

“The Literalness of Numbers in the Book of Revelation:  
A Case Study of the Number Seven”

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Introduction

A potential enigma in the history of dispensational interpretation appears in the commentary on the book of Revelation by Arno C. Gaebelein. Concerning the 144,000 mentioned in Revelation 7:1-8, the venerable, itinerant teacher noted the following: “The number, 144,000, that is, 12,000 out of each tribe, must be looked upon as *symbolical*. It speaks of the complete government, which as to the earth, is invested in a redeemed and restored Israel.”<sup>1</sup> Later on in Revelation chapter 14, when the 144,000 is mentioned a second time, Gaebelein firmly rejects any interpretation that the 144,000 is the church or part of the church.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the “144,000 are the same company which was sealed in chapter vii, but they also include the distinctly Jewish remnant which suffered more specifically in Palestine. The number 144,000 being symbolical and not actual permits such an interpretation. In one word they represent the ‘all Israel’ saved by the coming of the deliverer out of Zion (Rom. xi: 26).”<sup>3</sup>

What is interesting about Gaebelein’s view of the numerals 12,000 and 144,000 is that he takes the numbers themselves nonliterally while taking what the numbers describe (Jewish people) literally. Thus, the tribes of Israel mentioned in Revelation chapter 7 are exactly what is listed in the text. Gaebelein even notes that the lost ten tribes are known by God and “He will bring them to light at that time.”<sup>4</sup> There is, however, no specific group of Jews numbering precisely 144,000. Instead, that number stands for “complete government.” What is the basis for Gaebelein’s exegetical decision at this point? The idea of Jewish numerology appears to be accepted as a matter of course. Gaebelein gives appeals to Jewish sources at times as he performs nonliteral interpretation.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Christian sources such as F. W. Grant’s *Numerical Bible* influence him to some degree.<sup>6</sup> Grant’s short delineation of the spiritual significance of the number twelve is “the manifest rule of God.”<sup>7</sup> Although Gaebelein refutes

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<sup>1</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Revelation: An Analysis and Exposition of the Last Book of the Bible* (New York: Our Hope Press, 1915), 58.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>5</sup> See Michael D. Stallard, *The Twentieth-Century Dispensationalism of Arno C. Gaebelein* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 115 n 45, 143 n 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 182-85.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see F. W. Grant, *The Numerical Bible: Acts to 2 Corinthians*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1901), 6.

Bullinger's teachings at certain points,<sup>8</sup> he is in harmony with Bullinger's specific understanding of the spiritual significance of the number twelve:

[Twelve] is a perfect number, signifying *perfection of government*, or of *governmental perfection*. It is found as a multiple in all that has to do with rule. The sun which "rules" the day, and the moon and stars which "govern" the night, do so by their passage through the twelve signs of the Zodiac which completes the great circle of the heavens of 360 (12 x 30) degrees or divisions, and thus govern the year."<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, Bullinger, in his own commentary on Revelation, rejects the symbolic interpretation of the number 144,000 in Revelation 7 in favor of a solid literal approach.<sup>10</sup> If the numerological interpretation is assumed, however, one can understand Gaebelein's conclusion that the 144,000 as a multiplication of 12 times 12,000 demonstrates an intensified idea of complete government. This fits the Revelation 14 picture of the 144,000 standing with Christ in his coming kingdom, a picture that is held by many dispensationalists even when they do not appreciate the numerology of Gaebelein's argument. But the question remains: why opt to insert a numerological conclusion into one's exegesis in a potential violation of grammatical-historical rules?

### The Problem of Numbers in the Book of Revelation

Interpretive struggle in light of the massive volume of numbers in the text of the Apocalypse, coupled with the many symbols found throughout the book, has led nondispensational scholars like Beale to claim, "Past commentators have usually agreed that at least four numbers – three, four, seven, and twelve – and their multiples have symbolic meaning."<sup>11</sup> He goes on to note that the numbers four, seven, and twelve all convey the idea of completeness based, not on numerology, but on Old Testament usage.<sup>12</sup> Certainly Old Testament imagery abounds in the book of Revelation but one cannot assume equivalence in the Apocalypse unless there is exegetical reason to do so. Literary structure complicates the debate. For example, not only does the ordinal number seven occur explicitly at least thirty times in the book, the author often uses a heptad (grouping or series of seven) as an organizing principle even

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Exposition* (1912; repr., Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), 67.

<sup>9</sup> E. W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Significance*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (1894; London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1921), 208.

<sup>10</sup> E. W. Bullinger, *Commentary on Revelation, Or, the Apocalypse*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1935), 284.

<sup>11</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 58. Be comes from a modified idealist position. Other commentators of a futurist persuasion such as Paige Patterson will acknowledge numerical symbolism without going to the extremes of Gaebelein (*The New American Commentary: Revelation* [Nashville, TN: B & H, 2012], 35). See also the cautious appeal to numerical patterns in Revelation voiced in Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *God the Trinity* (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2016), 201.

<sup>12</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 58-59.

when the number seven is not explicitly mentioned.<sup>13</sup> Such a pervasive setup perhaps strengthens the case for seeing a notion like “completeness” attached to the actual numerical meaning of seven as a matter of the biblical theology of the book.

The interpreter must also grant that certain numbers in the book of Revelation are clearly symbolical. For example, the famous 666 associated with the Beast out of the sea (Antichrist figure) in chapter 13 is a case in point: “Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six” (13:18).<sup>14</sup> This cryptic statement lets the reader know that, even if 666 is a real number used in history in fulfillment of this prophecy, it still represents something other than the numerical value of the number; that is, it represents the human Antichrist who appears during the end times. Rampant speculation about the identity of the Antichrist using the number has dotted church history for nearly two thousand years. It is quite difficult to make a case for a mere number from this text.

An analogy from modern sports culture may help us understand. When someone says “number 23” today, more often than not, many people think Michael Jordan. That was his famous jersey number. Many buy jerseys with that number to identify with him. The same holds true for other athletes. Number 6 was Al Kaline’s number. Number 3 was Babe Ruth’s number. Number 7 was Mickey Mantle’s number, at least to a prior generation. In all these cases the number represents the person. While not attaching these great athletes to the Antichrist, the number 666 is somewhat of a jersey number for the man of sin. Details are lacking and it is perhaps the tribulation believers who will see the full significance of that number. It is not merely a number, but it includes the number in some way since there is a calculation.

One could list many other problems involving the interpretation of numbers in Revelation. At this point, the most disturbing problem to the thinking of dispensationalists is the use of nonliteral interpretation of numbers appropriately handled in some passages to justify using nonliteral interpretation in other passages. In other words, once a nonliteral use is found, all numbers become fair game to some exegetes or theologians. Of course, the most important case is found in the thousand years of Revelation chapter 20. If 666 is nonliteral, then 1000 may not be literal. If the number 7 refers to something other than numerical value, then maybe the 1000 years is not a definite period of time. So the argument goes. Smalley gives the characteristic rendition of such thinking:

The numbers which are used by the seer throughout Revelation have a consistently symbolic significance. This is true, for example, of the figures ‘seven’ (1.4, 20), ‘one thousand, two hundred and sixty days’ (12.6, 14; 13.5) and ‘six hundred and sixty-six’ (13.18). Note the similar symbolism at Ps. 90.4; 2 Pet. 3.8 (‘with the Lord, one day is

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<sup>13</sup> David Aune, *World Biblical Commentary: Revelation 1-5*, Vol. 52 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997), xciv-xcv. Aune specifically alludes to the seven beatitudes (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 10, 14) and the sevenfold use of the wording “every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:5). He also notes that this use of seven as a structuring principle is consistent with extra-biblical apocalyptic tradition (e.g., 4 Ezra).

<sup>14</sup> The textual variant of 616 as opposed to 666 is beyond the scope of this presentation. Either choice does not affect the point that the numbers stand for something else other than the numerical value.

like a thousand years’). Thus, ‘a thousand years’ in Rev. 20 is not to be thought of in literal and temporal terms.<sup>15</sup>

This method of handling the millennial teaching of the Apocalypse is unacceptable to premillennialists. However, we cannot simply dismiss the amillennial or indefinite views as nonliteral and believe the work is done.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, what follows is a presentation of a case study in how the number seven is used in the book of Revelation. Understanding the use of the most dominant numeral in the book helps to frame the conviction that the literalness of numbers in the book of Revelation should likewise not be cast aside so easily.

### Literal Uses of the Number Seven

In the thirty uses of the cardinal number seven, the vast majority express a literal numerical value of seven. The four major categories of use involve the often discussed seven churches, seals, trumpets, and bowls.

#### The Seven Churches

The literalism easiest to see is the category of the seven churches. In 1:4, the entire book is written to the seven churches in Asia. These seven churches are explicitly named in 1:11. In the next verse, Jesus appears in the midst of seven lampstands (v. 12). In verse 16, Christ holds seven stars in his right hand. Surely, the lampstands and stars are symbolic and point elsewhere. The word *mystery* in verse 20 confirms this conclusion. However, the meaning is clear. The seven stars are the seven angels or messengers of the seven churches (one angel for each church). The seven lampstands are the seven churches, which had been listed earlier in the chapter. In every use of seven in this picture of Jesus in the midst of the seven churches of Asia Minor, there is no nonliteral use of the number seven. The seven churches are explicitly and literally seven churches. The seven lampstands correlate to the seven literal churches. The seven messengers are literally seven servants of some sort for the seven churches.<sup>17</sup> In these cases, the number seven is always literal.

In passing, the idea that the seven churches represent in some way all churches must be addressed. There are at least two ways in which this is usually voiced. First, there is the historicist view of Revelation 2-3 that sees the seven churches as prophetically mapping out the seven periods of church history.<sup>18</sup> In this approach, the number seven is still literal. The content

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 502-503.

<sup>16</sup> For a refutation of the Augustinian recapitulation view of Revelation chapter 20 as presented at the Council of Dispensationalism 2014, see Mike Stallard, “A Critical View of Sam Storms’ *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative*.” A version of this article may be found at [www.pre-trib.org](http://www.pre-trib.org). This paper was also delivered at the Pre-Trib Study Group in Dallas, Texas in December 2015.

<sup>17</sup> One finds humorous the fact that most commentators seem to take the angels in Revelation 1-3 as elders and the elders in Revelation 4-5 as angels.

<sup>18</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with the debate over the historicist view of Revelation 2-3. This writer does not hold this particular view.

of each letter would be directed toward a different referent, although the historical churches could still be used as a baseline to which another layer of meaning is added. Regardless of the details of one's historicist understanding, the number seven in such a scheme is a literal and precise numerical seven and not some mystical meaning.

Second, there is the position that these seven churches represent typical churches (usually of all time) while the text deals with the assortment of issues they face. Of this view, Thomas notes:

Though he [John] may have chosen only seven because seven is the number that denotes completeness (Swete), the likelihood is greater that he chose them because they were typical assemblies with regard to their histories and spiritual states. These adequately represented the various spiritual situations of the surrounding churches at the time.<sup>19</sup>

It might be better to note that all the letters end with the encouragement to listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. This implies God's desire for all churches to learn from these situational letters and make appropriate application. This desire is an exegetical truth taught in the text and not deduced from elsewhere. However, this globalized application does not provide a mystical meaning for the number seven. Even if "completeness" is implied in its use, the historical enumeration of the seven churches in Asia cannot be undone.

## The Seven Seals

The scroll with seven seals is first presented in 5:1. The entire chapter points to Christ as the only one worthy to remove the seals and unleash the judgments of God as written on the scroll. In 6:1-8, the first four seals are the four horses of the Apocalypse which announce the coming of the Antichrist, war, famine, and death (through sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts). The fifth seal (6:9-11) gives the heavenly scene of martyrs killed due to their stance for the word of God. The sixth seal (6:12-17) provides a picture of an earthquake and cosmic signs demonstrating the wrath of God. After an interlude (chapter 7), the seventh seal (8:1) telescopically initiates the seven trumpets.<sup>20</sup>

The interpretation of the typical scheme above is not overly complicated. Some interpretive issues must be weighed carefully such as the identification of the rider on the white horse in the first seal, the timing of the death of martyrs under seal five, and the timing of the seventh seal (does it occur at the midpoint of the seven-year tribulation period or at some earlier point in the first half of the tribulation). Exegetes must naturally sort out these details and more as they evaluate various views presented.

There is one issue, however, that seems rather straight forward. The seven seals are numbered in the text. They are introduced using ordinal numerals (second, third, fourth, etc.). The one exception is the first seal which is announced by the following words: "when the Lamb broke one of the seven seals." This enumeration in list fashion presents the strong impression

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<sup>19</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 63-64.

<sup>20</sup> There are, of course, variations even among dispensationalists in the interpretation of the simple outline given here. However, as will be shown for some of those distinctions at least, the literalness of the number seven is not in question.

that the events described with each seal are viewed as a unit. The implication is that the seven seals represent seven singular things even if those “things” are a series or multiplicity of actions within the particular seal judgment. In some seals, the event in view is easily seen as singular. The appearance of the rider on the white horse in seal one, the presentation of war in seal two, the judgment of famine in seal three, and the picture of martyrs in seal five are easy to see in this connection. The fourth seal lists a multiplicity of divine judgments: sword, famine, pestilence, and while beasts. But these are viewed together in a citation from Ezekiel that clearly outlines the judgment of God (6:8; cp. Eze. 5:12, 17; 14:21; 33:27). Similarly, in seal six, there are two major events – an earthquake coupled with cosmic signs. But these are taken together as signs that God is now judging. The seventh seal which telescopically leads into the trumpets is taken as a whole in that scheme. While it is clearly possible to see descriptions of events within the seals as symbolic (e.g., red horse = war), there seems to be no exegetical evidence that the number seven itself is taken in anything but a literal way. There are literally seven enumerated seal judgments from God.

One’s overall view of the seven seals is intricately tied to the seven trumpets and seven bowl (vial, plague) judgments. This is largely an issue of literary structure within the Apocalypse. However, the major interpretive options do not necessarily unravel the literalness of the number seven. For example, interpreters have held that the seals, trumpets, and bowls constitute 21 distinct judgments from God. This linear understanding of how these judgments unfold would naturally lend itself to accepting the literalness of the number seven. In addition, the aforementioned telescopic view still observes each of the judgments as distinct even if within one judgment is found a series of divine actions which can be numbered in their own immediate context. Finally, even those who hold to some form of recapitulation among the seals, trumpets, and bowls do not need to resort to a nonliteral understanding of the number seven. The enumerated list would simply contain repeated events.

## The Seven Trumpets

The seven trumpets (8:2-21; 11:15-19) follow the same pattern as the seven seals. Instead of the Lamb of God removing seals from a scroll, the imagery is of seven angels blowing their trumpets in sequence. But the effect is similar in terms of the outpouring of God’s various judgments. Ordinal numerals (first, second, third, etc.) are likewise used to introduce the sounding of each trumpet. The result of each sounding is a singular divine judgment although there are various facets and consequences to each judgment. This truth is easily seen in the first four trumpets: (1) hail, fire, and blood with 1/3 of earth burnt up; (2) a third of the sea becomes blood; (3) a third of the waters become bitter; (4) cosmic darkness increased. The presentation of the fifth and sixth trumpets give more extended treatment to the description of divine activity. In trumpet five, locust hordes attack the earth as they come from the bottomless pit. In trumpet six, some form of war coupled perhaps with supernatural intervention kills a third of mankind. Like the seventh seal, the seventh trumpet is preceded by an interlude which encompasses mostly the story of the Two Witnesses. The sounding of the seventh trumpet leads directly and telescopically into an announcement of the arrival of God’s kingdom followed by the seven bowl judgments.<sup>21</sup> Now in the use of the seven trumpets, symbolic imagery can be found (e.g., locusts

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<sup>21</sup> The kingdom announcement shows that what is to follow (bowls, destruction of Babylon) takes history to the commencement of Christ’s earthly kingdom established at the Second Coming (Revelation 19-20).

from the bottomless pit in trumpet five). But one is hard-pressed to see any nonliteral use of the actual number seven or the enumeration of the list of trumpets. There are literally seven trumpets. There is literally a series of seven events or divine actions suggested by the blowing of each trumpet even when multiple events and consequences are described. Described symbolic events do not make symbolic numbers.

The case for a literal use of seven in speaking of the trumpets is strengthened by the labeling of the last three trumpets as three woes – judgments of unbelievable grief and despair (8:13). The textual movements from the fifth trumpet (first woe) to the sixth trumpet (second woe) and that from sixth to seventh trumpet (second to third woe) provide clarity on the issue. Revelation 9:12 notes: “The first woe is past; behold, two woes are still coming after these things.” Revelation 11:14 notes: “The second woe is past; behold, the third woe is coming quickly.” In each case, the singularity of the enumerated trumpet is reinforced. The movement from one to the other also prevents an over generalizing of divine activity that removes the consecutive nature of the supernatural events. In the end, as with the seals, one must affirm a literal use of the number seven.

### The Seven Bowls

There are seven angels who “pour out the seven bowls of the wrath of God into the earth” (16:1). Throughout chapter sixteen, seven distinct angels initiate specific divine actions in judgment by pouring out their specific bowl, plague, or vial. The distinction of the angels can be proved from the separation of one of them in 17:1 – “And one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me...” In all, there are precisely seven occurrences of the bowl judgments even though some include a multiplicity of components (e.g., seventh bowl – lightning, thunder, earthquake, hailstones of 100 pounds each, Babylon remembered). Each plague is introduced by an ordinal numeral (first, second, third, etc.) as with the seals and the trumpets. Much less information is given about the bowl judgments although there appears to be an intensification compared to seals and trumpets (e.g., third bowl – rivers and springs become blood; second trumpet – third of sea becomes blood; third trumpet – third of rivers and springs become bitter). Similarities especially between elements in the trumpets and bowls has caused some to see recapitulation of portions of the judgments and even in the overall scheme. Dissimilarities suggest this is not the best approach. Nonetheless, once again in the midst of exegetical decisions on every hand, one sure truth appears. The number seven in the presentation of the seven bowl judgments should be taken in a literal way. No compelling evidence can be marshalled against this understanding. There are precisely seven bowl judgments.

### The Ordinal Number Seven

For sake of completeness (pardon the potential numerological pun), the use of seven as an ordinal number (seventh) should be reviewed, some of which we have already seen above. There are only five such occurrences in the book of Revelation. One involves the Lamb opening the seventh seal (8:1). Two uses speak of the blowing of the seventh trumpet (10:7, 11:15). One more appears when the seventh angel pours out his bowl (16:17). The previous discussion has shown that there is no reason to see any of these uses of “seventh” as anything but a literal number. The remaining use of the ordinal number “seventh” is taken from the list of precious

stones adorning the foundation stones of the city walls for the new Jerusalem (21:19-20). There is a list of twelve precious stones such as jasper, sapphire, etc. The seventh one is chrysolite. The list is precise. The enumeration is clear. Chrysolite is exactly the seventh gem in the list. Its use is literal. In this writer's judgment, it does no good to appeal to any nonliteral understanding of the city description as a whole. The ordinal "seventh" would still appear as a literal number in a mosaic providing a piece of the overall portrait of the city. In summary, there appear to be no nonliteral uses of the ordinal number seven in the book of Revelation.

### Possible Nonliteral Uses of the Number Seven

While the seven churches, seals, trumpets, and bowls seem to be enumerated in a literal fashion, there are some uses of the number seven which raise more questions that must be explored.

#### Seven Spirits, Torches, and Eyes

Perhaps the most intriguing use of the number seven is in the designation "seven spirits." This expression occurs four times in the Apocalypse (1:4, 3:1, 4:5, 5:6). The term is equated with "seven torches" in 4:5 and with "seven eyes" in 5:6.<sup>22</sup> The first reference is the most enigmatic. In the Apostle John's salutation in 1:4-6, he calls for grace and peace to the seven churches from the following personages in order:

- Him, who is and who was and who is to come (v. 4)
- Seven spirits who are before His throne (v. 4)
- Jesus Christ (v. 5)

The identification of the Father as the first one in the list is not problematic. The identification of Jesus as the third one in the list is explicit by name. Between Father and Son one finds the seven spirits. What is the meaning of this cryptic phrase?

In the history of the Church there have been two major understandings of the seven spirits: (1) seven angels; (2) the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> While modern scholars provide an interesting array of alternatives, Osborne gives a typical list of four interpretive options:<sup>24</sup>

1. Seven archangels based upon Jewish tradition (e.g., 1 Enoch & 4 Ezra) flowing out of Babylonian astral religion;
2. Seven angels (probably the seven angels to whom the seven letters are written);
3. The seven-fold Holy Spirit;
4. Symbolic reference to the complete or perfect activity of God.

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<sup>22</sup> In 5:6, the term "seven horns" also occurs. It is not at all clear that this term is meant to be equivalent to the spirits or the seven eyes. It will be dealt with in a later section.

<sup>23</sup> See William C. Weinrich, ed., *Ancient Commentary on Scripture, New Testament XII: Revelation*, gen. ed. Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 74.



Osborne opts for choice number three. In the first selection, the number seven is quite literal. The seven angels before the throne would be special messengers standing before God. The same would be true for the second option. If the seven spirits are the angels who receive the seven letters or any combination of seven angels, then seven would be precisely and exactly the number seven as observed earlier. An impressive array of scholars hold the angelic view of the seven spirits including Aune<sup>25</sup> and Mounce.<sup>26</sup> The fourth option of symbolic reference to the perfect activity of God might be considered within the realm of grammatical-historical interpretation if the idea of completeness in the number seven is considered as part of the historical background for the text.<sup>27</sup> However, in the expression “seven spirits” itself, the number seven would not necessarily reflect any numerical value and thus be nonliteral.

The third option in Osborne’s list is the seven-fold Spirit of God. The interpreter is tempted quite easily to see a nonliteral reference to the Holy Spirit so that all the members of the Trinity are part of the greeting beginning in verse 4. Justification for the seven spirits as a reference to the Holy Spirit ranges from the impossibility of inserting angelic creatures in the middle of a reference to deity to the comparisons of seven torches of 4:5 and the seven eyes of 5:6 with images from Zechariah 4. In the context of Zechariah 4, the Holy Spirit appears to be in view. Some will also correlate to the LXX rendering of the seven-fold work of the Spirit in the Messiah in Isaiah 11:2. If this is the correct view, is the number seven nonliteral? It would certainly be a theologically loaded term based upon antecedent revelation. As such it would be within the realm of grammatical-historical interpretation, but it would be considered a figurative expression. In no sense, however, would the term’s interpretation be based on any mystical understanding.

## Seven Horns

In 5:6, the Apostle sees “a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God.” The seven eyes have already been addressed relative to the seven spirits. The idea of seven horns in this passage is most likely not in apposition to the term seven eyes; that is, the seven horns do not equal the seven eyes. The term *horn* does occur later in chapter 17 when the harlot sits on a scarlet beast having seven heads and ten horns. There the horns are textually defined as ten kings. The number ten, of course, does not match the seven horns of 5:6. There may be no correlation between the two passages.

Perhaps the reference to seven horns speaks of the power that kings normally have. If it is related to the Spirit of God in the same way as the seven eyes, the two terms may reflect the omnipotence or power of the Spirit and the omniscience of God (see Zechariah 4 again as background). This can only be understood this way if the number seven carries an idea of completion or perfection. Regardless of one’s interpretation, we do not seem to be on the same

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<sup>25</sup> Aune, *Revelation*, 34-35. Aune holds the view that the seven spirits are the seven archangels.

<sup>26</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 46-48. Although Mounce rejects the idea that the seven spirits are the seven archangels, he leans toward the thought that they are seven angelic creatures associated with Christ.

<sup>27</sup> Some interpreters hold that the phrase “seven spirits” does not necessarily reflect the perfect activity of God but, more specifically, the majesty of God. See J. Ramsay Michaels, *Revelation*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), 54.

turf as the seven churches, seals, trumpets, and bowls. However, there seems to be no need to resort to any allegorical method to try to resolve meaning.

### Seven Thunders

In 10:3-4, there are three uses of the term “seven thunders” or “seven peals of thunder” (NASB). Contextually, chapter 10 begins the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpets. The loud voicing of the seven thunders appears to be a response to a heavenly angel who shouts as “when a lion roars” (v. 3). The voice of the seven thunders is authoritative and may be God Himself. Many commentators point to Psalm 29 and the development in the song of God’s message through the thunder.<sup>28</sup> As such it would be a commonly understood image. Mounce points out that the mention of thunder elsewhere in the Apocalypse is always negative (8:5, 11:19, 16:18).<sup>29</sup> As to the number seven, there is nothing contextually to help understand any enumeration. There is no list. Most commentators are left to suggest that the number seven represents the fullness of God’s voice through the thunder. In this way, the number is used symbolically or metaphorically rather than as a literal numeral.

### Seven Heads and Ten Horns

The beast out of the sea in Revelation 13 associated with the Antichrist figure in much Christian theology is said to have ten horns and seven heads. In Revelation 17, the harlot associated with Babylon rides a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns. The ten horns have already been noted to be kings or kingdoms (17:12). The imagery links the two passages. The ten horns appear to be ten literal, concrete kingdoms. What about the seven heads?

In verses 9-10, the biblical author helps the interpreter’s job by letting us know what the seven heads are: in verse 9, the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits; in verse 10, the seven heads are seven kings. For the purposes of this presentation, the issue of the seven mountains or hills in verse 9 as Rome, Babylon, or some other place will be left behind for a later time. However, the seven heads of verse 10 which are clearly said to be seven kings will be addressed. Adopted here will be a common dispensational understanding such as that given in Walvoord<sup>30</sup> or Thomas.<sup>31</sup> Using a chart to illustrate the meaning of verses 10-11, we come to see how the seven heads are seven literal kingdoms or empires successively existing in biblical history.

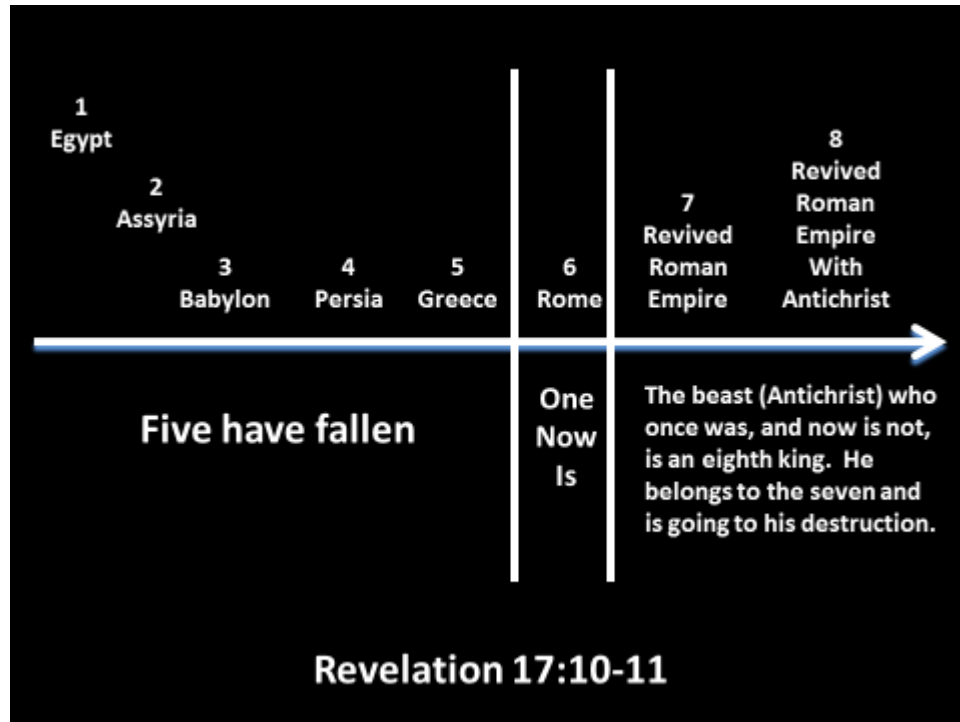
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<sup>28</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 396.

<sup>29</sup> Mounce, *Revelation*, 203.

<sup>30</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 250-54.

<sup>31</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 295-98.



Assuming this interpretation makes the best sense of the text, what does the number seven mean in verse 10? With the context of verse 11 providing the sequencing, seven refers precisely to the numerical value of seven. Seven successive historical kingdoms are in view and even an eighth kingdom is projected. There would be no need to have any recourse to a nonliteral understanding of these numbers.

### Conclusion

This presentation has attempted to explore in summary fashion the literalness of numbers in the book of Revelation. The motivation for doing so is the appeal sometimes made to the alleged non-literalness of numbers throughout the Apocalypse to argue that the number 1000 in Revelation 20 is nonliteral and refers to an indefinite length of time. This, of course, is common in amillennial presentations and many postmillennial ones. At stake is a premillennial understanding of Christ's Second Coming. The issue has much significance.

What have we found in our study? We noted that there are indeed nonliteral uses of numbers within the book which cannot be ignored. However, following a case study of the number seven – the most used numeral in the book – an inductive review showed that the overwhelming number of times that the numeral seven occurs, it is the precise numerical value of seven; that is, the number seven is quite literal. It simply is not a figure of speech in most verses whether in cardinal or ordinal form.

There were a few times, however, when the number seven was not so obviously literal. Examination of the seven spirits (1:4, 3:1, 4:5, 5:6) along with the seven torches (4:5), seven eyes (5:6), and seven heads (5:6) associated in the context led to a number of different views. Some of them were literal (seven spirits = literally seven angels) while others were more nonliteral but theologically robust (seven spirits = the sevenfold Holy Spirit). In the latter, there is no violation of grammatical-historical interpretation. There are reasonable, contextual

explanations for holding the views in question. The same could be said for the seven horns of 5:6 which appear to be figurative expressions as do the seven thunders of 10:3-4.

The last example covered was the seven heads associated with the ten horns in 17:9-11. A plausible historical overview of seven successive kingdoms or empires within biblical history were noted. In this interpretation, the number seven is literal giving the dispensationalist a reasonable account of a passage where obscurity normally reigns in the commentaries. The upshot of all of these examples is that not one example was found of a number taken in a mystical way. Interpretation could be found that was tied to the text in question.

Hence, the earlier quote from Smalley to the effect that numbers in Revelation have a “consistently symbolic significance” is simply not accurate.<sup>32</sup> Most numbers do not seem to be symbolic although allowance for some nonliteral uses must be made. Therefore, the conclusion Smalley draws that the literalness of the 1000 years in Revelation must be swept off the table is a hasty and unwarranted position.

Some final comments are in order to provide some practical guidance in this dangerous territory of numbers in the Apocalypse:

1. If a number is applied as an adjective (second seal) and the content of what the number modifies is symbolic or metaphorical (red horse = war), this does not make the number itself automatically metaphorical. One cannot assume that the large presence of figures of speech in the context force a number to be nonliteral.
2. The admission of the existence of nonliteral uses of numbers in the text does not mean that grammatical-historical interpretation has been abandoned. Literal interpretation defined as grammatical-historical interpretation is broad enough to encompass figures of speech, symbols, genre, literary structure and other language and historical issues. This applies to numbers as well. The issue of literal versus allegorical as a hermeneutical approach is a different issue than whether a phrase is literal or figurative.
3. Premillennialists must do their homework and study the text. Do not assume that all numbers are literal and that your theological adversaries are simply ignoring the obvious. Sometimes they are. Do not imitate them.
4. However, an overdose on figures of speech and metaphor may lead one sneakily up the path to the dispensationalist’s least favorite word – allegory. So, double check all your work.

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<sup>32</sup> Smalley, *Revelation*, 502.