Number symbolism in the Bible

(Iver Larsen, Revised October 2026)

The number 1:
Number one stands for unity, not necessarily one person. God is one, although in three persons. Man and wife become one in the marriage contract, although they continue to be two people.

The number 3:
The number 3 in the Bible has the symbolic meaning of "divine". It is especially prominent in connection with the Trinity, but there are also many examples of how the number three symbolizes a waiting for divine intervention (Genesis 40:10-17, Exodus 10:22, 19:16, 23:17, 25:32f, Judges 7:7, Jonah 1:17, Matthew 12:40, 16:21, 20:19, Acts 9:9, 10:16, 2 Corinthians 12:8).

The number 4:
While the number three symbolizes the divine, the number four symbolizes the human. The symbolic meaning is very common in prophetic-apocalyptic books like Daniel and Revelation. Examples are: the four corners of the world, the four winds, the four angles holding back the winds, the four beasts and four kingdoms. (Dan 7:2,3,6,17; 8:8,22, Rev 4:6-9; 7:1 etc.)

The number 6:
The symbolic meaning of six is derived from the meaning of seven. While the number seven stands for the perfect and complete and often connected with what God has created, the number six stands for the exact opposite, the imperfect and incomplete, often connected with what comes from the Devil or human sinful desires. It may symbolize something which pretends to be perfect, but in fact is a satanic deceit. The strongest characteristic of the Devil is that he likes to pretend to be an "angel of light". He is always deceitful trying to make people believe that he is the one who brings the perfect solution, help and even salvation. Everyone knows the number for the Devil in Rev 13:18 (666). The 3 times 6 stands for a supernatural evil. The alternate number 616 in some manuscripts is probably a clumpsy attempt to connect this number with emperor Nero by a Greek scribe who was not aware of Hebrew symbolis numbers. The Greek words for 666 are ἑξακόσιοι ἑξήκοντα ἕξ, which is also poetic alliteration. That would be spoiled by the number 616 ἑξακόσιοι δέκα ἕξ.
However, the number six does not always stand for the negative. When the Seraphs and Cherubim have six wings, this simply reflects that wings come in pairs, so that they have three (divine number) pairs of wings.

The number 7:
From the first page of the Bible it is clear that the number seven stands for the completed and perfect. When God rested (abstained from work) on the seventh day, the week was established. It is no coincidence that the first sentence in the Bible contains seven words, that the second sentence contains 2 x 7 words and that the first paragraph contains 3 x 7 words.
As can be expected the number seven is common in Revelation: Seven letters to seven churches, seven spirits, seven lamp stands, seven stars, seven angels, seven seals, seven thunders, seven trumpets, etc. When the Israelites were told to march round Jericho for seven days and seven times on the seventh days, it also refers to what is complete.
It is interesting that seven is the sum of three (divine) and four (human). When the divine and human is united in the right way, the perfect results.

The number 10:
This signifies rulership and authority. The ten commandments were given to be an authoritative guide to rule the behaviour of Israel. In the Old Testament, a leader was put over ten people and a new leader above ten leaders. (Ex 18:21,25, Deut 1:15). Boaz called ten leaders in the city to make a legal decision (Ruth 4:2, cf. Eccl. 7:19). The ten people from all nations in Zach 8:23 represent people who want to be ruled by the king of Israel. The number ten is often combined with a horn, which has the symbolic meaning of strength, so the combined meaning is mighty kings (Dan 7:24, Rev 12:3, 13:1, 17:3,12,16).

The number 12:
Since three is the number for God and four is the number for people, 3 x 4 is the number for God's people (Matthew 19:28). First, Israel with its twelve clans are the people of God, but with Christ a new people of God emerged, since the Jews (as a people) rejected their Messiah. However, in Revelation we see the two different peoples of God being united to one people. That is why we see 2 x 12 elders there (Rev 4:4,10; 5:8; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4). The elders represent the leaders for the two peoples. The 144,000 (12 x 12 thousands) represent the large number of people who will eventually belong to the people of God. (It is likely that the first occurrence of 144,000 in Rev 7:4 refers to God's old people, the Jews, and the second occurrence in Rev 14:1,3 to the redeemed people, the Christians. But this belongs to the realm of interpretation, not translation.) The number is not to be taken literally in a book like Revelation where symbolism is in the forefront. The 144 cubits in Rev 21:17 are probably also symbolic for the people of God.

The number 14:
Since 14 is two times seven, it may stand for two cycles of something complete. Jacob had to work for Lea for seven years, and then for Rachel for another seven years.
However, the number fourteen is also King David's number. In Hebrew, the name David is spelled with the three letters d,v,d. In Hebrew (and Greek) the letters were also used as number signs, so that the first letter of the alphabet stood for 1, the second letter for 2, etc. D is the fourth letter and v is the sixth. David's number is then 4+6+4=14.
The symbolic meaning of 14 is prominent in Matthew 1:1-17. Matthew has divided the generations into three groups of fourteen each (v. 17). We must remember that Matthew was writing for the Jews who would be looking out for number symbolism in any text and who knew that David's number was 14 and the divine number three. As a result, Matthew is communicating by this special arrangements of the generations (fathers) that Jesus was the divine king who was to take the place of King David as the greatest king of the Jews. The term Son of David also signifies a king who was to replace and overshadow King David. Matthew didn't hesitate to leave out some of the fathers in order to get to the number 3 x 14. The symbolic meaning of the genealogy is more important than the actual names of the fathers through the generations.

The number 40:
This number is four (humanity) times ten (rulership/authority). It stands for the question: Who is in authority, man or God? It is therefore the symbolic number for testing. The Israelites wandered 40 years in the wilderness and Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tested.

The number 70:
This number has two different meanings. Because it is 7 times 10, it can stand for a complete/perfect number of rulers. God told Moses to choose seventy elders as rulers over the people (Numbers 11:16). See also Exodus 24:1, Judges 9:2, Ezekiel 8:11). The Jewish Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin, had 70 members plus the High Priest as chairman and ex-officio member.
It also has the meaning of being in exile among a Gentile nation or more generally it refers to the Gentile nations. This seems to go back to the time when Jacob went to settle in Egypt with his family of 70 people (Genesis 46:27). Sometimes the number 12 which stands for the Jewish nation and the number 70 which stands for the other nations occur together. In Exodus 15:27 (and Numbers 33:9) the 12 springs point to the promised land which the people were heading for and which was established from the 12 sons of Jacob, while the 70 palm trees point back to the land of Egypt which the Israelites had now left. The time in Babylonian exile (or more specifically, the time Jerusalem would be in ruins) was also 70 years (2 Chron. 36:21, Jeremiah 25:11, 29:10, Daniel 9:2, Zechariah 1:12, 7:5). (See also Isaiah 23:17).
When Jesus sent out the disciples as a trial before Pentecost, he first sent 12 disciples, symbolising that the Gospel was first to be preached to the Jewish nation (Matthew 10:5, Mark 6:7, Luke 6:13, Luke 9:1). Then he sent out 70 disciples (Luke 10:1,17) to symbolise that later the Gospel should reach to all the Gentile nations.

The number 72:
This number had no significance in the Old Testament, but around the time of Jesus, there was a move to change the number for the Gentiles to 72 from 70, because the number 70 had a positive meaning to the Jews as the number of rulers. They suggested to give the number 6 times 6 times 2 to the Gentiles. Gradually the number for the Gentile nations changed from 70 to 72. This is why the Greek manuscripts do not agree whether it was 70 or 72 disciples Jesus sent out in Luke 10:1,17. It probably was 70, but in any case, it refers to the future preaching to the Gentiles.