that there is evidence that some peoples around Israel did use special signs for writing numbers, but there seems to be no evidence that the Hebrews employed such signs before the exile.⁵ On the basis of the present evidence, it appears that the Hebrews did not use a special sign for numbers until a rather late period. R. A. H. Gunner states the point as follows:

The idea of using letters of the alphabet for numerals originated from Greek influence or at least during the period of Greek influence, and, as far as is known, first appeared on Maccabean coins.⁶

After the exile, some of the Jews employed such signs as were used among the Egyptians, the Arameans, and the Phoenicians--an upright line for 1, two such lines for 2, three for 3, etc. and special lines for 10, 20, 100. At least as far back as the reign of the Maccabean Simon (143-135 B.C.), they numbered the chapters and verses and expressed dates by employing the consonants of the Hebrew alphabet: aleph for 1, beth for 2, etc. The letters of the Greek alphabet were used in the same way. This system, it must be emphasized, did not come into use until the post-exilic period. Numbers are spelled out on the Moabite stone (c. 835 B.C.) and the Siloam Inscription (c. 700 B.C.) and this is the case in all the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, numbers are also written out as they are in the Old, with one exception.⁷

II. The Use of Conventional Numbers

A. They are used in arithmetic. The following are some of the basic mathematical processes which employ numbers conventionally: (1) addition (Gen. 5:3-31; Num. 1:20-46), (2) subtraction (Gen. 18:28ff), (3) multiplication (Lev. 25:8; Num. 3:46ff), (4) division (Num. 31:27ff).

It is interesting to note that fractions were known and used in the Old Testament. Some examples are as follows: 1/2 (Ex. 25:10, 17), 1/3 (II Sam. 18:2), 1/4 (I Sam. 9:8), 1/5 (Gen. 47:24), 1/6 (Ezek. 46:14), 1/10 (Ex. 16:36), 2/10 (Lev. 23:13), 3/10 (Lev. 14:10),

1/100 (Neh. 5:11).

B. They are used in the basic, literal denotation of a quantity. Illustrations of this type are so numerous in the Scripture, it is not necessary to cite texts at this point. All are familiar with this "normal" use of numbers.

C. Higher numbers, which are conventional in use and literal in interpretation, are many times rounded and are not used for designating a large quantity in detail. For example, one hundred is used as a round number in Gen. 26:2; Lev. 26:8; II Sam. 24:3; Eccl. 8:12; Matt. 19:29; etc. A thousand is used in a similar way. This does not mean that the number is not to be understood literally, but it is a rounded number (cf. Ex. 20:6; Deut. 5:10; 7:9; I Sam. 18:7; Psa. 50:10; 90:4; 105:8; Isa. 60:22). Ten thousand is another case in point (Lev. 26:8; Deut. 32:30; Micah 6:7).

The highest number in the Bible described by a single word is 10,000. The highest numbers referred to in any way in the Bible are "a thousand thousand" (I Chron. 22:14; Rev. 5:11); "ten thousand times ten thousand" (Daniel 7:10; Rev. 5:11); and twice that figure (Rev. 9:16).

D. There are problems relative to the handling of conventional numbers. A number of problems are raised by the use of large numbers in the Old Testament. For example, the size of the exodus has been rejected because it is out of context for the Late Bronze Age (1500 B.C. - 1200 B.C.). If the numberings in Numbers 1 and 26 are correct, it appears that the children of Israel numbered about two and a half million. The critics are quick to point out that if this were the case, the Israelites would not have ^{desired} to enter Canaan which in the Late Bronze Age had a total population of about two or three million people.⁸ Critics object to this large number because that many people could not survive in the desert.

The solution offered to this problem by some scholars is to read 'eleph' not as "thousand" but as "family" or "tribe."⁹ By doing this, it is asserted, the totals would be from five to six thousand warriors. It is admitted that the term 'eleph' does have the idea of a family unit or tribe in some texts (e.g., Num. 1:16; 10:4), but the total given in Num. 2:32 raises a problem with this solution; namely, it assumes that 'eleph' means "a thousand." Other large numbers which have caused considerable difficulty to interpreters are the death of 50,070 male inhabitants of Beth-shemesh who were killed for irreverent treatment of the ark of God (I Sam. 6:19), the number of Jehoshaphat's army of 1,160,000 (II Chron. 18). II Kings 20:30 records that a wall fell and killed 27,000 people. More such large numbers could be enumerated but the foregoing should suffice to demonstrate that work is needed in these areas to clarify the use of these numbers.

Problems relative to conventional numbers are not only limited to large numbers, but to small numbers also. For example, the MT of II Sam. 24:13 gives the number of years of famine as seven, while the LXX and the parallel passage in I Chron. 21:12 give three.

The aim of this discussion is not to suggest solutions to all these problems, but to bring them to light. Each one of these considerations will in some way affect the handling of

numbers in every sphere of interpretation. Destructive critics, upon observing these large numbers, insist that they cannot be taken seriously, and from this point they attempt to discredit all numbers which cannot be harmonized with contemporary extra-biblical documents.

This problem, as well as others which have been discussed, should point out the absolute necessity for the interpreter having control of several disciplines in order to interpret the text accurately.

THE RHETORICAL USE OF NUMBERS

A very important use of numbers in the Old Testament is that for rhetorical or poetic effect. Whenever numbers are so used, they are not to be understood either literally or symbolically. Much time has been wasted in attempting to ascertain some hidden or mysterious meaning of a rhetorical phrase using numbers. The intention of the writer in this usage is not to emphasize the mathematical value of the number primarily, but to express either intensity or other concepts such as a "few."

There are, therefore, two basic applications of numbers in poetic structure.

I. The Climactic Use of Numbers

The arrangement of a numeral with its sequel within the same clause, either syndetically or asyndetically, is related to a similar rhetorical device in Northwest Semitic poetry in which consecutive numbers stand in synonymous parallelism. The intention of such a device is to express the concept of intensification and/or progression. The actual value of the number in such cases is not significant. Several examples of this use of numbers will illustrate this point. The numbers three and four are so used quite frequently in the Old Testament, but not in Ugaritic literature. The prophet Amos used such a device in Amos 1:9:

For three transgressions of Tyre, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof.¹⁰

It is evident that the writer is not attempting to total the sins of Damascus, Gaza, etc. for the sins enumerated are in most cases neither three nor four. Another example is found in Proverbs 30:18:

There be three things which are too wonderful for me; yea, four which I know not. . . .

This phenomenon is common in Ugaritic literature as well as the Old Testament. The Baal Epic uses numerical climax to describe the attitude of the fertility god to sacrifice:

For two (kinds of) banquets Baal hates,
Three the Rider of the Clouds:
A banquet of shamefulness,
A banquet banquet of baseness,
And a banquet of handmaids' lewdness.
(Baal II, iii, 16-21)¹¹

After Baal was furnished with a temple, he made a journey to claim the domains which were rightly his. This description of his journey employs the use of climactic numbers.

Sixty-six towns he took,
 Seventy-seven hamlets;
 Eighty (took) Baal of (Zaphon's) s(ummit,)
 Ninety Baal of the sum(mit.)
 (Baal II, vii, 9-12)¹²

The numbers one thousand and ten thousand are used in this manner on a number of occasions in Ugaritic literature.¹³ Many different numbers are employed for climactic effect in Old Testament passages. The numbers one and two are quite common in the Old Testament, but are not so used in the Ugaritic texts (cf. Deut. 32:30; Job 33:14; 40:5; Jer. 3:14). Two numbers used climactically in both Scripture and Ugaritic texts are two and three (Hosea 6:2). Three and four are used in this manner also in Prov. 30:15, 18, 29 and in Amos 1:3-2:6. Five and six do not occur in parallelism either in the Old Testament or Ugaritic literature. Six and seven occur at least twice in the Old Testament, but not at all in Ugaritic texts (cf. Job 5:19; Prov. 6:16). The numbers seven and eight are used climactically in Micah 5:5 (Hebrew text, 5:4) and Eccl. 11:2.

II. The Rounded Use of Numbers

In the preceding discussion, the climactic use of numbers in poetic and rhetoric texts was considered. In the climactic use of numbers, the intensive or progressive idea was emphasized, in the "rounded" use of numbers the concept of fewness or greatness was the point of emphasis. For example, the number two by itself is used to designate the idea of fewness (Num. 9:22). In many cases the next higher number may be added to emphasize that the figure is only approximate. II Kings 9:32 provides us with an excellent example of this type of usage.

And he lifted up his face to the window, and said, Who is on my side? who?
 And there looked out to him two or three eunuchs.

The obvious intent of this expression is to convey the idea of a few. This is not unique for it is used in our everyday conversations. Other examples of this usage in the Bible are II Kings 13:19, Isa. 17:6, Amos 4:8, and Matt. 18:20.

This usage is paralleled in the Middle Assyrian Laws. In Law #24 we read that:

If a seignior's wife, having deserted her husband, has entered the house of an Assyrian, whether it was in the same city or in some neighboring city, where he set her up in a house, (and) she stayed with the mistress of the house (and) spent the night (there) three or four times, without the master of the house knowing that the seignior's wife was staying in his house....¹⁴

Other uses of numbers either syndetically or asyndetically for this purpose could be mul

plied both in Scripture and other ancient texts.¹⁵ But the preceding discussion should demonstrate that, in the proper handling of numbers, the interpreter must first determine if the number is literal and has mathematical implications. Following this, it must be determined, if the case in point does not fit the literal usage, whether or not the number is used rhetorically. The general context will give the key to this. In poetic portions of Scripture, one should expect to find this phenomenon occurring with some frequency. If, by the process of elimination, the reason for the use of a number or numbers is still not clearly understood, symbolic implications of the number may be considered.

THE SYMBOLIC USE OF NUMBERS

A symbolic number is a number employed by a writer not only for its mathematical value, but for its theological significance. It should be pointed out that in most cases, if not in all, the numbers of Scripture are to be taken literally unless there is unquestionable proof that they are to be taken otherwise. The use of numbers symbolically is one of the more difficult aspects of the study of Biblical symbolism. It is difficult because of the mass of material involved. It is even the more difficult because of the methodology that must be employed to determine the nature and meaning of these symbols. The identification of symbolic numbers in Scripture, for the most part, must be the result of inductive research. Mickelsen states that: "Any symbolic meaning given to numbers must be based on inductive study."¹⁶ Terry suggests the same approach:

The only valid method of ascertaining the symbolical meaning and usage of such numbers, names, and colours in the Scriptures, is by an ample collation and study of the passages where they occur. The hermeneutical process is therefore essentially the same as that by which we ascertain the "usus loquendi" of words, and the province of hermeneutics is, not to furnish an elaborate discussion of the subject, but to exhibit the principles and methods by which such discussion should be carried out.¹⁷

But let it be noted at this point that this method need not be employed exclusively. This would have been the case one hundred years ago, but with the abundance of contemporary literature now translated and in print, one is able to compare literary forms. The science of philology has contributed considerably to a better understanding of Old Testament vocabulary and its literary devices. A careful reading of such contemporary literature, as for example the Ugaritic texts, will prove useful in the analyzation of symbolic numbers. This is not to say that the theological concepts of these texts must be paralleled with those of the Scripture, but helpful light can be shed on basic symbolic numbers which appear to be common to all Northwest Semitic languages. Extremes in this approach must be recognized. Cyrus Gordon recognized the fact that Ugaritic texts used numbers symbolically and rhetorically with considerable frequency, and in his effort to parallel Scripture with these texts, he has robbed Scripture of any real significant numerical reliability. The ages of men are constantly brought into question.¹⁸ Genealogies are reduced to schematic lists whose numbers one must not take seriously.¹⁹

Perhaps the easiest way to explain the method to be employed in ascertaining the meaning

and use of symbolic numbers is to illustrate the process. The best example of a symbolic number in Scripture is the number seven. We shall therefore examine this number in order to discover its symbolical meaning and usage. First, its occurrence in ancient Near Eastern literature as a symbolic number is significant. It occurs in many texts from widely separated geographic areas. It appears, therefore, that the symbolic use of the number was rather widespread and common in the Near East during the Old Testament period. The number seven:

. . . is found in reference to ritual in the age of Gudea, that is perhaps about the middle of the 3rd millennium B.C. "Seven gods" at the end of an enumeration meant "all the gods. . ."20

Smith further observes that:

There is clear evidence in cuneiform texts, which are our earliest authorities, that the Babylonians regarded seven as the number of totality, of completeness. The Sumerians, from whom the Semitic Babylonians seem to have borrowed the idea, equated seven with "all." The seven-storied towers of Babylonia represent the universe.²¹

The number seven in Scripture occurs in one way or another in nearly 600 passages in the Bible. When all the uses of this number are collected and studied they can be divided into four main categories.

I. The Historic Use of Seven

The number seven occurs many times in historic contexts or narratives. It is apparent that in many of these occurrences there are symbolic implications along with the literal meaning of the number. The following texts are examples of the use of seven in historical narratives: Jacob's 7 years' service for Rachel (Gen. 29:20f), Jacob's bowing down 7 times to Esau (Gen. 33:3), 7 years of plenty and 7 years of famine (Gen. 41:53), Samson's 7 day marriage feast (Judges 14:12 cf. Gen. 29:27), etc. The above numbers must, no doubt, be understood literally in most cases. But even when these numbers are interpreted literally, one is impressed by the fact that frequent occurrences of this number seem to indicate a symbolic usage also.

II. The Ritualistic Use of Seven

A careful reading of the commands and history of sacrifices, feasts, etc. will evidence a frequent occurrence of the number seven. Once again these are to be understood literally, but with symbolic implications. The following examples will illustrate this particular use of the number seven: The 7 days of unleavened bread (Ex. 34:18, etc.), 7 days of the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:34), the 7th year was the sabbatical year (Ex. 21:2, etc.), the Moabite Balak built for Balaam on three occasions 7 altars and provided in each case 7 bullocks and 7 rams (Num. 23:1, 14, 29), etc.

III. The Didactic or Literary Use of Seven

The symbolic use of seven naturally led to its employment by poets and teachers for the vivid expression of many, multitude, or intensity. This particular use of the number is sometimes very evident and other times latent. The following are some examples of this use: the 7-fold curse predicted for the murderer of Cain (Gen. 4:15), fleeing 7 days (Deut. 28:7, 25), praise of God 7 times a day (Psa. 119:164), etc.

IV. The Apocalyptic Use of Seven

The appearance of the number in the book of Revelation is so common that extensive commentary is not needed at this point. This use of seven, as in the other uses, is best understood literally with symbolic intentions. For example, in Rev. 1:4 there is mention of the "seven churches in Asia." There is no doubt as to the literal nature of this number for seven churches did indeed exist in Asia at that time. But the fact that there were more than seven in Asia at that time indicates that the writer is using the number symbolically or ideally. Hieropolis and Colossae were both located in the province of Asia (Col. 1:2; 4:13, 15, 16) but are not dealt with in Revelation. Other occurrences of the number seven in Revelation are as follows: 1:12 (candlesticks); 1:16 (stars); 1:20 (angels); 4:5 (lamps); 1:4, 3:1, 4:5 (spirits); 5:1 (seals); also, 5:6; 8:2; 10:3; 12:3; 13:1; 15:1, 7; 17:3, 9, 10.

It appears that in some cases there is an attempt to use the multiples of seven in a symbolic sense also. The following are possible examples: fourteen (2 x 7)--Ex. 12:6, 16; Num. 29:13, 15, etc.; forty-nine (7 x 7)--Lev. 23:15ff; 25:8ff; and seventy (7 x 10). Multiples of seven are employed respecting: persons (Ex. 1:5; Deut. 10:22; Ex. 24:1, 9); periods (Gen. 50:3; Isa. 23:15, 17; Jer. 25:11; and objects or animals (Ex. 15:27; Num. 33:9; II Chron. 29:32).

On the basis of these many occurrences, and on the basis of the usage of seven in extra-Biblical texts, it is generally agreed that the number seven when used symbolically designates the idea of completeness, or perfection. The above discussion is designed to illustrate the methodology of determining the meaning of a symbolic number. The analysis of this number is quite easy because of its frequent use, but other numbers are not so easy to analyze. There appears to be general agreement among interpreters that the numbers 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 12 and 40 are used symbolically in Scripture. Because of the lack of space, a detailed consideration of these numbers cannot be given at this point.

THE THEORY OF MYSTICAL NUMERICS

The theory of mystical numerics is that system of interpretation which endeavors to seek out hidden truths by means of numerical phenomena. According to this system of interpretation, all that God does He does with perfection and precision. His works are "absolutely perfect in every particular."²² All His works are perfect in power, holiness, design, execution, object, end, and perfect in number.²³ According to this theory, the perfection of God's handiwork is in evidence in both His works and His words.²⁴ If one is really to appre-

ciate the world about him, he must seek out the grand mysteries of nature as they are revealed in numeric design. So it is with the Word of God. It too has a perfect numeric pattern running through every chapter and for every Bible student who seeks out this pattern and analyzes it, there awaits a deep spiritual blessing. A careful study of these numeric patterns, according to this theory, will give the student insights into the Scriptures which he could get in no other way.

According to the advocates of this system, the student must be aware of two basic principles regarding numbers and the Bible. First, he must recognize that there is design in the use of numbers in the Scripture. Secondly, the student must recognize the significance of the numbers after the basic design has been established.

Who are the chief advocates of this complicated exposition of the deep mysteries? This system of hermeneutics has a long history. Aristobulus the philosopher interpreted the number seven mystically, and Philo followed suit, elaborating the hidden wonders of the number in considerable detail. The Talmudic, Midrashic, and Cabalistic literature developed and used for the interpretation of the Scriptures a sort of numerology called Gematria, a Hebraized form of geômetria which sought to discover the hidden sense of the Hebrew text through the numerical values of the letters of the alphabet. This method was recognized as the 29th of the 32 hermeneutical rules of Rabbi Eliezer ben Jose. In more modern times this type of interpretation has been propagated by Dr. Milo Mahan of New York in his work "Palomoni."²⁵ Perhaps the most detailed and extensive writings in this area have come from the pen of Ivan Panin, a Russian by birth and later a graduate of Harvard University. His works appeared in the early 20th century. Contemporary with Panin in this venture was the well known E. W. Bullinger of Great Britain.²⁶

It will be our purpose in this section to examine the claimed values of this system of interpretation and the principles on which it operates. Having done this, an evaluation of the system will be given.

The Claimed Values of this System

I. Bible Numerics Help Prove Inspiration

From the pen of Ivan Panin we have the following:

The present writer's labours in the field of numerics have been numerous and arduous, but they have been desultory; the reason being that he desired first of all to establish before the candid reader the fact that the unique, and on purely human grounds inexplicable, numeric structure of Scripture establishes its being the writing not of the human mind, but of a superhuman mind.²⁷

II. Bible Numerics Secures the Perfect Text of the Bible

Now, however, a perfect text can be obtained. The key of "Bible Numerics"

detects at once the true. . .²⁸

III. It Solves the Problems of the Authorship of Bible Books

Numerics solve the problem of New Testament authorship as here presented; and every one of the 33 Bible writers can be demonstrated as surely as those eight New Testament writers to be presented in our next paper.²⁹

IV. It Provides Deep Insight into the Mysteries of the Bible ³⁰

We will not comment on these claims at this point, but will first consider the methodology of this system and then evaluate the system and its claims in the final portion of this section. The principles of operation of this system fall into two general classes or methods.

The Methodology

I. The Open Numeric Phenomena

The open numeric phenomena are the data of the Biblical text which exhibit a numeric structure which is plain and incontestable. This design of Scripture is sought out by two methods.

A. The numeric analysis of verses and sentences. The best way to explain this method is to observe it in operation. The numeric analysis of sentences and verses consists of a counting of: (1) the number of letters in the verse, (2) the number of words in the sentence, and (3) the totaled number of significant words. This is illustrated clearly by a portion of Panin's treatment of Genesis 1:1:

The number of words in this verse in the Hebrew, in which language the Old Testament is written, is seven. (Feature 1.) These seven words have fourteen syllables, or 2 sevens (Feature 2) and 28 letters, or 4 sevens (Feature 3). The 28 letters of these seven words are thus divided: the first three words constituting the subject and predicate of the sentence - "In the beginning God created" -- have 14 letters, or 2 sevens; the last four words, constituting the object of the sentence -- "the heavens and the earth" - have also 14 letters (Feature 4), etc.³¹

It will be seen that the emphasis is upon the occurrence of the number seven and its multiples which, it is implied, demonstrates that the text has been perfectly preserved. But is this to say that verse two has not been transmitted accurately? Allis submits the following observation:

If the fact that verse 1 is a perfect example of 7's appearing in both words and letter means that its text has been perfectly preserved, are we to infer that verse 2 has been imperfectly transmitted to us because it has 52 letters? Or does this verse have a different numeric structure?³²

It will be seen that this type of objection may be raised in the handling of all verses in this manner. Granted that special numerical phenomena have been discovered in certain verses, does this make them more inspired than those which do not exhibit such mathematical niceties?

B. The numeric analysis of words, names and grammatical forms. More numeric data are compiled by these men by counting certain words and names as they occur in the Scripture. Such lists include the number of times such words as "covenant," "grace," "holy," "blood," etc. occur. Personal names such as Jesus, Moses, Paul, etc., are counted and analyzed.³³ The idea behind this approach is that in Scripture all names, words, etc. that are really important will exhibit numeric patterns, usually with the number seven as its basis. Bullinger has this to say regarding this method:

The actual number (of occurrences of certain words) depends upon the special significance of the word; for the significance of the word corresponds with the significance of the number of the times it occurs. Where there is no special significance in the meaning or use of the word, there is no special significance in the number of its occurrences.³⁴

But this assumption of Bullinger must at once be brought into question. Does numerical pattern demonstrate the importance or nonimportance of a name or word? For example it has been shown that the name of Moses occurs 847 times (7×121) in the Bible. This is a fact which all writers of this school have brought to our attention. But Allis objects to this method and with good reason. He points out that the name of Aaron appears 346 times in the Old Testament and 5 times in the New Testament for a total of 351 occurrences. He observes further that:

351 is one more than 350 (7×50). 346 is three more than 343 ($7 \times 7 \times 7$). 5 is two less than 7. Is there something wrong with the occurrences of this name? Or was Aaron relatively unimportant?³⁵

It should be rather obvious that this particular method of numerics rests on a faulty premise and no amount of argument will overcome the weight of evidence against it.

C. The numeric analysis of "vocabulary" words. Beside counting words, phrases, names, and certain grammatical forms, the advocates spend great time in establishing a "vocabulary" which exhibits numeric patterns. What is a vocabulary word? How is it to be determined? Ivan Panin explains this system as follows:

The form in which a word occurs is not necessarily the same as the vocabulary word. Thus "I struck him" has for its vocabulary "I, strike, he;" while the forms in which the words "strike" and "he" occur here are: "struck, him." A vocabulary of forms is thus hardly ever the same as the simple vocabulary.³⁶

Thus, the advocates of mysterious numerics extend their system farther and farther. Along with the establishment of the "vocabulary" words, the various forms of these words are calculated also (e.g. nominative, genitive, accusative cases).

The real fallacies in this system of interpretation become evident when one examines the methods of calculation. In many cases, vital portions of Scripture do not exhibit any observable numeric phenomena. In this case an appeal is made to "neighboring numbers." If a word or sentence produces a number which is only one digit from a multiple of seven, this is as good as if it were that number. In other words, a miss is not as good as a mile! A small miss is as good as a hit! It should be evident that such methodology has no place in a serious consideration of Biblical hermeneutics. This assertion will be further justified when the second major principle of operation is considered.

II. The Gematria or Mystical Numeric Phenomena

As previously pointed out, Gematria is that system of interpretation which seeks to discover the hidden sense of the Hebrew and Greek text through the numerical values of the letters of the alphabet. William Taylor Smith defines this approach as follows:

. . . the use of the letters of a word so as by means of their combined numerical value to express a name, or witty association of ideas.³⁷

It is argued that both the Greek and Hebrew alphabets have numerical values attached to their letters. And this is true. In the post-exilic period the Hebrews apparently did use their letters numerically on occasions, but it is not true that the Bible writers employed this method.

The best way to understand this method of interpretation is to see it at work. And for that we call the reader's attention to another portion of Panin's discussion of Genesis 1:1:

The numeric value of the first word of this verse is 913; of the last 296; of the middle, the fourth word, 401; the numeric value of the first, middle and last words is thus 1610, or 230 sevens (Feature 7); the numeric value of the first, middle, and last letters of the 28 letters of this verse is 133, or 19 sevens. (Feature 8.)

If now the first and last letters of each of the seven words in this verse have their numeric value placed against them, we have for their numeric value 1393, or 199 sevens. (Feature 9.) Of these, the first and last words have 497 or 71 sevens; and the remaining five words have 896, or 128 sevens. (Feature 10.)³⁸

Notice carefully the method by which these "features" are determined.³⁹ It can be seen that there is no end to which these men will go in their search for numeric phenomena. But they are not even satisfied with this. We have yet to discuss the "place value" of a number. Ivan

Panin reminds us that:

The place value of a letter as distinguished from its numeric value is the number of its place in the alphabet. Thus alpha being the first letter of the alphabet, its place value is 1; of beta 2; of gamma 3; . . . ⁴⁰

In other words we have a grand new horizon before us in which we may unlock even more mysteries of the Bible!

An Evaluation of this System

Without observing this methodology any further, let us pause amidst this mass of numbers and facts to evaluate the total system. It appears to this writer, from a consideration of all the claims of this system, that there must be total rejection of this approach to Biblical interpretation. The following are the reasons for this conclusion.

First, this system is based on a false apologetic: namely, if this wonderful numerical pattern can be established, the world will no longer be able to reject the Bible as uninspired. It is claimed that there is numeric precision in nature so there must be in the Word of God. But we should like to ask, what is all this to a blind man? What man has ever beheld the holiness of Christ in the numeric patterns of nature and was saved? If human depravity is all that the Scriptures describe it to be, no amount of numeric evidence will rationalize the sinner into salvation. Only the Spirit of God can make an individual aware of his condition before God.

Second, this system can be applied to any numbers. Allis has illustrated this point well with the number 1776, the year of the Declaration of Independence. It has two sevens in it. Add the first and last numbers together and you have another seven, etc. ⁴¹

Third, there is no objective basis for controlling this methodology. The interpreter selects his own words, and the combinations of numbers that he wishes. In other words, the number 7 might have several combinations (6 + 1, 5 + 2, 4 + 3). How do we know which of these combinations the author intended to bear symbolic implications?

Fourth, the appeal to "neighboring numbers" is not only a mathematical absurdity, but renders the symbolism of numbers meaningless.

Fifth, this whole system is based on a false premise. There is no proof that the Hebrews of the Old Testament used their alphabet in this manner (i.e. in Gematria). As was pointed out earlier, the Moabite Stone and the Siloam Inscription have their numbers written out. This is the case in all the Old Testament. If we grant, for example, that the Greeks did use their alphabet in this manner, it has yet to be proven that these two factors are combined in Scripture. As far as can be determined, there is only one example of Gematria in the Bible, namely, Rev. 13:18 (TR). The Greek letters chi, xi, sigma undoubtedly have reference to numerical value which totals 666. The interpretations of this number have been many and varied.

Nero has been a favorite candidate for identification of this personage in Revelation, since his name in Hebrew totals up to 666. One evangelist totaled up the values of the name Harry S. Truman and was sure he was the anti-Christ because he came up with 666! All kinds of theories and interpretations have been based on these three Greek letters, all of which have numerical support. This should make the interpreter aware of the fact that such attempts to uncover "Bible mysteries" is a waste of time.

Another example of the absurd conclusion that one might draw from numerics is found in Numbers 12:1. "The Cushite" has the numerical value of 735 which is the same as the value of "good looking" in Gen. 12:11. The conclusion would be that Moses' wife was a beautiful woman!

Sixth, this system of interpretation contributes nothing to a better understanding of the text. If anything, it complicates the simplicity of the Word of God. Any system of interpretation which operates on subjective notions is a scheme, not a system, and has no real place in Biblical hermeneutics.

CONCLUSION

The study of Biblical numbers can be a very rewarding and satisfying venture provided it is done within the limits of sound hermeneutics. Any attempt to construct an elaborate system of interpretation based solely on the occurrence or non-occurrence of certain numbers can be very dangerous. There is a definite place for the study of the use of symbolic numbers and their theological implications. But the interpreter must beware that he be not carried away with this approach and lose sight of the all important literal uses of numbers. In this age of semantic and theological confusion, let us who handle the Word of God do so with power and simplicity, both of which are results of the Spirit's leadership.

DOCUMENTATION

1. Cyrus H. Gordon, The World of the Old Testament. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1958) p. 117, note 7.
2. Rev. 13:18. This text will be discussed at a later point.
3. M. H. Pope, "Number." The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962) p. 563.
4. Ibid.
5. William Taylor Smith, "Numbers." The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Co. 1925) IV, p. 2157.
6. R. A. H. Gunner "Numbers." The New Bible Dictionary. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962) p. 895.
7. Rev. 13:18. For a detailed discussion of the syntax of Greek numbers see A. T. Robertson, A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research. (New York: Hodder & Stroughton, 1915) p. 281 ff.

8. R. A. H. Gunner, op. cit., p. 896. (cf. also The Journal of Biblical Literature, March 1958).
9. Ibid.
10. Compare also Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6.
11. James B. Pritchard. (ed.) Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) p. 132.
12. Ibid., p. 134.
13. Ibid., p. 135 (Baal II, viii, 24); p. 136 (Baal VAB, A, 13, 14); p. 138 (Baal VAB, F, 1, 2 11).
14. Ibid., p. 182. (underlining mine)
15. Compare also Amarna Letter #29:17, 20.
16. A. Berkeley Mickelsen. Interpreting the Bible. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963) p. 272.
17. Milton S. Terry. Biblical Hermeneutics. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.) p. 380.
18. Cyrus H. Gordon. The World of the Old Testament. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1958) pp. 140, 141.
19. Ibid., pp. 116, 117.
20. William Taylor Smith, op. cit., p. 2159. The date for Gudea is more accurately the late third Millennium or early second Millennium. Recent trends have tended to lower all dates for this period.
21. Ibid.
22. E. W. Bullinger. Number in Scripture. (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode Ltd., 1913) p. 1.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., p. 2.
25. This work has long been out of print and knowledge of this work comes from the preface to Bullinger's work on numbers. Op. Cit., p. vi.
26. A host of others might be listed here, but those named appear to be the leaders of this school of interpretation.
27. Ivan Panin. "Bible Numerics." Things To Come. (London: Horace Marshall & Son, Feb. 1912) Vol. XVIII, No. 12, p. 21. See also Bullinger, op. cit., p. 20.
28. Ibid., Vol. XVII, No. 1, (1911) p. 2.
29. Ibid., Vol. XIX, No. 1, (1913) p. 7.
30. E. W. Bullinger, op. cit., p. 20ff.
31. Ivan Panin, op. cit., Vol. XVII, No. 12, (Dec. 1911) pp. 140-141.
32. Oswald T. Allis. Bible Numerics. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1961) p. 7.
33. Ivan Panin, op. cit., Vol. XIX, No. 4 (1913) p. 44f. cf. also Ibid. no. 3, p. 30f.
34. E. W. Bullinger, op. cit., pp. 22, 23, (parenthesis mine)
35. Oswald T. Allis, op. cit., pp. 8, 9.
36. Ivan Panin, op. cit., Vol. XVII, No. 1 (1911) p. 8, #5.
37. William Taylor Smith, op. cit., p. 2162.
38. Ivan Panin, op. cit., Vol. XVII, No. 12, (Dec. 1911) pp. 140-141.
39. Ivan Panin, op. cit., Vol. XVII, No. 7, (July, 1911) pp. 82-83.
40. Ivan Panin, op. cit., Vol. XVII, No. 1, (1911) p. 8, #4.
41. See Allis, op. cit., pp. 3, 4 for a complete illustration of this point. Also cf. p. 24.