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Revelation 11:8-1, ESV.

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The Bible and Numerology: *No safety in numbers.*

Over the centuries, countless people have torn the Bible apart, examining it in extreme detail, looking for hidden meaning. I try to stick to well clear, accepted academic interpretations of the Bible, and I usually don't focus on more mystical interpretations of Scripture. But there are legitimate analyses of the Bible that pursue mystical aspects of the Bible. There are times when the original authors are trying to convey mystical concepts related to faith. Sometimes the authors clearly believe in certain mystical interpretations of things like natural phenomena. What I would like to talk about today is the fact that the Israelites held mystical beliefs about certain numbers. They saw some numbers as conveying in themselves powerful psychological and spiritual concepts.

Consider this. We all know about this first quote from Genesis, Chapter 7, which tells us the number of days that it rained in the Great Flood:

¹¹ In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. ¹² And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights.

Then, in Exodus, Chapter 24, we are told that Moses climbed up the mountain to meet with God, and guess how long he was there?

¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶ The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. ¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

You might also remember, that in Joshua, we are told that the people in the desert wandered for so many years, that an entire generation died, and a new one was born.

How long were the Israelites wandering in the desert as they strove to enter the

Promised Land of Canaan? This is from Chapter 5:

⁶ For the people of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the men of war who came out of Egypt, perished, because they did not obey the voice of the LORD; the LORD swore to them that he would not let them see the land that the LORD had sworn to their fathers to give to us, a land flowing with milk and honey.

There are many other uses of forty in the Old Testament, and while there are far fewer references in the New Testament, the number forty does appear. You might remember that in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus spent a certain number of days fasting in the desert cleansing himself before he was tested by Satan. This is from Chapter 4:

⁴ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And

after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Another number that is used multiple times in the Bible is seven. Consider Chapter 7 of Genesis; this tells us that God made the world in a certain number of days, and that on the next day, he rested. This ended up deciding the number of days in a week and the day that is used as our Sabbath.

2 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

Most of us are aware that the one book of the Christian Bible that is famous for its symbolic use of numbers is Revelation. Indeed, it is heavy in numerology. The number seven appears many times in the Book of Revelation. Here's a reference to the number seven, and I chose it because it's not that obvious why seven is significant here. This is from Revelation, Chapter 1:

⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

Well, here are seven churches in Asia, the ones to whom John addressed himself.

In the Bible, forty is used as a representation of completeness, or a full cycle. The length of the great flood, the time Moses spent on the mountain, the years the Israelites

wandered as homeless and nationless, and the number of days Jesus spent alone in the desert.

In comparison, seven represents fulfillment and restoration. The number of days in the cycle of creation. The number of churches in Asia. Okay. That one is a bit obscure for most of us. We have to look at Revelation closer to see this. Revelation is a book of prophecy describing a spiritual war between God and the army of Satan. Many think that it is in truth an allegory, and that John, the author of the book, was actually describing the end of the Roman Empire, and how God would destroy it. As it turns out the number seven appears over and over and over in Revelation. In it there is an anti-Christ with seven heads, the restoration of Earth takes place during the seventh seal and the seventh trumpet, and after the seventh plague. It is much like the cycle of creation in Genesis: seven represents the fulfillment of the cycle of war and restoration. So, what about there being seven churches in Asia? The point is that by addressing the document to seven churches, John is symbolically addressing the document to the entire emerging Christian church – which includes all Christians, all of the faithful, and indeed, all of us. Six or eight churches would have been just six or eight churches. Seven churches includes everyone who follows Christ.

Let's consider another number, and I can only look at a small subset of the special numbers used in the Bible. In Revelation, the number forty-two represents a short but very intense period of suffering. This number occurs twice in

Revelation. In the first case, in Chapter 11, the author, John of Patmos (not to be confused with the John who wrote a Gospel, who was the Apostle John) is told to not measure the outer court of the temple because it has been handed over to Gentiles. These non-believers will trample on the holy city for forty-two months:

11 Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, "Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, ² but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months."

In Chapter 13, the second time that forty-two is used in Revelation, it is used to represent the period of time over which the beast will trample the holy city:

⁵And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months.

It is also intriguing that in Chapter 33 of the Book of Numbers, the Israelites are described as wandering in the wilderness for forty years, and during that time, they create forty-two separate named encampments.

Interestingly, in the numerology of the Bible, fractions are often used to represent broken or incomplete or wrong things. The idea is that a fraction is somehow not complete, not representative of the wholeness of God's world. In Revelation Chapter 11, verses 8 to 11, we see three and a half used twice. It is half of the perfect number of seven. It is used to describe the period of time of the persecution of saints. And powerfully, three and a half days of humiliation of two witnesses symbolizes the suffering that the church must endure during the "inter-advental" age, the overlapping period of

time between the first coming of Jesus, i.e., the first advent, and the second coming of Jesus, the second advent.

⁹ For three and a half days some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, ¹⁰ and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth. ¹¹ But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them.

What is all this about? Why are numbers so symbolic in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament? Numerology is the study of number symbolism. To many, it's considered a cultish area, and not a legitimate academic discipline. But this sells it far short. In some ways, this negative judgement is an example of modern science putting down traditional or ancient areas of philosophical study. The truth is that the authors of the Bible, these Israelite, Jewish, and Christian thinkers, knew that they could make what they wrote more powerful by slyly making use of numbers. This is because the surrounding culture put a lot of mystical belief in numbers. They could convey completeness simply by using the number forty. Why forty? Any number, if it is used so repetitively, takes on a powerful significance. So, by the time the reader sees the number forty for about the third or fourth time, it makes the reader have a lofty vision of a full, godly cycle. And likewise, seven conveys a magnificent sense of restoration. As for the number seven, remember that the Book of Revelation was written long after what we call the Old Testament was established as the basis of Jewish faith, and John, the author of Revelation,

was writing to Jews, not Gentles who were following Christ. So, John, knowing the mystical beliefs of Jews, used the number seven to convey deep, mysterious meaning.

But there is more to this than just the authors making use of a convenient literary trick that leveraged existing mystical beliefs about numbers. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, was written by people who themselves believed that certain numbers naturally conveyed specific and powerful concepts. To the authors of Scripture, numbers conveyed real truths. This tradition in truth predates the Israelite culture. Pagan cultures also had significant numerological components. To us, though, what matters is that holy Scripture is what our faith turns to for eternal truths, and early students of the Bible easily saw that numeric symbolism was very important to the writers of the Bible. Augustine, who lived around the year 400 A.D. and who witnessed the final collapse of the Roman Empire from his home in north Africa, wrote about Scripture and numerology. He argued strongly that if we dismiss numerology in our study of the Bible, we will miss important, key scriptural concepts. We miss a powerful, intended aspect of Scripture.

There is a question, though, that I'd like to address: Are numbers simply used as a literary tool, but one that leverages the ancient philosophical belief on the part of the authors of Scripture themselves that certain numbers hold special mystical meaning? Or could it be true that God himself deliberately speaks to us through numbers? In other words, did the Bible writers and their faith predecessors introduce

this mystical idea about numbers, or does God put mystical meaning in numbers? I think the answer is that numbers are a human preoccupation, not God's.

Let me come at this from another direction. When I was in college, I decided at one point that I wanted to do computer work. Back then, there were very few colleges and universities that offered computer science degrees. If you wanted to do software work, you majored in either physics or mathematics. I chose math as my major. There was one thing about mathematics that I dearly loved, that strongly influenced my choice of major - and that was its elegance. Mathematics takes a chaotic world that is difficult to wrap one's mind around and gives it a clean, coherent, tight representation. Mathematics gives the mathematician a formal, precise foundation that can be used to understand things that otherwise are so multifaceted and diverse, that they can't be understood. Mathematics provides a clean model for nature that the mathematician uses to put the whole world in order in his or her mind. Mathematics makes the world understandable and unafrightening. It gives purpose to things that are otherwise incomprehensible or unimaginably complex. That is why I can appreciate the seemingly cultish nature of biblical numerology, why I admire what many see as a crude superstitious practice of the biblical writers.

Although I didn't become a mathematician, and would have made a mediocre one at best, I did maintain my love for numbers. I think that God created in us a natural sense that numbers, and mathematics in general, can help us organize the world around

us. It makes sense that certain numbers would represent specific, important concepts, like completeness and restoration. In fact, these two concepts are at the core of our faith, and they appear over and over in Scripture. Our human journey, as people of faith, is to pursue spiritual completeness. That's what the number forty is all about and that is what many of the stories in the Bible are about. Our spiritual completeness is not dependent upon any living human other than ourselves. It is not dependent upon money or politics or political correctness. Spiritual completeness is not theoretical or abstract. It is practical and real. Everything we need to be complete, to be fully human, to have our lives encompass a full cycle, is provided by God.

This is the almost-cosmic, extraordinarily famous opening to the Gospel of John:

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Before even beginning to tell us about the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the author of the Gospel sums up what the life of Jesus is all about: completeness. If we want completeness, we just need to turn to Christ. Jesus was there in the beginning. Everything was made through him and if he had not existed, there would have been nothing. Most importantly, Jesus' life is the light of humanity.

And what about the number seven, what about restoration? That's the vehicle for becoming complete, that's how we seal our faith in God. We look inside ourselves

and we see what's wrong – and we work to fix it. We do this over and over, all of our lives. Each restoration step makes us more and more complete, brings us closer and closer to the perfect relationship with the God who is completeness, who is the entire cycle of existence, who embodies a time that had no beginning and will have no end. Through restoration we find infinite completeness.

And in general, the use of numbers in the Bible resonates within us, even if we are not consciously aware of it. It tells of the precise control that God has over our lives, the promise of God to give us an orderly Kingdom of God even in the very disorderly kingdom of people. But we don't want to let numbers get the better of us. We don't want to become preoccupied with mystical symbolism, as many ancients probably did. We don't truly find safety in numbers. We need to not fall into the mathematician's trap, that of seeing order and security and a future in numbers. In general, if we want to lose our anxiety, if we want to live with hope and confidence, we don't find it by distracting ourselves with any area of human study, like philosophy, biology, literature, or art. We should not hide in video games, television, or social media. We shouldn't worship billionaires, politicians, or celebrities. We find true purpose only in the things of God's world. Yes, the things of this world are often necessary and even highly valuable, and God does want us to study mathematics. But God wants us to look for him in only one place: The Kingdom of God.