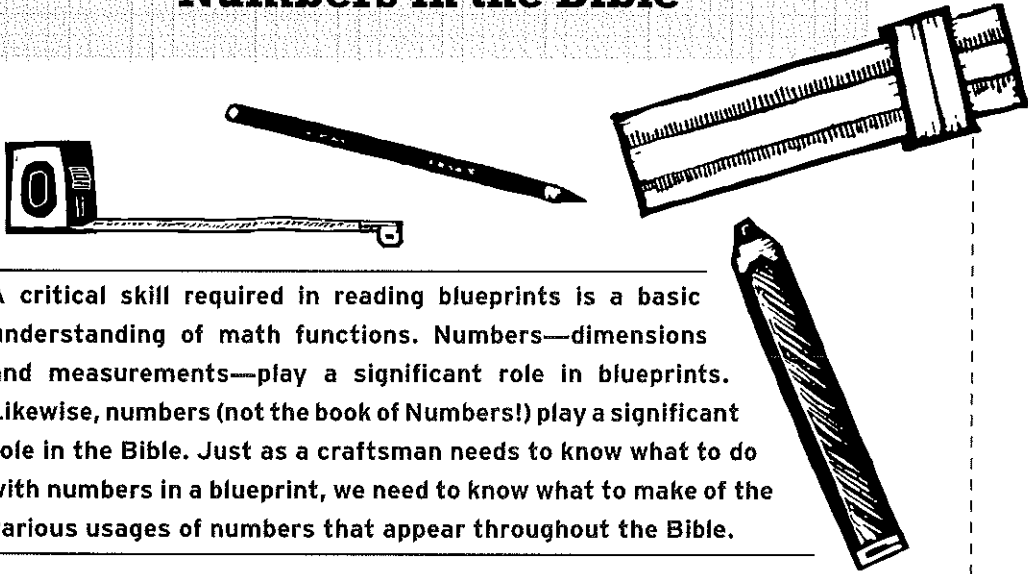


Chapter Seven

Do the Math— Numbers in the Bible



A critical skill required in reading blueprints is a basic understanding of math functions. Numbers—dimensions and measurements—play a significant role in blueprints. Likewise, numbers (not the book of Numbers!) play a significant role in the Bible. Just as a craftsman needs to know what to do with numbers in a blueprint, we need to know what to make of the various usages of numbers that appear throughout the Bible.

As you read the Bible, pay close attention to the use of numbers and locations. References to numbers and locations are often a clue to some deeper symbolic meaning. While archeology has substantiated many historical, geographical, and numerical references in the Bible, quite often the authors were not as interested in the facts as we tend to be but were instead using numbers and locations as a tool for communicating something symbolic. Let's take a closer look at each of these.

What is the literal sense of a passage is not always as obvious in the speeches and writings of the ancient authors of the East, as it is in the works of our own time. For what they wished to express is not to be determined by the rules of grammar and philology alone, nor solely by the context; the interpreter must, as it were, go back wholly in spirit to those remote centuries of the East and with the aid of history, archaeology, ethnology, and other sciences, accurately determine what modes of writing, so to speak, the authors of that ancient period would be likely to use, and in fact did use. (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 35)

The Number Forty

Guess what the answer is to all of the following questions:

- How many days and nights did it rain for Noah?
- How many days did it take to embalm Jacob?
- How many years old were Jacob and Esau when they each got married?
- How many years did the Israelites wander through the desert?
- How many years did both David and Solomon rule as king?
- How many years old was Moses when he slew an Egyptian?
- How many years later did Moses encounter the burning bush?
- How many days was Moses on the mountaintop before he came down with the Commandments?
- How many days did it take Moses's scouts to reconnoiter the land of Canaan?
- How many days and nights did Goliath take his stand before meeting up with David?
- How many days and nights did Elijah walk, strengthened by the food and drink he received?
- How many days' warning did Jonah give the people of Nineveh?
- How many days and nights did Jesus spend in the desert without food?
- How many days did Jesus remain with his disciples after his Resurrection?

The answer to all of the above: forty!

Numbers

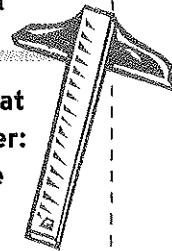
The biblical authors loved numbers. Some numbers are good. Some are bad. Some numbers are repeated so often that we can rightly become a bit suspicious. We've already talked a little about the number forty. You might be surprised to know that the number forty occurs nearly two hundred times in the Bible. This is a clue that it is being used as a symbol and not strictly to communicate fact. Deuteronomy 8:2 tells us about the significance of the number forty. "Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments." In other words, the number forty represents a significant period of time during which a person's faithfulness is tested and can be judged or determined. Other numbers are used frequently in the Bible to convey symbolic meaning.

3 The number three appears hundreds of times in the Bible. In biblical tradition, it is always on the third day that God saves. The angel intervened to stop Abraham from sacrificing Isaac on the third day. After three days in the desert without water, God provided fresh water through Moses. The prophet Hosea says, “After two days he will revive us; / on the third day he will raise us up / to live in his presence” (6:2). Jonah emerged from the large fish on the third day. Paul regained his sight on the third day. Mary and Joseph found the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple on the third day. Jesus fed four thousand people after they had been with him for three days with nothing to eat.

Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. The book of Exodus gives us a clue about the significance of the third day when it says, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire . . .” (19:10–11, 16, 18). Needless to say, the number three is one of those good numbers in the Bible because God always comes through on the third day.

6 The number six, on the other hand, is not such a good number. Not that it’s bad, but it tends to represent incompleteness. Noah was six hundred years old when the flood came. Pharaoh sent six hundred first-class chariots to chase after the Israelites. God worked for six days to create the heavens and the earth but blessed and made holy the seventh day for rest. Of course, in the book of Revelation, the “beast” is represented by the number 666. Think about that: three is a good number, representing completeness. Six represents incompleteness. Three sixes, or 666, represents complete incompleteness! In other words, the use of 666 in the book of Revelation is not some secret code to tell us who the Antichrist will be. It is simply a symbolic way of representing evil in whatever form it may take in any age.

The bottom line to all this is that numbers are a clue to the reader: pay attention and look for the deeper meaning. Look for the truth being communicated.



7 The number seven—ah, back to the good numbers—tends to represent fullness or perfection. God rested on the seventh day. Noah took seven pairs of all clean animals aboard the ark. The walls of Jericho came tumbling down after seven days of trumpet playing. Jesus tells Peter to forgive his brother seventy times seven times. The book of Revelation speaks to the seven churches. The same book also tells us that the seventh trumpet will signal the end of the world. Whenever we encounter the number seven, it tends to be satisfying.

12 Last but not least is the number twelve. Twelve, of course, symbolizes first and foremost the fullness of the people of Israel, with its twelve tribes. The people of Israel discovered an oasis called Elim with twelve

streams of water. Jesus, of course, had twelve apostles. And, once again, the book of Revelation tops it all off by telling us that one hundred forty-four thousand people will be saved at the end of the world. This number is divisible by twelve, representing twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes of Israel—not a restrictive or exclusive number of people but an expansive and inclusive number. In other words, God wants all people to be saved. With this much use of the number twelve, we can be sure that we are dealing with metaphorical language and not facts. In other words, we don't know how many people will

Back to the Number Forty

Is it any coincidence that human pregnancy, on the average, lasts forty weeks? Could it be that this may be the reason for the significance of the number forty in the Bible? Pregnancy involves pain and growth that leads to the birth of new life. Many of the occurrences of the number forty in the Bible—Noah's ark, the wandering in the desert, Jesus' temptation in the desert—are stories of profound growth accompanied by pain, resulting in new life and a new beginning.

be saved at the end of the world, but the truth is that God's work will have reached its completion.

The bottom line to all this is that numbers are a clue to the reader: pay attention and look for the deeper meaning. Look for the truth being communicated.

Locations

Many biblical references to locations have proven to be historically accurate. Archeologists have unearthed cities referred to in the Old Testament that were thought to be fictional or at least long gone. Many locations referred to still exist, some in a relatively unchanged state. On the other hand, we encounter many other references to locations that prove troublesome. We've already discussed the problem of the location of the Garden of Eden and the question of whether Jesus delivered the Beatitudes on a mount or on a plain. More questions may arise as we read. Was Jesus really born in Bethlehem? Did the Holy Family really hide in Egypt? Did Jesus travel to Jerusalem once as Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us or three times as John indicates? (Notice the use of the number three here?) Why were the two disciples on the road to a place called Emmaus after Jesus' death?

The key here is to recall our discussion of the difference between truth and fact. The biblical authors were concerned with teaching truth. They were not historians or geographers and their use of locations is often as symbolic as their use of numbers. Locations conjure up images. Even today when someone names a location, people have a reaction, either positive or negative depending on what that location suggests. How are we to know how people in biblical times reacted to certain locations? Often, footnotes and commentaries will contain useful information. For now, here are a few clues about some places that we just mentioned.

Bethlehem The prophet Micah refers to Bethlehem saying, "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, / who are one of the little clans of Judah, / from you shall come forth for me / one who is to rule in Israel" (5:2). When the Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, they are teaching us the truth that Jesus is the ruler who has come from humble beginnings to become the shepherd of all Israel, thus fulfilling the hopes and expectations of God's people.

Egypt The Gospel of Matthew is the only Gospel that recounts the flight into Egypt. Recall that Matthew was writing for a predominantly Jewish audience familiar with the story of the Exodus. To such an audience, this reference would immediately summon images of the time that God called forth his people out of the land of Egypt. In the same way,


Jesus would now be seen as called by God out of the land of Egypt to form a new people. While there is much we don't know about Jesus' early life, we do know this: Jesus is he who is called to emancipate the new Israel (that means you and me) from the sin that enslaves us and lead us to the promised land of our salvation.

Jesus' Travels to Jerusalem Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that Jesus "cleansed" the Temple during his last days as part of his only journey to Jerusalem. John places this event near the beginning of his ministry and has Jesus traveling to Jerusalem a total of three times. These facts seem to conflict. The truth is, however, that Jerusalem and the Temple were seen as the center of Jewish life. John's Gospel was written at a time when Jewish Christians were experiencing the turmoil of being "thrown out" of their synagogues as the split between Jews and Jewish Christians deepened and grew acrimonious. John's chronology of Jesus' three visits to Jerusalem and his references to the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of Jesus' ministry emphasize the truth that Jesus is the new center of God's presence in the world, replacing the Temple in Jerusalem that the Christians of John's time no longer had access to. And, since God saves on the third day, it makes sense that Jesus' saving action—his death and Resurrection—would occur on his third visit to Jerusalem.

Emmaus Where the heck is Emmaus and why are two disciples headed there after Jesus' tragic death? The fact is, very little is known about Emmaus. It seems to have absolutely no significance, and that's the point. After Jesus' death, the disciples were lost and directionless. The only important thing about the location of Emmaus is that the two disciples are headed *away* from Jerusalem. The disciples are attempting to leave behind the experience of Jesus' death. They don't know where they are headed as long as it is away from the past. After their encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus, their destination changes: they make a 180-degree turn and head back to Jerusalem, back to where Jesus' death occurred. While we know little about a place called Emmaus, we do know the truth: when we are lost and without direction, we do not recognize the presence of the risen Lord in our midst. When we do encounter him in the sharing of God's Word and the breaking of the bread, our eyes are opened, and we can revisit the place of our pain with a new faith.

Personally, my favorite location reference is a little-known one found in the sixth chapter of Mark's Gospel. The chapter begins with Jesus and his disciples in Nazareth. Jesus encounters some difficulty in his own town. He proceeds to send out the twelve. After they come back reporting their success, Jesus invites them to an out-of-the-way place, a deserted region not far from the shore of the Sea of Galilee. In this deserted place, Jesus feeds five thousand people despite the apostles' reluctance. All of this is taking place on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee—Jewish territory. After this incident, Jesus tells the apostles to get in the boat and precede him to the other side of the lake toward Bethsaida—Gentile territory. That evening, the apostles do so, but encounter their own turbulence as they try to row with the wind against them. Between three and six in the morning (note: they've been rowing since evening—a total of between nine and twelve hours), Jesus comes walking on the water toward them. After he gets in the boat and the winds calm down, the story tells us the following: "When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat." (6:53). Interestingly enough, Gennesaret is on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, which is where they were before they left! After struggling all night rowing against the wind for nine to twelve hours, they ended up just about back where they started.

We tend to miss all of this symbolism because we are not familiar with the area around the Sea of Galilee. However, audiences familiar with the region would certainly catch the irony in the apostles' destination. Is the author trying to give us historical information about location? Perhaps. But more important, the author is using references to location in order to communicate some very important truths: the twelve apostles



A young boy had just gotten his driving permit. He asked his father if they could discuss his use of the family car. His father said, "I'll make a deal with you. You bring your grades up, study the Bible, get your hair cut, and then we'll talk about it." A month later, the boy again asked his father about using the car. The father said "Son, I'm very proud of you. You've brought your grades up, you've studied the Bible diligently, but you didn't get your hair cut." The young man waited a moment and then replied, "You know, Dad, I've been thinking about that. You know Samson had long hair, Moses had long hair, Noah had long hair, and even Jesus had long hair." His dad said, "Yes, and everywhere they went, they walked."

(the Church) had a difficult time carrying the gospel across the lake to unfamiliar territory. They could make no headway in the face of turbulence. Only Jesus can rise above this (walking on the water). Jesus alone leads them on to Tyre and Sidon and the district of the ten cities, all Gentile areas where, interestingly enough, in chapter 8 of Mark's Gospel, he again feeds a huge crowd—this time four thousand people—after they had been with him three days. All of these references to location reinforce the powerful messages in these stories—all of which are true.

“But I Need to Have Proof!”

Once, when I was delivering a Bible workshop to a group of young adults in a Chicago suburb, I covered the above examples of figurative language in the Bible and the difference between truth and fact. While the participants listened intently and accepted the approach I was taking, two main concerns surfaced. One was, “If the Bible is not all fact and uses figurative language and stories, that opens the door for anyone to interpret them any way they so desire!” Indeed, we are called upon to interpret the Bible in light of our experiences. However, we do so within a faith community and within the broader tradition of interpretation going back over two thousand years. This tradition of interpretation invites us to consider the

“Comfort in tribulation can be secured only on the sure ground of faith holding as true the words of Scripture and the teaching of the Catholic Church.”

—ST. THOMAS MORE

original context in which a passage was written as well as the original author's intent. We simply cannot understand the full meaning of a Bible passage for ourselves today until we have some insight into its meaning as originally intended. It is also important to remember that while the Bible speaks to us personally it does not speak to us exclusively. We are not free to interpret the Bible any

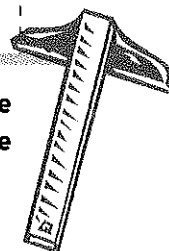
old way we please, but within the context of our Catholic Christian tradition. Our interpretation of the Bible must be done in communion with our present-day brothers and sisters in the Church as well as with those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith.

The second concern was even more pointed. One participant applied all of this discussion of figurative language to the story of the Resurrection and said, “I understand how this might apply to Noah's ark or some other

ancient story, but I have to know that Jesus literally rose from the dead. I need proof of that!" I responded first by stating emphatically that we do know for a fact that Jesus was a historical person. Then, I stated that, without a doubt, I believe that Jesus is risen. Yet, that absolute confidence is based on testimony, not proof. No one can offer proof of the Resurrection. Not even the Bible offers proof. What we do have are the astonishing accounts of those who proclaim that their lives were completely transformed by an encounter with the one they recognized as the risen Jesus. Their stories are overwhelmingly compelling—compelling enough to change the lives of millions of people over the last two thousand years.

The Resurrection is something we believe in by faith, based on powerful evidence and testimony of witnesses. Such evidence, however, falls short of proof. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist, we say, "Let us proclaim the *mystery* of our faith: Lord, by your cross and Resurrection you have set us free!" Ultimately, the Bible does not provide us with proof of anything. And yet, we can read it with absolute confidence, knowing that we can trust God, who is good to his word. The Bible provides us with the compelling testimony of those who have encountered the risen Christ and been transformed, and who now invite us to enter into his Paschal Mystery. In his book *Against an Infinite Horizon*, Ronald Rolheiser explains that "Certitude is not the real substance of faith. Faith is a way of seeing things" (9). Ultimately, Scripture helps us to see our lives, not in isolation, but against the "backdrop" of Jesus' Paschal Mystery. Robert Ludwig describes in his book *Reconstructing Catholicism: For a New Generation* how the Bible (the Gospels in particular) does this.

The Bible provides us with the compelling testimony of those who have encountered the risen Christ and been transformed, and who now invite us to enter into his Paschal Mystery.



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Bert is inspired by the story of Pentecost, but those tongues of flame sound like a real fire hazard."

Do the Math—Numbers in the Bible

“It is our story, it is the story of all the earth, a universal story about gracious mystery as our source and destiny and the need to live by courage and trust. Yet, this story is not an ‘answer’ to our questions, as the fundamentalists would have it. Rather, the Gospel is the thematization of our experience of mystery, helping us make peace with our deepest questions by our acceptance of incompleteness, vulnerability, emptiness” (97).

Finally, it is important here to lend credibility to this whole discussion about the difference between truth and fact. In other words, the approach to Scripture described in this chapter is not something that I made up. Rather, it is a summary of the official position of the Catholic Church as expressed by the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document entitled, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church.” Here are a few quotations from that document (section I. F.) that serve as the foundation for this chapter.

Fundamentalism also places undue stress upon the inerrancy of certain details in the biblical texts, especially in what concerns historical events or supposedly scientific truth. It often historicizes material which from the start never claimed to be historical. It considers historical everything that is reported or recounted with verbs in the past tense, failing to take the necessary account of the possibility of symbolic or figurative meaning.



It is not sufficient to translate a text word for word in order to obtain its literal sense. One must understand the text according to the literary conventions of the time. When a text is metaphorical, its literal sense is not that which flows immediately from a word-to-word translation (e.g. “Let your loins be girt”: Lk 12:35), but that which corresponds to the metaphorical use of these terms (“Be ready for action”). When it is a question of a story, the literal sense does not necessarily imply belief that the facts recounted actually took place, for a story need not belong to the genre of history but be instead a work of imaginative fiction.



[Fundamentalism] refuses to admit that the inspired word of God has been expressed in human language and that this word has been expressed, under divine inspiration, by human authors possessed of limited capacities and resources. For this reason, it tends to treat the biblical text as if it had been dictated word for word by the Spirit. It fails to recognize that the word of God has been formulated in language and expression conditioned by various periods.



The fundamentalist approach is dangerous, for it is attractive to people who look to the Bible for ready answers to the problems of life. It can deceive these people, offering them interpretations that are pious but illusory, instead of telling them that the Bible does not necessarily contain an immediate answer to each and every problem. Without saying as much in so many words, fundamentalism actually invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide. It injects into life a false certitude, for it unwittingly confuses the divine substance of the biblical message with what are in fact its human limitations.



Fundamentalism is right to insist on the divine inspiration of the Bible, the inerrancy of the word of God and other biblical truths included in its five fundamental points. But its way of presenting these truths is rooted in an ideology which is not biblical, whatever the proponents of this approach might say. For it demands an unshakable adherence to rigid doctrinal points of view and imposes, as the only source of teaching for Christian life and salvation, a reading of the Bible which rejects all questioning and any kind of critical research.



It does not follow from this [text] that we can attribute to a biblical text whatever meaning we like, interpreting it in a wholly subjective way. On the contrary, one must reject as unauthentic every interpretation alien to the meaning expressed by the human authors in their written text.



In its attachment to the principle “Scripture alone,” fundamentalism separates the interpretation of the Bible from the tradition, which, guided by the Spirit, has authentically developed in union with Scripture in the heart of the community of faith It presents itself as a form of private interpretation which does not acknowledge that the Church is founded on the Bible and draws its life and inspiration from Scripture.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- How are numbers and locations used for effect in Bible stories? What are some examples?
- What does the Pontifical Biblical Commission teach us about understanding the Bible in “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church”? How do you feel about the approach to understanding the Bible proposed by this chapter and this document? How does this approach change your understanding of the Bible? How does it help? How does it challenge?
- What experience(s) have you had with fundamentalists or fundamentalism?
- In your own words, how would you explain the Catholic approach to understanding the Bible with regards to fundamentalism?
- Why is fundamentalism considered “dangerous” by the Pontifical Biblical Commission?