



James C. Peterson

Let the Authors Say What They Want to Say, Including Running the Numbers

We cited “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” in the March editorial. The authors of the declaration knew from reading the Bible that they had to be very clear about what they meant by without error. Here is Article XIII:

Article XIII

We affirm the propriety of using inerrancy as a theological term with reference to the complete truthfulness of Scripture.

We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose. We further deny that inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.

The qualifications are on the list because they are all present in the Bible. Look, for example, at “lack of modern technical precision,” “round numbers,” and “topical arrangement” in regard to numbering. When the Bible refers to numbers or counting or sequence, it might not be in the same way North Americans generally do now. The Bible is crucial for twenty-first-century English speakers, but do not assume that the people who wrote it were twenty-first-century English speakers. The Bible was written for us too, but it was not written to us. They lived in a desert. Most of us do not. They spoke Hebrew. We do not. They thought the sun goes around the earth. We do not.

Let the authors speak to us what they want to say. Do not try to make them us. They expressed themselves differently than we do. We can still hear and understand them, especially because we serve the same living and active God. But we have to listen carefully to hear them and what God is saying through them. Have you ever sought to understand someone speaking to you in English for whom English is a second language? Even if they get the words and grammar right, they might be speaking from a different cultural situation, so that we miss entirely their intent. The example so often cited is that if an Englishman tells you that he is “mad about his

flat,” he does not mean that he has been frustratingly marooned by loss of air pressure in one of his car tires. He means he really likes his apartment. And that is a difference between two native English speakers in the same year. Now add thousands of years of different history, languages, and life experiences.

Scripture is ideally like a letter from someone you know and love. You can hear their voice in it. As you come to know God better, you more clearly hear what God is saying, and become more the kind of person who God can reveal more to. Anthony Thiselton calls this a hermeneutical spiral (*New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 1997): as one listens to the whole counsel of scripture, using scripture to interpret scripture, and recognizing God’s consistent character as God reveals more and more about who God is and what God is doing, one can understand more of the scripture to reinforce the process.

So, looking carefully at how scripture does use numbers, consider the sequence of the temptations in Matthew 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13. What do you notice? These two passages say this happened, then this, and then this. Same temptations, but they are in a different order. This does not mean that one of the texts is wrong. It means that at least one writer was not trying to tell the sequence in this event. Is Matthew or Luke more concerned about sequence? In Luke 1:1–3, Luke says explicitly that one of his goals is to get the sequence right. Matthew then may have chosen an order that helped to teach a particular point.

Notice also that in this passage, the adversary-Devil quotes scripture. It is not enough to have a text that can be read the way the speaker wants. Jesus replies each time with scripture, but rightly interpreted and applied. Scripture can be abused. It can be twisted. The enemy quotes scripture accurately in terms of the words, but out of context and understanding. The adversary twists the point, using scripture to his own ends, rather than listening to what it actually teaches. Jesus replies with scripture, rightly used.

Another description of sequence. Did Jesus clear the temple at the beginning of his years of ministry or in his last week? See Luke 19:45–46 and John 2:13–22. Luke

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describes this event as in the last week of Jesus's earthly life. The Gospel of John reports this at the beginning of his description of the three years of public ministry. John is organized around each chapter describing a different metaphor for who Jesus is. John chapter 6 is about Jesus as the bread of life, chapter 7 as the living water, and chapter 15 as the vine. The Gospel of John cannot tell everything about Jesus at once. The gospel has to present the accounts in an order, but that does not have to be in a chronological order.

For that matter, how does Jesus use numbers in Matthew 18:21–22? When he says that his disciples should forgive a person that wrongs them “70 times 7 times,” does he mean to carefully count 490 offenses, and then on 491, smite him? No, that would miss the point. Jesus is telling his followers not to hold grudges or counts of wrongs. He takes the number of completeness, 7, multiplies it by ten, and then multiplies by yet another 7, to emphasize *not* counting.

When Jesus says in Matthew 12:40 that he will be in the grave for three days and three nights, is he mistaken when he is crucified Friday afternoon and raised Sunday morning? (Matthew 26–27). That is about 36 hours over three days and two nights if you count as meticulously as many do in our clocked society. Even if you are part of such a clock-oriented society and maybe even strap a clock to your wrist or carry one around in

your phone, do not assume that two thousand years ago in the Middle East that people were as obsessed with precision time and counting as we are in our society that depends on hyper-coordination. The plane leaves at a certain time whether you are on board or not. The number crunchers among us, the sequence- and number-obsessed accountants, should insist on numerical precision when they are measuring out prescription medication or calculating how many cars, buses, and trucks the highway bridge can carry. We count on them for pinpoint accuracy, but in the biblical text, it would be missing the point. In 1 Corinthians 10:8, we read that 23,000 died from the plague on a particular day, yet Numbers 25:9 says that 24,000 died from that same plague. Is one counting only the primary day of the plague and the other including those who lingered a day or two longer? Are they both giving a precise number that is not plus one or minus one? No rounding allowed?

You may love the potential exactness of mathematics, as I do, but we cannot insist that the Bible talk the way of an English-speaking scientist in the twenty-first century. Let the text say what it wants to say. No more. No less. That is respect for the Bible's message. What is authoritative in scripture is what it is teaching, not what we expect or read into it. ●

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