

One, Three, and Seven: Sacred and Symbolic Numbers

There are three uses of numbers in the Bible:

1. Conventional. Conventional use relates to the actual counting of people, animals, things, and so on—the conventional use of numbers constitutes the most frequent manner of referring to numbers in scripture.

2. Rhetorical. Rhetorical use is employed occasionally in poetry and prophecy (e.g., Prov. 30:18–19, 20–23, 29–31; Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13).

3. Symbolic. In symbolic use, the number means something beyond its conventional value.²⁵

This chart deals with the third use of numbers, their symbolism. According to one biblical scholar, “Few doubt that in certain contexts in the Bible numbers take on symbolic overtones. . . . It is not that the number has symbolic meaning every time it appears, but through literary and cultural convention symbolic use is possible in some and without doubt in other passages.”²⁶

The numbers one, three, seven, and twelve have symbolic values that are directly related to the lord. One is the principal component

of the word *atonement* (at-one-ment), three points directly to the Godhead, seven is used in dozens of contexts with regard to the lord and His Atonement, and twelve is the number of the lord’s specially empowered disciples—the Twelve Apostles: “And when [Jesus] had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease. Now the names of the twelve apostles are these . . .” (Matt. 10:1–2).

This chart presents several numbers that are used symbolically, together with their possible meanings and some representative passages. Readers of the scriptures should use caution and not attempt to apply symbolic values to all numbers or even to most numbers. As stated above, the conventional use in scriptures is by far the most frequent employment of numbers. Applying a symbolic meaning to a number when none is intended will negatively affect one’s understanding of the scriptural passage that is being studied.

Number	Associated Meaning(s)	Representative Passages
One	At-one-ment, Unity	"That they may be one, even as we are one" (John 17:11, 21–22; see also Gen. 2:24; Deut. 6:4; John 10:16; Acts 4:32; 2 Cor. 13:11).
Two	Law of witnesses	"At the mouth of two witnesses . . . shall the matter be established" (Deut. 19:15; see also Deut. 17:6; Mark 6:7).
Three	Godhead	"For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one" (1 John 5:7; cf. also <i>three</i> in Jonah 1:17; Matt. 12:40).
Three and one-half	Righteousness is cut short and the wicked dominate	"A time and [two] times and the dividing of time" (Dan. 7:25)—three and one-half years that a wicked king will blaspheme God and persecute the Saints (see also Dan. 9:27; 12:7; Rev. 11:2–3, 11; 12:5, 14; 13:5).
666	An inaccurate attempt to counterfeit the number seven; number of the beast	"Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six" (Rev. 13:18).
Seven	Completeness, totality; connected to covenant-making (Hebrew root for seven [<i>sheva</i>] is same as Hebrew verb that means "to take an oath")	"For in six days the lord made heaven and earth . . . and rested the seventh day: wherefore the lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it" (Ex. 20:11; see also Lev. 13:21; 15:28; 25:4–5; Num. 23:1, 29; Deut. 16:13; Josh. 6:4–15; Matt. 18:21–22; Rev. 1:4, 12, 20; 5:5; 8:6; 15:1; 17:1).
Ten	"Completeness of order"	"The perfection of Divine order." ²⁷ (Ex. 8–10; 20:1–17; Deut. 23:3–5; Matt. 25:1–14).
Twelve	Governmental perfection; lord's special witnesses	See Gen. 49:28; Ex. 39:8–14; 1 Kgs. 7:25; 10:20; 18:31–32; Matt. 10:1; 19:28; Rev. 7:5–8; 21:12.
Forty	Period of probation, testing, and tribulation	"A period of evident probation" (Gen. 7:4; Ex. 16:35; 24:18; 1 Kgs. 19:8; Num. 14:33–34; Ezek. 4:6; Matt. 4:2; Luke 4:2).

Number	Associated Meaning(s)	Representative Passages
Seventy	A product of seven and ten, "spiritual order" ²⁸	"The lord appointed . . . seventy" (Luke 10:1; see also Gen. 10; Ex. 24:1, 9; Num. 11:16; Matt. 18:21–22).
Thousand	A large quantity	"The lord thy God . . . keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations" (Deut. 7:9; see also Ps. 84:10; 90:4; Isa. 7:23).
Ten thousand times ten thousand	A vast number	"Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before" the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7:10; see also Rev. 5:11).