



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

Volume 12, Issue 10

Web Site: <http://www.minuteswithmessiah.com>

August 2011

THE MEANING OF NUMBERS

What do numbers mean in the Bible? What does the number 11 mean, since I keep seeing it in variations every day? What is the biblical meaning of 777? These are common questions people ask about numbers in the Bible. Maybe it is because of the prominence in modern theory and entertainment of the one number that has true prophetic meaning in the Bible, 666. Maybe it is because people have always been fascinated by numerology.

There is one branch of numerology that just deals with names. If you assign the letters of the English alphabet the numbers 1-9, beginning again after the first nine, until all letters are assigned a digit, then take your name, you can calculate, supposedly, what your personality type is, or your compatibility with another person, or even your future. Once you add up the digits, then you add the digits in that sum, and keep doing that until you get a single digit. (For instance, if the digits from your name add up to 49, add the 4 and 9 to get 13, then add the 1 and 3 to get 4.) Each digit is supposed to have certain traits associated with it, so a 4 may be compatible with certain numbers or incompatible with others. If you want to change your personality or compatibility or future, just change your name. That person who was a 4 might, with a judicious change to a full name or only using initials, become a 9 or a 1. See the problem? It is still the same person, but playing with the numbers leads to that person's choice of who he is.

People have done this same thing with the number six hundred sixty six of Revelation 13. Some say it is the number of Nero. Others have assigned it to Hitler (whether using just his last name or first and last is unclear), Napoleon, Saddam Hussein (using his name in Arabic or English?), and many others. Each generation, it seems, has someone whose name reduces to that number and who opposes God or the established religion. Maybe those are right who point out that the verse says it is the number of "man," meaning mankind in general, rather than of "a man," meaning a specific person.

There is a basic rule of thumb when interpreting numbers in the Bible. It goes: the vast majority of times numbers appear in the Bible, they are just numbers. The number 777, for instance, has no special significance. It is the count of the number of years Lamech lived. (Gen

5:31) Most of the time, twelve is a count of items (sons, tribes, apostles). The only thing that might give a number any other significance is its use in prophecy. Even then a number may not have any other significance. In particular, a number ending in a five or zero is usually not a precise number. A thousand, in prophecy, simply means a large number. Two may just be a count of items, with no special significance, even in prophecy.

Then what of the famous three, four, and seven? While these do seem to have some prophetic significance (seven bowls, seven trumpets, seven seals, half of seven— $3\frac{1}{2}$ —years), the exact interpretation is sometimes a matter of conjecture. For instance, three is supposed to be the "number of God." Yet, in prophecy, the number is more often associated with evil than with good. Perhaps our interpretation of three as a perfect number is related to the Catholic doctrine of the trinity more than an actual meaning in prophecy. Four is a more complete number, in many systems. The flag of the State of New Mexico has a sun symbol with four sets of four rays. Each symbolizes four different things (directions, winds, seasons, sacred obligations of the Zia theology). So four has symbolic significance even outside the Bible. Seven is interpreted as a combination of the other two "perfect" numbers. Its real significance may be related, however, to the days of the week rather than any other interpretation. So even these special numbers may not, or may, have the significance we assign to them.

Basically, though, a number in the Bible means a count of something unless there is compelling reason in a prophetic book to take it otherwise. Most of the time there is no compelling reason. So if someone asks you, what do numbers mean in the Bible, the proper answer, generally, is that numbers mean numbers.

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HE WILL BE CALLED

There are some passages, especially in the Nevi'im (the prophets) that have long been considered to be about the moshiach (Messiah). Even before the time of Jesus, whom many consider to be that person, these passages were considered to be about one who was to come, not necessarily immediately after the passage was written. One such passage is Isaiah 9. Verse 6 of that chapter gives a number of names or descriptions of the messiah. It is one of the passages Handel set to music in his oratorio, *The Messiah*.

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

We might be served well to look at each of these designation. Whether or not one believes that Jesus is Messiah, they may reveal certain attributes of God.

Wonderful Counsellor

Translators differ on whether this is one description or two. Since the original language did not use punctuation, about half the English versions translate this as one phrase. The rest translate it, as quoted from the King James Version above, as two different names. In support of the single phrase idea, the remaining appellations are, even in the versions that separate the two

God is "Lord of Hosts." In his hands are all the armies of the world.

words here, taken as phrases (not "everlasting, father"). If the others are adjective-noun phrases, it makes sense that this would be as well. On the other hand, both words stand well on their own.

His name is Wonderful. That would certainly apply. Read the Psalms. Read Jonah, chapter 2. Read portions if Isaiah. God is certainly full of wonder, as would also be his messiah. God is the creator of all wonders. "Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" (Ex 15:11)

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. (Ps 19:1-3)

A synonym for wonderful might be "aweful." In English we have sometimes taken out the "e" and made it into a different word entirely. We speak of something very good as awesome, and something very bad as awful. If it is full of awe, how can it be terrible? (And yet, awesome is listed as one of the synonyms of terrible, as in "an awesome responsibility.") God is worthy of all our awe and wonder. When we look at the beauty of nature, we should stand in awe of God, we should be struck by the wonder of the one who created it all.

But God is also a Wonderful Counsellor. If we but listen, God can deal with the problems we face. Some say that there is an answer for every problem in the Bible. While that may be true in the generic sense, there are many problems that come up for which there is not a specific scripture. Nevertheless, if we look at the root cause of those problems we could probably find counsel in God's word. Is there jealousy? God says love. Is there avarice? God says do good to your neighbor. Is there injustice? God says (repeatedly) not to take a bribe or favor one side based on any other artificial inducement.

People want counseling. Perhaps they feel they cannot trust their own understanding. Perhaps, sometimes, they want to be able to blame someone else for their bad choices. In America today almost every school has a Guidance Counselor. Sometimes this is nothing more than an Academic Advisor, but more often it is a trained person to whom students may turn if they have a variety of problems that may affect their lives or their school work. After leaving school, many employers have counseling programs available, and bring in more under certain adverse circumstances. Then there are marriage counselors, job counselors, psychiatrists, and the list goes on. We like to have our counselors. How many, though, turn to God's word for what no man can fully do? "O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day." (Ps 119:97)

Mighty God

God has many names or descriptions in the Bible. Some of them emphasize his power. He is the Mighty God. One of the most common phrases calls God the "Lord of Hosts" or ruler of armies. In his hand are all the armies of the world. That is not to say he needs armies. He has been known to wipe out a whole army with no outside help.

And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the LORD went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand:

and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. (2 Kgs 19:35; Isa 37:36)

That alone shows that he is a mighty God, and yet he is also the Lord of armies. He has a mountain “full of horses and chariots of fire.” (2 Kings 6:17) He has thousands of angels” (Ps 68:17) But he is also over all the armies of the earth. He has the power to create nations, and to destroy them. “For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwellingplaces that are not theirs.” (Hab 1:6) Yet in the following chapter God tells the prophet that he will destroy that nation which he raised up to punish Judea.

What a comfort to know that we have a mighty God on our side. What a terror if he is not. To his own people his power is a support.

Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God *is* a consuming fire. (Heb 12:28-29)

On the other hand, what a horrible thought to those who are not his. They have no comfort; only fear.

The high places also of Aven, the sin of Israel, shall be destroyed: the thorn and the thistle shall come up on their altars; and they shall say to the mountains, Cover us; and to the hills, Fall on us. (Hos 10:8; quoted in Lk 23:30 and Rev 6:16)

May we have no fear of God’s might. May we be on his side!

Everlasting Father

As with the previous phrases, there can be two separate thoughts here, which combine into one greater thought. Each part is powerful in itself, but combined they teach a marvelous lesson.

Our God is eternal. This is something we struggle with. We have difficulty understanding eternity. People ask where God came from, and cannot grasp that He has no beginning or end. We are so constrained by time that we cannot comprehend timelessness. We are in awe of those things that appear timeless, such as the pyramids of Egypt. But even those pyramids are crumbling. God is eternal.

An even harder thing to grasp is that God is outside of time. We are linear, God is universal. We wonder what *will* happen, not realizing that to God it *has* happened and *is* happening, all at once. That is the basis for prophecy. God already knows our future, so he can reveal it or not at his own will. It is also a source of comfort, because God already knows his own are safe in his arms.

That is the other figure, here. We are safe because God is Father. God is Mother. God is eternal parent. Whenever we need compassion, protection, guidance,

discipline, God is there. God is the best part of our parents. “How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings.” (Ps 36:7)

Combine the two thoughts, and you get a parent who will never leave you. Our parents must leave, if only through death. Some parents abandon their children. God will never abandon us, and he never dies. “For the LORD will not cast off his people, neither will he forsake his inheritance.” (Ps 94:14)

Our messiah is one with God. He will be called Everlasting Father. Like our eternal Father God, the messiah will always be our eternal parent.

Prince of Peace

Melchizedek was called King of Salem, or King of Peace. (Gen 14:18) The messiah of whom Isaiah spoke bears a similar title: Prince of Salem (*Sar Shalom*). In a

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world known for conflict, peace. In a world of individualism, a prince. Moshiach is not what we expect. We want a mighty king at the head of a great army to come and conquer our enemies. Instead we get a Prince of Peace, who loves our enemies as he loves us.

The idea of the Prince of Peace may also be contrasted with a title Jesus used of the devil. “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out.” (Jn 12:31) If this world is in conflict it is because it was once under a prince of conflict. Now it belongs to a prince of peace, who brings peace into our lives. Does that mean that there will no longer be conflict in this world. No. Peace cannot be known except in the presence of turmoil. The peace of our prince is shown by the calm in our lives when all around appears to be in conflict.

He is now Prince of Peace, but that is not what he will become. Just as in this world a prince may inherit an even greater title, so our Prince of Peace will be known as “King of kings and Lord of lords.” (Rev 19:16)

The titles of the Moshiach teach us a lesson. One of the words that is repeated above is comfort. These titles bring us comfort. When we belong to the one who has all these attributes, how can we but be comforted? Our eternal father is a mighty God. Our Prince of Peace is a wonderful counselor. What more could we ask?

THE ONLY TOMORROW

He plant - ed his crops and he watched them grow 'Till he had no room to store. So he tore down his barns and he
We meet, and we sched-ule, and make our plans For a day we may not know. And we pract - tic - 'ly live in our

told his soul, "Take your ease, we'll build for more." He wor-ried for mon-ey and in his greed To the poor and the help-less he
min - i - vans. We are al - ways on the go. We hust-le and bust-le and in our speed To our God and his warn-ings we

paid no heed. The on-ly to-mor-row he's guar-an-tee'd Is the one from yes - ter-day.
pay no heed. The on-ly to-mor-row we're guar-an-tee'd Is the one from yes - ter-day.

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