



Some Significant Numbers In the Bible

A New Awareness of the Significance of Numbers in the Bible

I do not intend to give a historical survey here of the emergence of what may be called a new awareness in our time of the numerical aspects of the Bible. Neither shall I try to give an answer to the question of who precisely should be credited with the honor of being the discoverer of the insight that the biblical writings are numerical compositions. In point of fact, since there has always been some awareness of the significance of numbers in the Bible, particularly in the Jewish tradition, one cannot really speak of the discovery of the numerical aspects of the Bible in our time. It is rather a matter of a rediscovery, a new and deeper awareness in recent times of the important role played by numbers as a literary structuring principle in the biblical writings. This awareness led to serious endeavors the last three decades to study the numerical aspects of the Bible on a scientific basis. This study has been done on a limited scale, since the great majority of biblical scholars still seem to be indifferent.¹

I intend to tell how I myself became aware of the significance of numbers in biblical antiquity, and how I came to appreciate the crucial role they played in the composition of the biblical texts. In doing so, I shall describe the rise of the

scholarly discipline of numerical structural analysis and refer to the work of the pioneers in this field of study.

Without claiming any break-through yet as regards the attitude of biblical scholars towards the numerical aspects of the Bible, I believe that something has changed. Since the emergence of serious scholarly research in this respect, there are signs that scholars are beginning to realize that they cannot go on ignoring these matters indefinitely. Numerical structural analysis is here to stay and the results already brought to light simply cannot be dismissed as unimportant. Up till now, scholars could shut their eyes to matters pertaining to numbers in the Bible, shrugging them off and regarding them as only relevant to mystics, numerologists, and number jugglers. However, that time has passed. Biblical scholars find themselves confronted with two options. They can continue on the old course of ignoring the facts and run the risk of being exposed ultimately as having lacked a scholarly attitude, or they can take the numerical aspects of the Bible seriously and acknowledge the facts already brought to light by the pioneers.

The latter choice entails the necessity of accepting numerical structural analysis as part and parcel of textual analysis. The reason is simple: if the biblical authors regarded counting as inextricably bound up with writing and used numbers to give structure to their literary products, we have no right to disregard the quantitative aspects of their texts. On the contrary, we must take them into account. In my experience, as I shall demonstrate, the study of the quantitative aspects of the biblical text opens up fascinating new vistas to our understanding of their structure and beauty of composition.

Explicitly Mentioned Symbolic Numbers In the Bible: 40, 12, and 7

My interest in the numerical aspects of the Bible goes back to my childhood. The daily Bible reading in our family and the Bible stories my mother told us in our private Sunday school

made me familiar with the contents of Scripture. One of the things that caught my interest and fascinated me most, apart from the exceptionally high life spans of our biblical ancestors, was the high frequency in occurrence of certain numbers, particularly 40, 12 and 7.²

How I marveled at the fact that in the story of the Great Flood it rained for 40 days and 40 nights; that Moses is said to have spent 40 days and 40 nights on the mountain; that Elijah's journey to the mountain of Horeb took exactly 40 days and 40 nights, and that the Gospels tells us that Jesus spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert. And is it not so that the Israelites trekked 40 years through the desert and that it took the explorers 40 days to spy out the land of Canaan?

Having heard the number 40 so frequently, I first regarded it as a matter of coincidence. But then I began to wonder as I discovered numerous other instances. The Philistine warrior Goliath challenged the Israelites for 40 days. Ezekiel is said to have lain on one side for 40 days. Jonah warned the people of Nineveh that the city would be overthrown in 40 days. The priest Eli is said to have been judge over Israel for 40 years; and David, Solomon and Joash reigned for 40 years.

As a child, I could do nothing but marvel at the frequent occurrence of the number 40, which I regarded as something belonging to the wonderful world of the Bible. It was only when I grew up and went on to study theology that I discovered that numbers can have a symbolic function. I learned that the number 40—which occurs in the Bible almost exclusively in connection with time—was used by the biblical writers to express a special, but indefinite and indeterminate span of time.³

Another number that struck me by its high frequency was 12, the number of the sons of Israel's ancestor Jacob. However, it is also said that Nahor, the brother of Abraham, had 12 sons; and the same goes for Ishmael, Abraham's eldest son. It did not surprise me to hear that in the wake of the twelve tribes of Israel there were 12 explorers of the land, 12 men who brought 12 stones from the Jordan to build a memorial.

Nor was I surprised to learn that the high priest wore 12 precious stones on his breast, that the Israelites found 12 springs and 70 palm trees in Elim, that there were 12 loaves of the Bread of Presence in the sanctuary, and that Moses, Joshua, and Elijah built altars of 12 stones.

It was not unexpected to learn that Jesus had 12 disciples, who would—according to Matthew 19—sit on 12 thrones to judge the 12 tribes of Israel. Rev 7:4–8 refers to the 144,000 servants of God marked with the seal: 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes. In Revelation 21, we read that the new Jerusalem will have a wall of 12 foundation-stones, with 12 gates guarded by 12 angels. It seemed only fitting to hear that, after Jesus' first wonderful feeding of the crowd, the leftovers filled 12 baskets. However, it was a bit unexpected to find out that at the second feeding the scraps filled 7 baskets, but 7 is another frequently used number that we will examine in detail below.

What is symbolically expressed by the number 12 is completeness, perfection, and totality, which was derived from the fact that 12 is the product of the factors 3 and 4, representing the vertical and the horizontal dimension of the world respectively. In the ancient Near Eastern view of the world, the cosmos consisted of 3 vertically arranged levels: the vault of the heavens, the earth, and the nether world; on the horizontal level the earth has four quarters. Thus $3 \times 4 = 12$ expresses the idea of the perfect, harmonious totality: encompassing the whole of heaven and earth. In this respect, 12 is intimately related to 7, the sum of 3 and 4, the number expressing fullness, completeness, and abundance. Moreover, it could have been known in the ancient world and in biblical antiquity that 12 is the sum of the measures of the three sides of the perfect rectangular triangle (height 3, breadth 4, and diagonal 5), and even before Pythagoras, that $(3 \times 3) + (4 \times 4) = 5 \times 5$.⁴

Since the numbers 12 and 40 do not function as text structuring numbers in the Bible, as far as I can judge at this point in time, we need not discuss their use any further. It must suffice to state that they served the purpose of demonstrating the

unmistakable symbolic use of numbers in the Bible, showing clearly that we must be aware of the fact that numbers in biblical usage should not always be understood in their literal sense.

In the present context, and for my purpose to bring the structuring function of symbolic numbers in the Bible to the attention of the reader, the number 7 should be studied more closely. It was particularly this number that fascinated me most as a child when I was confronted with the contents of the Bible. What made this number special for me was not so much the fact that my parents had 7 children, but more particularly the fact that we got acquainted with this special biblical number through the daily family Bible reading. Evening after evening, we had to listen attentively to what my father read, especially because after the prayer and the singing we were called upon in turn to tell what impressed us most and to recite a striking sentence or verse. We did not realize that this was an excellent exercise in attentive listening and remembering. Our greatest concern was, as we say in Afrikaans and Dutch, not to “stand with the mouth full of teeth,” unable to say a word, having forgotten what we tried to remember.

It was exciting, and sometimes even frightening, when my father read about the apocalyptic expectations in the book of Revelation. In these readings the exceptionally high frequency of the number 7 could not escape our notice. The 7 churches, the 7 stars, the scroll with its 7 seals, the lamb with 7 horns and 7 eyes, the monster with its 7 heads and 10 horns, the 7 angels, 7 trumpets, 7 plagues, 7 bowls, 7 thunderclaps . . .

Many years afterward, I learned that this particular number is explicitly mentioned no less than 56 times in the book of Revelation. Seeing its high frequency of occurrence elsewhere in the Scripture, I realized that 7 should be considered the most important symbolic number in the Bible. What I did not know at that time was that this number would be my access number to the fascinating world of the biblical numerical compositions.

Explicit References To the Number Seven in the Bible⁵

No other number has a higher score when it comes to the number of times it is mentioned explicitly in the Bible. In the great majority of instances, it does not have a literal, but clearly a symbolic meaning. Occurring no less than 390 times in the Old Testament and 88 times in the New Testament, it runs, so to speak, as a thread through many books of the Bible. This is not surprising, since it was the number *par excellence* employed to express symbolically the idea of fullness, completeness, totality, and wholeness.⁶

In ancient Israel, the number 7 is associated with the rhythm of life by giving structure to the flow of time by means of the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week. No wonder that it was also used in other ways as a structuring and organizing principle, more particularly to give structure to the content of texts and to imbue them with its symbolism, by means of series and cycles of seven, as I shall illustrate further on. It stands to reason that in such cases the number 7 is not visibly or audibly present in the text, because it is not explicitly mentioned. Its presence as a structuring device can only be detected by counting instances, items, phrases, or words: e.g., the series of seven parables in Matthew 13, the seven intentions in the prayer of Solomon in 1 Kings 8, and the seven intentions in the prayer Jesus taught his followers.

Before surveying such latent occurrences, I shall first give the reader a general impression of the many instances in which 7 is mentioned explicitly: seven and multiples of seven, sevenfold, seven times, seventy, seventy-seven, seven hundred, etc. Significantly the first explicit reference to 7 occurs in the Creation Story in the very first chapter of the Bible according to the Hebrew text, Gen 1:1 – 2:3, where it is said that on the seventh day, God, having finished all his work, blessed that day and made it holy. In Genesis 4 we read that Lamech said: “If 7-fold vengeance was to be exacted for Cain,

for Lamech it would be 77-fold.” In Leviticus 26, it is said no less than four times that God would punish his disobedient people “7 times over” for their sins (verses 18, 21, 24, and 28). The 7-fold vengeance reminds us not only of what is said in Ps 79:12, “Turn back 7-fold on their own heads, Lord, the contempt our neighbors pour on you,” but also of Jesus’ injunction: “If your brother does wrong, reprove him; and if he repents, forgive him. Even if he wrongs you 7 times in a day and comes back to you 7 times saying “I am sorry,” you are to forgive him” (Luke 17:3–4). According to Matt 18:21–22, when Peter asked Jesus whether one should forgive 7 times, he said: “I do not say 7 times but 70 times 7.”

In the story of the flood in Genesis 7, God commanded Noah to take with him in the ark 7 pairs “of every kind of clean animal” (7:2), and 7 pairs “of every kind of bird” (7:3). God said that in 7 days time he would send rain on the earth for 40 days and 40 nights. The ark grounded on the mountains of Ararat on the seventeenth day of the seventh month; and Noah, having sent out a dove that returned, waited 7 days more and again sent out the dove.

In the story of Jacob and Esau we are told in Genesis 33 that Jacob bowed low to the ground 7 times as he approached his brother Esau. The author of Psalm 119 declares that he praises God 7 times each day (verse 164). In Psalm 12, refined gold is called “gold purified 7 times over.” In the story of Daniel, in chapter 3, it is said that King Nebuchadnezzar ordered that the furnace had to be heated to 7 times its usual heat. In Joshua 6, we are told that 7 priests carrying 7 trumpets had to go before the ark when the Israelites marched round the city of Jericho, and that they had to march round the city 7 times on the seventh day. In Prov 24:16, it is said of an upright person: “Though he may fall 7 times, he is soon up again.”

There are many instances of 7 as a span of time. According to 1 Kings 6, Solomon built the temple in 7 years. In Daniel 4, we read that Nebuchadnezzar was told three times that “7 times” would pass over him. Of Ezekiel it is said that after he

arrived among the exiles he stayed with them for 7 days in a state of consternation. The great famine during Elisha's life lasted 7 years (2 Kings 4). In 2 Samuel 10, it is said that after he was anointed king, Saul had to wait 7 days for further orders. Certain impurities were supposed to last for 7 days (Lev 15:19 and 28; Num 19:11, 14 and 16). A marriage feast as well as the Feast of the Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Tabernacles lasted 7 days. Passover was celebrated in the seventh month and the Feast of Weeks 7 weeks later. The Year of Jubilee, according to Leviticus 25, was celebrated after 49 (=7×7) years, in the fiftieth year.

The number 7 expressed symbolically the idea of abundance, profuseness, and completeness, especially in regard to having many children. Job had 7 sons and 3 daughters—which brings to mind Solomon's 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3). Having 7 children means fecundity, as in the case of Leah (Genesis 30). In similar manner, we read in the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:5, "The barren woman bears 7 children." And Jeremiah refers to "the mother of 7 sons," i.e. a very strong woman, who sank into despair on the day of judgement. Having 7 sons was supposed to be something very special: Ruth was said to "have proved to be better than 7 sons" to her mother-in-law Naomi (4:15).

In Genesis 46 and Exodus 1, we are told that Jacob had 70 descendants in Egypt. This reminds us of the fact that in ancient Israel and in Judaism it was thought that there were 70 nations. In Numbers 11, it is said that the spirit of the Lord was conferred on 70 of Israel's elders, and in Luke 10:1 that Jesus sent 70 disciples ahead of him. And didn't God leave 7000 in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal (see 1 Kgs 19:18 and Rom 11:4)?

According to Deuteronomy 7, the Israelites were confronted with 7 nations, of whom it is said in Acts 13:19 that God overthrew them. In Deut 28:7, we read that it would be a blessing for the Israelites if their enemies would come by one way

towards them but flee from them by 7 ways—compare verse 25, where the same image is used with regard to Israel.

The number 7, in connection with gifts and sacrifices, frequently expresses the idea of abundance. Abraham reserved 7 lambs for Abimelech as a testimony that he had dug a certain well (Gen 21:28—29). Job's three friends had to bring 7 bulls and 7 rams as a whole-offering for themselves (Job 42:8) and Balak had to build 7 altars for Balaam and prepare 7 bulls and 7 rams (Num 23:1). According to 2 Chr 29:21, 7 bulls, 7 rams, and 7 lambs were brought as a whole-offering and 7 he-goats as a purification offering. The blood of an offering and anointing oil could be sprinkled 7 times (Lev 4:6 and 8:11).

In many other instances, 7 expresses the idea of fullness and abundance. There were 7 years of bumper harvests and 7 years of famine in Egypt, symbolically represented in Pharaoh's dream by the 7 lean and 7 gaunt cows and the 7 ears of full, ripe grain and the 7 blighted, thin ears. Samson is said to have been bound with 7 fresh bowstrings and to have had 7 locks of hair (Judges 16). In Isa 4:1, the prophet refers to 7 women who would cling to one man to be enabled to bear his name. In 1 Kings 18, we read that Elijah's servant had to go and look toward the west 7 times for signs of rain and that he saw a cloud the seventh time. We are told that after Elisha revived the child of the Shunammite woman from apparent death, the boy sneezed 7 times and opened his eyes (2 Kgs 4:35). And we read that Naaman was ordered by Elisha to go and wash 7 times in the Jordan to be cured from his illness (2 Kgs 5:10)?

The house of Wisdom was supposed to have been built on 7 pillars (Prov 9:1). There are 7 steps in the approach to the new temple envisaged by Ezekiel (40:22). The golden lampstand with its six branches had 7 lamps (Exod 25:37; Num 8:1); and the lampstand the prophet saw in a vision had 7 lamps and 7 pipes (Zech 4:2). The stone set before Joshua had 7 facets (3:9) representing "the eyes of the Lord which range over the whole earth" (4:10). This brings back to memory the vision in

Rev 5:6 about the lamb with 7 horns and 7 eyes, the eyes representing “the 7 spirits of God sent to every part of the world.”

We find the predilection for the number 7 in the New Testament as well as the Old Testament. In addition to the examples already cited, I would remind the reader of the following instances. In Luke 2, it is said of the old prophetess that she had been married for 7 years (i.e., a complete number of years) and lived alone as a widow to the age of 84 (7 cycles of 12 years). According to the Gospel of Mark (8:6) Jesus fed a crowd with 7 loaves of bread; this miracle was preceded, however, by a previous feeding where Jesus also used 7 items: 5 loaves and 2 fish (6:38). In both cases, 7 seems to express both the totality of what was available and the idea of sufficiency and abundance. It is no coincidence that 7 evil spirits were driven from Mary of Magdala. On another occasion, Jesus spoke about an evil spirit that comes out of a person and comes back with 7 others to settle there again (Matt 12:43–45). And in their discussion with Jesus about the resurrection, the Sadducees referred to the case involving 7 brothers who were married in succession to the same woman (Matt 22:23–28). Acts 6 tells about the appointment of 7 men of good repute to serve the church. Since I had to learn such names by heart in my childhood, I can still reproduce their names: Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas.

The New Testament passage about these 7 men, of whom it is said that they were “full of the Spirit and of wisdom,” reminds us of the messianic prophecy in Isaiah 11, where it is said of the Messiah: “On him the Spirit of the Lord will rest: a spirit of wisdom . . .” The Messiah was obviously the archetype Luke had in mind when he wrote about the seven men “full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” These words bring us back to the Old Testament, where we are now going to look for instances of the hidden presence of the number 7 in the text.

Let us now have a closer look at the Isaiah passage. Utilizing our ability to count, we discover some interesting features of

the text we have not noticed before: more particularly the striking structural function of the number 7.

The Hidden Presence of the Number Seven In the Old Testament

As some commentators have already observed—however, without closer investigation and without drawing any conclusions—exactly 7 qualifications have been attributed to the Spirit that rested on the Messiah. Let us number them:

- the Spirit of *the Lord* (1),
- a Spirit of *wisdom* (2) and *understanding* (3),
- a Spirit of **counsel** (4) and *power* (5),
- a Spirit of *knowledge* (6) and *fear of the Lord* (7).

What was not noticed is that the text is phrased in such a way that the word “Spirit” occurs 4 times. This could be shrugged off as mere coincidence, were it not that there are many instances in the Old Testament of the use of 4, the number expressing extensiveness (L. A. Snijders), in combination with 7, the number of abundance, wholeness and fullness, especially in the pattern $7+4 = 11$ (see chapter 4 below).

Scrutinizing the text further and registering its other features, we find that no less than three additional series of 7 emerge, which have not been noticed before, so far as I know. The first series of seven can be detected in the feats ascribed to the Messiah (verses 3–4):

1. his delight is in the fear of the Lord,
2. he does not judge by outward appearance,
3. he does not decide a case on hearsay,
- 4. he judges the poor with justice,**
5. he defends the humble in the land with equity,
6. his verdict strikes the ruthless like a rod,
7. with his word he slays the wicked.

The reason why the fourth deed has been printed in bold type is to draw attention to the fact that it appears in the mathematical center of the series, a position that gives it pride of

place and therefore special emphasis—a compositional technique we discussed above in chapter 1. In light of the paramount importance of justice in the Kingdom of God and in the Messianic era, it does not surprise us that the Messiah’s rule of justice receives special emphasis by its center position. This emphasis is underlined by what is said in the concluding remark (verse 5): “Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist and faithfulness the girdle of his loins.”⁷

In the next passage, verses 6–10, dealing with a description of the paradisiacal situation to be expected in the messianic era, we detect two series of 7 references to animals. The first series comprises 7 different kinds of animals:

1. the wolf, 2. the lamb, 3. the leopard
- 4. the kid**
5. the calf, 6. the young lion, 7. the fatling (cattle).⁸

The series is concluded with the remark, “and a little child shall lead them.” Verses 7–8 contain another series of 7 references to animals:

1. the cow, 2. the bear, 3. their young
- 4. the lion**
5. the ox, 6. the cobra, 7. the viper.

The survey shows that there are no less than 4 series of 7 items hidden in the text, which suggests that the combination of 4 and 7 found in verse 2 (the 4 instances of the Spirit) is a feature in the rest of the text as well. The author of this literary gem employed the symbolic numbers 4 and 7 not only to organize the text, but especially to deepen it, imbuing it with a symbolic connotation proclaiming the fullness, completeness, and extensiveness of the Messianic era. Its fullness would extend to the four quarters of the earth!

This passage from the book of Isaiah can be considered an illustrious example demonstrating the use of counting as a compositional technique. Whoever wants to believe that what has been revealed by our investigation rests on mere coincidence, may for my part continue doing so. However, it should be realized that by turning a blind eye to the numerical

aspects of the text, one not only fails to notice an essential feature of the text, but also slights the author who has produced such a beautiful work of art. A text with such features simply cannot have been written off the cuff. It was carefully composed, and in such a way that the structural numbers do not disturb the even flow of the text. We can only become aware of the presence of such numbers in a text by counting items such as key words, key phrases, stereotyped formulas, and enumeration. Let us survey some instances in the New Testament.

Examples from the Four Gospels

The number 7 regulates both genealogies of Jesus in the Gospels. According to Matt 1:1–17 there were forty-two generations from the time of Abraham to the birth of Jesus. This period of time is divided into three spans of 14 (2×7) generations, showing that the structure of Matthew's genealogy of Jesus is governed by this number. This is explicitly stated in 1:17, "There were thus 14 generations in all from Abraham to David, 14 from David to the deportation to Babylon, and 14 from the deportation until the Messiah." This structure was achieved by omitting some names in the list of the descendants of David in 1 Chronicles 3. The reason why this particular number was used to give structure to the genealogy is in the first place to imbue the text with the symbolic meaning of $14 = 2 \times 7$, the double number of fullness. Matthew obviously wanted to express what Paul called "the fullness of time" in Gal 4:4, the conviction that the time of the Messiah had fully come. But there is more to it.

Since the name of David clearly forms a pivotal point in the genealogy, it is reasonable to expect that the author would emphasize the Davidic line of descent of the Messiah. He did this by employing the numerical value of the name David (Hebrew דָּוִד), 14 ($ד=4$) + ($ו=6$) + ($ד=4$) to give structure to the genealogy.⁹

The purpose of Matthew's version of the genealogy is to show that Jesus descends from Abraham through the royal line of David, not only as "son of David" but also as "son of Abraham." This is explicitly stated in the heading: "The genealogy of Jesus Christ, *son of David, son of Abraham.*" Whereas Matthew used the structuring number 14 to underscore Jesus' descent from David, he employed another numerical technique in order to underline Jesus' qualification as the son of Abraham: the number 41, the numerical value of the five Hebrew letters of the name Abraham [(א=1) + (ב=2) + (ג=20) + (ד=5) + (ה=13) = 41].

In Matthew's view, there are 42 generations from Abraham to Jesus. Since Jesus was a member of the forty-second generation, there ought to be 41 progenitors. However, when I counted the names of the factual progenitors, the biological forefathers of Jesus, from Abraham through David and Jeconiah to Joseph, I found that they amount to only 40 (14 + 13 + 13), since Jeconiah's name is used twice to get 42 generations. This is rather problematic: where is the forty-first progenitor? The solution might be to add the Holy Spirit, the Spiritual Father of Jesus, between Joseph and Jesus as the forty-first "Begetter," as suggested to me by Duane Christensen in a private communication. It seems as if Matthew has intended to mention only 40 biological progenitors in order to draw attention to the missing forty-first Begetter, the Holy Spirit, upon whose role he elaborates in 1:18–25.

The genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (chapter 3), with its 77 names, is regulated throughout by the symbolic number 7. From Jesus, son of Joseph, a genealogical line is followed back to Adam, son of God, in such a way, so it seems, that a number of important names appear in every seventh place, e.g. two Josephs, David, Abraham, Enoch, and Adam. These 11 names are: Joseph, son of Jannai (not Jesus' father, Joseph, son of Heli); Matthathias; Shealtiel; Joshua; Joseph, son of Jonam; David; Admin; Abraham; Shela; Enoch and Adam. The purpose of the Lucan genealogy is clearly to

demonstrate that Jesus is “son of God” through famous ancestors such as David, Abraham, Enoch and Adam.

The number of generations from Adam to Jesus amount to 77. This significant number was chosen primarily because of its symbolical value, being the product of 7 and 11, the numbers expressing fullness and fulfillment respectively. The latent numerical message seems to be the fulfillment of the fullness of the Messianic era.

It is interesting to note, moreover, that 77 happens to represent the numerical value of the initial letters of the five Greek words Iesous, CHristos, THEou HUios, Soter, meaning “Jesus, Messiah, God’s son, Savior” ($9+22+8+20+18 = 77$). These five letters together form the Greek word ICHTHUS, “Fish.” As we know, the fish was an important early symbol of Christianity. It cannot be excluded that the author of this genealogy was familiar with this and that the numerical value of “fish” played a role when he chose the number 77. It is worthwhile noting that the reference to God brings the total number of names up to 78 (3×26).

Let us survey other instances of a hidden series of 7. In Luke 2:25–26 exactly 7 things are said of Simeon who witnessed the presentation of the child Jesus in the temple:

1. he was upright, 2. he was devout, 3. he waited for the restoration of Israel
- 4. the Holy Spirit was upon him,**
5. the Holy Spirit had revealed to him, 6. that he would not see death, 7. until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.

The central position of the fourth attribute of Simeon in the text shows that his most crucial trait is that the Holy Spirit was upon him, which enabled him to pronounce his prophecy about Jesus as the Messiah.

As we have noted above, the prayer Jesus taught his followers contains seven petitions:

1. may your name be hallowed, 2. your kingdom come,
3. your will be done . . .
- 4. give us today our daily bread,**
5. forgive us our sins . . . 6. do not put us to the test,
7. save us from evil.

A most striking feature in this prayer is that whereas the verbs in the first three petitions have the third person form, there is a change at the fourth request, which is phrased in the second person, a form that is retained throughout the rest of the prayer. The change of person gives the fourth intention of the prayer special emphasis, in the same way we noted above in Psalm 23 with regard to the words “for you are with me,” where the second person appears suddenly in a third person context. Moreover, the fourth petition concerning our daily bread stands in pride of place: in the mathematical center of the series.

This petition occupies center position even in the shorter version of the prayer in the Gospel of Luke (11:2–4), which has *five* requests:

1. may your name be hallowed, 2. your kingdom come,
- 3. give us today our daily bread,**
4. and forgive us the wrong we have done . . . 5. do not put us to the test.

What is most significant in Luke’s version is that the prayer is followed by a parable in which bread and fish feature prominently (verses 5–12)! Both versions of the prayer attest to the paramount importance of food.

It goes without saying that our daily bread is of crucial importance to our very existence, in accordance with the fact that Jesus himself attached great significance to eating and drinking as witnessed by the Gospels. This is in line with the Old Testament view of the importance of vegetation as the source for sustenance: in the seven acts of creation in Genesis 1 the creation of vegetation occupies the fourth, central position (see below in chapter 4 under “The Primeval History in Genesis 1–11”). Moreover, it is underscored by the arrangement of the seven good qualities of the land of Canaan in the

famous “Song of Praise for the Good Land” in Deut 8:7–10. It is a land:

1. with streams, 2. springs,
3. underground waters,
- 4. in which you will eat food without scarcity,**
5. in which you will lack nothing,
6. whose stones are iron, and 7. in which you will mine copper.¹⁰

The apostle Paul was aware of the emphasizing function of the center position, for in my opinion, it is not a matter of mere coincidence that he placed hunger at the center when he wrote about the 7 things that cannot separate us from the love of Christ (Rom 8:35):

1. affliction, 2. hardship, 3. persecution,
- 4. hunger,**
5. nakedness, 6. danger, 7. sword.

The paramount importance of bread is also stressed in the series of 7 Parables in Matthew 13, where the parable about leaven stands in central position:

1. the sower, 2. the good seed and the weeds, 3. the grain of mustard,
- 4. leaven,**
5. the hidden treasure, 6. the merchant, 7. the net cast in sea.

To crown it all, in the series of 7 “signs” attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John, his miraculous feeding of the crowd occupies the center position. The eighth “sign” (21:1-14) clearly stands apart, being of a different order, and may be regarded as a super additum ($8=7+1$). The seven coherent “signs” are:

1. changing water into wine (2:1-11);
2. healing the son of an officer (4:46-54);
3. healing the man who had been crippled for 38 years (5:1-18);
- 4. feeding the crowd** (6:1-15—in this context Jesus refers to the “bread of life!”);
5. walking on the sea (6:16-21);

6. healing a man who had been blind from birth (9:1–16);
7. raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1–46).

Let me conclude by mentioning a few more examples of conspicuous series of seven. In Matthew 5, the stereotyped formula “I say to you,” used in the mouth of Jesus, occurs 7 times (verses 20, 22, 28, 32, 34, 39 and 44).¹¹ In Matthew 23 we find 7 woe-utterances introduced by the stereotyped phrase “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees” (verses 13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27 and 29).¹² The Gospel of John contains 7 “I am”-utterances by Jesus specifying his mission by means of impressive metaphors:

1. I am the bread of life (6:35);
2. I am the light of the world (8:12);
3. I am the door of the sheepfold (10:7);
- 4. I am the good shepherd (10:11);**
5. I am the resurrection and the life (11:25);
6. I am the way, the truth and the life (14:6);
7. I am the true vine (15:1).

The four Gospels attribute altogether 7 utterances to Jesus on the cross, with the cry of distress, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?,” in fourth place.

More Examples from other Books Of the New Testament

In addition to the series of 7 things Paul refers to in Romans 8, cited above, he also lists 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit (12:6–8):¹³

1. to prophecy, 2. to serve, 3. to teach,
- 4. to counsel,**
5. to give generously, 6. to lead with enthusiasm, 7. to help cheerfully.

The Letter of James (3:13–18) refers to “wisdom that does not come from above” and “wisdom that comes from above.” Both have 7 qualities, in accordance with the fact that the House of Wisdom has 7 pillars (Proverbs 9). The first kind is qualified as follows:

1. it is earth-bound, 2. sensual, 3. demonic;
- 4. where jealousy and**
5. rivalry exist, 6. there is disorder and 7. the practice of every kind of evil.

The wisdom that comes from above, however, is:

1. pure, 2. peace-loving, 3. considerate,
- 4. open-minded,**
5. full of mercy and good fruits, 6. impartial, 7. sincere.

The author of the Second Letter of Peter listed 7 fruits of faith belonging together as the links of a chain (1:6–7):

1. virtue, 2. knowledge, 3. self-control,
- 4. steadfastness,**
5. piety, 6. brotherly affection, 7. love.

In addition to the numerous instances of explicit reference to 7 in the book of Revelation, of which I have given some examples above, there are a number of instances where 7 can be detected only by counting, e.g. in 5:12 where we read that the Lamb who was slain, is worthy to receive:

1. power, 2. wealth, 3. wisdom,
- 4. might,**
5. honor, 6. glory, 7. praise.

Rev 6:15 lists 7 categories of men trying to escape from the earthquake:

1. the kings of the earth, 2. the nobles, 3. the commanders,
- 4. the rich,**
5. the powerful, 6. all slaves, 7. all free persons.

Another list, however, in 21:8, mentions not seven but eight categories (of sinners). Like the Lamb, to whom 7 things are attributed in 5:12, as we have seen, God himself is being attributed with 7 things in 7:12 by the angels prostrating themselves before him:

1. praise, 2. glory, 3. wisdom,
- 4. thanksgiving,**
5. honor, 6. power, 7. might.

It stands to reason that the fact that certain elements of the text appear in center position in such series, giving them pride of place, have consequences for our interpretation: we have to respect the emphasis laid on them by the authors.

The examples brought forward so far must suffice to illustrate the principle that concerns us here: the profuse use of the number 7 to give structure to the contents of the text and imbue it with a particular symbolism.

Having paid some attention to the New Testament I would now like to take the reader back to the Old Testament—a field in which I feel myself more at home—to tell how I discovered particular series of seven formulas introducing divine speeches in the Pentateuch. In so doing, I learned to count phrases, words, and verses in the Bible as a matter of course in my literary-critical analysis of the texts.