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THE RHETORICAL USE OF NUMBERS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

JOHN J. DAVIS
Instructor, Hebrew and Old Testament
Grace Theological Seminary

A very important use of numbers in the Old Testament is that for rhetorical or poetic effect. Whenever numbers are so used they are not to be understood literally nor symbolically. Much effort has been expended attempting to ascertain some hidden or mysterious meaning of rhetorical phrases using numbers. The intention of the writer in this usage is not to emphasize the mathematical value of the number primarily, but to express either intensity or other concepts such as "few," "many," etc.

There are, therefore, two basic applications of numbers in poetic structure.

THE CLIMACTIC USE OF NUMBERS

The arrangement of a numeral with its sequel within a clause, either syndetically or asyndetically, in Scripture is a common poetic device with numerous parallels in contemporary literature. The intention of such a device is to express the concept of intensification and/or progression. The actual value of the numbers in such cases is not significant.

This phenomenon is perhaps best expressed in the formula $x/x+1$. It occurs principally in poetic passages but not exclusively. Syntactically $x/x+1$ may appear in the same sentence or in two different sentences. In most instances in the Old Testament it appears in poetical passages employing synonomous, synthetic and antithetical parallelisms. The following is a list of the occurrences of the $x/x+1$ sequences in the Old Testament:

Sequence 1/2 - Judges 5:30; Deut. 32:30; II Kings 6:10; Jer. 3:14; Psa. 62:11; Job 33:14, 40:5; Ezra 10:13; Neh. 13:20.

Sequence 2/3 - Deut. 17:6; II Kings 9:32; Isa. 17:6; Hos. 6:2; Amos 4:8; Job 33:29.

Sequence 3/4 - Ex. 20:5; 34:7; Num. 14:8; Deut. 5:9; Jer. 36:23; Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13, 2:1, 4, 6; Prov. 30:15, 18, 21, 29.

The above article is taken from the author's doctoral dissertation presented to the faculty of Grace Theological Seminary in 1967.

Sequence 4/5 - Isa. 17:6.

Sequence 5/6 - II Kings 13:19.

Sequence 6/7 - Job 5:19; Prov. 6:16.

Sequence 7/8 - Micah 5:4.

Sequence 8/9 - none.

Sequence 9/10 - none.

Sequence 1000/10,000 - Deut. 32:30; I Sam. 18:7, 21:11, 29:5; Psa. 91:7.

The above list includes occurrences of this type of expression in both prose and poetic passages and it does not distinguish between the two fundamental types of occurrence.¹

X/X+1 As A Poetic Device

The most striking use of this device is found in poetic portions of the Old Testament. It is frequently employed in synonymous, synthetic and antithetic parallelisms and when it is thus employed, the numbers should generally be regarded as parallel. Roth explains this point in the following manner:

Since there is no other expression for a given numeral than the numeral itself, the numeral one unit lower serves as a parallel term; a phenomenon as strange to us as it is characteristic of Semitic poetic parallelism.²

In this usage of x/x+1 formula there is little or no regard for the actual mathematical value of the numbers employed. For example Amos speaks of the anger of Yahweh in the following manner:

. . .for three transgressions of Damascus, yea, for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof. . .³

It is evident that the writer is not attempting to total the sins of Damascus, Tyre, Gaza, etc., for the sins enumerated are in most cases neither three nor four. The purpose is to show climax and finality by means of numbers in progression. In fact, the fundamental function of this idiom is to strengthen and intensify the parallelism in such a manner that the reader cannot escape its impact. This observation is clearly illustrated in the following examples where the wrath or the end of patience is the theme:

For God speaketh once, yea twice, though man regardeth it not (Job 33:14 ASV).

Once have I spoken, and I will not answer; Yea, twice but I will proceed no further. (Job 40:5 ASV).

Micah also illustrates this phenomenon:

. . .then shall we raise against him seven shepherds, and eight principal men
(Micah 5:5 ASV).

In each one of the above examples other numbers could have been substituted and the meaning or impact would not have been violated. The precise literary value of the formula $x/x+1$ was not recognized until recent years when contemporary inscriptions were made to bear on Hebrew grammar and syntax. Older grammarians concluded that numbers in this arrangement merely expressed "a number not exactly specified or an indefinite total."⁴ This analysis is not incorrect but merely incomplete. There are cases when juxtaposition of two numbers in progression do indicate an indefinite total, but these do not constitute the majority of cases. With the appearance of Ugaritic poetry the student of Biblical studies had at his disposal a rich supply of cognate parallels for this numerical phenomenon. This literary device was used freely by the scribes at Ugarit and with considerable effectiveness. In the Baal Epic $x/x+1$ sequence of numbers is used to create literary climax with regard to Baal's view of sacrifice:

For two (kinds of) banquets Baal hates,
Three the rider of the clouds;
A banquet (banquet) of baseness,
And a banquet of handmaids' lewdness.
(Baal II, iii, 16-21)⁵

After Baal was furnished with a temple, he made a journey to claim the domains which were rightly his. The description of the journey employs climactic numbers:

Sixty-six towns he took,
Seventy-seven hamlets;
Eighty (took) Baal of (Zaphon's) s(ummit),
Ninety Baal of the sum(mit).
(Baal II, vii, 9-12).⁶

It appears that the scribes utilized this device to intensify the emotion of a given event or act for in the majority of occurrences of this phenomenon strong emotions are expressed (e.g. anger, love, etc.) or violent actions are expressed. In the Baal and 'Anat epics there is a good example of this practice. Baal apparently meets with a tragic death and the weeping, mourning, etc. of the other gods is described in vivid language. In this portion of the text which is rather fragmented there are no less than five occurrences of climactic numbers.⁷ Note the intense sadness and frustrations of this occasion:

Wine of is^v [ryt]
number []
Like the seven cries of his mouth
Yea his eight shrieks.
The sun---
She goes to seek []

The Sun after him []
 One place, two places []
 One place, two places []
 The foundation(s) of the sea []
 Weeping, fills []
 Tears of []⁸

The Legend of Krt,⁹ and the Legend of Aqht,¹⁰ also contain numerous examples of climactic numbers. Aramaean literature also gives evidence of this practice. In an Aramaean Magical text dating from the seventh century B.C. the following appears:

[w]ives of Hauron, whose utterance is true and his seven concubines and the eight wives of Baal.¹¹

Examples of this literary device are not common in Akkadian literature. When numerical climaxes do occur, they are more subtle and not as redundant as is the case with Ugaritic epics. The more common form of this sequence is used in relation with days and nights.¹² In Die Assyrische Beschwörungssammlung Maglu there are two passages dealing with incantations against witches which employ numerical climax:

He, meine Zauberin oder meine Spukmacherin,
 die auf eine Meile ein Feuer anzündet, /
 auf zwei Meilen ihren Boten geschickt hat. . .¹³

Zwei sind die Töchter des Himmelsgottes Anu, /
Drei sind die Töchter des Himmelsgottes Anu.¹⁴

When an ancient scribe wished to express magnitude along with intensity of expression in a parallelism he would, in most cases, employ large numbers for his x/x+1 sequence. A favorite combination of the scribes at Ugarit was 1000/10,000. In a banquet scene recorded in the Baal and Anat cycles the following passage attempts to show the great amount of the wine presented to Baal:

He stands, serves liquor, and gives him drink.
 He places a cup in his hand,
 A flagon in the grasp of his hand;
 A vessel large and conspicuous.
 A jar to dumbfound a mortal;
 A holy cup of woman ne'er seen,
 Only Asherah beholds such a flagon.
 He takes a thousand pots of wine,
 Mixes ten thousand in his mixture.¹⁵

Later in the epic we read:

[O'er] thousand ['fields' in the] sea,
 Ten thousand [acres] in the floods.
 [Tra] verse Gabal, traverse Qa'al,
 Traverse Ihat-nop-shamem. . .

From a thousand fields, ten thousand acres,
 At Kotha[r]s feet bow and fall down,
 Prostrate thee and do him honor.¹⁶

This literary device was also known to the Old Testament scribes and was used by them on numerous occasions. The question raised in Deut. 32:30 is an example of this phenomenon:

How should one chase a thousand,
 and two put ten thousand to flight,
 except their rock had sold them,
 and the Lord had shut them up?¹⁷

Again in Psa. 91:7 we read:

A thousand shall fall at thy side,
 and ten thousand at they right hand;
 but it shall not come nigh thee.¹⁸

The other occurrences of this expression are found in antithetic parallelisms. The song dedicated to David employs these two numbers and their effectiveness is illustrated by Saul's immediate response.¹⁹

And the women answered one another
 as they played, and said,
 Saul hath slain his thousands, and²⁰
 David his ten thousands (I Sam. 18:7 KJV).

"It is obvious that in this verse the two numbers are contrasted with each other in accordance with the intention of the verse, that is, the exaltation of David over Saul."²¹ The interpretation of numbers which occur in the numerical sequence $x/x+1$ in synonymous, synthetic and antithetic parallelisms, therefore, must be interpreted in the light of the literary idiom and context, not necessarily the actual value of the number. This does not mean that the numbers employed in the $x/x+1$ sequence in parallelism never have mathematical value, for they quite commonly do. Their literary and/or mathematical values must be determined by the context alone.

X/X+1 As A Mathematical Expression

As observed above, there are instances when the climactic formula $x/x+1$ does have actual numerical value. When this formula takes on numerical value, it will usually be found

in the opening lines of a text, and the value usually referred to will be the second number given (i.e. $x+1$). Prov. 30:18 reads:

There be three things which are too wonderful for me,
yea, four which I know not.²²

In the verses that follow four things are actually listed. Ugaritic literature also employs the $x/x+1$ sequence in the same manner. In the Baal Epic, to which we have already alluded, there is an excellent example of this phenomenon:

Baal hates two sacrifices,
Three, the Rider of Clouds:
The sacrifice of shame
And the sacrifice of baseness'
And the sacrifice of the murmur of handmaids.²³

Examples of numerical sayings of this type are also found in Aramaic. In the Aḥiqar text from Elephantine, which is probably of Mesopotamian origin, the following has been preserved:

Two things are an ornament (to a man), /
of three there is pleasure to Šamaš:
One who drinks (?) wine
and also gives it (to others) to drink,
one who restrains (his) wisdom. . . (?)
and (one who) hears a thing and does not
reveal (it to others).²⁴

In the above examples the literary force of the numerical phrase is the same as the examples cited in synonomous parallelisms, but with the additional factor of the numbers having actual mathematical values. In all cases examined, in both the Bible and extra-biblical literature, the only number receiving literal values was the second ($x+1$) which was always the higher number.

THE IDIOMATIC USE OF NUMBERS

X/X+1 As An Indefinite Value

In the Old Testament and in extra-biblical literature there is a large group of numerical sayings that are, in meaning, different from the above, but at the same time share in some fundamental structural similarities. In both poetical and prose portions of the Old Testament there are numerous times when the sequence $x/x+1$ is found as one phrase in one sentence. The numbers either appear asyndetically one beside the other or are joined by the waw conjunction, especially when a preposition or negation stands between the two numbers.²⁵ The following Old Testament passages belong to this group:

. . . a maiden or two for every man (Judges 5:30)
 . . . who is on my side? Who? Two or three eunuchs looked out at him
 (II Kings 9:32)
 . . . we cannot stand in the open. Nor is this a work for one day or for two. . .
 (Exra 10:13).
 On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses he that is to die shall
 be put to death. . . (Deut. 17:6).

Gleanings will be left in it, as when an olive tree is beaten--
two or three berries in the top of the highest bough, four or five on the
 branches of a fruit tree. . . (Isa. 17:6).

So two or three cities wandered to one city. . . (Amos 4:8).²⁶

The same sequence is employed in the New Testament:

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the
 midst of them (Matt. 18:20).

Now there were six waterpots of stone set there after the Jews' manner of
 purifying, containing two or three firkins apiece (John 2:6).²⁷

In all these instances the addition of the second number calls attention to the fact that the first
 number is not meant to be an exact sum. When, therefore, the sequence $x/x+1$ appears in
 juxtaposition in a single phrase, the reference is always to a somewhat indefinite numerical
 value. Perhaps it is intended to express the concept of a "few" or "a small number."

There are abundant parallels to this phenomenon in extra-biblical texts. In the Gilgamesh
 Epic (Old Babylonian Version), Tablet II, col. II, lines 6, 7 the following sequence occurs:

For six days and seven nights Enkidu came forth
 Mating with the l[ass] .²⁸

The Middle Assyrian Laws also provide a parallel:

If a seignior's wife, having deserted her husband, has entered the house of an
 Assyrian, whether it was in the same city or in some neighboring city, where
 he set her up in a house, (and) she stayed with the mistress of the house (and)
 spent the night (there) three (or) four times, without the master of the house
 knowing that the seignior's wife was staying in his house. . .²⁹

Evidence for the use of this literary device in Egyptian and Hittite cultures is found in the two
 version of the "Treaty Between the Hittites and Egypt."

. . . if a man or two men--no matter who flee. . . (Egyptian version).

If one man flees from Egypt or two men or three men. . .(Hittite version)³⁰

In all instances the sequence $x/x+1$ has the idea of a "few."

SUMMARY

In the Old Testament and in contemporary Semitic and non-Semitic inscriptions the numerical sequence $x/x+1$ can be utilized in two ways: (1) It may be employed in a synonymous, synthetic or antithetic parallelism and when it is so employed, it functions to climax or intensify the sense. The numbers may or may not have mathematical values. The determination of possible numerical values in this usage must be derived from the context in which the expression occurs. (2) It could be used merely to indicate a concept such as a "few." In most instances of this type the sequence occurs in the same phrase and it may or may not take the conjunction.

DOCUMENTATION

1. One type is when the expression $x/x+1$ occurs in one sentence and the other is when it occurs in two separate sentences.
2. W. M. W. Roth, "The Numerical Sequence $x/x+1$ in the Old Testament," Vetus Testamentum, Vol. 12 (July, 1962), p. 304.
3. Amos 1:3 cf. 1:6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6.
4. E. Kautzsch, ed., Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar, 2nd. ed. rev. by A. E. Cowley (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 437.
5. J. B. Pritchard, ed. Ancient Near Eastern Texts (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 132.
6. Ibid., p. 134.
7. Cyrus H. Gordon, Ugaritic Literature (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1949), pp. 55, 56.
8. Ibid., p. 56.
9. Ibid., Text 128:II:20, p. 75. Cf. ANET, p. 143.
10. Ibid., Text 3:30ff, p. 93.
11. W. F. Albright, "An Aramaean Magical Text in Hebrew From the Seventh Century B. C." Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, No. 76 (Dec., 1939), p. 9.
12. Cf. "The Epic of Gilgamesh," Tablet VII:iv:10, ANET, p. 87.
13. Gerhard Meier, ed. Die assyrische Beschwörungssammlung Maglu (Berlin, 1937), p. 45 quoted by Roth, op. cit., p. 305, (Underlining mine).
14. Ibid., (Underlining mine).
15. "Poems about Baal and Anath" (VAB, A,) ANET, p. 136.
16. Ibid., (VAB, F,) ANET, p. 138. Cf. also Baal II, viii, 24, p. 135.

17. KJV.
18. Ibid.
19. I Sam. 18:8. This song gained such wide popularity that even the Philistines knew of (cf. I Sam. 29:5).
20. The translation of the conjunction here is better "but" than "and" since the poetry is antithetic parallelism. Cf. also I Sam. 21:11.
21. Roth, op. cit., p. 303.
22. KJV cf. Psa. 62:11 Job 5:19, 33:14, 40:5; Prov. 6:16, 30:15, 21, 29.
23. Cyrus H. Gordon, op. cit., p. 30.
24. A. Cowley, ed., Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B. C., (Oxford: The Clarendon Press 1923), p. 215 (col. IV, 92-93a).
25. Cf. Roth, op. cit., p. 308.
26. All verses from RSV. Cf. also Jer. 3:14; Job 33:29; Ex. 20:5; II Kings 13:9; Eccl. 11:2 and Jer. 36:23.
27. ASV. Also cf. I Cor. 14:29 (Underlining mine).
28. Translated by E. A. Speiser, ANET, p. 77.
29. Law #24, Translator Theophile J. Meek, ANET, p. 182 (Underlining mine).
30. Egyptian version translated by John A. Wilson, ANET, p. 200.
Hittite version translated by Albrecht Goetze, ANET, p. 203.