

The Number Ten in Scripture

door: Ernest Brown

Order

The consistent witness of Holy Scripture is that the number ten signifies *order*, according to God. It symbolises the full measure of human responsibility to God to maintain the orderliness of that which God has brought into being. There you are! There's nothing like plunging straight into the deep end. God is a God of order. He signified this at the very outset by ensuring that when things are done in an orderly way, by Him, or on His behalf, the number ten is prominent. In other words, God builds, or injects, the number ten into His work, and the record of the work, that is, the Holy Bible. This highlights the order integral with all that He does. By the way, no doubt men over the years have thought themselves to be very clever in introducing decimalisation into their records, systems and calculations. In doing so, they were merely following the example God had given at the very beginning. It is always good to follow the guidelines God has laid down.

An orderly creation

The first occurrence of the number ten coming to light by something happening in a ten-fold way is in the first chapter of the first book in the Bible, that is, Genesis chapter 1. We read there that, in establishing an orderly creation, ten times over, "God said". That is, at each stage, or phase, of creation, the creative act happened because "God said" so. This is confirmed in Psalm 33, where we read in verse 6, "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth". Then, again in verse 9, "He spake, and it was so; He commanded, and it stood fast". At the end of each stage, it is said, "It was good". Then, when God surveyed the completed work, and summed up what He Himself had done, He saw that "it was very good".

Human responsibility

Man was, and is, the climax of God's creation. God committed man to rule over creation for Him, and maintain God's order in it. He was made responsible to God to do so, and for the way he did it. To signify this, man was created with ten fingers and ten toes. He is a responsible creature with the capacity for action and competence to live uprightly before God. The measure of capacity granted is also the measure of responsibility. Privilege always brings, in its train, commensurate responsibility. The greater the privilege, the greater the responsibility. The relation between privilege and responsibility is often signified in Scripture by the use of the number ten somewhere in the context. Man, as the topstone of God's creation, is thereby the more responsible to God for the way he acts and reacts.

The Flood

In Genesis 8 we read that, after the judgment of the Flood, the flood waters receded sufficiently on the tenth day of the tenth month for the dry land to be seen. God was again putting a man on the earth with the responsibility to act for God in supervising the earth on God's behalf. Who did He appoint to do so? The choice was quite clear. It had to be Noah. Noah was marked out as the tenth of the antediluvian patriarchs. It is recorded of him that "Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God".

The tithe – a tenth

A very interesting example of these principles occurs in Genesis 14. Abraham went to war to rescue his nephew Lot who had got himself into difficulties by linking up with other nations. After the victory was gained, Abraham was returning home with the spoils of victory. He was met by Melchizedek, priest of the Most High God. Abraham realised that here was God's

official representative. He recognised that by giving Melchizedek one tenth of the fruit of victory. In the tithe, one tenth part, required by God, we have the whole (of whatever it might be) looked at as being composed of ten parts, the measure of responsibility. God takes one of those ten parts in token of His sovereignty.

Another thought about Genesis before we move on. I have a very good Christian friend who is much addicted to the detailed study of the Scriptures, day by day. In the course of conversation recently, he told me that he is currently enjoying examining the first and last occasions when things are mentioned in Scripture. That set me off thinking, in two directions. First of all, the law of first mention is well known and accepted by most. That is, the first mention in Scripture of a principle, a concept, a place, a person, very often gives us a very good guide to the intended significance of the term in most places where it is found. We shall expect to find occasional exceptions to this, of course. Similarly, but not commented on so much, is that the last mention of a term is also frequently significant. So, thinking about this, my mind was drawn to enquire, what is the first and last mention of the number ten in Scripture? Could it be, that, if the number ten is intended to be significant in Scripture, that the first and last mention of the number will have a clear significance? Secondly, could it be that if the number ten is important, that it will be prominent in the first and last books of the Bible, Genesis and Revelation? Let us take the plunge and find out.

First and last mentions

In Genesis, the actual number ten is given first in Genesis 16:3, in gauging Abraham's responsible attitude in regulating his household and family matters in an orderly way before God. A principle of high moral significance, well worthy of noting. Likewise, the last mention in Genesis is chapter 45:23, where we read about Joseph sending a tremendous gift to his distant father Jacob, in token of the blessing and value of living a righteous life before God and men. To round off the study, there are indeed ten occasions in the book of Genesis where the number ten is brought in to highlight what is due to godly order.

In Revelation, again, it was no surprise to find that there are indeed ten occasions where the number ten is brought in. The first is in chapter 2:10, where we are told that God will set a limit on the suffering of His distressed people, prepared to suffer hardship because of their faithfulness to their God in difficult days. The last mention is in chapter 20, where we are told that Satan, released from the abyss at the end of the world to come, will show that he is no more inclined to obey God than he ever was, and is cast into the Lake of Fire. Another very significant moment in the history of the

world! Satan will have to reap the due rewards of the misery and sorrow he has caused in God's fair creation.

All in all, a clear demonstration of the consistency of the Word of God, and the value of studying it, both in scope and in detail. Obviously, the structure comes out most clearly in the original languages in which the Bible was written. Nevertheless, most of the time it comes through so clearly in our simple English version that it firmly establishes the principle. Let us look at a few of the innumerable examples that are to be found in the Word of God.

Pharaoh and the people of Israel

In the book of Exodus, Pharaoh's responsibility to God for his treatment of God's earthly people is noted in the ten times he hardened his heart. The ten plagues God brought upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians demonstrated God's orderly discipline on those who oppose God and His people.

Ten commandments were given to the Israelites. Man, representatively in Israel, was thus put on the ground of responsibility. If a man kept the ten commandments, in every detail, his life would be one of perfect order, before both God and man. The people's failure under this responsibility is expressed in the ten times they 'tempted' their God (Num. 14:22).

Tabernacle and Temple

The number ten is very often used in various multiplied forms in the many ordinances incorporated into the ceremonial procedures of the nation of Israel. It is prominent in the measurements and dimensions of the Tabernacle and the Temple. In the Tabernacle, the Holy of Holies itself was a cube. Each side measured ten cubits. The inside linen curtains of the Tabernacle were ten in number. The Laver, the vessel for regular washing by the priests as they went about their service, is mentioned ten times in connection with both the Tabernacle and the Temple. Indeed, there were ten lavers associated with the Temple. The Laver itself is a picture of the necessity to apply the cleansing effect of the Word of God as we go about our business day by day. Again, a picture of the need for the whole of our lives and service to be regulated in an orderly way by the Word of God. The Bible is the only real agent for producing an orderly life, before both God and men.

In a more mundane way, the Israelites gave a tenth of all their substance to the Levites. They in turn had to give a tenth of their assets to the priests.

Ten Acrostic Psalms

Turning to the poetical books, we find that ten Psalms are laid out as acrostics. Each has its message integrated into its verbal, grammatical and poetic structure. The very form of words, as well as the words themselves, impresses the reader with the orderliness of all things pertaining to God. Psalm 119, the longest Psalm, with 176 verses, is a most exhaustive treatise on the way we should live in every department of our lives. It covers the A to Z of human conduct. This is clearly supported by the layout of the Psalm. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, the language in which the Psalm was written. There are twenty-two sections in the Psalm. Each verse of each section of eight verses begins with the letter highlighted in that section. So, each verse of the first section of eight verses starts with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Then, each verse of the second section begins with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and so on right through the alphabet. The orderly structure of the Psalm is well calculated to induce an orderly, disciplined life in those who read it and meditate upon it..

Of course, we Christians, with the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, do not slavishly follow any written code of practice or set of rules and regulations as such. The New Testament teaches us that the kind of life that pleases God is produced by the Holy Spirit within us. He applies all Scripture, not only one particular part, but each in line with its own context, and then in the context of Scripture as a whole. But, the principle remains; it is the Word of God which produces a life that is orderly before God and man.

A nice detail about Psalm 119 is that the Holy Spirit uses ten particular words, each with their particular emphasis, for various aspects of the fundamental word for the communications of God to us. Words like law, precepts, commandments, statutes and so on. A study of those ten words, and the way in which they are used in the Psalm, is a most edifying exercise.

In addition there are specific words used in the Bible ten times each. They are well worth digging out to see their particular significance. I have heard that there are ten of them, but I haven't yet had time to check that out for myself. Clearly, I cannot make a special point of them until I have had time to do so. I certainly intend to do that as soon as time and other jobs permit. That is one of the joys of this kind of study. The more you look, the more you find!

Responsible government on God's behalf

The same message comes through clearly in the books of the prophets. For example, the ten toes of Nebuchadnezzar's image (Dan. 2), and the ten horns on the fourth beast (Dan. 7)! They correspond to the

responsible government committed to the hands of Gentile powers, acting as God's disciplinary tools, on God's behalf, towards His earthly people Israel. These details are confirmed in similar terms in Revelation chapters 13 and 17.

The coming King

Now let us move into the New Testament, beginning with the Gospel by Matthew. Looking into its overall structure, it clearly presents the Lord Jesus as the coming King, who will take up the reins of universal government on God's behalf. So, we can expect to find some indications of His competence to do so. In chapters 5, 6, and 7, the so-called Sermon on the Mount, the Lord laid down what we might call the principles of the Kingdom. He did this with due majesty, as the coming King legislating in and for His own Kingdom. This anticipates the time foretold, among many other places, in Acts 17:31, "God has appointed a day in which He will rule the world in righteousness by that man whom He has ordained; whereof He has given assurance unto all men, in that He has raised Him from the dead."

Following that, we read in Matthew 8 and 9 of ten separate incidents where the Lord Jesus exhibited His personal power, and fitness to reign, by performing ten acts of extraordinary power, ten demonstrations of the power of the kingdom. After that, He sent out His messengers to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom.

The Decapolis

In an incidental way, Matthew 4:25 refers to an interesting group of ten cities, known collectively as Decapolis. After the conquest of Palestine by the Romans, these cities were rebuilt and partly colonised. In virtue of this, they were granted substantial privileges. Under the hand of God, the Romans, a very orderly nation, were constrained, no doubt unwittingly, to demonstrate God's principle of the blessing of doing things in an orderly way. God gives credit where it is due. Then, in the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25, discipline is applied by the Master on those who had been left with the charge of waiting and watching expectantly for His return.

Ten lepers

In Luke 17:12 we read of ten lepers who were cleansed by the Lord Jesus. Sadly, only one of them returned to give thanks, and glorify God. One out of ten! One tenth, a mere tithe. Likewise, the ten servants in the parable of the pounds in Luke 19 are clearly held

responsible for the way in which they had fulfilled their stewardship as servants in the absence of their Master.

Ten post-resurrection appearances

The period between the Resurrection and the Ascension of the Lord Jesus is one of the utmost importance. The Bible records that, during that period, the Lord Jesus made several appearances. Five of them were on the day of His resurrection. One of them was a week later. Three of them were at times not stated. One of them was on the day of the Lord's Ascension back to heaven. These appearances were made to different people, singly, in groups and companies, in public, and in private, in different localities, and at different times of day. How many appearances were there, in all? Ten, of course!

Ten days

The period between the Ascension of the Lord Jesus going back to heaven, and the Descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, was, significantly, ten days. This was a crucial period. The Lord was no longer with them in Person, and the Holy Spirit had not yet come down to indwell them. The disciples needed special wisdom and grace to act responsibly on the Lord's behalf. The Lord gave them that power when He breathed on them and said, "Receive ye Holy Ghost" (John 20:22).

Kingdoms, and specific forms of government, come and go. The last phase of human government will be a ten-kingdom confederation (Dan. 2 and 7; Rev. 13 and 17). Then, ultimately, the Lord Jesus will appear in power and great glory. He will put down His enemies and bring in His everlasting Kingdom, which will never be superseded by any other kingdom. This is the

major focal point of much of prophecy. God is moving on to that special period, referred to in the Bible as the world to come, which we are told in Revelation 20 will last 1000 years. It must be significant that that period, when the Lord Jesus will assume complete control, not only of the earth, but the very universe, will be 1000 units of time. A thousand is the cube of ten; ten times ten times ten. This earth, and those who have lived on it, will not be brought to final judgment until a full demonstration of orderly government, and orderly living, has been seen for a full cycle of 1000 years. How orderly God is in all that He does. He will exercise righteous disciplinary judgment on man for the way he has soiled God's fair creation. God, through Christ, will then display true righteousness for that extended period. Praise His Holy Name!

Addendum: 10 tens in Genesis

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| 16:3 | Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan |
| 18:32 | "I will not destroy it for ten" |
| 24:10 | the servant took ten camels |
| 24:22 | ten shekels weight of gold |
| 24:55 | let the damsel abide with me a few days, at least ten |
| 31:7 | Jacobs wages were changed ten times |
| 32:15 | Jacob gave to Esau ten bulls |
| 32:15 | and ten foals |
| 42:3 | Joseph's ten brethren went down to buy corn in Egypt |
| 45:23 | ten asses laden with the good things of Egypt |