

Numerical Symbolism in the Book of Revelation

Utilizing a dualistic cosmology, John presents good supernatural beings and bad supernatural beings, good people and bad people, good places and bad places, good things and bad things, and so forth. Numerical symbolism, therefore, is one symbolic element within John's cosmological repertoire. Like other symbols, there are "good" numbers and "bad" numbers.

Good Numbers

The following numbers are "good" because they are most often connected with God and his people: two, four, seven, ten, and twelve.

Two

The number "two" (δύο) symbolizes completeness and is often connected to a valid testimony and effectual witness (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6; 19:15; Matt 18:16; John 8:17; Heb 10:28). Thus, the two witnesses of Revelation represent the church, particularly its distinguishing characteristic as witnesses for Christ despite persecution and death (11:3–13).

Four

"Four" (τέσσαρες) signifies full and total coverage, most often in view of God's creation, the surface of the earth, and universality (Exod 25–39; Isa 58; Amos 1–2). Thus, the "four corners of the earth" (7:1; 20:8) refers to the whole earth. The fourfold phrase "every tribe and language and people and nation" (in differing order) symbolizes everyone on earth without exception, and is further accentuated by being listed seven times.

Seven

This number connotes completeness, fullness, totality, and perfection. "Seven" (ἑπτά), with its multiples, is found throughout the ancient Near East as a sacred number. Its symbolism is traceable throughout Scripture, from the seven days of creation (Gen 4:15) to the sevenfold voice of God (Ps 29) to the sevenfold wrath of God (Ps 79:12) to the seven eyes of God (Zech 4:10). The number appears 739 times in the OT, sixty-six times in the Apocrypha, and 108 times in the NT. Eugene Boring cautions, "Not all these have a particularly sacred or symbolic meaning, of course, though the majority have at least this tone." John's encompassing use of this number (63% of all NT uses are in Revelation) emphasizes theological truths and underscores the intricate structuring of his Apocalypse—seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, and so forth.

Ten

This number (and its multiples) emphasizes indefiniteness, magnitude, and completeness, often from the point of view of time and humanity, especially with satanic influence and activity in mind. Long ago, Isbon Beckwith related that "ten" (δέκα) is a number signifying fullness and completeness in the Bible and with apocalyptic writers. When connected to its multiples such as a thousand, it is more suggestive of indefiniteness and of magnitude. Thus, the number "thousand" (χιλιάς, χίλιοι) is a large, round number that represents multiplicity, vastness, entirety, and fullness. The Bible reveals that "thousand" was used as hyperbole for quantity, immeasurability, or completeness (Deut 1:10; 1 Sam 18:7; Job 9:3; Ps 50:10; Dan 7:10; 2 Pet 3:8). Since various Bible genres understand "thousand" symbolically instead of literally, it should also be understood this way in apocalyptic literature, which is grounded in symbolism.

Twelve

"Twelve" (δώδεκα) symbolizes fullness and completeness, often with humanity in mind, and with special reference to the saints. Twelve is a significant number throughout the Bible. The twelve sons of Israel (Gen 35:22–29) became the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen 49:28), and biblical writers soon employed the number to symbolize the tribes as the people of God (Exod 24:4; Num 1:44; Deut 1:23; Josh 4:1–7). Unlike seven, which can be used for both divine and demonic symbolism, the number twelve is reserved exclusively for the saints. Jean-Pierre Prévost relates, "So the number twelve has become a consecrated number: it is the number of the people of God."¹ Thus, John's readers are treated with the twelve tribes representing the complete number of saints (7:4–8). The woman with twelve stars on her head symbolizes the people of God (12:1). Twelve is especially highlighted in the vision of the new Jerusalem (21:9–22:9). There are twelve gates, twelve angels, twelve tribes of Israel, twelve foundations, and twelve names of the apostles (21:12–14) to signify completeness. The multiples attached to twelve such as twenty-four elders, 144 cubits, 12,000 stadia, and 144,000 servants would also indicate symbolism.

Bad Numbers

“Bad” numbers are attached to the demonic realm, to unbelievers, or to the suffering and persecution endured by believers.

Fractions

Fractions such as one-third, one-fourth, and one-half mean something is not complete. Thus, they may be viewed as “bad” because they represent something partial, imperfect, and unaccomplished.

Three and a Half

The number “three and a half” (τρεις καὶ ἥμις; 11:9, 11) is half of the perfect number of seven. It is a “bad” number because alongside its other matches (“forty-two months,” “thousand two hundred sixty days,” and “time, times, and half a time”), it emphasizes the time period of persecution for the saints. Moreover, the three and a half “days” of the humiliation of the two witnesses symbolizes the suffering to the point of martyrdom the church endures during the interadvental age. Most scholars maintain a distinction between the “days” and “years” attached to these numbers. Thus, three and a half “years” and three and a half “days” signify two distinct short periods of time under God’s control. The three and a half days of humiliation endured by the two witnesses corresponds to the three and a half years of ministry of Jesus analogously. It also serves as a reminder to the length of time from Jesus’s own death to his resurrection “on the third day.” John’s audience would have picked up on the symbolic number three and a half from Elijah’s drought (1 Kgs 18:1) to which both Jesus (Luke 4:25) and James (Jas 5:17) utilize. Yet 1 Kings 18:1 states “in the third year,” not three and a half. Thus, “John has converted the ‘third day’ of Gospel tradition into ‘three and a half days,’ just as the tradition he followed with regard to Elijah’s drought converted the ‘third year’ of 1 Kings 18:1 into ‘three and a half years.’”

The point is that John is emphasizing the theological importance of the number three and a half, not the “days” or “years.” Therefore, the number “three and a half” is much more significant than the added time elements of “days” or “years.” Edmondo Lupieri stresses that symbolism is not as significant in the measurement (days, weeks, months, years) as in the numerical value attached to the measurement (one-half, three and a half, seven, ten, twelve). Similarly, James Resseguie states that “A broken seven appears once again, but now in terms of days, not years. The numerical portion (three and a half) is more important than the time span (days). The church’s life and work is symbolized by the number three and a half, whether three and a half days or three and a half years.” John Sweet adds, “In other words, John is urging the church to see its whole life and work under the sign of three and a half.” John is not referring to two separate time periods (days and years) but presenting two angles on the same time period—the Christian era. In sum, “three and a half” emphasizes the time period of the witness of the church. It symbolizes the entire interadvental age from the resurrection to the return of Christ. The significance of the number is that the church (two witnesses) testifies and suffers even to the point of martyrdom. When the two witnesses arise after three and a half days, it reflects the second coming and the end of the age. Since three and a half is matched with forty-two (months), thousand two hundred sixty (days), and “time, times, and half a time” (12:14), they would all signify the same interadvental time period.

Forty-Two

“Forty-two months” (μῆνας τεσσαράκοντα [καὶ] δύο) is a numerical symbol for a short yet intense period of persecution for the saints, covering the entire church age. This time designation occurs twice. First, John is instructed not to measure the outer court of the temple “because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months” (11:2). Second, it is the time period for the beast “to exercise its authority for forty-two months” (13:5). Forty-two recalls the time period of Israel’s wilderness wanderings, which included forty-two encampments (Num 33:5–49). The number is also associated with violence (2 Kgs 2:23–24). For certain, forty-two months is equivalent to three and a half years mentioned above, a common figure signifying a short intense period of suffering for the people of God. By John’s time, “three and a half” had become a symbol, a metaphor, a standardized expression of persecution of the faithful.

Thousand Two Hundred Sixty

This time designation emphasizes the church’s role in witnessing the gospel in spite of persecution. The saints are promised spiritual protection and provision to enable them to be witnesses throughout the church era. The two occurrences of a “thousand two hundred and sixty days” (ἡμέρας χιλίας διακοσίας ἐξήκοντα) are found in the second (10:1–11:14) and third interludes (12:1–15:4). In the first instance it relates the time period of witnessing for the church (two witnesses). “And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth” (11:3). The second mention relates the protective care the people of God

(symbolized by the woman) receive during this period. “The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days” (12:6). “Wilderness” alludes to the forty years that the Israelites were cared for by God (Exod 16:32; Deut 1:31; Ps 78:52). Thus, a thousand two hundred sixty days “symbolizes not just testing and trial but also divine comfort and protection.” Whereas forty-two months stresses the persecution of the saints (11:2; 13:5), a thousand two hundred and sixty days stresses perseverance, protection, and provision for the saints.

Another link to spiritual provision is that the woman is taken care of for “time, times, and half a time” (καιρὸν καὶ καιροῦς καὶ ἥμισυ καιροῦ; 12:14). This direct allusion to Daniel 7:25 confirms that all these time elements correspond to three and a half years, a common expression for persecution of the people of God. What John has added is the promise of spiritual protection and nourishment during this time that enables believers to witness. The beast and his forces are allowed to “kill the body” but they “cannot kill the soul” (Matt 10:28). In sum, the temporal markers above are used synonymously and interchangeably. They all reflect persecution, protection, testing, and witness for the saints. On closer inspection, however, it appears they stress different aspects of the same thing. “Time, times, and half a time” and forty-two months accent persecution; a thousand two hundred sixty days emphasizes perseverance, protection, and provision; and three and a half highlights witness. As Frederick Murphy concludes, “All of these are the same thing seen from different angles.”

Six Hundred Sixty-Six

There is one more “bad” number to consider. “Six hundred sixty-six” (ἑξακόσιοι ἐξήκοντα ἕξ) is the numerical symbol for the beast (Rev 13:18). It stands for incompleteness and imperfection. The threefold six is a demonic parody of the Trinity. This number is the most obvious “bad” number in Revelation. Countless studies have attempted to interpret the number and identify possible human referents.