

Exegesis “By the Numbers”: Numerology and the New Testament

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Introduction

In a recent article, Alan Culpepper has surveyed the various interpretations of the notoriously difficult reference to the miraculous catch of one hundred fifty-three fish recorded in John 21:11.¹ Furthermore, Culpepper has himself ventured, if rather cautiously, into the arcane discipline of numerological symbolism in his interpretation of the number of stone jars of water that Jesus turns into wine at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11).² Thus, it is appropriate in an issue of *Perspectives in Religious Studies* honoring Dr. R. Alan Culpepper³ to take up the issue of numerology and the New Testament.

Others have noted the importance of numerological symbolism in early Christianity. Of particular importance is the work of François Bovon of Harvard Divinity School. In his SNTS presidential address on the importance of names and numbers, Bovon claimed, “It is my hypothesis that the early Christians used the categories of ‘name’ and ‘number’ as theological tools. Often they consciously interpreted names and numbers in a symbolic way.”⁴ Adela Collins, of Yale Divinity School, has observed:

¹R. Alan Culpepper, “Designs for the Church in the Imagery of John 21:1-14,” in *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language* (ed. Jörg Frey, Jan van der Watt, and Ruben Zimmermann; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 369-402. Culpepper concludes that the number, one hundred fifty-three, had symbolic significance now lost to the modern reader.

²About the six water jars, Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon: 1998), 131, observes: “The number six may symbolize the incompleteness of the traditional ritual, which Jesus then literally fills (that is, fulfills) and replaces.” In his forthcoming commentary on Mark, however, Culpepper eschews numerological significance for the numbers of baskets of fragments taken up in the feeding stories in Mark (Mark 6:30-44; 8:1-10; esp. 8:14-21). Appreciation is expressed to Dr. Culpepper for making his Smyth-Helwys commentary on Mark available to me in a pre-publication format.

³It is with deep joy that I contribute this essay in a Festschrift honoring my mentor and friend, Alan Culpepper. Over the past quarter century, our relationship has deepened and matured from my service as his graduate assistant at Southern Seminary to the point that I count Alan as one of my very dearest and closest friends. He has always been unselfish with his time, clear-headed in his critique, and unswerving in his commitment to excellence. Even with a barrage of emails and long conversations on the topic of numerology, Alan has demonstrated remarkable patience and generous encouragement. Such encouragement, of course, does not make him responsible for the observations made in this essay! All of his relationships, whether personal or professional, have been marked by a profound sense of fidelity. He belongs to a handful of Baptist scholars who have left an indelible mark on the academic study of the Bible. I can think of no one more deserving of a NABPR Festschrift than Alan Culpepper!

⁴François Bovon, “Names and Numbers in Early Christianity,” *NTS* 47 (2001): 267.

Numerical symbolism is part of the activity of discovering order in environment and experience First, [numerical symbolism] is used to order the experience of time Numerical symbolism also expresses order in the experience of space. The perception of such order is expressed in the Greek idea of the cosmos.⁵

Despite these learned appeals to the significance of numerology both for early Christianity and its larger Mediterranean milieu, New Testament scholars have been reluctant to probe very deeply in this area. No doubt one reason for this collective hesitation is the excessive numerological interpretations found in the patristic area, an excess that matches, and in some ways is part and parcel of, the extremes of allegorical interpretation.⁶ Consider, for example, the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower by Jerome:

Thirty refers to marriage: for the very joining of the fingers, as if embracing each other in a tender kiss and uniting; depicts husband and wife. Sixty indeed refers to widows, because they are placed in distress and affliction. Whence also [sixty] is pressed down by the superior finger [i.e., the index finger presses down on the thumb]; the greater the difficulty of abstaining from the enticements of pleasures once experienced, so much the greater is the reward. Next, the number one hundred (please attend carefully, reader) is transferred from the left hand to the right, and to be sure with the same fingers but not the same hand on which are signified brides and widows, making a circle [100] portrays the crown of virginity. (Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.3)

Few modern exegetes are prepared to agree with Jerome that the yield of the good seed in the Parable of the Sower, as the canonical Jesus told it and the Synoptic writers interpret it, was “really” told in order to extol virginity! Furthermore, Irenaeus’s polemic against the numerological speculations of the Gnostics is well known (*Haer.* 1.14-16; 2.20-28). It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that Irenaeus dismissed entirely the importance of numerical symbolism; rather he insisted that such numerology be constrained by the Scriptures and tradition (not vice versa): “For the Tradition does not spring out of numbers, but numbers from the Tradition” (*Haer.* 2.25.1).

To conclude that numerological interest arose only after the composition of the early Christian writings that would later form the New Testament would be a grave error, and modern exegetes recoil from all types of

⁵Adela Yarbro Collins, ‘Numerical Symbolism in Jewish and Early Christian Apocalyptic Literature,’ *ANRW* 2.21.2:1221–87. A good example of this numerical significance is Irenaeus’s classical defense of the fourfold gospel. In *Haer.* 3.11.8, Irenaeus finds significance in the fact that there are four Gospels, for the world in some measure is ordered according to fours—there are four quarters of the earth and four principle winds. Moreover, there are four heavenly creatures that surround the throne in the Apocalypse, a representation of the fourfold gospel, and there are four covenants that God has made throughout history with humans. Irenaeus’s statements reflect the common conception in the ancient world that history and the cosmos were ordered, and this order was reflected numerically.

⁶Another reason scholars tend to find numerological interpretation reprehensible is the modern obsession with numerology, for example, the whole “Bible Code” phenomenon.

numerological interpretations at their own peril. To quote Bovon again: "If we fail to recognize the significance of names and numbers, we . . . are vulnerable to losing a depth to our understanding of Scripture and deeper insights into its message."⁷ Following this lead, I will explore the potential significance of several numbers (6 and 7, 100, 153 and 276) for the interpretation, composition, and/or collection of several New Testament writings.⁸ The essay is meant to be exploratory and illustrative and by no means definitive or exhaustive.⁹

The Importance of Seven and the Problem of Six

Seven was clearly a significant number for Jews and Christians in the first and second centuries.¹⁰ Seven occurs eighty-eight times in the New Testament writings compared to seven times for the number six (ἕξ).¹¹ Explicit references to seven play a significant role in the numerology of Revelation. There are seven spirits (1:4), seven lampstands (1:12), seven stars (1:16), seven horns and eyes (5:6), seven seals (6:1), seven angels with seven trumpets (8:6), seven crowns and seven heads of the dragon (12:3), seven angels with seven plagues (15:1), seven bowls of wrath (16:1), seven hills (17:9), and seven kings (17:10). In John 21:2 seven disciples are listed (Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, sons of Zebedee (2), two other disciples).¹² In Acts 6:3, seven deacons are chosen. There are seven afflictions in Rom 8:35, seven gifts in Rom 12:6-8, seven qualities of wisdom in Jas 3:17, and seven virtues that supplement faith in 2 Pet 1:5-8. The doxology in Rom 11:33-36 contains seven affirmations. Prayer in Matt 6 contains seven petitions. In Mark 8:1-11, Jesus feeds the four thousand with seven loaves and afterwards collects seven basketfuls of what is leftover. Origen points out that the seven loaves and seven basketfuls denote the superior spiritual capacity of the four thousand over the five thousand (*Comm. Matt.* 11.19).¹³

⁷Bovon, "Names and Numbers," 288.

⁸If space allowed, we might explore the significance of other numbers as well, especially the number "eight," which played a particularly important role in early Christian circles as the referent for the resurrection (see *Syb. Or.* 1.342; 7.139-40; cited by Bovon, "Names and Numbers," 283; probably also Acts 9:32-35 and possibly Luke 9:28).

⁹Parts of this article appeared earlier in two publications: on seven and six, (with Jason Whitlark), "The 'Seven' Last Words: A Numerical Motivation for the Insertion of Luke 23:34a," *NTS* 52 (2006): 188-204; and on eighteen, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006). Appreciation is expressed to the editors of each of these publications for permission to reproduce part of those materials here.

¹⁰See Collins's discussion of seven, "Numerical Symbolism," 1272, 1275-79.

¹¹In Acts 11:12 the numerical implication is 6+1 (the six brothers who went into Cornelius's house + Peter who went in).

¹²Talbert (*Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and Johannine Epistles* [New York: Crossroad, 1994], 259), understands this listing of seven disciples to indicate "disciples generally."

¹³Cf. "ἑπτά," *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (ed. G. W. H. Lampe; Oxford Clarendon Press, 1961), 543, for extensive references to the continuing importance of seven in the patristic writings. Concerning the pagan context, Collins writes about seven, "The number seven was emphasized because it was generally recognized in the Hellenistic world as having a major cosmic role. By the first century C.E., not only Jews, but most people living under

Moreover, seven is used as a structuring principle in the composition of a few New Testament documents.¹⁴ Revelation is structured by two organizations of seven. In chapters 2-3 there are seven letters to seven churches. In chapters 4-22:5 there are seven visions of the shift of the ages.¹⁵ The Fourth Gospel is organized around sevens. The beginning (1:19-2:11) and the end (12-20) of the Fourth Gospel are organized around seven days.¹⁶ Furthermore, 2:13-11 is structured around seven events that demonstrated Jesus both fulfills and supersedes Jewish worship.¹⁷ Also, the genealogy in Matt 1 is structured according to the three sets of fourteen (7 X 2) generations each.

Not only was seven a structuring principle in the New Testament writings, but there are several collections of seven in the New Testament. The opening narrative of Matt 1-4 contains seven fulfillments of Scripture by Jesus (1:22-23; 2:5-6, 15, 17, 23; 3:3; 4:14). Matthew 13 is a collection of seven parables about the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 23 is a collection of seven woes. Interspersed throughout the narrative of the Fourth Gospel are seven "I am" sayings spoken by Jesus and seven signs performed by Jesus. In Rom 3:10-18, Paul quotes seven Old Testament passages that have been collected together to prove the charge that both Jews and Gentiles are under sin. Also, the florilegium in Heb 1 is a collection of seven passages from the Old Testament that demonstrate Jesus' superiority over angels. Even in the fourth century, Chrysostom collects proof texts according to seven. In his *Homily* 4.6 on Heb

the Roman Empire, used a seven-day week. The image of the seven planets was a widespread and powerful one" ("Numerical Symbolism," 1278). A portion of the work M. Terentius Varro (116-28 B.C.) is quoted in Aulus Gellius's *Attic Nights* 3.10 in which Varro discourses on the significance and excellence of the number seven (see also Collins, "Numerical Symbolism," 1252). Examples could be multiplied from the pagan, Jewish, and Christian literature, but what is said here is enough to demonstrate that seven was held to be a universally significant number in the ancient Mediterranean context. Cf. M. H. Pope ("Seven, Seventh, Seventy," *IDB* 4:294-95) for succinct discussion of the significance of seven in the Scriptures and their milieu.

¹⁴In the Pentateuch, seven as a structural principle plays an important role. Genesis 1 has a clear literary structure. First, there are six days of creation. The seventh day is a day of rest for God, providing divine warrant and precedence for the peculiarly Jewish habit of Sabbath worship. The pattern of seven continues to be found throughout the rest of the Torah. The building of the tabernacle, precursor of the temple (in Exod 25-31) is accomplished in seven speeches by God; the actual construction of the sacred space of the tabernacle is accomplished by seven acts of Moses (Exod 40:17-33); there are seven speeches given regarding the sacrificial activity in that sacred space (Lev 1-7); and the ritual for the ordination of the priesthood is accomplished in seven acts (Lev 8); see Frank Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990). For the significance of seven as a structural principle in Proverbs, see Patrick W. Skehan, "The Seven Columns of Wisdom's House in Proverbs 1-9," *CBQ* 9 (1947): 190-98; and in Amos, see James Limburg, "Sevenfold Structures in the Book of Amos," *JBL* 106 (1987): 217-22. For a discussion of seven in the Ugaritic texts, see Arvid S. Kapelrud, "The Number Seven in Ugaritic Texts," *VT* 18 (1968): 494-99.

¹⁵Charles Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 12.

¹⁶Talbert, *Reading John*, 80.

¹⁷Talbert, *Reading John*, 94.

3:7-11, he collects seven Scripture citations (6 OT +1 NT) that are marshaled in order to prove that sin leads to unbelief.

These examples indicate the influence of seven at the compositional level of the New Testament writings and traditions. Seven also influenced the post-publication editorial collection of some New Testament texts as well as some non-canonical early Christian texts. The original collection of the letters of Ignatius, written as he was traveling to Rome to be martyred, is a collection of seven letters.¹⁸ When the catholic letters are finally collected together there are seven (1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; James; Jude). More important to our discussion is the various collections of Paul's letters by the end of the first century. Likely the oldest collection of Paul's letters was the seven churches edition when letters to the same communities were counted together (Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians).¹⁹ Murphy-O'Connor posits three early collections: a four-letter collection to three churches (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians), a five-letter collection to four churches (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians), and a collection of four letters to individuals (Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy, Philemon). Murphy-O'Connor states that early on, before the beginning of the second century, the two collections of letters to the seven churches were combined and circulated.²⁰ The significance of a collection of Paul's letters addressed to seven churches was not lost upon the early church. The Muratorian fragment from the second half of the second century²¹ contains this interesting statement:

Since the blessed apostle Paul himself, following the order of his predecessor John, but not naming him, writes to seven churches in the following order: first to the Corinthians, second to the Ephesians, . . . Philippians, . . . Colossians, . . . Galatians, . . . Romans. But although [the message] is repeated to the Corinthians and Thessalonians by way of reproof, yet one church is recognized as diffused throughout the world.²²

The tradition reflected in the Muratorian fragment saw significance in a seven-church edition of Paul's letters, namely that the church universal was addressed through these occasional documents. Moreover, this collection of letters addressed to the seven churches goes back to the earliest time (before 100) when the letters were collected and edited together. Here is evidence of post-publication shaping of a collection of materials by the earliest Christians

¹⁸Michael W. Holmes designates this as the middle recension known to Eusebius, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 131-32.

¹⁹Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 42.

²⁰Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, His Options, His Skills* (Good News Studies 41; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 126-30. Marcion is the earliest attestation of a collection of Pauline letters. His collection consists of ten letters: nine letters to seven churches + one letter to an individual, Philemon. Cf. Tertullian, *Marc.* 5.11.

²¹For a cogent defense of this date see C. E. Hill, "The Debate over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon," *WJT* 57 (1995): 437-52.

²²Translation in F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 160.

according to the number seven. Additionally, when the letters to individuals were added to the collection of letters to the seven churches by 100, Hebrews is routinely added to this collection (e.g., P⁴⁶, B, κ, D 06).²³ By so doing a thirteen letter collection is made a fourteen (7x2) letter corpus.

What about the number six? At least in one instance, the number six in the early Christian tradition conveyed a negative connotation. We are told in Rev 13:18 that the number of the beast from the earth is the number of humanity, namely 666. Possible another instance can be detected in John 2:6 where Jesus has the servants fill up six stone jars used in Jewish purification rites at the wedding in Cana. When the water is served to the steward of the feast, it is turned into wine. Six in this episode may carry a negative connotation, namely an indication of the incompleteness of Jewish ritualistic practices which Jesus has come to fulfill and supersede.²⁴ In John 19:14, Jesus is turned over and crucified at the sixth hour, and in Luke 23:44, darkness starts to cover the land during the crucifixion at the sixth hour. Furthermore, the Samaritan woman in the Fourth Gospel has had six suitors, but Jesus is the seventh and final "suitor" who brings salvation to her. While "six" may have negative connotations for early Christian auditors, the real problem with the number six for early Christians was that it was not seven!²⁵

This fact may explain the addition of Luke 23:34a to the text of Luke's gospel so as to move the number of sayings from the cross from six to seven when they were read together in Gospel harmonies and collections. Tatian's *Diatessaron* (the Arabic version)²⁶ is our earliest extant witness (c. 170) of the words of Jesus from the cross collected together in a single narrative and also attests to the secondary nature of Luke 23:34a. Tatian's order of sayings reads: (1) Luke 23:43; (2) John 19:26-27; (3) Mark 15:34/Matt27:46; (4) John 19:28; (5) John 19:30a; (6) Luke 23:34a; and (7) Luke 23:46a.²⁷ Here is a collection of seven sayings, a phenomenon that is not uncommon in the canonical Gospels and writings of the New Testament.²⁸ What is also notable is that the saying from John and the two undisputed sayings in Luke maintain their original narrative order. Only Luke 23:34a is out of place; its placement in Tatian

²³Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer*, 129-30.

²⁴Charles Talbert, *Reading John*, 94.

²⁵According to Collins, "Numerical Symbolism," 1273, 1275, there was no set meaning for the number six in antiquity.

²⁶The Arabic version is an important witness to the original Syriac version of the *Diatessaron*. Cf. Tjitze Baarda, "An Archaic Element in the Arabic *Diatessaron*? (TA 46:18=John xv 2)," *NovT* 17 (1975): 151-55 and "The Roots of the Syriac *Diatessaron* Tradition (TA 25:1-3)," *NovT* 28 (1986): 1-25.

²⁷The traditional order of the sayings predominantly among Protestants is (1) Luke 23:34a; (2) Luke 23:43; (3) John 19:26-27; (4) Mark 15:34/Matt27:46; (5) John 19:28; (6) John 19:30; and (7) Luke 23:46 (cf. Simon J. Kistemaker, "Seven Words from the Cross," *WTJ* 38 [1976]: 182-91 and John Wilkinson, "The Seven Words from the Cross," *SJT* 17 [1964]: 69-82). Interestingly the harmonized narrative of the crucifixion in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (4th century) is a harmonization of the accounts in Matthew/Mark and Luke. If one removes the Johannine saying from the *Diatessaron*'s list one would have the same order of sayings as is found in the *Apostolic Constitutions*.

²⁸This collection might go back earlier to Justin's harmony, by which Tatian is likely influenced and to a degree dependent upon.

betrays its role as a independent saying or a “floating” logion.²⁹ One might argue that Tatian has merely displaced the saying from its original context, but the fact that the *Apostolic Constitutions* maintains the same order minus the Johannine sayings likely points to an independent literary or oral tradition concerning the sayings from the cross that Tatian or possibly Justin knows. What this suggests is that at the time Tatian wrote his *Diatessaron* (ca. 170) this logion had not secured its place in the text of Luke. The saying we now know as Luke 23:34a was first included in a collection of sayings from the cross (whether oral or written) in order to increase the number of sayings from six to seven. But not much time elapsed after the publication of the *Diatessaron* before this logion was inserted into the text of the Third Gospel. Consequently, the text of Luke is modified by a scribe of the Western text in order that the fourfold gospel narrative contains seven sayings of Jesus from the cross, thereby “canonizing” this tradition and Luke 23:34a for the church.³⁰

Eighteen and the Name of Jesus

The number “eighteen” occurs three times in the NT, all three of them in Luke 13. Mentioning the specific length of a person’s illness is a rarity for Luke, and to mention it twice is unprecedented.³¹ The number’s significance begs further consideration. A variety of explanations, of course, have been offered. Some commentators suggest that the number eighteen is a “conventional” expression for a “long time.”³² Still others conjecture that the length of time is mentioned to underscore the seriousness of her condition.³³ A few commentators have suggested that the number of those killed by the collapsing tower of Siloam influenced the use of the number in our text, thus creating a kind of catchword to hold the otherwise disparate stories together.³⁴

Still, it seems that the exegetical tradition has not fully comprehended the potential meaning of the reference. First, we note that commentators fail to

²⁹This is in contrast to the traditional Protestant order which maintains the sayings in their narrative sequence.

³⁰For more details of this hypothesis, see Whitlark and Parsons, “The ‘Seven’ Last Words.”

³¹For more on this topic, see Parsons, *Body and Character*, 89-91.

³²So John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34* (WBC 35B; Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 724; see also J. D. M. Derrett, “Positive Perspectives on Two Lucan Miracles,” *DR* 104 (1986): 274, 284 n. 14; O. Stein, “The Numeral 18,” *Poona Orientalist* 1 (1936): 1-37; 2 (1937): 164-65; Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke’s Gospel* (completely revised and expanded; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 261, cites the use of “eighteen years” in Judg 3:14, 10:8, as evidence that the number refers to a long period of oppression. Conversely, he argues (*ibid.*) that “*Test. Judah* 9:1 applies the term to a period of peace.”

³³See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (IVPNTCS; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 241.

³⁴See, e.g., Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, 261. Danker cites the use of “twelve” in 8:42-43 as another example of a numerical narrative link (though he fails to mention that this link is found also in Mark 5:25, 42); here Luke has brought the two references much closer together.

observe that the wording for the number “eighteen” changes from δεκαοκτώ in 13:4, 11 to δέκα καὶ ὀκτώ in 13:16.

What is striking here is that the formula of 13:16, δέκα καὶ ὀκτώ, is reminiscent of the non-canonical text of *Barnabas*, a late first- or second-century Christian text. In *Barn.* 9:7-9, the author explains that the number 318, which occurs at Genesis 14:14, has hidden meaning.

Learn fully then, children of love, concerning all things, for Abraham, who first circumcised, did so looking forward in the spirit to Jesus, and had received the doctrine of three letters. For it says, “And Abraham circumcised from his household eighteen men and three hundred.” What then was the knowledge that was given to him? Notice that he first mentions the eighteen, and after a pause the three hundred. The Eighteen is I (iota = ten) and H (eta = 8)—you have Jesus—and because the cross was destined to have grace in the T (tau) he says “and three hundred.” So he indicates Jesus in the two letters and the cross in the other. He knows this who placed the gift of his teaching in our hearts. No one has heard a more excellent lesson from me, but I know that you are worthy. (*Barn.* 9.7-9)

In his version of Genesis, the number is written eighteen and three hundred and was abbreviated ιητ, with the letters standing for numbers.³⁵ Barnabas’s contention that ι and η have the numerical value of ten and eight reflects the tradition of counting the old digamma, obsolete in literary usage by Barnabas’s day, but still used in counting of this sort.³⁶

α	=	1	Ϝ	=	6
β	=	2	ζ	=	7
γ	=	3	η	=	8
δ	=	4	θ	=	9
ε	=	5	ι	=	10

Table 1. Letters for Numerals

The ι and η stand for eighteen, as Barnabas says, and the τ stands for three hundred.³⁷ Barnabas then elucidates the hidden meaning. “Eighteen” is “ten” (ι)

³⁵For a discussion of this and other issues, see Reider Hvalvik, “Barnabas 9.7-9 and the Author’s Supposed Use of *Gematria*,” *NTS* 33 (1987): 279-80.

³⁶On this, see Bruce Metzger, *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible: An Introduction to Palaeography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 9.

³⁷It is significant that the Chester Beatty Papyrus IV to Genesis (c. A.D. 300) gives the number 318 as τιη. Of course, this does not solve the problem that Barnabas claims that in his text the number was written “eighteen and three hundred.” The Yale Genesis Fragment, Papyrus Yale 1 (c. 90 C.E.), has a lacuna at just this point in Genesis 14:14, and it has been conjectured that there is just enough space there for the abbreviation for 318; see Bovon,

and “eight” (η), and thus “ten and eight” (Luke’s precise use in 13:16) represents the *nominum sacrum* of Jesus, ιη.

Furthermore, it must be noted that this interpretation is not some idiosyncrasy of the writer of Barnabas, for Clement of Alexander also knows of the Christological use of the number “eighteen”:

As then in astronomy we have Abraham as an instance, so also in arithmetic we have the same Abraham. “For, hearing that Lot was taken captive, and having numbered his own servants, born in his house, 318 (τϛη), he defeats a very great number of the enemy.” They say, then, that the character representing 300 is, as to shape, the type of the Lord’s sign, and that the Iota and the Eta indicate the Savior’s name; that it was indicated, accordingly, that Abraham’s domestics were in salvation, who having fled to the Sign and the Name became lords of the captives, and of the very many unbelieving nations that followed them. (Clement, *Stromata*, ix)³⁸

Clearly, “eighteen” had Christological value among some early Christian writers, but did it have this symbolism for Luke? Given the prominence of the number in Jesus’ exclamation and the fact that other early Christians (including Luke) were finding symbolic meaning in numbers, it seems appropriate to infer from Jesus’ statement in 13:16 a Christological message that suggests that eighteen is an appropriate length of time for the woman’s illness, for Christ himself is hidden in the number. In other words, read properly, the reference to “eighteen,” with its widely known Christological symbolism, would have served as a rhetorical marker that the woman’s time of illness has reached its “fullness,” inasmuch as the number itself points to Christ. In this sense, the number “eighteen” functions for Luke in much the same way as “fourteen” (the value of David’s name in Hebrew) does for Matthew in his infancy narrative, in which there are three periods of fourteen generations.³⁹ For the initiated audience, the 3 X 14 plan points to the fullness of time for the epiphany of the Messiah. Likewise, for the initiated audience, the very fact that the woman’s illness had lasted eighteen years points to its cessation. As “David” is written over the salvation history of the Jews for Matthew, so “Christ” is written over the length of this woman’s illness.

This interpretation is reinforced by one of the earliest papyrus witnesses to Luke, Chester Beatty Papyrus I, better known as P45. P45, an early third-century manuscript, has a lacuna at Luke 13:4, but is extant for our entire

“Names and Numbers in Early Christianity,” 282 n. 95. In the same note, Bovon cites additional literature on the Yale Genesis Fragment and its possible relationship to Barnabas: C. Bradford Welles, “The Yale Genesis Fragment,” *The Yale University Library Gazette* 39:1 (1964): 1-8; C. H. Roberts, “P. Yale 1 and the early Christian Book,” in *Essays in Honor of C. Bradford Welles* (New Haven: American Society of Papyrologists, 1966).

³⁸Bovon (“Names and Numbers in Early Christianity,” 283) also cites *Sibylline Oracles* 1.342, as providing indirect evidence for reading eighteen as the numerical value of Jesus’ name.

³⁹On the symbolism of Matthew’s 3 X 14 pattern in the infancy narrative, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 74-81.

story in Luke 13:10-17. At both 13:11 and 13:16, the number “eighteen” is written as ιη, with an over stroke to indicate the letters are serving as a number. Likewise, in 13:14, the name of “Jesus” is written in the same way, ιη, also with an over stroke, here though to indicate the *nominum sacrum*. The result is a purely visual phenomenon in which the reader of P45 would encounter the same abbreviation, ιη, for both “eighteen” and “Jesus,” reinforcing our Christological interpretation of the number eighteen in Jesus’ response in 13:16.

The abbreviation, ιη, which uses the first two letters of the name, is called an abbreviation by suspension. Of the fifteen *nomen sacra*, sacred names abbreviated in early Christian writings (such as God, Holy Spirit, etc.), only the name Jesus is used with the suspended form.⁴⁰ Later, the suspended form drops out of the manuscript tradition and the contracted form ΙΣ (first and last letters of Jesus’ name in Greek) is used uniformly as the *nomen sacrum* for Jesus.⁴¹ In the earliest Christian circles before the loss of the suspended form of the sacred name, a reader of the text of Luke 13, as evidenced by P45, would not have missed the connection between eighteen and Jesus, the symbols of which are visually indistinguishable.⁴² Assuming this symbolism goes back to the time of Luke near the end of the first century (witness Barnabas), its symbolism has been eclipsed first by the subsequent manuscript tradition and later by the critical editions of the Greek NT with which most contemporary students work. This phenomenon would have originally been an exclusively visual experience. We should not, however, underestimate the iconic importance of those symbols for early Christians, even illiterate ones, who upon viewing the symbols on the

⁴⁰Larry Hurtado has proposed, quite convincingly in my opinion, that the suspended form of Jesus was actually the first of the *nomina sacra*. Thus, the use of the over stroke to indicate a sacred name in Christian writings, which has long puzzled interpreters, is borrowed from the more widely practiced custom in secular Greek literature of using the over stroke on letters which stand for numbers (as here with “eighteen” as ιη); see Larry W. Hurtado, “The Origin of the Nomina Sacra: A Proposal,” *JBL* 117 (1998): 657, for a list of the fifteen *nomina sacra*. Hurtado suggests that the association of eighteen with Jesus may originally have been intended to link Jesus with “life,” since the numerical value of the Hebrew letters for life יח, was eighteen. In email correspondence dated 12 November 2002, Professor Hurtado wrote:

I wonder if the repeated “18” in the two stories in Lk 13 explains in part why the two stories are connected by the Evangelist; and I wonder also whether the Evangelist or (perhaps more plausibly) earlier stages of the tradition saw the numbers as playing on/off the numerical significance of “life” and “Jesus” as life-giver. So, we have a group of “18” (a number connected with life) who undergo a tragic death; and we have a woman victimized for 18 yrs by Satan (again a number that is supposed to be associated with life, but here a period measured by captivity and torment), this woman then released by “Jesus” the “life-giving Lord.”

⁴¹Colin H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 36. To date, forty-five occurrences of the suspended form of Jesus’ name (ιη) have been identified in seven Christian papyri; see Roberts, *Manuscript*, 36.

⁴²I should hasten to add that this phenomenon was not uniform in earliest Christian circles; see, e.g., P75.

page, could see for themselves the equation of eighteen with Jesus, even if they could not read Greek.⁴³

The reception of early Christian texts was primarily in an oral and communal context, that is, the texts were read aloud by a lector to a community probably gathered together for a meal and some kind of edifying activity (e.g., worship, etc.)⁴⁴ Thus, Luke surely assumed that his text would have been read aloud and then discussed, as was the custom of the day. This process would have allowed for the subsequent examination and explication of the text.⁴⁵ This context would have provided the occasion for the interpreter to communicate orally this visual phenomenon. The manuscript evidence supports this position.

Once the numeric abbreviations were dropped in the manuscript tradition, the terms for eighteen, as noted earlier, were not exactly written in the same way (δεκαοκτώ being replaced by δέκα καὶ ὀκτώ), even though translations tend to render them simply as “eighteen.” The use of the expanded form “ten and eight” in Luke 13:16 would aurally draw the attention of the hearer to the component parts of the number eighteen, that is ten *and* eight. The use of the exclamatory ἰδοὺ in 13:16 is also an aural marker used to draw attention to the importance of what follows (see, e.g., 9:30; 24:4; and Acts 1:10, in which what follows is also a number, in this case the “two men” who are witnesses to the Transfiguration, Resurrection, and Ascension).

Given the presumed propensity to equate the number eighteen (or better “ten and eight”) with Jesus, at least in some circles, this form drew attention to the number and was the aural equivalent to the visual phenomenon. Thus, an audience hearing Luke 13 could have the experience in identifying the eighteen years of Luke 13:16 with Jesus, an experience not altogether unlike the one enjoyed by the actual reader of the symbols on the page. In this reading, not only is the woman’s true character made manifest in the healing, so is the identity of Jesus revealed in the very number associated with the length of her illness.

This interpretation of Luke 13:10-17 is not meant to displace the exegetical insights of others on this passage,⁴⁶ but rather to enhance and enrich

⁴³I have had analogous experiences with modern audiences who enjoy “seeing” the parallel symbols in P45, even though they could not read Greek. On codices as icons, see the suggestion by Eldon Epp, “NT Papyrus Manuscripts and Letter Carrying in Greco-Roman Times,” in *The Future of Early Christianity* (ed. Birger A. Pearson et al; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 35-56.

⁴⁴See William Shiell, *Reading Acts: The Lector and the Early Christian Audience* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

⁴⁵See H. Gregory Snyder, *Teachers and Texts in the Ancient World: Philosophers, Jews, and Christians* (London: Routledge Press, 2000).

⁴⁶See, e.g., M. Dennis Hamm, “The Freeing of the Bent Woman and the Restoration of Israel: Luke 13:10-17 as Narrative Theology,” *JSNT* 31 (1987): 23-44; Robert F. O’Toole, “Some Exegetical Reflections on Luke 13,10-17,” *Bib* 73 (1992): 84-107; Joel B. Green, “Jesus and a Daughter of Abraham (Luke 13:10-17): Test Case for a Lucan Perspective on Jesus’ Miracles,” *CBQ* 51 (1989): 643-54. O’Toole, Hamm, and Green rightly, and in various ways, demonstrate the eschatological overtones of the story as well as the woman’s symbolic function in relationship to the kingdom of God, thus partially explaining the presence of the story of the barren fig tree that immediately precedes the pericope (13:1-7) and the two kingdom parables which immediately follow it (13:18-19; 20-21). On the

its understanding by highlighting an otherwise largely ignored or misinterpreted element of the text. The very length of the bent woman's illness, "eighteen years," has hidden within its abbreviated form $\iota\eta$, the sacred name of Jesus himself, $\iota\eta$. Despite the length of her illness, or perhaps because of it (!), this woman is revealed by Jesus to be a daughter of Abraham, and also—as the length of her illness reminds us—a child of Christ.

On the Right Hand: One Hundred and Finger Counting in Antiquity

Both literary writings and archaeological artifacts provide ample evidence that counting with one's fingers was a commonplace in the ancient world, especially during Roman times.⁴⁷ Quintilian considered the ability to count accurately on one's fingers (*flexio digitorum*) an indispensable skill for the educated orator (*Inst.* 1.10.35). On occasion during a sermon, Augustine exhorted his congregation to count on their fingers and "read" the answer on their hands (an interesting way to keep one's audience awake!) In the course of giving his interpretation of the catch of one hundred fifty-three fish in John 21 (see below), he says: "Reckon seventeen, from one all the way to seventeen, so that you add them all, and you will reach one hundred fifty-three. What are you waiting for from me? Compute for yourselves!" (*Sermones* 250.3). Finger calculations were so common that Augustine could comment elsewhere on the implications for finger counting in Jesus' prophecy that no one knows the time or season for his return: "Truly he relaxes the fingers of all who calculate concerning this subject and orders them to be quiet, who says: it is not for you to know the time which the Father has placed in his own power" (Augustine, *Civitas Dei* 18.53).

Of particular interest for our purposes is the fact that in finger counting, calculations up to ninety-nine were done on the left hand, and triple digit (and above) calculations were done on the right hand, e.g., "The number one hundred is transferred from the left hand to the right . . ." (Joannes Cassianus *Collationes* 24.26.7).⁴⁸ In a world that valued "right handedness," recognition of the superiority of counting on the right hand is hardly surprising. Juvenal, for example, commended Nestor: "Happy certainly [is Nestor] who has postponed death for so many generations and now counts his years on his right hand"

relationship of 13:10-17 to its immediate context, see especially O'Toole ("Some Exegetical Reflections," 101-105). Hamm ("The Freeing of the Bent Woman," 29-31) has offered an elaborate, though not altogether convincing, chiasmic structure for Luke 12:49-13:35. See also Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Lk 13:10-17: Interpretation of Liberation and Transformation," *Theology Digest* (1989): 315; J. Wilkinson, "The Case of the Bent Woman in Luke 13:10-17," *EVQ* 49 (1977): 195-205 and L. Milot, "Guérison d'une femme infirme un jour de sabbat (Luc 13.10-17)," *Sémiotique et Bible* 39 (1985): 23-33; Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke & Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), esp. 39-57.

⁴⁷See Burma P. Williams and Richard S. Williams, "Finger Numbers in the Greco-Roman World and the Early Middle Ages," *Isis* 86 (1995): 587-608; and esp. 588-93 for additional bibliography.

⁴⁸See Bovon, "Names and Numbers," 284, and Williams and Williams, "Finger Numbers," 587-88.

(Juvenal, *Satires* 10.248-249).⁴⁹ In economic terms, counting on the right hand also had certain salutary implications! “He holds his left hand on his left thigh, he computes a sum with the fingers of the right [thus implying a large amount of money]” (Plautus, *Stichus* 706-707).

Among early Christian writers, reference to counting on the right hand took on theological significance. Cassiodorus comments on the significance of Psalm One Hundred: “So that he seems to have rightly obtained this number [100], which represents the form of a desirable crown by the bending of the fingers of the right hand” (Cassiodorus, *Expositio in Psalmum 100 concl.*). Similar are observations on the use of the number one hundred in the New Testament, whether the comments are on the Parable of the Lost Sheep, in which the recovered sheep restores the original number to one hundred (Luke 15:3-7//Matt 18:12-14) or the Parable of the Sower, in which the good seed bears fruit “one hundred” fold (Matt 13:8//Mark 4:8//Luke 8:8).

Consider these comments on the parable of the lost sheep:

He is the shepherd who left behind the ninety-nine sheep which were not lost. He went searching for the one that had gone astray. He rejoiced when he found it, for ninety-nine is a number that is in the left hand that holds it. But when the one is found, the entire number passes to the right. As that which lacks the one—that is, the entire right [hand]—draws what was deficient and takes it from the left hand side and brings [it] to the right, so too the number becomes one hundred. (*Gospel of Truth* 31.35-32.16)⁵⁰

What is pertinent to ninety-nine? They are on the left hand, not on the right hand. For ninety-nine is counted on the left hand: add one, it is transferred to the right hand. (Augustine, *Sermones* 175.1)

Both the *Gospel of Truth* (explicitly) and Augustine (implicitly) suggest that the return of the lost sheep had efficacious effects for the ninety-nine to whom it was returned. The original number of “one hundred” is now restored, and the community, whose destiny was inextricably tied to the return of the one, can continue to enjoy the benefits of being on the “right side.” To put it differently, would it matter to the interpretation of the parable if the number of sheep restored had been fifty or seventy-four (or something less than one hundred)? That this kind of community reading was part of the *intentio operis* of Matthew (whose community emphasis in the parable has long been noted) and perhaps also Luke is at least worthy of further contemplation.⁵¹

Early interpretations of the Parable of the Sower make a similar point about the number one hundred. Consider this interpretation by Jerome:

For the left hand is our present life: the right hand truly is life to come. And rightly by the number one hundred the contemplation of eternal life is signified, because whenever after thirty and sixty we reach one hundred by

⁴⁹This example is cited by Bovon, “Names and Numbers,” 284, and Williams and Williams, “Finger Numbers,” 588, 600.

⁵⁰Cited by Bovon, “Names and Numbers,” 284.

⁵¹So also Bovon, “Names and Numbers,” 284.

counting, so the number one hundred crosses to the right hand. (Jerome, *Homilia in Ezechialem* 17; cf. also *Epistulae* 48.2, 123.9; and *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.3, cited earlier)

Once again, this kind of numerological interpretation raises the question as to whether or not the Synoptic writers saw some symbolic significance that would have made sense in a world in which the number one hundred held such an important place in the prevalent practice of finger calculations in the Roman world.⁵²

One Hundred Fifty-Three and Two Hundred Seventy Six: The Triangular Numbers

In the post-resurrection story of the miraculous catch of fish in the Gospel of John, the narrator informs the audience that the catch numbered one hundred and fifty-three, a number that has vexed interpreters from patristic to modern times.⁵³ Jerome, in an effort to claim the one hundred fifty-three represented all the peoples of the world who would be drawn into the church, observed: “writers on nature and properties of animals who have learned *Halieutica* in Latin as well as in Greek, among whom is the learned poet Oppianus Cilix, say that there are 153 different kinds of fishes” (*Homilia in Ezechialem* 47.12).

Another interesting interpretation of the number was made by Augustine who noted about the number of one hundred fifty-three: “When you have reached seventeen, then up springs the total one hundred fifty-three. You will be on the right hand to be crowned, you will not stay behind on the left to be damned” (Augustine, *Sermones* 251.7). This quotation echoes our earlier discussion of the significance of triple digit numbers (especially “one hundred”) for moving from the left hand to the right hand in finger counting, but it also introduces a new element, namely the significance in antiquity of triangular numbers.

Augustine says that when one has reached seventeen, “then up springs the total one hundred fifty-three.” But what does he mean by this cryptic reference? His intent is made clear in other interpretations of John 21:11:

If you compute from one to seventeen, it adds up to one hundred-fifty three. There is not need to count it all now, count for yourselves at home; calculate it like this, one and two and three and four are ten. In the same way that ten is one plus two plus three plus four, so add the rest of the numbers up to seventeen: and you will find the sacred number of the faithful and the future saints in heaven with the Lord. (Augustine,

⁵²This is not to negate other functions of the number one hundred, such as introducing a break in the expected pattern (whether “30, 60, 90” or “30, 60, 120”; cf. *Gospel of Thomas*) and thereby signalling that the parable has come to an end (so J.D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* [New York: Harper & Row, 1973], 43-44). Nor would I rule out the possibility that Jesus himself may have attached some numerological significance to both parables under consideration here. More work would need to be done on numerological symbolism in first-century Jewish sources, however, before drawing such a conclusion about the *vox Jesu*.

⁵³For a survey of interpretations, see Culpepper, “Designs for the Church.”

Sermones 248.5; cf. Sermones 249.3; Sermones 250.3; Tractates on John 122.8)

Thus, Augustine knows that 153 is the sum of the consecutive integers, 1 + 2 + 3 . . . + 17 equals 153. This kind of number is now known as a triangular, so called because when schematized, it forms an equilateral triangle.

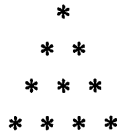


Figure 1. Triangular 10 = (1 + 2 + 3 + 4)

Triangulars were known to ancients (and not just Pythagoreans, see Augustine below), although they were unaware of its modern formula:⁵⁴

$$T_n = \frac{n(n+1)}{2}$$

That early interpreters such as Augustine recognized that 153 “springs out” of 17 is significant, especially when we recall (as noted above) that by the time of the writing of John’s Gospel (near the end of the first century A.D.) eighteen was the numerical value of the suspended form of the name Jesus IH. The relationship between seventeen and eighteen in Christian numerology becomes very interesting when we interpret, with Jerome, the 153 of John 21:11 as representing the “world” (based on his “knowledge” that there were 153 different varieties of fish in the world).⁵⁵ Seventeen, representing the created order, is not eighteen; rather it is just “under” eighteen, the number for Christ. Since the world is already under the “Lordship of Christ” (seventeen is less than eighteen), the success of the universal Christian mission is already guaranteed in John 21 (“the net was not torn”; v. 11b). The point is made more straightforwardly in the Colossians hymn: “in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:16-17).

Another triangular number is found in Acts 27. The number of passengers on the boat in Acts 27:37 has long puzzled interpreters. Some, like Calvin, emphasize the miraculous nature of the account in that none of the two hundred seventy-six perished: “The number of the men is recited, first, that it may more plainly appear that none of the multitude did perish . . . it is a thing impossible that two hundred threescore and sixteen men should escape to land, having suffered shipwreck, without loss of any man’s life Therefore, God

⁵⁴This formula is also known as the “handshake effect,” since with it one can calculate the total number of handshakes, if everyone in a given room shakes hands!

⁵⁵It is interesting in this regard to note that seventeen different nationalities comprise the “Table of Nations” in Acts 2:9-11, another implicit reference to the nations of the world; see F.H. Colson, “Triangular Numbers in the New Testament,” *JTS* 16 (1915): 74.

did plainly stretch forth his hand out of haven, seeing all those came to shore safe and sound which had cast themselves into the sea" (*Commentary on Acts*, 28.37). Others, on the other hand, remark on the plausibility of the number, citing Josephus's report that he was shipwrecked along with six hundred others (*Life* 15). Occasionally, an interpreter observes that two hundred seventy-six is a triangular number (the sum of the consecutive integers 1-23), only to deny the number contains any symbolism.⁵⁶ The only modern interpreter who does allow for some symbolic meaning in the number makes no suggestion as to what it might be!⁵⁷

If there is any symbolism to be attached to two hundred seventy-six, it is probably to be found in its "triangulator," twenty-three, and here the significance is to be found in the fact that twenty-three is *not* twenty-four (a similar phenomenon was noted earlier about the "seven sayings from the cross" not being six).⁵⁸ Twenty-four is a multiple of twelve and was recognized as such by patristic interpreters of the "twenty-four elders" in the book of Revelation (4:4 et al). Victorinus of Petovium, for example, said, "These twenty-four fathers are also the twelve apostles and the twelve patriarchs" (*Commentary on the Apocalypse* 4.3). Tyconius makes the same point, but argues further that twenty-four, as a multiple of twelve, represents the whole church in its totality:

The elders represent the whole church . . . the twenty-four includes at the same time both leaders and people, as though duplicating the twelve tribes of Israel on account of the two Testaments. For the very same church is established in both the old and in the new, since he shows the church in the twelve apostles, namely, the entire body of leaders. . . . The twenty-four thrones, considered by way of a distribution of offices, are twelve, since also the leaders of the twelve tribes will be advanced. And the twelve thrones, considered by way of a mystical number, is one throne, where from comes the church. For the Lord Christ is alone the one who will sit in judgment. However, the church also will sit and does sit judging

⁵⁶C.K. Barrett, *Acts* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 2.1211, notes that H. Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (Hermeneia; trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 220; and R. Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (2 vols.; Zürich et al: Neukirchener, 1986): 2.293; erroneously give 276 as the sum of 1-24.

⁵⁷Colson, "Triangular Numbers," 72.

⁵⁸This view gains momentum when we acknowledge that Luke has a penchant for using numbers in various contexts, and some of the uses have apparent symbolic value. In addition to the eighteen and one hundred already discussed here, consider, for example, the "Seven" Hellenists, a number whose symbolic value (representing the Gentiles; see Michael Livingston, "The Seven: Hebrews, Hellenists, and Heptines," *Journal of Higher Criticism* 6 [1999]: 32-63) is evidently distinctive of Luke (see Acts 6:1-6, and especially Acts 21:8, in which the "Seven" is used as a title in much the same way as the "Twelve"). Forty is an important number in Acts with biblical precedence, both for the number of days during which the disciples were instructed by the resurrected Lord (Acts 1) and the age of the lame man healed in Acts 3-4. As we noted earlier, eight represents "resurrection," and in Acts 9, Aeneas, sick for eight years, is "raised up" from his bed; the length of his illness may certainly evoke a "resurrection/resuscitation" motif (cf. also the Transfiguration scene in Luke 9:28, in which Luke states the event occurred "after eight days" (rather than the six mentioned by Mark).

the twelve tribes, but she will do this in Christ in whom is the whole [church]. (*Commentary on the Apocalypse* 4.4)

In his argument, Tyconius alludes to Luke 22:29-30: "I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." Did Luke also understand the reference to the twelve apostles and the twelve tribes as pointing to the totality of the church? Luke is certainly able to use a multiple of twelve with symbolic significance; he does so with the mention of the 120 in Acts 1:15. He also thought that the ingathering of the church through the Gentile mission could not commence until the circle of Twelve was restored. Eleven apostles were insufficient; twelve were required. By similar logic, twenty-four (a multiple of twelve and the sum of the twelve tribes/patriarchs + the twelve apostles) represents the church, and twenty-three does not. What is the upshot? Despite the early references to the church as a "ship" (cf. Matt 8:23-27), the two hundred seventy-six gathered on the boat with Paul do *not* "represent" the church, and the meal Paul shares with them is *not* the Eucharist; that is, twenty-three is not twenty-four. Had Luke only wanted to indicate the impressive, even miraculous, number of passengers who survive the shipwreck (so Calvin above), he could have accomplished this by referring to "about 300" (cf. Acts 2:41 in which Luke reports "about three thousand souls were added that day"). But by using the triangular number two hundred seventy-six (in a way that triangular sixty-six—the sum of integers 1-11—does not do), Luke is able both to give an impressive number of crew and passengers spared by God from the storm and to make clear, to those who have numerological ears to hear, that this group does not represent the Christian community. Luke makes the point that this is no "Gospel ship" explicit when the soldiers, still full from Paul's bread, plan to kill the prisoners to prevent them from escaping in the chaos of the storm (27:42). The subtle symbolism in Acts 27:37, if intended, functions at a secondary or even tertiary level to discourage a symbolic interpretation of the ship's meal scene as a Eucharistic meal. Luke uses one kind of symbolism to undermine another! The danger of such subtle symbolism, of course, is that the message may be missed. Certainly the manuscript tradition, in which the number is changed to a smaller number (seventy-six, two hundred seventy-five, two hundred eighty), destroyed both the symbolism and miraculous magnitude of the number. Thus, in the subsequent extant reception history, the symbolism largely failed.

Taken together, these two triangular numbers, one hundred fifty-three and two hundred seventy-six, function to make two crucial points, one Christological (the world is under the cosmic Lordship of Christ) and one ecclesial (the world is not the church).⁵⁹

⁵⁹The third triangular number in the NT, six hundred sixty-six (sum of integers 1-36), is even more complex, since here the significance may be not only that "666" is not 7, but that in isopsephy the importance is found in the numerical value of the letters of the name of Nero (or some other political figure from antiquity), rather than in the number 36 (which itself is the triangular number of 1-8!). Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the triangulator 36 was especially sacred and signified the Cosmos for the Pythagoreans, because

Conclusion

The world of early Christian numerology remains relatively unexplored, especially with regard to its possible presence in the New Testament writings themselves (excluding Revelation). One necessary step is the establishing of criteria for distinguishing between numbers used with symbolic meaning and numbers used simply to state a calculation. In some cases, one must consider seriously the possibility that numbers are introduced to reflect historical verisimilitude or perhaps even reality itself. This would be especially important in the case of numbers whose meaning is not readily apparent (153) or if containing some symbolic referent, is only at a secondary or tertiary level (276?).⁶⁰ In other instances, it is important to note that some numbers have their significance in relationship to other numbers, as with the examples cited here: six is *not* seven; seventeen is *not* eighteen; twenty-three is *not* twenty-four; and ninety-nine is *not* one hundred.

It is also all too easy to find hidden meaning behind every number one turns over; in most cases, the context, both the immediate literary context and the larger cultural context, provides important clues for possible numerical symbolism. Still, before dismissing these examples of symbolic numerology as too arcane or complicated, we do well to remember the fascination early

it was the sum of the first four odd and first four even integers (Plutarch, *de Is. et Os.* 75; cf. Colson, "Triangular Numbers," 70).

⁶⁰Older commentators leaned toward the solution that the number simply reflected the number of fish caught (see Culpepper, "Designs for the Church"). J.H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John* (ICC; Edinburgh 1928), 2:699–700, argued that fishermen counted fish in order to divide the catch equally among the participants. On the view that the number reflects actual historical fact, of course, we are in no position to verify or falsify such a claim. Our honoree, Alan Culpepper, "Designs for the Church," recounts the following memorable story: "When he finished writing his commentary on John, Raymond Brown joked that after he wrote on John 21 he dreamed every night that when he got to heaven he would find the Beloved Disciple and ask him why he said there were 153 fish in the net, and every night the answer was the same: 'Because that is how many there were!'" The case for historical verisimilitude is not any less problematic. Brown (*The Gospel according to John* [AB 29A; Garden City, N.Y. 1970], 2:1076), who leaned toward the solution of verisimilitude, noted that in John there is an "an emphasis on the authentic eyewitness character of what has been recorded (xxi.24). . . . so here perhaps we are to think of his reporting the exact number of fish that the disciples caught." The case of historical verisimilitude is hardly compelling, however, since one could rightfully ask if the number is for the sake of appearing "history-like," why not choose a number that is not particularly vulnerable to symbolic speculation (say 152)? Thus, we are led to disagree with Craig Koester's conclusion: "Do the 153 fish have symbolic significance? Probably not. There is little reason to think that mentioning this number is any more probable than observing that the invalid had been ill for thirty-eight years or that the five thousand were fed with five loaves and two fish. Its function is to emphasize the size of the catch" (C.R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* [2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003], 315). In the case of numbers—whether corresponding to reality or verisimilitude—which also have some symbolic meaning in antiquity, the interpreter is surely responsible for exploring its possible symbolism.

Christians had with numbers (cf. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* II.16.25).⁶¹ And we would need compelling evidence to presume that this fascination began only *after* the New Testament writings were composed. Indeed, in some instances, even within the New Testament, we need to consider, at least, the potential payoff for better understanding the early Christian worldview by engaging, from time to time, in exegesis “by the numbers”!

⁶¹As Bovon, “Names and Numbers,” 281, has noted, such numerological speculation “did not belong to the elementary doctrinal or ethical teaching of the first Christian communities. But as soon as a desire to deepen the faith occurred, such a development became possible.” Bovon cites the *Epistle of Barnabas* as self-consciously reflecting this understanding of numerology as “advanced” doctrine. I suspect this interest in numerology is part of a larger fascination in antiquity in the correlation between outer and inner in terms of body and character (e.g., physiognomy; see Parsons, *Body and Character*) and outer/inner in terms of the “hidden” meaning of numbers and letters. For example, in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, 14, the boy Jesus says to his teacher: “If you’re really a teacher, and if you know the letters well, tell me the meaning of the letter alpha, and I’ll tell you the meaning of beta.”



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