

Numerology

Nearly all commentators and informed readers of the book of Revelation will agree that among all the books of the Holy Scripture, Revelation is most replete with biblical numerology – the use of numbers with special meanings. In this book we find fours, sevens, twelves, 666, 1,000, 144,000, and other significant numbers. The purpose of this paper is to explain the significance of the most important numbers used in Revelation and to suggest their symbolic meanings as keys to the interpretation of the book.

Questions and Answers

Q. Why should we try to find symbolic meanings for numbers in the book of Revelation? If we believe the Bible literally, doesn't that mean we should just take a number at face value and not try to "spiritualize" it?

A. This is a good question and an important one. When we say we believe the Bible "literally," what do we mean? I would suggest that what we should mean by this phrase is that we believe the Scriptures communicate truth to the people of God when they are interpreted to mean what the writer (or speaker) intended his words to mean.

For example, in John 15 Jesus says, "I am the vine." Now no one thinks Jesus meant that we should expect to see Him sprouting green leaves and grapes. He meant, of course, that just as a branch must be rightly attached to a grapevine and must depend on that vine for its life and fruitfulness, so His people must depend on Jesus and be rightly connected to Him in order to live and bear fruit. This is what Jesus meant literally. We see that the literal meaning has more to do with the figurative, metaphoric intent of the speaker than it does with the "dictionary meaning" of the words used.

The book of Revelation is written in a literary genre called "apocalyptic" literature. The use of symbolic numbers is a characteristic of apocalyptic writing (portions of the Old Testament books of Daniel and Ezekiel are also apocalyptic in nature). Thus we should not be surprised or perplexed to find numbers used in special ways in this book of Revelation. Recognizing this feature of Scripture is not improperly "spiritualizing" the text; it is merely interpreting the numbers of Revelation in the way the author (ultimately God Himself) meant for them to be understood.

Q. What are some of the key numbers used in Revelation?

A. *The number "four."*

The number four is a significant one in Revelation. Grouping into fours is a literary device found throughout the Bible, used to represent a universality of things in the created world. Today we speak of "the four corners of the earth," even though we know the earth has no corners. By this phrase, we mean "the whole world." Likewise, Revelation uses the number four to represent the totality of creation or mankind. For example, Revelation 4:6-8 describes four living creatures around the heavenly throne of God. These creatures represent all of creation in its praise of the Heavenly Father.

In Revelation 5:9, those purchased from the earth are called “men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” Revelation 7:9 says that the great multitude standing before the Lamb (which should be identified with the 144,000; see below) is from “every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues.” In verse 11:9, this fourfold phrase is used to describe the people of the unbelieving world who rejoice over the apparent demise of the church, and in verse 13:7, the same four terms are used to describe people all over the earth who fall under the evil authority of the beast. Thus, we see that the number four is symbolic of the totality or universality of whatever subject in the created world the number is used to describe.

The number “seven.”

Seven is one of the most significant numbers in all the Bible. Like four, seven signifies a completeness or totality. But whereas four is most often used to emphasize the “createdness” of things, seven is generally used to describe subjects of a spiritual or divine nature. In the ancient world, seven was sometimes thought to be the perfect number, the sacred number of God. In Revelation 5:6, the Lamb (symbolizing Jesus) has seven horns (complete power, or omnipotence) and seven eyes (complete knowledge, or omniscience). This same verse echoes Revelation 1:4 in its reference to “the seven Spirits of God,” emblematic of God’s universal activity in both His church and the world. The whole book of Revelation, in fact, is structured around the number seven: seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, etc. These sevens signify the completeness of God’s holiness, His plan, His warnings, and His ultimate judgment of a world which is in rebellion against Him.

The number “twelve.”

Twelve is the number used in Revelation to represent the people of God. The Old Testament church was built on the foundation of the twelve tribes of Israel. The New Testament church is built upon the foundation of the twelve apostles. In Revelation 4:4, John describes seeing the throne of God surrounded by twenty-four thrones, and seated upon them were twenty-four elders. The fact that there were twenty-four (2x12) elders signifies that God’s people of the Old Covenant plus His New Covenant people are all represented in His presence in the form of these elders (representatives of believers under both the Old and New Testaments). The Heavenly Jerusalem, described in Revelation 21, is envisioned as being built almost exclusively on the number twelve, indicating that it is purposely designed to be the eternal dwelling place of God’s people. The length of each of its walls is 12,000 stadia, and the height (or thickness) of the walls is 144 (12x12) cubits. The city has twelve gates with twelve angels as the gatekeepers, and the gates themselves are twelve pearls. The names of the twelve tribes of Israel are written on the twelve gates, and the walls of the city rest upon twelve foundations, on which are inscribed the names of twelve apostles. Revelation 22:2 tells us that the tree of life on the newly recreated earth will bear twelve kinds of fruit during each of the twelve months of the year. We see in the Revelation the beauty of the symbolic use of the number twelve, showing that God’s eternal plan is focused on calling a Bride for His Son and preparing a special place for them to dwell together eternally.

The number “thousand.”

Thousand is a number used both literally and symbolically in the Bible. When “pure history” is being recorded, as in, say, 1 Samuel 15:4, where Saul is said to have summoned 10,000 men of Judah to war, then we should take that number literally or at least as an accurate “rounding” of the number of men summoned. (If there were 9,998 or 10,012 men, that wouldn’t mean the Bible is in error, of course.) Such references are historical, not poetic or apocalyptic. We should take numbers as they are used in the Bible’s historical accounts literally or statistically.

However, sometimes the number thousand is used in a general sense, simply to mean a really large number. When a parent says to a child, “I’ve told you a thousand times not to do that!” no one thinks that the word “thousand” is to be taken literally. Yet, we get the point of the parent’s meaning.

This is the sort of meaning for “thousand” which we read in passages like Psalm 50 and Deuteronomy 7, where the “statistical” approach would be erroneous: “For every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills...” (Psalm 50:1). Are we to understand that God owns the cattle on literally only “a thousand hills” and that, therefore, if I can find hill #1,001, I can keep all the cattle I find there? Of course not. The sensible reader will understand that God means that He owns all the cattle (and everything else) on all the hills (and everywhere else). The number “thousand” is used in the poetry of Psalm 50 to mean the “wholeness” or “completeness” of God’s ownership.

Likewise, in Deuteronomy 7:9, God says: “Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments....” What does this mean? If I am in generation #1,001, God won’t love me? Of course not. God means He will always love those who love Him and keep His commandments...even to the thousandth generation! Once again, we see the number “thousand” used in a figurative sense to mean a “wholeness” or “completeness,” this time of God’s love.

In poetic, prophetic, and apocalyptic passages, then, the number “thousand” is better understood in this latter symbolic (rather than a statistical) sense. This fact, of course, has great implications for the interpretation of Revelation 20 and its discussion of the Millennium (literally: “thousand years”). If one were to demand, despite all the symbolic usages of numbers in the Revelation, that the “thousand years” of Revelation 20 must literally mean the time that the earth takes to orbit around the sun a thousand times, his interpretation would be inconsistent at best. The “thousand years” of Revelation 20 describes the period between the First and the Second Comings of Jesus, a long but necessarily indeterminate period of time during which the wholeness of God’s plan for this age is completed. (See the author’s paper *The Millennium*.)

Q. What about the group of people in Revelation called the 144,000? Is that number related to the meanings of the number twelve and the number thousand?

- A. Yes, it is. You have noticed that 12×12 equals 144, and, of course, $144 \times 1,000$ equals 144,000. Let's look at how the meaning of the number 144,000 is revealed in Revelation.

In Revelation 7:4-8, John hears the number of those who are sealed on their foreheads as bondservants of God, thus being protected from the judgment to follow. "And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand from every tribe of the sons of Israel" (v.4). Notice that what he hears is the symbolic number 144,000, and he also hears that they are Israelites. Verses 5-8 tell us that 12,000 are sealed from each of twelve tribes – but on a closer reading, something seems amiss! The list of tribes John gives is apparently in error! Notice that the tribes of Dan and Ephraim are omitted completely from John's list. The tribe of Joseph is included (though not referenced elsewhere in the Bible), and the half-tribe of Manassah, presumably included in the tribe of Joseph (Manasseh's father), is also mentioned separately! Either John has forgotten the names of the twelve tribes, which as a good little Jewish boy he would have learned by heart on his father's knee, or John is letting us know that this list of the tribes is not to be taken literally. Plainly, since the Bible is without error, the latter must be the case.

This interpretation is confirmed by verse 9, where John says that after he heard the symbolic representation of this "144,000," he looked and saw the reality behind the symbol: "...a great multitude which no one could count (not just 144,000), from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues (not just from the nation of Israel), standing before the throne and before the Lamb...."

So we see that the 144,000 and the innumerable multitude are really one and the same assembly of the redeemed. The 144,000 represents all of God's people, all those whom Jesus has saved from the wrath of God. The number 144,000 equals 12 (representing the Old Testament church) $\times 12$ (representing the New Testament church) $\times 1,000$ (indicating the completeness of their number). All believers are sealed in protection from God's judgment, and all believers will stand before God's throne, dressed in "white robes" of righteousness, praising Him forever.

In Revelation 14, this "144,000" is described again as standing on Mount Zion with the Lamb. In verses 14:1-5, we learn many things about this group which confirm our interpretation in chapter 7. These 144,000 are also sealed on their foreheads. They "have not been defiled with women," a reference to Old Testament usage which means they have not followed after false gods. They "follow the Lamb wherever He goes." They have "been purchased from among men....", "No lie was found in their mouth" (they speak the truth: the Gospel), and "they are blameless," without the guilt of sin. Ask yourself who is being described by these phrases, and the answer is plain: Christians, the Church.

Thus, we see that 144,000 is a symbolic number representing the wholeness or completeness of all men and women, boys and girls, who have trusted in Jesus, who have been saved from their sins, and who then follow Christ, in faith and obedience, wherever He may lead them.

Q. What about the frightening number 666? That's the mark of the beast, right? What does that mean?

- A. In Revelation 13:16-18, John writes that “the small and the great, the rich and the poor, the free men and the slaves” are to receive a mark on their foreheads or upon their right hands. This mark is called “the number of the beast.” Significantly, we are also told that the number of the beast “is the number of man.”

This passage has created a tremendous amount of speculation over the centuries. Who (or what) is the beast? What is the meaning of his number? And why is the number of the beast called the number of man? Certainly a brief paper like this one cannot deal with all possible issues which might arise in a discussion of these questions, but a basic and accurate answer may be given which helps clear up the mystery.

When we studied the 144,000, we saw that God caused a “seal” to be placed on their foreheads in order to identify them as His elect people. This image of God sealing His people on the forehead comes from the Old Testament book of Exodus. In Exodus 13:9, just after the Lord had delivered His people from slavery in Egypt, God told the Israelites that they should never forget to tell their children of the salvation from bondage which Jehovah had provided for them. When they remembered their deliverance, God told them, “it shall serve as a sign to you on your hand, and as a reminder on your forehead, that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth; for with a powerful hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt.”

Was this sign on the hand and the forehead of the ancient Israelites to be a physical mark, like a brand or a tattoo? No; in fact in Leviticus 19:28 God commands His people not to mark or tattoo their bodies. This sign was to be a spiritual “mark” which would characterize the Israelites as God’s chosen people. The “sign” on the hand meant that everything they did, all of their labor, should be for His glory. The “sign” on the forehead meant that their every thought was to be honoring to Him. The hand and the forehead represented all that the people did and believed – thought, word, and deed. Each Israelite was to show the world that he or she belonged to the great Jehovah and had been redeemed by Him.

In Revelation 13, we read of the beast’s counterfeit seal being applied to those who have been seduced into his kingdom. Like the true seal of God, this mark is not a physical one. It, too, is a spiritual mark, in this case displayed in the thoughts, words, and deeds of those who are the beast’s. Those who bear the mark of the beast belong to this world and live not according to God’s law but according to the rules of the beast’s world-system. As the believer shows his mark by obeying Jesus, the rebel shows his mark by his wicked deeds and evil intentions of his heart.

But why 666? Many suggestions, most of them bizarre and disproved by history, have been made in an attempt to discover the identity of the beast. The ancients identified six as the number symbolizing man, created on the sixth day and being created just a little lower than God. (Note that in Revelation 13:16, six types of men are mentioned as receiving the mark.) God’s sacred number is seven; thus, a trinity of sevens (777) could be said to represent symbolically the triune God. Likewise, a trinity of sixes (666) represents man’s attempt to be God, to usurp the rightful place of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as sovereign in the universe. Satan tempted Adam and Eve by telling them

that if they rebelled against Jehovah, they would be “like God.” The number 666 represents man in his rebellion against his Creator, man seeking to be his own god.

This answer, perhaps, is so evident that many have missed it. Revelation 13:18 tells us plainly, “the number is that of man.” Many people have spent a lot of time trying to identify a man as the beast, but the text tells us that 666 is the number of man, in the sense of mankind (Greek: ἄνθρωπος). It is mankind in rebellion against God, attempting to live in, understand, and interpret the universe with no reference to the Creator, ignoring the evidence that God is here, there, and everywhere. Mankind is very interested that there be no God – at least not a God like the one in the Bible! Man follows his father Adam in going his own way, defying God in an insurrection of conceit and pride. Thus rebellious, autonomous man is the beast, and his number is 666!

Q. One more numerical question: What is the meaning of the references to “a time, times, and half a time,” “forty-two months,” and “twelve hundred and sixty days?” I know all of those numbers add up to the same amount of time, but what do they mean in the book of Revelation?

- A. Popular books lining the shelves of Christian bookstores resound with fictional depictions of terrible conditions which will supposedly take place in a purported future time called the Tribulation. (See the author’s paper on The Tribulation.) Interpreters who envision this alleged future Tribulation place a three-and-a-half year period in the second half of their seven-year Tribulation which they identify with the time spans in question. The question before us is whether such an interpretation is justified by the Bible or whether it is merely an exciting but misguided attempt at predicting the future.

To be sure, the interpretation of these time designations are difficult. The period under discussion is variously called “a time, times and half a time,” “forty-two months,” and “twelve hundred and sixty days” (all equivalent time periods). Nevertheless, by taking the meaning of the book of Revelation as a whole and understanding the “big picture” of God’s plan for this age, the meaning of these numbers becomes clear. Once again we will learn that the meaning of numbers in the book of Revelation is not statistical but spiritual.

The original scriptural reference to this time span is in the book of Daniel. In Daniel 9:27, three-and-a-half years designates the time during which Messiah’s covenant with His people remains in effect after the cessation of sacrifice (through the final sacrifice of Messiah Himself). In Daniel 12:7, the “time, times and a half time” is the period during which God’s plan, including the Resurrection Day and Final Judgment, will be completed.

In Revelation 11:3, the two witnesses (who symbolize the Church in its role as proclaimer of the Gospel to the world) are said to have authority to prophesy for twelve hundred sixty days. In verse 12:6, the woman (who symbolizes God’s people under persecution) is nourished in the wilderness by God for one thousand two hundred sixty days. In verse 12:14, the woman is protected from the presence of the serpent for “a time, times, and half a time.” In verse 13:5, the sea beast (symbolizing the

humanistic/demonic world-system which exalts man and seeks to dethrone God) is given power to act for forty-two months.

To determine the symbolic meaning of the cryptic numbers describing this enigmatic period, let us ask a few questions:

1. *During what period of time does Messiah's covenant with His people remain in effect?*
2. *During what period of time is God's plan being worked out, concluding with the Judgment Day?*
3. *During what period of time is the Church called to evangelize (prophecy to) the world?*
4. *During what period of time does God care for His people, nourishing them and protecting them from the power of the serpent, Satan?*
5. *During what period of time is the anti-God world system at work to replace the sovereignty of God with the sovereignty of man?*

The answer to all of these questions, it should be clear, is the same: The time during which all of these events and processes are taking place is this present age, the time between the First and the Second Comings of Christ. Thus, we conclude that the forty-two months, the twelve hundred sixty days, etc., are symbolic of the time in which we live, between the Resurrection of Jesus and the Resurrection Day for all the world, which will take place at His Return, when also the world will be judged.

Conclusion

1. The book of Revelation, as apocalyptic literature, is full of numerological symbolism. A careful reading of the book and an understanding of biblical numerology help not only to understand the meaning of particular numbers but of the overall meaning of Revelation.
2. God is sovereign. Mankind is in rebellion against its true King. But God has wooed some of the rebels back into faithful service to Him and His Kingdom. Although often persecuted and experiencing tribulation in this world, we servants of the King must bear up with hope and cheer, for our Lord has overcome the world.