



Outline – Friday Bible Study, March 27, 2020

What is the Significance of Numbers in Scripture?

The following material from The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia should be helpful here: *III. Significant numbers*

Numbers are also used with a symbolical or theological significance.

One is used to convey the concept of the unity and uniqueness of God, e.g. *Dt. 6:4*, ‘The Lord our God is one Lord’. The human race stems from one (*Acts 17:26*). The entry of sin into the world is through one man (*Rom. 5:12*). The gift of grace is by one man, Jesus Christ (*Rom. 5:15*). His sacrifice in death is a once-for-all offering (*Heb. 7:27*), and he is the first-born from the dead (*Col. 1:18*), the first fruits of the dead (*1 Cor. 15:20*). ‘One’ also expresses the unity between Christ and the Father (*Jn. 10:30*), the union between believers and the Godhead, and the unity which exists among Christians (*Jn. 17:21; Gal. 3:28*). ‘One’ further expresses singleness of purpose (*Lk. 10:42*). The concept of union is also found in the saying of Jesus concerning marriage, ‘and the two shall become one’ (*Mt. 19:6*).

Two can be a figure both of unity and of division. Man and woman form the basic family unit (*Gn. 1:27; 2:20, 24*). Animals associate in pairs and enter the ark in twos (*Gn. 7:9*). Two people often work together in companionship, e.g. Joshua’s spies (*Jos. 2:1*), and the Twelve and Seventy disciples were sent out in pairs (*Mk. 6:7; Lk. 10:1*). In addition, at Sinai there were two stone tablets, and animals were often offered for sacrifice in pairs. By contrast two is used with separating force in *1 Ki. 18:21*, as it is also implied in the two ‘ways’ of *Mt. 7:13-14*.

Three. It is natural to associate the number 3 with the Trinity of Persons in the Godhead, and the following references among others may be instanced: *Mt. 28:19; Jn. 14:26; 15:26; 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Pet. 1:2*, where this teaching is implied. The number 3 is also associated with certain of God’s mighty acts. At Mt Sinai the Lord was to come down to give his Law on ‘the third day’ (*Ex. 19:11*). In Hosea’s prophecy the Lord would raise up his people ‘on the third day’, probably meaning a short time (*Ho. 6:2*).

There is a similar usage of 'three' in *Lk. 13:32*, where 'third day' is 'poetical for the moment when something is finished, completed, and perfected' (N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 1950, p. 384, n. 4). Jonah was delivered (*Jon. 1:17; Mt. 12:40*), and God raised Christ from the dead, on the third day (*1 Cor. 15:4*). There were three disciples admitted to special terms of intimacy with Christ (*Mk. 9:2; Mt. 26:37*), and at Calvary there were three crosses. Paul emphasizes three Christian virtues (*1 Cor. 13:13*). A further instance of three being used in connection with periods of time is the choice offered to David of 3 days' pestilence, 3 months' defeat or 3 years' famine (*1 Ch. 21:12*). The deployment of Gideon's army furnishes an example of division into three (*Jdg. 7:16*), and the fraction, a third, is employed in *Rev. 8:7-12*.

Four, the number of the sides of a square, is one of symbols of completion in the Bible. The divine name Yahweh has 4 letters in Heb. (YHWH). There were 4 rivers flowing out of the garden of Eden (*Gn. 2:10*) and there are 4 corners of the earth (*Rev. 7:1; 20:8*), from whence blow the 4 winds (*Je. 49:36; Ezk. 37:9; Dn. 7:2*). In his vision of the glory of God, Ezekiel saw 4 living creatures (*ch. 1*), and with these we may compare the 4 living creatures of *Rev. 4:6*. The history of the world from the time of the Babylonian empire is spanned by 4 kingdoms (*Dn. 2; 7*). Four is a prominent number in prophetic symbolism and apocalyptic literature, as the following additional references show: 4 smiths and 4 horns (*Zc. 1:18-21*), 4 chariots (*Zc. 6:1-8*), 4 horns' of the altar (*Rev. 9:13*), 4 angels of destruction (*Rev. 9:14*). In addition, there are 4 Gospels, and at the time when the gospel was extended to the Gentiles Peter saw in a vision a sheet let down by its 4 corners.

Five and ten, and their multiples, occur frequently on account of the decimal system used in Palestine. In the OT 10 Patriarchs are mentioned before the Flood. The Egyptians were visited with 10 plagues and there were Ten Commandments. The fraction one-tenth formed the tithe (*Gn. 14:20; 28:22; Lv. 27:30; 2 Ch. 31:5; Mal. 3:10*). In the parable of *Lk. 15:8* the woman possessed 10 coins, and in the parable of the pounds mention is made of 10 pounds, 10 servants and 10 cities (*Lk. 19:11-27*). Of the 10 virgins, 5 were wise and 5 foolish (*Mt. 25:2*). 5 sparrows were sold for 2 farthings (*Lk. 12:6*); Dives had 5 brothers (*Lk. 16:28*); the woman by the well had had 5 husbands (*Jn. 4:18*), and at the feeding of the 5,000 the lad had 5 loaves. There are 10 powers which cannot separate the believer from the love of God (*Rom. 8:38f.*) and 10 sins which exclude from the kingdom of God (*1 Cor. 6:10*). The number 10, therefore, also signifies completeness; 10 elders form a company (*Ru. 4:2*).

Six. In the creation narrative God created man and woman on the 6th day ([Gn. 1:27](#)). 6 days were allotted to man for labour ([Ex. 20:9; 23:12; 31:15](#); cf. [Lk. 13:14](#)). A Heb. servant had to serve for 6 years before he was freed. The number 6 is therefore closely associated with man.

Seven has an eminent place among sacred numbers in the Scriptures, and is associated with completion, fulfilment and perfection. In the creation narrative God rested from his work on the 7th day, and sanctified it. This gave a pattern to the Jewish sabbath on which man was to refrain from work ([Ex. 20:10](#)), to the sabbatic year ([Lv. 25:2-6](#)), and also to the year of jubilee, which followed 7 times 7 years ([Lv. 25:8](#)). The Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Tabernacles lasted 7 days ([Ex. 12:15, 19; Nu. 29:12](#)). The Day of Atonement was in the 7th month ([Lv. 16:29](#)), and 7 occurs frequently in connection with OT ritual, e.g. the sprinkling of bullock's blood 7 times ([Lv. 4:6](#)) and the burnt-offering of 7 lambs ([Nu. 28:11](#)); the cleansed leper was sprinkled 7 times ([Lv. 14:7](#)), and Naaman had to dip 7 times in Jordan ([2 Ki. 5:10](#)). In the tabernacle the candlestick had 7 branches ([Ex. 25:32](#)). Other references to be noted are: the mother of 7 sons ([Je. 15:9; 2 Macc. 7:1ff.](#)); 7 women for one man ([Is.4:1](#)); a loving daughter-in-law preferable to 7 sons ([Ru. 4:15](#)). The Sadducees proposed a case of levirate marriage with 7 brothers ([Mt. 22:25](#)). The priests encompassed Jericho 7 times ([Jos. 6:4](#)). Elijah's servant looked for rain 7 times a day ([1 Ki. 18:43](#)). The psalmist praised God 7 times a day ([Ps. 119:164](#)), and [Gn. 29:18; 41:29, 54](#) and [Dn. 4:23](#) mention 7 years (times). The early church had 7 deacons ([Acts 6:3](#)) and John addresses 7 churches in the book of Revelation, where there is mention of 7 golden candlesticks ([1:12](#)) and 7 stars ([1:16](#)). At the miraculous feeding of 4,000 from 7 loaves and a few fishes ([Mk. 8:1-9](#)), the 7 basketsful collected afterwards may indicate that Jesus can satisfy completely. The complete possession of Mary Magdalene is effected by 7 demons ([Lk. 8:2](#)), while the dragon of [Rev. 12:3](#) and the beast of [Rev. 13:1; 17:7](#) have 7 heads.

Eight. [1 Pet. 3:20](#) records that 8 people were saved in the ark of Noah. Circumcision of a Jewish boy took place on the 8th day ([Gn. 17:12; Phil. 3:5](#)). In Ezekiel's vision of the new Temple the priests make their offering on the 8th day ([43:27](#)).

Ten. See Five.

Twelve. The Heb. year was divided into 12 months, the day into 12 hours ([Jn. 11:9](#)). Israel had 12 sons ([Gn. 35:22-27; 42:13, 32](#)) and there were 12 tribes of Israel, the people of God ([Gn. 49:28](#)). Christ chose 12 apostles ([Mt. 10:1ff.](#)). Twelve is therefore linked with the elective purposes of God.

Forty is associated with almost each new development in the history of God's mighty acts, especially of salvation, e.g. the Flood, redemption from Egypt, Elijah and the prophetic era, the advent of Christ and the birth of the church. The following periods of 40 days may be listed: the downpour of rain during the Flood ([Gn. 7:17](#)); the despatch of the raven ([Gn. 8:6](#)); Moses' fasts on the mount ([Ex. 24:18; 34:28; Dt. 9:9](#)); the spies' exploration of the land of Canaan ([Nu. 13:25](#)); Moses' prayer for Israel ([Dt. 9:25](#)); Goliath's defiance ([1 Sa. 17:16](#)); Elijah's journey to Horeb ([1 Ki. 19:8](#)); Ezekiel's lying on his right side ([Ezk. 4:6](#)); Jonah's warning to Nineveh ([Jon. 3:4](#)); Christ's stay in the wilderness prior to his temptation ([Mt. 4:2](#)), his appearances after his resurrection ([Acts 1:3](#)). For 40 years, the general designation of a generation, the following may be quoted: the main divisions of Moses' life ([Acts 7:23, 30, 36; Dt. 31:2](#)); Israel's wandering in the wilderness ([Ex. 16:35; Nu. 14:33; Jos. 5:6; Ps. 95:10](#)); the recurring pattern of servitude and deliverance in the era of the judges (e.g. [Jdg. 3:11; 13:1](#)); the reigns of Saul, David and Solomon ([Acts 13:21; 2 Sa. 5:4; 1 Ki. 11:42](#)); the desolation of Egypt ([Ezk. 29:11](#)).

Seventy is often connected with God's administration of the world. After the Flood the world was repopulated through 70 descendants of Noah ([Gn. 10](#)); 70 persons went down to Egypt ([Gn. 46:27](#)); 70 elders were appointed to help Moses administer Israel in the wilderness ([Nu. 11:16](#)); the people of Judah spent 70 years of exile in Babylon ([Je. 5:11; 29:10](#)); 70 weeks, 'sevens', were decreed by God as the period in which Messianic redemption was to be accomplished ([Dn. 9:24](#)); Jesus sent forth the Seventy ([Lk. 10:1](#)); he enjoined forgiveness 'until seventy times seven' ([Mt. 18:22](#)).

666 (or 616) is the number of the beast in [Rev. 13:18](#). Many interpretations of this number have been proposed, and by gematria, in which figures are given the value of corresponding letters, the number 666 has been identified with the numerical values of the names of a variety of personalities from Caligula and Nero Caesar onwards, and with such concepts as the chaos monster.