

A Hermeneutical Handbook

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with

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Introduction

As the early church transitioned from Apostolic to Hellenistic leadership

in the second century, the symbolic interpretation of Bible numerals began to appear in Christian writings. Various church Fathers, like Justin Martyr (2nd century) began to confidently assign symbolic meanings to numerals in Scripture, and proponents of this numerological practice proliferated through the centuries all the way to Bede's time (8th century). A few disagreed with a mystical approach to Bible numerals, notably Irenaeus (around AD 180),¹ but the symbolical method of interpretation got a boost from Augustine (5th century), and later from Jewish Cabalistic literature (9th century and onward). Symbolic numerology remained popular throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and during the Reformation, both Luther and his enemies weaponized it. Luther used numerology to interpret the number 666 as referring to the limited duration of the papacy, and Luther's contemporary, Peter Bungus, used it to show that 666 applied to Luther himself.² More recently, E. W. Bullinger (1837-1913) and Ivan Panin (1855-1942) helped plant the symbolic approach to Bible numerals firmly in the consciousness of modern interpreters. Thus, the dissemination of ancient assumptions about numerals in Scripture having symbolic meaning has continued unabated down to our time.

A direct result of this ancient interpretive heritage, is the tendency of today's scholars to disparage — with little or no explanation — the quantitative accuracy of numerals in the Bible, and to even cast doubt upon their use as literal quantifiers. Thus, Leland Ryken, et al., write,

The lack of numerical exactness explains why in the Bible three, seven, and forty appear with inordinate frequency: three is a few, seven a few more, and forty a lot more.³

¹ *Against Heresies*, Book 2, ch. 24

² John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology*, p. 132.

³ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 305.

More radically, Alec Gilmore writes, *in reference to numerals in the Bible*, “Numbers were specially important in the ancient world, more for their symbolism than for their literal accuracy”⁴ We see that the current inclination to doubt the reliability of Bible numerals does indeed overlap with the ancient assumption that they are “symbolic.”

Now, once scholars accept the idea that numerals in Scripture are not intended as literal expressions of quantities and sequences, they cannot resist making speculative pronouncements about what specific numbers “symbolize.” If we look back to the influential numerologist E. W. Bullinger, we find in his book *Number in Scripture* (p. 23), the following introduction to the “perfect” numbers:

3 is the number of *Divine* perfection.

7 is the number of *Spiritual* perfection.

10 is the number of *Ordinal* perfection.

12 is the number of *Governmental* perfection.

The product of these four perfect numbers forms the great number of *chronological perfection*, $3 \times 7 \times 10 \times 12 = 2520$, the times of Israel’s punishment, and the times of Gentile dominion over Jerusalem.

In the face of such pronouncements, the responsible exegete should ask:

- **On *what basis* does this author assert that these numbers represent the kinds of perfection listed or that they represent any kind of perfection at all?**
- **What indication do we have *in Scripture* that the biblical peoples understood these numerals in this way?**
- **What does the product of multiplying various Bible numerals have to do with responsible exegesis?**⁵

⁴ “Numbers,” in *A Concise Dictionary of Bible Origins and Interpretation*, p. 142.

⁵ Marty Solomon, in *Asking Better Questions Of The Bible*, encourages us to read the Bible from an Eastern Perspective. Sadly, he does not distinguish between an Eastern and a *Hebraic* perspective, and sends us on a web search (p. 24!) for our first exercise: learning to see numbers as an Easterner does. He writes, “The Easterner sees numbers primarily as qualitative or symbolic.” He then illustrates with the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand (p. 25):

To a Jewish reader, the story of Jesus feeding five thousand in Galilee with five loaves and two fish is full of meaningful numbers. Five represents the Torah, and one thousand is the

- **How does an esoteric knowledge of number symbolism serve to edify the church?**

Bullinger's book contains some pearls of insight and presents many fascinating, if trivial, numerical oddities and coincidences that appear in Scripture, but by and large, his conclusions regarding a lengthy list of numbers are "the outcome of fancy," *a charge he levels at others* on p. 273 of his book.

In the face of both the ongoing confusion engendered by the symbolic approach to interpreting Bible numerals, and the current tendency to disparage the reliability of Bible numerals, surprisingly little has been published on responsible hermeneutical guidelines for interpreting number words in Scripture. John J. Davis's *Biblical Numerology: A Basic Study of the Use of Numbers in the Bible*, (Baker 1968) has helped fill the gap. Building, in part, upon Davis's work, we offer the following handbook. It consists of ten observations that we deem important for correctly interpreting numerical terms in the Bible. We hope by these observations to encourage a more constructive approach to interpreting Bible numerals, and to aid preachers, teachers and authors in the task of exegeting Scripture passages that contain number words.

numerical representation of a people group — so five thousand (5×1000) means "people of the Torah." Two represents the tablets of Moses. Jesus feeds the people of the Torah with the law, and there is enough leftover bread to fill twelve baskets (representing the tribes of Israel).

[Chapter Eight](#) of this handbook will illuminate the true source of this symbolical approach to biblical numerals.

Quote

There is one body and one Spirit,
just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;
one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
one God and Father of all
who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4.4-6



Scribal Errors Have Crept In

Copyist errors crept into biblical manuscripts over the centuries, and a few of those errors involve numerals. As noted in *Hard Sayings of the Bible*,

The transmission of numbers in ancient documents was especially susceptible to textual error due to the fact that the [numerical] systems were so diverse and with little standardization between cultures or periods of history in the same nation or culture.⁶

Consequently, whether due to scribal carelessness or confusion, large numbers in the Old Testament can be particularly problematic, notoriously in the book of Numbers. A definite error occurs, for example, in Numbers 3.15-39, a passage in which three addends, 7,500, 8,600, and 6,200 add up to the sum of 22,300 *not* the stated sum of 22,000.⁷ In this case, since the sum is confirmed as correct by the following verses (22,273 minus 273, according to Nu 3.40-51), Keil and Delitzsch are probably correct in saying that, “in v. 28 we should read שלש for שש,”⁸ i.e., *three* for *six*, resulting in an addend of 8,300 instead of 8,600.⁹ Other problematic large numbers in the book of Numbers are not so easily accounted for, as Timothy R. Ashely helpfully explains in his “Excursus on Large Numbers.”¹⁰ Thankfully, none of the debated large numbers in the Old Testament significantly alter the overall meaning of their contexts, nor affect a doctrine of the Jewish or Christian faiths.

Some copyist errors involving numerals in the Old Testament can be corrected by parallel passages. For example, the Hebrew text of 2 Chronicles 22.2 says that Ahaziah was forty-two years old when he became king upon the death of his

⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., et al, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, p. 51.

⁷ All of these numbers, as with all numbers in Scripture, are written out phonetically rather than with figures.

⁸ *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, p. 664.

⁹ Curiously, the LXX does change the second addend to 6,050 (Nu 3.34) but still maintains the sum of 22,000 (Nu 3.39).

¹⁰ In his commentary on *The Book Of Numbers*, p. 60, ff.

father *who had died at forty years of age*. Ahaziah could hardly have been older than his father. The Hebrew text of 2 Kings 8.26 preserves the correct number for Ahaziah's age at his coronation, namely *twenty-two*, and some of our translations (e.g. NASB95) have corrected the Hebrew text's number of forty-two in 2 Chronicles 22.2 to *twenty-two* in our English text.

Now, the corollary to the fact that scribal errors occur more commonly with larger numbers in the earlier books of the Bible, is that such errors are less likely with smaller numbers and with numbers in the New Testament. Nevertheless, when questions arise about a numeral in Scripture, our first concern is to ascertain, if possible, whether a copyist error has occurred. If we suspect that it has, then we must investigate whether parallel passages or other evidence supports a different numeral in the place of the questionable one.

We assure the reader that scribal errors involving numerals are statistically rare in the biblical text. Since such errors are a real phenomenon, though, their possibility must be taken into account by the careful interpreter. Still, to borrow a legal principle, numerals in Scripture should be "considered innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt." As John J. Davis concludes on this point, **"All numbers of the Bible should be regarded as fundamentally dependable and the interpreter should be hesitant to change the traditional text unless there is clear evidence of textual corruption and only when he has sufficient evidence to support the new reading."**¹¹

¹¹ *Biblical Numerology*, p. 156, emphasis added.

Two

People In Antiquity Measured In Different Ways

Biblical authors express measurements differently than we do in our time and culture. For example, Jonah 3.3 describes the 8th century BC city of Nineveh as “a three days’ journey in breadth.”¹² To us, that means that the city would take three days to walk, or ride a burro, from one end of the city in a straight line to the other end. However, the archaeological remains of Nineveh imply a walled city of no more than 3 miles in diameter.¹³ There are a handful of solutions to this seeming error of measurement on Jonah’s part, so the interpreter should not hastily resort to a figurative, or even hyperbolic, explanation. There is some ambiguity in the Hebrew expression, מֵהֶלֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים, *a walk of three days*: does it mean in breadth or in circumference? Even the circumference of the archaeological remains, however, is too small to account for it taking three days to circumambulate.¹⁴ Now, the Hebrews probably understood Nineveh to include both its immediate “suburbs” outside the walled city as well as its “sister cities” within an 18-mile radius,¹⁵ and this could account for the “walk of three days” to traverse it. Another consideration, though, is the nature of the city itself, both architectural and moral. We assume that by “a walk of three days” Jonah meant by way of a linear or circular path on paved streets or sidewalks, but one could probably not walk across 8th century BC Nineveh in a straight line. One might have had to take a circuitous route, not only to avoid narrow streets congested by

¹² English Standard Version (ESV).

¹³ Titus Kennedy, in *The Essential Archaeological Guide to Bible Lands*, estimates a circumference of only about 3 miles (5 km), but surmises that it “may have been the largest [city] in the world at the time” of Jonah’s mission.

¹⁴ *The Facts On File Dictionary Of Archaeology* estimates the circumference of Nineveh’s city wall in its “heyday,” about a century after Jonah, as 12 kilometers, i.e., 7.45 miles.

¹⁵ See Unger, *Archaeology And The Old Testament*, pp. 89-90. Also, Titus Kennedy thinks it probable that “Nineveh” included “the districts outside the walls and perhaps even satellite villages.” In Scripture we see cities counted with their villages in Jos 13; 15; 16; 19; Jdg 11.26; 1Ch 2.23; 4.32-33; 2Ch 13.19; 28.18.

pedestrians and animals,¹⁶ but also to bypass dangerous neighborhoods. The point is that the interpreter of biblical measurements must remain aware of his modern presuppositions and compare them to the relevant historical data — *or lack of data* — currently available.

¹⁶ Regarding the latter, consider Jonah 3.6-8.

Three

Different Bible Authors Expressed Ideas Differently

Canonical authors make use of the different nuances of words and phrases within their own writings,¹⁷ and often emphasize a different meaning of a given term than the meaning emphasized by a different author. Therefore, we have this basic rule in biblical hermeneutics: **Do not assume that a word or phrase means the same thing, or is used in the same way, in every passage and book of the Bible.** A corollary of this rule is that: **One canonical author may use a different term than another to say or talk about essentially the same thing.** As examples of the rule,

- Luke may use the term “apostle” to refer only to the twelve disciples of Jesus, while Paul uses “apostle” more in the sense of *missionary*;
- Paul may use the terms *faith* and *works* with different nuances than James.¹⁸

As examples of the corollary,

- Old Testament writers use the phrase *fear of the LORD* where New Testament writers might use *faith in God* or *faith in Christ*;¹⁹
- Matthew uses both *kingdom of heaven* and *kingdom of God* to speak of God and Christ’s present and future reign, while Mark, Luke and John use the phrase *kingdom of God* exclusively;
- John uses the *witness-testimony* word family in his Gospel and epistles to talk about the Christian message, whereas Paul uses the *gospel-evangelize* word family.²⁰

With regard to numerical terms, we find that **Biblical authors had different ways to express the numerical multiple of a quantity.** Luke’s

¹⁷ As John does with *world*, *κόσμος*: Jn 1.10,29; 3.16; 8.23; 12.19; 14.17; 1Jn 2.15.

¹⁸ T. Desmond Alexander, et al, *New Dictionary Of Biblical Theology*, p. 70.

¹⁹ Willem VanGemenen, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Vol. 1, p. 192.

²⁰ Walter A. Elwell, “The Diversity Of Scripture,” in *Evangelical Dictionary Of Biblical Theology*.


version of Jesus' parable of the sower (Lk 8.4-8) uses one way, as we see in this excerpt:

“ ... some [seed] fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.”

In this text, Luke has Jesus using an *n-fold* expression, in which *n* is a number and *-fold* is a suffix that multiplies the number. In the Greek text, the relevant term is *ἐκατονταπλάσιονα*, “hundredfold” (ESV), in which *ἐκατον* is the number *a hundred* and the ending *-πλάσιονα* expresses the idea of *times multiplied*.²¹ **This *n-fold* expression is the normal and precise *adjectival* way to express the idea of a thing or a quantity being multiplied by a given number.**²²

However, Matthew and Mark expressed the same *n-fold* idea using cardinal numbers, *hundred* (*ἐκατὸν*), *sixty* (*ἑξήκοντα*), *thirty* (*τριάκοντα*) — without the **πλάσι** suffix (Mt 13.8,23; Mk 4.8,20).²³ This is not a grammatical anomaly, but a known usage of cardinal numbers as *the abbreviated form of an n-fold expression*.²⁴ The important thing for us to note is that *the other New Testament authors did not use cardinal numbers to express an n-fold multiple like Matthew and Mark did*.

Therefore, if we come across an unfamiliar numerical expression, like the Revelation's “seven spirits of God” (Re 3.1; 4.5; 5.6), we should not hastily interpret the cardinal number *seven* as signifying anything other than a quantity of seven. We should certainly not interpret it as signifying *sevenfold*, unless we can show that John used cardinal numbers in other passages to express an *n-fold* multiple.²⁵

²¹ As does the - suffix in Hebrew.

²² This contrasts with the *adverbial* description of an action occurring a number of times, for which biblical Greek uses the **χis* suffix, as in *πεντάχis*, *five times* (2Co 11.24), *ἐπτάχis* and *ἐβδομηκοντάχis*, *seven times* and *seventy times* (Ge 4.24; Mt 18.22), and *πολλάχis*, *many times* (= *often*, Mt 17.15; Jn 18.2; Ro 1.13; etc.).

²³ Both Matthew and Mark also had occasion to use *ἐκατονταπλάσιονα*, “hundredfold,” (Mt 19.29; Mk 10.30).

²⁴ Cf. Ge 4.24 where *seventy-seven* is used for *seventy-sevenfold*.

²⁵ For an explanation of the Revelation's “seven spirits of God,” see Roderick Graciano, *The Seven Spirits Of God And The Man Who Will Judge The World*, Second Edition 2025.

Four

Cardinal Numerals In Scripture Are Generally Exact

Generally, cardinal numbers in Scripture express an exact quantity.

One might think this fact should go without saying, but even well-meaning scholars are apt to question whether numbers in the Bible should be taken at face value. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (DBI), for example, to repeat a quote already given above, says,

The lack of numerical exactness explains why in the Bible three, seven, and forty appear with inordinate frequency: three is a few, seven a few more, and forty a lot more.²⁶

The DBI bases its assessment on evidence external to the Bible, and admits a few sentences later that, “There are ... instances in which [such numbers seem] to be a precise reckoning”²⁷ The Bible does use approximate and even hyperbolic numbers, as explained below, but **our exegetical starting point should be to assume a number in Scripture to be precise**, and then consider whether we should adjust our assessment in the light of contextual clues. As John J. Davis concludes on this point, “**Numbers should always be taken at face value ... unless there is either textual or contextual evidence to the contrary.**”²⁸

Not only are numbers in the Bible generally precise, but many of them are *demonstrably* so. Examples begin with the seven days of creation (six days of work, one of rest), Genesis 1.1 to 2.3. The Genesis narrative describes both the events of each day and each day’s completion (except in the case of the seventh), leaving no doubt that the narrative has a precise quantity of *exactly* seven days in view.²⁹

²⁶ P. 305.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *Biblical Numerology*, p. 155, emphasis added.

²⁹ While the authors of this handbook believe that the days of creation were literally periods of time equal to one full revolution of the earth, the nature and the length of the days of creation is irrelevant to the question under consideration here: Does the Bible mention any numbers clearly intended to express an *exact* quantity? The days of creation tell us at the beginning of the biblical revelation that the answer is Yes.

There are many other instances in which an exact quantity is confirmed by describing or naming the constituent persons or things that comprise the total of that quantity. Thus, we know that Jacob had exactly twelve sons, since exactly twelve are named (Ge 35.22-26). The same goes for the twelve disciples of Jesus (Mt 10.2-5). Similarly, we know that Jesus represented exactly seven churches with his symbol of seven golden lampstands (Re 1.12,20), because He named exactly seven churches by their respective cities (Re 1.11).³⁰ Likewise, we know that John saw exactly *seven* bowls of wrath in his revelation, because he describes seven distinct results when one after another of the seven bowls are poured out.

As with John's bowls of wrath, another case involving one of the DBI's supposedly approximate numbers, appears in Genesis 18 and 19. The first of these chapters relate how Abraham looked up and saw that "three men were standing opposite him" (Ge 18.2). As the story unfolds, one of the men turns out to be the LORD. As the LORD's visit with Abraham draws to an end, He stays to talk with Abraham a bit longer, while the other men go ahead to Sodom. Genesis 19.1 confirms that these other men were "two angels." Thus, contrary to the DBI, the number *three* in Genesis 18.2 means precisely *three*, as confirmed by the simple sum of one LORD plus two angels. The number three in the Bible is not an "approximation" for a few, nor is seven an approximation for "a few more." Thinking about biblical numbers in the DBI's imprecise way is unwarranted in view of the fact that both the Hebrew and Greek languages have words for *few*, *more*, and *many*; the Scriptures do not use specific numerals to signify these generalized ideas.

³⁰ That exactly seven churches are addressed in the Revelation ***does not limit the application of their letters to those churches only***. As Christ tells us at the close of each letter, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." *It is possible* that the number *seven*, in connection with the churches, is intended to connote "completeness" and thus to nudge the reader toward the recognition that the seven named churches were representative of the "complete" group of churches in Asia, and therefore, that the letters to the seven should be shared with the whole group. However, other connotations or allusions of the number *seven* could apply just as well in this context, and the application to all the churches is made explicit without any resort to the number seven.

Along with the Bible's *demonstrably* precise numbers, others are *implicitly* exact. For example, in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand recorded in Mark 6, Jesus first says to His disciples, "How many loaves do you have? Go look!" The text continues, "And when they found out, they said, 'five and two fish'" (Mk 6.38). We see that the narrative flow of this verse leaves no doubt that the numbers five and two are intended to be understood as exact quantities, not approximations. Also implicitly exact is the number of fish netted by the disciples according to John 21.11, *a hundred and fifty-three*.³¹ Had John intended this number as an approximation he would have at least rounded it to *about a hundred and fifty* (using the comparative ὥς), if not simply generalizing the quantity to *more than a hundred*. Likewise, Luke's count of *two hundred and seventy-six* persons aboard the ship that was wrecked off Malta (Ac 27.37) is implicitly precise, and like John's count of the netted fish, supports the supposition of *an eye-witness account*.³²

The point, again, is that **the appropriate exegetical starting point when interpreting a numerical term in Scripture is to take it literally**, that is, to assume it signifies a precise quantity. This interpretation should be maintained until historical, literary or textual context demands that the literal and precise interpretation of a number be reassessed. When evidence suggests that a numeral in the Bible is not intended to express a precise quantity, we may then consider whether we should interpret that numeral as approximate or exaggerated. We describe these possibilities in the next two chapters.

³¹ In the hundred and fifty-three fish, Augustine found allusions to the Holy Spirit overshadowing the law by this formula: "... when to the number of ten, representing the law, we add the Holy Spirit as represented by seven, we have seventeen; and when this number is used for the adding together of every several number it contains, from 1 up to itself, the sum amounts to one hundred and fifty-three" (*Tractate on the Gospel of John* 122). Responsible biblical exegesis does not utilize such numerical shenanigans.

³² Bullinger accurately reported that the number *one hundred and fifty-three*, in Jn 21.11, "has taxed the ingenuity of some of the greatest of Bible students, and that from the earliest times. All have felt there must be something deeply significant and mysterious in this number" But all the great scholars who have offered symbolic interpretations of this number, including Augustine, Jerome, Gregory the Great, and down to Bullinger himself, in their rush to the mystical, lost sight of the apologetic value of evidences in Scripture of eye-witness testimony. See Bullinger, *Number In Scripture*, pp. 272-278.

Quote

Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand.

John 6.10

Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught."

Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn.

John 21.10-11

Five

Some Numerals In Scripture Are Approximate

Rounded Numbers

Biblical numbers may be rounded, as is probably the case in passages like Judges 3.31 (600), Judges 15.15-16 (1,000), and Amos 5.3 (1,000, 100, 10). As we would anticipate, rounded numerals in the Bible generally end in zero. This does not mean that every numeral ending in zero is rounded. On the contrary, exceptions include:

- the precise number of men in a military unit (e.g. 2Ki 1.1-10),
- the number of persons in another kind of organized group, like the missionaries sent out by Jesus or the lepers who banded together for mutual aid (Lk 10.1,17; 17.12-17), and
- the amount of a monetary transaction (Mt 26.15).

Nevertheless, when we encounter a numeral in Scripture that ends in zero, it *may be rounded* if there is no contextual evidence to the contrary, and it is *definitely rounded* if it is preceded by the adverb *about* (e.g. Jos 7.4; Ac 1.15).³³

However, even when rounded, numerals in Scripture always denote a specific quantity which serves as the reference point for the rounded approximation. Therefore, if a number large or small number, say, “a hundred,” is interpreted as a rounded number, we must read it as “approximately a hundred,” not as “a quantity substantially more or less than a hundred.”³⁴ This principle holds true even with the rare, idiomatic “rounding” of days in the Bible. When Jesus spoke of His burial, He used Jonah’s phrase, “three days and three nights” (Jon 1.17; cf. 1Sa 30.12), to describe a period of time which would conclude on the third day (not on the fourth;

³³ To say *about*, in the sense of *approximately*, Hebrew uses אֲדָנָה, and Greek uses ὥς.

³⁴ The probably rounded but disputed large numbers of the book of Numbers present a special problem, because the number word אֶלֶף, normally translated *thousand*, both in the LXX and in our modern versions, is interpreted by some as meaning *clan* or *tribal group*, rather than a numerical quantity, in some contexts (cf. Mic 5.2).

Mt 12.40). Esther had also used the like idiom (cf. Es 4.16 and 5.1, with Mt 12.40 and 16.21; 17.23; 20.19). Thus, as used by Jesus, the phrase “three days and three nights” could be interpreted as meaning “approximately three days.” The idiom probably has a more technical meaning, however, and should be understood as: *a period of time stretching over parts of three consecutive days*. The point is that the phrase, even when understood as an idiomatic “rounding” of the quantity of three days, did not signify a period of time *substantially longer or shorter than one including parts of three consecutive days*. All rounded numbers in Scripture still set a specific quantity before the mind of the reader, even though that quantity is approximate rather than exact.

Explicitly Approximate Numbers

Obviously, this is also true for numbers that Scripture *explicitly* presents as approximations. For example, the number of people gathered in the upper room after Christ’s ascension is rounded to “one hundred and twenty” (Ac 1.15), and made explicitly approximate with the word *about* (ὥς, cf. Mk 8.9; Ac 4.4). So, there were not *exactly* one hundred and twenty people in the upper room, but neither were there only a hundred or a number greater than one hundred and forty. Rounded and explicitly approximate numbers maintain the quantity given as their near estimate. Thus, when in his vision John describes “huge hailstones, **about** (ὥς) one hundred pounds each” (Re 16.21), readers who have not lived in extreme weather locales might think John was speaking hyperbolically, but John’s explicit approximation indicates that a hundred pounds (literally, *weighing a talent*) was his near estimate of their actual weight.³⁵

³⁵ In his gospel, John regularly uses *explicit approximations*: “about three or four miles” (Jn 6.19); “about the sixth hour” (Jn 19.14); “about one hundred yards away” (Jn 21.8).

Six

Some Numerals In Scripture Are Hyperbolical

John may not have exaggerated the size of the apocalyptic hailstones, but **hyperbolical numbers do occasionally appear in Scripture**. We should understand, though, that instances of numerical hyperbole in the Bible are never lies of exaggeration, like those of a modern fisherman bragging about the size of the trout he caught. Instead, numerical hyperbole in Scripture is used for effect, either to:

- *signify a number too large to count* but less than the stated number expressed by a simile (e.g. Jdg 7.12), or
- *express an extreme measure* that in reality would be less than the stated quantity or amount (e.g. Ge 4.24; Job 6.1-3), or
- *describe a minute amount* using a number in the text that is smaller than the probable reality (e.g. 1Sa 11.11),³⁶ or
- *express a rhetorical contrast* by exaggerating the difference between one quantity and another (e.g. 1Sa 18.7).

When hyperbole in Scripture uses a finite number, the number does not necessarily represent an *extreme* exaggeration; it may express a moderate exaggeration, using a number potentially still within the boundaries of reality. For example, when the women of Israel sang that, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (1Sa 18.7; 21.11), they may or may not have employed extreme hyperbole. We must understand that the women did not mean that David had killed tens of thousands *on his own*; they were simply honoring David for having killed a greater number of Philistines with the army under his command, than the troops led by Saul had killed.

³⁶ This reminds me of how Americans who went through hard financial times used to say, “We didn’t have two nickels to rub together,” as if they had no more than five cents to their name. In reality they probably had at least a few dollars with which to get by.

The greater question regarding the hyperbole of killing “tens of thousands” arises from the suggestion of archaeological evidence that the entire Philistine population of the time may not have exceeded 18,000 people.³⁷ On the other hand, David’s misguided census of Israel’s manpower, recorded in 2 Samuel 24, reported *eight hundred thousand* Israelite men of military ability, a number of soldiers that could have easily exterminated the entire Philistine population, had that pagan population not exceeded 18,000. The scarcity of both biblical and archaeological demographic data for the time will not permit us to accurately assess *the scale* of the Israelite women’s hyperbole in their song about David. Nevertheless, their song reminds us that such hyperbole is apt to occur in lyrics, propaganda or in a rhetorical flourish, and so is usually easy to recognize as an exaggeration. Therefore, the biblical interpreter should not hastily assume such poetic or propagandist hyperbole in historical narrative, even when numbers seem overly large.

³⁷ Tristan Barako in “One if by Sea ... Two if by Land: How Did the Philistines Get to Canaan?” in *Biblical Archaeology Review* 29:02, 2003.

Seven

Repeated Number Words Serve Various Functions

In Scripture, the repetition of events in a historical narrative, as well as the repetition of words and phrases in narrative and other Bible genres, serves as a literary or rhetorical device much as it does in literature and oratory to this day. Thus, when a numeral (cardinal, ordinal or fraction) or a numerical sequence is repeated in a passage or book of the Bible, it might serve as an element in fulfilling one or more of the following functions³⁸:

- A. **Providing A Mnemonic Device** (e.g. 1Sa 10.3; Mt 1.17; Eph 4.4-6),
- B. **Expressing Emphasis** (e.g. Ex 30.13; Le 8.33; 25.8; 27.32; Jos 6.15; 1Ki 18.34; Da 5.1; Mt 18.22; 19.30; Mk 10.8; Lk 12.52; Jn 21.17; Ac 12.6; 2Co 11.25; Re 7.1; 8.7-12),
- C. **Signaling Thematic Continuity** (e.g. Re 1.20 with 2.1; 5.9 with 6.1,3,5,7,9,12 and 8.1),
- D. **Building Anticipation Or Suspense** (e.g. Am 1-2),
- E. **Forming A Parallelism** (e.g. Gen 25.23), **Chiasm**³⁹ (e.g. Re 14.1-4) **Or Inclusio** (e.g. Ge 29.18-20),
- F. **Interpreting A Symbol** (e.g. Da 7.17,23,24; 8.22; Re 1.20; 2.1; 4.5; 5.6; 17.9,12),
- G. **Confirming A Revelation** (Ge 40-41; 1Sa 10.1-9).

As the reader might guess, the repetition of numbers (as with the repetition of other words and phrases) most often serves to emphasize a fact or command (**point B**). The use of numbers in forming parallelisms, chiasms or inclusios (**point E**) serves the same function of emphasis, though in a more sophisticated manner. Let us note that a single repetition of a numerical term, that is, only two

³⁸ Cf. Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher And The Ancient Text*, pp. 290-291.

³⁹ Though it does not employ a numerical term, the hymn of the four living creatures in Re 4.8 is a short chiasm that begins with a triple “holy,” and ends with God’s triple state of being, with three divine titles, *Lord, God, Almighty*, in between.

instances of the term in the same passage *might* provide emphasis. However, a threefold repetition of an idea or a word (including number words) is widely recognized as an intentional attention-grabber. In the DBI, pages 866 to 867, Leland Ryken, et al., explain the importance of threefold occurrences in Scripture:

... the significance of three as a literary motif is not purely arbitrary. Three is the minimum number necessary to establish a pattern of occurrences. A single event can be pure chance; a pair can be mere coincidence; but three consecutive occurrences of an event serve as a rhetorical signal indicating special significance.

In another work, Ryken makes a similar comment about threefold occurrences. He writes,

... three is a pattern. Once we are aware of this significance, we come to expect something when a pattern of three appears in a story, inasmuch as the pattern announces importance.⁴⁰

Now, in these statements, Ryken chiefly focuses on threefold *events* that occur in narrative, like Peter denying Christ three times. However, scholarly commentaries frequently point out this same literary effect of “special significance” or “announcing importance” when *words and phrases*, including number words, are repeated three times within passage of any genre.

A dramatic example of number words pointing forward to important truth occurs in Isaiah 6. The verse with the numbers is verse 2, for which I offer our translation with the number words emphasized in bold:

Seraphs attending above Him, **six** wings, **six** wings to *each one*; with **two** he covered his face, and with **two** he covered his feet and with **two** he flew.

The reader will observe that the original language text of a given passage may well include more number words than carry over into our translations.⁴¹ The numbers in the Hebrew text of Isaiah 6.2 seem to intensify in their repetition: *six, six, one, two, two, two!* To what do these repeated numbers lead the reader’s attention? To the threefold declaration, “**Holy, holy, holy** Yahveh of armies!” From the onset

⁴⁰ A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible, pages 198-199.

⁴¹ Not even the Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* translates the doubling of the word *six*, and few English versions besides the KJV and NKJV include the word *one* in the phrase *each one*.

of Isaiah's vision, the seraphs, creatures of fiery purity, were giving the prophet visual and auditory cues: *Cover your two eyes! Hide your two soiled feet that reflect your imperfect walk! You are before the holy, holy, holy King of heavenly armies! Be ready to go as with wings to wherever He may send you!* Isaiah gets the message and cries out, "Woe is me ... a man of unclean lips ...," and then, once his sin is forgiven, "Here am I. Send me!" To reiterate, our intent with this example is to illustrate the idea of **point B: repeated number words in Scripture are sometimes meant to emphasize the things they quantify, and sometimes to draw our attention to ideas or events that follow in the context.**

If three repetitions are meant to provide emphasis and draw our attention, seven repetitions clearly serve this purpose as well. Consider the apostle Paul's summary of the cardinal truths of the faith in Ephesians 4.4-6. He presented it in a proto-creedal form that repeats the number *one* seven times. This numerical repetition functioned first as a mnemonic device (**point A** above) to help readers memorize the summary. In its emphatic function, though, the repetition of the number *one* also signaled readers to contemplate the important implications of there being *only one* of each thing in the list.

Moving on to the function of **signaling thematic continuity (point C)**, we can hardly cite a better example than the triple series of seven woes in the book of Revelation. The first series of woes, tied to the breaking of seven seals (Re 6.1 to 8.5), overlaps toward its end with the woes announced by seven trumpets (Re 8.6 to 11.19), which woes overlap even more with the catastrophes that occur when the seven bowls of God's wrath are poured upon the earth (Re 15.1 to 16.21). In these series, the repetition of the cardinal number *seven*, and the ordinal numbers, *the first, the second, the third*, etc., thematically ties together the entire main body of the Revelation.⁴² In other words, the numerical repetition in the main body of the Revelation signals to the reader that all twenty-one woes can be thematically

⁴² The repetition of *seven* also serves to attach the supplementary tableau of the judgment upon Mystery Babylon to the main body of the Revelation (Re 17.1 to 19.2), by way of having "one of the *seven* angels who had the *seven* bowls," show the tableau to John (Re 17.1).

interpreted under a single heading like, “The Woes That Must Precede The End Of The Present Age.”

Of course, the repetition of the numerical sequences in the Revelation also helps **build suspense (point D)**. The manner in which the Revelation quickly draws the reader into a numbered sequence of woes, starting with *the first* and building to *the seventh* (Re 6.1 to 8.5), and then requires him to read through a similar seven-point sequence of woes *twice more*, cannot help but create an eager anticipation to know how the prolonged crises will end. We find a similar use of a repeated numerical sequence to build suspense in Amos, chapters 1 and 2. However, instead of repeating the sequence 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, the prophecy in Amos repeats the pair of two cardinal number, 3-4, *eight times*. In eight prophetic stanzas about judgment, the LORD, speaking through Amos, begins each stanza with the formula, “For three transgressions ... and for four” The first stanza proclaims the coming punishment for Damascus, and at its conclusion we can imagine Amos’ Israelite audience breathing a sigh of relief, *Ah, that’s about those Syrians, nothing to do with us*. But as soon as Amos proclaimed the second, “Thus says the LORD, for three transgressions ... and for four,” his audience realized, *Uh-oh, he’s not finished yet*. The suspense then builds up through the next five repetitions of, “Thus say the LORD, for three transgressions and for four” Finally, in the last two stanzas, Amos’ audience learned that their growing sense of foreboding was justified. The LORD announces that not even Judah nor Israel will escape judgment, because they too are guilty because of “three transgressions ... and for four,” and the LORD will not revoke their punishment.

Now, let us return to the book of Revelation and its prequel, the book of Daniel, to see how repeated numbers aid in **the interpretation of prophetic symbols (point F)**. In Daniel 7, the prophet recorded a vision involving four great beasts. In Daniel 7.17 the symbolism of the beasts is explained when the prophet is told,

“These great beasts, which they *are* **four**, **four** kings *they are who* will arise from the earth.”⁴³

Let us note that the number word, *four*, does not seem essential for interpreting the symbol. Couldn’t an explanation like, “These great beasts are kings who will arise from the earth,” suffice? We might think so, but the immediate juxtaposition of the repeated number at the center point of the verse⁴⁴ gives the number emphasis. This emphatic repetition of the number *four* assures the reader that the four beasts do not represent future kings in general, but four kings (and their kingdoms, Da 7.23) *in particular*. Furthermore, the repeated number word helps to unambiguously confirm the relationship between the symbol and the thing symbolized: **four** beasts = **four** kings.

This kind of unequivocal clarity is vital in the explanation of the symbolic seven heads of the Antichrist beast in Revelation 17. John is told in Revelation 17.9, “The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits,” and then in verse 18, “The woman whom you saw is the great city” Now, imagine the result if instead of being given the unequivocal equation, “The **seven** heads are **seven** mountains,” John had been told only that, “The seven heads are mountains on which the woman sits” The current debate among commentators as to the identity of “the woman ... the great city” would be multiplied by the question of whether specifically seven mountains are in view, or whether the seven heads simply represent *a cluster of mountains*. In the latter case, any one of countless mountainous cities could be symbolized! We see that the numerical repetition (The **seven** heads are **seven** mountains ...) can be an indispensable aid in interpretation, particularly with regard to apocalyptic symbols.⁴⁵

⁴³ Our literal translation, with bold font added.

⁴⁴ Only the forms change from feminine to masculine to coordinate with the respective genders of *beasts* and *kings*.

⁴⁵ The most specifying contextual key to the identity of the woman, Mystery Babylon, is the present-tense description, “which reigns over the kings of the earth” (Re 17.18). Understanding this as describing the woman-city *in John’s day* leaves no doubt as to her identity being Rome. However, popular eschatology books happily ignore the temporal bounds of this statement, and assume that it can describe a city *of our day* that “rules over the kings of the earth.”

We must note one more function of number repetition in Scripture, namely that of **confirming a revelation (point G)**. This function relates to the biblical law of testimony which states that,

On the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.⁴⁶

This principle of civil law carries over into biblical hermeneutics, particularly with regard to establishing biblical doctrine. In hermeneutics we might call it “the Berean principle,” after the noble-minded Jews of Berea who examined the Scriptures for textual witnesses that would confirm what Paul and Silas were preaching (Ac 17.10-11). We can summarize the hermeneutical rule this way: **To establish the truth and importance of a biblical proposition, support it with at least two or three Scripture passages.** Now, the more important or controversial the proposition, the more vital it is that at least one of the supporting Scripture passages states the proposition *explicitly*, but the general principle is simply to support a doctrinal proposition with multiple scriptural witnesses.⁴⁷

What multiple human witnesses provide in a court of law, and multiple supporting passages of Scripture do for doctrine, the Holy Spirit does for revelation by the repetition of content or the multiplication of supporting signs. For example, to assure Saul of his divine call to rule Israel, the Holy Spirit, through Samuel, gave Saul a threefold sign of threes (1Sa 10.1-9): you will meet “three men ..., one carrying three goats, another carrying three loaves of bread ...” Samuel gave other signs as well, but our current interest is in the numerical repetition. In the number sign given to Saul, we see that the repetition of *three* made the sign much stronger than a more generalized prediction like, “you’ll meet some men with goats and bread.” A sign involving three *different* numbers, like, “three men, two goats and one loaf of bread,” would serve as well, but the threefold repetition of *three* connoted the well-known law of testimony, and so, when fulfilled, provided striking confirmation of the prophetic word for which the sign was given.

⁴⁶ Dt 19.15; Mt 18.16; cf. Dt 17.6; 1Ti 5.19.

⁴⁷ The lack of multiple witnesses in Scripture for a proposition does not prove it is untrue, but only that it is not of primary importance.

Let us consider an earlier example in which number repetition played a supporting role in confirming a revelation. In Genesis 41 we read about the Egyptian Pharaoh of Joseph's day having two dreams (Ge 41.1-7). In the first dream, Pharaoh saw seven fat cows and seven lean cows; in the second dream he saw seven good ears of grain and seven withered ears of grain. Joseph was able to interpret the dream as foretelling seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine. But here are Joseph's words that are of particular interest for us (Ge 41.25,32):

"Pharaoh's dreams are one *and the same* **Now as for the repeating of the dream to Pharaoh twice, it means that the matter is determined** by God,⁴⁸ and God will quickly bring it about."

We note that *it is the repetition of the dream itself that confirms the revelation*.⁴⁹ However, it is the repetition of the number *seven* in both dreams that confirms the second dream as a witness to the first. In other words, the repeated number words fulfill a supporting role in providing confirmation of the revelation.

With this final observation in mind, of how number repetition can aid in confirming revelation, let us imagine the prophet Daniel, in exile with his Judean countrymen, as he studied the prophecies of Jeremiah. Daniel wrote,

I, Daniel, observed in the books the number of the years which was *revealed as* the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet for the completion of the desolations of Jerusalem, *namely*, seventy years.⁵⁰

Discerning that Jeremiah had predicted the exile to last seventy years immediately propelled Daniel into strategic and effective prayer. Why? Why didn't Daniel say to himself, "Well seventy is a round number, and probably just symbolizes that our exile will last until we are brought to *complete* repentance, and only Jeremiah mentions this heptad, so I mustn't build a doctrine on it nor tell my compatriots that our exile is coming to an end"? Daniel *did not* respond with this uncertainty

⁴⁸ Cf. the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. In that translation we find, "*it means that the revelatory word will be true*" (our paraphrase).

⁴⁹ Cf. the threefold repetition of the visionary command to Peter in Ac 10.9-16.

⁵⁰ Da 9.2.

because, first, numbers in Scripture do not indicate, simply by virtue of being rounded, that they convey a symbolic meaning or non-precise quantity, and second, Jeremiah repeated this number of years *three times*. We can imagine Daniel's heart stirred as he read,

This whole land will be a desolation and a horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon **seventy years**. Then it will be when **seventy years** are completed I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, ...⁵¹

"Can it be?" he must have thought. "Since the Babylonian nation has now been 'punished' by the Medes, might also our exile be coming to a close?" Then when he read a little further, Daniel came to the letter of Jeremiah to the people in exile, and read these words,

For thus says the LORD, "When **seventy years** have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart."⁵²

"Yes!" Daniel must have thought. "By two or three witnesses! Not only did the LORD limit the time of our service to Babylon to seventy years, but explicitly promised to bring us back to Jerusalem when seventy years have been completed. The time for us to call upon the LORD with all our hearts is now!"

⁵¹ Je 25.11-12.

⁵² Je 29.10-13.

Eight

Numerals In Scripture Are Almost Never Symbolic

What We Mean By Symbolic

Symbolic numbers in Scripture are a rarity. To help us understand this fact, let us remind ourselves what is meant by the adjective *symbolic* (also *symbolical*):

- To say that a tangible thing is symbolic, is to say that *it represents something other than what it is itself*. In the Lord's Supper, for example, the bread and wine are symbols that represent something other than bread and wine, namely the body and blood of Christ.
- To say that an intangible thing seen in a dream or a vision is symbolic, is to say that *the thing perceived represents something other than what it is perceived as*. The stars seen by John in Revelation 1.16 and 20, for example, are symbolic in that they represent something other than stars, namely, the angels or messengers of the churches.
- To say that a word or phrase is symbolic (in other than the most basic sense, explained in the next paragraph), is to say that *the word or phrase is figurative, describing something other than what it would signify literally*. For example, "the almond tree" that blossoms in Ecclesiastes 12.5 is symbolic in that it is a metaphor for hair turning white with age; it represents something other than a literal almond tree.

Now, numerals in Scripture (all of which are spelled out phonetically in words, rather than written with figures), are *symbolic* only in the sense that all words are symbolic, that is, in the sense that all words signify something beyond their combination of letters in a written text. The word *horse*, for example, signifies something beyond the letter combination, h-o-r-s-e; it signifies a particular kind of quadruped. We can say, therefore, that the word *horse* "symbolizes" a large quadruped with hooves, a shaggy mane and a tail. However, we cannot say that the

word *horse* symbolizes an apple in the same sense that it symbolizes the quadruped. In like manner, the word *four* signifies the quantity *one plus one plus one plus one*. If we wish, we can say that the word *four* “symbolizes” the above mentioned quantity, but we cannot say that the word *four* symbolizes a horse in the same sense that it “symbolizes” the quantity known as “four.” Thus, like other nouns and adjectives, number words do not normally (apart from in a pre-defined code) signify or “symbolize” something other than the conventional meaning assigned to them by common usage. The word *ten* conventionally means a quantity of ten, *seventh* conventionally means that something occurs in position seven of a sequence, etc. **With only one exception, numbers in Scripture are never symbolic in the sense of representing something other than a quantity or sequential position.** The one exception to the rule is the apostle John’s use of a numeral to represent the name of the Antichrist, in Revelation 13.17-18.

John was able to use a numeral for a name because the Greeks (as early as c. 500 BC⁵³), and then the Hebrews (by c. 140 BC⁵⁴), assigned numerical values to the letters of their respective alphabets, such that the letters could then be used as numeric figures, α for 1, β for 2, etc. (see charts on following pages). Thus, by the first century, the number of Abram’s trained men (Ge 14.14), for example, could be expressed by using the Greek letters, $\tau \iota \eta$, instead of by writing the number out phonetically as in the Septuagint, *τριακοσίους δέκα καὶ ὀκτώ*. Also, once the numerical values of the alphabetical characters became established, people realized that they could express words, including names, by the numerical total of the word’s letters. For example, the name *David*, spelled with its Hebrew consonants, is *דָּוִד*, *dalet vav dalet*. Since the letter *dalet* has the numerical value of four, and the *vav* has the numerical value of six, the numerical values of the letters in *דָּוִד* total fourteen. The number *fourteen*, then, can be used as “number code” for the name David. We see a surreptitious use of this very number code in a

⁵³ “Coin Week” describes the earliest known coins bearing a year date. They were minted by Greek refugees and bear a prominent *alpha* to designate year 1,... a *delta* to designate year 4, etc. Year 1, in this case was 494 BC.

⁵⁴ See Gesenius’ *Hebrew Grammar*, §2d.2 (4) and §5k.

graffiti from Pompeii. The graffiti, which survived the city's AD 79 destruction, reads:

φιλω ἧς ἀριθμὸς φμεί.⁵⁵

This translates as, "I love [her] of whom [the] number [is] 545."

In the Revelation, John was not trying to be furtive nor cryptic. He simply provided his readers with a clue to the identity of the coming Antichrist. Along with everything else that the prophets and apostles tell us about this coming incarnation of wickedness, John revealed that the letters of the wicked one's name will add up to 666.⁵⁶

GREEK LETTER-NUMERAL EQUIVALENTS

α = 1	ι = 10	ρ = 100
β = 2	κ = 20	σ = 200
γ = 3	λ = 30	τ = 300
δ = 4	μ = 40	υ = 400
ε = 5	ν = 50	φ = 500
ϛ = 6	ξ = 60	χ = 600
ζ = 7	ο = 70	ψ = 700
η = 8	π = 80	ω = 800
θ = 9	Ϟ = 90	Ϡ = 900

⁵⁵ Adolf Deissmann and Lionel Richard Mortimer Strachan, *Light From The Ancient East*, p. 275.

⁵⁶ As Deissmann commented, "Scientific commentators are probably by this time agreed that the name to be "counted" must be found by ... [looking] for a name the letters of which, taken separately in their ordinary values as numerals and added together, will make up the sum of 666 ...," *Light From The Ancient East*, p. 275.

HEBREW LETTER-NUMERAL EQUIVALENTS

א = 1	י = 10	ק = 100
ב = 2	כ = 20	ר = 200
ג = 3	ל = 30	ש = 300
ד = 4	מ = 40	ת = 400
ה = 5	נ = 50	ך = 500
ו = 6	ס = 60	ם = 600
ז = 7	ע = 70	ן = 700
ח = 8	פ = 80	ף = 800
ט = 9	צ = 90	ץ = 900

Incautiously, both Jewish and Christian scholars have pointed to John's symbolic use of the number 666 as an instance of the Jewish number-for-word *exegetical* system called *gematria*. We now understand that this designation is incorrect and should be avoided, for three reasons. First, John was not giving an exegesis of an antecedent mention of 666 in the Scriptures (cf. the instance of *gematria* by Barnabas, below). Second, all authorities agree that *the use* of *gematria* dates from the 2nd century,⁵⁷ and, consistent with this, the term *gematria* does not appear in written records until around AD 200.⁵⁸ Third, while there are

⁵⁷ E.g. *The JPS Dictionary of Jewish Words*, p. 50; *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*, p. 646; *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5, p. 589.

⁵⁸ *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5, p. 589. As we have acknowledged, the non-exegetical use of letters for numerical figures was in use by the Hebrews long before, but this use was not *gematria*.

now *many different kinds of gematria*,⁵⁹ from its earliest rabbinical use it has been known as an imaginative and even mystical approach to the interpretation of the words, including number words, in Scripture. In fact, its emphasis upon the mystical only increased over time, reaching a pinnacle in the Cabalistic literature of the Middle Ages (beginning in the 7th century). Consider the following definitions of *gematria*:

Gematria is a numerological technique that consists of calculating the numerical value of a word or a phrase by adding up the values of all its letters, often **in order to find or demonstrate the supposed relations between different words and concepts by proving the equivalence of their gematria values**.⁶⁰

An ancient system of Hebrew numerology, dating from the 2nd century ..., in which each Hebrew letter was assigned a numerical value. **Mystics believed there were hidden messages in the sacred Jewish texts and used *gematria* to decode them**.⁶¹

GEMATRIA The use of the total numerical value of the letters of a Hebrew word to arrive at **a hidden meaning of the word**.⁶²

A Jewish method of interpreting **the deeper meaning of words** based on the numerical value of their individual letters.⁶³

In Revelation 13, we have no indication whatsoever that John used 666 to convey a hidden or deeper meaning of some word in the biblical text, *or* to share some mystical meaning of the number 666 itself, according to these known principles of *gematria*. To illustrate this fact, let's consider a verse that *does* represent the earliest known usage of *gematria* by a Christian author (around AD 130-135), namely, *The Epistle Of Barnabas* 9.7-8:

... Learn then, my children, concerning all things richly, that Abraham, the first who enjoined circumcision, looking forward in spirit to Jesus, practised that rite, having received the mysteries of the three letters. For [the Scripture] saith, "And

⁵⁹ *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5, p. 589 ff.

⁶⁰ *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, p. 661, emphasis added.

⁶¹ *The JPS Dictionary of Jewish Words*, p. 50, emphasis added.

⁶² Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms*, p. 192, emphasis added.

⁶³ *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of New Testament Greek*, p. 59, emphasis added.

Abraham circumcised ten, and eight, and three hundred men of his household.”⁶⁴
 What, then, was the knowledge given to him in this? Learn the eighteen first, and then the three hundred. The ten and the eight are thus denoted — Ten by I, and Eight by H. You have [the initials of the name of] Jesus. And because the cross was to express the grace [of our redemption] by the letter T, he says also, “Three Hundred.” He signifies, therefore, Jesus by two letters, and the cross by one.⁶⁵

Let us summarize the point of these verses: since the number of those circumcised by Abraham, 318, can be written with the Greek letters τιη, or using majuscules, TIH, it refers mystically to Jesus and the cross, in that, *Jesus* is spelled ΙΗΣΟΥΣ, the first two letters of which are I and H, leaving the T to refer to the cross, the Greek word for which is spelled ΣΤΑΥΡΟΣ, with its second letter being the cross-shaped T.

The first thing to note about these verses of Barnabus, is that they are the author’s *exegesis* of a numerical episode in Genesis. This is *gematria*: exegeting a preexisting text on the basis of number-word equivalence. The Jews had their own *gematria* of Abraham’s 318 men. In the Babylonian Talmud we read:

- A. “He armed his dedicated servants born in his own house” (Gen. 14.14):
 - B. Rab said, “He equipped them through the Torah.”
 - C. And Samuel said, “He equipped them with gold.”
- A. “**Three hundred and eighteen**”:
 - B. Said R. Ammi bar Abba, “Eliezer was equal to all the rest of them.”
 - C. *There are those who say, “It was Eliezer alone, since that is the numerical value of the letters that make up his name.”*⁶⁶

In other words, instead of interpreting 318 as referring to Jesus and the cross, Rabbi Ammi bar Abba interpreted it as numerically referring to Abraham’s faithful servant, Eliezer. In Revelation 13.18, John did not use 666 in this manner to exegete an earlier text.

Second, *gematria* takes a number in the biblical text and (A) shows that it is equivalent to the numerical value of the totaled letters in a noun or noun phrase also in the biblical text (as in the Talmud’s exegesis of Abraham’s 318), or (B) shows

⁶⁴ Inferred by Barnabas from Gen 14.14.

⁶⁵ Alexander Roberts, et al, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1.

⁶⁶ Nedarim 32A, l.11-12, Jacob Neusner translation, emphasis added.

that each of a number's constituent numerals are equivalent to the numerical value of the whole or a part — even of a letter or two — of a biblical noun or nouns (as in Barnabas' exegesis of Abraham's 318). Alternatively, *gematria* exegetes a noun or noun phrase in Scripture by showing that it is numerically equivalent to the whole or a part of a different substantival term. In Revelation 13.18, John did none of these things. If he had, Revelation 13.18 might read something like this:

Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six. This number for his name is fitting, because six hundred stands for *Christ* (χ), the sixty for *foreign* (ξ for ξένος) because he makes himself a foreign Christ, and the six (ϝ) stands for the stigma (mark) of this evil one.⁶⁷

John never engaged in the kind of number symbolism suggested in this imaginative supplement to Revelation 13.18, so we have come to realize that we should not implicate him in an anachronistic use of *gematria*.

We must keep in mind this historical fact: ***In its early stage, the ancient practice of using letters for numerical notation, and of expressing names or other words in an informal alpha-numeric code, had no inherently mystical purpose or character.*** However, as Ray Pritz observes, about the Jews,

... it was not a great step from the concept that the Bible text was holy to the idea that the words, indeed the letters themselves, were divine. If this was so, then deeper meaning might be hidden **even in the numerical value of the letters** of particular words and phrases. This is the basic assumption of rabbinic use of *gematria*.⁶⁸

As we will explain below, other influences also contributed to the swift evolution from a simple use of letters for numerical figures to the letter-number system becoming the premier tool of Jewish mystics for finding secret meanings in both the words and numerals of Scripture. The point of providing this historical

⁶⁷ The eventually dropped sixth letter of the Greek alphabet, ϝ, *stigma*, and its earlier form, Ϛ, served as a ligature for στ.

⁶⁸ "On Calculating the Time of the Messiah's Appearance," in *The Death of Messiah*, p. 87, emphasis added..

background, however, has been to demonstrate that the apostle John was not a participant in this evolution toward the mystical.

Nevertheless, John's use of 666 to represent the name of the Antichrist *does provide us with an instance of the earlier, straightforward number-letter symbolism*. So, **the final important point to which we must call the reader's attention, about John's one use of number symbolism, is that he made the symbolism explicit**, telling us that the number represents a name, and thereby a man. Nowhere else does Scripture explicitly indicate that a number has symbolic meaning.

Most Numbers Words In Scripture Intended As Literal

Therefore, instead of hastily interpreting a number in Scripture as symbolic, we should recognize that, aside from instances of *gematria* and hyperbole, **the vast majority of numbers in Scripture are clearly intended to be taken literally**, and this should be our starting interpretive assumption.⁶⁹ Sadly, Eckhard J. Schnabel tells us to approach the numbers in John's Apocalypse with *exactly the opposite assumption*. He writes:

This numerical symbolism suggests that **unless there is a clear indication to a literal interpretation, the numbers in John's Apocalypse should be understood to have a symbolic meaning**.⁷⁰

Where did this interpretive notion come from? The book of Revelation is full of symbols, but what makes Schnabel think that the *numbers* should be "understood to have symbolic meaning"? We will see that Schnabel does show an interest in the Pythagorean interpretation of numbers, but he may not be aware that, "The desire to find symbolic and significant meanings in numbers can be traced back to ... the Pythagoreans."⁷¹ Regarding this historical wellspring, John J. Davis acknowledges

⁶⁹ Those who study levels of meaning in the Scriptures would say that we should begin with "the conventional meaning" of numbers in the Bible, before considering a possible "resonant meaning" which would take note of any connotations and allusions that might attach to a number in view.

⁷⁰ *40 Questions about the End Times*, p. 63, emphasis added.

⁷¹ *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, p. 381.

Gnostics and Jews⁷² as more recent influences toward a symbolic approach to numbers, but writes,

The Gnostics and Jews were in turn influenced by the Pythagoreans and Neo-Pythagoreans of days gone by.⁷³

He explains,

It was not until the age of Pythagoras (sixth cent. BC) that number symbolism received systematic treatment. Pythagoras, a student of Thales, was one of the greatest thinkers of his day. He was a well-traveled man having visited Babylon, India and Egypt. He based his philosophy upon the postulate that number was the source of the various qualities of matter and was the basis for meaningful knowledge of the universe. This led him to dwell upon the mystic and symbolic properties of numbers and their relationships. **The followers of Pythagoras expanded his ideas and methods until almost every number was given some special value symbolically**⁷⁴

Schnabel explores just such a Pythagorean approach to the book of Revelation. He writes that, “some of [the apostle] John’s numbers can be interpreted in the context of Pythagorean mathematics, which conceived of numbers as corresponding to geometrical figures. John uses square numbers for the people of God”⁷⁵ Now, Pythagoras was a mathematical genius, but he also dabbled in metaphysical speculation, and for a time propounded the idea that *things are numbers*. The religious philosophy of his followers included a focus upon “the metaphysic of number and the conception that reality, including music and astronomy, is, at its deepest level, mathematical in nature.”⁷⁶ As James Hastings, et al., reported, “the later Pythagoreans had to abandon the doctrine that things *are* numbers and to substitute the statement that things *are like* numbers.”⁷⁷

⁷² Philo is often mentioned in connection with the “Pythagorean fashion” in which he interpreted numbers in the biblical text. See, for example, Hauser and Watson’s *A History of Biblical Interpretation: The Ancient Period*, Vol. 1, pp. 122-123.

⁷³ *Bible Numerology*, p. 129.

⁷⁴ *Bible Numerology*, pp. 107-108, emphasis added.

⁷⁵ *40 Questions about the End Times*, p. 63.

⁷⁶ “Pythagoreanism,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2016.

⁷⁷ *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 10, p. 528.

We will return to this Pythagorean connection to number symbolism below, after we clarify some other issues in the interpretation of biblical numerals. For now, though, we do well to heed the fact that various Christian authors in modern times have taught number symbolism in Scripture, and yet their “mathematical procedures are precisely those of the Pythagoreans and the Gnostics. The only difference is that the conclusions are changed in order to conform to Christian theology.”⁷⁸

Returning to Eckhard Schnabel’s prioritization of symbolic meaning for “the numbers in John’s Apocalypse,” let us note that he juxtaposes “symbolic meaning” to “literal interpretation,” implying logically that a number in the Apocalypse must be one or the other. With this in mind, we will momentarily examine Schnabel’s thoughts regarding the number *seven* in Revelation 1.11. In this passage, the Lord instructs John, “Write ... to the seven churches [in Asia]” As we mentioned in the section above on Exact Numbers, we have “a clear indication to a literal interpretation” of the number *seven* in this case, because Jesus named exactly seven churches by their respective cities (Re 1.11). In this case therefore, according to Schnabel’s antithetical juxtaposition, since the number *seven* is clearly literal, it must not be symbolic.

However, Schnabel seems to disagree. He uses the seven churches as his first example under the heading, “Numerical Symbolism,” and writes,

The most important numbers in the Apocalypse are three, four, seven and twelve Most acknowledge the presence of [numerical] symbolism in at least some of the passages in the Apocalypse. It is well known that there were more churches in the province of Asia at the end of the first century than the seven churches that John singles out (Re 1.4,11; 2.1-3.22). ... Whatever the particular reason for the selection of the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea may have been, they are intended to describe “typical assemblies with regard to their histories and spiritual states.”⁷⁹

⁷⁸ *Bible Numerology*, p. 134.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

This is confusing! While Schnabel highlights the number *seven*, in this paragraph emphasizing numerical symbolism, he doesn't explicitly say that *seven* symbolizes something other than a quantity of seven. Instead, he names each of the seven churches of Revelation 1.11, confirming again that in Revelation 1.4 the number *seven* literally means a quantity of seven. What's going on here?

It appears that Schnabel is committing two errors commonly made by others. These two errors appear all too frequently in Bible commentaries and other Christian literature. One is to call a number "symbolic" when in fact it is the thing quantified by the number that is figurative; we'll say more about this in [observation 9](#) and in the [concluding application](#) below. The second and more insidious error is **the imprecise and inconsistent use of the adjectives *literal* and *symbolic*.**

What commentators usually mean, when they describe a biblical number as *symbolic*, is either that the number under consideration is *hyperbolic*, which **does** preclude its being literal (see [observation 6](#) above), or that the number is *connotative*⁸⁰ or *allusive*, both of which **do not** erase its literal meaning (we

⁸⁰ We often read statements like Richard Bauckham's, who writes, "the number [seven] is the number **symbolic** of completeness," and, "Seven, as we have noted, is the number of completeness, a **symbolic** significance ..." (*The Climax Of Prophecy*, p. 30, emphasis added). What Bauckham means is that the number seven *connotes* the idea of completeness and has a *connotative* significance.

Expositors not only refer imprecisely to biblical numbers as "symbolic," but are also apt to declare on their own authority what a particular number symbolizes. Bauckham, for example, declares that "quite clear in its **symbolism** is the number four, **which is the number of the world**" (*ibid.*, p. 31, emphasis added). Schnabel follows him, saying, "Four is the number of the world" (*Forty Questions*, p. 62). To support his definitive identification of the number four's "symbolism," Bauckham (with Schnabel writing similarly) cites references to the four winds, the four corners of the earth, and various fourfold divisions of creation found in the Revelation. These citations are insightful in connecting various things in the Revelation having a fourfold aspect, but they lead Bauckham and Schnabel to erroneously posit that the "four parts of creation are respectively the targets of [only the first four] judgments of ... all three series of seven judgments." By Bauckham's own exegetical standard, the judgments of the sixth seal, the fifth trumpet, and the fifth bowl also impact the creation. Regardless, the Scriptures nowhere tell us directly that, "four is the number of the world," and even Bauckham cites as an exception to the idea an instance in which the creation is described in only a threefold division (*ibid.*, p. 32). How then can we say definitively that four *is not* the

explain connotation and allusion under [observation 10](#) following). So, what Schnabel appears to mean with respect to the seven churches, but does not spell out for his readers, is something like the following:

While the number *seven* in the relevant verses fulfills its quantifying job *literally* by specifying exactly seven churches, it may at the same time *connote* an idea of wholeness. If so, then *seven* implies that the seven churches in view were conjointly “symbolic,” in the sense that together they were *representative* of all the churches in Asia. This would underscore the fact that the messages of the letters to the churches were for all the Christian congregations.

If this is what Schnabel wished to say, it is a fine interpretation, and he should rearticulate his comments about the seven churches in a manner that doesn’t abet the imprecise and ambiguous branding of all the numbers of Revelation as “symbolic.”

However, Schnabel presses his assertion that, “the numbers in John’s Apocalypse should be understood to have a symbolic meaning,” by immediately citing the number 666 of Revelation 13.18. As we have just explained, though, the number 666 is the only explicitly symbolic number in the entire Bible. As such, 666 in no way implies that any other numbers in the Revelation should be understood symbolically, and in fact militates against that idea!

But Schnabel forges ahead. He supports the idea of the Revelation’s numbers being symbolic by telling us, as we mentioned above, that, “some of John’s numbers can be interpreted in the context of Pythagorean mathematics, which conceived of numbers as corresponding to geometrical figures.”⁸¹ He supports *this* observation by listing the following points:

- “John uses square numbers for the people of God”;

number of something else, like God’s throne and its four living beings (Eze 1 and 10; Re 4-7; 15.7; 19.4)? At best we may say, “the number four sometimes connotes a region of the world (like a rectangular region including the Holy Land), or a fourfold aspect of the earthly sphere.” We must not limit the number four as if it always and only connotes the world or creation; biblical numbers are not used connotatively with that kind of consistency. As Bauckham says about one of the Bible’s most important numbers, “Three seems to be a number without a consistent symbolic significance,” *ibid.*, p. 32.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

- “John states that the New Jerusalem is square (Re 21.16)”;
- “[John] uses the number twelve exactly twelve times in the description of the New Jerusalem”;
- “John also uses rectangular numbers: the apocalyptic period of the end times lasts 42 months The number 42 is the sixth rectangular number (6 × 7)”;
- “It seems that John deliberately chose rectangular numbers to describe the period during which the beast reigns (triangular number) persecuting the people of God (square number)”⁸²

Schnabel then concludes this section by saying,

In sum, the symbolism of these numbers suggest that [most, if not all], numbers in John’s Apocalypse should be interpreted symbolically, not literally.⁸³

Now, Schnabel’s stated reason for undermining the literal integrity of the numbers in the Revelation is to tell us that,

The symbolism of most if not all of the numbers in the Apocalypse suggest that John’s focus is not on historical events for their own sake but on the meaning of God’s judgment both for the world (as a call to repentance) and for the church (as a call to faithful perseverance and courageous witness).⁸⁴

We agree that the *practical meaning* of the Revelation’s depictions of God’s judgment is that *the world is called to repentance*, and that *the church is called to faithful perseverance and courageous witness*. But let the reader observe: this practical message is not jeopardized in the least by interpreting the numbers in the Revelation literally, nor is it enhanced by interpreting the numbers as “symbolic.” Instead, it is fanciful distractions, like Schnabel’s interpreting John’s numbers in terms of Pythagorean geometry (instead of in terms of allusions to Old Testament realities⁸⁵), that diminish the practical meaning of the Revelation. So, instead of

⁸² Ibid., pp. 63-64.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 64-65.

⁸⁵ The New Jerusalem is more than a square; it is cubical like the ancient Holy of Holies, 1Ki 6.20; Re 21.16).

taking Schnabel's suggestion that, "unless there is a clear indication to a literal interpretation, the numbers in John's Apocalypse should be understood to have a symbolic meaning," we reiterate that, aside from instances of approximation and hyperbole, **the vast majority of numerical terms in Scripture — including those in the Revelation — should be understood literally.**

We also remind ourselves that Schnabel and many others misspeak when they refer to biblical numbers as "symbolic." They really mean that the numbers carry allusive or connotative freight *along with their literal meanings that quantify and sequence*. Once we recognize the imprecision of calling biblical numbers "symbolic," and simultaneously become mindful of the twofold work of biblical numbers (quantifying/sequencing + alluding/connotating), we can return to our interpretive principle of *first assuming that biblical numbers are intended literally*, even in books like Daniel and Revelation. When we read in Daniel 7.3 that Daniel had a vision of "four great beasts coming up from the sea," we understand that the number *four* may carry a connotation, but in its quantifying work it literally means *a quantity of four*. When we read that Daniel saw a beast with ten horns (Da 7.7), we understand that the number *ten* may be connotative, and that the beast and its horns are indeed figurative, but for Daniel, *ten* literally signifies a quantity of "ten." Likewise, in the book of Revelation, John saw literally *four* living creatures around the throne (Re 4.6), *seven* seals on the scroll (Re 5.1), *two* wings of the great eagle (Re 12.14), etc.

So, with the literal character and conventional significance of numerical terms in Scripture firmly in mind, let us say a little more about they can *support* nouns that *are* symbolic, and also themselves carry additional meaning by way of connotation and allusion.

Nine

Numerals In Scripture Can Modify Figurative Nouns

Even though number words in the Bible are almost never symbolic, they may quantify or sequence a noun or noun phrase *that does convey more than its literal meaning*. For example, in Revelation 15.7, John describes seeing “seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God” given to seven angels who subsequently pour the bowls out on the earth. In this part of John’s vision, we can take the number *seven* as literally signifying a quantity of seven, though it also *connotes* the fullness and the completion of God’s judgment (Re 15.1). However, while we should understand the number *seven* according to its conventional meaning, the golden bowls quantified by the number *seven* are surely figurative; how could God’s wrath be literally held in a material bowl? The golden bowls probably represent something like the *pure justice* of the judgment they “contain,” and the *divine authority* given to each angel to act as the agent of the judgment he “pours out.” The point, we reiterate, is that **numbers in Scripture are usually literal but they may fulfill a supportive role in quantifying or sequencing something that is figurative.**

Quote

Nowhere in the Old Testament is any number given conceptual value or identified with a specific theological truth....

The universal arrangement of all things by number was clearly a Pythagorean doctrine and not one found in the Old Testament.

John J. Davis,
in *Biblical Numerology*, pp. 109-110.

To be sure, later New Testament exegeticians were able to discover numerical secrets everywhere in the life and preaching of Jesus, but it is obvious to the most casual reader, that such scholarly interpretation is utterly at variance with the Spirit of naivete and directness which distinguishes the Scriptural accounts. The Pauline epistles ... are completely innocent of the number theory. The synoptic Gospels, together with ... John and the Acts ... do contain numbers, but these are [used] only in the most elementary sense.

Vincent Hopper,
in *Medieval Number Symbolism*,
quoted by John J. Davis in *Biblical Numerology*, p. 111.

Ten

Numerals In Scripture Can Connote And Allude

Along with their fundamental functions of quantifying and sequencing, and occasionally along with modifying a figurative noun or noun phrase, **numerals in Scripture sometimes express additional meaning by connotation or allusion.** For example, the number seven may connote the action of completion or the state of completeness, or may allude to an antecedent group of seven things, like the seven days of creation. For another example, while the mathematical product *one hundred and forty-four thousand* is unique to the book of Revelation (Re 7.4; 14.1,3), the factor *twelve thousand* (Re 7.4-8) appears frequently as a military number in the Old Testament (see table below of [Possible Connotations & Allusions](#)). Therefore, while the numbers *twelve thousand* and *one hundred and forty-four thousand* in the book of Revelation signify precise numerical quantities,⁸⁶ they also have a military connotation that encourages the reader to interpret the group of Israelites sealed in Revelation 7 as a *militant group* in some sense. We hasten to add, however, that allusions are rarely explicit in the biblical text, and connotations even less so; therefore, the reader should find a rationale in the surrounding context before deciding that a number (or anything else in the text) connotes something or alludes to a precedent. To re-emphasize this in other words, **numerals in the Bible do not have an inherent “symbolic” meaning; their ability to connote or allude is entirely dependent on the context in which they are used, such that we cannot say that the number *seven*, for example, “always means” *perfection or completeness*.** Furthermore, even when an allusion or connotation is quite certain, we must recognize that it supports — but is not equal to — the primary meaning of the text. Nevertheless,

⁸⁶ See the flowchart on p. 61. The round numbers, *twelve thousand* and *one hundred and forty-four thousand* are probably precise in that they are divinely ordained quantities of divinely “organized groups” of persons, and also probably military units, at least figuratively.

connotation and allusion are literary devices that add meaning, and enrich the reader's enjoyment of a text.

We note that along with precise numbers, rounded and approximate numbers can also carry a connotation or an allusion. For example, the explicitly approximate number of the “one hundred and twenty” believers gathered in the upper room (Ac 1.15) may allude to death of Moses (Dt 34.7), underscoring the assembly of believers as an event marking a new era. Alternatively, the “one hundred and twenty” may allude to the dedication of Solomon's temple when 120 priests blew trumpets and the glory of God filled the building (2Ch 5.11-14).

When we observe that any cardinal number in Scripture *may* convey a connotation or an allusion, we realize that Bible numerals will often fall into overlapping categories like **exact-connotative** or **rounded-allusive**. At the end of this handbook we provide a table on the “Possible Categories For Cardinal Numbers In The Bible” to enhance the reader's awareness of the rich possibilities for how the Scriptures might use a given numeral or numerical phrase.

Application

A Concluding Application

To conclude this handbook about interpreting numerical terms in Scripture, let us apply the observations we have made in an analysis of the “thousand-year” phrases of Revelation (Re 20.2-7).

In application of our **first observation**, we check to see whether there is manuscript evidence for a variant reading of the phrase. Though the book of Revelation has a complex textual tradition, and does not lack for manuscript variants, “the basic text of the book isn’t in dispute”⁸⁷ Accordingly, when we peruse *The Center for New Testament Textual Studies NT Critical Apparatus*,⁸⁸ we find that no ancient manuscript gives a different number than *a thousand* nor any other time period than *years* in the Revelation verses that mention the *thousand years*. We may, therefore, discard any concern that a copyist error occurred with the Revelation’s *thousand-years* phrases

To apply our **second observation** we must investigate whether people in Bible times meant the same thing by the chronological measurement of *a thousand years* as we do today. When we research this question, we find that some scholars speculate that the Hebrew word “אלף,” almost always translated *thousand* in the Bible, might occasionally mean *group* or *clan*, when referring to numbers of persons.⁸⁹ That speculation is irrelevant here, since we are concerned with the numbering of years, not persons. More relevant is the fact that the *Greek word* in the Septuagint and New Testament, “χίλιοι,” has always meant *a thousand* since the time of Homer. Furthermore, we see the meaning of χίλιοι confirmed in the book of Revelation when the phrase, ἡμέρας χιλίας διακοσίας ἐξήκοντα, *one thousand two hundred and sixty days* (Re 11.3; 12.6), is made to correspond to

⁸⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Revelation*, p. 56-58.

⁸⁸ From the H. Milton Haggard Center for New Testament Textual Studies, 2021. Available as a resource in Logos Bible Software.

⁸⁹ E.g. Is 60.22 NASB. See Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book Of Numbers*, p. 63.

the phrase, *μῆνας τεσσεράκοντα δύο, forty-two months* (Re 11.2),⁹⁰ and also to the phrase, *καιρὸν καὶ καιροὺς καὶ ἥμισυ καιροῦ, a time and times and half a time* (Re 12.14).⁹¹ It appears that John, in the very book containing our test phrase, uses *χίλιοι, thousand*, in its conventional sense of a quantity equivalent to ten hundreds.

We might wonder, though, if the phrase *a thousand* has a more general meaning in 2 Peter 3.8,

... with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.

Couldn't we paraphrase this as, "with the Lord one day is like a *very long time*"? Sure, but **a paraphrase is only as good as its correspondence to the source text**. If we used such a generalized paraphrase of 2 Peter 3.8 in our teaching, someone would likely respond, "Okay, but what do you mean by 'a very long time'?" We would have to answer, "Well, a thousand years, more or less." Any other answer would completely sever the paraphrase from its biblical basis. To suggest that Peter might have meant that "a day with the Lord is like *thousands* of years" would reduce the interpretation to speculation. In reality, Peter, like Moses in Psalm 90.4, used the *definite period* of "a thousand years" to give a particular nuance to the comparisons, "like one day," and "like yesterday when it is past." Furthermore, Peter and Moses used *a thousand years* to give us perspective on God's relationship to *our experience of time*, not to give us a variant meaning for *a thousand years*. Therefore, even if a paraphrase of 2 Peter 3.8 and Psalm 90.4 as referring to a *very long time* were appropriate, these verses are irrelevant to the interpretation of the phrase we're investigating in Revelation 20. The *thousand years* phrase in Revelation is not used in a comparison between God's experience of time and ours, but is stated straightforwardly as a simple duration of time.

So, John apparently means "a thousand" when he uses the word *thousand*. Nevertheless, we must apply our **fifth and sixth observations** and consider

⁹⁰ I.e., lunar months of 30 days each.

⁹¹ I.e., three and a half years, using Daniels expression (Da 7.25; 12.7).

whether the number *a thousand* in the Revelation's *thousand-year* phrases might be less than exact. We look and see that in John's usage, his *thousand-years* phrases are nowhere made explicitly approximate; he never introduces these phrases with the preposition *like*, or the adverb *about*. Still, might his number *a thousand* be rounded or exaggerated? The answer is Yes. However, if John intended that his phrase *a thousand years* be understood as using a rounded number, then we must read the phrase as signifying, "approximately a thousand years." This would mean that the duration John had in view was something between 900 and 1,100 years, *not* something like 300 years or 2,000 years. Alternatively, if John used his phrase *a thousand years* hyperbolically, then it would mean, "a duration of time that is *less than* a thousand years, but long enough so as to seem like a millennium." If we tentatively assume that John's *thousand years* is hyperbolic, we must note that there is nothing in Revelation 20 to suggest that the hyperbole is extreme. Nevertheless, the more extreme the numerical hyperbole, the smaller the real quantity, and the more extreme the chronological hyperbole, the shorter the real duration.⁹²

Apparently, then, we can assume that the Revelation's *thousand-years* phrases express either an exact duration, or an approximation to indicate a period of time lasting between 900 and 1,100 years. So, in application of our **ninth observation**, let's look more closely at the word *years*. Might John have intended a figurative meaning of the word *years*? After all, doesn't the Bible sometimes use the word *year* to mean a significantly longer time than twelve months?

Yes, in Isaiah 61.2, and in Jesus' quotation of it (Lk 4.19), the phrase, "the favorable year of the LORD" does use the word *year* figuratively. In this instance, "the favorable year" speaks of the eschatological jubilee (i.e., the ultimate release of captives, cf. Le 25.10).⁹³ Since Isaiah used the phrase, "the day of vengeance of

⁹² To say "a thousand years" using moderate hyperbole would mean something like seven or eight hundred years. To say "a thousand years" using extreme hyperbole would mean something like five or six hundred years.

⁹³ The eschatological jubilee was foreshadowed by Jesus' healing and deliverance ministry during His first-coming ministry (Lk 4.21; 7.22).

our God” (Is 61.2; cf. 34.8; 63.4), as a synonymous parallel with his phrase, “favorable year of the LORD,” we realize that the figurative year in view is tantamount to the eschatological day of the LORD. *That* is a “day” we know will last much longer than a solar year.⁹⁴ So, Isaiah does provide us with a precedent for using the word *year* to signify a much longer period of time. Is it possible that John used the word *year* in this figurative way?

In answer, we must apply the hermeneutical rule of our **third observation**, and **not assume that a word or phrase ... is used in the same way** by different biblical authors. Upon investigation, we find that Isaiah alone used the word *year* in a synonymous parallelism with *the day of vengeance* (Is 34.8; 61.2; 63.4). Furthermore, Isaiah always used *year* and *day* together in the same verse when he employed this figurative use of *year*. In his many other instances of using the word *year*, he always used it in its conventional sense. We would expect, therefore, that if John were to imitate Isaiah’s figurative use of *year*, he would have likewise paired the figurative use of *year* with a figurative use of *day*, as Isaiah did. Instead, in both his gospel and in the Revelation (not counting chapter 20), John always used the word *year* in its literal, conventional sense. In fact, in Revelation 9.15, as if to assure us that by the word *year* he means “a year,” John describes angels who had been prepared for a particular “hour and day and month and year” Nowhere in his writings does John give us a hint that he uses the word *year* figuratively, so we should hardly expect a figurative use of *years* in Revelation 20.

Our **seventh observation**, regarding the functions of repeated numbers, has particular relevance for interpreting the *thousand-years* phrase of Revelation 20, since it appears in the text six times. In spite of the repetition of the phrase, when authors disparage its literal interpretation, they often support a symbolic interpretation by saying that a *thousand-year* phrase appears nowhere else in Scripture *in connection with the eschatological reign of Christ*. Preterist Kenneth L. Gentry Jr. writes,

⁹⁴ See the excursus on “The Day Of The LORD” in *Redemption By Jesus*, by Graciano and Martínez.

Only one place in all of Scripture limits Christ's rule to a thousand years: Revelation 20:1–10, a half chapter in the most highly figurative book in the Bible. As I pointed out above in my treatment of the 144,000, the number 1000 is surely a symbolic sum representing quantitative perfection The length of the Millennium could actually be thousands of years, as hermeneutics authority Milton Terry ably argues.⁹⁵

Gentry writes similarly in a parallel work,

The only place in all of Scripture associating a period of one thousand years with the reign of Christ is the first half of this single chapter. If a literal earthly Millennium is such an important and glorious era in redemptive history (as premillennialists argue), then it is odd that reference to the thousand years should appear in only one passage in all of Scripture. ...

This becomes even more significant in that it occurs in the most figurative book in all of Scripture. Revelation prophesies through symbolic imagery. **If the thousand years serve as a literal time frame, why is it only mentioned in one highly symbolic book?**⁹⁶

In these excerpts (and their larger contexts not included here), Gentry raises multiple interpretive issues, but we will not allow them to distract us from our main interest of the moment. Our concern is with the complaint that, “The only place in all of Scripture associating a period of one thousand years with the reign of Christ is the first half of this single chapter,” and the inference that “the thousand years” should therefore *not* be interpreted as a literal duration of time.

Let us be clear: *an inference* is all that Gentry offers on this point; there is certainly no assertion in Scripture itself that, “if a numerical quantity or temporal duration is to be taken literally, it must be repeated in more than just one chapter (or at least appear in a non-apocalyptic text).” On the contrary, Gentry’s inference, if applied consistently, would prompt us to interpret *non-literally* Jeremiah’s prophecy of the Babylonian exile lasting *seventy years*. After all, the *seventy-years* phrases are only associated with the exile in three verses of one book of the Bible.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ *Four Views Of The Book Of Revelation*, p. 82, emphasis added.

⁹⁶ *Three Views On The Millennium And Beyond*, p. 51, emphasis added.

⁹⁷ Je 25.11-12 and 29.10. Not to mention that from a symbolical interpreter’s point of view it is an “obviously” rounded number, and a multiple of the two “perfect” numbers, seven and ten.

Furthermore, the first two *seventy-years* phrases appear in Jeremiah 25, a chapter that includes apocalyptic imagery (vv. 30-33), and figurative language about Jeremiah making the nations drink the “cup of the wine of [God’s] wrath” (v. 15), imagery that we obviously cannot take literally. And yet, no serious Bible student has ever proposed that Jeremiah’s seventy years be understood *non-literally*, least of all the prophet Daniel (Dn 9.2-3).

The truth is that, when a specific numerical quantity or duration of time appears in only a limited total of books, chapters or verses of the Bible, this contextual limitation does not ipso facto suggest non-literality. Furthermore, in Jeremiah and the Revelation, it by no means outweighs the evidence of literality provided by a threefold (or more) repetition of the relevant numerical phrase. “On the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.” That a specific numerical quantity or duration appears in a highly figurative passage also has no bearing on whether it is literal or figurative, since **figurative passages always include a mix of figurative and literal expressions**.⁹⁸ As we have observed above, the only sure indication that a number in Scripture serves a symbolical function is *an explicit declaration of that function* as in Revelation 13.17-18.

Now, let us look again at the *thousand-years* phrases of Revelation 20. The debate over these statements of duration usually focuses upon whether there will be a literal reign of Christ on earth after His second coming. However, the focus of the *thousand-year* phrases is upon the incarceration of the devil. We are told of this duration *three times*:

... an angel ... laid hold of ... Satan and bound him for **a thousand years** (Re 20.1-2)

... so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until **the thousand years** were completed ... (Re 20.3)

When **the thousand years** are completed, Satan will be released from his prison. (Re 20.7)

⁹⁸ Rule 20. A. in Graciano’s *Polishing Our Hermeneutical Glasses*.

Not only is the duration of the incarceration repeated three times, implying confirmation consistent with the ancient law of testimony, but the second and third instances employ the anaphoric definite article,⁹⁹ confirming that the *thousand-years* phrases refer to a definite thing, and don't simply express an imprecise idea.

What, then, does all this imply about the duration of Christ's reign with the Saints, mentioned in the same chapter? Interestingly, the two sentences about the thousand-year duration of the saints' reign are grammatically interwoven into the larger context so as to make the whole of Revelation 20.1-10, manifestly about ***one definite period of a thousand years***, characterized by both the devil's incarceration and the reign of Christ with His saints. Let the reader understand: nothing in Revelation 20 *limits* the reign of Christ with His saints to a duration of *only a thousand years* (cf. Re 22.3-5). Instead, **it presents a thousand-year period of Christ's reign with His saints as concurrent with the thousand-year period of the devil's pre-condemnation incarceration.**

Returning, now, to the main interpretive point of this section of our concluding application, we assert that, **the unqualified, two-fold affirmation of the numerical duration of a thousand years for Christ's reign with His saints** (Re 20.4,6) **suffices to confirm the truth of that reign and the duration of its first phase while the devil is incarcerated.** This is especially so, as the second affirmation not only repeats, but also complements the first with additional information about the nature of that reign.

It appears, then, in light of the preceding facts, that we will do well to take John's *thousand-years* phrases in Revelation 20 as literal and precise, in accord with the **fourth** and **eighth observations** of this handbook. Why then have so many Christian authorities insisted on a symbolical interpretation? Matthew Waymeyer, in *Revelation 20 and the Millennial Debate*, has very helpfully collected the various arguments offered for a symbolic interpretation of the thousand years, and the first argument is:

⁹⁹ The word *the* referring back to something mentioned antecedently in the text.

... symbolism is used extensively throughout the Apocalypse ... it would be facile to insist that the number 'one thousand' be taken literally in this context¹⁰⁰

Ironically, this argument is “facile,” in that it downplays a fundamental principle of apocalyptic literature, namely, that “**symbolic entities [in a work like Revelation or Daniel] attach to and depend upon a framework of non-symbolic reality.**”¹⁰¹ In other words, the symbolic terms in an apocalyptic passage are presented in a grammatical framework that pins the symbols to real-world points of reference. For example, in Revelation 9.3-4, we read,

Then out of the **smoke** came **locusts** upon **the earth**, and power was given them, as **the scorpions of the earth** have power. They were told not to hurt **the grass of the earth**, nor **any green thing**, nor **any tree**, but only **the men** who do not have the **seal of God** on their **foreheads**.

Notice that in these two verses only the term *locusts* is assuredly symbolic (*smoke*, *seal* and *foreheads* may be figurative or literal). In contrast, note all the real-world terms (in bold font) that provide reference points for the sphere and activity of the symbolic “locusts.” The non-symbolic terms greatly outnumber the symbolic one, and this is normal: a preponderance non-symbolic terms provide the real-world ballast for figurative texts. If *everything* was symbolic in a passage and *nothing* was intended literally, the passage would be unintelligible.

Imagine our confusion if, instead of being weighted by literal terms, Revelation 9.3-4 read like this:

Then out of the smoke came **locusts** upon **the woven mat**, and power was given them, as **the darkness of moons** has power. They were told not to hurt **the spoons of the woven mat**, nor **any green utensil**, nor **any pot**, but only **the trumpeters** who do not have **the smile of the olive** on their **lamps**.

Now imagine the entire main body of the Revelation being written in this uninterrupted symbolic gibberish. Needless to say, the book would not have passed the tests of inspiration and canonicity. Thankfully, though, the book of Revelation provides a narrative framework of real-world nouns throughout its narrative, so

¹⁰⁰ On p. 47 of his book, Waymeyer quotes these words from JETS, Vol. 23.

¹⁰¹ Rule 20. A. in Graciano's *Polishing Our Hermeneutical Glasses*.

that we can make sense of the probably symbolic terms.¹⁰² **Even though “symbolism is used extensively throughout the Apocalypse,” this only means that the interpreter must decide on a case by case basis which textual elements in a passage are literal and which are symbolic.**

Since there are no textual hints anywhere in the Revelation that the *thousand years* phrases should be understood symbolically, proponents of the symbolic interpretation must have another argument to support their position, right? Yes, but that argument is an assumption based upon an assumption! Amillennial theologian, Robert B. Strimple, wrote in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*,

[In] Revelation 20, ... what is the significance of the number “one thousand”? We may readily **assume** that the number is symbolic, for numbers are used symbolically throughout Revelation.¹⁰³

Do we see that the final clause of this quotation is a second assumption, namely that, “numbers are used symbolically throughout Revelation”? We can paraphrase Strimple as saying,

We may readily **assume** that the number [“one thousand”] is symbolic, for [we have previously **assumed** that] numbers are used symbolically throughout Revelation.

This is hardly compelling exegesis. Under [observation 8](#) above, we have already asked — regarding Schnabel’s notion that “the numbers in John’s Apocalypse should be understood to have a symbolic meaning” — *where did this interpretive notion come from?* Now we must ask again, *on what basis does Strimple assume that*, (A) “numbers are used symbolically throughout Revelation,” *and that, therefore*, (B) “the number [one thousand] is symbolic”?

Quotes from a few other theologians may enlighten us as to the source of this all-too common assumption that numbers in the Revelation, and particularly

¹⁰² The real world entities in Revelation 20 include an angel, the devil, nations, thrones, Christ, etc. The symbolic terms might include *key* and *chain*.

¹⁰³ p. 127, emphasis added.

the number *a thousand*, are symbolic. Consider first a statement from Anthony Hoekema:

The book of Revelation is full of symbolic numbers. It would seem rather likely, therefore, that the number “thousand” which is used in this passage ought not to be interpreted in a strictly literal sense. Since **the number ten signifies completeness, and since a thousand is ten to the third power**, we may think of the expression “a thousand years” as standing for a complete period, a very long period of indeterminate length.¹⁰⁴

Second, Benjamin B. Warfield:

Now it is quite certain that the number 1000 represents in Bible symbolism absolute perfection and completeness It can scarcely be necessary to insist here afresh on the symbolical use of numbers in the Apocalypse **When the seer says seven or four or three or ten, he does not name these numbers at random but expresses by each a specific notion. The sacred number seven in combination with the equally sacred number three forms the number of holy perfection ten, and when this ten is cubed into a thousand the seer has said all he could say to convey to our minds the idea of absolute completeness.** It is of more importance doubtless, however, to illustrate the use of time-periods to convey the idea of completeness.¹⁰⁵

Finally, Peter J. Gentry:

The thousand years in Revelation 20 seem to function as a symbolic value, not strictly limited to a literal thousand year period. After all, ... the perfectly rounded and exact numerical value seems more compatible with a figurative interpretation But of what is the “thousand” a symbol? **One thousand is the cube of ten ($10 \times 10 \times 10$); ten is the number of quantitative perfection** (apparently because it is the full complement of digits on a person’s hands or feet). **The “thousand years,” then, serve as John’s symbolic portrayal of the long-lasting glory of the kingdom Christ established at his first coming.**¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ *The Bible and the Future*, p. 227, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁵ *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Biblical Doctrines*, Vol. 2, p.654, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁶ *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, p. 51-52, emphasis added. The fact is not lost upon us that Gentry leans to this symbolical interpretation of the Revelation’s *thousand years* in order to place the beginning of that period at the time of Christ’s first coming instead of at the time of Christ’s second coming.

In these three quotations we easily discern the Pythagorean heritage as the source behind the assumption of number symbolism. That heritage is revealed by the attention to “sacred” and “cubed” numbers, and has to do with presuppositions that are utterly pagan and non-apostolic.¹⁰⁷

Apparently, a pervasive Pythagorean influence has infected even great theologians, with a consequent bent toward interpreting numerical terms in Scripture symbolically. At variance with this symbolical inclination, our observations relating to the interpretation of numerals in Scripture, has shown that:

- only one number in all of Scripture is explicitly indicated as symbolic,
- apocalyptic passages typically contain far more literal terms than symbolic ones, and thus a noun or noun phrase in a figurative passage cannot be assumed to have a symbolic meaning, and
- the literary functions of numerical repetition have encouraged us to understand a twofold or threefold repetition of a number or numerical phrase as indicative of the term’s literal veracity, in accord with the ancient biblical law of testimony.

We must conclude, therefore, that amillennial and postmillennial scholars who interpret the thousand years of Revelation 20 as symbolizing “a very long period of indeterminate length,”¹⁰⁸ are making use of an interpretive assumption — the ancient pagan sources of which they may or may not realize.

¹⁰⁷ The Bible never mentions a “holy” or “sacred” number, and never draws our attention to numbers (as distinct from structures) that are squared or cubed. Nor do we ever see the New Testament writers embellishing their Scripture quotations with number symbolism. In Ro 11.4, for example, we *do not* see Paul writing,

... “I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” Now the LORD does not use the rounded number seven thousand literally. Instead, since seven means perfection and ten symbolizes the law, and ten cubed gives a thousand, which represents a people, the LORD was telling Elijah that a perfectly holy, law abiding people remained faithful to Him.

¹⁰⁸ Hebrew and Greek authors unequivocally expressed the idea of “a long period of indeterminate length” when that was their intended meaning. They could employ phrases like: שְׁנַיִן שְׁנַיִן (Ezr 5.11); יָדָר וְיָדָר (Is 61.4; Jo 2.2) ; יָמִים רַבִּים (Dt 20.15); πολὺν χρόνον (Mt 25.19; Jn 5.6); χρόνων αἰωνίων (Tt 1.12).

Apart from that underlying assumption of symbolism, the other reasons given by these scholars for interpreting the thousand years as symbolic, such as that the relevant phrases only appear in one book of the Bible, are not hermeneutically justified. Instead, they are feeble attempts to defend a symbolic interpretation of the thousand years *because a symbolic interpretation is required by their eschatological theories*. Nothing better illustrates this commitment to a non-literal interpretation of Revelation 20, in the face of the contrary indications of sound hermeneutics, than the words of pre-20th century scholar Milton S. Terry (the very authority commended by Kenneth Gentry in [a citation above](#)):

From that period [when Judaism fell, and Christianity opened upon the world] ... **no well-authenticated instance of demoniacal possession can be shown**. With that shutting up of Satan the millennium begins, a long indefinite period, as the symbolical number most naturally suggests ..., but a period of ample fulness for the universal diffusion and triumph of the Gospel

We understand that the millennium of Rev. 20.1–6, is now in progress. It dates from the consummation of the Jewish age. It is a round definite number used symbolically for an indefinite æon. It is the period of the Messianic reign [now] passing through its gradual development. It may require a million years. The impatient Chiliast will not be satisfied with this slow Messianic order, and refuses to see that **the powers of darkness have been repressed, and the progress of human civilization has been more marked since the end of that [Jewish] age than ever before. But others see and know that since the dawn of Christianity, idolatry has been well-nigh abolished, and every element of righteousness and truth has been gaining prominence and control in the laws of nations.**¹⁰⁹

We wonder if Milton Terry would still stand by his words had he lived through two world wars and the Great Depression as some of our grandparents did, or even if he had lived to witness the disasters brought about by human, *even demonic*, wickedness around our world since. We certainly wonder why Terry is still cited as a reliable authority. The jettison of his teaching on *the thousand years*, and of other symbolic interpretations of *the thousand years* of Revelation 20, is surely overdue.

¹⁰⁹ *Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 374, 377-378.

Nevertheless, though we emphatically renounce the symbolic interpretation of the Revelation's *thousand-years* phrases, we may in good conscience take these phrases as involving a rounded (and thereby *approximate*) number or as employing numerical-chronological hyperbole. We remind ourselves, though, that if we choose one of these less than precise interpretations, we must recognize that they limit the duration of John's *thousand years* to between 900 and 1,100 years (if the number is rounded) *or* between, say, 500 and 800 years (if the number is hyperbolic).¹¹⁰

We may now conclude with an application of our **tenth observation** and consider whether, besides its plain meaning, John's phrase *a thousand years* might connote an additional idea or allude to something in the earlier Scriptures. *It is not necessary* to find a connotation or allusion attached to a number in Scripture; a number may serve solely in its fundamental purpose of quantifying or sequencing. However, the many commentators who say that numbers in apocalyptic literature are "often symbolic" are nearly correct in spite of their imprecise use of the word *symbolic*: **numbers in apocalyptic passages are often connotative or allusive**. So, how about the Revelation's *thousand years*?

While the number *a thousand* is common in Scripture, outside of the Revelation it only quantifies a number of years three times, and only appears in the phrase *a thousand years* twice.¹¹¹ However, *the idea* of a thousand years has a shadowy presence throughout Genesis 5, in that the first seven ancestors of Lamech, Noah's father, excluding the special case of Enoch, all lived for a duration just short of *a thousand years*. Adam's life span of "nine hundred and thirty years" (Ge 5.5) is of particular interest to us here, because in Jewish Midrash, the idea emerged that the date at which Adam died for eating the forbidden fruit (Ge 2.17)

¹¹⁰ This is bad news for amillennial interpretations of Revelation 20. Whether we take John's *thousand years* as signifying a precise duration of a thousand years, or a less exact duration of no more than 1,100 years, it is impossible that he referred prophetically to our present *much longer* "church age."

¹¹¹ In Ps 90.4, and in Peter's paraphrase of Ps 90.4 (2Pe 3.8). Ec 6.6 speaks of the vanity of living *two thousand years* without enjoying good things.

was still within a single day's time from his sin, by God's reckoning. This idea was based on the inference from Psalm 90.4 that God's days — in contrast to earth days — are a thousand years long. Thus, we read in the Book of Jubilees 4.30,

Adam ... lacked seventy years from one thousand years, for a thousand years are like one day in the testimony of heaven and therefore it was written concerning the tree of knowledge, "In the day you eat from it you will die." Therefore he did not complete the years of this day because he died in it.¹¹²

The book of Jubilees was composed prior to 100 BC, and later Jewish writers elaborated upon its idea of God's days lasting a thousand earth-years. Louis Ginzberg provides an excerpt of the composite legend:

[Adam] heard what the angels were saying to one another about his fall, and what they were saying to God. In astonishment the angels exclaimed: "What! He still walks about in Paradise? He is not yet dead?" Whereupon God: "I said to him, 'In the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die!' Now, ye know not what manner of day I meant — one of My days of a thousand years, or one of your days. I will give him one of My days. He shall have nine hundred and thirty years to live, and seventy to leave to his descendants."¹¹³

We do not suggest that this idea, that "God-days" last a thousand years, derives from a sound exegesis of the relevant biblical passages. Nevertheless, since the tradition developed in the intertestamental period, it would have been known in John's time.¹¹⁴ Apparently, therefore, if the *thousand-years* phrases of Revelation 20 evoked something in addition to their literal meaning for the original hearers, it would have been the traditional duration of "a day of God" (cf. Re 16.14).

¹¹² Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 2, pp. 63-64. Also known as the *Little Genesis*, Jubilees was used by the Qumran community and later by various church fathers.

¹¹³ *Legends Of The Jews*, pp.73-74.

¹¹⁴ We know that biblical authors were able to allude to non-canonical works, as Paul alluded to the apocryphal book of Wisdom 5.17-20 with his summary of the "full armor of God" in Eph 6.13-17.

Tables & Chart

The table on the next page presents five categories (top row) into which a numerical term in Scripture may fit. Under the top row, the chart provides sub-categories in each of the five columns. In this table, a number in the **ERROR** column, may fit simultaneously in any of the other columns. Only **EXACT** numbers cannot fit simultaneously in one of the following inexact columns, but a **ROUNDED** number may also be **EXPLICITLY APPROXIMATE** or **HYPERBOLICAL**. A number will often fit in multiple *rows* in the same column, as do the *threes* in the phrase *three days and three nights* of Matthew 12.40. We should avoid putting any other Bible number than the 666 of Re 13.18 in the **SYMBOLIC** sub-category of the **EXACT** column.

On the page following the “Possible Categories” table, we have provided a flowchart to help determine the category or categories that a numeral in Scripture may fit into. The flowchart will help discern whether or not a numeral should be understood literally or as approximate, hyperbolic or symbolic. Finally, the flowchart provides alternatives for what function a repeated numeral might fulfill in its context.

The final table lists possible connotation and allusions that might be suggested by a given numeral. Connotation prompts *direct evocation*; the evocative content of a connotative word or phrase is either innate or directly implied. Allusion prompts *indirect evocation* by first recalling an antecedent thing or proposition and then suggesting a relationship between the allusion and its antecedent. A connotative passage may provide the basis for an allusion. An allusive phrase may at the same time be connotative, and vice versa. Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to decide whether a numerical word or phrase should go in the connotative or allusive column, or in both.

POSSIBLE CATEGORIES FOR CARDINAL NUMBERS IN THE BIBLE

ERROR	EXACT	ROUNDED	EXPLICITLY APPROXIMATE	HYPERBOLICAL
Scribal, Corrected By Cross Ref., e.g. 2Ch 22.2; 2Ki 8.26	Connotative, e.g. Re 7.4-8	Connotative, e.g. Jdg 15.15- 16	Connotative	Connotative
Scribal Addend Error Corrected By Sum, e.g. Nu 3.15- 39	Allusive, e.g. Jdg 17.2 → 16.5; Re 13.18 → 1Ki 10.14; 2Ch 9.13	Allusive, e.g. Mt 12.40 → Es 4.16; Jon 1.17	Allusive, e.g. Lk 3.23 → Nu 4; Ac 1.15 → 2Ch 5.11-14; Re 16.21 → Ex 25.9 or 2Sa 12.30 ¹¹⁵	Allusive
	Monetary Transaction, e.g. Mt 26.15	Non- Monetary Rounding With Zero, e.g. Am 5.3		= Countless, e.g. Jdg 7.12; Re 5.11; OR = Minute Amount, e.g. 1Sa 11.11
	Precise To The One Column, e.g. Jn 21.11	Idiomatic Rounding, e.g. Mt 12.40		= Beyond Measure, e.g. Ge 41.49; Dt 1.11; Job 6.1-3
	Symbolic, e.g. Re 13.17-18			Rhetorical Comparison, e.g. 1Sa 18.7

¹¹⁵ This allusion occurs by way of the connection between *ταλαντιαία* (weighing a talent) and *τάλαντον* (a talent).

POSSIBLE CONNOTATIONS & ALLUSIONS OF NUMBERS IN THE BIBLE

NUMBER	CONNOTATIONS	ALLUSIONS
1	Marriage , Ge 2.24; Eph 5.31; Deity , Dt 6.4; Unity , 1Co 12.13; Eph 4.4-6; Re 17.13; Uniqueness , Ex 9.14; Is 45.5,21; 46.9; Brevity , Mt 20.12; 26.40; Re 17.12; 18.8,10,17,19; Smallest Quantity , Mt 23.15. <i>As ordinal</i> , Primacy , Is 44.6; Mt 6.33	Deity , Uniqueness , Mt. 19.17; 23.8; Smallest Quantity , Mt 18.12; 25.15, 40,45
2	Help , Ec 4.9-10; Witness, Testimony , Dt 17.6; 19.15; 1Ti 5.19; Heb 10.28; Contrast, Enmity? Ge 25.22; Lk 15.11-32; Gal 4.22-31	Law of Testimony , Mt 18.16; 26.60; Mk 6.7; Lk 10.1; Re 11.3
3	Theophany , Ex 19.11; Witness, Testimony , Dt 17.6; 19.15; Mt 18.16; Heb 10.28; Thoroughness , Jn 21.17; Strength , Ec 4.12; God's Holiness , Is 6.3; Renewed Life , 2Ki 20.5-8; Ho 6.2; Jon 1.17	Plague of Darkness , Ex 10.21-23; Mt 27.45; Law of Testimony , Mt 26.75; 1Ti 5.19; The Three Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob); The Three Pilgrimage Festivals (Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot); The Tanakh? (Torah, Nevi'im, and Kethuvim); The Tabernacle? (court, holy place, Holy of Holies)
3½		Years of Elijah's drought , Lk 4.25
4	Extremities, Universality , Je 49.36; Eze 46.21; Da 8.8; Re 7.1; 9.14,15; The Biblical World , Is 11.11-12	The Nations? Ac 10.11-12 with Is 11.11-12; The Tetragrammaton? The Matriarchs? (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah); The Rivers of Eden? Ge 2.10; The Throne of God? Eze 1; Re 4
5	Redemption of firstborn , Nu 3.47; Pagan Rulers , Jos 10.5; Jdg 3.3; 1Sa 6.4	The Pentateuch? The megillot? (Song, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther); Five indigenous grains of Israel? (wheat, barley, spelt, oats, and rye); Sacrifices For Peace Offering , Nu 7

6	Days of work , Ex 20.9; 23.12; 31.15; Years of indenture , Ex 21.2; Dt 15.12; Years of planting , Le 25.3; Refuge, Cities of Refuge , Nu 35.6,13,15	Work, Days of Work , Ru 3.17; Days Before Sabbath , 2Sa 6.13; 1Ki 10.18-19
7	Creation , Ge 1.1 to 2.3; Fullness? ¹¹⁶ Ge 41.7; Completion, Completeness , 1Ki 6.8; Ps 12.6; Re 15.1; quantities of seven, even when the word <i>seven</i> is not used, often carry one of these connotations, as with the number of times that a sickle is mentioned in Re 14; Rest (weekly sabbath and sabbatical year); Purity and Holiness , Ge 7.2; Ex 29.35-37; Ps 12.6; Ordination , Le 8.33-35; Swear, Oath , Ge 21.28-31	National Sin Offering , 2Ch 29.21; Why the seven circuits of Jericho (Jos 6.15-16)?
8	Circumcision, Covenant , Ge 17.11-12; Ac 7.8; Fatness or Oil? ¹¹⁷ Le 14.10; [Day Of] Cleansing , Le 14.	
10	Plagues, Judgments, Law, Covenant , Ex 34.28; Dt 4.13; 10.4 The Tabernacle , Ex 26.1,16; 27.12; 36.8,21; 38.12; Sufficiency, Enough , Ge 18.32; 24.10,55; 31.7; Nu 14.22; Ru 4.2; 1Sa 25.5; Job 19.3; Da 1.14; Ransom, Census , (ten gerahs), Ex 30.12-16	Displaced Peoples Of The Holy Land? Ge 15.18-21
12	Israel , ¹¹⁸ Ex 24.4; 1Ki 18.31	Israel, Tribes of Israel , 1Ki 7.23-25; Mk 3.14; Re 12.1; 22.2
20	Military Age , Nu 1	
24	Israel Enhanced? Re 4.4,10; 5.8; 11.16; 19.4	

¹¹⁶ Bullinger, *Number in Scripture*, derives the Hebrew word, *seven*, שֶׁבַע (*shevah*), from the root שָׂבַע (*savah*), which means *to be full* or *satisfied*, but this etymology is suspect.

¹¹⁷ From presumed shared root of שְׁמֵנָה, *eight*, with שָׁמֵן, *become fat*, and שֶׁמֶן, *oil*.

¹¹⁸ Bauckham and Schnabel overly generalize the connotation of this number as to “the people of God,” and obscure its reference to Israel.

30	Priesthood , (foreshadowed, Gen 41.46?) Num 4; Price of Slave , Ex 21.32; Mourning , Nu 20.29; Dt 34.8	Priestly Responsibility , 2Sa 5.4; Lk 3.23; Slave Status , Zec 11.12-13
40	Hardship, Suffering, Judgment , Ge 7.4; Nu 14.33; Dt 25.3; Jdg 13.1; Ps 95.10; Jon 3.4; Eze 4.6	Israel's Sojourn In The Wilderness; Hardship , Mt 4.2
50	Retirement (age) , Nu 4.3,23,30; 8.25-26; Jubilee, Redemption, Liberation , Le 25.11-12; Harvest , Dt 16.9-14	Age of Retirement , Jn 8.57
70	The Nations , Ge 10; The Nation of Israel , Ge 46.26-27; Ex 1.5; 24.1,9; Nu 11.16, 24-25; Exile , Je 25.11-12; 2Ch 36.21; Healthy Lifespan , Ps 90.10	Israel and Nations? (i.e., duration before reconciled), Da 9.24
80	Advanced Age , Ps 90.10	
100	Old Age , Ge 17.17; Military Unit , 2Sa 18.4; Completeness? Mt 18.12-13; Blessing (Agricultural) , Ge 26.12; Mt 13.8	Military Unit , Le 26.8
120		Death of Moses , Dt 34.7; Dedication of temple, coming of Shekinah ; Ac 1.15 with 2Ch 5.11-14
600	Military Unit , Ex 14.7; Jdg 3.31; 18.11,16-17; 1Sa 14.2; 23.13; Roman Cohort , Mt 27.27; etc.	
1,000	Military Unit , Nu 31.4-5; 2Sa 10.6; The Unreachable Age For Fallen Man; Traditional Duration Of A "God Day," Jub 4.30; Ge 2.17; 5.5; cf. Ps 90.3	Military Unit , Jdg 15.16; A Day of God , The <i>thousand years</i> of Re 20.2-7 with the intertestamental tradition of Jubilees 4.30
12,000	Military Division , Nu 31.4-5; Jdg 21.10; 2Sa 10.6; 1Ki 4.26; 10.26; 2Ch 1.14; 9.25	Militant/Military Divisions , Re 7.5-8
144,00	Multiple Military Divisions?	Warriors , Re 7.4; 14.1,3; Defensive Walls? Re 21.17

<p>200,000,000</p>	<p>Spiritual Forces? Re 9.16</p>	<p>μυριάς (10,000) is usually associated with a large military division (1Sa 18.7-8; 21.11; 29.5; Jdth 2.15; 16.3; 1Ma 15.13), “the myriads of Israel” (Nu 10.35) or with the armies and/or worshippers of heaven, i.e., angels and saints (Dt 33.2; Da 7.10; Heb 12.22; Jud 14; Re 5.11)</p>
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