

The Role of Numbers in the Jehovah's Witnesses Religion

During my recent and limited encounters with Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) I noticed that they put a special emphasis on numbers. I will provide a summary of these observations and will speculate for some of the reasons behind this interest. I propose that the main causes of focusing on numbers are to provide a sense of hope, accomplishment, unity and progress, a structured environment and support social control.

Like any religion based on sacred scriptures JW need a way of referencing the writing within those scriptures. JW is a mostly literalist, Bible based religion. They base their life on Bible principles. Studying the Bible on a daily basis is strongly recommended. Furthermore at public or group events when they are reading non-Bible text that has references to it they are encouraged to look up the original. All of this is done with the set of abbreviations and numbers that is familiar for those of us who were brought up in the Judeo-Christian heritage. For example "Dan. 4:16" refers to the book of Daniel, chapter four, verse 16. The organized JW church provides a lot of religious and other kind of materials to its members. Most of these are heavily peppered with Bible references. Therefore when studying readings provided by the organization Witnesses see much more numbers/references compared to other kind of literature, books, magazines. This is one tool that helps them to separate the sacred from the mundane. They can easily identify what comes from approved and trusted sources and what may not.

Beside the Biblical references I found that in most JW books, newsletters, study guides and publications each paragraph in a continuous text is clearly marked with a

serial number. This makes it easier to refer to a specific section. Often at the bottom of the pages in the footnotes one can find questions pertaining to the content of the similarly numbered paragraph on the page. Without the numbers this task would be more difficult.

JW is a millennialist religion. They believe that history has several phases and the current one will end at a certain point in time and a new one will start then. The date of this change is significant. This is a focal point in the believers' life. This is what s/he is waiting for, because it will mark her/his entrance to Paradise. The end of this current "wicked world" will be marked by a cataclysmic Armageddon—"the war of the great day of God the Almighty" REV 16:14, 16)--and God's Kingdom will be established after that. Paradise on Earth will await those who followed the right path and lived according to (JW's interpretation of) the Bible. [A true believer Witness might object to my term "interpretation of the Bible" because they believe there is only one correct one, theirs.]

The current official JW doctrine doesn't give a precise date. Instead it quotes Revelations 12:12: "a short period of time" (Reasoning 98). However the year 1914 has significance in this regard. Originally, when the church was founded in the 1870s this year was taught as the end of Armageddon. Through a relatively complex series of calculations, based on various prophecies found in the Bible October 1914 was marked as "the final end of the kingdoms of this world" (Russell 99). As we know World War I started that year, but the world as such did not end. Since then the JW modified their understanding of the prophecies several times. Without going into many details let me recount them. First it was set that Armageddon will shortly end after 1914, and then the year 1925 was singled out. Next it was said that people old enough to understand the events of 1914, i.e. they were alive and not as small children that year, will live to see

Armageddon, while later this was modified that it will happen during the lifetime of the generation of 1914. Based on this idea, but with different reasoning the date has shifted to 1975, 1989 and 1994. Since 1994 no new dates have been given, only the aforementioned “short period of time”.

My intention with the summary above is not trying to discredit the tenets of the religion but to show that for over a century the major focus of the believers’ attention was a very specific date. My main source for the details on the date changes was an article online that is clearly hostile towards JW. However it used lots of precise references to JW materials to back up each of its claims. I did not have a chance to check all of them, but they appeared to be correct. To be fair I should listen to the other side and ask a knowledgeable witness about his interpretation of these changes. Unfortunately I do not have the time to do so, so I will just share what I heard on an earlier meeting. One difference in the interpretation of the date 1914 is due to the fact that the founders did not have a correct translation of the Bible. They were misled by incorrect translations, such as the King James version. Since the 1950s though JW worked on their own translations and through consequent revisions the New World Translation was born. Based on the new, better version the true meaning of the date has been understood.

Another controversial and often mentioned number in regards to JW is 144,000. It is mentioned in Revelations 7:4 and 14:3. JW believe that this is the number of people who will go directly to heaven. (Reasoning 167) Everyone else has a chance to reach Paradise on Earth though. As far as I know this literal interpretation of the number is unique to this Christian religion and all the other denominations take a different view. To have this number and concept provides another layer of hope for Witnesses. They

proclaim that God will select who will become one of the 144,000 but they can be sure that all of them will be JW. Therefore any JW member has a slight chance to go to heaven, despite that they cannot do much more about it than following their faith. Nevertheless it is a great motivation.

The church organization is interested in the numbers of its members, the amount of time they spend with ministry work/"publishing"/proselytizing, and the circulation of their publications. For example each of the 3 books I have been studying, reading has the information on their first page how many copies they have been printed. A commentary on Isaiah was printed in 5million copies; the edition of the "Reasoning from the Scriptures" had 2million, while the New World Translation of the Bible has been printed in 56.9 million copies up till 1989. The fortnightly Watchtower magazine has an average printing of 25.203 million.

The final set of numbers I would like to mention is from the monthly JW newsletter: Our Kingdom Ministry. On its first inner page one can read the service meeting schedule for a whole month, broken down to segments with specific length like 8 minutes or 25 minutes. On the same page there is a table summarizing the number of hours Witnesses worked, the number of magazines were distributed, all information broken down to the various levels of hierarchy. Hierarchy is another term a Witness would probably object to, because they view their organization as egalitarian. They have lay leaders who gain this rank through their knowledge of Bible and standing in the community. However they use terms like Pioneers and Auxiliary Pioneers to differentiate what level one has attained in their understanding and also show how active they are in their publishing. From the box in the newsletter I learned that in March 2003 1601 person

was baptized to become a committed Witness. A quick look at the official JW website tells us that as of August 2002 there were 6,304,645 practicing members worldwide, which is a 2.8 percent increase compared to the previous year.

Having shown how thoroughly a Witness' daily life is soaked with various kinds of numbers I would like to explore the reasons for them. I believe a sense of hope is essential for any thinking human's survival. We all have to hope for a better future. The founders of this religion looked around and interpreted what they experienced as a decline in humanity's quality of life. And that is the experience of JW members today. The Bible and its prophecies definitely can be interpreted in a way that is promising a Paradise for those who are worthy. This was the solution, the venue they offered as hope for the believers. When we see the ecological political and social disasters that cover our Earth today, it is very tempting to say that the next version will be better and there is no way to get out of the current problems without divine intervention. I do not know the future of course, but if I had a choice between believing that there is some better coming up or that things are just going downhill I would choose the former option myself. And this is what witnesses can do while also proclaiming it as part of the divine plan. For a long time they had a more or less specific date in mind, which strengthened them: they only had to wait for a limited time for God's Kingdom. That sense of urgency is still around, but not as exact as it used to be.

The fact that the organization keeps very close track on the number of faithful ones and shares this information with the people has several psychological effects. It provides a sense of unity. When you are at a meeting or even if you are not you can be assured that over 6 million people share your view and you all go to Paradise. It can give

strength to endure daily hardship. [A Witness would probably emphasize at this point that true strength comes from Jehovah.] The ever increasing numbers of witnesses can also fill a person with a sense of accomplishments. As they consider one of their primary duties to spread the word and make sure that every human being has a chance to convert, find their path it must be good to see that some do. Their work has results. A 2.8% increase may not be a lot but it shows that the effort was worth it.

However I also believe that the numbers are also deliberately used as a form of social control. When I first went to a JW meeting it appeared to be free-flowing. Since then I read their newsletter and magazine and from them I learned that every meeting has a pretty tight schedule. Again this provides a sense of security, members know in advance what to expect when. It not just provides a structure, that most religions' services have but a timeline that other usually lack. It would be far-fetched to compare this to military, because (as far as I know) there is no punishment for deviating from the schedule. Nevertheless I was surprised to see rules in an area where I am used to none.

The most surprising numbers for me was the numbering of the paragraphs in the JW literature. On both meetings I attended texts were studied in a manner that that the paragraph was read by a member of the community, the accompanying preprinted question was asked by the leader and member answered them. They were all encouraged to read the text before the meeting and prepare their answers. This is an unusual way of studying for me. I have learned in psychology that asking back and answering questions about text we just read is one of the most effective ways of internalizing that. However in my view the pointed, pre-defined questions are not helping but limiting free thinking. JW are sometimes accused of brainwashing their members. I do not agree with this

accusation but believe one has to be a really dedicated thinker to ask the questions one is interested in and seeking out the answers. It is too easy to fall back to using only the pre-set questions in the spiritual inquiry. Therefore I believe that the questions, along with the numbered paragraphs are a form of social control. Notice that I did not say anything about the content of the materials, JW dogmas and interpretation of the Bible. Every religion has a form of these, so while the JW is a unique, that can be said of every religions'.

I believe I proved that numbers are important on several levels within JW. From the minutes of the meetings, through the sections of the literature, including the number of congregants to the end of our days everything is counted explicitly. This connects the members closer to each other, provides a measurement for the progress of JW as a whole and helps the countdown towards Armageddon.

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