

# The Succession of Twelve by Seven/Seventy in Scripture

by Darek Barefoot

*Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? Matt 16:9-11, NIV.*

The prominence of certain numbers in literature has deep roots. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the world's oldest narratives, numbers that occur repeatedly include seven, ten, twelve, and sixty. Subject to translation, twelve receives moderate emphasis: twelve days of illness preceding the death of Gilgamesh's friend Enkidu (Tablet VIII), twelve measures of time-distance for Gilgamesh to travel the sun's path through the mountains (Tablet IX), and twelve times that Gilgamesh is exhorted to push his boat forward over the waters of death with punting poles (Tablet X).<sup>1</sup>

An emphasis on the number seven in the *Epic* is unmistakable, even allowing for different choices in translation. The seven sages, legendary founders of Gilgamesh's home city of Uruk, are mentioned at the opening and closing of the story (Tablets I and XI).<sup>2</sup> In between we find "six days and seven nights" as the duration of several events (Tablets I, II, X, XI).<sup>3</sup> Other references include seven large cups, seven gates, seven baths, seven armored cloaks, seven auras, seven plus seven pits, seven leagues, seven years' crops, seven cubits, seven sons, seven levels, seven flasks, and seven loaves (Tablets II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, X, XI).<sup>4</sup>

In *Gilgamesh* as in other Mesopotamian literature, numbers such as ten, twelve, and especially seven, are used for "many" or "a full measure." The symbolism is simple, and numbers do not occur in patterns conveying sophisticated concepts.

The significance of the numbers twelve and seven in ancient Near Eastern cultures in all likelihood owes to the use of the Sun, Moon, and stars as markers "for seasons and for days and years" (Gen 1:14). The need for a reliable calendar to time religious festivals and business contracts led priests and scribes to study celestial time-keepers, foremost among which are the Sun and Moon. The solar passage can be tracked broadly by the change of seasons and precisely by solstices and equinoxes. The month or "Moon period" of approximately 29-1/2 days does not constitute a round fraction of the 365-day solar year, but the closest whole number for the lunations per annum is twelve. Through a long historical process the number of months came to be reflected in the mapping of the sky by the ancient

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1 *The Epic of Gilgamesh: A New Translation* (translated and with an introduction by Andrew George; London: Penguin, 1999), 62, 73-74, 82.

2 *Ibid.*, 2, 99.

3 *Ibid.*, 8, 12, 78, 81, 93.

4 *Ibid.*, 14, 20, 24, 38, 46, 49, 51, 58, 90.

Mesopotamians in terms of the twelve constellations of the zodiac.<sup>5</sup>

Less widely recognized among the world's emerging cultures than the lunar month was the seven-day week, which arises from an astronomical coincidence. The Sun and Moon are the most prominent members of seven heavenly objects that move from day to day as opposed to those "fixed stars" that shift gradually relative to the horizon but not to one another. The other five are the planets that can be seen with the naked eye: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. The days of the week in English and most other western languages still correspond to the Sun, Moon, and five bright planets, as they have for millennia.<sup>6</sup> Seven also happens to be the whole number approximation of the days in one quarter of the lunar cycle, a cycle which naturally suggests division into two periods of "waxing" and two of "waning" phases.<sup>7</sup>

In the Bible, twelve is a number associated with Israel because of Jacob's twelve sons and the twelve non-priestly tribes of the Hebrew nation (Gen 35:22b; 49:28; Exod 24:4; Num 1-2).<sup>8</sup> Seven connotes perfection or completeness (Gen 2:2-3; 4:15, 24; Exod 12:14-19).

In what follows, I will explore a Biblical pattern in which the number twelve is succeeded by the number seven or seventy. This sequence appears to encode the idea of expansion from small beginnings, specifically of God's relationship with Israel giving way to his appeal to all humanity.

Seventy can function as an intensification or amplification of seven, as when seventy is either added to or multiplied by seven (Gen 4:24; Matt 18:22). Judah is said to have lain desolate seventy years so that the land might enjoy its unfulfilled seventh days and years of rest (Lev 26:43; 2 Chron 36:21). The seventy-year desolation, begun by Nebuchadnezzar, is likely mirrored in the personal desolation of Nebuchadnezzar himself, which Daniel says lasted for seven periods of time (4:16, 23, 25, 32).<sup>9</sup> The seventy years is also echoed in the seventy prophetic weeks, "seventy sevens," of Dan 9:24-27 (cf. v. 2). In terms of their symbolism, seven and seventy are largely interchangeable.

### **The Succession in the Pentateuch**

The first obvious instance of the twelve-to-seven/seventy succession is the numbering of the family of Jacob. Jacob comes to have twelve sons who live in Canaan, the future land of Israel (Gen 35:22b). When Jacob emigrates to the Gentile territory of Egypt, the number of his expanding family is given as seventy (Gen 46:27; Exod 1:1-6; LXX, seventy-five).

Another example of the succession comes from the prophetic dreams associated with Joseph. These form three pairs consisting of Joseph's dreams about his brothers, the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker, and Pharaoh's own dreams (Gen 37:5-10; 40:5-22; 41:1-32). Significant in the first pair of dreams is the number twelve. Jacob and a woman (presumably, Leah) are represented in the second of these dreams but not the first, the only recurring characters being Joseph and his brothers. The number of the brothers is not given in the first dream, but in the second it is confirmed as eleven. Consequently,

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- 5 See J. H. Rogers, "The origins of the ancient constellations: I. The Mesopotamian traditions," *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* 108:1 (Feb, 1998): 9-28. The twelve-year cyclical "zodiac" of the Chinese reflects the change of position of Jupiter as a result of its 11.86-year orbit around the Sun.
- 6 In English, it is easy to see the correspondence in the cases of Sunday (Moon Day) and Saturday (Saturn Day). The planetary connections of Tuesday (Mars), Wednesday (Mercury), Thursday (Jupiter), and Friday (Venus) are by means of the Norse names of the Greco-Roman gods associated with the planets. See Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1998), 12-14.
- 7 See, for example, the Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*, Tablet V.
- 8 The Bible links the sons of Jacob with stars or bright heavenly objects in the dream of Joseph at Genesis 37:9 (cf. 15:5; Rev. 12:1).
- 9 Apparently, *times* in Daniel is synonymous with *years* (cf. Rev 12:6, 14).

the primary subjects of the two first dreams are Jacob's twelve sons. Also, the dreams occur in the future land of Israel and concern relations within proto-Israel, the family of Jacob.

Although the middle two dreams lack the broad prophetic significance of the first two, such is not the case with the final pair. The emblematic number of Pharaoh's dreams, which is repeated twice in each, is seven, describing the number of years both of abundance and of famine coming upon Egypt. These dreams not only occur to a non-Israelite ruler on non-Israelite soil, they concern a famine that will encompass the entire world envisioned by Genesis. The dreams therefore exhibit a progression from twelve to seven coinciding with the expansion from twelve sons to seventy heirs that occurs as Jacob's children multiply in the land of the covenant and then move to Egypt. The numerical succession in either instance accompanies a shift of focus from the family of Jacob to the wider world.

A similar shift occurs in the final example from Genesis. In Egypt, Jacob gives a deathbed blessing to each of his twelve sons and their descendants (Gen 29:1-28). After Jacob dies, Joseph weeps over his father in an act that must represent the mourning of Jacob's other sons as well (50:1).<sup>10</sup> There is a forty-day process of embalming and the Egyptians pay their respects to Jacob. "And the Egyptians mourned for him seventy days" (50:3). Finally, Joseph, his brothers, and a retinue of Egyptian soldiers, horse-men, and officials conduct Jacob's remains to Canaan to Abraham's burial plot at Hebron. At a place called Atad east of the Jordan, Joseph and the burial party lament for another seven days (vv. 7-11).

Because Joseph is an Egyptian ruler leading an Egyptian company to Canaan, the local inhabitants look upon this second period of mourning as an Egyptian expression of grief. "When the Canaanites who lived there saw the mourning at the threshing floor of Atad, they said, 'The Egyptians are holding a solemn ceremony of mourning.' That is why that place near the Jordan is called Abel Mizraim [i.e., 'mourning of Egypt' or 'meadow of Egypt']."

Mourning is a kind of blessing conferred upon the dead, as the absence of mourning is a curse.<sup>11</sup> After Jacob gives a twelve-fold blessing and is in turn blessed by his sons through the grief of Joseph, he receives a blessing from Egyptians in the form of seventy days of mourning followed by a further seven days. The sympathetic Egyptians, by blessing Abraham's seed Israel, put themselves in line for blessing according to Genesis 12:3: "I will bless those who bless you." The blessing conferred by Israel (Jacob) at the end of Genesis, marked by the number twelve, is followed by a blessing conferred on Israel by Egyptian Gentiles marked by the numbers seventy and seven.

Turning now to Exodus, one of Israel's camps on the way to Sinai after leaving Egypt is at an oasis called Elim, where there are twelve springs and seventy palm trees (Exod 15:27; Num 33:9).<sup>12</sup> Besides being mentioned first, the twelve springs have a natural priority in that they sustain the seventy trees.

To finalize the Sinai Covenant, God tells Moses to bring seventy elders with him up to the mountain. First, however, Moses erects an altar with twelve pillars at Sinai's base, one pillar for each of the tribes. After the offering of sacrifices on the twelve-stone altar, Moses, Aaron, Aaron's two oldest sons, and seventy elders of Israel ascend the mountain to eat and drink with Yhwh in ratification of the covenant (Exod 24:4-11).

The book of Numbers opens by naming twelve leaders, one for each of Israel's non-levitical tribes. These men are given a representative as well as an organizational role, since they present the offerings for their respective tribes to the tabernacle (7:2-88). After naming the twelve tribal leaders three times (1:4-16; 2:3-31; 10:14-27), Numbers narrates God's command to gather seventy elders of Israel (per-

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10 The other sons of Jacob were present when Joseph grieved (49:1, 29). Though all the sons are charged to bury Jacob in Canaan, Joseph as family leader assumes the responsibility (49:29-32; 50:4-5). Cf. Acts 7:16, in which the burial of Joseph (Josh 24:32) seems to be representative of that of his brothers along with him.

11 Gen 50:1; 1 Kgs 13:29-32; 14:12-13; Zech 12:10; Jer 16:4; 22:18; 25:33.

12 For a discussion of possible symbolism, see Bernard P. Robinson, "Symbolism in Exodus 15:22-27 (Marah and Elim)," *Revue biblique* 94 (July, 1987): 376-388.

haps the same seventy who were present on Sinai) so that he can inspire them to share the burden of judging the people (11:16-17, 24-30). Two men of the group, Eldad and Medad, manifest the gift of prophecy while in the camp of Israel rather than with the other men gathered near the tabernacle, moving Joshua to protest to Moses. Moses replies that he is not threatened and would be glad to see God inspire all the people. The appointment of the seventy is therefore a dramatic—even unsettling—expansion of divine activity that follows upon the twelve-name roster of tribal heads.

A background text to remember as we consider further instances of the twelve-to-seven/seventy sequence is Genesis 10, the “Table of Nations” that summarizes the world’s population in terms of seventy ethnic divisions (LXX, seventy-two). The list includes the descendants of Shem, but its scope is intended to be universal. Humanity as a whole is a non-Israelite category even if as a technical matter Israel is included within it.

In contrast to the limited occurrences of seventy and its importance in Genesis 10, the number seven connotes completeness or perfection in so many biblical contexts that its association with the world of mankind is less obvious. The connection can be made in part by applying to the human family the concept of wholeness or universality implicit in seven.<sup>13</sup> We can also infer it from the description of the non-Israelites who occupied the land of Canaan as “seven nations” (Deut 7:1; Acts 13:19). Seven might have been used in passing for all the nations of Canaan, but in addition Deuteronomy provides a list: Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites (7:1). Genesis lists eleven ethnic groups at 10:16 and ten at 15:21.<sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy seems to regroup these peoples deliberately so that the appropriate number for them, seven, receives emphasis. If Canaan is a microcosm, its seven indigenous nations roughly parallel the seventy nations of Gen 10:2-32.<sup>15</sup> It is as the early Israelites approach this new world of Canaan after their decades of wandering that the sequence of twelve-to-seven/seventy again emerges.

### **The Succession in Israelite History**

Twelve occurs repeatedly in the Joshua narrative of Israel crossing the Jordan, in which twelve stones are taken from the river by twelve men and used for a monument (Josh 3:12; 4:2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 20). Following this episode is the renewal of the covenant by circumcision (5:2-9). In the subsequent capture of Jericho, the key number is seven. Seven priests carrying seven rams’ horns are to lead the people as they march around Jericho on seven consecutive days. They are to circle the city seven times on the seventh day to initiate the collapse of its walls (6:2-16). The battle plan based on seven accompanied not merely the destruction of Jericho but the reception of the Canaanite Rahab and her family into the assembly of Israel (6:25).

The war chronicle of Joshua runs through 12:24, after which Yhwh instructs Joshua to apportion the land west of the Jordan among nine tribes plus part of Manasseh (13:7). The other part of Manasseh had already received land east of the Jordan alongside the tribes of Reuben and Gad (v. 8). Josh 13:9-19:51 is an informal title deed providing details of the allotments of the twelve non-levitical tribes on both sides of the Jordan. The concluding part of this document, like the Jericho narrative, turns on the

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13 An example from English vernacular that survives to the present is the term “the seven seas,” meaning all the world’s seas and oceans.

14 Only Deut 7:1 and Acts 13:19 designate a number for the nations of Canaan, but seven are also listed at Josh 3:10; 24:1; Ezra 9:1. In the last reference, seven nations are named but Egyptians and Moabites appear in place of Hivites and Girgashites. Six nations are listed at Exod 3:8, 17; 13:23; 33:2; 34:11; Deut 20:17; Josh 9:1; 11:3; 12:8; Judg 3:5; Neh 9:8. Five nations are listed at Exod 13:5; Num 13:29; 1 Kgs 9:20; 2 Chron 8:7.

15 Canaan functions this way for Paul (Rom 4:13). This symbolism may be reflected in the seventy Canaanite kings subjugated by Adoni-bezek according to Judg 1:7.

number seven. The two tribes that lay entirely east of the Jordan had quickly secured their territories, as had the large and powerful tribes of Judah, Ephraim and Mannaseh. But even after the war of conquest was over, no firm land claims had been established by the the seven weakest tribes, consisting of Benjamin, Simeon, Zebulun, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan. Joshua asks each of these tribes to provide three men who will survey the remaining territory and return with a book describing its geography. Upon their doing so he will determine by lots their respective inheritances (18:2-10). The twenty-one men are to divide the land into seven areas in their description (v. 6). The concluding portion of the book of the land inheritances of the twelve tribes therefore comprises a book-within-a-book, the seven-fold division (18:11-19:51).

We can compare the survey by the representatives of the seven tribes, in Josh 18:2-10, with the earlier and better known mission, in Num 13:1-26, which was undertaken by a man from each of the twelve tribes. Moses issued the command for the first expedition as his successor Joshua did for the second. Both were of territory as yet unsettled by Israel and both were accompanied by exhortations to take the land that Yhwh had given to his people (Num 13:30; Josh 18:3). Both groups of explorers departed from and returned to Israel's leader at the encampment of the entire assembly (Num 13:3, 26; Josh 18:1-4, 9). Both groups also brought back a token of the land's character, consisting of fruit in first instance and a written account in the second (Num 13:20, 23, 26; Josh 18:6, 9). The expedition on behalf of the twelve heralded Israel's initial approach to Canaan in fear and faithlessness; the expedition for the seven occurred when the land was subdued and settlement was underway (Josh 18:1b). The center of the territory covered in the second survey was the inheritance of Zebulun, Naphtali, and Issachar that became known as "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Isa 9:1).

### **The Succession in the Gospels and Acts**

The clearest example of the twelve-to-seven/seventy succession from the Gospels consists of the missions of the twelve and the seventy (in some mss., seventy-two) disciples in Luke 9:1-2 and 10:1. The suggestion that Luke 10 adumbrates the mission to the Gentiles has no direct support from the text.<sup>16</sup> However, if the successive sets of mission instructions in Matt 10 and 28:18-20 bear a functional similarity to those of Luke 9 and 10, we might infer an anticipation of the Gentile mission in Luke 10 based on something other than the number seventy.<sup>17</sup> That speculation aside, the two missions of Luke unarguably portray the widening scope of Jesus' ministry.

Luke's twelve-to-seventy succession is absent from the other Synoptics, but they have a succession that Luke lacks. It consists of the numbers of baskets of fragments from the two miraculous feedings recorded in Matt 14:15-18; 15:32-38 and Mark 6:35-44; 8:1-9.<sup>18</sup> Twelve baskets after the first feeding are succeeded by seven after the second. Jesus later draws attention to these numbers as an indication of a deeper spiritual meaning to his provision of food or bread (Matt 16:5-12; Mark 8:14-21). In the two feedings we have widely cited evidence of a Jewish context giving way to a Gentile one, hinting that the gospel after having been preached to the Jews will be presented to the Gentiles.<sup>19</sup> The grouping

16 For an argument for a Gentile connection, see Morton S. Enslin, "The Samaritan Ministry and Mission," *HUCA* 51 (1980): 29-38 and "Luke and the Samaritans," *HTR* 36 (1943) 282; but see also Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)* (AB 28A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 846-7, n. 1.

17 Cf. πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (Matt 28:19) with πᾶσαν πόλιν καὶ τόπον (Luke 10:1). Each Gospel associates the second mission with an assertion of Jesus' universal authority (Matt 28:18; Luke 10:22).

18 Luke contains only the first feeding, at 9:12-17.

19 R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 305-306; Alan Richardson, "The Feeding of the Five Thousand," *Interpretation* 9 (1955): 146; Sanae Masuda, "The Good News of the Miracle of the Bread: The Tradition and Its Marcan Redaction," *New Testament Studies* 28 (1982): 208-11.

of the first crowd in fifties and hundreds echoes the organization of Israel in Exod 18:21. The baskets in which the leftovers of the first feeding were gathered were associated with the Jews, while those used after the second feeding were the provision baskets common throughout the Roman empire.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the second feeding likely occurred in the Gentile territory of the Decapolis (Mk. 7:31).

In John's Gospel, a twelve-to-seven sequence occurs in 20-21 in describing the apostolic witnesses to the resurrected Jesus. In 20:19-23 the disciples to whom Jesus appears are not numbered, but the conferral of the Spirit indicates that the apostolic group is in view. Verse 24 says that "Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve" had not been present on the first occasion, setting the stage for a second appearance that includes him. Perhaps the witnessing group in John is assumed to include others besides the core disciples, by means of whom the twelve can be reconstituted (cf. Acts 1:15-26; 13:31). Or perhaps twelve is intended simply to identify those remaining of Jesus' inner circle. Less important than the rationale at work in John 20:24 is that like 1 Cor 15:5 it employs twelve as the identifying number of the apostles as witnesses to Jesus. In the final post-resurrection appearance in John, by contrast, the apostles present are listed so that we can be certain of their number, which is seven (21:1-2).

Accompanying the numerical sequence at the end of John is a difference in the assignments of authority. When Jesus shows himself to the disciples as the twelve, he grants them power through the Spirit to pass judgments in the church. When he shows himself to the select group of seven, he orders Peter three times to feed and care for the sheep (21:15-17). Earlier in John, Jesus had used the sheep metaphor to prophesy the incorporation of non-Jews into the early church (10:16). And Peter did formally welcome both Samaritans and Gentiles into Jesus' flock, as I will consider in more detail below (Acts 8:14-17; 10:44-48).

A blurring of the physical and spiritual senses of food similar to that at work in the miraculous feedings of Matthew and Mark is present in yet another instance of succession, the appointment of the Hellenistic ministers in Acts 6:1-5. After the appointment of seven ministers with Greek names to supply physical bread to Greek-speaking Jewish Christian widows, the immediate result is that the word—spiritual bread—is disseminated more widely (v. 7a). The first two of the ministers, Stephen and Philip, are thereafter seen in prominent roles of witness-bearing and evangelizing (6:8-7:59; 8:4-40; 21:8-9). That the seven ministers form a complement to the twelve apostles who preceded them is evident from the parallel designations of "the twelve" (6:2) and "the seven" (21:8). The circumstances that motivated the appointment of the seven as described in Acts 6:2-3 significantly resemble those that led to the inspiration of the seventy elders related in Num 11:1-17 (cf. Exod 18:13-26).<sup>21</sup>

The Greek-speakers of the Jerusalem church, represented by the seven, naturally formed the vanguard for the spread of the gospel beyond Judea. In contrast to the apostles, who remained in Jerusalem during the persecution following Stephen's martyrdom, the Hellenists were scattered and would eventually begin preaching to Gentiles in Antioch (Acts 8:1; 11:19-20). The ministry of the apostles followed in the tracks of Philip, second of the seven after Stephen, as he went first to Samaria and then to the Hellenistic coastal cities via Gaza. Philip finally arrived at Caesarea, where Peter later came to convert the Roman Gentile Cornelius (8:40; 10:1-11:18).

Saul of Tarsus, the Hellenistic Pharisee-turned-Christian evangelist, functions in Acts as the replacement for the first of the seven ministers, Stephen, whom Saul himself had helped to murder (Acts 8:1).<sup>22</sup> After his conversion, Saul is credited at various points with the qualifications of Stephen. Like

20 Greek, κόφινος at Matt 14:20; 16:9; Mark 6:43; 8:19; Luke 9:17; John 6:13; σπυρίς at Matt 15:37; 16:10; Mark 8:8, 20.

21 Of interest are the presence and role of non-Israelites in the Numbers narrative (v. 4) and the occurrence of γογγυσμὸς at Num 11:1, LXX and Acts 6:1.

22 Saul (Paul) restores the number of seven Hellenistic ministers after the martyrdom of Steven as James the brother of Jesus effectively fills the vacancy in the apostolic body left by the martyrdom of James the brother of John (Acts 12:1-2; 15:13-21).

Stephen, Saul is commissioned by the laying on of hands (6:5-6; 9:17; 13:1-3) and filled with the holy Spirit (6:3; 7:55; 9:17; 13:9). Saul performs miraculous works as had Stephen and Philip, and which at first had been done through the twelve (2:43; 6:8; 8:6-7; 19:11-12). As Stephen had confounded the Greek-speaking Jews who opposed the message about Jesus (6:8-11), Paul confounds Hellenistic Jews in Damascus and Jerusalem and is nearly martyred in both cities as a result (9:22-25, 29-30). Saul even acquires the Greek name Paul in keeping with the Greek names of the original seven ministers (13:9). The evangelistic and apologetic sermons of Acts are delivered by three persons: Peter, spokesman for the twelve (2:14-36; 3:12-26; 10:34-43); Stephen, the first of the Hellenists (7:2-53); and Saul (Paul), who became the preeminent Greek-speaking missionary of the early church (13:16-41; 17:22-31; 22:1-21; 26:1-23).

Acts displays the twelve-to-seven code in yet another way. Hellenists might have led the effort to preach to the world at large once there was an opening to do so, but the opening had to be made first by the apostles. The twelve served as God's emissaries for the initial offering of the Spirit to the three spiritual-ethnic divisions of humankind: Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles (2:14; 37-38; 8:14-15; 10:44-45). Although disciples other than the apostles were present at the offering of the Spirit to the Jews, the twelve are designated as spokesmen, with Peter in the lead (2:14).<sup>23</sup>

At the momentous conversion of Cornelius and the first reception of the Spirit by Gentiles, Peter again had the leading role—this time as part of a group of seven (11:12). The status attributed to these seven as witnesses is comparable to that enjoyed by the twelve (cf. 2:32; 10:39-41). The symmetry of this succession, consisting of Peter-plus-eleven for the appeal to Jews and Peter-plus-six for the invitation of Gentiles, is more striking for being understated. Key details of Peter's call to go from Joppa to Caesarea are stressed by their repetition in Acts 10:1-48 and 11:1-18, but we are told in 10:23b simply that "some" brothers accompanied Peter. The number is specified in 11:12 almost as an afterthought, making it unlikely that the author set out deliberately to create the twelve-to-seven sequence.

Surveying Acts as a whole, the Jewish focus evident at the opening of the book accords with the number of early disciples, one hundred twenty (10x12, 1:15), as well as by that of the apostles, whose proper number of twelve is so important that special measures must be taken to restore it after the defection of Judas Iscariot (1:16-26). As the book progresses and the gospel spreads toward the Gentile world, three groups of seven stand out. We have already examined two, namely, the slate of seven Hellenistic ministers whose number was restored by the conversion of Saul, and the company of Peter-plus-six that preached to the first Gentile convert, Cornelius. The third consists of the seven ministers who accompanied Paul during the latter part of his third missionary journey (20:4).

Unlike the first seven Hellenistic ministers, all of whom were either Jews or proselytes, most or all of the final seven likely were Gentiles. One of them, Timothy, had a Jewish mother and a Greek father and had been circumcised by Paul in order to avoid controversy among the Jews to whom Paul preached (Acts 16:1-3). Two pastoral letters bearing his name have given Timothy a special place in the history of Christianity.

The last of the Gentile seven, Trophimus of Ephesus, was the immediate cause of the mobbing of Paul in Jerusalem. Paul had been seen with Trophimus in the city and was consequently accused, falsely, of trying to bring Gentiles into the temple. Paul's accusers were Hellenistic Jews of Asia, and the attack took place at the end of a seven-day period of purification Paul had been observing (Acts 21:27-29; 24:1-6). The accusation over Trophimus led to hearings over Paul before the Sanhedrin, Roman governors Felix and Festus, and King Herod Agrippa II, and to Paul's appeal to go before Caesar Nero (22-26).

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<sup>23</sup> Paul later presides over a reprise of Pentecost when the Spirit is poured out upon Jewish Christian converts in Ephesus. At that event, twelve is the number of recipients instead of the number of evangelists. Shortly afterward, Paul is forced out of the synagogue and preaches to the city at large, recreating in miniature the progression in Acts as a whole.

The second of the seven, Aristarchus of Thessalonica, accompanied Paul on his difficult journey to Rome (27:2) and is referred to in Colossians 4:10 and Philemon 24 as Paul's fellow prisoner. The sixth, Tychicus, is mentioned four times in the Pauline letters as a close associate of Paul's and messenger on his behalf (Eph 6:21; Col 4:7; 2 Tim 4:12; Titus 3:12). The fourth, Gaius of Derbe, is possibly the same man Paul baptized in Corinth, and whom many years the Third Letter of John warmly commends (vv. 1-6).

To summarize, the final group of seven ministers in Acts accompanied Paul on his fateful journey to Jerusalem, occasioned the appeal to Caesar that took him to the seat of the Roman empire, and helped to carry the Christian gospel into every corner of the Greco-Roman world.

The twelve-to-seven/seventy progression that first occurs in the Hebrew Bible assumes a sharper profile as we trace it through the Gospels and Acts. Other features of the New Testament reinforce the pattern. Church fathers saw figurative significance in exactly seven churches being the addressees of the canonical Pauline letters, as there are seven addressees of the messages to the Gentile Asian churches in Rev 2-3.<sup>24</sup> This numerical characteristic of the Pauline corpus is especially fitting since Paul was known as the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 2:8), and invites comparison with the number of addressees of the letter that bears the name of the leader of the Jerusalem church, James, who wrote to the twelve dispersed tribes (James 1:1).

### **The Succession in Unexpected Places**

It is intriguing that due to obscure historical circumstances the first large-scale translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into a Gentile language came to be identified by means of the number seventy (Latin *Septuaginta*, or LXX). Systematically rendering the holy writings into Greek catalyzed the spread of Hebrew religious ideas throughout the Alexandrian empire. When the process began, early in the third century BC, the documents that would become the Ketuvim (Psalms through Chronicles) of the Tanakh did not yet enjoy the settled status accorded the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy) and Nevi'im (Joshua through Malachi). The Nevi'im, or prophetic section, ended with what came to be known as the "Book of the Twelve" or *Trei Asar* (Hosea through Malachi).<sup>25</sup> The priority of the first two documentary sections still resonates in the New Testament phrase, "the law and the prophets" (Matt 7:12; 22:40; Luke 16:16; Acts 13:15; Rom 3:21). In historical terms, therefore, it was after the Book of the Twelve brought the prophetic tradition to a close that the Book of the Seventy, a revolutionary and expansive new manifestation of Scripture, emerged.<sup>26</sup>

With the pattern of the twelve-to-seven/seventy now established, a mystery remains. The foremost example of the number seventy as symbolic of the whole of humanity is, as I have noted, Gen 10. Why is there no instance of twelve preceding it? Or is there one?

The genealogy of the early chapters Genesis would seem ideally suited to create a numerical succession with the list of seventy nations. Setting aside the abbreviated treatment of the line of Cain in 4:17-22, the genealogy running from Adam to Noah in 5:1-32 is strictly linear until Noah's sons, at which point it broadens slightly. It is in 10:2-32, immediately after Shem, Ham, and Japheth, that the list fans

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24 *Muratorian Canon* 47-60; Cyprian, *The Treatises of Cyprian*, 11.11, 12.20; Victorinus, *On the Creation of the World*.

25 See David L. Petersen, "The Book of the Twelve/The Minor Prophets" in *The Hebrew Bible Today: An Introduction to Critical Issues* (ed. Steven L. McKenzie and M. Patrick Graham; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 95-96.

26 During the same period, the post-exilic supreme council of Jewish elders, the Great Synagogue, which according to Talmudic tradition bridged the gap between the latter prophets and the early rabbis, gave way to the Jerusalem Sanhedrin. The Great Synagogue reputedly had one hundred twenty members, while the Sanhedrin that succeeded it had seventy, not including the president or *Nasi* (*Ab* 1:1; *Yer Ber* 4d; *Meg* 2a, 17b; *Sanh* 1.5, 6).

out into seventy names like a river reaching the sea. With the table of nations even the word *son* shifts its meaning to that of a horizontal ethnic identifier. Vividly present is the idea of God nurturing a narrow bloodline until it burgeons into an entire world. However, ten generations span Adam to Noah, and since only one additional generation is represented by Noah's sons, the total for the generations preceding the seventy is eleven, not twelve. We have a second list tracing the descent from Adam to Shem, at 1 Chron 1:1-4, but it matches Genesis name for name. The evidence of the Hebrew Bible weighs against the genealogy of Genesis having been stylized in order to create a twelve-to-seventy progression.<sup>27</sup>

One more genealogy must be considered, this one from the New Testament. Luke 3:23-38 gives a list extending from Jesus back to Adam. Luke augments Genesis and 1 Chronicles without contradicting them by reading, “the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God” (v. 38). Luke implies that another name always belonged on the list because Adam was not fatherless—his father was God. Luke therefore incorporates God using the same formula as for the other entries, producing a list with twelve generational steps before Noah's grandchildren. The author of the last historical narrative of the Bible provides the key to finding a remarkable twelve-to-seventy succession at the Bible's beginning.

In the case of Gen 1-10, the foremost reference for seventy as the number of all humanity is preceded by a cryptic twelve-step lineage exclusively favored by God. At the other end of the canon, Rev 7:4-8 employs an emphatic twelve-fold repetition of the number twelve thousand to portray ideal Israel. Verse 9 then pictures a multitude “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (ἐκ παντὸς ἔθνους καὶ φυλῶν καὶ λαῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν). The wording here evokes Gen 10:4, 20, 31-32, LXX with its listing of the peoples “according to [their] languages, in their tribes, and in their nations” (κατὰ γλῶσσαν ἐν ταῖς φυλαῖς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν αὐτῶν), except that the order of *nation*, *tribe* and *language* is reversed. Inasmuch as Rev 7:9, following closely upon twelve twelves, hearkens back to Gen 10's timeless spectrum of the seventy names of mankind, the twelve-to-seven/seventy succession brackets the Bible in its entirety.<sup>28</sup>

I have tried to demonstrate here that the sequence of twelve-to-seven/seventy foreshadowed and underscored a progression from Israel to the greater world of humanity in the outworking of the divine purpose. Modern Bible readers may not appreciate that to many Jews of the Second Temple period, the claim that Gentiles were being admitted into the sacred relationship formerly reserved for Israel was not only shocking but deeply offensive. According to Acts, Paul was nearly torn to pieces in Jerusalem not so much for advocating Jesus as for suggesting that through Jesus God had begun appealing directly to Gentiles (Acts 21:27-31; 22:21-23).

For the very reason that it was so unexpected from the standpoint of Judaism, the expansion of God's covenant to include Gentiles is celebrated in the New Testament letters as a mystery—a profoundly surprising expression of God's mercy through Christ (Rom 11:25-33; 16:25; Eph 3:4-6; Col 1:26-27). Twelve followed by seven/seventy numerically encodes this mystery, which Paul enunciates as “the Jew [twelve] first, then the Gentile [seven/seventy]” (Rom 1:16; 2:9). Not only do the Gospels allude to this divinely-appointed order,<sup>29</sup> it is the best explanation for the mysterious meaning Jesus invests in the twelve and seven baskets of fragments from the feedings recorded in Matthew and Mark.

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27 We cannot rule out the genealogy having been stylized for other purposes.

28 Later in Revelation, other occurrences of twelve are followed by references to “the nations” without the mention of tribes and languages (21:12-24; 22:2).

29 See, for example, Matt 10:5-6; 15:23-28; 21:43; Luke 7:3-6; John 10:16. Note the juxtaposition in Mark of the details about Jewish concern over kosher foods, the declaring of all foods to be clean, and the healing (or, cleansing) of the Gentile woman's daughter (7:1-30).

The twelve-to-seven/seventy pattern exhibits four characteristics that together defy naturalistic explanation: breadth, depth, subtlety and prescience. *Breadth* refers to the diversity of biblical documents in which the pattern appears and the variety of ways in which it is expressed. *Depth* refers to the sense the pattern makes in terms of biblical themes. *Subtlety* describes the absence of explicit biblical statements identifying the pattern as a code or organizing principle. *Prescience* means that the rationale for the pattern emerges long after the first instances of the pattern itself. If the numerical succession is an inspired confirmation of God's plan to expand his covenant with Israel to include people of all nations, then it is unlikely that patterns with like characteristics occur in comparable collections of ancient literature.

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