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Bar-Ilan, Meir

The Numerology of Genesis [Hebrew]

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Shulamit Valler
Haifa University
Haifa, Israel 31905

A glance at the book's cover, itself a feast for the eye, might suggest that this is a compendium of predictions and visions of the future, a kind of hocus-pocus to be effected by calculating the numerological value of dates and names. That was my first thought. My affection for numerology, however, led me to read on and discover that here, astonishingly, is a precise, interesting, and enlightening research essay concerned not with predicting the future but rather with clarifying the literature of the past, or, to quote the writer, "interpreting literature through numbers."

The main theme of the work is clarification of the use of numbers in the Bible and especially in Genesis, where the author finds the numerological tendency conspicuous. To do so, he distinguishes between random and deliberate numbers cited in the Bible. After a particular number is found to be deliberate, the idea it represents is explained most convincingly on the basis of evidence from the world of the Bible and the cultures that surrounded ancient Israel. Finally, the author explains the significance and purpose of using that number in its particular context.

Reading the book is highly likely to convince the reader that numerology—knowledge of the symbolic significance of numbers—may well be an excellent tool for the literary and ideological interpretation of the biblical text.

The book opens with an introduction to numerology, explaining it as a word and a concept, presents the history of the research on it and on related studies, and goes on to discuss Jewish numerology.

The first chapter is the longest and the most instructive. It discusses the significance of numbers in Genesis and compares them with the same numbers when they appear elsewhere in the Scriptures. The introduction explains that numbers may have a symbolic as well as a quantitative meaning. It goes into the link to, as well as the distinction between, the Pythagorean system and the numerology appropriate for understanding numbers in the Bible. The writer also distinguishes between numerological and gematrical interpretations.

The chapter's main purpose is to disclose the significance of the numbers in Genesis on the basis of three principles: (1) significant numbers are multiplied by other significant numbers, so large numbers must be factored into their components; (2) some numbers express their characteristics not as a multiple but rather as a sum of their components; and (3) at the basis of some numbers is a cube, a three-dimensional, six-faced figure, or a number that reflects the "volume" of that "cube."

Using these three basic principles, the writer offers a most convincing explanation regarding the symbolism and meaning of single-, double-, and triple-digit numbers. Separately, there are explanations of the numbers connected with Abraham and Isaac, with the blessings given to Rebekah, the lives of Jacob and of Joseph, the ages of the patriarchs, and Noah's ark.

The question of randomness as against symbolism is examined in regard to numbers repeated within a single context and those repeated in different contexts. In the first group age numbers stand out: they can be recognized as symbolic mainly because the same age is attributed to different individuals, because of the frequent appearance of symbolic single-digit numbers, and because of the difference between the age-related numbers attributed to particular biblical figures and those attributed to them in other sources.

The discussion begins with the numbers 6-7-8, as the author explains the significance of 6 in the ancient world. This was the number of the parallel faces in all the great blocks that made up the monumental edifices, towers, and pyramids, so it was the ultimate representative of the concrete world of doing and building. The number 7, then, was beyond that world, something sanctified, whether in a positive or negative context, always representing qualities in their ultimate form.

Numerous examples from the Bible illustrate the convincing discussion of the number 7, supported by other scholars' views. Also persuasive are explanations regarding the single-digit 4 (e.g., the four corners of the earth, four seasons of the year) representing cosmic perfection and the double-digit 10, the number of fingers, representing human perfection. Thus 40, 70, 100, and 400, multiples of perfections, represent perfections in the highest degree. Throughout the discussion, the symbolic significance of these numbers is congruent with the biblical contexts they elucidate so clearly.

Somewhat less convincing are the examples of three-digit numbers, for which there appear to be other equally good explanations. Thus 127 is said to represent a high degree of perfection because it represents the perfect number 8,128, as expressed in the Pythagorean representation of numbers. With that, the author himself offers other possibilities, such as the one based on factoring 127 into $3 \times 3 \times 3 + 10 \times 10$. However, the number 127 also plays an important part in chapter 2, and its meaning is convincingly explained in this chapter devoted to 127 and 31 as random numbers,

The beginning of chapter 2 explains why 6 and 28 are perfect, developing an idea set forth briefly in chapter 1 as the Pythagorean train of thought. Later, the perfect number 8,128 is expounded.

In the Pythagorean context, it is clear that 3 represents the perfect number 6, 7 the perfect number 28, and 127 the large perfect number 8,128. The author's entirely plausible conclusion is that the symbolic 127 represents a very high degree of perfection. Similarly, he explains 31, which is the number of kings that Joshua conquered. However, Bar-Ilan himself has reservations as to its typological nature because it appears in the Bible just this once. He believes that 31 expresses the perfect number 496, and hence the biblical writer used it to represent the kings' complete capitulation to Joshua. The brief second chapter has an appendix that explains, with many examples, the differences between numerology and gematria.

Chapter 3, the final one, describes the creation and the flood: numerology, the use of antonyms, and the language of formulas. It begins by examining the story of creation from all these standpoints, as well as kinds of time. Following this route, the author reaches the conclusion that the description of creation in Gen 1 is scientific in nature. In his words, it is "a scientific description of Creation from the perspective of ritual, and without myth." Thence comes an additional conclusion regarding the interreaction between the Jewish and the ancient pre-Socratic or Pythagorean culture. The second part of the chapter discusses the flood, concluding that the presence of so many numbers indicates that a numerologist wrote it. The author believes this shows that the flood story

continues the creation story not only in the literary and technical sense but also in relating to the same scientific area.

Recognition of the scientific nature of Genesis is reinforced by the concluding section of Chapter 3, which presents that book as the work of a linguist. The chapter concludes by recognizing the compiler of Genesis as an astronomer, a mathematician, a numerologist, and a linguist, as well as a zoologist and a priest, too, and above and beyond all this, having a link with pre-Socratic views. An appendix lists the sages involved in numerology, with the content of their sayings and writings.

In his afterword, Bar-Ilan expresses doubts as to the acceptance of his book by the world of scholarship and the world of religion. While I cannot respond to his concerns about religious reactions, I see no reason at all for such concerns regarding the response of the research world. The work follows the scientific method meticulously. Most of the author's insights are supported by evidence from Israelite and neighboring cultures in the ancient period under discussion. The numerous references to research literature in Hebrew and other languages indicate the broadest study of those sources. The language is clear and fluent, the material well organized.

This clarity, fluency, and presentation may make the book accessible to interested lay people who are not scholars, which could strike a discordant note with a few denizens of the world of scholarship. Their reactions, however, do not resonate in the real world.