

THE RUNE. ALPHABET
AND THE EVOLUTION OF NUMBER SYMBOLISM

Gematria in the Germanic World

by
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A Thesis Presented to
THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
in Partial Fulfilment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts
Department of German

February 1979



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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

In the ancient languages, number and language were closely related, and from this relationship, number symbolism has evolved. The roots from which number words were formed in the Semitic languages are the bases for the symbolic meanings which have been handed down through the ages and through the various languages. Originally these meanings were understood by all who spoke the language, but as new languages developed, the meanings underlying the number words became less evident, and gradually they had to be explained as being symbolic.

Not only in the spoken language but also in the written word can we trace a definite correlation between number and letter. In Hebrew and Greek, each letter of the alphabet represents not only a phonetic but also a numeric value. Every word therefore can be equated with a numeric, or gematric sum. Since these values are not obvious at first glance, they lend themselves to a secret code which lies hidden within the written word. The Bible employs a system of gematria as a means of giving a unified structure to the text.

In mystic cults, gematria was passed on to initiates as secret knowledge, and as such it was adopted into the Germanic rune alphabet. The gematric values of bracteate inscriptions, for example, show a preference for sums which are divisible by 13. The rune which bears the value 13 is named "yew" (German Eibe).

As this tree is associated with health, strength, and longevity, these qualities were transferred to the number 13, making it the most desired factor in amulet inscriptions.

With the advance of Christianity, shamanism all but died out in Europe and with it the gematria of the runes. Since the symbolic meanings of numbers and letters were never common knowledge, they were lost for centuries, and we are only now rediscovering them.

When the Latin alphabet came into use in Europe, there developed a greater emphasis on the meanings of number words, since the Romans had never established a system of gematria. During the Middle Ages, symbolic numbers were no longer employed to endow words with charms, but to lend harmony and design to the written message. Both the pagan gematria and the medieval numeric structure developed a complexity which cannot be understood from the meaning of the word, as had been the case in the Semitic languages, but has to be explained by a special symbolic code.

To K. W. Maurer

in whose inspiring classes the topic
of this dissertation was conceived.

Without his faithful encouragement
the work may never have been completed.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the publishers who gave permission to duplicate the following photographs:

- The Vadstena bracteate on page 66 from Dr. Eric Graf Oxenstierna, Die Nordgermanen, Stuttgart: Kilpper, 1957.
- Various bracteates on page 74 from volume II of Wolfgang Krause, Die Runeinschriften im älteren Futhark, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1966.

My sincere gratitude goes out to the many professors of the University of Manitoba who have freely given of their time to lend advice and assistance, especially to:

- H. Bessason, Icelandic
- Fr. L. C. Braceland S. J., Classics
- R. J. Dowling, Mathematics
- B. K. Kale, Statistics
- M. Nahir, Judaic Studies
- N. Rose, Judaic Studies

Last but not least, I am indebted to R. J. Glendinning, my thesis supervisor, on whom fell the difficult task of editing the manuscript.

INTRODUCTION

Number . . . is not so much
a symbol as an essence.¹

In early times, the concept of number was inseparable from the concept of language. The Greek word *λογος* exemplifies this unity, because it stands for meanings which, to our way of thinking, seem almost unrelated. Among them are:

— word, discourse, story, book;

— thought, reason, reckoning, computation.²

In most languages we recognize a limited correlation between number words and their symbolic meanings, but in the Semitic languages, the two are inseparably linked. In Hebrew, for example, the verb meaning "to unify, collect" has the same root as the number "one."³ The verb meaning "to fold, duplicate, alter, disguise, pervert" has the same root as the number "two"⁴, hence "two" received the symbolic meaning of "division or separation" and therefore "evil." Other

¹ Vincent Foster Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism (1923; rpt. New York: Cooper Square Publ., 1969), p.68. This is a reference to Gnosticism as compared to Pythagoreanism.

² Langenscheidt's Pocket Greek Dictionary (n.d.), s.v. "logos."

³ James Strong, Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible (n.d.), s.v. #258 "achad" and #259 "echad."

⁴ Strong, s.v. #8138 "shannah" and #8147 "shenayim."

number words have corresponding meanings.⁵

As long as we remain with the Semitic languages, the association of word and number is easily understood. Even in English, the meaning of the number "one" is reflected in such words as "oneness, only, unify, unity." In German, the original meaning of the number "zwei" has given rise to such derivatives as "entzweien, Zwist, Zwietracht." Above two, however, we resort to symbolic explanations to clarify the deeper meanings of numbers, because in the Germanic languages the original bond between number and language has been lost.

This present study will trace the evolution of number symbolism by concentrating on the following stages in its development:

- (a) The unity of number and language in the ancient languages (Chapter One).
- (b) The system of number symbolism in the Germanic world (Chapter Two).
- (c) The reliance on numeric structure in medieval times (Chapter Three).

Stages (a) and (c) have been extensively researched during the last hundred years, while stage (b) has been sorely neglected, probably because the extant primary sources are not always too well preserved and are therefore difficult to decipher. In an attempt to remedy this neglect, this thesis will focus its main effort on this period which presents a necessary link between the other two.

⁵ For a discussion of the meaning of "seven" see pp. 13-14 below.

CHAPTER ONE

UNITY OF NUMBER AND LANGUAGE:

THE BIBLE

I. The Significance of Number in Scripture

He telleth the number of the stars,
he calleth them all by their names.
Ps. 147:4

Lift up your eyes on high and behold
who has created these things that
bringeth out their host by number,
he calleth them all by their names.
Isa. 40: 26

Scripture assigns great significance to numbers and names, and when linking the two concepts, number is mentioned first. Whole pages are devoted to the enumeration of numbers as well as names, and in fact, the fourth book of the law of Moses bears the title "Numbers." Not only the Bible, but ancient writings in general show a preoccupation with the study and application of number.

Some numbers carried greater significance than others, and one way of establishing their order of preference is to simply check the frequency of their use. With the help of Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, a rough count of numbers as ordinals and cardinals was made. In this particular

concordance, each listed item is identified by its Hebrew or Greek original, and it is probably the most accurate work of its kind. Table 1 shows the results of this investigation.

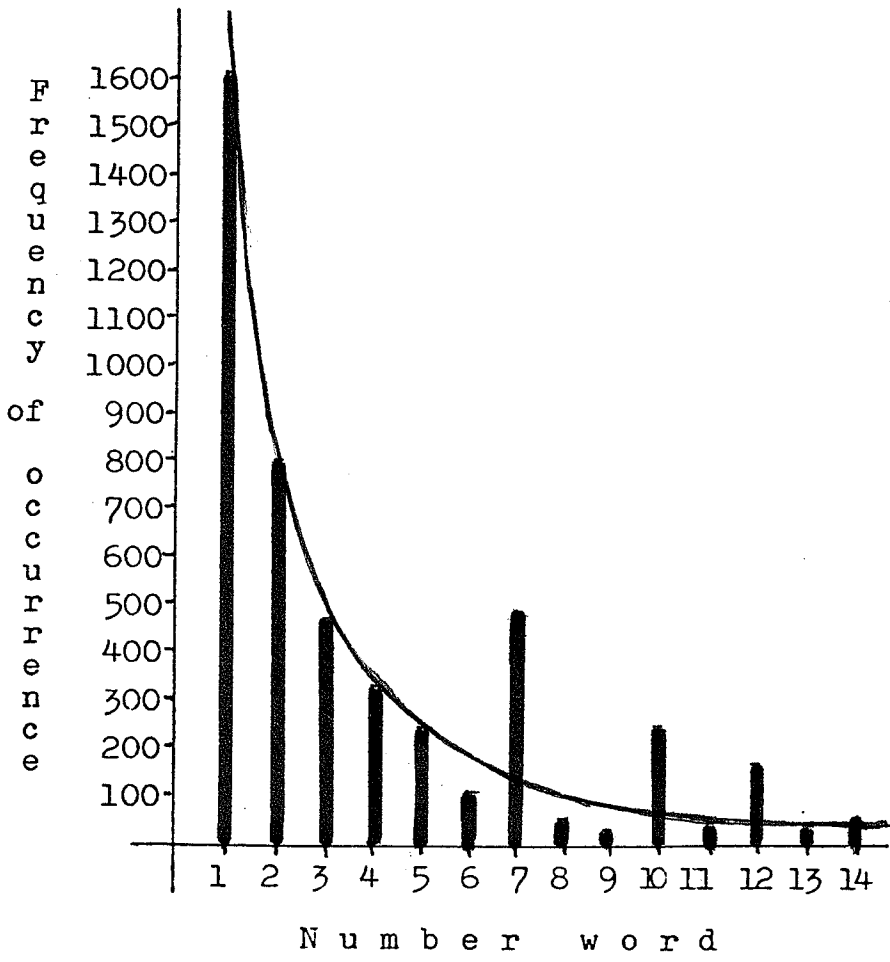
TABLE 1: Frequency of Occurrence of Number Words in the Bible

| Number Word | Occurrences |
|-------------|--------------|
| 1 | roughly 1600 |
| 2 | roughly 800 |
| 3 | 475 |
| 4 | 325 |
| 5 | 241 |
| 6 | 106 |
| 7 | exactly 490 |
| 8 | 62 |
| 9 | 17 |
| 10 | 248 |
| 11 | 39 |
| 12 | 186 |
| 13 | 24 |
| 14 | 43 |
| 20 | 126 |
| 40 | 101 |
| 50 | 113 |
| 60 | 24 |
| 100 | 107 |
| 1000 | 140 |

When visualized in a graph, the significant numbers are more easily recognized. Graph 1 records the results shown in table 1 and compares them with distribution according to chance selection.

GRAPH 1: Occurrence of Number Words in the Bible

■ Bar graph illustrating the findings of table 1
— Line graph showing chance distribution



As might be expected, numbers show decreasing frequency with increasing magnitude. In the numbers from one to nine, a fairly regular curve would emerge, were it not for the abnormally high frequency of the number seven. It occurs about 4½ times as often as expected. "It is the number three (with its multiples) which is the outstanding number in ancient

- 6 -

religions and philosophies, seven having to take a lower place. In the Bible, however, seven stands supreme."¹ Three shows only normal frequency, and its multiples, six and nine, even fall below their expected norms. This fact is surprising, because traditional liturgies emphasize the role of three almost to the exclusion of all other numbers, and in ancient literature the same pattern prevails. In Homer's writings, for example, three occurs more than twice as often as its closest rival, twelve, which is then followed by nine, twenty, ten, and only then by seven in sixth place — disregarding one and two.²

TABLE 2: Predominant Numbers above 2 in Order of Frequency

| In the Bible | | In Homer's writings | |
|--------------|-----------|---------------------|-----------|
| Number word | Frequency | Number word | Frequency |
| 7 | 490 | 3 | 123 |
| 3 | 475 | 12 | 59 |
| 4 | 327 | 9 | 47 |
| 10 | 248 | 20 | 44 |
| 5 | 241 | 10 | 41 |
| 12 | 182 | 7 | 34 |
| 1000 | 140 | 6 | 25 |

¹ R. McCormack, The Heptadic Structure of Scripture (London: Marshall, 1923), p. 14.

² Details taken from Gabriel Germain, Homère et la mystique des nombres (Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), p. 8.

Even elementary school children learn to regard 7 with respect, because it is the lowest number which presents considerable difficulty in calculations. When reducing fractions, for example, we have available fairly simple tests of divisibility for every number up to 10, except for 7. There is only one way of finding out whether a number is divisible by 7, and that is to actually carry out the division. This is one reason why this number has so often been regarded with a kind of awe — an awe which is intensified by the reading of the Bible where this number seems to be endued with mystery. The Pythagoreans also revered the number 7, since it is the only member of the decad which is not generated geometrically by other numbers.³ We shall therefore take a closer look at this number, which appears to have unique mathematical properties as well as mystical qualities.

II. Number as a Literary Device

Besides denoting arithmetic values, number serves several other purposes in the Bible, of which we may distinguish three main groups:

- (a) Symbolic use of number words.
- (b) Numeric structure in which the numbers retain their original symbolic meaning.
- (c) Gematric structure.

³ This is demonstrated in a most intriguing article by Grace Murray Hopper, "The Ungenerated Seven as an Index to Pythagorean Number Theory," American Mathematical Monthly, 43 (1936), 409-413.

Let us deal with these as they apply to the number seven. When visualizing seven, we either see it as an indivisible entity, or we intuitively divide it into two parts, namely three and four. Since this division is characteristic of Bible usage, these two components will be dealt with first.

i. Symbolic Use of Number Words

Since antiquity, three has been associated with the concept of divinity, and in Christian tradition, the very word "Trinity" represents God. Nevertheless, scripture presents a different view of divinity. The idea of divine trinity is certainly foreign to the monotheistic view of the Old Testament. The much abused phrase of traditional liturgy, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost," occurs only once in the New Testament (Matt. 28:19). To the equivalent expression, "the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost," are added the words, "and these three are one" (1 John 5:7). Only once more does a similar phrase occur: "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost" (2 Cor. 13:14). Here we are shown not three persons but three aspects of God's personality: grace, love, and communion.⁴

English-speaking theologians refer to the three persons of the Trinity without explaining the original

⁴ This threefold divine nature is reflected in man who is shown to be comprised of "spirit and soul and body" (1 Thess. 5:23).

meaning of the word "person." Theological terminology was formulated at a time when Latin was the language of the church, and the Latin word "persona" does not translate "person," but "attribute, quality, personality trait." The biblical "Trinity" is therefore not three persons, but one God with a three-dimensional nature. For example:

- The oneness of God's eternal existence is expressed in temporal terminology thus: "which art and wert and shalt be" (Rev. 16:5 and 11:17).
- His power resides in the threefold name: "Lord God Almighty" (Rev. 4:8, 11:17, 15:3, 16:7, and 21:22).
- His holiness is exalted in the cries of the seraphim: "Holy, holy, holy" (Isa. 6:3).

In none of these examples is the numeral three mentioned expressly, but whenever God's divine power is demonstrated, an abundance of threes is in evidence. For example:

- After a three days' journey into the wilderness — which is mentioned three times (Exod. 3:18, 5:3, and 8:27) — the Red Sea opened for the Israelites but swallowed the Egyptian army.
- Three people were raised from death by the prophet Elisha (1 Kings 17:22, 2 Kings 4:34 and 13:21).
- Christ also raised three people (Luke 7:15 and 8:55, and John 11:44).
- Christ arose from the dead on the third day:

- 9 times (3x3) Christ talks about rising on the third day.
- 3 times other speakers mention it.
- 9 times Christ talks about the 3 days or 3 nights preceding the resurrection.
- 3 times other writers mention the same matter.

Adding the above numbers, we find this particular association of three and the resurrection exactly 27 times (3x3x3). In fact, all events surrounding the resurrection and all Old Testament types foreshadowing it are so literally interwoven with threes that an impartial Bible reader cannot help but associate three with resurrection.

Three then symbolizes divine attributes, particularly divine power as demonstrated in the resurrection.⁵

Four presents no problem. All writers agree that it symbolizes God's creation: the universe, all living creatures, and created life in general. "When applied to man, it represents the Flesh in an unsaved state."⁶ For example:

⁵ Almost all writers approach this subject with preconceived ideas. Without presenting scriptural evidence, they hold that three represents God. Bullinger and Kistler present a view identical with mine, however, and they are the only ones who quote sufficient supporting Bible references. See Ethelbert W. Bullinger, Number in Scripture (1894; rpt. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 1967), pp. 107-122; and Don Kistler, The Arithmetic of God (King's Mountain, N.C.: n.p., 1967), pp. 22-30.

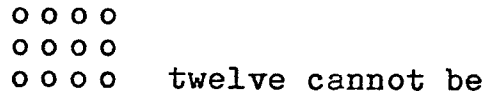
⁶ Kistler, p.30.

- God's creatures are found in four distinct parts of this earth: "in heaven. and on the earth and under the earth and . . . in the sea" (Rev. 5:13).
- The best exemplification of four as the number of creation can probably be found in the vision of the four living creatures which was seen by Ezekiel and also by John in the Apocalypse:
"Every one had four faces and every one had four wings . . . and they had the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides . . . They four had the face of a man, . . .
the face of a lion, . . .
the face of an ox, . . .
and the face of an eagle"
(Ezek. 1:5-10). The number 4 is contained 8 times (2x4) in this passage.

As three represents the eternal, dominant qualities of God, the creator, so four symbolizes the temporal, passive role of his creation. We can find a parallel view in Pythagorean number theory. Since this theory is geometrically oriented, three and four are considered the first real numbers. Three is the first masculine or odd number, the "absolute principle of generation of begotten things."⁷ Four is the first feminine or even number.

⁷ G. M. Hopper, p.411, quoting Proclus who is quoting Philolaus.

When 3 and 4 are multiplied, the product is 12, a number which symbolizes sonship and divine authority. In this union of the two numbers, three, the divine power, rules over four, the creation. By its very nature, 12 proves to be unstable: it falls apart into its components. In the diagram:



visualized as an indivisible whole, but either as 4 threes or 3 fours. Either God rules over his creation with an iron rod, or else the creation rebels against his government. In a perfect relationship, we would expect a blending of characteristics of the two elements, a transferring of attributes, whereby the creation (4) takes on the nature of God (3). This relationship was first realized in the New Testament in the person of Jesus Christ, "for the full content of divine nature lives in Christ, in his humanity" (Col. 2:9).⁸ In other words, the creature (4) is indwelt by divine nature (3). The relationship is perpetuated by a union of Christ and man: "This mystery . . . is Christ in you" and "every man perfect in Christ Jesus" (Col. 1:27-28). This is not a superimposition of two elements but a harmonious blending, so that through "his divine power . . . ye might be partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:3-4).

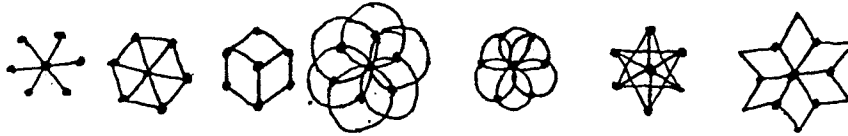
This union of divine nature (3) and creation (4) is symbolized by the addition of 3 and 4. The prime number 7 is stable by nature. It can easily be visualized as a unity and was regarded as such by Pythagoreans.⁹ It is most readily visualized as



⁸ Good News Bible, Today's English Version (1976).

⁹ See G. M. Hopper, p. 409.

a constellation which gives rise to only stable, well-balanced, self-contained images, pleasing to the eye, no matter from which angle they are viewed. For example:



If we perceive 7 as the sum of 3 and 4, we regard the union of God and man as a conferring of divine nature on God's creation. There is, however, another explanation for the indwelling of man by God which is portrayed by the symbol:



Here man, whose number is 6, is indwelled by God, whose number is 1, presenting another view of the number 7. Either as the sum of 3+4 or 1+6, the number 7 represents the same perfect relationship, and therefore 7 symbolizes perfection.

In the Hebrew language, no other number could possibly represent the idea of perfection or completeness, for the very word for "seven" derives its meaning from the word for "fulness, completeness, perfection" — or is it the other way around? Johannes Hehn demonstrates "daß für den Hebräer 'Fülle' und 'sieben' eins sind."¹⁰ The same root appears in sibah=seven and in sheba=fulness, the only distinction between them being the position of the diacritical point above the first letter, a distinction which did not even exist in the ancient Hebrew. Bible translators have experienced considerable difficulty in passages employing this root, because they have failed to realize that the Semitic way of thinking barely distinguishes

¹⁰ Johannes Hehn, "Zur Bedeutung der Siebenzahl," Karl-Martini-Festschrift (Gießen: Tölpelmann, 1925), p. 136.