The Function of Numbers in Antiquity

An examination of studies on the use of numbers in biblical times from the first half of the 20th century shows that these studies have themselves contributed much to the linking of numbers with mysticism and magic. A typical example is the frequently cited book by F. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie* (Berlin, 1925).¹ The result was that the function of numbers in biblical times came to be associated primarily with number-symbolism, number-mysticism and magic—a most unfortunate and lamentable development. Countering this deplorable situation, the primary concern of the quantitative structural analysis of the biblical writings is to study the use of numbers as a purely technical device in the art of writing to give structure to the text and to imbue them with symbolism. It is an exact and rational approach to the text. Nonetheless, since numbers did have a symbolic value in antiquity, the investigation into the numerical aspects of the text inevitably involves the study of the symbolism of the numbers in question as well. Study of the pure technical function of numbers in the Bible has until now been grossly neglected. Scholars seem to have been interested in their symbolic function only and in their use in mysticism and magic.²

In order to study the pure technical function of numbers in biblical times, scholarly research requires us to distance ourselves from the traditional association of numbers with the hazy world of mysticism, magic and pseudo-science. This means that we have to concentrate on their two main functions: first, as a technique to count, calculate and structure—also with regard to the composition of texts—and second, as a means of adding depth to a text and to imbue it with symbolic significance. As everyone knows, numbers had a symbolic value in antiquity: they had a metaphorical and allegorical capacity to refer to something beyond the surface meaning.

In our modern, rationalistic First World culture we seem to know numbers only in their arithmetic and mathematical functions, as a means to count, reckon and measure. Though we are aware of the fact that numbers play an important role in composing music, the function of numbers in composing texts has fallen into oblivion. In addition to this, biblical scholars, being primarily schooled in arts and humanities, seem to feel ill at ease and out of their depth when it comes to numbers. This shows that though illiteracy has generally been conquered in our culture, mathematical illiteracy is still rife—even among academic scholars.³

Classical scholars and medieval specialists have long been acquainted with the use of numbers as a device to give structure to literary compositions. Substantial research has been carried out already regarding the structural function of symbolic numbers in classical and medieval texts, showing that numerical techniques were generally employed to organize literary compositions from antiquity until at least the eighteenth century. Numerical criticism is an accepted scholarly approach in text analysis.

Numerological criticism analyses literary structures of various kinds, ordered by numerical symmetries or expressing number symbolism. In poetry, numerological structure often forms a level of organization intermediate in scale and externality between metrical patterns, on the one hand, and structure as ordinarily understood, on the other. As such, it constitutes a huge subject—perhaps even larger than most medieval and Renaissance scholars have begun to realize. It is probably no exaggeration to say that most good literary works—indeed, most craftsmanlike works—were organized at this stratum from antiquity until at least the eighteenth century. Moreover, numerological criticism is potentially a more fruitful subject than large-scale prosody, since it has more bearing on meaning, thematic content, structure and other adjacent strata.⁴


