

Numbers in Apocalyptic

In order to grasp the message of Revelation, you have to do your math. Numbers play a critical role in all apocalyptic literature, and to misunderstand them is to miss the message. For a more detailed explanation, see Leon Morris' short book "Apocalyptic." [link here] It is invaluable for helping the reader think like the readers of John's day.

This is NOT numerology. That mystical system applies spiritual power to numbers and patterns of numbers. In apocalyptic, there is no inherent value of the number 3, but rather it is an artistic method to help us understand the characters and the meaning of what is being taught. So there is a difference between apocalyptic use of numbers and numerology – which you may have had some exposure to. Further more, John (and other apocalyptical writers) use numbers from the Arabic systems, which were more advanced in mathematics and highly esteemed. To Jewish readers, numbers are a reflection or representation of another idea and any value is placed on the idea rather than the number itself.

So let's look at what the numbers show us in Revelation.

ONE is the loneliest number

One is a number of unity. It is a number, which represents God as the "one true God", differentiating him from the gods of other peoples. We still put a heavy burden on the number one. Number one means to be the winner in a contest, "We're number ONE" is a chant of the victorious. Our culture has picked up a spiritual context for one as in the Matrix, where Neo wonders if, and later learns he is "The One." Number one does not occur in this context in Revelation. By this time, through the teachings of Jesus and his resurrection, the concept of the trinity had become deeply imbedded in Christian thought and we see the number 3 becoming pre-eminent over 1.

TWO – Can I get a witness

The number two is the number of witness. How many of you got married? When you got married how many witnesses did you have? Generally two (although some jurisdictions are changing this). If you have a will, how many witnesses are there? Probably Two. For most legal documents, even for us today, two witnesses are required to verify a signature. You will also find that back in scripture, in Deuteronomy 19th chapter, Moses laid down the law that two witnesses were required for charging someone with a crime.

Deut. 17:6 "On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness.

Deut. 19:15 ¶ "A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.

Throughout history in almost all cultures, Two Witnesses have carried great weight.

So when you see the number of two appearing in the text, it generally refers to some kind of witness. Whether as a single appearance, or as a mathematical factor, when you see TWO you need to be looking for witness of some kind.

THREE – Holy, Holy, Holy

The number three we have already alluded to, and is somewhat commonly understood? Three is the number of God, his identity (in the Trinitarian construct), his realm and his acts. Even in the Old Testament, Isaiah's vision, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty." [Is 6:3] They thought of God in threeness even before they understood the trinity, which is pretty fascinating. After Jesus ministry, in which much clarification and explanation of the Godhead was given, we understood the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a Trinitarian construct. We see this clearly in Jesus benediction "in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!" [Matt 28:19] However, the word Trinity does not occur in the Bible. While the concepts of the trinity appear clearly for us, it wasn't until Tertullian (165-220) answered a question that word trinity was coined. He formulated "three persons, one substance." [By the way, Tertullian is also credited as being the first to use the terms "Old Testament and New Testament."] So while Trinity is not a Biblical word, it is a legitimate word and the number three is always associated with the nature of God. When you see the number three in John's writing, you know it has something to do with the divine nature.

FOUR - It's only natural

Four is a very common number in our text, and isn't really a hard one to figure out. The very basic use of directions in ancient thinking was of a person standing and the four directions he could move- forward, backward, left or right. This sense of four directions ultimately became our North, South, East and West. We also have four seasons, Spring Summer, Autumn and Winter. If you believe in a flat square earth, like they did at that time, you can end up with Four Corners of the earth, and also as winds are generated we have references to the four winds.

All of these ideas are related to the orientation of nature. These are conditions that occur in nature and are different in substance from that which is divine. So, Four is the number of nature, of the earth, creation. When you see the number four appear it generally refers to worldly or natural things, things that we observe and affect us on earth.

FIVE and TEN, Woolworth's and Apocalyptic

5 and 10 do not have significant spiritual significance. But rather they serve their most common purpose. They are used for counting. From the time we recognized we had 5 fingers on each hand we have been able to count by 5's and 10's.

5 does not appear in John's revelation, although it does occur in other apocalyptic writings of the period. 10, however, is heavily depended on. It is used in a counting sense as particularly in being rounded. For instance, groups are counted as 10 or 100 or a thousand – in other word a small group, a medium group or a big group. The emphasis is

on the totality of the group and the relative size – it does not necessarily indicate there are 10 or 100 of some specific thing. 10 is a counting number in the natural sense – simply a complete set, not bearing particular spiritual significance. It can have added sense when it is a factor in a larger number. For instance the holy of holies in the temple measured 30 cubits wide, 30 cubits deep and 30 cubits high. This combines 3, the number of God with 10, a counting number and gives us a cube with God’s signature on it.

It should not be lost of us that God gave 10 commandments to Moses. This reinforces the complete nature of the covenant, but it is different in completeness than a list of 7 might have been. The ancient law was added to, but was always viewed as the basic 10 – even though there would be over 600 new laws added over time.

When finding 10’s or multiples of 10’s you have to figure out what is being accounted for and the multiplier will often give the key.

SIX a manly number for sure!

Many interpreters will list Six as a lacking number, incomplete and deficient in its relationship to the much more important number 7. Some writer’s call 7 the perfection number and therefore 6 the imperfection number. But there is no real basis for this. However, there is a simpler explanation, and so often the simpler one is the most accurate. Six is about man. While we will see it earlier in the book, the most famous use of 6 is in association with one of the beasts.

Rev. 13:18 ¶ This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man’s number. His number is 666.

We will look at this later, but John gives us the answer to this number. It is “Man’s Number.” We’ll look at factoring and multiplying later, but when it occurs it is pointing to mankind in his most basic, non-divine sense. It likely came from being associated with the sixth day of creation which is the day man was created.

SEVEN – the perfect sum

Seven is recognized early for it’s significance and appears frequently. The creation account is certainly our earliest sense of the importance of Seven. It is so significant that it has affected all the world’s calendars that reflect a seven-day week. There is no other natural occurring phenomena from which 7 is derived. (one possible source are the heavenly bodies, see below). This writer does not adhere to a strict seven days of creation, rather it is a magnificent mnemonic which was useful to teaching children from their earliest memories that God created all things. But this shows us that from the beginning, 7 was a number for big important and perfect things.

We think it is not an accident that Seven is the Sum of THREE and FOUR, or the sum of everything that is divine and everything that is natural. We get a clue to this when we look at TWELVE which is the product of THREE and FOUR.

This makes SEVEN not only a number of perfection, but it is also a number of big, important things. It was even written in the heavens. Besides earth, there were seven

celestial planets known at that time: Five planets, Mercury, Venus, Mars Jupiter and Saturn, in addition to the sun and moon you get 7.

So 7 is a SUMMATION number, one that conveys big things inclusively and with finality. You can't add to things that are divinely measured in 7's. You can't add a day of the week, another day to creation, or even add a new celestial body (although others would be discovered, it was not considered possible at the time.) Seven Sums it up. It is the combination of everything that is divine and everything that is universal and that leads to the perfect number. Where it occurs, look for qualities of fullness, perfection and "all summed up." A caution, just because 7 is attributed to many important things, like the lamb, it does not in itself point to a quality that is always pure. But it does point to the full sum of whatever it is describing.

12 – of the people, by the people and for the people

Now a word about mathematics in the ancient world. While multiplication and division were in widespread use through the ancient world, with Greeks, Egyptians and others knowing how to use operators, the Babylonians were the most advanced and actually had systems and structures for doing multiplication and division. The fact that Abraham came out of this culture would imply he was very familiar with the techniques and this would not have been lost on his descendants. This would have been enhanced during the time of Egypt, but there certainly is no reason to think that our ancients did not have basic math operators to work with.

As we see the summation of Number 7 being everything that is God summed up with everything that God created, the Number 12 is similar, except that it is the PRODUCT of 3 and 4. Or in other words, when that which is God interfaces with His creation the "result" or "product" is people.

People. It is a multiplying together of that which is divine, the image of God, and that which is natural, from the dust of the earth. Man is literally the coming together of those two aspects. When you see twelve, it generally refers to people. Twelve patriarchs, twelve apostles, twelve tribes, twelve is the number of people. (Don't get too tempted to include the 12 signs of the zodiac. These were developed in China after the Old Testament was complete, but may represent a Chinese adoption of a Jewish concept.)

It can be argued as to whether or not God specifically gave Jacob twelve sons to stick with his theme, but is interesting that even though there were twelve sons, we also have twelve tribes which DO NOT correspond to the 12 brothers. It seemed terribly important to maintain the presence of 12, which was done by separating Levi and breaking Joseph into two tribes represented by his two sons.

So, whenever you see the number 12 you should be striving to identify what people are being discussed.

More Algebra

In apocalyptic writings, which are all about imagery and meaning – we also find the occurrence of *squares* and *cubes*, the use of two-dimensional area and three-dimensional images. The Hebrews loved cubes best of all and you find them in many places: the Holy

of Holies; a square (cubic earth) even the dimensions of the new temple we find in Revelation.

Generally when we find something squared it is reference to an area, and when it is cubed it has a deeper consummate meaning. When a counting number is cubed, it is generally $10 \times 10 \times 10$ and represents a really complete accounting of a large number. When it is squared it generally references a large number over a large area.

Conclusion

So, we can see how these numbers evolved and how they point to significance in the persons and ideas of apocalyptic literature. It is very dangerous to land on any of these number-images and make a specific prediction about them as they are always used as pointers to another truth. When people start doing that, they run into trouble very quickly.