

Large Numbers, the Ancients, and Millennialism

By
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In the book *Gods, Graves and Scholars*, C. W. Ceram writes that "...large numbers are of comparatively recent conception in the Western World. The Greeks, for example, to whom we accord such high mathematical-astronomical regard, still thought of the number 10,000 as a 'large, uncountable aggregation.'"

Modern man is accustomed to speaking in literal terms about very large numbers, but we cannot actually comprehend them. What is a million, anyway? Our minds cannot visualize a million of anything, and what we cannot visualize, it is difficult to comprehend. The ancients used numbers on a more human scale, and tended to use large numbers in a figurative way. Today, we use large numbers in much the same way: "millionaire" means a person who has at least a million dollars, but in actual usage simply means the person is rich; in like fashion "billionaire" means the person is super-rich.

The figurative use of large numbers has important implications for biblical interpretation. Large numbers are typically used as a specialized figure of speech---the synecdoche---in which a part of something stands in for the whole. Jesus used a synecdoche when he said: "The Son of man hath not where to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20). Jesus was not saying he didn't have a pillow, but that He didn't have anyplace where He could lay down---that He didn't have anywhere He could call home. The synecdoche is a common figure of speech in the scriptures, particularly when we are talking about large numbers---numbers for which the plain literal meaning is symbolic of a larger whole.

For example, in Matthew 18 we read the parable of the unjust steward who owed his master a debt of **10,000 talents** (Matt 18:23-35). Most commentators begin by computing the value of a talent, then dividing that value by the average daily wage: all to show that the servant had no possibility of repaying his master. This is an excessively literalistic interpretation. Once we know how the ancients thought about large numbers, the meaning is clear: the 10,000 talents is a synecdoche. We are meant to understand that the servant owed an incalculable sum, much more than it was possible to repay.

This is the clear implication for the famous "seventy times seven" speech that precedes the parable of the unjust steward. Numbers that are big and round, such as the number seventy times seven, imply a figurative interpretation. Thus we understand that seventy times seven does not mean "490", such that Peter was under no obligation to forgive the 491st offense. After all, it is possible to keep track of seven offenses, but not seventy times seven. Instead, we understand that Jesus was proclaiming a requirement for unconditional forgiveness for *all* offenses---a standard which only He could keep.

Understanding the figurative use of large numbers by the ancients helps us interpret other parts of scripture as well. In Ps. 50:10, God says: "For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle

upon a **thousand hills**.” Obviously this passage, in its larger context, is not meant to limit God to only the cattle on the thousand hills. This literalistic interpretation would mean that our God was merely a regional God, and that the cattle on the thousand and first hill belong to someone else. The “thousand hills” becomes more clear when we understand the figurative uses to which the ancients used large numbers. Obviously this is a synecdoche, and the literal interpretation of this term, as intended by the writer, was meant to be all-inclusive: God owns *all* the cattle on *all* the hills.

In another psalm it is written: “For a **thousand years** in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night” (Ps 90:4). Once again, this is a synecdoche: the literal meaning of this passage is that eternity is but a day to God. This is the meaning as given by the apostle Peter: “But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a **thousand years**, and a **thousand years** as one day” (2 Pet 3:8). Used in this way, the apostle is telling us that God is timeless, that He is not bound by time, but is its master. The use of the term “thousand years” is not meant in a literalistic fashion, but is used figuratively, as was the custom of that day.

In terms of a human life, a thousand years stands in for eternity. A thousand years is longer than the lifetime of the most venerable Methuselah, who lived 969 years (Gen 5:27). For even the longest-lived person, a thousand years extends before that person was born and after that person’s death. No one has any direct knowledge of what happened prior to our birth, and the world continues even after our descent to the grave. So a thousand years is, to a human being, as good as an eternity, and therefore stands in for eternity in scripture.

So what then are we to make of the following passage from the Revelation of St. John?

And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a **thousand years**, And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the **thousand years** should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season. And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a **thousand years**. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the **thousand years** were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a **thousand years**. And when the **thousand years** are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison.
(Rev 20:1-7)

Clearly the use of such a large, round number has implications beyond the purely literalistic rendering of the term. The ancients typically used larger numbers as a synecdoche in which the part is representative of something larger. Therefore, the thousand years refers to an eternity, just as a thousand hills figuratively stands in for the entire world, and seventy times seven represents unconditional and uncountable forgiveness.

Thanks be to God: which doeth great things and unsearchable; marvelous things without number.