

The Context Bible

Life Group Lesson 44

October 27, 2014 – November 2, 2014

Revelation 1:1-2:11

Have you ever wished the Bible was easier to read through like an ordinary book – cover to cover? Because the Bible is a collection of 66 books, reading it like an ordinary book is quite difficult. Compounding this difficulty is the fact that the later writers of the New Testament were often quoting or referencing passages in the Old Testament. In fact, much of the New Testament makes better sense only if one also considers the Old Testament passages that place the text into its scriptural context.

You are reading a running commentary to The Context Bible. This arrangement of Scripture seeks to overcome some of these difficulties. Using a core reading of John's gospel, the book of Acts, and the Revelation of John, the Context Bible arranges all the rest of Scripture into a contextual framework that supports the core reading. It is broken out into daily readings so that this program allows one to read the entire Bible in a year, but in a contextual format.

Here is the running commentary for week forty-four, along with the readings for week forty-five appended. Join in. It's never too late to read the Bible in context!

Week Forty-Four Readings

<p>10/27 John's Revelation Rev 1</p> <p>Mrk 12:1-12:12 Dan 7:9-7:14 Zech 4 Isa 41:1-41:4 Pslm 89 Isa 46</p>	<p>10/29 John's Revelation Rev 1</p> <p>Heb 13:7-13:16 Eph 6:10-6:20 Heb 4:11-4:13 Num 6:22-6:27 Isa 48:12-48:22</p>	<p>10/31 The Letter to Ephesus Rev 2:1-2:7</p> <p>Jer 2:1-2:3 Gen 3:22-3:24 Prov 3 Prov 29:24-29:26 Isa 17</p>
<p>10/28 John's Revelation Rev 1</p> <p>Ezek 2 Ezek 3:4-3:27 Isa 49</p>	<p>10/30 The Letter to Ephesus Rev 2:1-2:7</p> <p>Lev 26:1-26:13 Heb 12:3-12:17 Prov 17:3 Prov 12:1 Prov 20:30 Gen 25:19-25:34 Num 20:14-20:21 Heb 10:32-10:39</p>	<p>11/1 The Letter to Smyrna Rev 2:8-2:11</p> <p>Jas 2:1-2:7 Prov 19:1, 4, 19:6-19:7 Matt 24:1-24:14 Jas 1:1-1:4; 1:16-1:27 Prov 17:28 Prov 18:2, 6, 13, 15 Prov 19:11 Prov 10:20, 10:30-10:32</p>
		<p>11/2 Off</p>

BACKGROUND

This week we begin working through the Revelation of John. It is a book that has invigorated the imagination and scholastic endeavors of many through the millennia. The book is foreign to modern thought in many ways. It is steeped in Old Testament language. It follows a style that echoes that of multiple Old Testament prophets. Revelation fits into a genre of literature called “apocalyptic literature” peculiar historically to an era long ago. It speaks to issues that were sensitive to life in the Roman Empire in the first century, yet it seems to be speaking predictively of the future as well.

As we work our way through the book in the Context Bible series, our goal is not to write a commentary on Revelation. Nor is our goal to explain in detail all the different approaches to Revelation. In these lessons, our plan is to explain the supporting scriptures to try and give a semblance of meaning to Revelation’s usage of the Old Testament. We will also explore some of the issues that help us understand the significance of some of the unique features of Revelation compared to much of our literature, culture, and thought today. For example, in this introductory lesson, we will focus on the significance of numbers. They play a role throughout the book of Revelation and understanding them is key to anyone’s processing of the text.

I add one final background note on the approach to Revelation in these lessons. While many will quite properly read Revelation through the lens of their own views of the end times (pre-millennial, post-millennial, a-millennial), only occasionally will my view peek through the pages. When it does, I will try to keep other significant views in mind, trusting the reader and teacher to apply their own personal filters. To me, many of the final end events of the world as we know it, and that of the world to come, will be understood as they unfold. While I am comfortable with my views, I am not the most adamant about my own “knowledge” of exactly how it unfolds!

Revelation 1 (Mark 12:1-12:12; Daniel 7:9-7:14; Zechariah 4; Isaiah 41:1-41:4; 46; 48:12-48:22; 49; Psalm 89; Ezekiel 2; 3:4-3:27; Hebrews 4:11-4:13; 13:7-13:16; Ephesians 6:10-6:20; Numbers 6:22-6:27)

From the very beginning, Revelation is like many things we typically encounter. The text of the entire book, we have a text that “works” on multiple levels. This was a vision that was to be read out loud to others (Rev 1:3), and it reads *vividly*, evoking strong images in the minds of the hearers. Revelation is not only a good “read” or “listen,” but like many Old Testament prophetic books¹, it is also one that is suitable to deep contemplation and study. So, while the book delivers a strong message on what

¹ Like Ezekiel in Ezek. 2, John was called to the task of proclaiming this message to the people of God. As Revelation unfolds scenes of judgment, the parallel with Ezekiel 2 and 3:4-3:27 becomes even more pronounced.

we might carefully call a “casual” level (i.e., on a preliminary reading), it also packs an even stronger punch as one dissects the book carefully to discern more subtle variations on the same core message and theme.

A good example of this comes in by the usage of numbers from even the earliest verses. An appendix is attached to help understand numbers as symbols, but we insert here briefly some core concepts.

We live in a “numbers” society. We have numbers for identification where one digit makes the difference between you and someone else. Numbers are the reference points for whether we can legally drive. We memorize our date of birth in number form. We calculate our gas mileage and follow rules of the road based on numbers. The time of day is expressed in numbers, as are the days of the month. Our recipes are number intensive both for the amounts of ingredients and the cooking temperature. We have numbers in our passwords, numbers for our bank accounts and credit cards, and numbers for our ATM usage. Most every financial transaction involves math and numbers. Few of us barter for our electricity!

Importantly in our number society, we all take many years of math in school. Although many of us forget a good bit of it (how many can recite the quadratic equation without help?), we all know many basic math formulas. We live by the literal values of numbers. Rarely do we use numbers for any symbolic meaning. They are concrete representations of specific values or quantities. In almost thirty years of practicing law, I have heard many bizarre things, but I have never heard someone defend a traffic court case by arguing,

“But your Honor, I thought the 70 M.P.H. speed limit sign was symbolic! I thought it meant I could drive a perfect speed!”

In our 21st century society we do not generally consider numbers for their symbolic significance, but it has not always been so. In ancient times, math was not so readily known, nor was there as great a need. The advent of coins was relatively late, and while silver and gold were metals of commerce, bartering was much more common. As the ancients experienced and explored numbers, they quickly identified mysterious things. Not surprisingly, the earliest trades associated with the usage of math were builders and priests!² Builders naturally needed to know how to make a square corner. Priests were ones who stared at stars, kept calendars and clocks, and were more carefully observant of seasons. Moreover, priests were involved with music, and music demonstrated core principles of math, from counting to scales.

² Farbridge, Maurice, *Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism* (Wipf & Stock 1970), at 93.

In the ancient world, numbers held symbolic significance. We note several for now, adding an appendix to give the references and reasons for the conclusions we enumerate here. The number “3” was considered a divine number, also representing the spiritual aspects of life and the world. The number “4” was symbolic of the earth and physical things. The numbers “7” and “12” were complete or total numbers, not surprising since “3” (the spirit) and “4” (the material/world) add to be everything “7” or multiply to “12.”

So in Revelation 1, for example, we read of seven churches in Asia (1:4, 11, 20), seven spirits before the throne (1:4), seven golden lampstands (1:12, 20), seven stars (1:16, 20), and seven angels (1:20). On a more subtle level, we read in chapter one the beatitude

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near (Rev 1:3).

This is one of seven beatitudes found in the book (See also, Rev 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14). We also see in chapter 1, a frequent occurrence in Revelation of references to God and the Lord Jesus in terms of “threes,” the “divine” number.

Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth (Rev 1:5).³

Sometimes the “three” is found in another group of three. Consider the trio of God as one who “is, was, and is to come,” one of three descriptors pocketed into God as “Alpha and Omega,” “the Almighty.”

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev 1:8).⁴

A similar tri-partite description is found in the Lord’s claim in Isaiah 48:12.

I am he; I am the first, and I am the last.

The threefold descriptor is found for Jesus in Hebrews 13:8.

³ This verse ascribes to Jesus titles used in the Septuagint translation of Psalm 89:27, which speaks of God making his chosen the “firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.”

⁴ The description of “first and last” is one ascribed to YHWH in Isaiah 41:4. “I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he.” Similarly, in Isaiah 46:9-46:10, God’s self-description emphasizes the timelessness of his reality, “for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done.”

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Numbers 6:22-6:27 shows another usage of three, this time as a threefold blessing from God.

1. The LORD bless you and keep you.
2. The LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.
3. The LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Symbolism in numbers is frequently found not only in many Old Testament passages, but also in many writings outside of Scripture (see appendix). In the contextual readings, one passage that has great import, not only in Revelation 1, but also beyond, is Daniel 7. As set out in this lesson, Daniel 7:9-7:14 images the thrones of heaven with the Ancient of Days sitting in judgment. Those before the thrones are “a thousand thousands” and “ten thousand times ten thousand” (Dan 7:10). “Ten as an ancient number was symbolic as a multiplier. Ten of anything indicates a lot! So using “thousands” and “tens of thousands” is symbolic of an innumerable amount.

Beyond the numbers, we can also find significance in many of the symbols used in the Revelation vision. When John turns to hear the voice speaking to him, he sees one who is described in the language used of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7:

The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire (Rev. 1:14)	The Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames (Dan. 7:9)
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The fuller description in Revelation is even more intensely explored in Daniel. Revelation describes Jesus as “one like a son of man” who is holding seven stars, with a double-edged sword coming from his mouth.⁵ His face was “like the sun shining in full strength” (Rev 1:13-1:16). When read in companionship with Daniel 7:13-7:14, we see the role of this “Son of Man.”

⁵ The “sword coming from his mouth” is found in the Isaiah 49 passage about the servant of the Lord who was called from the womb with God making his “mouth like a sharp sword.” This is the servant who conquers by the truth of his words, rather than through some physical might. Hebrews 4:11-4:13 speaks of the “word of God” as “sharper than any two-edged sword,” indicating its power in discerning truth and revealing secrets. Paul also used the “sword” to describe the word of God, which is the work of the Spirit (Eph 6:17).

Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Jesus comes in victory and judgment. We can see how he won his victory in the explanation of Revelation 1:17-1:18.

Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.⁶

John finds Jesus “in the midst of ... seven golden lampstands” (Rev 1:12, 20). Jesus declared in Revelation 1:20 that the lampstands were “the seven churches,” but reading from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, we see some additional insight into the symbolism. Zechariah had an angelic visitor in a vision who showed him a golden lampstand with seven lamps on it. The golden lampstand was deeply ingrained in Old Testament thought as a key part of tabernacle/temple furnishings (Num 8:1-8:4; Exod. 25:31, etc.). The lampstands represented the presence of God, but also the reach of God illuminating the worship and his people. New Testament scholar G. K. Beale considers the lamps in Zechariah 4 as the part of the temple that

stands for the whole temple, which by extension represents faithful Israel who is required to live “not by [earthly might] nor by power, but by my Spirit” says the Lord (Zec 4:6).

In this sense, as Jesus cites the golden lampstands as the “seven [i.e., “all”] churches,” we see the church is core to the people of God illuminated by God and also the faithful people of God who illuminate him to the world.

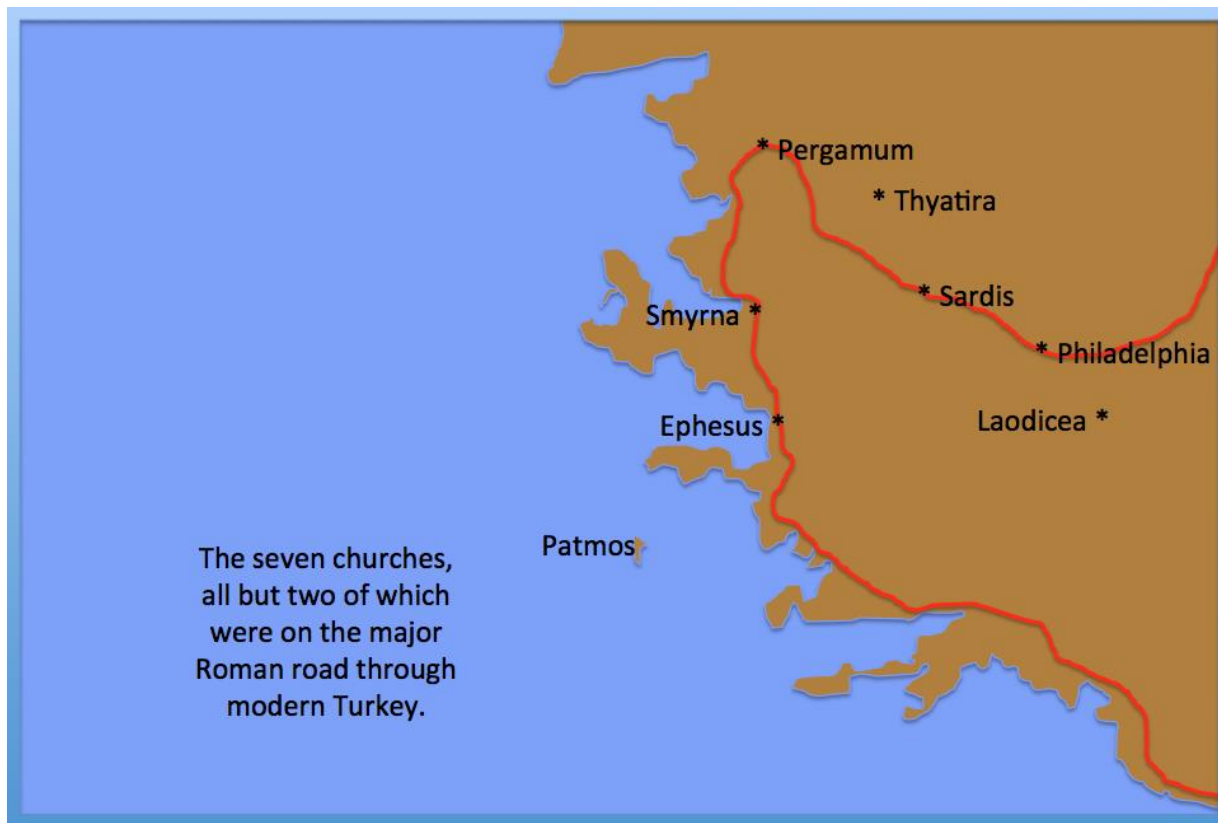
The eyes of the LORD, which range through the whole earth (Zech 4:10).

The Letter to Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-2:7; Leviticus 26:1-26:13; Hebrews 12:3-12:17; Proverbs 3, 12:1; 17:3; 20:30; 29:24-29:26; Genesis 25:19-25:25:34; Numbers 20:14-20:21; Hebrews 10:32-10:39; Jeremiah 2:1-2:3; Genesis 3:22-3:24; Isaiah 17)

After chapter one, the next chapters of Revelation are letters dictated to John for the seven churches. These letters number seven as indicative of “all” churches,” yet we also see that they were real churches with specific issues addressed. In part we can see this with the messages, but the ordering of the churches also indicates it. These churches are ordered as they would be for delivery. Ephesus as the central church in

⁶ Here we see the end of the story inherent in the parable of the tenants in Mark 12:1-12:12.

Asia would not only get the first letter, but would also be the logical coastal starting point preceding delivery inland.



The first letter to Ephesus again comes from Jesus, the one “who holds the seven stars in his right hand” and “walks among the seven golden lampstands” (Rev 2:1). The church is recognized for its hard work, patient endurance, and intolerance for evil. But even as the church discerned false apostles and bore up under tough circumstances, the church had “abandoned the love” it had “at first” (Rev 2:4). The church was called to remember and repent, lest the lampstand be removed. As a final appreciation, the church is noted for its hatred for the works of the Nicolaitans. The letter closed with an admonition to hear what was said, knowing the one who conquers will be given to eat from “the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Rev 2:7). (This is an obvious reference to the Genesis 3:22-3:24 curse that removed Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden and denied them opportunity to eat of the tree of life.)

There is sound biblical advice in this letter, and many of our readings are other scriptures that give similar advice. The idea of blessing and living in the presence of God is a strong Old Testament promise to those who live in obedience. Leviticus 26:1-26:13 sets out blessings for obedience to the Israelites who were destined for the

Promised Land, including the promise that God would make his dwelling with them (Lev 26:11).

Hebrews 12:3-12:17 emphasizes holding patiently to the course set before us – that we not grow weary or fainthearted, in our struggle to resist sin. Hebrews 12:12-12:13 employs a great physical analogy for the spiritual battle.

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

It is in holiness we “see the Lord” (Heb 12:14).

Proverbs 3 contains many admonitions to living wisely before God, with the practical instructions that accompany such living. There is an assurance that as one trusts God and leans on God’s instructions for life, God ensures straight paths (Prov 3:5-3:6). There are many other practical instructions in the proverbs including honoring God with first fruits (Prov 3:9-3:10), care against taking advantage of close relationships (e.g., borrowing from your neighbors when there is no need) (Prov 3:28), and more.

We also inserted the reading from Genesis 25:19-25:34 where the births of Jacob and Esau take place. Esau, the first born, then sells his birthright to Jacob for the temporary pleasure of a bowl of stew. This shortsightedness was certainly wrong on Esau’s part, but it was also an unfair abuse of a relationship by Jacob, that would wind up causing him and his family fear and consternation later. A loving brother living right before the Lord would have accorded it an honor to give food to his hungry brother.

Living as a good neighbor should involve treating others with kindnesses we should expect. In Numbers 20:14-20:21 we read of the Edomites refusing passage to the Israelites, stirring up an enmity that would last generations.

Endurance in what is right (for the church at Ephesus this was their need to sustain the “first love”) is hard. Recognition of this is a repeated theme in Scripture, both directly and by implication. The Hebrews 10:32-10:39 passage encourages believers not to lose sight of early convictions of love and compassion that stemmed from commitment to righteousness and holiness. This passage echoes the belief of many scholars that the “first love” lost by the Ephesians was in fact, “love” and “compassion.” Hebrews 10:32-10:39 reads,

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings... For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of

endurance... But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

Similarly, Jeremiah 2:1-2:3 is a prophetic pronouncement of the failure of God's people to sustain the early love and devotion that had produced obedience. Isaiah 17 laments the times where people live desolate, having "forgotten the God of your salvation" and "not remembered the Rock of your refuge" (Isa 17:10).

The Letter to Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-2:11; James 1:1-1:4, 1:16-1:27; 2:1-2:7; Proverbs 10:20, 10:30-10:32; 17:28; 18:2, 6, 13, 15; 19:1, 4, 19:6-19:7, 11; Matthew 24:1-24:14)

In Revelation 2:8-2:11 we have the letter to the church at Smyrna. This church was poor by the world's standards, but rich in the Lord. This is a good thing. As Proverbs 19:1 says, it is better to be poor and honest, than a dishonest fool. This is true even though wealthy people draw friends while the impoverished are often isolated (Prov 19:4, 19:6-19:7).

Unlike the other churches, there is no corrective admonition for sin, but instead encouragement for the difficulties that were coming. There was to be testing. A period of "tribulation" was coming that would last "ten days" (symbolically a "full period," rather than 240 hours). The church was urged to stay faithful even unto death, confident in receiving a crown of life!

Again, this is practical instruction for godly devotion and living found repeatedly in the pages of scripture. James wrote to his readers to count trials and tribulations as opportunities to "test" faith. This testing is not so much like an exam in school, i.e., a chance to get the answer to a question right. It is more a "testing" in the processing of metals, where the metal is melted down and the impurities are scraped off. In this way, times of tribulation and trial produce a steadfastness, a "stick-with-it-ness" that matures the believer, preparing them for anything life (or death) may throw at her/him (James 1:1-1:4). There is a difference between simply hearing the words of God and the teachings of scripture, and doing them. This is core to what makes a believer a *believer*. This is one who *does* what God says, not simply hears or reads it (James 1:22).

There is a key to some of the actions that were destructive to the believers in Smyrna that are referenced as "slander of those who say that they are Jews," but are really "a synagogue of Satan" (Rev 2:9). We have chosen this passage to key off the serious nature of how we use our words, examining what they say of us, as well as the results they have on others.

The Proverbs are a treasure trove of practical living advice in this regard.

- The righteous have words of life, while the wicked have hearts worth nothing (Prov 10:20, 10:30-10:32).
- Righteous people speak carefully, but fools speak carelessly and destructively (Prov 17:28; 18:2, 6, 13).
- The wise seek to know and understand the implications of life (Prov 18:15).
- Good sense gives patience, even in the face of others' sins and mistreatments (Prov 19:11).

As Jesus recounted the signs of the close of the age to his disciples in Matthew 24:1-24:14; he was clear that tribulation would come to his followers. How the followers handle it is a statement of their faith. There are many who will lose the ardor of their convictions, but to those who stand firm, salvation awaits.

QUESTIONS

1. As you read and study through Revelation, there is a challenge to both appreciate the vivid narrative and to dig deeper into the text and find multi-layered meanings. Will you join in that endeavor? Have someone read passages aloud, close your eyes and listen. Then dig out the text and consider it in light of the contextual readings.
2. Can you remember the early days of your faith? Have you lost any of the ardor or love that typified your early walk with the Lord? How can you rekindle that (or keep it aflame, if you find it still burning strongly)?
3. Is holiness important to you? Why? How can you grow in that?

Week Forty-Five Readings

<p style="text-align: center;">11/3 The Letter to Smyrna Rev 2:7-2:11 cont'd</p> <p>Prov 14 Prov 22:28 Prov 23:10-23:11 Prov 29:13 Heb 3 Pslm 95 Heb 4:1-4:10 Rom 2:28-2:29 2 Tim 3:10-3:13</p> <p style="text-align: center;">11/4 The Letter to Pergamum Rev 2:12-2:17</p> <p>Num 22-23</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">11/5 The Letter to Pergamum Rev 2:12-2:17</p> <p>Num 24-25 Prov 15:10-15:16</p> <p style="text-align: center;">11/6 The Letter to Thyatira Rev 2:18-2:29</p> <p>Prov 2 1Kgs 16:29-16:34 1 Kgs 21:25-21:29</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">11/7 The Letter to Thyatira Rev 2:18-2:29</p> <p>2 Kgs 9 Prov 21:9-21:19 Rom 2:2-2:5 Pslm 26 Jer 19</p> <p style="text-align: center;">11/8 The Letter to Thyatira Rev 2:18-2:29</p> <p>2 Chron 21-24 Prov 24:11-24:12</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>11/9 Off</i></p>
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SYMBOLIC USAGE OF NUMBERS (Appendix)

This appended approach to the ancient view of numbers includes the following:

1. Primarily, a review of the extant ancient literature to see primary accounts of using numbers,
2. Secondly, a review of other books written on the subject.
3. A focus on the Ancient Near East (those communities in the sphere of influence on Israel, including Israel), as opposed, for example, to the Far East, and,
4. A focus on the time period expressed in the Bible.

SYMBOLIC NUMBER USAGE

In typical 21st century number fashion, the temptation is to start with number one and march numerically through each number searching for a symbolic usage. However, lines are not so clear cut in ancient days. It is clear from reading the ancient documents and texts that many times numbers are used for their clear numerical value, much like we would today. There are passages where four means four and two means two. There are also passages that demonstrate a symbolic usage of numbers where the number used is clearly not the actual number meant! Yet there is another group of passages where the number appears to have an actual value as well as a symbolic value. A few passages are somewhat ambiguous, and do not readily indicate whether the number is referencing a specific value or symbolizes something else. With that warning in mind, let us consider some of the more common numbers that held significance beyond

simply a numerical value we associate with them today, focusing on those found most frequently in apocalyptic literature.

3 Scholars analyzing Scripture and writings of the Ancient Near East see the number three often used symbolically as a small well-rounded total that typically is associated with something sacred.⁷ Farbridge's review of Babylonian literature (remembering that Daniel is placed in Babylon as an author steeped in a Babylonian royal education) indicates,

An examination of the frequency with which the number three occurs in Babylonian Literature suggests that here also the number had some symbolic or sacred significance.⁸

Our review of the literature confirms both Driver's and Farbridge's conclusions, yet with the caveat. Rarely does it mean that the number three is not *also an actual number value*. In other words, the number might be used simply as a symbol, but it is not definitely used only that way. Many times it seems to be used as an actual number *because of its associations as a symbolic number*. Here are a few examples:

Biblical Examples

- Num. 24:10 – Balaam blesses Israel three times.
- Jonah 1:17 – Jonah is in the belly of the whale serving his sentence for three days and nights.
- 1 Kings 18:34 – In his showdown with the prophets of Baal, Elijah has the sacrifice watered three times before calling down God's fire.
- Gen. 15:9-15:10 – Abram's covenant with God involves cutting in half a group of three threes: a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old goat, and a three-year-old ram. (There are also two birds, but the birds are not cut in the story and there is no way to know the ages of the birds.)
- 1 Sam. 3 – Samuel is called by YHWH three times before Eli the priest perceives it is YHWH calling.

⁷ Driver, S. R., *The Book of Genesis*, (Methuen 1907), at 176.

⁸ Farbridge, at 101.

- Num. 6:24-6:26 – The priestly blessing is a three-fold repetition of YHWH. (YHWH bless and keep; YHWH make his face shine and be gracious; YHWH lift up his countenance).
- 1 Chron. 21:9ff – YHWH gives David three choices of threes for his punishment on conducting a census (three years of famine, three months of devastation, or three days of pestilence).
- Dan. 6:10 – Daniel kneels and prays three times a day.
- Ex. 23:17ff – The Israelites are to journey to festivals honoring YHWH three times a year.
- Jer. 7:4 – The people were wrongly taking solace in a three-fold chant of “This is the temple of YHWH.”
- Isa. 33:10 – God’s actions are in threes. (“Now I will arise, now I will lift myself up, now I will be exalted.”)
- Isa. 6:3 – The angels exalt YHWH in a three-fold repetition (“Holy, holy, holy...”)
- Hos. 2:19-2:20 – God’s betrothal of Israel is announced in a three-fold formula (“I betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness.”)
- Jer. 22:29 - YHWH uses a three-fold repetition in pronouncing his word (“O land, land, land, hear the word of YHWH!”).

Babylonian Examples

- The head of the Babylonian pantheon was a triad⁹ of gods in space: Anu (god of heaven), Ellil (god of earth), and Ea (god of water).¹⁰

⁹ These triads are not to be confused with the concept of the Trinity. This was not “three in one” but were three distinct gods who were fully independent and even capable of fighting and plotting against each other.

¹⁰ These are referred to as the “great gods” in the late Babylonian version of Nergal and Ereshkigal (dating from roughly the time of Daniel). See Hallo and Younger, *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Brill 1997), at 386. See also the *Enuma Elish* (the Babylonian creation account) at tablet IV, line 146.

- Marduk makes three times one-hundred gods for Anu in heaven, as well as for the god of the underworld.¹¹
- The gods used for times and seasons were another triad: Sin (the moon god); Shamash (the sun god); and Ishatar (the earth mother god of life and fertility).
- If a man broke a drinking vessel while drinking, three days of troubles would befall him.¹²
- The pathway of the sun was divided into three divisions, each associated with a separate deity.
- Magical texts were frequently written with incantations of threes.¹³
 - Witches manifested in three night divisions (evening, midnight, and dawn).
 - The influence of witches was destroyed by reciting an incantation three times.
 - There was a magical effect of tying a cord three times around the neck of one sick.
 - Incantations over a house were recited three times¹⁴
- Exorcisms were more effective if performed three times.
- Toothaches were cured by three ingredients incanted over three times and then applied to the tooth.
- War sacrifices were performed to three gods with a three-course meal including three sheep.
- At a temple dedication, there were three meal-offerings made. In the temple program for Babylon's New Year's festivals, the three-time temple blessing occurred, *inter alia*, on the third day of the month three hours after sunrise.¹⁵

¹¹ *Enuma Elish*, tablet VI, line 42, 43.

¹² Mesopotamian Omens, Hallo and Younger, at 423.

¹³ See, e.g., the stone ritual from Assur where seven gods were incanted three times. Hallo and Younger at 444.

¹⁴ Maklu series.

4 Scholars frequently cite “four” as a number that symbolized for the ancients, the completeness of the world in its physical aspects.¹⁶ We see this in Biblical usages as well as Babylonian. There is also a substantial similar symbolism for the Greeks. In this regard, it is helpful to know that there is a good scholarly consensus that Pythagoras, the “father” of Greek mathematics and numbers apparently travelled into the Ancient Near East as far as Egypt and Babylon.¹⁷

Biblical Examples

- Gen. 2:10 – The river from Eden divided into four to encompass the land.
- Isa. 11:12 – God will gather Israel from “the four corners of the earth.”
- Ezek. 7:2 – YHWH announces the end has come to the four corners of the land.
- Gen. 15:13 – Abram’s offspring are foretold to live in Egypt for four times one-hundred years.
- Jer. 49:36 – God brings judgment on Elam from “the four winds from the four quarters of heaven.”
- Ezek. 37:9 – God instructs Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath for resurrecting the dry bones: “Come from the four winds.”
- Dan. 7:2ff – Four winds stirred up four creatures that represent four kingdoms in the world.
- Zech. 2:6 – God has spread his people to the four winds.
- Zech. 1 – God has four horses to patrol the earth. He also raises up four craftsmen to cast down the four horns that have scattered the land of Judah.
- Acts 10:11, 11:5 – Peter sees a sheet descending by its four corners announcing God’s approval for eating non-kosher meats.

¹⁵ Pritchard, James, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, (Princeton 1969), at 331ff.

¹⁶ Farbridge at 114.

¹⁷ Guthrie, Kenneth, *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, (Phanes 1987), at 12ff.

- Rev. 7:1 – God will set four angels to stand at the four corners of the earth and hold back the four winds.

Babylonian Examples

- The god Anu forms and produces the four winds of earth.¹⁸
- Marduk is the greatest god over the earth with his “fourfold vision” and “fourfold hearing.”¹⁹
- In exercising dominion over the earth, Marduk deploys “the four winds,” the “south wind, north wind, east wind, and west wind,” and the “four-ways wind.”²⁰
- Marduk hitches his storm to fall on earth to a four-steed team.²¹
- The gods worked in drudgery on earth for four times ten years before man was made to relieve them from their labors.²²
- The gods created “the four quarters of the world.”²³
- After the flood, the Babylonian Noah released all the animals to the four cardinal points of the earth.²⁴
- Nebuchadnezzar was motivated to rebuild a temple when Marduk “aroused the four winds and removed the sand inside.”²⁵
- The Babylonian kings used the term “king of the four corners” to describe themselves as rulers of the world.²⁶

¹⁸ *Enuma Elish*, tablet I, line 105.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, at lines 92-95.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, tablet IV, at lines 42-46.

²¹ *Ibid.*, at line 51.

²² *Atrahasis*, line 37.

²³ *Etana*, at Hallo and Younger, 453.

²⁴ *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Hallo and Younger, 458ff.

²⁵ Nebuchadnezzar’s Restoration of the Ebabbar temple in Larsa, Hallo and Younger, at 308-9.

²⁶ See, e.g., *The Sippar Cylinder of Nabonidus*, Hallo and Younger at 310.

Greek Examples

- The Greeks identified the entire world as a composite of four different elements: fire, air, earth, and water.²⁷
- Pythagoras reportedly divided the world into a double quadrant.²⁸
- Philo-Judeas considered four the earth's perfect number.

7 Seven as a symbolic number dates back as far as any other in written records. Going back several thousand years B.C.²⁹, seven seems to indicate a godly perfection or totality. While the origin of this thought is not known, some scholars believe it derives from adding three, the well-rounded sacred number to four, the completeness of the world. This provides the number seven, a complete number of things sacred and earthly. (The same principle is cited for the number 12, which is three times four, and is also indicative of godly perfection or totality.) This number carries the symbolic meaning in a number of references throughout Biblical times and geography/cultures. As we see the examples, we will see reasons for Farbridge's comment,

When the number seven is insufficient to express the complete thought required, then multiples of seven are used.³⁰

Biblical Examples

- Gen. 2:2 – There were seven days of creation and God finished on the seventh day.
- Gen. 2:3 – God made the seventh day of the week a holy day that brought the week to completion.
- Gen. 4:15 – God announces a seven-fold vengeance on any who kill Cain.

²⁷ Plutarch, *De Plac. Phil.*, at 878.

²⁸ Plutarch, *De Anim. Proc.*, at 1027.

²⁹ The Gudea inscriptions date 2,000 B.C., and most every scholar agrees that their employment of seven is symbolic.

³⁰ Farbridge, at 126.

- Gen. 4:24 – Lamech announces that, “If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold.”
- Gen. 7:2ff – Noah is instructed to take seven pairs of all clean animals into the ark. Noah also takes seven birds. God is set to commence his rains in seven days. (The rains last 4 times 10 days, a full complement for covering a full earth!)
- Gen. 8:4-8:12 – Noah's ark rests on the seventh month, the seventh-plus-ten day. After seven days Noah sends out a dove. Seven days later he sends another dove.
- Gen. 29 – Jacob serves Laban seven years for Rachel and seven years for Leah.
- Gen. 33:3 – Jacob bows to the ground before Esau seven times, seeking his forgiveness.
- Gen. 41 – Pharaoh dreams of seven cows twice and seven heads of grain twice, Joseph interprets the dream as seven years of goodness and seven years of famine.
- Gen. 50 – Joseph and others lament the death of his father for seven days.
- Ex. 21:2 – Hebrew slaves were to be released after seven years.
- Ex. 22:30 – First-born cattle were to be given to YHWH after seven days of life.
- Ex. 23:11 – Fields were to be left fallow in the seventh year.
- Ex. 24:16 – YHWH had Moses wait on Sinai until the seventh day before he spoke to him.
- Ex. 25ff – The priests' rituals before YHWH repeatedly are built around sevens: seven lampstands, seven days of priestly garb, seven days of consecration, etc.
- Lev. 4ff – The priests would sprinkle water and blood seven times in rituals before YHWH.
- Josh. 6 – Jericho is taken as seven priests with seven horns lead the people seven days marching around the city, seven times on the seventh day. Then the wall came down.
- Judg 6:1 – Because of Israel's disobedience, YHWH gave them into the hand of the Midianites for seven years.

- Judg. 16 – When Samson was giving bogus reasons God had assured him strength, he built the false explanations around seven, as if imparting a special Godly significance: tie with seven fresh bowstrings, weave hair in seven locks, etc.
- 1 Sam. 10-13 – Samuel tells Saul to wait for him seven days. Saul takes the seven days literally and when Samuel does not show up, Saul offers the sacrifice himself. Samuel then shows up and judgment falls on Saul for not waiting until Samuel got there, at the fullness of time, whether it was seven precise days or not.
- 1 Kings 18:43ff – Elijah sends his servant seven times to look at the sea for indications of rain. The clouds are seen on the seventh time.
- 2 Kings 5 – Elisha had Naaman dip in the Jordan seven times to cure his leprosy. (Lev 13 sets seven days as important in the assessment of leprosy.)
- Prov. 24:16 – The righteous fall seven times, but get up again.
- Prov. 26:25 – Do not believe a hater, because there are seven abominations in his heart.
- Jer. 25:11 – The exile was set to last seven times ten years.
- Ezek. 3:15ff – YHWH comes to Ezekiel after seven days of waiting.
- Ezek. 40 – Ezekiel’s model temple in his vision has seven steps for the people to approach the temple and YHWH.
- Dan. 3:16 – Nebuchadnezzar has the furnace heated seven times normal for the failure of the Jewish men to worship his gods.
- Dan. 4:23 – The king was set to live as a beast for “seven periods of times.”
- Zech. 4:10 – Zachariah cites the seven eyes of YHWH that range throughout the whole earth.
- Matt. 15 – Jesus feeds the masses with a few fishes and *seven* loaves (the number is specified) and has seven baskets of leftovers.

There are 70 times 7 more examples in Scripture (including Jesus responding to Peter that he must not forgive seven times, but seventy-seven times – Matt 18:22), but these give a good flavor.

Babylonian Examples

- In the Babylonian flood account, the storm lasts seven days and the dove is released after seven days. This is followed by a sacrifice with seven and seven cult vessels.³¹
- The Ashipu ritual for temple sacrifice included seven altars with seven vessels of incense and seven cups of wine.
- The Bavian inscription of ten gods names each of the ten, but ends by calling them the “seven great gods,” a clear indication of seven as a symbolic number.³²
- The temple of all the gods was known simply as the “house of seven gods.”
- The penitent offered the prayer, “My god, my sins are seven times seven, pardon my sins. My goddess, my sins are seven times seven, pardon my sins.”
- The descent into the underworld involved going through seven doors to enter and seven to exit.³³
- The version of Nergal and Ereshkigal, contemporary to Daniel, not only has the seven doors to the underworld, but also seven doormen who are struck down as the god Nergal (Erra) lays with the goddess Ereshkigal for seven days.³⁴
- Seven day feasts were used to install the storm god’s high priestess, where seven dried cakes and seven pots of beer were offered as seven and seven men ate and drank.³⁵
- In divination prayers to Shamash, the penitent offers seven and seven sweet loaves.”³⁶

³¹ Hallo and Younger, at 459ff.

³² Farbridge, at 127, comments, “There are ten gods mentioned here, so that the number seven cannot refer to the names of the previously mentioned deities, but can only be taken as a symbolic round number in which all the gods of the pantheon are included.”

³³ *The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld*, Hallo and Younger, at 382f.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, at 388f.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, at 427.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, at 427.

- In the Erra and Ishum myth, the god Anu impregnates the earth and the earth bears seven gods.³⁷
- In the Tel El-Armana documents, a number of letters feature the writer bowing to the king and lord, “seven times and seven times.”³⁸

Greek and Roman Examples

- Aulus Gellius (123-170 A.D.) wrote philosophy and history. Writing of the Greeks’ views, he noted the symbolism rich in seven noting seven stars in each dipper (the “greater” and “lesser” bears), seven stars in the Pleiades, seven rotations in the heavens, moon cycles of four (the earthly number) times seven, seven wonders of the world, seven sages of old, and seven laps in a circus race. Gellius also noted the Babylonians building a life off of seven cycles.³⁹
- Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria (a contemporary of St. Paul’s) was trained in Greek and Jewish thought. He believed the “seventh number does indeed bring with it perfection.”⁴⁰ Philo placed the significance of seven as deriving from three plus four, the holy and the profane. He cited Hippocrates’s seven ages of man, built around seven year cycles (a little boy getting all the baby teeth by age seven; a boy until 14 years and the onset of puberty; a lad until 21 and the full growth of the beard; a young man until 28 when all growing is done; a man until 7 times 7 or 49, an elderly man until 56, after which one is an old man.) Philo started observing seven first in the heavens, mentioning the same sevens as Aulus above. He then noted that “the principle of the number seven, after having begun from above, descended also to us and visited the race of mortals.” In this regard, Philo pointed to the seven parts of the soul (five senses plus the power to speak and procreate); seven entrails to a human (stomach, heart, lung, spleen, liver, and two kidneys); seven parts to the body (two legs, two arms, belly, chest, and head); seven features to the head (two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and a mouth); seven bodily emissions; seven Greek voice inflections; seven vowel sounds, seven strings to a lyre (and notes on a musical scale). Philo also noted the religious significance and summarized, “I doubt whether anyone could adequately celebrate the properties of the number seven, for they are beyond all words.”

³⁷ *Ibid.*, at 405.

³⁸ See the Archival Documents volume of Hallo and Younger which translate the letters on pages 237-242.

³⁹ Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, Tran’d by John Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard 1946), book III.x

⁴⁰ Philo of Alexandria, *On the Creation*, XXXVII.

10 In antiquity, ten was an independent and distinct symbol. It was “employed as a round number” and was used to express “indefinite magnitude” when used by itself or in some power of ten (one hundred, one thousand or even a myriad). Ten was a number that represented the whole, regardless of how big the whole might have been.

Biblical Examples

- Gen. 31:7 – Jacob points out that he was cheated in his wages “ten times.”
- Ex. 12 – The tenth plague was the final plague that brought about deliverance.
- Num. 14:20ff – God uses ten as the number of times the Israelites put him to the test.
- Deut. 32:30 – These numbers are used roundly and symbolically asking how one could chase a thousand and two chase ten thousand.
- Deut. 23:3 – No Ammonite or Moabite was allowed to enter into the assembly of YHWH “even to the tenth generation.” Nehemiah 13:1 interprets this passage as meaning, “no Ammonite or Moabite *should ever* enter the assembly of God.”
- Ten words were used to summarize the Ten Commandments.
- The Holy of Holies was ten cubits high, long, and wide.
- The tithe as ten percent represented the whole amount being given to God.

Babylonian Examples

- The Babylonians would add ten to the number of each of their gods (this might be confusing in English, but in the cuneiform, they would add the symbol for ten to the word/number for each god.) The total pantheon was the cuneiform for “god” added to the cuneiform for “ten.”
- Many of the examples above include numbers that are raised to some multiple of ten. Each of these examples show the same influence of the number’s symbolism.

There are many other examples of numbers used symbolically in ancient civilizations and writings, but these are some of the most central that are biblically relevant. As the study in Revelation unfolds, other numbers will be examined as well.