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Q&A#116 Numerology

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Today's question: "Can you present some guidelines for a responsible handling of Biblical numerology? Many numerologists go way overboard, and many sober-minded theologians reject its use wholesale. Can you inject some moderation into this?"

James Jordan deals with Abram's 318 fighting men here: <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/biblical-horizons/no-133-abrams-318-men/>. He deals with the catch of 153 fish here: <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/biblical-horizons/no-133-153-large-fish/>.

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, can you present some guidelines for responsible handling of biblical numerology? Many numerologists go way overboard and many sober-minded theologians reject its use wholesale. Can you inject some moderation into this? Within the past week alone, I've referred to several numbers within the texts that I've been handling and drawn attention to them for various reasons.

Sometimes it's because the number might be significant for a narrative purpose. For

instance, that Abraham would go down to the number of 10 when pleading for Sodom, that number 10 may be connected with the number of people within the household of Lot. So it's not an accidental number that may be significant just in a narrative sense.

I've commented upon the fact that Abraham is 99 years old when God appears to him and establishes the covenant of circumcision and that Ishmael is 13. Both are occurring in significant points before the beginning of a sort of second week. In the case of Abraham, it's a double jubilee, 2 times 50, and in the case of Ishmael, it's 2 times 7. Now, what do we make of that? I don't know.

I'm not sure how much weight to put upon that particular detail. But it's interesting and it's worth paying attention to. I've also noted the significance of the number 70 times 7. That is the number of weeks.

70 weeks are established for the people according to Daniel and the prophecy given in chapter 9. That is a significant number and it's a number that we have repeated on a number of occasions. That number associates 70 years that Israel is in captivity in Babylon. 70 times 7 associated with Jesus's message of forgiveness.

You need to forgive your brother 70 times 7. God's pattern of forgiveness after 70 times 7 and then our pattern of forgiveness that follows that and then how that associates with 70 times 7 in the case of Lamech. In the line of Cain. But then we have Lamech in the line of Seth and he dies at 777 years.

So there seems to be something going on there. These details are worth paying attention to. So there are many reasons we might pay attention to these numbers.

Sometimes it's a significant number for symbolic reasons. 70 times 7 that's associated with a sort of super jubilee. It's a jubilee that's about the jubilee is 7 times 7 and what happens after that it's the 50th year when the debts are all released.

Slaves are set free etc. So there's a significant number there and the fact that God has this number that's associated with the liberation of Israel and it's 70 times 7 that suggests all these jubilee connotations. It's a significant number.

Then there are significances in parallels that we see between different texts that we see 70 times 7 mentioned in Genesis 4 in Daniel 9 and also in Matthew suggests that maybe there's some connection between these numbers. Or what about in the case of Sinai when 3,000 people are cut and are killed by the Levites who put on their swords and then in the story of Pentecost 3,000 people are cut to the heart by the word of Peter and the apostles. There might be a connection there and within the broader constellation of connections that we see between those stories there would seem to be some weight to be placed upon those numbers.

Now those are some examples of ways in which numbers can be significant. Symbolic

numbers, numbers that are associated with things like the year of jubilee, things like 7 it's the days of creation, it's associated with Sabbath, 8 the first day of a new week perhaps and these other numbers have significances from the narrative of scripture that we should have picked up. Now every time we see those numbers, do we read them in that way? Not necessarily.

We need to register that they are present. We're like detectives and as a detective is doing his job well, he notices all these details. He's observant.

He recognises what there is and then he decides what to make of that. Sometimes leads, there's nothing to them. It's a clue that seems to be a clue and then it proves to be nothing.

That's generally how things turn out. But often you will find something that does yield insight. 70 times 7, there seems to be something there.

And if you just had that reference in Genesis chapter 4, well, you probably couldn't put much weight up on it. But when you've got these other texts that deal with similar themes and are juxtaposed with it, then there might be something going on. There are other ways in which numbers can be used.

So I've mentioned the ways that numbers can serve a narrative purpose. 10 associated with the number of the people in Lot's house. It's just paying attention to the narrative details.

Other occasions it can be associated with other accounts that we've read in scripture. So in the account of the healing in John chapter 5, we are told that the man has been 38 years with the infirmity. Why 38 years? Why is he waiting by the sheep pool? Why is he waiting to get into the water to enter into the city? These are themes that should recall things to us and 38 years is a significant number.

Israel wandered for 38 years in the wilderness after their sin of failing to enter into the land. So there are 40 years in the wilderness altogether. So 38 years waiting to go into the water and enter into the city, it's a significant number and it should alert us to some of the other themes that exist within that context.

Likewise when Jesus is 40 days in the wilderness, there are things that we could be alerted to there. 40 days, 40 years in the wilderness for Israel being tested. Elijah is 40 days in the wilderness on the way to Mount Sinai.

There are other significant periods of 40. David is anointed by Samuel and then in the next narrative, Goliath stands against Israel for 40 days until he's defeated by David. All of these suggest narrative connections and the numbers have significance in themselves, 40 being a time of testing, but the narrative connections may be more prominent and more significant there.

Like the 3000 in the case of the day of Pentecost. There may be a significance in that it's a round number that it's associated with other forms of symbolism, but probably the main point of that number is that it is a number that recalls the story of Exodus. Likewise, there are other numbers that we find within scripture that are clearly symbolic.

So for instance, when we have the measurements of different things in the book of Revelation, those measurements are symbolic. 144,000, that's 10 by 10 by 10 by 12 by 12. And that number is the full number, the full complement of Israel.

It's a number that's associated with the gathering together of the fullness of Israel. So within that number, 12 is a number that we should be alert to. We know that number.

There are 12 apostles. Why are there 12 apostles? Why are they called the 12, even when one is last in the case of Judas? Why do they need to bring the number up to 12? Because the number 12 is significant as a number associated with the tribes of Israel and they will sit upon 12 thrones judging the tribes of Israel. This is a number that has importance.

Likewise, when we go through the Old Testament, I mentioned things like the fact that Ishmael has 12 princes arise from him. That connects you with the story of Israel with 12 sons with 12 tribes. And in all of these cases, what we are seeing are broader pictures emerging from significant numbers.

Often that's what you'll see. You'll notice an interesting number and then other things will arise from that. So pay attention to surprising details.

Don't put all of the weight of a case upon a single detail and be prepared to just put a little weight upon things and see where they go. Explore them. Often that's how you'll find things out.

Just put a little weight and work out from something. See what happens. Explore.

That's the way that we often discover things within scripture. What other things can we think of as examples of the way that language works and numbers work within scripture? We could think about the numbers that we see that have a strange particularity to them. So in the story of Abraham fighting against the kings, he leaves with 318 house-born servants.

Now what is going on there? That's a very specific number to have in a narrative that's about an event so long ago. Why not just say around 300 men or with many men or something like that? Why 318? So specific. Well, there is a suggestion that it's associated with the name of Eliezer.

Eliezer is the one who's standing at that point to inherit the whole of Abraham's house. Now if you look at Hebrew names, they're associated with numbers as well. You can use

the letters as numbers.

And so if you put Eliezer's name as a number, it's 318. And that use of what's called gematria is a way in which we can associate numbers with names. Now what would that association teach us? How does that, what weight should we put upon that? Just by itself, not much.

But if you pick that thread and follow it and see where it might lead you, you might find out that there are reasons to put more weight upon it than you might have initially thought. So you have the house-born servant, the one who's going to inherit Abraham's house as things stand, and then there are 318 house-born servants that go with Abraham in the battle against the kings. This suggests a connection between Eliezer and this body of persons.

It suggests that there is again an underlying story of sons. So Lot is in many respects a lost son. He's left Abraham and he's gone off.

He's moved to Sodom and he's departed. And now you have the son of the house, the faithful son Eliezer, and men who are associated with him, other house-born servants, and they go off in pursuit and in rescue of this lost son. There is a deeper theme playing out there and the association of those house-born servants with Eliezer, who would be their captain, is worth noting.

Likewise, we have numbers in scripture that might seem to use these principles in ways that are pronounced, that they're foregrounded for us. And very explicitly, for instance, in the number 666, I've done a video upon that. There are many ways in which we can pick apart that.

It's a thousand minus a third. Now there may be something going on with that, some of the judgments that involve a third of something being removed in the book of Revelation. Or it can be associated with 666 as the amount of gold that Solomon took in at that key moment where he started to turn away from God.

These are significant numbers. It could also be gematria for the name of Nero or something like that. There are ways in which we can explore a number like that.

But the text calls upon us to understand that number. The text puts that number in our face and says this number has a meaning. And the fact that you don't initially understand that meaning maybe suggests there's a lot in the numbers in scripture more generally that we might be missing.

What other details can we think of in scripture? 153 fish that are caught in John 21 11. Why not say a lot of fish, many fish, or around 150 fish? Why 153? That's such a specific number. Even if you're telling your friend after you had a great catch of fish like that, you probably wouldn't be that specific.

You'd say we had well over 100 fish. Nearly 200. More like 200 fish.

Or you'd say over 150 fish. Something like that. The fact that you'd count them down to the specific fish, I mean that takes work.

You don't, I mean you just have this huge overflowing net of fish and now you're going to pick each one of them and count them individually. Takes a while. Why would you do that? And why would that number be given to us that are in such a distant remove from this event? What significance whatsoever would that have for us? Why is God wasting words on this? That's a good question to ask.

Does God waste words in scripture like that? Or are these numbers things that we need to pay attention to? There are times when the numbers may just be part of an accounting of a body of people as we have in the story of numbers, the numbering of the people. And those numbers may not have so much weight. There are other times when they might have a bit more weight than we might think.

Some of the names in the numbers in the genealogy in Genesis chapter 5 seem to have significance to them. They're not accidental. Likewise the numbers of the events the dates associated with events in the flood.

It seems to be associated with a year pattern. What about some of the numbers that we find in the Gospels? 5,000 people fed, 5,000 men and they're separated into 50s. Israel left Egypt and entered into the promised land in 50s and they were divided into these different groups by the apostles.

And the apostles are similar to the elders under Moses who divided the nation between them into different bodies of people. We can also see after that event that Jesus tells his disciples to consider how many baskets they gathered after the feeding of the 5,000 and after the feeding of the 4,000. Those numbers have significance.

They're not accidental. And so 153 is a very specific number. And I think that the most reasonable suggestion I've come across is a surprising one, which is that it's a reference back to Ezekiel 47 where the waters flow out from the temple and there's a number of references to living water and water flowing out things like that within the story of John's Gospel.

And then it goes to this statement. This water flows toward the eastern region, goes down into the valley and enters the sea. When it reaches the sea its waters are healed and it shall be that every living thing that moves wherever the rivers go will live.

There will be a very great multitude of fish because these waters go there for they will be healed and everything will live wherever the river goes. It shall be that fishermen will stand by it from En Gedi to En Eglim. They will be places for the spreading their nets.

Their fish will be of the same kinds as the fish of the great sea, exceedingly many. So it would seem that John might be picking up upon those themes. Now, how would he be doing that in that number 153? Well, if you look at the Gematria for En Gedi and if you look at for En Eglim and remove the N at the beginning, which is just a prefix to it, you get 17 and you get 153 and you move from En Gedi to En Eglim.

And so 17 to 153. What significance do you have in those numbers? Well, 153 quite obvious, but 153 is the triangular number of 17. And so there might be a connection there that the numbering of the fish is associated with the fulfillment of the prophecy of Ezekiel.

Now that's a surprising detail. It requires us to be very alert readers of scripture. This is something that is a deep easter egg as it were within the biblical text.

You have to really be paying attention. And I think scripture gives a lot of those details. These aren't things that we would necessarily be on the lookout for.

But the detail is given in a way that draws our attention. And if we're asking the sort of questions that we should be asking, we will be thinking that way. We'll read the number of the genealogy in Matthew 1, for instance, 42 divided into 14s.

What's going on there? 14. It's 2 times 7 and then 6 times 7 is 42. It seems six weeks.

So it might be associated with months. If it was months, it would be associated with 42 months and 42 months is associated with the 1,260 I think it is that we have within the numbering of the days in certain parts in Revelation and also in Daniel. It might also be associated with a time, times and half a time.

A time, one year, times, two years and half a time. That's one plus two plus a half, three and a half. It's a broken week.

And then it's also associated with other things. So it's a broken week. It can be a time of testing.

It can be other things like that. It's associated with the number of days. It's associated with the number of months and it can play out in different ways.

So those details are ones that we should be alert to and it doesn't seem to be accidental that Matthew has arranged his genealogy that way. It's arranged in a very specific order. It's arranged very carefully and there are some people missed out, other things that are ordered in a way that suggests that this was not something that just occurred accidentally.

He does this very much by design and there's part of the meaning of the text is embedded within the way that he records the genealogy. More generally in scripture, I

think that we'll see that there are numbers that are repeated on a number of occasions. 40, 7, 3, 10.

These sorts of numbers are associated with, for instance, 10 as a sort of fulfillment or fullness or 7, the completion of it's associated with the Sabbath, things like that. 40, the time of testing or something along those lines. All these numbers have significance and we need to pay attention to those details.

And often those will be the building blocks from which bigger sorts of symbolism will emerge. But as usual it requires being attentive, not putting too much weight upon things, but being prepared to explore these potential leads. Paying attention to those areas that seem surprising.

Why record that detail? Why 153 fish? Why 318 fighting men? That figure sticks out from its context. And so it's not something that we do with every number that we encounter in scripture at all. But it's something that we do pay attention to when the number sticks out, when it seems odd in its context.

Likewise, there will be some people who will pay a great deal of attention to the matriarch when it does not seem to be foregrounded within the text itself. And they'll ask questions about how many times do we see a particular word mentioned in the specific text? I'm a lot more cautious about that sort of thing and I don't generally engage in that myself. But I've occasionally seen things to emerge from that that do make sense.

So I wouldn't dismiss that. Just put less weight upon it. Thank you very much for listening.

If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support this and other videos like it, please do so using my Patreon or PayPal accounts. Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow.

God bless!