

7

Proper Use and Misuse of Numbers in the Bible

The Significance of the Numerical Aspects of the Bible

The discovery of the numerical features of the biblical writings is first and foremost a matter that concerns the scholarly world. Its importance lies primarily in the significance it has for biblical studies. Since the numerical aspects of the text belong to its invisible inner structure, they are not apparent to the average reader of the Bible. They can only be detected by means of quantitative analysis, which is a scholarly enterprise. To this end, I have developed a standard procedure that I used in my Deuteronomy commentary to assess the quantitative aspects of the text with regard to its larger and smaller literary units, verses, and other categories relating to their form. These categories, such as “main clause” and “subordinate clause,” “narrative” and “direct speech,” singular and plural sections, first, second, and third person passages, are dictated by the texts themselves. In order to get an overall picture of the numerical structure of a text, one has to carry out a complete logotechnical analysis. It stands to reason that one runs the risk of over-registering because it is hard to differentiate between what was intended by the writers and what is contingent. However, such risks cannot be avoided, since we simply do not know beforehand precisely how the authors structured their texts numerically. It is only through a

comprehensive quantitative analysis that the real structure of a text can be brought to light.

The discovery of such structures has far-reaching implications for our view of the form and the formation process of the biblical writings. First of all, it proves beyond any doubt that the final form of the text is not the result of a fortuitous process of haphazard accretions, but the outcome of designed compositional intention. This means that we are constrained to take the *Endgestalt* of the text more seriously than has been done by scholars working with the traditional historical-critical method. Diachronic analysis of the text should never be carried out to the detriment of a synchronic approach. Without questioning the relevance of diachronic analysis, I am convinced that the study of the final form of the text must have priority over investigations into the history of its formation. The key to understanding the distinctive or peculiar features of a text does not lie primarily in the reconstruction of the different stages of its growth, but in a careful and exhaustive examination of its final form. In my experience, many idiosyncrasies of the text can be explained as due to numerical considerations. In short, the study of the numerical aspects of a text can help us to detect its literary form.

Moreover, the numerical features of a text can help us to delimit its literary units correctly, which can have serious consequences for its interpretation. Let me demonstrate this with an example of such a crucial delimitation—Deut 8:7–10. We have examined this text in the preceding chapter and discovered that the two compositional formulas of the “minor tetraktys,” $55 = 23 + 32$ and $55 = 26 + 29$, enabled us to delimit this four verse pericope precisely. Since the verses 7–10 comprise a literary unit, the next passage begins in verse 11, which means that the verb in verse 11 introduces a new literary unit: 11–16, “Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God.” In other words, the protasis in 7a, “Since the Lord your God is bringing you in a good land,” has its apodosis in verse 10b: “you must eat and be sated and bless YHWH your God.”

The good quality of the land entails, even demands, eating, getting full, and praising the Lord. Therefore translations such as the one suggested by A. D. H. Mayes, “When the Lord brings you into the good land . . . and (when) you eat and get full and praise the Lord . . . (11) *take heed* lest you forget the Lord your God,” in which the apodosis begins in verse 11, cannot be correct.¹

How Numerical Structures Support The Message of a Text

In the previous chapters, I have presented many examples to illustrate the close connection between the form and the content of a text. I also tried to show how the numerical structure of a text can support and underscore its message. The first instance I cited, in chapter 1, was Psalm 23, in which the three words at the mathematical center of the text, *ki ’attah ’immadi*, “for you are with me,” are surrounded by 26 words, representing the numerical value of the divine name, to express the central idea of God’s presence. Let me present some additional instances:

a) Psalm 82

In this poem, the author presents YHWH as pronouncing judgement among other gods. The psalm is made up of 61 words, consisting of 2 words in the heading and 1 word, *selah*, at the end of verse 2, and 58 words in the poem itself. The 58 words are structured as follows.

1–4 Heavenly scene: YHWH challenges the gods	26	}	32	}	32
5a The gods fail to meet YHWH’s challenge	6				
5b–8 Earthly scene: implications for the earth	26 . . .				

Exactly 26 words are used to describe the heavenly scene, in which the psalmist introduces YHWH standing in the heavenly court to pronounce judgement among the gods (verse 1). God challenges the gods in a direct address to them, in which the second person plural form is used (verses 2–4). After

quoting God's address, the author describes in verse 5a the reaction of the gods to YHWH's challenge to realize justice on earth. They appear to be totally at a loss for action and unable to meet YHWH's challenge. Here the psalmist uses 6 words and employs the third person form of the verbs: "They know nothing and understand nothing, they walk about in darkness." As in Psalm 23, the sudden change in the verbal form is a clear indication of a new phase in the text.

In verse 5b, there is another significant change; for here the author speaks about the consequences that the failure of the gods has for the earth: "the foundations of the earth are all giving way." This means that from here on he has an earthly scene in mind, which he maintains throughout the rest of the poem. A further implication of the failure of the gods to meet YHWH's challenge follows as the author comes to realize that the so-called "gods" are no gods at all (verses 6–7): "I thought you were gods, all sons of the Most High, but surely like mortals you shall die and fall as any prince does." He concludes his poem by calling upon YHWH to stand up and judge the earth, in verse 8, which corresponds symmetrically to verse 1, where YHWH is presented as standing in the court of heaven to pronounce judgement among the gods.

Like the heavenly scene (verses 1–4), the earthly scene (verses 5b–8) comprises exactly 26 words. This means that the 6 words in verse 5a are at the mathematical center of the poem, where they receive special emphasis: they depict the total bankruptcy of the "gods." From a structural point of view, it does not seem to be a matter of coincidence that the description of the bankruptcy of the "gods" is situated between the heavenly and the earthly scene. The position of verse 5a in the psalm appears to be so intended as to give an appropriate indication of the position of the "gods"—who are unmasked as total failures, they are nowhere, dangling in the void between heaven and earth.²

The numerical structure seems to emphasize still another point: what is also at stake is YHWH's honor, which was

jeopardized by the presence of the false gods. By the denouncement of these gods as non-gods on the strength of God's judgement, the honor of YHWH, the only true God, was saved. This is numerically expressed by the use of the *kebod*-YHWH model, which represents YHWH's glory and honor: $26 + 32 = 58$, and its reverse, $32 + 26 = 58$. Together with the 26 words dealing with the earthly scene (verses 5b-8), the 6 words of verse 5a form the compositional model $26 + 32 = 58$. These same 6 words function in a pivot position, together with the 26 words of the heavenly scene (verses 1-4), where they form its reverse $32 + 26 = 58$, emphasizing once again the center position of the description of the bankruptcy of the false gods.

b) Psalm 8

The similarly phrased opening and concluding lines of this hymn, "Lord, our Sovereign, how glorious is your name throughout the world," in verses 2a and 10, clearly express the purpose of the author: to sing the praise of the glorious manifestation of God's name throughout the Universe. Therefore it does not surprise us to find that the divine name numbers 17 and 26—both of which also represent the numerical value of *kbd/kbwd*, "glory"—figure prominently in the numerical structure of the psalm. Moreover, the number 32, the alternative numerical value of *kbwd*, occurs explicitly in verse 6b.³

Including the 5 words of the heading, Psalm 8 is made up of 10 verses and 77 (11×7) words. The first and last lines have 7 words each. The number 7 also figures in the seven instances of the second person singular suffix *-ka*, with the reference "your name" at the beginning and at the end of the series, and with the remarkable term "your heavens" (verse 4a) at the center.

1. your name (2a)
2. your majesty (2b)
3. your adversaries (3a)
- 4. your heavens (4a)**
5. your fingers (4a)
6. your hands (7a)
7. your name (10b).

The compositional formula of the hymn itself in verses 2–10, without the heading, is $72 = 38a + 34b$ (38 words before and 34 [2×17] after the *'atnach*). Whether it is a matter of chance or not, the number 38 represents the numerical value of *wekabod*, “and honor” (verse 6b), and 34 represents the numerical value of *shem*, “name” ($\text{שׁ} = 21$) + ($\text{מ} = 13$), which occurs explicitly in the first and last lines. Incidentally, 26 simultaneously represents the numerical value of *hodeka*, “your majesty” ($\text{ה} = 5$) + ($\text{ד} = 6$) + ($\text{ק} = 4$) + ($\text{א} = 11$) = 26, which appears in verse 2b.

A logotechnical analysis of the psalm brought the following structure to light.⁴

2a	Glorification of God's name	7		
2b-3	God's achievements in the universe	15	}	32
4-5	Surprise at man's privileged status	17		
6-9	God's ordination of humankind	26. . . .	}	58
10	Glorification of God's name	7		

The central core of the psalm, verses 2b-9, consists of 58 words, arranged in the *kebod*-YHWH pattern: $58 = 32 + 26$, with 32 words in verses 2b-5, the numerical value of *kbwd*, “glory,” and with 26 words in verses 6–9, representing God's name YHWH as well as his Glory. The other divine name/Glory number (17) figures in the number of words in the exclamation of amazement about the privileged position of humankind in the universe (verses 4–5). Thus the numerical structure of the hymn underscores its central message, that the name and the Glory of God are interwoven into the fabric of the universe, where they testify to God's presence. In the same way, they are also interwoven into the fabric of Scripture, where they serve the same purpose.⁵

c) Psalm 19

It has long been recognized that this psalm divides into two distinct parts: verses 2–7, a hymn on the witness of the universe to God’s work, which is strongly reminiscent of Psalm 8, and verses 8–15, a didactic poem praising the excellence of the Torah. It would be very wrong to consider the two parts as completely disparate texts, since the psalm is an incontestable structural unity. This is proved by the following logotechnical analysis, which clearly shows how the two parts have been fused to form a single entity.

Section	Contents	Number of words
2–5	The Universe proclaims God’s Glory	34 (19a+15b)
6–7	The action of the sun	17
2–7	The Universe and the sun	51 (3×17)
8–11	The features of YHWH’s Torah	38
6–11	The sun and the Torah	55 (32a+23b)
12–15	Concluding prayer	34 (23a+11b)
2–5 + 12–15	<i>Framework to the sun/Torah Hymn</i>	68 (42a+26b)
1–15	The psalm including its heading	126 (77a+49b)

First and foremost, the psalm is structured in terms of the number 7—the number of fullness and abundance.

- ▶ The compositional formula of the entire text contains multiples of 7: $11 \times 7 + 7 \times 7 = 18 \times 7$
- ▶ The psalm itself is made up of 14 verses.
- ▶ The name YHWH occurs 7 times (8a, 8b, 9a, 9b, 10a, 10b, 15b), with the reference to YHWH’s radiant commandments (9b) at the center, hinting at the radiance of the sun.
- ▶ In verses 2–5, 7 cosmic elements are mentioned:
 1. the heavens (2a)
 2. heaven’s vault (2b)
 3. day (3a)
 4. night (3b)
 5. the earth (5a)
 6. the end of the world (5a)
 7. the sun (5b)

- God's Torah, containing his instructions, has 14 characteristics (verses 8–11).
1. it is perfect
 2. revives the soul
 3. is stable
 4. makes the simple wise
 5. is right
 6. rejoices the heart
 7. is radiant
 8. enlightens the eyes
 9. is pure
 10. endures for ever
 11. is true
 12. righteous
 13. more desirable than gold and fine gold
 14. sweeter than honey

At the same time the numerical structure of the text is significantly governed by the divine name number 17 in particular, but also by 26, both of which also represent God's Glory. The way they are interwoven into the text can be clearly seen in the table above. I might draw attention to a feature that has not been noted in the table, namely the dominance of the divine name numbers in the larger framework, 2–7 and 12–15, surrounding the Torah-section (8–11).

2–7	Compositional formula: $29a + 22b = 51 (3 \times 17)$
12–15	Compositional formula: $23a + 11b = 34 (2 \times 17)$
2–7 + 12–15	$52a + 33b = 85 (5 \times 17)$

The occurrences of the two numbers representing the numerical values of *kabod* “glory,” 23 and 32, can be detected easily. Incidentally, a significant fact is not evident in the table: verses 2–4, dealing with the proclamation of God's glory by the heavens, are made up of 23 words, while 11 words are devoted to the role of the earth (verse 5), in order to attain the number 34 (2×17).

Another significant feature of verses 6–11, the section dealing with the duo, sun and Torah, is the use of the “minor

tetraktys,” $55 = 32a + 23b$, as a compositional formula, which demonstrates the literary unity of this section of the poem.

The primary reason why our author has chosen this particular formula, is the fact that 23 and 32 signify the glory of God. However, there is an additional reason in that 55 represents the numerical value of the word *shemesh*, “sun:” ($\text{ש} = 21$) + ($\text{נ} = 13$) + ($\text{ש} = 21$) = 55.

Needless to say, Psalm 19 is a high-grade numerical literary work of art. The author has made the fullest possible use of the symbolic number signifying “fullness” and the numbers representing the name and the Glory of God, in order to make his psalm a single entity. Moreover, he used these numerical techniques to underscore his message that the entire universe, in which the sun and the Torah occupy a central position, proclaims God’s glorious handiwork.

d) Isa 8:19 – 9:6

My last example illustrating how the biblical authors used the numerical structure of a text to support their message is a passage in which we are faced with many problems regarding the delimitation and structure of the text and its interpretation. The passage is a difficult one in the book of Isaiah, in which the prophet proclaims a message of hope arising from the birth of a new ruler, in a desperate situation due to the Assyrian threat and the danger of a civil war during the reign of king Ahaz.

I delimit the relevant text as 8:19 – 9:6 (8:19 – 9:7 in some translations), primarily on the basis of the two masoretic layout markers, the *setumah* “paragraph marker” at the beginning and the end. The passage comprises two distinct literary units, which are juxtaposed because they are inextricably bound together by the same theme of the dawn of light in the darkness: 8:19–23 and 9:1–6 (8:19–22 and 9:1–7 in some translations).

There is much uncertainty among scholars with regard to the delimitation, more particularly, the beginning of the first subsection. The editor responsible for the book of Isaiah in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* has added to the confusion by bringing

about an open space in the text of 8:23, suggesting that a new passage begins in the middle of verse 23: "Formerly the lands of Zebulon and Naphtali were lightly regarded . . ." ⁶ However, in light of the layout in *Codex Leningrad*, which has no open space at this point, there is no basis for such a delimitation. In my opinion, we should follow the layout markers in the codex: the *setumah* before 8:23 and after 9:6. This delimitation is corroborated by the numerical aspects of both 8:19–23 and 9:1–6.

My logotechnical analysis of 8:19–23 has revealed the following structure.

8:19–23	a + b = Mc + Sc = Total	
19. 10 + 9 = 14 + 5 = 19		Proposition about divination
20. 2 + 9 = 6 + 5 = 11		Dawn of God's Guidance ···
21. 4 + 9 = 11 + 2 = 13		Distress and Darkness } 23
22. 3 + 7 = 10 + 0 = 10		
23. 15 + 6 = 11 + 10 = 21		Honor bestowed on land ···
20–23 <u>24 + 31 = 38 + 17 = 55</u>		
19–23 34 + 40 = 52 + 22 = 74		

The literary unity of the passage is attested by the compositional formula on the basis of the verse divider, $74 = 34a + 40b$ (for vss 19–23) and the syntax, $55 = 24a + 31b$ (for vss 20–23), in which the divine name numbers 17 and 26 have been interwoven. The 74 words divide into 19 in verse 19, and 55 in verses 20–23, which signifies the presence of the "minor tetraktys" (see below).

Verse 19, should therefore be regarded as an introduction to the "minor tetraktys" in verses 20–23. It contains a proposition regarding the practice of seeking guidance through divination, which was understandably rife in those uncertain times. Taking such practices as his starting-point, the prophet presents his own guidance to the people, advising them to keep to the instructions God has given them. He points to the prospects for the future: darkness and gloom for those who rely on the diviners, but light and honor for those in anguish.

The components of the "minor tetraktys" can easily be detected, when we take the contrast between light and darkness

as the key to unlock its artfully arranged structure. In verses 21–22, which are made up of 23 words, the prophet speaks about distress, darkness, and the gloom of anguish. This part of the prophecy is surrounded by utterances about light from the Torah (verse 20), and about a situation of “no gloom” and of the “bestowing of honor” (verse 23). In the 11 words of verse 20 “dawn” is clearly the keyword: “Surely, according to this word (the citation in verse 19!) they say that there is no dawn for him (the people).” The dawn pertains to the light of guidance and salvation for those in anguish.

The 21 words of verse 23 are devoted to the bright prospects envisaged by the prophet. The total number of words in verses 20 and 23 are 32, which represents the numerical value not only of *kabod*, “glory,” but also of the cognate verbal form *hikbid*, “he bestowed honor / made glorious,” found in verse 23 ($hkbyd = 5 + 11 + 2 + 10 + 4 = 32$).

When I discovered this artful structure of the “minor tetraktys,” I realized that the purpose of the author was to show how the light of God’s guiding and saving presence encompasses the darkness, which means that the light shall overcome the darkness. It reminded me of the converse expressed in John 1:5, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

The number 55 also features in the compositional formula, $94 = 55a + 39b$ in 9:1–6, in which the main theme is clearly the dawn of the light of hope and salvation:

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light;
on those who lived in a land as dark as death a light has
dawned.

The passage in Isa 9:1–6 has the following structure.

$$\begin{array}{l}
 \mathbf{9:1-6 \quad a + b = Mc + Sc = Total} \\
 1. \quad 6 + 6 = 10 + 2 = 12 \quad (\textit{third person form}). \dots\dots\dots 24 \\
 2. \quad 5 + 8 = 9 + 4 = 13-+ \} 26 \text{ (second person)} \\
 3. \quad 10 + 3 = 3 + 10 = 13-+ \} \\
 4. \quad \underline{8 + 4 = 4 + 8 = 12} \quad (\textit{third person form}). \dots\dots\dots 24 \\
 1-4 \quad 29 + 21 = 26 + 24 = 50 = 26 + 24 \\
 5. \quad 11 + 10 = 0 + 21 = 21 \quad (\textit{third person form}) \} \\
 6. \quad \underline{15 + 8 = 18 + 5 = 23} \quad (\textit{third person form}) \} 44 \\
 5-6 \quad \underline{26 + 18 = 18 + 26 = 44} \\
 1-6 \quad 55 + 39 = 44 + 50 = 94 = 26 \quad + \quad 68
 \end{array}$$

The text, which divides into two parts (1–4 and 5–6), is skillfully arranged in such a way that the name/Glory-number (26) features several times in its structure, for instance, in the 26 words in the second person section (verses 2–3). The other divine name/Glory-number, 17, features in the number of words in the third person sections (verses 1, 4, 5, 6): 68 (4×17).

Particularly interesting is the syntactic compositional formula of verses 1–4, $50 = 26Mc + 24Sc$ (Mc = Main clause; Sc = Subordinate clause), which corresponds to the division of the 50 words into 26 in the second person section, and 24 in the third person section. The same applies to the twofold use of the compositional formula $44 = 26 + 18$ in verses 5–6, where the formula $44 = 26a + 18b$ occurs in a reversed form in the syntactical formula $44 = 18Mc + 26Sc$. Moreover, there is a third instance of this formula: the 44 words also divide into 26 in the passage in which the name of the newly born prince is specified and his reign envisaged (in italics in the translation below), and 18 in the rest of the text.

For a child has been born to us, a son is given to us;
 he will bear the symbol of dominion on his shoulder,
 and they shall proclaim his name:

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty Hero, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. Wide will be the dominion and boundless the peace bestowed on David's throne and on his kingdom, to establish and support it with justice and righteousness from now on, for evermore.

The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will do this.

Let me conclude the discussion by drawing attention to another significant numerical aspect of Isa 8:19 – 9:6. It concerns the use of the number 55, which not only occurs in the "minor tetraktys" giving structure to 8:20–23, but also, as we have noted, in the compositional formula of the second section of the passage (9:1–6): $94 = 55a + 39b$. Apart from being the sum of 23 and 32, the number 55 appears to have a deeper significance in this particular context. In light of the likely possibility that the newborn child, referred to in 9:5, was the infant prince Hezekiah, it is not a matter of chance that the number 55 was chosen for the make-up of the text. It represents the numerical value of the name of the newborn prince הזקיהו [(ח=8) + (ז=7) + (ק=19) + (ה=10) + (י=5) + (ו=6) = 55].

In my opinion, the author's choice for the 55 words of the "minor tetraktys" was also, and perhaps primarily, motivated by his desire to embed the name of the newborn prince in the text of his prophecy. This would mean that he encoded a message in the text, expressing the messianic expectations arising from the birth of the new prince. Since it concerns a hidden message that does not meet the eye of the ordinary readers, it was known only to the prophet and to some insiders. However, it was there all the same, as a witness to his messianic expectations.

To return to where we started: the passage in question must be interpreted against the backdrop of the proposition concerning the consultation of diviners during the dark days of the reign of Ahaz. In that situation, Isaiah warned his people not to turn to mantic practices, but to listen to the word of God. As YHWH's spokesman, the prophet presents his own prophecy in opposition to that of the diviners, to offer his people guidance and hope, intimating that the newly born prince might be a messianic prince of peace.

The Misuse of Numbers by Numerologists

In view of the impending danger of misunderstanding and misusing the numerical aspects of the Bible, there is every

reason to sound a warning at this point. We should exercise great caution in dealing with the function and the symbolism of numbers in the biblical writings. What we must realize at the outset, and constantly keep in mind, is the fact that biblical writers employed a limited number of symbolic numbers to give structure to their texts and, as far as I can see, an equally limited number of symbolic values to fit their texts with encoded messages. This means that we have to limit our expectations and restrict our imagination. It is wrong to assume that every number has a symbolic significance and that every text contains an encoded message. This would open the door to unrestrained speculation and arbitrary inferences.

What scholarly numerical research has brought to light is that the use of structural numbers by the biblical writers was limited to the following categories.

- ▶ the three numbers which have obtained a specific, individual symbolic significance: 7 (the number expressing fullness and abundance), to a lesser degree 10 (the useful mnemonic device expressing totality), and 11 (the number of fulfillment)
- ▶ the numbers 17 and 26, representing the numerical values of the divine name YHWH and God's *Glory*, which were interwoven into the fabric of the biblical text to express God's presence, and 23 and 32, the other two numbers representing the numerical values of *kabod* "glory," the combination of which, $23 + 32 = 55$, forms the popular "minor tetraktys,"
- ▶ the numbers that derive their symbolic significance from the numerical value of a cardinal idea, or a keyword or important name occurring in some texts

As I have demonstrated above, the extremely high frequency with which the numbers 7, 11, 17, and 26 as well as the combination of 23 and 32 occur in the biblical writings shows that their occurrence is not a matter of chance or contingency, but one of design. Scribes consciously and intentionally used these numbers. The occurrence of some of the numbers that happen to have the numerical value of a cardinal idea, a keyword, or an important name in a given text could, of course,

in some cases, be a matter of chance. In the instances presented here, however, they seem to have been deliberately chosen. Their function is clearly to underscore a crucial idea in the text or to convey a message encoded in it.

However, as I have stated above, such instances are limited. Therefore, once again I must lay the greatest possible stress on the need for exercising caution in using the numerical aspects of a text to detect hidden messages and veiled predictions. Such efforts lead to the pseudo-science of numerology, a practice that goes far beyond the intentions of the biblical writers and amounts to gross misuse of the numerical aspects of the Bible. To assume the presence of an encoded message in a given text, three hard conditions have to be met.

- ▶ First, there must be a clear relation between such a message and the contents of the text—from a human point of view.
- ▶ Second, it should not fall outside the historical and cultural perspective of the biblical author.
- ▶ Third, its use by the author must be plausibly designed, reasonable, and probable. In other words, the function of the numerical aspects of a text is restricted to what the biblical writer intended.

These criteria establish the boundaries between proper use and misuse. Let me give some examples to demonstrate what I mean.⁷

In Rev 13:17–18, reference is made to the name and the number of the Beast, of which it is said “it is a human number: its number is six hundred and sixty-six.” The most feasible explanation of 666 in my opinion is that it represents the numerical value of the Hebrew equivalent of Caesar Nero: QeSaR NeRoWN: Q=100 + S=60 + R=200 + N=50 + R=200 + W=6 + N=50 = 666. This interpretation fully complies with the conditions formulated above: the reference to Nero, the notorious persecutor of the early church, bears a clear relation to the contents of the book; it fits the historical and cultural context of the author and it is most plausible that he intended this veiled reference. Finally, the use of the Hebrew language in preference to Greek or Latin for comput-

ing the numerical value of Caesar Nero is compatible with the Jewish cultural background of the author.

The fact that 666 also represents the numerical value of the Roman numerals in Diocles Augustus (Diocletianus), DIoCLes aVgVstVs: $D=500 + I=1 + C=100 + L=50 + V=5 + V=5 = 666$, is a matter of contingency. Apart from the fact that a reference to this emperor (who lived at the end of the third century) does not square with the historical situation of the author, it is not probable that he would have used such an un-Jewish device.

The same applies to the fact that 666 also represents the numerical value of the Greek word *lateinos*, “latin”: $(l=30) + (a=1) + (t=300) + (e=5) + (i=10) + (n=50) + (o=70) + (s=200) = 666$, which I regard as the least probable explanation.

The explanation given by the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic numerologist Peter Bungus, who interpreted the number 666 as representing the numerical value of Martin Luther (LUTHERNUC = $30 + 200 + 100 + 8 + 5 + 80 + 40 + 200 + 3 = 666$), to prove that Luther was the Beast of Revelation 13, is of course bogus numerology, which has nothing whatsoever to do with the intent of the writer of Revelation.

The same goes for the assertion, which circulated during the eighties among the religious right, that Ronald Reagan was the Beast, since each of his two forenames and surname consists of 6 letters each: Ronald (6) Wilson (6) Reagan (6). What are the limits of absurdity?

Another example of the misuse of the numerical aspects of the Bible is the completely misguided, rather arrogant supposition that the Bible contains numerically coded “prophecies” pertaining to our own times. In this vein, the book of Esther is supposed to contain a coded reference to the Jewish year 5707 (707 being the numerical value of \aleph , \beth , and \daleth , three Hebrew letters occurring in the names of the ten sons of Haman who were hanged: $[\aleph=400] + [\beth=300] + [\daleth=7] = 707$). Thus it was claimed that the year 5707 (= 1946—what happened to the 5?), the year in which the Nazi war criminals were brought

to justice and condemned to death by the international war crimes tribunal, was already predicted in Esther. So what?

A notorious example of numerology, based upon the Authorized Version, is mentioned by David Wells: “in Psalm 46 the forty-sixth word is “shake”; the forty-sixth word from the end counting backwards is “spear.” Shakespear! Why? Well, when the King James Authorized Version was completed in 1610, Shakespear [sic!] was 46 years old!” What of it?⁸

This reminds us of the endeavours by modern computer-literate Bible freaks who subject the text of the Hebrew Bible to computer analyses in order to extract from it supposed encoded “information” regarding past, present, and future historical events, ranging from the discoveries by Edison to the rise to power of Adolf Hitler, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Holocaust, the presidency of Bill Clinton, the names of rabbis, the Gulf War, and the death of Yitschaq Rabin. Such exercises, which degrade the Bible to a mechanical prophesying machine, can only impress the naive and the credulous. They constitute a flagrant outrage to the biblical writers and should be rejected out of hand as totally irrelevant, and blatant nonsense.⁹

A Theological Assessment of The Numerical Aspects of the Bible

Having read what I have written in the seven chapters about the rediscovery of the astounding numerical aspects of the Bible, the reader might wonder what should be made of it. As I have stated at the beginning of this chapter, the discoveries are first and foremost a matter of concern for the scholarly world. However, since I have not written the book primarily for “specialists” but for a broader public, I shall now try to evaluate the findings on what I may call the ground level and the level of faith. During the past eighteen years, when I was invited to speak about the numerical aspects of the Bible, I was regularly confronted with the question: “What does it mean for the ordinary reader of the Bible?” My answer has always

been twofold: First, that the new discoveries can arouse in us a new appreciation of the Bible as a high-grade literary work of art, our most precious heritage from antiquity. Second, that the fascinating and in some respects awe-inspiring numerical aspects of the Bible underscore the unique character of the the book that we believers assert is the Word of God.

Whether these discoveries can be interpreted as proof that the Bible is the Word of God, is quite another question. The Bible as the Word of God is a matter of faith. It does not require proof on our part. The situation is the same as regards the existence of God, which is also a matter of faith that cannot be proved in any scientific way. Therefore, in my opinion, the numerical aspects of the biblical writings, which belong to their form and style as distinct from their content, should neither be used as proof for the existence of God nor as evidence for the doctrine that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. The inspiration of the Bible concerns primarily its content, and only secondarily its form. What is said in 2 Pet 1:21, "it was under the compulsion of the Holy Spirit that people spoke as messengers of God," pertains to the message of the Bible, not to its form. The message is divine, the form is human. I might remind the reader of what I said about the interweaving of the holy divine name numbers into the fabric of the biblical texts: it renders them sacred, not divine. In other words, the content of the Bible, the substance and material dealt with in it, is divine, while its literary form and style as distinct from its content are human. Its literary form can be termed sacred but not divine in the sense of superhuman or supernatural.

This means that, despite the close relationship between the content and the form of the biblical writings, which I have amply demonstrated above, we should differentiate between the message and its form, in the same way as we differentiate the contents of a packet from its packing. The human aspects of the Bible are manifested both in its frailty and its beauty. To use a phrase from Paul's letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor 4:7): "We have this treasure in earthenware jars." They are both

frail and beautiful. The discovery of the incredibly artful numerical structures has brought to light the unsurpassed beauty of these earthenware jars. In the course of my investigations into the numerical aspects of the Bible, I was more than once deeply impressed by what I discovered. I often regarded what I found with a sense of awe, but the idea that I confronted a superhuman or supernatural phenomenon, has never crossed my mind. Though I sometimes thought “this is too beautiful not to be inspired,” I have never drawn the conclusion that it cannot be the work of human beings and must therefore be ascribed to God.

Such would put God and his human agents in a most unfortunate competitive position.

Yet these discoveries have given rise to the conclusion that the Bible could not have been produced by human beings, but must have been the work of God himself. Oskar Goldberg, whose work I have discussed in chapter 6, was one of those scholars who claimed a supernatural origin for the Bible on the basis of the literary form of the Pentateuch. He regarded the awe-inspiring numerical aspects of the Torah not only as rendering it “a miracle in Antiquity” (“*ein Wunder der Urzeit*”), but also as proof of its “metaphysical origin.”¹⁰

The most ardent and strenuous protagonist of the metaphysical origin of the Bible on the basis of its numerical aspects was Goldberg’s contemporary, Ivan Panin (1855–1942), a Russian born Jew who emigrated to the New World and studied at Harvard University, where he worked as a professor of mathematics. Initially a fervent antagonist, he converted to Christianity on the basis of his study of the numerical aspects of the New Testament, more particularly his discovery of the occurrence of the number 7 and its multiples in these writings, analogous to the books of the Old Testament. His findings led him to the conclusion that the Bible as a whole is “a mathematical miracle” which could not have been produced by ordinary human beings and should therefore be regarded as God’s own work. The bulk of his approximately 40,000 pages of “numerics” is

devoted to kabbalistic calculations and investigations into the occurrence of the number 7, which he regarded as God's own "watermark" and which he discovered in a great number of literary and linguistic categories in both Testaments.¹¹

There is no doubt that Panin actually detected a great number of such occurrences which were intentionally designed by the biblical authors, for as I have demonstrated earlier, they are indeed there. However, as a mathematician, Panin should have realized that it is relatively easy to register a great number of contingent occurrences—especially when the number of categories are unlimited—and to amass in this way an impressive number of both designed and contingent occurrences. The chance of obtaining an occurrence of 7 or a multiple in each category selected is relatively high: 1 to 7, which is more than 14 percent.

From a statistical point of view, this is one of the reasons, in my opinion, why critical scholars were not impressed by the evidence amassed by Panin. Moreover, his simplistic view of the Bible as the product of 33(!) authors, and his unscholarly, if not naive, approach to the text of the New Testament, in regarding Westcott and Hort as the most reliable, made it difficult for biblical scholars to take his work seriously. Finally, his claim regarding the metaphysical origin of the Bible on mathematical grounds, fervidly defended by himself and a horde of credulous disciples, excluded him definitively from serious, scientifically based biblical scholarship, causing all his work, including what is worthwhile in it, to be ignored. Unfortunately, but quite understandably, and inevitably, he suffered the same fate as Oskar Goldberg.

The fact that the work of both Panin and Goldberg was eclipsed does not rule out the presence of a hard core of truth in their investigations. It would be worthwhile to explore their writings to find out which discoveries could be used as scientific evidence contributing to a better understanding of biblical compositional techniques.¹²

Another prominent champion of the divine origin of the Bible in Panin's vein, was Friedrich Weinreb, a well-known but controversial figure in the Netherlands, mainly because of the dubious role he played during the war, for which he was convicted on charges of fraud and betrayal of fellow Jews. Despite this and other fraudulent practices, and due to his ability to influence, fascinate, and deceive credulous people, he had a sizeable circle of admirers particularly in the Netherlands.¹³ Weinreb was a modern exponent of the Kabbalah, who used the biblical text as starting point for his cosmic number and letter speculations. His endeavors to detect the supposed hidden structure of Scripture do not contribute anything to our knowledge and understanding of the biblical writings. On the contrary, as Claus Schedl remarked, Weinreb's writings do not lead us towards the biblical text but rather away from it.

In my opinion, the rather naive idea brought forward by Goldberg, Panin, Katz, Ordman, and others—to which they are fully entitled as far as I am concerned—that the numerical features of the Bible could not possibly have been constructed by normal human computation, shows lack of respect for the mathematical capabilities and the literary craftsmanship of the biblical scribes and really amounts to slighting them. The devices the biblical scribes used were not supernatural, they were technological, falling within the competence of human beings, certainly when we consider their genius inspired. Whereas there is nothing mysterious about numbers as such, as I have stated before, there is likewise nothing mysterious in the use of numbers as a literary device to give structure to the biblical writings and to imbue them with a symbolic message.

My own reaction to the discovery of the artful numerical compositions was a considerable enhancement of my esteem for the literary craftsmanship of the biblical writers. I can confidently conclude that God bestowed exceptional gifts on these scribes, which enabled them to create such artful compositions. In the same vein, I could speak, for instance, about the medieval cathedrals and the compositions of Johann Sebastian

Bach or Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart as the inspired products of rarely gifted human beings. One does not honor God by denying what the biblical writers achieved through his gifts.

But having said all this, I would also say that there still remains an ultimate mystery about the Bible as God's inspired work that lies beyond the scope of our rational inquiry into the means he used to produce that book. The situation here is somewhat comparable to the scientific inquiry into the so-called "Big Bang" so far as the creation of the universe itself is concerned. No matter how much we learn about the process that unfolded from the moment God said, "Let there be light" (Gen 1:3), there still remains a great mystery that simply stands there—beyond the scope of scientific inquiry—invoking awe on our part.

To any reader who might conclude that my rational inquiry here on the subject of the "Bible Codes" has removed any of that ultimate mystery, I would express a word of sincere apology. I would be quick to assert that nothing is less true. Do not fear! My investigations have left the content of the biblical writings intact. What I intended was to draw your attention to the wonderful literary form of the book of books. The object of my research was the earthenware jars, not the treasure they contain, the packing, not its content. What I tried to probe was the exquisite intricacies of the biblical text, not the mystery in and behind it, that mystery that is the deepest and most profound we can experience.

I would hope that I have enabled you to look at the Bible with new eyes and to appreciate it for what it really is—from a rational point of view, our most precious literary heritage from antiquity, from the vantage point of faith, the Word of God.