The Numbers Game

In his last two challenging sermons on the strange New Testament book called *Revelation* , Gary

mentioned the coded language and symbolic numbers which make that book so obscure for modern readers.

The number 7, which he singled out for special mention, occurs an astonishing 52 times in that book as the

mystical number of perfection — in itself a bit of trivia, but a matter of some interest to both of us as an

example of what one needs to know to read the Bible as it was read by its first audience.   There are plenty of

reasons for not being an inflexible literalist in reading Scripture, but its use of number symbolism alone should

be enough to wake people up to the danger of failing to approach the Bible with the kind of imagination and

human creativity that went into the writing of it.

We still play our own games with numbers, of course, investing some with the power to bring us good

luck, and others with the power to cause us harm. I once met a man who picked a combination of numbers

made from his wedding day and the ages of his children, made a $2 bet at a race track, and won $1800.   No

one will ever convince him that there may not be magic in numbers, no matter how much pure science may

scoff. And in all honesty I have to wonder how much popular culture influences **my** life on some non-rational

level. Was I only being playful, or did I secretly hope for a little magic, when for years I had a decorative

number 7 on my home office door? I would answer lightly that I was simply having fun with the day of my

birth and with that Biblical number of perfection, but there's no way to be sure there was not a tiny touch of superstition involved.

The idea that certain numbers may influence human events or be in some mysterious way "sacred" is as old as recorded history and it shows up hundreds of times in that very culturally influenced book we call the Bible. Nearly everyone knows that *Revelation's* number for the anti-Christ — 666 —has been applied over centuries to all sorts of people, including a recent American President when a few nutcases noticed that his three names all had six letters: Ronald Wilson Reagan. If that's **bad** magic in numerology, then all those 7's found in *Revelation* are a kind of **good** magic, and if it's surprising to find how important that number is in the last book of the Bible it's astonishing to see how intricately the author of the **first** book of the Bible worked the numbers game in his opening chapter.

But that is no more than my say-so unless you have some acquaintance with the evidence, so I'd like to share what a legendary Professor of Hebrew at the University of Jerusalem has to say about how the number 7 was worked into the first chapter of *Genesis.* So please activate your patience button for a moment, keep in mind that we are talking about the original **Hebrew** text not the **English** translation, and let's listen to some of Professor Cassuto's proof. I'm hoping that as you listen you will wonder why, if God dictated the Bible word for word as many believe, he would sacrifice precious time and space to play such elaborate numerical games.

My personal convictiion is that the excessive fondness for number symbolism in the Bible is due not to the

Eternal but to the many different people who wrote about his work.

So how artificial **are** the number arrangements in that first chaper of *Genesis* ? Well, according to the

great Jewish scholar, there are 7 words in the first verse of the Hebrew text, and they are doubled to make 14 in

the second verse. The Hebrew words for *light* and *day* appear **7** times in the first paragraph, while in the 4th

paragraph there are **7** references to *light* . *Water* is mentioned **7** times in paragraphs 2 and 3. The comment

about God's looking at his work and calling it "good" appears **7** times. And if you are still tuned in, he will tell

you that in the 7th paragraph, which deals with the 7th day, there are 3 consecutive sentences, each of which

contains **7** words, and that as a final touch the total number of words in that seventh paragraph is 35 — five

times 7**.** If all that's too artificial to be mere coincidence, as our famous scholar says, then either **God** liked to

work such tricks or they have to be seen as the work of a man who was thoroughly enjoying his own artistic

ingenuity as he recorded the legend of how things began.

In other words his numbers are the stuff of **magic**, not **history** — of **poetry** rather than **journalism** —

and instead of getting hung up on a literal seven days of creation we are meant to read it as faith's way of saying

God performed perfectly when he set about to create the world.   There is a difference, by the way, between the

Bible's use of "sacred" numbers, of which 7 is only one, and its frequent use of what we call "round numbers"

and use ourselves in a loose and non-literal way all the time. When your mother said, "If I've told you once,

I've told you a thousand times, stay out of the street," you knew even as a child that she didn't literally mean

999 times plus 1, and you had the good sense to interpret her exaggeration to mean, "I've told you this several

times already and I don't want to have to tell you again!" So the report of a million and a half fighting men in

David's time is surely patriotic exaggeration (1 *Chron*. 21:5), the millions of angels mentioned in *Revelation*

(5:11) and Paul's comment that he'd rather say five words with his understanding than "ten thousand words in

an ecstasy" were never meant to be read as if they were part of a divine mathematical history.

But even though they suggest so strongly the touch of human hands on the Bible, it's not these lightly

used round numbers that should remind us how much the Bible was shaped by the delight its authors had in the

so-called **sacred** numbers — numbers thought to have a special mystique and magic of their own, numbers

which profoundly shaped both Jewish and Christian religion. One of these odd numbers became sacred so early

in human culture that their gods were often grouped in three's. In **Babylon**, which Abraham left to become the

founding father of the Jewish nation, there was the divine trinity of Anu, Bel and Ea who ruled heaven, earth

and the abyss. In **Egypt** it was Isis, Osirus and Horus. In **India** it was Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. In **Greece** it

was Athena, Zeus and Apollo. And the Christian church followed suit with its doctrine of the Trinity and its

baptismal formula of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The frequent grouping of qualities or people or events by threes certainly seem to reflect the widespread use of this particular number.   To name just a few: There is Paul's triple benediction, "The **grace** of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the **love** of God, and the **fellowship** of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor.13:14)   There are **3** disciples in the inner circle that witnessed the Transfiguration (Mk.9:2), **3** crosses on Calvary, **3** days in the tomb, **3** cardinal virtues in 1 Cor. 13, **3** gates on each side of heaven in the book of *Revelation*, **3** questions addressed to Peter by Jesus, **3** visions given to Peter so he can learn not to be prejudiced — the literary device of symbolism is at work.

But it became so entrenched in our own religious history that 13 centuries later the great Christian poet, Dante, divided his epic poem into 3 sections of 33 cantos each, with each canto written in groups of 3 lines. Dante uses 3 times 3 to get his 9 circles of hell, his nine levels of purgatory, and his nine spheres of heaven. Shakespeare is echoing such traditions when he has a character say about birth, luck and death that "There is divinity in odd numbers" (*Merry Wives,* 5/1/2). And just last week as I was doing some research into numerology I came across a more recent Irish poem that makes playful romantic use of the old superstition. In the poem a girl speaks first, saying, "That's 8 times today that you've kissed me," to which her lover says, "Then here goes another, just to make sure..... For there's luck in odd numbers,"

Three times three — 9 worked for him — but those who wrote the Bible were nothing if not inclusive, so their symbolic games are not restricted to odd numbers like 3 and 7. According to the Greek philosopher-mathematican Pythagoras, six centuries before Christ, the first four numbers (1,2,3,4) add up to 10 and symbolize the roots of all existence. So **4** and **10** became special and are picked up in Biblical literature: **4** rivers of Paradise, **4** guardians of God's throne (Ezek.1), **4** world kingdoms in Daniel, **4** gospels, **4** horsemen of the Apocalypse. The number **10**, which also conveniently happens to be a total of the two sacred numbers **3** and **7**, is woven into the Bible in the same artificial ways: **10** commandments, **10** patriarchs listed before the Flood, **10** after it, **10** different times in desert when Israel put God to the test, **10** talents and **10** virgins and **10** lepers in stories told by Jesus . And **4** times **10** provided the indeterminate number **40** which shows up throughout the Bible: the Flood waters fall for **40** days and nights, the life of Moses is split artificially into 3 periods of **40** years each, Goliath taunted the Hebrew army for **40** days, Elijah was fed by ravens for **40** days, Jesus spent **40** days in the desert and appeared **40** days after his death.

If you are still awake, some of you will have thought of another example of number symbolism used extensively in the Bible. I have to skip the theories as to why, but number **12** was also sacred. So we get 12 tribes of Jacob and 12 tribes of Ishmael, and 12 spies sent into Canaan, and 12 apostles in the early church, and 12 gates in Heaven. And to show how seriously this elaborate game was played, twice **12** made the 24 classes

of priests and the 24 elders around the throne in *Revelation* , and 4 times 12 made the 48 Levitical cities, and in

perhaps the most famous of all examples 12 times 12 is 144, and 10 times 10 times 10 is 1,000 — and when you

multiply those two totals you get 144,000 which is the number of people populating Heaven in the book of

Revelation (7). Reading this quite literally, some modern Christians claim that out of all the billions and

billions born on earth the number of those who will make it to Heaven will be less than one half of the present

population of Wichita, Kansas. They seem unaware that such literalistic math makes a mockery of the saving

work of Christ.

One final word about the fabled number 7 , because it so truly obsessed Biblical authors. Why it came

to symbolize perfection or completeness has been debated for centuries. The best guess may be that it became

sacred among those early Babylonian astronomers who tracked the seven visible objects which moved around

the sky on a regular basis: the sun, the moon and the five planets they could see. The Babylonian story of

creation, by the way, was recorded on 7 tablets, and clearly influenced the opening chapters of *Genesis* , so it's

no wonder the authors of the Old Testament seem unable to get enough of it in their scripture, or that Jews who

later became Christians filled their own scripture with it: So, 7 years to build Solomon's temple, 7 fat and 7

lean cattle in the Joseph story, 7 sons in Job's perfect household, 7 days of marching around Jericho, 7 dips in

the Jordan river to heal the leper Naaman, 7 demons cast out of a woman, 7 words from the cross, 7 woes in

Matthew 23, 7 virtues in 2 Peter, 7 deadly sins....the number permeates not only the Bible but our whole culture.

Rome, for so long the center of the world, had to be the city of 7 hills even if that had to be stretched a little. Any crossword puzzle fan can name the 7 wonders of the world and the 7 seas. The famous Congregational minister Henry Ward Beecher first came to national prominence because of his Seven Lectures to Young Men preached in Indianapolis. The Seven Champions of Christendom was the name given in medieval stories to the 7 national saints of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, France, Spain and Italy. You may have had to read in college a Greek play called *Seven Against Thebes* or an American novel called *The House of Seven Gables* .

I was warned by the choir member I know best that talking about all those number games in the Bible would bore you to death, so I kept saying, "All right, I'll do something else," but I kept coming back to it because it's one of many pieces of evidence that the Bible is everywhere influenced by the culture in which its authors lived, and because it is so essential to know that. People who believe that God dictated every single word have killed elderly women as witches, amputated their own body parts, died from drinking poison and handling rattlesnakes, and killed their neighbors in holy war — all because since the Bible approved such things

that meant God had sanctioned them. One has to separate eternally true statements in the Bible from its cultural

contexts, and what I have tried to do this morning is use numerology as one example of Biblical acculturation.

But the choir members warning still weighs heavily on my mind, so let's close, after this overload of

numerical symbolism, on a lighter note.   I realized as I put this sermon together how easy it is to find number

magic in all sorts of odd places, especially when it occurred to me that you chose to have serving you at present

a Senior Minister named **Gary** and a Minister Emeritus named **Bob** — count the letters!   And if the ancient

supersitition about the number 7 is still not enough to give you hope for our ministry, you could take it one step

further to consider this: that the combined letters in the **last** names of those two servants add up to 9, which is

the square of that other sacred number, 3. I'm teasing, of course, about this accident of numbers, but not in my

promise that the two of us will keep trying with all our might to make it a **happy** accident.

Make it useful to us, gracious God, to learn the ways of that world

in which our sacred book was written, and keep us from being blind

to its context, its color, and its complexity when we read it. Amen.