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Q&A#21 What to Make of the Curious Numbers of Acts?

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Today's question: "What is the significance of the book of Acts recording the number of people being saved (3000 in Acts 2, 5000 in Acts 4)?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what is the significance of the Book of Acts recording the number of people being saved? 3000 in Acts 2 and 5000 in Acts 4. The first reference is to verse 41 of chapter 2. Then those who gladly received his word were baptized. This is Peter on the day of Pentecost.

And that day about 3000 souls were added to them. And then in chapter 4, verse 4, however many of those who heard the word believed and the number of the men came to be about 5000. So I think the main reason that these details are recorded for us is because it gives us a sense of the significant growth of the early church.

That the early church is increasing very significantly in its numbers. When you consider that Jerusalem was not a very large city, we're talking only tens of thousands of people. The fact that 5000 people, men alone, of its population are numbered among the Christians, the church is making a very significant impact within that context.

And so there are debates about the exact population of Jerusalem. Josephus has it lower than most modern interpreters would, commentators would. But it's important just to

notice how big an effect the church is having.

Is there something else going on beyond this? Well, possibly. I think in the first case, in the case of the 3000 saved on the day of Pentecost, almost certainly. In the case of the second, possibly.

The first case, I think, is best understood against the background of the broader typology of the day of Pentecost. What is happening on the day of Pentecost? Among other things, the leader of the people ascends to God's presence, receives something from God and delivers it to the people. And as a result, there's also the establishment of a new realm of God's presence, a new temple, as it were.

There's the establishment of a new priesthood, the royal priesthood, the church is the royal priesthood. And these events draw our mind back to Sinai. So Sinai is the significant background for what's taking place here.

About 50 days after the Passover, around the same time that the giving of the law occurred, we have Pentecost, the giving of the spirit. Law and spirit are juxtaposed with each other for various reasons, not least because the spirit is the one who writes the law on the heart. So the gift of the spirit is the writing of the law upon the heart.

The tongues of flame are associated with themes of Sinai elsewhere. I've written on this, I'll give a link to some of my comments on the subject of Pentecost. And when you see that connection, I think a number of other minor connections start to come into focus.

Christ, like Moses, ascends to God's presence. Christ received the spirit where Moses received the law. The tabernacle, the plan for the tabernacle was given on Mount Sinai.

The church is established as the temple of God's presence through Pentecost. The lighting of the lamps, the church is lit as it were, as a lampstand with the tongues of flame that descend upon the disciples. There are other things that take place here.

There's a relationship between Numbers 11 and the spirit that was placed upon Moses being placed upon the 70 elders. Here we see something similar with the spirit of Christ being placed upon the 120 disciples on the day of Pentecost. But beyond that, what happens at Sinai? At Sinai, Moses goes up onto the mountain and while he's away, the people grumble and then end up forming a golden calf.

Aaron forms a golden calf with them. This golden calf they worship as the one God who took them out of Egypt. As a result of that, Moses comes down the mountain and it leads to judgment for the people.

In chapter 32, verse 25, Now when Moses saw that the people were unrestrained, for Aaron had not restrained them to their shame among their enemies, then Moses stood in the entrance of the camp and said, Whoever is on the Lord's side, let him come to me.

And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. And he said to them, Thus says the Lord God of Israel, Let every man put on his sword on his side and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp.

And let every man kill his brother and every man his companion and every man his neighbor. So the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And about three thousand men of the people fell that day.

Then Moses said, Consecrate yourselves to the Lord, that he may bestow on you a blessing this day for every man has opposed his son and his brother. Within this event, we see a significant setting apart of the Levites for their purpose. The Levites are a tribe associated with violence from Genesis onwards.

In the judgment of, or in the blessing of Jacob at his death, he refers back to the actions of Levi and Simeon, their violent actions surrounding the seduction of Dinah. And here we see, in Exodus, we see a use of that violence for good as the Levites come to represent the zeal of God against wickedness. And so in their zeal, they slay three thousand people as a judgment of God.

And this is a result of the great sin of Sinai, the paradigmatic sin of worshipping the golden calf. What we see in the day of Pentecost is a reversal of this. God has established a new priesthood, a royal priesthood.

And this royal priesthood, represented here by Peter, speaks the word of God like a two-edged sword. And the language for the reaction of the people of Jerusalem to Peter's message is very telling. In chapter 2, verse 37, Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and to the rest of the disciples of the apostles, men and brethren, what shall we do? Cut to the heart, that's very powerful language.

About three thousand people cut to the heart on the day of Pentecost. Around three thousand people cut to the heart with swords at Sinai, after the sin concerning the golden calf. So I think there's a parallel between these two things.

There's a juxtaposition of Sinai and Pentecost, a juxtaposition of the law and the spirit, a juxtaposition of the administration of the law and the administration of grace by the spirit. And so where the law brought condemnation and death, the spirit brings life. There is the sword, the two-edged sword of the word, that cuts to the heart, but yet that cutting to the heart brings life.

And that's a very sharp contrast with what happened before. And so there are a few things going on with that number. That number helps us to see, first of all, the contrast between the ministry of the spirit and the ministry of the law.

It helps us to see the relationship between the Levitical priesthood and the kingly priesthood of the royal priesthood of the church. And it helps us to see a number of the

other connections that there are between Sinai and the day of Pentecost. It helps us to see that there is something significant here that is best understood against that particular background.

What about Acts 4, verse 4? The 5,000 men who are among the number of the church. This is less clear, but the following is going to be some speculation. Within the book of Luke, Luke records the feeding of the 5,000.

And the 5,000 numbered there are men. Men only, not men, women and children, but just men. Which is strange if you're going to be numbering men, women and children.

If you're going to be numbering people for food, you'd expect to be numbering men, women and children. If you're just numbering men, that is a bit odd in some respects. What we have here is another numbering of people.

And again, it's just men, which is not... It's something that you tend to have in military numbering. Again, the church is engaged in a sort of holy warfare. And these themes are quite significant within the context of Acts.

This theme of holy warfare, whether that's the Nazarite vow that Paul takes, or the sort of vow that Paul takes which can be associated with holy war, or whether it's something like the Achan-like events with Ananias and Sapphira, or whether it's the events of the Day of Pentecost where we see the work of the apostles and the cutting to the heart of these people, or a number of other events that we find within the Book of Acts. These can be understood against the background of the Canaanite conquest and Joshua. And so maybe there's a numbering of the people here that's supposed to allude back to things that have happened before, to events that are associated with military conquest, the fact that it's just men numbered.

That's a possibility. I think more likely is the connection with the feeding of the 5,000. The apostles were given that particular task as part of their ministry, their participation in the ministry of Christ.

They drew up 12 baskets afterwards, one for each one of them. And it was a sign of their ministry, their participation in the ministry of Christ. Whereas Christ could have done the miracle directly, he did the miracle through his disciples.

And that is significant. And what we have here, 5,000 men, is maybe an allusion back to that, an allusion back to this occasion that showed the ministry of the disciples, of the apostles, as they had to separate the 5,000 men into groups of 50 and 100, which is again military ranks. Israel went out of the land of Egypt in the 50s and went into the land of Canaan in the 50s.

And so these are military ranks. And in the same way we have about 5,000 men, a military numbering, and the apostles are ministering to this group. This group that draw

their attention back to the 5,000 that they first fed at the beginning of their ministry.

And so there's a new loaf formed with the leaven of the spirit. And then there's the administration of that with the work of the apostles. Now, I wouldn't put too much weight on that particular connection, but I think there might be something there.

At least it is an evocative number. It's a number that draws our mind back to things that have happened before. And so that would be the one possibility that I'd think of.

I'd be interested to know if anyone else has any thoughts on this. I've yet to make my mind up and I would appreciate any thoughts or further suggestions or evidence that could be drawn into the discussion. If you have any further questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account.

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