

The Bible and Numbers

By Paul R. Blake

(Answering Bible questions...) A fellow disciple recently asked the following: "I wanted to ask your help with a question one of the brethren here asked in a Bible class: 'What is the significance, if any, of the number 40 that occurs so often in the Bible?'"

There is no directly stated significance for the number forty in the Bible. However, because of its frequent appearance in the Bible, it can be reasonably assumed that it has some significance with God, but what that significance may be is not specified. However, its meaning can be inferred by its use. While the Jewish people later attached cabalistic meanings to numbers, we know that this is not the case with inspired Bible writers. Our confidence in the Divine inspiration of scripture, combined with the frequent use of 40, can be understood to be a Divinely generated implication that number means something.

The scriptures often appear to combine symbolic, significant numbers to create more numbers of symbolic significance. Forty seems to be a combination of the four directions encompassing the whole earth, and the number ten which indicates a substantial amount, creating the number forty signifying "a substantial amount in this world," regardless of what is being counted (days, people, money, etc.). With regard to time, it can also represent the combination of a month and ten days, or a symbolically lengthy period of time.

The number forty is frequently represented throughout the Bible. It is mentioned 146 times (91 verses). It is the tenth most frequently used number in scripture after 1, 2, 7, 3, 4, 10, 100, 5, and 12 (1- 2259 verses; 2- 645; 7 - 362 verses; 3- 338 verses; 4 - 226 verses; 10 - 199 verses; 100 - 191 verses; 5 - 189 verses, 12 - 162 verses).

The following uses of forty stand out in scripture:

Rain fell for "forty days and forty nights" during the flood.

Forty years of testing of Israel in the wilderness (Deut. 8:2-5; Psalm 95:10; Acts 13:18). This period represents the time it takes for a new generation to arise.

Moses' life is divided into three 40-year segments, separated by his fleeing from Egypt, and his return to lead his people out.

Several Jewish leaders and kings are said to have ruled for forty years, that is, a complete generation. (Examples: Eli, Saul, David, Solomon.)

Goliath challenged the Israelites twice a day for forty days before David defeated him.

Moses spent three consecutive periods of forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai:

1) He went up on the seventh day of Sivan, after God gave the Law to the Jewish people, in order to learn the Law from God, and came down on the seventeenth day of Tammuz, when he saw the Jews worshiping the golden calf and broke the tablets (40 days).

2) He went up on the eighteenth day of Tammuz to beg forgiveness for the people's sin and came down without God's atonement on the twenty-ninth day of Av (40 days).

3) He went up on the first day of Elul and came down on the tenth day of Tishrei with God's atonement (40 days).

A mikvah (bath) consists of 40 se'ah (approximately 200 gallons) of water.

Forty lashes or strokes with a rod is one of the punishments meted out by the Sanhedrin, though in actual practice only 39 lashes were administered.

Before the temptation of Christ, Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights in the Judean desert.

Forty days was the period from the resurrection of Jesus to His ascension.

Forty days of the spies, resulting in the sentence of the 40 years in the wilderness (Num. 13:26, 14:34).

Elijah hid in Mt. Horeb (1Kings 19:8); Jonah preached in Nineveh (Jonah 3:4). Ezekiel lay on his right side 40 days to symbolize the 40 years of Judah's transgression (Ez. 4:6).

Forty year periods:

- under Othniel the judge (Judges 3:11)
- under Barak the judge (Judges 5:31)
- under Gideon the judge (Judges 8:28)

- under King David (2Sam. 5:4)
- under King Solomon (1Kings 11:42)
- under King Jeroboam II (2Kings 12:17,18, 13:3,5,7,22,25, 14:12-14,23,28)
- under King Jehoash (2Kings 12:1)
- under King Joash (2Chron. 24:1)
- under the Philistines (Judges 13:1.
- under Eli (1Sam. 4:18)
- under Saul (Acts 13:21)

Since God did not specify His purpose for using the number forty, or any other number frequently used in scripture, it is not necessary for us to know its meaning if any beyond in actual numerical value. God didn't think it important to tell us; the number has no significance with regard to our salvation, and it has no impact on how we keep New Testament instructions as Christians in the Lord's Church. We can conclude that there is no point in striving over the meaning of numbers beyond their actual value. It's acceptable to be mildly curious over apparent patterns, but it is best to focus on what is clearly revealed. (1Tim. 6:3-5)

Put to the Test

"Test all things; hold fast what is good" (1Thes. 5:21). "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:15-16). "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1John 4:1).

According to a recent Associated Press story, Norman and Melissa Cameron informed the Federal National Mortgage Association that they would not pay their \$54,000 mortgage because, as they said, "We asked God, the Heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, and He heard us and freed us from this mortgage bondage." When someone says that God has told them something which plainly contradicts Scripture, we can know immediately that they are frauds.

The Sense of a Goose

As each bird flaps its wings it creates uplift for the geese following. By flying in a "V" formation, the whole flock adds much greater flying range than if each bird flew alone. LESSON: People who share a common direction and a sense of community can get where they are going quicker and easier because they are traveling on the thrust of one another.

The geese in formation honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed. LESSON: We need to make sure our honking is encouraging and not something else.

When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back into formation and another goose flies at the point position. LESSON: It pays to take turns doing the hard tasks and sharing responsibility

When a goose gets sick or wounded it honks for help and two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help protect it. They stay with the sick goose until it is able to fly again or it dies. Then they launch out on their own, or with another formation, or catch up with the flock. LESSON: If we have as much sense as a goose, we too will stand by each other in difficult times as well as when we are strong.