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SOME USES OF NUMBERS

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Every reader of the Bible is conscious to some extent of the part which numbers play in the division of Biblical Books, or in the organization of those books. Most notably is this the case with the number five which, originally merely mnemonic, derived from the body—the two hands with five fingers each were the reason for the two tables of stone with five laws on each; equally the ten fingers were the basis of the decimal system, and for the duodecimal also for that matter, the latter by counting each hand in addition to its ten fingers—assumed ultimately what we may call a mystical character, owing to its relation to the Words of the two tables, so that finally the Law was arranged in five books, the Pentateuch. Later the Psalter, which we may call the prayer and hymn book, or the book of liturgy, in distinction from the Law, was arranged in five divisions to correspond with the Law. It is curious to see how mechanically this arrangement was effected. Three books of psalms had grown up, the third ending with Psalm 89. The growth continued, and there came to be a fourth collection, outside of and beyond the three books. It seemed good to divide this fourth collection in two, in order to harmonize the Psalter with the Law. The division was made mechanically, by counting from the beginning of this new collection, commencing with Psalm 90, a number of psalms equal to those in the third book, 73-89 inclusive. As there were seventeen psalms in that book, therefore the division was made after the seventeenth psalm of the fourth book, that is, after Psalm 106. The result is that the book division falls in the midst of a liturgical series, between Psalms 106 and 107, which belong together, being properly a part of one larger whole. Incidentally, this division of the Psalms at this point is valuable for critical study of the growth of the Psalter.

These two books, the Law and the Psalter, are the best known examples of the fivefold division. There are, however, other fives, as in the Book of Isaiah, but these are not carried out so

systematically, nor are they so clearly recognizable in the present arrangement of that Book. Besides the fivefold we have frequently a threefold division. This appears in Isaiah, both in Isaiah proper and in Deutero-Isaiah. The three-scheme appears also in the discussions of the book of Job. It appears in the Book of Revelation, in combination with the number seven, in utmost elaboration. Seven appears also in the Beatitudes in St. Matthew, and the petitions of the Lord's Prayer.

These numerical schemes are all familiar to the Bible student. I desire to call attention to some other numerical schemes in the sectional division and literary organization of books of the Old and New Testaments which have been more or less overlooked. Preparing in 1896 a study of Genesis as a piece of literature for a volume called the "Bible as Literature," I first became conscious of the fact that that Book, as we have it, is a finished and well-rounded whole, a true artistic creation, entitling its maker to the name of author, and not merely compiler. The Book is arranged according to a very definite and simple scheme. In the first place, it is divided into two volumes, corresponding to the two parts in the Egyptian and Babylonian accounts of the beginnings of those countries, which have come down to us in a more or less fragmentary form through the Greek. (Apparently the Phoenicians also possessed a record of the same general type, and indeed the division is almost universal.) In each case the first part of the history deals with a mythical period of the beginning of the world, in which gods and demi-gods play the leading rôle, and where the ages are enormous, reckoned by thousands and hundreds of thousands. The second part in each case is more human, sober and sane. In Egyptian lore this part begins with the first Egyptian dynasty. The first part of these histories seemed to the ancients themselves to partake of the nature of mythology. The second part was, supposedly, plain history. The Hebrew Book of Beginnings is divided in precisely the same way into two volumes. The first volume, consisting of the first eleven chapters, deals with the beginnings of the world, and contains among other things the lists of those mythical, semi-divine heroes who lived for enormous periods of time. The second volume contains the supposedly sane history of the race, commencing with the patriarch Abraham. Here our feet are on the ground. Each of these volumes is divided into sections or

chapters according to a very definite and simple scheme, to each section being prefixed what we may call a chapter heading, stating the contents of that particular chapter or section. These chapter or section headings are unmistakable, and they are practically identical: *These are the generations*, אלה תולדות, or in one case, *This is the book of generations*, זה ספר תולדות. Only the first chapter of each volume has no heading, because the first page or chapter or section is always clear as such to both eye and ear without anything further. The chapters themselves are arranged in a thoroughly systematic order.

According to the conception of the author Israel began with the creation of the universe, because God had Israel in mind when He began to create, and the history of the beginnings of Israel must commence with the history of the beginnings of the universe. This is the chapter of creation: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The second chapter, which commences at 2:4, seems at first sight to overlap the first, and it does do so to some extent. It is entitled: "These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created; in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heaven." This chapter is concerned with the preparation of the earth for the dwelling-place of man, and the formation of a garden of delight, wherein man is placed. Everything in the garden is given him to use, except one tree; and out of his very flesh and bones a help-meet is formed. But with sex sin comes into the world; they eat of the forbidden fruit; man and woman are driven out of the garden, and there begins for the human race the hard life of toil and child-bearing and strife and envy and murder, out of which came the knowledge of proper sacrifice, city building, metallurgy, music and much more. It is the chapter of the preparation. The third chapter, 5:1-6:8, is "The book of the generations of Adam," i. e. man, but man in an ante-diluvian, mythical state. This contains a list of names of long-lived patriarchs, corresponding largely with the Babylonian prehistoric ancestors who reigned for aeons, intermingling with the gods. The fourth chapter, 6-9:29, is "The Generations of Noah," where the sheep and the goats, as it were, are separated; all mankind is destroyed but Noah and his family, and that mankind from which practical, present-day men are descended begins, with husbandry and the vintage and control and use of the beasts

of the earth. The fifth chapter, 10-11: 9, is "The Generations of the Sons of Noah," the re-peopling of the earth, and the division of the nations. The author is concerned, however, with only part of the peoples of the world, that race to which the Israelites belonged; so the sixth chapter, 6: 10-11: 26, is "The Generations of Shem," a typical race genealogy. Among the Semites he is concerned only with the Aramaean race, that particular group of Semites from which Israel is descended. Accordingly the seventh chapter, 11: 27-32, is "The Generations of Terah," similar in character to the preceding. It will be observed that the mystical number seven, peculiarly emphasized in the very first section of this book in connection with the creation of the world, is the number selected for the chapters or sections of this volume.

The second volume, like the first, has no heading, because the heading is not needed, the object of a heading being to set section off from section. This volume begins with the story of Abraham, the father of the Hebrews. At this point, **פרשת לך לך**, there is a marked break; the manner of the writer changes altogether. He has more to relate. There is less genealogy, more detail, more story. The first chapter in this volume, the story of Abraham, 12: 1-25: 12, is without heading. At the beginning of the second chapter, 25: 12-18, we find the same form of heading as in the preceding volume: "These are the generations of Ishmael." But this chapter leads us into a *cul de sac*, a no thorough-fare, so far as the development of the story of Israel is concerned. It is brief and genealogical, intended to show the connection of Abraham with Ishmael, and that the line of Ishmael goes no whither. Accordingly the third Book, chapter 25: 19-35: 29, carries us back and starts afresh, as it were. The true line of Israel's descent was through the younger son. This chapter is headed: "The Generations of Isaac." The fourth chapter, like the second, is a no thorough-fare, and almost exclusively genealogical, 36: 1-37, 1, giving us "The Generations of Esau,"¹ the elder son. Again the elder son is rejected, and we must turn back. With the fifth chapter, 37: 2-50, we come finally to the line of the God-chosen descent, the true descent of

¹This chapter is confusingly composite, and incidentally **אלה הולדות** occurs twice, 36: 1 and 36: 9, but these "generations" are manifestly variant duplicates.

Israel. This chapter is entitled, "The Generations of Jacob," although in point of fact it tells relatively little of Jacob, but principally the stories of his children, and, above all, of Joseph. Indeed one is inclined to ask, Why not a chapter of the generations of the Sons of Jacob, or of the generations of Joseph?

We have in the second volume of the Book of the Beginnings five sections or divisions, arranged very systematically. The reason why we do not have a special division to cover Joseph or the sons of Jacob is because of the number five. Another division would exceed the mystical number and spoil the scheme. The last volume ends with the twelve tribes of Israel, and the purpose of the author was to end his scheme in twelve, to correspond with the tribal division. He had divided his first volume into seven parts, because the foundation of that volume was the creation of the world, which took place in seven days. It was necessary to confine the second volume to five sections, that the five added to the seven of the first volume might give us the number of the twelve tribes of Israel.

I am not going to discuss here the question of the date of this arrangement. As to the plan of the book, *quâ* book, it is so absolutely clear, and the scheme so complete, that for the fact of its existence there is no need of argument. This is the most elaborate use of a schematic system of mystical numbers which I have observed in the Bible, outside, perhaps, of the Book of Revelation, and is quite *sui generis*.

This year by pure accident my attention has been called to two other curious numerical systems in the books of the Bible, where the books are divided into sections of fives and sevens, as in the Book of Genesis, by a catch word or rather phrase, marking the division between sections, while the sections themselves are carefully organized according to a literary plan. One of these, as far as I can ascertain, has never been observed before.

It was at a meeting of the New York Oriental Club one night last winter, when the Book of Ecclesiastes was under discussion, that my attention was attracted for the first time to seven repetitions of the phrase: "All is vanity, and a striving after wind," These occur at 1:14, 2:11, 2:17, 2:26, 4:4, 4:16, and 6:9. This phrase does not appear elsewhere in the book. Examination of the passages thus divided will show that, while they are somewhat unequal in length, each is complete in itself. Each

deals with one part of a proposed scheme. The first section, 1:3-14, is introductory and general. It tells the reader what the object of the book is, the search after the permanent good: "What profit hath man of all his labor wherein he laboreth under the sun?" It closes with the statement: "I have seen all the works that have been done under the sun, and behold all is vanity and a striving after wind." Section two, 1:15-2:11, after stating the intention of investigating wisdom and madness and folly takes up first the latter of these two alternatives, mirth or pleasure, which some count as the permanent good, concluding, with regard to that alternative, that: "All is vanity and a striving after wind, and there is no profit under the sun." The third section, 2:12-17, deals with the other alternative, wisdom, and, after a similar treatment and search, reaches the same conclusion with regard to it as the permanent good, that: "All is vanity and a striving after wind." The fourth section, 2:18-26, discusses labor for the acquisition of wealth in the same way, concluding that here also: "All is vanity and a striving after wind." The fifth section, 3-4:3, considers the possibility of virtue or righteousness as the permanent good, ending with the conclusion that: "This also is vanity and a striving after wind." The sixth section, 4:5-16, treats of friendship or love, but beautiful as human affection is in the end it fails, and even "this is vanity and a striving after wind." The concluding section, 5:1-6:9, seems to advocate, as the best philosophy of life, to take things as they come, to be moderate, not to worry, and to avoid responsibility; but while this seems clearly the philosophy of the author, which he is recommending to his readers, and to which he devotes the greatest space, nevertheless, so far as a solution of the quest for the permanent or ideal good is concerned, even this "also is vanity and a striving after wind."

So far we have a well-organized book, divided into seven sections, carefully marked off, each section dealing with one topic. The rest of the book, however, constituting almost one half of the whole, is an unorganized series of expatiations on the insoluble puzzle of a life which ends nowhere but in sheol, and neither produces nor results in anything lasting, so that even its temporary rewards are capricious and uncertain. It presents no new theme, but comes back often to one or other of the themes discussed in the first half. In general it supports with new

examples and more material the philosophy of life set forth in section seven. Both of these divisions, however, as we have them, are parts of one book, the organized and the unorganized having been framed together in one frame. That frame consists of the theorem: “‘Vanity of vanities,’ saith the preacher; ‘vanity of vanities, all is vanity,’” with which the book opens and closes, a cycle or circle, in which the beginning and ending are the same, 1:2 and 12:8, the one succeeded and the other preceded by a very beautiful and poetically elaborated passage. What precedes, 1:1, is a caption or title: “‘The words of the Preacher, the son of David, King in Jerusalem,’” and not a part of the book itself. What succeeds, 12:9–12:14, is universally recognized as a later addition, attached probably to make the book more orthodox, and not part of the original work. “‘Vanity of vanities,’” 1:2–12:8, constitutes a volume in itself.

What is the cause of the curious division of that volume into two parts, one thoroughly and carefully organized in seven sections, as shown above; the other an unorganized, invertebrate medley of reflections on the purposelessness of life? Had the original author collected a mass of material, and worked only a part of that into his scheme; then, failing for some reason or another to assimilate the remainder of the material, yet finding it too good to be lost, appended it in a lump after his seventh section, the doctrine of which it tends to support; or what is the reason for this curious inconcinnity of composition?² That I do not know; but I think that in the study of the book for critical purposes it is necessary to take into consideration the division to which I have here called attention, which seems to have been overlooked by every writer on Ecclesiastes.

The last example which I have to present of the division of a book into sections according to a numerical scheme is the Gospel of St. Matthew. I have forgotten just what was the accident that attracted my eye to the division of the main body of St. Matthew’s Gospel into five sections by means of a catch phrase, which I noticed for the first time last winter. I was not hunting for trouble at the time. I was simply reading my Bible, when my attention was called to the fact that the same formula

² It resembles a note book partly worked over. Here a proverb or an old saw, with a comment on it; here an instance from experience and a suggestion of its bearing and meaning; here a little fuller writing up.

reappeared five times at certain fairly definite intervals, namely, 7:28-29. "And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended those sayings, the people were astonished at His doctrine, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes;" 11:1 "And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished commanding His twelve Disciples, He departed thence to teach and preach in their cities;" 14:53 "And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these parables, He departed thence;" 19:1 "And it came to pass, that when Jesus had finished these words, He departed from Galilee, and came into the borders of Judea beyond the Jordan; and great multitudes followed Him; and He healed them there;" 26:1 "And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these words, He said unto His Disciples."

The recurrence of these refrains has been noted, as, for instance, by Allen in his commentary on Matthew in the International Critical Series; but no emphasis has been laid upon it, nor, to the best of my knowledge, has the character of the passages framed by these refrains been pointed out, or their relation in space and in content. They present, first of all, a progression in place. The first section is described as the teaching on the Mount (5:1). The second covers His mission in Capernaum (8:5) and about the Sea of Galilee (8:28, 9:35). The third extends a little further, into "their cities" (11:1, 20, 21). The fourth leads us into "His own country" (13:54), then into desert places (14:15), and country districts (14:34), even outside of Jewish regions (15:21, 16:13), and so back at last to Capernaum (17:24). The fifth is located in Judea. Within themselves these sections have a curious uniformity of arrangement. The first section, chapters 5-7:27, is entirely a section of teaching. The second section contains two chapters, 8 and 9, of miracles and teaching combined, ending with a chapter, 10, containing teaching only, the instruction of the Twelve. The third section, chapters 11-13:52, consists of two chapters of very short narratives, connecting miracles and teaching, followed by a section, 13:1-52, of teaching only, in the form of parables. Section four, chapters 13:54-18, comprises a longer mass, chapters 13:54-17, of miracles and teaching, connected with one another by a very brief narrative, with one chapter, 18, consisting entirely of teaching. Section five, chapters 19-25, is more homogeneous, consisting through 23 of teaching, connected by a very

slight thread of narrative, with two chapters, 24 and 25, of teaching only.

We have then a division into five sections by means of a catch phrase, these sections assigned to different localities, according to a progressive scheme; the first and last of these sections consisting exclusively of teaching, the three intervening sections containing each a longer part of narrative, miracle and teaching combined, and a shorter part of teaching only.

The systematic character of this scheme is unmistakable. It is evidently intentional, not a matter of chance. The Gospel, as a whole, however, consists not of five sections but of seven. To these five sections of teaching and miracles, connected by a brief narrative, were ultimately added, to make the Gospel, the story of Jesus' birth and His call, and the story of His passion, crucifixion and resurrection. I presume that this ultimate arrangement in seven parts is intentional; but I should suppose that the arrangement in five sections is primary, and prior to the expansion into the seven. Indeed one is tempted to ask whether there was not an intentional following of the ancient fivefold division of the Law in this arrangement of Jesus' teaching.

All these cases of numerical divisions are so clear that once stated there can be no doubt about their existence. No one can fail to see them. The singular thing is that so evident a phenomenon should ever have been overlooked.