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Some Aspects of Medieval Number Symbolism
in Langland's Piers Plowman, A-Text

by

Linda L. Lattin

Believing himself an infinitesimal part of the universe and his destiny closely aligned with the movement of the stars, primitive man formulated a concept of one as himself, and of another as that which was not himself, views antedating his abstractions of oneness and twoness. There is nothing conclusive, however, about the origin of number nomenclature, nor is there positive agreement among scholars as to how and when primitive man first conceived of the reality of numbers. Perhaps, he saw himself as one, "... the wings of a bird [as] two, clover-leaves three, the legs of an animal four, the fingers on his own hand five." Generally, he is thought to have discovered his fingers to be a convenient base for counting. Indeed, since all Indo-European languages (as well as Semitic and Mongolian) have ten as a counting base, scholars have assumed that man's original terms for the fingers may have suggested those for numbers. These words, of course, antedate recorded history, and abstract notions of number as an entity were later revelations.

By the time of the Middle Ages, nevertheless, man had come to accept number as a universal aid in such matters as agronomy, astrology, astronomy, commerce, and early forms of engineering. In this respect, however, he was not so much interested in number for its own sake as for what it achieved for him in his daily routine. Convinced, by this time, of the presence of a stable force in a perpetually changing universe, he seized upon the following statement in the Apocrypha (Book of Wisdom), "Thou hast ordered all things in measure, in number, and in weight," believing that it stressed the importance of number in the plan of creation. Thus, in a way, he reassured himself of cosmic order.

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3Dantzig, op. cit., p. 7.

4Ibid., p. 12.

5Ibid., p. 11.

6E. T. Bell, The Magic of Numbers, p. 11.

7H. F. Dunbar, Symbolism in Medieval Thought and Its Consummation in The Divine Comedy p. 197.


(5)
Apocalypse, had been a means of preserving an older idiom, the principles of which had probably originated with the Pythagoreans, who had believed that a Great Architect, upon the basis of number, had shaped the universe. Furthermore, the Jews had, for a long time, been attracted to the mystical properties of numbers, so that many of their ancient concepts had gradually infiltrated Biblical story. Consequently, when the medieval theologian became preoccupied with form and number, his theories tended to strengthen these ancient views on cosmic order. Concluding that all created things were computable, he believed the nine orders of angels to be spiritual, and all other things, living, dead, or inert, to be corporeal.

Medieval symbolism also partook of the supernatural, showing special interest for the mysterious and unaccountable. Attempting to explicate difficult mystical passages in Scripture, priests often devised elaborate numerical interpretations of Biblical idiom. Since the laity could neither read nor write, the clergy gradually increased their use of religious symbols as teaching devices with which to disseminate the history and doctrine deemed warranted by Church officials. In time, medieval symbolism promoted an understanding of basic religious tenets, both artist and poet agreeing that "... the mortal and tangible were but elements through which the poem or story, or the carved or painted picture, was made the realizing symbol of the unseen and eternal Spirit." It was a most effective symbolism, when natural and simple. As a means of imparting spiritual truths, it permeated the liturgy of the Mass, religious art, and the religious lyric. History reveals, therefore, that from the beginnings of the Christian era throughout the medieval period, the mystical and sacred properties of certain numbers were emphasized.

One was associated with God, five with the five wounds of Christ, twelve with the Twelve Tribes of Israel or the Apostles, forty with the days of the flood, the Israelites in the desert, or Christ's period in the wilderness. In the main, odd numbers reflected the celestial and divine: even numbers, the mundane. Thus, ancient concepts supplied...
the only garments in which the ideas of the new religion could clothe themselves." In this manner, number came to influence all aspects of medieval thought, "... because the internal universe is on a definite and co-ordinated plan in which quantitative relations are repeated correspondentially through different states and planes. Number is common to all planes and thus unites them." Consequently, a philosophy of numbers, related to specific Christian principles and not to the question of the true meaning of number itself, became firmly established in medieval literature. It is one that often eludes the modern reader trained to recognize the more conventional types of literary symbol.

In general, the numbers invested with symbolic meaning by medieval theologians were one, two, three, four, six, seven, ten, twelve, forty, and seventy. Five, eight, and nine, seldom occurring in Scripture, were later accorded significance, so that eventually all of the numbers of the decade became symbolic, as well as twelve, forty, and seventy. One suggested the center of all things; "uniqueness, self-sufficiency, indivisibility," or the unity of God and the Spirit. Two symbolized "... the inevitable duality of being on the planes of manifestation;" union; diversity of Earth and Matter; or one in two in spirit and matter. Three was suggestive of completeness of state; the Deity or Trinity; individual completion and action; or man himself as body, soul, and spirit. Four signified the spiritual world; nature; man by nature; or system and order. Five implied incompleteness or the flesh. Six symbolized earthly perfection in the sense of God's having created the world in six days. Seven, representing the union of Spirit

21Heath, op. cit., p. 28.
25Stuhlmaker, op. cit., p. 16.
26Gaskell, op. cit., p. 541.
29Gaskell, op. cit., p. 541.
30Bennett, op. cit., p. 659.
32Gaskell, op. cit., p. 773.
33Ibid., pp. 541-542.
34Bennett, op. cit., p. 659.
36Gaskell, op. cit., p. 756.
37Bennett, op. cit., p. 659; also, Emil Kautzch, "Sacred Numbers," Religious Encyclopedia, VIII, 204.
38Gaskell, op. cit., p. 291.
39Bennett, op. cit., p. 659.
and Matter in the world, was also the perfect number, from which have come the seven wonders of the world, seven wise men, seven ages of man, and seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Eight was a symbol of regeneration or of immortality, i.e., God created the world in six days, rested on the seventh, and decreed the eighth to be the eternity which followed. Nine was also a perfect number, being an extension of the Trinity. Ten symbolized perfection or completion; i.e., seven (all created things) plus three (Trinity of the Creator) equals ten (perfection). Eleven, on the other hand, represented that which is incomplete. Twelve corresponded to the "soul-states" (the Twelve Tribes of Israel); the "soul-qualities" (the Twelve Apostles); or the Children of God. Forty symbolized trial, humiliation, or desolation. Seventy was the number of transition. For convenience, one may state this information as follows:

One uniqueness; self-sufficiency; indivisibility; God
Two diversity of spirit and matter; union; combination
Three completion; the Trinity
Four physical world; spiritual state of the Creation of the Trinity
Five incompletion; imperfection; secular state of the world; worldliness
Six earthly perfection
Seven perfection; union of spirit and matter in the creation of the world
Eight regeneration; immortality
Nine extension of three, i.e., perfect completion
Ten perfection, completion
Eleven transgression; outside of measure
Twelve Children of God
Forty trial; humiliation; desolation
Seventy transition

Combinations of Numbers

three x four = world and man in intimate union with God
four + eight = world and man renewed through God

In Piers Plowman, number symbolism occurs within the major framework of the twelve passus constituting the poem, the number of a passus often suggesting the subject treated therein. For example, in

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44 Whittick, op. cit., p. 229.
46 Gaskell, op. cit., p. 245.
47 Ibid., p. 537.
49 Gaskell, op. cit., p. 749; Stahlaker, op cit., p. 17; Bennett, op. cit., p. 659.
50 Gaskell, op. cit., p. 248.
51 Ibid., p. 773; Stahlaker, op. cit., p. 17; also, "Symbolical and Sacred Numbers in the Scriptures," Methodist Review, CX (November, 1927), 975.
52 Bennett, op. cit., p. 659; Thurston, op. cit., XIV, 376.
53 Stahlaker, op cit. p. 18.
Passus I, concerning Truth as God, Langland asserts that the one best way for man to live is by adhering to Truth (God). In Passus II, he reveals that Meed and Falsehood, the physical and spiritual evils antagonistic to the world, have planned to marry in order to oppose Truth: "Such weddyng to werche to wrathen treue."

In Passus III, he considers the necessity of the presence of the Trinity in the world, prophesying that "... kynde wyt [Holy Ghost] shal come yet, & conscience [God the Creator] togide, / And make of lawe a labourer, such loue [Christ] shal arise." (III.275-276) In Passus IV, he attempts to understand the kind of justice that would result from the proposed marriage of Conscience and Lady Meed. In Passus V, he is concerned with the imperfections of humanity. In Passus VI, through Piers, he describes the highway to Truth, implying that man's achievement of a state of earthly perfection is requisite to his attainment to heavenly bliss (Truth). In Passus VII, in the plowing of the half-acre, he epitomizes the life proper to all Christians and delineates man's cycle (seven) in terms of religious doctrine. In Passus VIII, he describes the reading of the Pardon bringing salvation (immortality) to mankind. In the remaining four passus, and in all twelve for that matter, it is clear that his poem concerns the Children of God, the fair field full of folk.

The twelve passus are also divided into two parts: one of eight passus related to man's physical acts; and one of four passus concerned with man's thinking life (i.e., spiritual). In the broadest sense, then, two emerges as Langland's symbol for matter and spirit. At the same time, he utilizes the concept of three associated with the Trinity, further dividing each of the two main sections of his poem into thirds: one treating philosophical, ethical, and spiritual matters; the other comprising a reiteration of these subjects, a discussion of the mysteries of faith, and a treatise upon the Church as a corporate body. He also emphasizes three ways of life (the physical, the spiritual, and a desirable combination of these two) in Do-well, Do-bet, and Do-best. Furthermore, he assigns to Piers three main episodes in the narrative: the pilgrimage to Truth, the reading of the Pardon, and the passage on Hunger. That he divides each of the twelve passus into thirds may also be significant. At least, it is possible for one to state the general theme of the poem in terms of the following formule: (a) four passus (all creation) added to eight passus (immortality, rebirth) produce twelve passus (the world and man renewed by a quest for Truth); or (b) four passus (all creation) multiplied by the three "thirds" of the poem (Trinity) equal twelve passus (the world and man in union with God).

The presence of medieval number symbolism in the poem also contributes significantly to the allegorical meaning in numerous specific instances. For example, seven (perfection), the number most frequently employed, occurs fourteen times. Two (union) appears eleven times.

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51William Langland, Piers Plowman: The A. Version, edited by George Kane, II.81. All references to the poem are from this edition. See also David C. Fowler, Piers the Plowman: Literary Relations of the A and B Texts, pp. 3-18.
Three (Divinity, completion) and five (worldliness, imperfection) occur six times each. One hundred (eternal completion) is employed five times. Four (the world), ten (completion), and eleven (transgression outside of measure) appear four times each. One (power, self-sufficiency), occurs three times. Six (earthly perfection), twelve (Children of God), and forty (trial, desolation, humiliation) occur twice each. Eight (immortality), thirteen (evil), fifteen (complete worldliness), and ten thousand (all humanity, all creation) are employed once each. The following examination of the use of certain numbers in Piers Plowman (A-Text) is representative of Langland's approach to medieval number symbolism:

"I found þere Freris, alle þe foure ordis . . . ." (Pro.55) This is Langland's first reference to number in the work. Since four is the sum of the Trinity and the Creative Force, he may have meant for it to reflect, here, the spiritual state of the world. If so, it embodies not only the four orders of friars (Friars Minor), but their worldliness, as well. Because he is later concerned with the degeneration of these spiritual institutions and is moved to criticize priests who seek worldly benefits, four (physical world) may have signified for him the full scope of this lively medieval argument (cf., VIII.176).

"Þere houide an hundrit in houuis of silk . . . ." (Pro.84) London priests who "sang for simony" were subject to Langland's attack. Hundred, the number of absolute completion and the numerical embodiment of eternal completion, illustrates the clergy's extensive abandonment of spiritual life.

"Al þis I saug slepyng & seue sipes more." (Pro.109) The Dreamer utters this statement, having observed that the populace, as well as the clergy, had forsaken the teachings of the Church. Seven, the sum of the first "real" numbers and, thus, symbolic of all numbers, signifies "perfect completion," either in a sacred or profane sense. Consequently, the dream has been complete in its thorough exposure of the evils in the world.

". . . [Treuþe] fourmid ȝow alle / Boþe wip fel & wip face, & ȝaf fyue wyttes / For to worship hym þerewip whiles ȝe ben heere." (1.14-16) Thus, Holy Church describes the actions of Truth, dwelling in the Tower. Five refers to the flesh or man's imperfections; hence, Holy Church is telling the Dreamer that God (Truth) has created him in the flesh so that he may overtly worship Him.

". . . [Treuþe] comaundite of his curteisie in commoun þre þinges . . . ." (1.20) Since three symbolizes the Deity, all actions attributable to three are perfect, complete, and holy. Thus, matters which Truth commands are three, encompassing the whole of man's spiritual existence, relating to God, and sharing in perfection, completion, and holiness.

"And nought to fasten a fridey in fyue score wynter . . . ." (1.99) Fyue score rather than one hundred is dictated by the metre and alliterative pattern, for one hundred would be conveyed a more profound meaning. In fyue score, nevertheless, it is still possible to comprehend
a state of absolute completion. Thus, the probable reading, here: “And
never only to fast one Friday in a lifetime (completion).”

“Alle here fyue fyngris were frettid wiþ rynges . . . .” (II.11) In
reference to Lady Meed, fite (the secular, the flesh, and imperfection)
suits her worldliness, subsequently verified in Langland’s careful descrip-
tion of her elaborate costume.

“Alle þe riche retenaunce þat regniþ wiþ false / Were beden to þe
b[r]jdale on boþe two sides.” (II.34) As an even number, two is weak,
because it can be divided. At the same time, it can represent antagonism
toward the world. Here, the retinue is divided into two equal groups,
symbolic of weakness. However, should these two groups eventually
unite, immediately they will become antagonistic to the world, their
leader being False.

“And ten þousand tentis teldit beside . . . .” (II.42) Ten (comple-
tion) is manifest four times in this sum (i.e., 10 x 10 x 10 x 10). Since
four stands for the physical world, ten thousand, the people present at
the wedding of Lady Meed and False, represents all humanity, all
creation.

“And wipheld him half [a] þer & elleuene dayes.” (II.190) Al-
though not an associational number, eleven was, nevertheless, employed
by Hugo of St. Victor to connote transgression outside of measure. Con-
sequently, it is most fitting that False’s period of confinement be govern-
ed, in part, by eleven.

“And þe þalshad hadde follewid þe þis fiftene wynter . . . .”
(III.38) Not symbolic in itself, fifteen is, however, the sum of ten and
five, or the product of five times three—in either sense, suggesting
complete worldliness; thus, False, a product of the world, is likely to
plague man throughout life.

“She may neþ as muche do in a moneþ ones / As þoure seere sel
in seue score dayes.” (III.134-135) Seven symbolizes the perfection of
the universe in spirit (three) and matter (four). Thus, one is used in
an ironic sense, here: Lady Meed can accomplish as much evil in one
month (by means of her purse) as the sacred seal (king’s seal) achieves
in a half year of doing good deeds.

“Þou hast lonðid on myn half eneluene tymes . . . .” (III.168)
Lady Meed reproves Conscience for taking liberty (in the way of ex-
tending charity) with her treasure. Eleven implies that, by Lady Meed’s
standards, the charity of Conscience lies outside of measure—that it is a
sin without measure.

“And o cristene king kepe vs ichone.” (III.265) One refers to the
unity and strength needed in the world to combat the antagonism
created by Lady Meed.

“And takþ me but a taile for ten quarteris otis . . . .” (IV.45) Ten
(earthly and spiritual completion) symbolizes the wholesale destruction
of the possessions of Peace at the hands of Wrong.

“He sh[al] not þis seue þer se hise feet ones!” (IV.73) Wrong is to
be cast into irons for his misdeeds, and seven (perfection) illustrates
the nature of his incarceration (cf., V.56).
"In a torn tabbard of twelue wynter age . . . ." (V.111) *Twelve* refers to the Children of God and suggests the penetration of matter with spirit. It may also be associated, here, with the colors of Jacob’s coat, with the Tribes of Israel, the age of Christ when He accompanied His parents to Jerusalem, or with the Twelve Apostles. Referring as it does, here, to a torn garment, however, it probably discloses the degree of penetration achieved by the Spirit of God, perhaps more clearly evident when Covetousness later states, “Ferst I lernide to leige a lef opere tweige . . . .” (V.117) When next he reveals that during “pise seeu ȝer” (V.122) he could not have sold his wares without the grace of Guile, he is confessing in his use of *seven* (perfection) that *never* would he have become a successful salesman without Guile’s assistance. He admits, also, that he has cheated others by measuring his goods “Til ten ȝardis opere twelue tolde out þrittene.” (V.128) *Thirteen*, associated with betrayal (Judas), lies outside the scope of *twelve* and represents, therefore, complete evil.

“Sheo ȝap yholde huxterie elleuene wynter.” (V.141) Envy, alluding to his cheating wife, measures the seriousness of her crimes in terms of *eleven*, implying that, because she has been a huckster, she has placed herself beyond the reach of benevolence; that she has denied herself the Grace of God.

“Shal no sonneday be þis seeu ȝer, but sekenesse it make, / Þat I ne shal do me er day to þe dere chirche / And here masse & matynes . . . .” (V.222-224) Sloth vows to reform. Using *seven* (perfection), he pledges that, unless he be ill, he will attend Church every Sunday in the perfection of time.

“I haue ben his folere al þis fourty wynter . . . .” (V.30) so says Piers of Truth. *Forty*, an associational number, stands for man’s trial, humiliation, and desolation. It is also possibly connected, in a three-fold sense, with the days of Christ in the wilderness, the Israelites in the desert, and with the days of the flood. Hence, the trial for Piers is his long quest for Truth.

“Happily an hundrit wynter er þou eft entre.” (VI.101) *Hundred* is *ten* times *ten*. Since *ten* is the number of completion, *ten* times *ten* suggests *absolute* completion; i.e., one who willingly denies himself the companionship of God must endure the completion of time before he may have a second opportunity to enter into God’s grace.

“For þou shalt zelde it azen at one ȝeris ende . . . .” (VII.42) *One* (unique, self-sufficient, indivisible) implies that the time span alluded to, here, is that which tests the individual to his capacity.

“Pise sixe ben yset to saue the castel . . . .” (X.22) *Six*, like *three*, is associated with the Deity, but in an extended sense (power, majesty, wisdom, love, mercy, justice). As a perfect number, it implies, here, that the castle will be saved. It is also used, later, to suggest another state of earthly perfection: “He ȝap weddit a wif wipinne þise voukes sixe . . . .” (XI.106)
"Outtake þe eígte soulis, & of iche beste a couple . . . ." (X.175)
Since Christ arose on the eighth day, *eight* by association signifies regeneration, immortality. Here, the eight souls alluded to in Langland's account of Noah and the flood are to enter upon a new way of life; to experience new states of existence.

"I am massager of dep; men haue I tweyne . . . ." (XII.83)
Since *two* is symbolic of spirit and matter, the two men accompanying death's messenger are probably those who are to consume man's body and soul, especially inasmuch as they are later described as "trewe drînkere bope." (XII.85) United in this mission, they would also be antagonistic to the world; hence, to man.

Although it is possible for one to derive an entirely satisfactory understanding of medieval literature without a knowledge of number symbolism, his appreciation of the material will be vastly enriched by his comprehension of the variety of meanings inherent in the numbers employed in this literature. At the start, he should realize that these symbols were readily comprehended by medievalists and that the presence of number in a medieval work, more likely than not, suggests a host of meanings.
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