

Numbers In Apocalyptic Writings

In the Hebrew language there is not a separate set of symbols from the alphabet to represent numbers (like 0, 1, 2, etc.). Instead each Hebrew letter carries a numerical value as well as a sound. This arrangement is very different from our own and led to the Hebrews having a different view of numbers than we do today. As one of my teachers once put it. To the Jews, numbers are first qualitative and only second quantitative.

1. As a general rule, numbers in apocalyptic writings symbolize ideas rather than actually indicate a literal count. (In some cases both literal count and symbolism apply).
2. We do this to a small extent today. For example the number “13” is our symbol for bad luck.
3. Some examples of apocalyptic symbolism for numbers.
 - a. The number **2**
 - i. Typically used to refer to God’s people at work in this world
 - ii. Perhaps drawn from several Biblical examples of God’s messengers traveling two by two.
 - b. The number **4**
 - i. Typically used to refer to activities on earth versus activities in heaven.
 - ii. Perhaps drawn from directional imagery such as the four directions of a compass. (North, South, East, West)
 - c. The numbers **7** and **10**
 - i. Typically used to denote a full and complete set not lacking in any way
 - ii. Perhaps drawn from the variety of situations where 7 and 10 mark a complete set.
 1. 7 days of the week
 2. 10 digits of Arabic math
 3. 10 fingers, 10 toes
 - d. The number **6**
 - i. Typically used to denote man’s failure to attain a “divine” completeness or perfection on his own.
 - ii. Perhaps drawn from the idea that 6 is close to 7 but still short.
 - e. The number **12**
 - i. Typically used to refer to the saints of God as a group.
 - ii. Perhaps drawn from the 12 tribes (Old Testament saints) and the 12 apostles (New Testament Saints)
4. Bigger numbers are often seen as combinations of these numbers with similar symbolism
 - a. $1000 = 10 \times 10 \times 10 =$ the complete or whole thing.
 - b. $144,000 = 12 \times 12 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10 =$ the complete set of the saints of God.
 - c. $666 =$ man’s failure to reach perfection lined up three times in a row.