MEDIEVAL NUMBER SYMBOLISM IN LANGLAND'S PIERS PLOWMAN

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PREFACE

A modern reader often finds medieval allegory and symbolism difficult to understand. Medieval number symbolism, an area of symbolism upon which there has not been much scholarly work, provides symbols which not only are easily comprehended, but also which are a means to a deeper and richer understanding of the themes of medieval authors.

I chose to investigate the medieval number symbolism which Langland has used in deepening and pointing clearly to his theme of the salvation of men's souls in Piers Plowman. Number symbolism, serving for clarification of the theme in addition to enriching and enhancing a reader's understanding of the entire work, is easily understood when one has a knowledge of the inherent meanings of numbers and of the associational meanings of numbers, which were derived from Biblical stories. Therefore, I have included a short appendix of the most popular number symbols and their meanings.

I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Charles E. Walton for his most patient assistance and encouragement during the preparation of this study and to Dr. June Morgan for her kind assistance in the criticism of this manuscript.

May, 1965 L.L.L.
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CHAPTER I

THE ORIGIN OF NUMBER SYMBOLISM

Number and form were present in the universe before man's discovery of them. Man's first concept of this ever-present phenomenon of number concerned himself as opposed to something which was not himself. Thus, the discovery of number was based on man's observation of the universe which surrounded him. Primitive man saw himself as an infinitesimal part of this universe and felt his destiny to be inextricably bound with the stars which he observed in the heavens.[1] He first formed the concept of *one* as himself, and *another* as that which was not himself. The concrete realization of *one*, *another*, and *another* long preceded the abstract notions of "oneness" and "twoness."[2] Primitive man saw himself as *one*, the wings of a bird as *two*, clover leaves as *three*, the legs of an animal as *four*, and the fingers of his hand as *five*.[3] However, the abstract concept of number as an entity was a much later discovery of man. Many primitive tribes today are said to count with

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[1]David Eugene Smith, *History of Mathematics*, I, 17-18.

[2]Tobias Dantzig, *Number, the Language of Science*, p. 6.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 7.

the idea of *one*, *two*, and *many*. Here, what follows after *two* can only be described as *many* since these people have not yet discovered a concept of numbers which extends beyond *two*.[4]

As early man observed the universe and felt himself a part of it, his hopes and fears gradually found a more concrete expression in religious mysticism with stars, beasts, stones, words, herbs, and numbers as manifestations of human destiny.[5] For example, his observations of the stars eventually led him to concepts of measurement, such as the determining of eclipses, and the naming of constellations and signs of the zodiac.[6] Therefore, the beginning of man's appreciation of the many wonders inherent to mathematics is directly connected with a social comprehension of religious mysticism.[7] It follows that upon observing the cycle of the moon, man based his month upon its changes, and certain days became sacred to him. He discovered that he could divide the twenty-eight day cycle by *four*, leaving *seven*. Hence, the number *twenty-eight* became sacred, along with *seven*, *fourteen*, and *twenty-one*. One finds later

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[4]Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

[5]Dantzig, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

[6]Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

[7]*Ibid.*, p. 16.

mystical number symbolism in close association with the sacred quality of solar symbolism.[8]

When man began to count, he discovered that the most convenient base was his ten fingers. One observes that all Indo-European languages, in addition to Semitic and Mongolian, have ten as the base of numeration.[9] Basically, this number nomenclature of all societies has been the same, so that the original names for man's fingers seem to have evolved into man's number names.[10] Number words, however, preceded recorded history by many thousands of years.[11] Therefore, one discovers that there is neither conclusive evidence as to the definite origin of number names nor any positive agreement among scholars on the problem of how and when primitive man conceived the reality of numbers.

The earliest date in recorded history, 4241 B. C., marks the introduction of the Egyptian calendar, which is formed upon the basis of twelve months consisting of thirty days each, plus five feast days.[12] This calendar with its high degree of organization is as nearly accurate as today's

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[8]Helen Francis Dunbar, Symbolism in Medieval Thought, p. 197.

[9]Dantzig, op. cit., p. 12.

[10]Smith, op. cit., p. 8.

[11]Dantzig, op. cit., p. 11.

[12]Smith, op. cit., p. 42.

calendar and exemplifies a high development of computation as well as a knowledge of astronomy. This early form of a calendar indicates that the state of society in the early periods of Egyptian history was highly civilized.[13] The degree of organization and specialization in this Egyptian society allowed the priest class to develop. A system of mathematics for the Egyptian developed out of the leisure time of this class and was infused into their religion. From their study of the stars and other heavenly bodies, Egyptian priests perfected a science of astronomy, which study necessitated an understanding of numbers and mathematics. Since it was the priest class that had the time and facilities for such study, it appears logical that this class, upon discovering the proportions of the right triangle and the incorruptibility of the number three and other mystical number meanings, should infuse this information into the current religion, although the symbolism was a closely guarded secret within the priest class, and the laity comprehended little of it.

The actual date of the beginning of Egyptian mathematics has been established as 3400 B. C.[14] However, judging from the evidence contained in the calendar of 4142 B. C.,

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[13]Dantzig, op. cit., p. 9.

[14]Loc. cit.

one feels certain that the Egyptians were cognizant of numbers and methods of computation many years prior to the development of the calendar itself. There is further evidence to suggest that a form of arithmetic existed in Babylon in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley in the fourth and fifth millenium B. C.[15] The Babylonian calendar is thought by many to have appeared at least five hundred years before that of the Egyptians.[16] The Babylonian calendar year began at the vernal equinox with the first month named after the Bull. Scholars have concluded, therefore, that this calendar must have been established when the sun was in Taurus at this equinox, or at that period of time around 4700 B. C. or earlier.[17]

About 2750 B. C., the Babylonians began to make use of the more advanced astronomy, calendar, measure, and numerals of the Sumerians.[18] However, they used sixty and its multiples for significant or holy numbers.[19] Their number base was sixty, that number on which they believed the universe to be based. The Babylonians, also, divided the day

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[15]Smith, op. cit., p. 37.

[16]Loc. cit.

[17]Loc. cit.

[18]Ibid., p. 38.

[19]Dantzig, op. cit., p. 38.

into twenty-four hours with sixty minutes in an hour and sixty seconds in a minute.[20] Scholars have discovered evidence which points to the existence of a sixty-hour day prior to the theory of a twenty-four hour day.[21]

As the Egyptian and Babylonian civilizations ceased to evolve, the Greek civilization became the leader of the world. Pythagoras, the founder of the mystical cult of Pythagoreans, is believed to have obtained some of his ideas from the East where he had traveled.[22] The transmigration of souls of the Hindus and the idea of the three-in-one, one-in-three god are examples of Pythagorean importations. As did ancient man look to the universe for an explanation of his being, so also did Pythagoras. Explaining his theory, he states:

> The deceptions of the senses shall mislead mankind no more. Observation and experiment, the deceitful panders of sensory experience, shall pass from human memory and only pure reason remain. Everything is number.[23]

From the statement that "everything is number," Pythagoras proceeded by means of arithmetical logic to show that everything in the universe was, indeed, composed of number.

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[20] Ibid., p. 6.

[21] Loc. cit.

[22] Smith, op. cit., p. 71.

[23] Quoted in Eric Temple Bell, The Magic of Numbers, pp. 4-5.

Throughout the universe, Pythagoras found that harmony depends on proportion in numbers, for, he reasoned, "where harmony is, there are numbers; hence, the order and beauty of the universe have their origin in numbers."[24] Pythagoras also applied his discovery of the proportions in harmony in music to the universe when he explained that the intervals between stars and planets were determined by the same laws which governed the harmony in music, and, thus, mankind was given the doctrine of the harmony of the spheres.[25] Plutarch states that Pythagoras believed that earth was produced from a regular hexahedron; fire, from a pyramid; air, from an octahedron; water, from an icosahedron; and the heavenly sphere, from a duodecahedron.[26] Pythagoras shows that in everything are the physical elements related to number and form.[27]

The Pythagorean Greeks in their study of numbers determined that one was not actually a number, but merely a point in space; and that two was an extension of this point, a line in space. Three, therefore, became for them the first real number since it, as a triangle, formed the

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[24] Florian Cajori, History of Mathematics, p. 55.

[25] Smith, op. cit., p. 76.

[26] Ibid., p. 73.

[27] Loc. cit.

basis for objects which were perceptible to the senses.[28] Although the Greeks did not consider one and two to be real numbers, they gave to these "numbers" a reality when used as a part of Pythagoras's tetraktys, that is, the number ten on which they believed the universe to have been created -- formed from the addition of the first four numbers, one, two, three, and four.

The entire philosophy of Pythagoras is based on the postulate ". . . that number is the cause of various qualities of matter."[29] Hopper states that the Pythagorean treatment of numbers is the ". . . exaltation of the decad as containing all numbers and therefore all things, and the geometric conception of mathematics."[30] The number ten was considered holy because of its incorporation of all numbers and because the sum of the first four numbers, one, two, three, and four, equals ten. The first four numbers were considered important because any number in the decad could be formed from them; they were also important because they were equated to earth, air, fire, and water, from which the entire universe was thought to be composed. Therefore, the universe (decad) became the sum of earth, air, fire, and water (one, two, three, and four).[31]

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[28]Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 35.

[29]Smith, op. cit., p. 73.

[30]Hopper, op. cit., p. 34.

[31]Dantzig, op. cit., p. 41.

The number ten was considered holy by Pythagoras and his followers. The following prayer was addressed to this divinity by Pythagoras:

> Bless us, divine number, thou who generatest gods and men! O holy, holy tetraktys, thou that containest the root and source of the eternally flowing creation! For the divine number begins with the profound, pure unity until it comes to the holy four; then it begets the mother of all, the all-comprising, the all-bounding, the first-born, the never-swerving, the never-tiring holy ten, the key-holder of all.[32]

To the Pythagoreans, the number ten held the secret of the universe. Both universe and ten were built on the same pattern, and one who could understand the properties of ten could understand the properties of the universal whole.

In the Pythagorean theory (in any right triangle, the sum of the squares of the legs equals the square of the hypotenuse), the followers of Pythagoras found an inherent relationship between geometry and arithmetic which served as confirmation for their theory that number rules the universe.[33] Working, then, with figures as well as numbers, the Pythagoreans used the circle as a symbol for the divine, all-encompassing ten. The circle, however, had long been an astrological symbol for the zodiac. At the same time, the origin of this symbolization is lost in antiquity, but

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[32]Quoted in loc. cit.

[33]Ibid., pp. 100-101.

evidences of its use have been found in Egypt, Tibet, and China.[34]

In their complex and detailed study of numbers, the Pythagoreans discovered the perfect numbers and the amicable numbers. A perfect number is one in which the sum of its divisors adds up to the number itself. Six and twenty-eight are the smallest perfect numbers, and were known to the Hindus and Hebrews.[35] The divisors of six are one, two, and three, which, in turn, produce the sum of six. Amicable numbers, on the other hand, are those whose divisors add up to the other number.[36] Even numbers were considered feminine and weak, because they could be divided into two equal parts; odd numbers were considered strong and masculine, since they can not be divided equally without having a remainder. Pythagoras designated three as the number of completion, for it is a number that has a beginning, a middle, and an end.[37] Greek mythology has the three Graces, the three Fates, the three Furies, the three-headed Cerberus, and the nine Muses as examples of the completeness of three.[38] Later,

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[34]Hopper, op. cit., p. 121.

[35]Dantzig, op. cit., p. 44.

[36]Loc. cit.

[37]Arnold Whittick, Symbols, Signs, and Their Meaning, p. 224.

[38]F. Edward Hulme, Symbolism in Christian Art, p. 10.

Christianity adopted this meaning for the Trinity, the complete God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.[39]

Aristotle says that Pythagoras, furthermore, related virtues and traits to numbers.[40] To the first five numbers, Pythagoras gave symbolic meaning. One symbolized reason or the unchangeable; two was symbolic of opinion; three was the number of completion; four symbolized justice, since it is the product of equals; and five, the marriage number, was the union of the first feminine and masculine numbers.[41]

Pythagoras also considered arithmetic as one of the four degrees of wisdom, along with music, geometry, and spherics or astronomy.[42] Consequently, the Pythagorean school seems to have imitated the Egyptians in mystic and secret observances.[43] Since the group was political by nature, its mysticism appeared dangerous to the state; therefore, ultimately it became an organization which met with no sanction from the government. The Pythagoreans remained active, however, and their "mystic number philosophy" influenced the speculations of Plato and Aristotle.[44] When

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[39] Whittick, op. cit., p. 224.

[40] Smith, op. cit., p. 73.

[41] Dantzig, op. cit., p. 40.

[42] Smith, op. cit., p. 73.

[43] Dantzig, op. cit., p. 18.

[44] Ibid., p. 43.

Aristotle was asked about the source of his admirable knowledge, he answered, "From things, which do not know how to lie."[45] Much of the Pythagorean philosophy of numbers ruling the universe can be seen in Aristotle's confidence in the truth or reality of "things." The "Platonic number," "the lord of better and worse births," has been found in ancient Babylonian texts.[46] This number, which is mentioned in Plato's Republic, was probably learned by Plato from the Pythagoreans, who previously had learned it from the Babylonians.[47] Pythagoras is reputed to have visited Babylonia during the period of Jewish captivity and is said to have been instructed in the sacred beliefs of the Israelites by Daniel and possibly Ezekiel.[48] It is significant that the Hebrews held seven to be an especially holy number.[49] The Greeks also considered seven a sacred number, because it neither produces by multiplication another number in the decad nor is it produced by multiplication within the

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[45]Daniel J. Sullivan, "Symbolism in Catholic Worship," Religious Symbolism, p. 44.

[46]Cajori, op. cit., p. 7.

[47]Loc. cit.

[48]Leo Stalnaker, Mystic Symbolism in Bible Numerals, p. 15.

[49]Dantzig, op. cit., p. 38.

decad.[50] Seven is, therefore, comparable to the virgin goddess Athena who sprang from Zeus without a mother.[51] She was not produced by the union of two, nor did she produce, but as is the case of the number seven, she was begotten of one pure unit.[52]

The Pythagoreans detected in everything a confirmation of their number philosophy. The harmony of sound in music and the harmony of sight and touch in the figures of geometry (the circle and sphere, the regular polygons and the perfect solids) combined to become the elements which were used by the Great Architect in forming the universe.[53] Number was found everywhere to reign supreme, and the mystic symbolism of the Pythagoreans followed closely the relationship of numbers to the universal whole. They regarded one as the father of all numbers or the cause of the numerical system.[54] Later, Christian writers were to see in this concept an intimation of the concept of God, the father of all things. For twenty-two centuries, from Pythagoras to

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[50]Grace Murray Hopper, "The Unregenerated Seven as an Index to Pythagorean Number Theory," American Mathematical Monthly, XLII (August-September, 1936), 409.

[51]Loc. cit.

[52]Loc. cit.

[53]Dantzig, op. cit., p. 99.

[54]Stalnaker, op. cit., p. 16.

Galileo, mystic number symbolism flourished.[55] However, upon Galileo's revival of the experimental method in science, the mysticism of numbers ceased to exist.

During the Pythagorean period, the Hebrew people were also concerned with numbers. The Hebrews, like the Greeks, adopted the letters of the Phoenician alphabet,[56] whose letters were used not only for the formation of words, but also for counting. A letter, therefore, stood not only for itself, but also for a certain number. Consequently, both the Greeks and the Hebrews used the letters of their alphabets for numbers. Therefore, a word was also a sum of numbers.[57] The practice of gematria, the letters of a word forming an arithmetic sum, was used in the writing of the Bible and also, early in the Christian era, for Biblical interpretation.[58] For example, the number of the beast in Revelations, six hundred sixty-six, has been found by various methods to equal the names of Nero, Martin Luther, and Hitler, among others. The Greeks also practiced gematria, an example of which is the fact that Achilles was deemed superior to Hector and Patroclus because the sum of the

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[55]Bell, op. cit., p. 1.

[56]Dantzig, op. cit., p. 24.

[57]Ibid., p. 39.

[58]Loc. cit.

letters in Achilles' name equals 1276, Hector's 1225, and Patroclus' 87.[59] Since Achilles' name was the largest arithmetic sum, he was considered the greatest of the three. In Hebrew, a word often used for God is eschad, which means one and which in gematria equals thirteen; JHVH, an abbreviation used for the word "God," equals twenty-six or twice thirteen.[60] Here, the Christian mystics found confirmation for the Biblical principle that God is One.

The schools and scholastic atmosphere of Alexandria attracted many Greek scholars during the pre-Christian era. Pythagoreans and Platonists alike at Alexandria were influenced by Oriental philosophies which later stood in opposition to Christianity. The study of these mystic philosophies renewed the interest in symbolism and the theory of numbers.[61] Philo, known as the Hellenizing Jew of Alexandria, intended to substantiate the validity of the Bible through allegory.[62] The four rivers in Genesis he compared to the four virtues with thich Pythagoras had worked in connection with the balance of the entire universe. The second Alexandrine

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[59] Loc. cit.

[60] Oscar Goldberg, "On Numbers in the Bible," Scripta Mathematica, XII (September, 1946), 231.

[61] Dantzig, op. cit., p. 45.

[62] Henry Osborne Taylor, The Medieval Mind, p. 69.

school, which began with the Christian era, also placed much importance on the mystic and symbolic.[63]

It is obvious, then, that in each of the societies described above, symbolism played an important part in scholarly work and/or religion. Scholars conclude that this symbolism persisted because for man most of reality is not accessible without symbols.[64] Early man used his fingers as concrete representatives of abstract numbers. Here, one can easily apply the following definition of symbolism stated by Hopper: symbolism is the representation of one entity or idea in terms of another, usually the translation of an abstraction into concrete form.[65] Richardson states that symbols are a means of becoming aware of things, since they register meanings deeply.[66] He also mentions that a symbol is that by which something is made intelligible or is put into a coherent pattern.[67] Since symbolism developed from primitive religious beliefs, it is still considered as that which reflects the religious life of the centuries, while the graphic arts and literature reflect the secular

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[63] Loc. cit.

[64] Cyril C. Richardson, "The Foundations of Christian Symbolism," Religious Symbolism, p. 2.

[65] Vincent F. Hopper, "Symbolism," An Encyclopedia of Religion, p. 754.

[66] Richardson, op. cit., p. 2.

[67] Ibid., p. 3.

life of nations.[68] The problem, then, is to consider whether symbolism in literature reflects the religious or the secular life of a people.

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[68]Sidney Heath, The Romance of Symbolism, p. 4.

CHAPTER II

SYMBOLISM IN MEDIEVAL LIFE

The student of medieval history becomes acutely aware of the presence of a highly developed degree of symbolism in this era. Symbolism is the most indicative attribute of both the national and individual mind of the Middle Ages.[69] Taylor states that ". . . the medieval man thought and felt in symbols, and the sequence of his thought moved as frequently from symbol to symbol as from fact to fact."[70] Thus, symbolism was not only a mode of expression to medieval man, but also a mode of understanding and comprehension of ideas. Evidences of the use of symbolism throughout medieval life are found in the emblems of heraldry, tradesmen's signs, rebuses, and monograms in secular life.[71] An example of the secular use of symbolism in daily life is found in Piers Plowman in the "merkes of merchantes medeled" in painted glass.[72] Symbolism in religious life manifested itself in the plans, ornaments, and details of abbeys, churches, and cathedrals.[73] The value

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[69] Heath, op. cit., p. 1.

[70] Taylor, op. cit., p. 69.

[71] Heath, op. cit., p. 2.

[72] Loc. cit.

[73] Ibid., p. 1.

of secular symbolism was derived from the medieval doctrine of both institutional and individual perfection.[74]

By the medieval period, the common man had accepted number as a universal convenience in astrology, trade, agriculture, astronomy, and primitive engineering.[75] He was not interested in number for its own sake, but for what it would perform for him in his daily existence. Medieval man believed that all created things were countable. These creations were either of spiritual being or corporeal substance. For example, he considered the nine orders of angels to be of spiritual being, and all living and dead things and those things which were inert to be of corporeal existence.[76]

Indicative of the Middle Ages was the belief in the existence of a continuous essence throughout the constantly changing universe.[77] Medieval man was greatly concerned with the concept of order in the universe, and number symbolism became his method of assuring himself of cosmic order.[78]

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[74]Richard H. Greene, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," Journal of English Literary History, XXIX (June, 1962), 122.

[75]Bell, op. cit., p. 11.

[76]R. W. Rauch, "Langland and Medieval Functionalism," Review of Politics, X (October, 1943), 443.

[77]Dunbar, op. cit., p. 23.

[78]Vincent F. Hopper, "Number Symbolism," An Encyclopedia of Religion, p. 755.

The basis for this symbolism had originated in that of the Pythagoreans and in their theory of the harmony of the spheres. In On Heavenly Hierarchy, Dionysius the Areopagite, a fifth-century Christian Neoplatonist, believed that the angels were arranged in a special order ". . . according to their natural capacity to receive the undivided divine essence."[79] The medieval Christian man felt the entire universe to be ordered similarly, and established the Chain of Being theory. God was at the head of the chain with the angels, man, beasts, and the rest of the entire creation following in order of their ability to accept the divine essence. This preoccupation with form and number strengthened the concept of cosmic order for the medievalists in the many associations which they were enabled to see among the various parts of the universe.[80]

The nine orders of angels were symbolic to medieval man, since the triple divisions were significant of the Trinity and were also equal to the nine divisions of the material heavens: the primum mobile, the fixed stars, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon.[81]

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[79]E. M. W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture, p. 37.

[80]C. A. Patrides, "Numerological Approach to Cosmic Order during the English Renaissance," Isis, XLIX (December, 1958), 394.

[81]Tillyard, op. cit., p. 38.

According to Tillyard, there were three divisions of the nine orders of angels. The division nearest to God was the contemplative, which consisted of the Seraphs, Cherubs, and Thrones; the second division was potentially more active and was made up of the Dominions, Virtues, and Powers; the third category was active and consisted of the Principalities, Archangels, and Angels.[82] Therefore, for the medievalist there were three general orders of angels, and each order also consisted of three more specific categories. The Angels, who represent the last order, acted as mediums between God and man, and were able to travel between heaven and earth.

Symbolism in medieval literature is embodied in the people's love of mysticism, their belief in the supernatural, and their fondness for the mysterious and unaccountable.[83] Mysterious and unaccountable passages in Scripture, however, were often explained by the priests in their sermons. Many of these sermons were, in reality, numerical interpretations of Biblical passages.[84] Since the ordinary people could neither read nor write, religious symbols were used to teach as much history and doctrine of the church to the common people as church men felt to be necessary.[85]

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[82] Loc. cit.

[83] Heath, op. cit., p. 3.

[84] Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 114.

[85] Heath, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

During the Middle Ages, there developed an apocalyptic hope of spiritual renewal among the people.[86] As in art, so also in literature did all forms of symbolism develop to give the people a more thorough understanding of basic concepts. The poet, as well as the artist, realized that ". . . the mortal and tangible were but elements through which the carved or painted picture, or the poem or story, was made the realizing symbol of the unseen and eternal Spirit."[87] While use of religious symbolism was effective, it is important to realize that the people learned from it only when it was sufficiently natural and simple to appeal to their native intelligence.[88] Number symbolism from the Bible was simple and, therefore, easy for the people to comprehend.

Numbers are often used in the Bible as a continuance of an accepted idiom.[89] There is a great employment of the use of numbers in the New Testament, especially in the Apocalypse.[90] The Jews, as stated earlier, were cognizant

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[86]Christopher Dawson, Medieval Religion, p. 175.

[87]Taylor, op. cit., p. 112.

[88]Herbert Thurston, "Religious Symbolism," Charles G. Herbermann, (ed.), The Catholic Encyclopedia, XIV, p. 373.

[89]Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 71.

[90]Herbert Thurston, "Use of Numbers in the Church," Charles G. Herbermann, (ed.), The Catholic Encyclopedia, XI, p. 151.

of many of the mystical meanings of numbers, and these meanings infiltrated Bible stories with their significance. The basis for the Jewish use of symbolic numbers is comparable to that employed by the ancient Greeks. One recalls that the Greeks had believed that the Great Architect had formed the order of the universe on number; on the other hand, the Jews believed that God created and sustained the universe on an ordered pattern.[91] Therefore, allegory and symbolism became the accepted principles of imparting spiritual truth in the Middle Ages.[92] Symbolism thoroughly penetrated the Liturgy of the Mass, religious art, and religious poetry. Though symbolism had existed in these areas from the beginnings of Christianity, religious leaders became more conscious of it as a method of instruction in the Middle Ages and, hence, utilized it more fully. Significantly, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Church sanctioned symbolism in the Mass from the introit to the three-fold benediction.[93] The worship service of the Catholic Church was infiltrated with ". . . sensible signs symbolic of hidden realities."[94] Therefore, it is possible

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[91] Tillyard, op. cit., p. 81.

[92] Taylor, op. cit., p. 102.

[93] Loc. cit.

[94] Sullivan, op. cit., p. 39.

to view the Catholic liturgy on two levels of being which were merged into one in the ceremonial form of worship. In the natural and material actions and orders, therefore, the liturgy came to signify the reality of the supernatural and spiritual orders.[95]

One can see the nature of this all-encompassing element of symbolism in Taylor's description of the Mass in The Medieval Mind.[96] He states that the chanting of the introit is symbolical of the ideals and works, the "prayers and praises" of the Jews during their anticipation of the advent of Christ. The seven candles which precede the priest in the procession are the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost to Christ. The two acolytes are the Law and the Prophets, and ". . . the four who bear the canopy are the four evangelists, declaring the Gospel." The bishop remains silent, as was Christ before his ministry. The reading of the Epistle symbolizes the preaching of John the Baptist. As the reader completes the Epistle, he ". . . bows before the bishop, as the Baptist humbled himself before Christ." The reading of the Gospel by the bishop thus symbolizes Christ's preaching to the people. The Creed, the twelve divisions of which are symbolic of Christ's choosing the apostles, is then spoken,

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[95] Loc. cit.

[96] Taylor, op. cit., pp. 103-104.

for the Creed, symbolic of faith, naturally follows the Gospel, which is symbolic of truth. The sermon (Word of God) follows the Creed, which is symbolic of the calling of the apostles. This symbolism, however, is that which pertains to the beginning of the Mass. As the service proceeds, the symbolism increases in complexity. The hours at which the Mass was performed are also symbolic. Masses given at the third hour are indicative of Christ's being on the Cross, and this is also the hour during which the Apostles supposedly received the Holy Spirit; Mass at the sixth hour is symbolic of Christ crucified; Mass at the ninth hour symbolizes Christ's giving up His spirit while He was on the Cross.

As the Mass became increasingly symbolic, so also did the church edifice. Referring again to Taylor's The Medieval Mind, one finds that the ecclesiasts designated all parts of the church building to be symbols.[97] The four walls were, first, the teachings of the evangelists; next, the four virtues (righteousness, fortitude, prudence, and temperance); or, finally, the four corners of the world which the church embraced. The length was the long suffering with which the Church endured adversity; the breadth was the embracing love of the Church; and the height symbolized hope of future reward. The door symbolized Christ, the

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[97] Ibid., pp. 105-107.

Apostles, or obedience. The pavement was the foundation of faith, the "poor in spirit," or humility. The roof or rafters were the preachers and princes who defended the faith, or charity. The colored glass windows symbolized hospitality and pity, or the true Scriptures which repel rain (evil), but admit light (God) into the church (hearts of the faithful). That part of the church reserved for the congregation was the Vita activa, and that for the clergy was the Vita contemplativa. The windows, which were symbols in themselves, also often contained symbols in the stained glass depictions of the betrayal of Christ, such as the sword, club, ear, lantern, torch, rope, thirty pieces of silver, or the head of Judas.[98] The passion of Christ was symbolized by the Cross, three nails, a hammer, pincers, a ladder, a sponge and reed, a spear, a title board from the Cross with the letters INRI, a seamless coat, or three dice.[99] The Vita activa and the Vita contemplativa areas of the church were symbolic of the active and contemplative lives which were bound with the two commandments of Christ (love God and love one's neighbor) which formed the most common duo of the medieval period.[100]

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[98]Heath, op. cit., p. 151.

[99]Ibid., pp. 151-152.

[100]Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 134.

From the beginning of the Christian era to the time of the Venerable Bede and through the Middle Ages, priests gave much attention and attached much importance to the mystical and sacred significance of certain numbers.[101] The symbolic numbers in Christianity arose primarily for associational reasons.[102] For example, one is associated with God, five with the five wounds of Christ, twelve with the twelve tribes of the Israelites or with the Apostles, forty with the days of the flood, the Israelites in the desert, or Christ's period in the wilderness. Therefore, the pagan symbolism of the ancients became, through association, also indicative of Christian beliefs. As Heath states, "Pagan forms made up the only garments in which the ideas of the new religion could clothe themselves."[103] These associational numbers were those with which the medieval people became most familiar. However, the mysticism of basic number concepts as advanced by Pythagoras was unknown to the laity. Of course, from the reading of philosophies, many of the clergy were familiar with these concepts of the ancients; however, the symbolism which was advanced in Christianity had only a remote connection with the earliest

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[101] Thurston, op. cit., XI, p. 151.

[102] Whittick, op. cit., p. 224.

[103] Heath, op. cit., p. 28.

of number symbolisms, as will be explained later in the chapter.

The pagan forms which clothed the ideas of Christianity were felt by Danielou to be corrected by the book of Genesis. Danielou states that Genesis is a correction of pagan distortion of the creation, and Genesis ". . . restores the elements of cosmic symbolism (that had been interpreted in a mythical sense by paganism) to their real value as the expression of the creative and judicial primacy of God."[104] In other words, Christians rejected the primacy of number for the primacy of God. Still, Christians could not ignore the presence of number in the world nor overlook much of its importance. Although ecclesiasts stated that one symbolized God and three symbolized the Trinity, the fact that both of these are odd numbers relates again to the ancient pagan view. One recalls that one of the widely-known and generally accepted Pythagorean principles was that odd numbers were more godlike, perfect, and powerful than even numbers, since even numbers can be divided.[105] Medieval churchmen asserted that, in Scripture, odd numbers allude to the celestial and the Divine and even numbers relate to earthly things.[106] One can readily perceive, therefore,

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[104]Sullivan, op. cit., p. 48.

[105]Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 101.

[106]Stalnaker, op. cit., p. 19.

the relationship between these pagan and Christian concepts, and since classic literature was discovers primarily in monasteries, can be fairly certain of the acquaintance with, and understanding of, ancient number symbolism by the medieval clergy. On the other hand, the illiterate common people became acquainted with number symbolism only after it had been passed through a simplification process by the priests. Here, the ancient symbolism of numbers became associated with the basic tenets of Christianity of which the people already had an understanding and, then, was further associated with God, people, and events in the Scriptures in a manner which seems complex to the uninformed reader and interpreter of medieval literary works.

At the same time, the teachings of Pythagoras were known to scholars of the Middle Ages, for the course of study followed in the universities was based upon his theory of the four wisdoms, in which supposedly was incorporated all worldly wisdom. Hence, the four wisdoms which formed the quadrivium of medieval study were arithmetic, music, geometry, and spherics or astronomy.[107] Furthermore, the study of arithmetic incorporated Pythagoras' number symbolism, music enlarged upon his discovery of harmonic proportion, geometry explained the forms upon which he felt the world

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[107]Smith, op. cit., p. 73.

to be created, and spherics or astronomy also enlarged upon his theory of harmony.

Heath has found that there is also much teaching of Socrates and Plato that is in accord with early Christian principles.[108] For example, the Neoplatonist immaterial triad of One, the Intelligence, and the Soul is comparable to the Christian Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.[109] There are yet three more common bonds between the two philosophies: i.e., common beliefs in a supreme Creator, an orientation toward the contemplative attitude in life, and a desire to transcend earthly matter and to re-establish harmony with the Creator.[110]

St. Augustine, one of the first of the Church Fathers, with an analytical logic and intellectual curiosity about ancient number symbolism, gave to it a Christian recognition. With a deep concern for order in the universe, St. Augustine states in his City of God:

> . . . the peace of the heavenly city is a perfectly ordered and fully concordant fellowship . . . ; the peace of all things is a tranquility of order. Order is the classification of things equal and unequal, that assigns to each its proper position.[111]

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[108] Heath, op. cit., p. 28.

[109] Gordon Leff, Medieval Thought, p. 35.

[110] Loc. cit.

[111] Saint Augustine, The City of God, trans. by William C. Greene, p. 175.

Order, the concern of the Pythagoreans, again generated concern in Christian minds. Augustine, as did the Pythagoreans, turned to numbers for a reassurance of the existence of order in the universe.

Many medieval philosophers and theologians found inspiration and sanction for their beliefs in the orderliness of the universe in a verse from the Book of Wisdom, one of the books of the Apocrypha: "Thou has ordered all things in measure, and number, and weight."[112] This verse sanctions not only the order of the universe, but also the order of all things in number. Therefore, the medieval theologian felt he was following the pattern of God when he found numbers to be symbols of precepts of his faith.

St. Isidore, Bishop of Seville (570-636), became so confident in the validity of the symbolism to Christian thought that he wrote an encyclopedia of numbers which occur in the Bible.[113] His work was so comprehensive and precise that it stabilized numerical interpretation of the Bible until the time of Dante. Boethius was another writer of this period to whom number symbolism was important. He, however, adhered not strictly to Christian interpretation of numbers, but to the tenet of Pythagoras in which all things are said

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[112]Rauch, op. cit., p. 442.

[113]Bell, op. cit., p. 291.

to be formed of number.[114] Therefore, there were two schools of number symbolism, for the Christian school believed numbers to be associational symbols referring to Biblical terms and entities, while the other school, best designated as non-Christian, followed the pagan, scientific concept of numbers as symbols for the qualities inherent in the number itself.

It remained to be the work of Alcuin, 735-804 A.D., an English monk who taught at the court of Charlemagne, to merge these two schools of symbolism into one.[115] With a perception of the basic similarities of these two systems, he fused them into a symbolism which embodied both philosophies. For example, he saw in Biblical numbers not only their association with the incidents involved, but also the fact that these incidents were related to the qualities of the number which described them.

Hugo of St. Victor, who lived in the first half of the twelfth century, formulated a plan involving numbers which was a ". . . systematic exposition of the symbolical or sacramental plan inhering in God's creation."[116] In his study of the universe, Hugo followed the four wisdoms of Pythagoras and also ascribed to the importance of number,

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[114] Ibid., p. 290.

[115] Dantzig, op. cit., p. 114.

[116] Taylor, op. cit., p. 87.

as did Pythagoras. As evidence of his agreement with Pythagoras, Hugo states:

> A knowledge of things requires a knowledge of their form and their nature. Form consists in external configuration, nature in internal quality. Form is treated as number, to which arithmetic applies; or as proportion, to which music applies; or as dimension, to which geometry applies; or as motion, to which pertains astronomy.[117]

Hugo's number symbolism is achieved by extension, using the Biblical significance of numbers. In his plan, seven beyond six signified rest after work, just as the Sabbath signified rest after the six days of creation; eight after seven symbolized eternity after mutability, as the day following the seventh after the creation was eternity; ten was considered perfection and, therefore, nine before ten symbolized a defect, and eleven after ten was symbolic of transgression outside of measure.[118] From this system of number symbolism, Hugo postulates:

> Symbolism and allegory are made part of the constitution of the world and man; they connect man's body and environment with his spirit, and link the life of this world with the life to come.[119]

From Hugo of St. Victor also is derived the confirmation of the universality of symbolism. From the following quotation and from his known work with number symbolism comes the

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[117]Quoted in ibid., p. 93.

[118]Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 101.

[119]Quoted in Taylor, op. cit., p. 101.

inference that number played as important a part in Hugo's concept of the universe as it did in Pythagoras' concept:

> Symbolism is rooted in the character and purpose of the material creation; it lies in the God-implanted nature of things; therefore the allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures corresponds to their deepest meaning and the revealed plan of God.[120]

St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas frequently referred to the previously quoted verse from the Book of Wisdom for confirmation that number did exist as an entity in God's creation of the universe.[121] Medievalists recognized Pythagoras as the highest authority on the aspects of world order. St. Thomas Aquinas allowed infinity to be a quality of the First Cause in creation. Bonaventura, however, followed Pythagoras more closely and opposed Aquinas on this point, for Bonaventura felt that infinity was not consistent with the Godhead as being of order and perfection.[122] Both Aquinas and Aristotle felt that knowledge was the ultimate end in life. However, Aquinas in his philosophy, combined many of the Aristotelian doctrines with the ecclesiastically orthodox beliefs of the church.[123]

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[120]Quoted in ibid., p. 92.

[121]Rauch, op. cit., p. 442.

[122]Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 96.

[123]Alfred H. Welsh, Development of English Literature and Language, I, p. 133.

Aquinas, although his concept of world order was Pythagorean, followed the numerological theology of Aristotle, as did Albertus Magnus.[124]

During the period of the Middle Ages, there appeared a pseudo-scientific religious group, known as the Gnostics, whose common practice was to relate science and religion in order to find likenesses between the physical and spiritual worlds.[125] To co-ordinate Greek philosophy with eastern science and religion was the primary concern of the Gnostics and, in so doing, they necessarily followed the doctrines of the Pythagoreans, including that of number symbolism.[126] The creeds of Gnosticism were so wide-spread and the implications of these creeds so great that no scholar of the age could have failed to recognize this pervading philosophy.[127]

The science of the Middle Ages was hypothetical and, therefore, the power allotted to numbers by the ecclesiasts was not to be taken lightly by the common people.[128] Indeed, even the doctors in this period had a great concern for the balance of man's four humors and often prescribed pills in

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[124]Bell, op. cit., p. 292.

[125]Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 55.

[126]Ibid., p. 51.

[127]Ibid., p. 52.

[128]Ibid., p. 117.

odd numbers as being more effective.[129] Physicians also organized man's brain into three sections. The number three was significant because it indicated man's nearness to God as opposed to an animal's nearness. The lowest part of the brain contained the five senses; the middle contained common sense, fancy, and memory; the highest part contained will and understanding.[130] The doctors in the medieval period believed that to combat the seven demons, one should tie them in seven knots in a handkerchief, scarf, or girdle.[131] Though this remedy strikes a modern mind as being thoroughly unscientific, because of the significance of the double seven, medievalists placed their faith in it. In the pseudo-science of alchemy, the number seven, referring to the world, also played an important part. The symbol for a chemical change in alchemy was a dragon devouring its tail with a mystical motto of three words composed of seven letters.[132] In Pythagorean terminology the circle symbolizes the universe, as does the sum, ten, of the words and letters.

In all aspects of medieval life, number symbolism asserted its importance. Science, medicine, scholarly study,

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[129] Ibid., p. 118.

[130] Tillyard, op. cit., p. 65.

[131] Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 120.

[132] Ibid., p. 117.

and religion each appropriated that part of the symbolism which coincided with its own philosophy. Gaskell states:

> Numbers became symbols 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.[133]

Since the medievalists accepted the theory that the universe was constructed on several planes and the idea that number united these planes through a meaning inherent in the number itself, the philosophy of numbers infiltrated into the literary works of the time. Although numbers are prevalent in medieval literature, one must carefully consider the total context of a work in order to determine if symbolism is intended.[134] The number symbols used in medieval literature are those which are used to relate specifically to Christianity and not those which are used to touch upon the deep question of the true meaning of the number itself.[135] Since the true meaning of numbers was significant only to those who had an understanding of metaphysics, the number symbolism in popular medieval literature was but an echo of science, philosophy, and theology.[136] Consequently, the number symbolism in

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[133] G. A. Gaskell, ed., Dictionary of All Scriptures and Myths, pp. 541-542.

[134] Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 128.

[135] Ibid., p. 135.

[136] Loc. cit.

medieval literature often escapes detection, because numbers do not so clearly and immediately reveal their symbolism to the modern, uninitiated reader as do other conventional forms of symbolism.[137] The medieval number symbolism is basic and elementary, numerical, astrological, and theological, and it implies the ". . . congruency of physical and spiritual truths."[138] Therefore, although the modern reader may have a satisfactory understanding of a medieval literary work without a comprehension of its number symbolism, his understanding will be deepened and enriched by a knowledge of the many meanings which the use of number implies, since a number in medieval literature denotes not only itself, but also symbolizes ideas and concepts inherent in the Christian religion. Since numbers are symbols easily comprehended, the priests of the church often used them in their oral instruction and preaching to the common people. During the period of medieval history, the art of printing was yet unknown, and the only means of transmitting an author's work to the public were by hand-written manuscript or by oral communication. Since the hand-written books were prohibitively expensive and most of the people could not read, the common people gained their literary knowledge by word of mouth. Whatever symbols

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[137]Hulme, op. cit., p. 10.

[138]Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 93.

are involved in this literature, therefore, must necessarily have been readily comprehensive to the listeners since they could not study the symbol, nor would they have an opportunity to do so, as would a reader. Thus, numbers which had been symbols to man from the first time he gained a concept of the abstract present in the universe, were convenient aids to a thorough understanding of a literary piece.

As stories were recited, a group of people was usually in attendance. As one listened to the unfolding of the story, distracting influences were at work within the group. Therefore, to minimize the degrees of distraction on the part of the listener, authors often resorted to the use of number symbolism within their works. Although a listener might lose the general train of thought in a narrative, a number symbol easily and quickly provided him with an immediate understanding of the story. Number symbolism also gave the attentive listener a wider, richer comprehension, for he heard and understood the literary piece and also gained from the deeper meanings of the number symbols. Before a present-day reader can derive the same experience from a medieval piece of literature, he must first acquaint himself with the familiar medieval interpretations of numbers. Here, however, one must keep in mind that medieval number symbolism was only remotely connected with the science of the number itself and that the churchmen who had access to ancient writings had

applied general qualities of numbers to specific cases in the Bible from which application had emanated the medieval number symbolism. The common people became familiar with its methods through the preaching of the Church, and this symbolism was integrated into many areas of medieval life so that the mere mention of a number would conjure up a host of meanings, each of which served for clarification and insight.

The numbers in the Bible which are considered symbolic by most theologians are one, two, three, four, six, seven, ten, twelve, forty, and seventy.[139] Because of their frequent and symbolic appearances in the Bible, these numbers were of highest importance to the medievalists. The numbers five, eight, and nine, although infrequent in Biblical appearance, were given theological meaning by medieval theologians and philosophers. Therefore, all the numbers in the decad are symbolic in addition to twelve, forty, and seventy.

To the ancient Greeks, one symbolized uniqueness, self-sufficiency, or indivisibility;[140] to the medievalists, however, the meaning was Christianized in that one signified the unity of God and Spirit.[141] The number one is odd, showing strength,

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[139] Stalnaker, op. cit., p. 16.

[140] W. H. Bennett, "Number Symbolism," Dictionary of the Bible, James Hastings, (ed.), p. 659.

[141] Vincent F. Hopper, "Number Symbolism," An Encyclopedia of Religion, p. 755.

masculinity, and godliness. To the Christian, one symbolized the one almighty and eternal Creator of the universe.

Bennett states that two symbolizes union.[142] In addition to the union or combination idea, two is usually associated with antagonism to the world.[143] While there was still only one man upon the earth, he was comparable to God, since God is One; however, when the population of the earth became two, antagonism was present.[144] Two is symbolic of Christ, one who becomes two (spirit and matter).[145] Referring again to the union idea, one finds that Christ is a union in one Being of God and man. Two symbolizes to the medieval man the association of opposites and also their union to form an entity, such as do man and woman unite to form marriage; or good and evil, the world; or even and odd numbers, the number system; or light and darkness, day.[146] The concept of opposites' forming one entity did not originate with Christian scholars, but with an ancient Greek, Heraclitus, who stated that good and evil are one.[147] Two is an even

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[142]Bennett, op. cit., p. 659.

[143]Stalnaker, op. cit., p. 19.

[144]Ibid., p. 26.

[145]Gaskell, op. cit., p. 773.

[146]Stalnaker, op. cit., p. 25.

[147]Bertrand Russell, Mysticism and Logic. p. 3.

number, and, therefore, weak. However, when two opposing forces unite, which act is symbolic of *two*, they form the perfect *one*.

The number *three* is symbolic of the deity,[148] divine nature,[149] or attributes of the Godhead.[150] Authority is an attribute of the Father; love, the Son; and knowledge, the Holy Spirit.[151] The meaning of the number *three* in reference to the Trinity is based on the definition of perfect completeness given to *three* by Pythagoras. The Christian God is complete--the beginning, middle, and end, and the past, present, and future--One in Three and Three in One. *Three* was particularly fascinating to the medievalist, for it is one of the basic concepts of the Christian religion. Any action or being to which *three* or a multiple of the number was attributed was considered perfect, complete, and holy. The medieval man was familiar with the threefold aspect of God to man--authority, love, and knowledge.[152] Man himself was considered Godlike in his being of body, soul

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[148]Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 659; Emil Kautzsch, "Sacred Numbers," *Religious Encyclopedia*, VIII, p. 204; Vincent F. Hopper, "Number Symbolism," *An Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 755.

[149]Thurston, *op. cit.*, XIV, p. 376.

[150]Hulme, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

[151]*Loc. cit.*

[152]Gaskell, *op. cit.*, p. 756.

and spirit.[153] The body was created by the Father, the soul saved by the Son, and the spirit given by the Holy Ghost. The active, contemplative, and active-contemplative lives of the theological teaching of the Middle Ages were co-ordinated also in the completion relationship seemingly inherent in three.

As stated previously, Pythagoras defined four as justice, or as that which is equal on both sides. The early Christian theologians designated four to be a worldly number. Since even numbers in the Bible referred to things of the world and four was considered the first real even number, four itself signified the world or worldliness.[154] Four, therefore, refers to the four corners of the world, four seasons, elements, winds, and directions.[155] In this manner, four symbolized the system and order of the world.[156] The four cherubim and four Gospels in conjunction with the four evangelists signify the world-wide extension of the Christian religion.[157] Four also symbolized the world itself because

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[153] Loc. cit.

[154] Kautzsch, op. cit., p. 204; Thurston, op. cit., XIV, p. 376; Vincent F. Hopper, "Number Symbolism," An Encyclopedia of Religion, p. 755.

[155] Stalnaker, op. cit., p. 17.

[156] Gaskell, op. cit., p. 291.

[157] Bennett, op. cit., p. 659; Stalnaker, op. cit., p. 41.

it is what exists as a result of the creative process of the Trinity.[158] Hopper states that four was considered the pattern for both the macrocosm and microcosm since the first letters in Greek of each of the four directions produce the name "Adam."[159] From the preceding descriptions, one sees the concepts of the world, man himself, and order implicit in four for the medieval man. Four, the Trinity plus their (its) creative power, symbolized the spiritual state of the world as opposed to five, the secular state in medieval literature.[160]

Five is symbolic of the flesh[161] or imperfection in the incompletion of ten, which is completion.[162] The use of five for the flesh relates to the five senses of man. The imperfection and/or incompletion idea is derived from the lack of final perfection in the Old Law of the Jews, the Pentateuch,[163] and the five wounds of Christ which were, by

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[158]Dunbar, op. cit., p. 467.

[159]Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 31; Dunbar, op. cit., p. 337.

[160]Greene, op. cit., p. 133.

[161]Vincent F. Hopper, "Number Symbolism," An Encyclopedia of Religion, p. 755.

[162]Kautzsch, op. cit., p. 204; Gaskell, op. cit., p. 280.

[163]Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 85.

this token, not the complete value of His suffering.[164] The pentangle in ancient belief was a charm against the evils of bodily illness or injury; however, in Christian belief, the pentangle became a symbol of salvation because it recalled the five wounds of Christ.[165]

As three symbolized attributes of the Deity, so also did its double, six.[166] The six attributes of the Deity are power, majesty, wisdom, love, mercy, and justice.[167] Six is considered perfect,and, therefore, God created the world in six days.[168] The Creation being perfect, six symbolized earthly perfection.[169] Because of the ancients' discovery of six as a perfect number in that the sum of its divisors equals itself, many early Biblical scholars felt that God, the Great Architect, created the world in six days, not because the Creation took that length of time, but rather because six was worldly perfection.[170] Some medieval scholars also regarded six and twenty-eight as the numbers on which was based the creation of the world, since six is the number

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[164]Thurston, op. cit., XIV, p. 376.

[165]Greene, op. cit., p. 134.

[166]Hulme, op. cit., p. 11.

[167]Loc. cit.

[168]Gaskell, op. cit., p. 695.

[169]Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 85; Stalnaker, op. cit., p. 17.

[170]Dantzig, op. cit., p. 45.

of days of creation, and twenty-eight is the number of the lunar cycle.[171]

In Biblical reference, seven is the symbol for perfection. There are numerous cases of seven used in conjunction with conquest, worship, forgiveness, sacrifice, strength, and wisdom; each of which symbolize perfection of the act or quality of being.[172] Since three and four are considered the first "real" numbers and seven is the sum of these first odd and even numbers, seven is considered symbolic of all numbers and means "perfect completeness."[173] Seven and twelve are forms of each other, since both are composed of three and four and refer to ideas of the universe, seven signifying the planets and days of the week, and twelve signifying the zodiac and the hours of the day.[174] The mathematical addition of three and four symbolizes the universe of the spirit (three) and matter (four).[175] Seven indicates the beginning and end of a cycle and symbolizes the holy or sacred as well as the profane or evil.[176] For

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[171] Loc. cit.

[172] Stalnaker, op. cit., p. 53.

[173] Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 79.

[174] Ibid., p. 86.

[175] Vincent F. Hopper, "Number Symbolism," An Encyclopedia of Religion, p. 755.

[176] Gaskell, op. cit., p. 679.

example, two sevens are used to show good and evil, such as seven wise and seven foolish virgins.[177] Each of these sevens is significant of perfection, whether it be in wisdom or foolishness. Seven is also considered sacred in itself since God rested on the seventh day, and from God's day of rest follows the Jewish Sabbath and the sabbatical year.[178] In the ancient world, seven was considered a number of perfection, and one also recalls the seven wonders of the ancient world. Usually, eight wonders are listed with "or" instead of "and" between the last two in order to keep the mystic number of perfection.[179] Other religions in addition to Christianity have considered seven sacred. The Hindus have their seven mansions of all created things ranging from earth to the seat of Brahma; the Moslems believe a pilgrimage is completed when one makes seven circuits of the sacred stone at Mecca.[180] The ancient Greeks, Jews, and Etruscans all believed seven symbolized perfection and, therefore, one finds again the seven days of the creation cycle, seven wonders of the world, seven wise men, and seven ages of man.[181] Furthermore, the Jewish church has seven

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[177]Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 24.

[178]Bennett, op. cit., p. 659.

[179]Hulme, op. cit., p. 14.

[180]Loc. cit.

[181]Whittick, op. cit., p. 225.

great holy days of the year, and the Roman church has seven sacraments.[182] In the Middle Ages, the seven sorrows of the Virgin Mother were designated as well as the seven joys.[183] The seven acts of God in creating the universe are also seen as the creations of light, firmament, plant life, heavenly bodies, fish and fowls, animals, and human beings.[184] The Holy Ghost has seven gifts to bestow.[185] These gifts were explained to medieval man as truth, wisdom, counsel, strength, knowledge, godliness, and fear.[186] Today, the multiples of seven are still considered of great importance, since man is at legal age at twenty-one, three multiplied by seven, and the natural duration of a man's life is seventy, or ten multiplied by seven.[187]

Upon achieving perfection, one reaches immortality. The number eight is significant of regeneration or immortality.[188] This symbolization is derived from the fact that Christ rose

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[182]Hulme, op. cit., p. 12.

[183]Ibid., p. 13.

[184]Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism, p. 23.

[185]Thurston, op. cit., XIV, p. 376.

[186]Hulme, op. cit., p. 187.

[187]Ibid., p. 14.

[188]Whittick, op. cit., p. 229; Vincent F. Hopper, "Number Symbolism," An Encyclopedia of Religion, p. 755.

on the day after the seventh, or the eighth. Eight is the symbol of entrance into a new state or condition of the soul, and, therefore, many baptismal fonts are octagonal.[189] The visible world was created in seven days, and the invisible kingdom of grace, eternity, is that which follows.[190] There are seven ages of man, and the eighth age is that which follows death, or eternity or immortality.

The number nine, as stated earlier, was very important to the medievalist in his concept of world order. Nine was considered to be an extension of the Trinity, for it is three squared, which is perfect and complete.[191] The nine orders of angels were thought to regulate the spheres of the universe.[192] In medieval thought, nine is the symbol of all creation, for regardless of the number by which it is multiplied, the product always adds up to nine.[193]

The number ten is that of completion. The most common reference of ten is to the completion of a man in his ten fingers.[194] Ten, however, refers also the the Pythagorean

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[189]Gaskell, op. cit., p. 245.

[190]Thurston, op. cit., XIV, p. 376.

[191]Vincent F. Hopper, "Number Symbolism," An Encyclopedia of Religion, p. 755; Gaskell, op. cit., p. 537.

[192]Tillyard, op. cit., p. 42.

[193]Dunbar, op. cit., p. 99.

[194]Stalnaker, op. cit., p. 17; Bennett, op. cit., p. 659.

tetraktys, for the medievalist knew ten as the sum of one (God); two, the duality of creation, physical and spiritual; three, the Trinity; and four, the Godhead plus its action, creation.[195] Ten was also a symbol of seven, all created things, plus three, the trinity of the Creator.[196]

Twelve is the symbol for the chosen people of God.[197] This symbol is derived from the twelve tribes, twelve apostles, and twelve gates of the New Jerusalem through which God's people must enter the Holy City.[198] Three multiplied by four, or twelve, is symbolic of a blending of what is divine with what is created (the penetration of matter with spirit)[199] or the people of God.[200] The sum of four and eight is the world and man renewed; the product of four and three is the world and man in intimate union with God; and the product of six and two is symbolic of Christ's taking man's sin and becoming subject to death for man's redemption.[201]

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[195]Dunbar, op. cit., p. 467.

[196]Gaskell, op. cit., p. 749.

[197]Kautzsch, op. cit., p. 204.

[198]Stalnaker, op. cit., p. 18; "Symbolical and Sacred Numbers in the Scriptures," Methodist Review, CX (November, 1927), 975.

[199]Thurston, op. cit., XIV, p. 376.

[200]Gaskell, op. cit., p. 542.

[201]Ibid., p. 773.

From the following quotation of St. Augustine, one gains a further understanding of the importance of twelve:

> The parts of the world are four; the east, the west, the north, and the south. From these four, saith the Lord in the Gospel, shall the elect be gathered together. Called, and how? By the Trinity. Not called except by baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and or the Holy Ghost; for four parts each called by the Three make twelve.[202]

Stalnaker, furthermore, states that forty symbolizes trial, humiliation, and desolation and that seventy symbolizes transition.[203]

Medieval man was intimately familiar with the preceding symbols for numbers. When he came upon a number for which he had no symbol reference, he often broke down the number in order to use symbols for its component parts. For example, the one hundred and fifty-three fishes mentioned in John 21:11 are of no symbolic quality until one recognizes that one hundred and fifty-three is the product of three and seventeen, which is the sum of two of the most sacred of numbers, ten and seven.[204]

With these basic meanings of the number symbols in mind, one turns to a specific medieval work in order to realize

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[202]Quoted in Hulme, op. cit., pp. 14-15.

[203]Stalnaker, op. cit., p. 18.

[204]Robert M. Grant, "One Hundred and Fifty-three Large Fish, John 21:11," Harvard Theological Review, XLII (October, 1949), 274.

more fully for medieval man the amount of symbolism which was embodied in a simple numberal. The following explanation of the numbers used in Piers Plowman is based upon the number symbolism discussed in the present chapter. Although a modern reader may understand this poem without benefit of number symbolism, his understanding and appreciation of the poem is certain to be deepened and enriched by a recognition of the background of these numbers. One must also remember that these numbers not only served the medievalist in the matter of a deeper theological understanding, but also served to clarify and were attention-getting devices since they were easily recognized and readily understood.

CHAPTER III

NUMBER SYMBOLISM IN PIERS PLOWMAN

Number symbolism had long ago been infused into Christian doctrine by learned priests. It was a symbolism which was easy for the common, illiterate people to understand; consequently, priests began to incorporate it into their sermons. Since the sermon is a type of oral literature, medieval number symbolism gained much popularity in this medium. Gradually, it was incorporated into many religious, as well as secular, oral literary works. Since the common people were well-acquainted with number symbolism through the priests' constant employment of it in sermons, the use of a number in the oral-formulaic theory of literature, therefore, came to signify not only the number itself, but also a deeper spiritual meaning. One must remember, as well, that these meanings, for which numbers were the symbols, had been derived from both pagan and Christian belief. In fact, it is more accurate to say that the Christian religion had inherited these pagan number symbols and had attached to them meanings significant to the Christian manner of belief concerning the order of the universe. The pagans, who originated numbers and number symbolism, had based the symbolism of a number, as has been shown earlier, upon a spiritual concept of number. For example, the concept of three, which consists

of three parts (the beginning, the middle, and the end), therefore, symbolizes completion.

Since number symbols originally were based upon man's understanding of universal order, it was also seen to be possible for the significant Christian concept of order to be communicated through number symbols. By the time of the medieval period, then, number symbols had come to indicate not only (for the typical person) the qualities inherent in a number itself, but also many additional Biblical associations. Therefore, although the number symbol on its inception was in part pagan, it communicated, as well, many fundamental Christian doctrines for the medievalist.

The author of The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman is generally thought to be William Langland, who was a member of a minor order of the English clergy. Throughout Piers Plowman, Langland has infused Christian doctrine as interpreted in the Bible:

> As in theological writings, Langland often uses quotations to settle a dispute; he assumes as knowledge of the exegetical tradition. Piers Plowman is impregnated with the Bible and the writings of the Fathers, but more especially of the Bible. . . . Langland speaks Bible, too; phrases, echoes and paraphrases crop out everywhere. His whole mind is steeped in the Bible; it is a real language to him.[205]

When it becomes clear that Piers Plowman is based upon this

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[205]Morton W. Bloomfield, Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse, p. 37.

method of Biblical teaching by reason of its author's knowledge of the Bible, one clearly recognizes the certainty of Langland's knowledge and use of Biblical number symbolism.

In order to comprehend the number symbolism pervading Langland's Piers Plowman (in a general sense), one must first become acquainted with the presence of number symbolism in the major framework of Langland's poem, and, next, must concern himself with individual instances of the use of this symbolism in specific lines throughout the poem.

For example, the number of a passus itself often is indicative of the content of the passus. In Passus I, Langland explains that Truth is God and that the one best way in which to live is by the pattern of God or by adhering to Truth. Therefore, Passus I capitalizes upon Langland's explanation of the number symbol, one. In Passus II, he next introduces Meed and Falsehood in opposition to Truth. Meed and Falsehood, the physical and spiritual evils, are shown to be antagonistic to the world and are caused to unite to form the complete opposition to Truth. Whereas Passus I deals with the singularity of God, Passus II deals with the duality of evil, and the union of Meed and Falsehood is seen by the poet as "Such weddyng to werche to wrappe wip treupe."[206] Langland explains the necessity of the Trinity

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[206]George Kane (ed.), Piers Plowman: The A Version, II.81. All further references to Piers Plowman will be to Kane's edition and will be noted within the text.

to the world in Passus III. Three, one recalls, is the number of completion, or of the Trinity. Langland states that "'. . . kynde wyt [Holy Ghost] shal come 3et, & consience [God the Creator] togidere, / And make of lawe a labourer, such loue [Christ] shal arise.'" (III.275-276) In Passus IV, Langland deals with the justice of the marriage of Conscience and Lady Meed. Four symbolizes worldly justice, or the spiritual state of the world. The imperfections of humanity are Langland's theme in Passus V. One recalls that the number five symbolizes the flesh, imperfection, or worldliness. In the sixth passus, Langland incorporates Piers' description of the pathway to Truth. Since six is the symbol of earthly perfection, one sees Langland is proposing that a state of earthly perfection must be achieved in one's life before man can attain to a state of heavenly perfection, or Truth. The seventh passus involves the well-known episode of the plowing of the half-acre, which Fowler thinks symbolic of the kind of life which Langland believes Christians must live upon earth.[207] Since seven is symbolic of the beginning and end of a cycle, in the seventh passus man's life, then, may be considered as the cycle, the performance of which is delineated in Christian terms. The

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[207]David C. Fowler, Piers the Plowman: Literary Relations of the A and B Texts, p. 10.

number eight, the symbol of immortality, governs the passus in which the reading of the pardon occurs, the act which bestows upon man the salvation or immortality which he has been seeking.

Furthermore, with a knowledge of the numbers on which the framework of Piers Plowman is developed, one may gain an understanding of the plot similar to that achieved by the medievalist. For example, Langland in these twelve passus explains that this is a story of the children of God--of the fair field of folk. The twelve passus are divided, therefore, into two sections: one of eight passus, the Visio, which concerns men's actions or physical matter; and the second of four passus, the Vita, which concerns men's thinking or spiritual processes. At this point, at once the number two comes into play as a symbol of matter and spirit, so that, thus far, the story concerns God's children and their physical and spiritual states.

One also discovers that Langland often uses the concept of three upon which the Trinity is based. For example, each of the two main sections of his poem is divided into thirds: the Visio is philosophical, ethical, and spiritual; the Vita is composed of a repetition of the Visio, the mysteries of faith, and a delineation of the Church as a corporate body. Langland, here, emphasizes the three kinds of life (physical, mental, and combined) in the lives of Do well, Do bet, and

Do best. In addition, there are three main episodes concerning Piers: the pilgrimage to Truth, the episode of the pardon, and the episode of Hunger. Furthermore, the twelve passus, although divided into two sections, are also divided into thirds; that is, the Visio contains two-thirds, and the Vita contains one-third. Each third, in turn, includes four passus. Consequently, in numerical symbolism, four passus, which symbolize all created things, plus eight passus, which symbolize immortality or rebirth, equal twelve passus, which symbolize the world and man renewed by means of a search for Truth. (IV passus [all creation] + VIII passus [immortality] = XII passus [world and man renewed through their search for Truth]) Four passus (all creation) multiplied by the three divisions of Piers Plowman (Trinity) equals the world and man in intimate union with God. (IV passus [all creation] x 3 divisions [Trinity] = XII passus [world and man in intimate union with God]) Langland shows that this union could only result after man had searched for and had found Truth.

The major theme of Piers Plowman centers around the immortality of man's soul, and throughout the work one detects Langland's ". . . earnest desire to discover the nature of the salvation of that soul."[208] Thus it is that Will begins the poem with his unknowing quest; however, Conscience ends the

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[208]George W. Stone, "An Interpretation of the A Text of Piers Plowman," Publications of the Modern Language Association, LII (September, 1938), 674.

poem with his knowing quest.[209] Although each character is in search of the salvation of the souls of all men, Conscience alone knows the means (Truth) by which this coveted state is attainable. With Truth also comes the spiritual knowledge which may transform both the individual and his society.[210] Although it is clear that the truth seekers in the poem do not discover the final solution to man's problems, Sister Rose Bernard Donna believes that the poem does not reflect an attitude of despair, for Langland's treatment of the theme is couched in the traditional Christian manner of Augustine.[211] Instead, Langland desires to know whether salvation is possible. Since the poem ultimately suggests the possibility of salvation, Langland proposes that man may hope and not despair.

Scholars agree that in Piers Plowman Langland presents the religious sentiment of the medieval English people.[212] The poem is obviously based upon Catholic doctrine and often has been referred to as the heritage of the Roman Catholic religion.[213] To Langland, as well as to other medieval Catholics, Mother Church was the natural parent, guide, and

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[209] Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 3.

[210] Loc. cit.

[211] Sister Rose Bernard Donna, Despair and Hope: A Study in Langland and Augustine, p. 176.

[212] Dawson, op. cit., p. 157.

[213] Ibid., p. 158.

teacher of the English race.[214] The Church through her instruction and doctrines was held to be all-knowing and all-powerful, so that only through her could man expect to find the true way to salvation. Langland, like Dante and the famous Pearl poet, stresses ". . . the insufficiency of man alone unaided by a higher power."[215] It is with the Church that man is to unite in order to find Truth (God) and salvation. This union of two thus forms the numerical basis for the discovery of the one, which is Truth and is perfect in all respects. Hence, one sees in Piers Plowman all of the basic tenets of a broad Christian belief. Dawson points out that Piers Plowman is Christianity stripped of pomp and useless learning and concerned with the poor.[216] Langland shows only those qualities which are necessary for a Christian in order to obtain salvation. Although Langland was a member of the lower class of society, he seemed to feel, nevertheless, that this portion of society, as well as other higher classes of society, had lost sight of the true meaning of religion by adhering to values found only in the secular world. Lady Meed, for example, may represent

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[214]Muriel Kent, "Fourteenth Century Poet Surveys the English Scene," Hibbert Journal, XL (July, 1942), 384.

[215]Stone, op. cit., p. 677.

[216]Dawson, op. cit., p. 177.

a reward for deeds well done, or she may be a symbol of reward for evil. The evil aspects of Lady Meed's behavior are those of the secular, corrupt society which Langland felt to be synonymous with his own contemporary society. By pursuing Truth, however, he felt that men would eventually regenerate their social system, and, therefore, his Piers Plowman becomes a social, as well as a religious, document. His prologue reveals that through insight ". . . man is going to penetrate to the very sources of his society's trouble and lay them bare."[217]

As Piers begins to contemplate the visible world, he realizes more deeply ". . . the marvels of the system that includes and directs the whole,"[218] a system which is the one Pythagoras and St. Augustine had earlier observed--the system of numbers. It is obvious that the order of the universe which Piers speculates upon is based upon the order of number.

It was shown earlier that the number three was of great importance to the medievalists because of its association with the Christian Godhead, the Trinity. In the poem, Langland uses a Pythagorean concept of three in the general sense in which it was incorporated into the Christian religion.

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[217]D. Stowe, "Fourteenth Century Social Gospel: Piers Plowman," Christendom, I (1944), 91.

[218]Kent, op. cit., p. 385.

One recalls that this concept maintains that three is the first "real" number and, that although it forms the singular figure of a triangle, it is also composed of three separate and equal parts. The most striking example of Langland's use of three occurs in his development of the lives of Do well, Do bet, and Do best. The life of Do well is comparable to that of the moral, active man, or to the most active order of angels. This is the man who is concerned with the action or physical existence of life as opposed to a life of contemplation alone. Do well is an example of the Christian man who, by moral and intellectual discipline and simple faith, learns self-rule and the art of honest living.[219] Since the poem is dealing with the salvation of men's souls, each of the lives of Langland's three characters is indicative of one way to salvation. Thus, by living one of the three lives to the best of his power, man might be assured of saving his soul. Furthermore, the composition of the three lives is comparable to the composition of the Trinity. The lives are bound into the three-in-one, one-in-three relationship. Each way of life is a means by which man may obtain communion with the One God of the Christian religion, although all three lives show every man the way to salvation.

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[219]Harry W. Wells, "The Philosophy of Piers Plowman," Publications of the Modern Language Association, LII (June, 1938), 341.

The three-in-one relationship demonstrates to mankind the way of eternal life; the one-in-three combination shows to the individual his pathway to salvation.

Embodied in the personage of Do well was a medieval recognition of God the Father and Creator, the Person of the Godhead of the most active nature of the three included in the Trinity, since it was He who physically created the universe, and it was He who created man in His image. The ordinary man, therefore, is a replica of the active God, the Creator.

The second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, is evidenced in Langland's account of the life of Do bet. Whereas Do well is personified in the layman's physical work and acts of brotherly love, the life of Do bet is shown through the priest's asceticism and redemptive charity.[220] The life of the priest is that of contemplation and devotion. Langland clearly depicts it as a mental state in opposition to the physical state of action evidenced in the Christian layman, Do well. Do bet is symbolic, therefore, of the redemptive charity of the Son of God. In addition, a life of devotion may lead man to salvation, although in this role he may not be a priest. Langland's terms, layman, priest, and bishop (in reference to Do best), are merely indicative

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[220]Rauch, op. cit., p. 448.

of the types of lives included in this category, and not necessarily of the kinds of people who exemplify these lives.

The life of Do best is often considered by scholars to be the highest or best of the three lives leading to salvation. Do best is symbolic of the life led by a bishop who has control over the life and governance of the Church.[221] The life of Do best, therefore, presumes a discipline over both the life of Do well and the life of Do bet and is based upon a concept of the Holy Ghost.[222] This personification is the most mystical of Langland's three, for Do best in addition symbolizes the Church, the Body of Christ, which is guided by the Holy Spirit, who is Grace and Light.[223]

As it has been pointed out, Piers Plowman is divided into the Vita and the Visio. These two divisions re-echo the active and contemplative duo of the Middle Ages in that the Visio shows the active way to salvation, and the Vita is an internal contemplation of the value of learning.[224] It is significant that Langland develops the lives of Do well, Do bet, and Do best in the Vita, although he also mentions them in the Visio. The Visio, the first eight passus of Piers Plowman, portrays the inherent sham in men's actions;

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[221] Loc. cit.

[222] Wells, op. cit., p. 341.

[223] Rauch, op. cit., p. 448.

[224] Fowler, op. cit., p. 17.

it emphasizes the active parts of their being; the Vita, the last four passus, shows the inherent sham in men's minds and the resultant confusion of their thinking, the contemplative part of man's being.[225] Only when man in his mind has achieved a state of peace and honesty can he hope to follow one of these three ways to Christian salvation.

Within the Visio, furthermore, are three sections which correspond roughly to the three lives later to be found in the Vita. These sections are (1) the allegory of political and civil corruption (active life), (2) the account of the inner life and confession and absolution (contemplative life), and (3) the Christian community ". . . depicted as one organism dedicated to one end through all its various pursuits, namely, the Quest for Truth. . . ." (active-contemplative life).[226] As one considers Langland's intricate mingling of the three lives throughout Piers Plowman, he realizes the complexity of the structure of the word, three.

One readily sees that Langland's use of three is important to the general structure of the poem and also recognizes the significance of two, as three is the basis of the structure of the character of Piers, who guides men to Truth (God) or salvation. Piers, as Christ who guides men, is also an intricate number symbol.

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[225]Stone, op. cit., p. 676.

[226]Wells, op. cit., p. 343.

Langland's concept of the duality of the second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, is also evident in the Christian belief that He is both human and divine, and one recalls that in the medieval mind, Christ was considered to be equally divine and human.[227] This Being is a part of the Trinity; yet He Himself may be considered also as three Persons in One. First, He is the Son of God, the second Member of the Trinity; secondly, He is Jesus, the human being in whom God was incarnate; thirdly, He is Christ, the union of the Godhead and manhood.[228] It was with the latter concept that the medievalists concerned themselves in the matter of Christ's nature in both a human and a divine sense. If one considers Piers as a symbol of Christ, he interprets Piers as a union of the Godhead and manhood. In essence, this is the union for which both Christ and Piers work, and in the poem, the salvation of the soul is considered to be the result of the union of man and God. Piers, in leading the people to Truth, is trying to effect this union. When one interprets Piers Plowman on all the levels of meaning as did Langland and his contemporaries, he finds that Piers-Christ who leads men to God, becomes the anagogical revelation

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[227]Howard W. Troyer, "Who is Piers Plowman?" Publications of the Modern Language Association, XLVII (June, 1932), 369.

[228]Loc. cit.

of man's redemption through Christ.[229] In the Visio, the active part of the poem, Piers is established as a laborer; in the Vita, the contemplative section of the poem, Piers is associated with the divine nature of Christ. Here, again, the dual nature of the Godhead is evidenced by Langland. Of the transition of Piers from the human state to the divine, Troyer explains:

> Piers is dual in character in that he is both human and divine. Through gradual transition he emerges from a symbol for humanity, plowman, king, overlord, pope, St. Peter, and Adam into a symbol for Christ and the Divinity. This association was possible for the medieval mind because of the belief in the duality of Christ Himself.[230]

Piers is a combination of Adam and Christ.[231] Adam brought death to mankind through his sin; Christ brought deliverance from death through his own suffering; together, Adam and Christ unite to form Piers, a symbol of Man. Here, again, one may see the duality (or "twoness") of Piers, human in sinning, but divine in forgiving.

One may interpret Piers Plowman literally, allegorically, or anagogically. A deeper understanding of the theme of the poem is available through anagogical interpretation; however,

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[229] Ibid., p. 372.

[230] Ibid., p. 369.

[231] Ibid., p. 380.

in order to achieve full benefits from the method of interpretation, one finds that a knowledge of medieval number symbolism becomes necessary, for it contributes to a clarification as well as to a depth of understanding of the theme. Although one must and does interpret Piers Plowman allegorically, he will readily discover that within the framework of the allegory lie further implications deriving from the presence of number symbols which Langland has consciously used. Symbolism is inherent in the numbers upon which Langland has based the significant themes of his poem. Only by investigating the specific and chronological instances of numbers within the poem can a present-day reader comprehend the depth of understanding embodied in the theme of Piers Plowman intended by Langland. The following discussion, therefore, consists of the specific instances of the use of numbers as they occur in chronological order in the poem.

"I fond þere Freris, all þe foure ordris. . . ." (Prologue.55) This statement constitutes Langland's first reference to number in Piers Plowman. One recalls that four in the Bible refers to "things of the world." It also symbolizes the system and order of the world, and the world itself. Therefore, one may conclude that four (the sum of the Trinity plus its creative power) stands for the spiritual state of the world. Consequently, when Langland alludes to the four

orders of friars, he refers not only to the worldliness of the friars, but also to the decay of their spiritual states. Later, he will develop this theme and criticize priests who seek to acquire worldly benefits instead of the love of the Lord. Since the use of the number four signified the scope of this argument for medievalists, it probably would be clear to them when the argument is later presented in greater depth by Langland through more conventional language in the poem.

The London priests who "sang for simony" are also the subject of Langland's attack. He writes, "Þere houide an hundrit in houuis of silk. . . ." (Prologue.84) Hundred is the number of absolute completion, for ten was the number of completion, and ten times ten was, therefore, a numerical statement of complete or eternal completion. Here, in the line cited, Langland uses hundred to show how complete was the turning away from the spiritual life by members of the clergy.

The Dreamer sees in his vision that the populace, as well as the clergy, is abandoning the truths inherent in the teachings of the Church, and, after cataloguing the evil ways of society, he remarks, "Al þis I sauȝ slepyng & seue siþes more." (Prologue.109) Here, one recalls that seven is the sum of the first "real" numbers and, as such, becomes symbolic of all numbers. Seven signifies "perfect completeness" in

either a sacred or profane connotation. In this line, therefore, Langland is using seven to indicate how perfectly complete had been his dream in depicting the evil which thrives in the world.

Truth (God), who dwells in the tower, as explained by Holy Church, ". . . fourmide 3ow alle / Boþe wiþ fel & wiþ face, & 3af 3ow fyue wyttes / For to worsshipe hym þerewiþ whiles 3e ben here." (I.14-16) Five is symbolic of the flesh or of imperfection, one recalls. In this passage, five connotes the flesh or physical being. Thus, Holy Church is telling the Dreamer that God created him in his fleshly being in order that the Dreamer should physically or overtly worship Him.

Truth (God) created man and ". . . comaundite of his curteisie in comoun þre þinges. . . ." (I.20) The sacred number, three, one recalls, symbolizes the Diety or Its attributes; hence, any action to which three may be attributed is perfect, holy, and complete. Therefore, those matters which God commands would be three: i.e., they encompass the whole of man's spiritual existence; they relate to God in that they are three; and they are perfect, complete, and holy, because they emanate from God.

"And nou3t to fasten a friday in fyue score wynter." (I.99) Langland's use of "fyue score" instead of "hundred"

appears to be necessary, here, because of the requirements of the meter and the alliterative pattern of the line. However, the number itself which, would conjure up a deeper meaning in the minds of the listeners, is hundred. Again, one is asked to contemplate the quality of absolute completeness embodied in the meaning of hundred, and a possible synonym for hundred would be "eternal completion."

"And crist, kingene king, kniȝtide tene, / Cherubyn & seraphyn, such suene & another. . . ." (I.103-104) In medieval theology, the ten orders of angels, established by Christ, were complete, for ten is the number of completion. Ten is also symbolic of universality, for it is the sum of seven (all creation) and three (the Creator). The ten orders of angels were, therefore, complete in their being. The number seven, then, is Langland's symbol for perfection, because the angels, created by Christ, were perfect.

"Alle here fyue fyngris were frettid wiþ rynges. . . ." (II.11) Lady Meed is the center of Langland's attention at this point in the narrative. Five, symbolic of the secular, the flesh, and the state of imperfection, is indicative of Lady Meed's adherence to worldly ways. Not only the description of her expensive, worldly dress, but also the use of five shows Lady Meed's worldliness.

"Alle þe riche retenaunce þat regniþ wiþ false / Were beden to þe bridale of boþe two sides." (II.34) Two is an

even number and, therefore, weak, since it can be divided evenly into two parts. Two becomes symbolic of union against or antagonism toward the world. In the passage, the retinue is divided into two equal parts, symbolic of weakness; however, when the two parts unite, they form a union immediately antagonistic to the world, for the leader is False.

"And ten þousand of tentis. . . ." (II.42) The number ten, one remembers, is symbolic of completion. Here, ten is used four times, for ten thousand is ten times ten times ten times ten. Four is symbolic of all creation, and ten is symbolic of completion. Therefore, the number of people who attend the wedding of Lady Meed and False represents all humanity, or all creation.

"And wiþheld him Falsehood half a 3er & elleuene dayes." (II.190) The number eleven is not one of the associational numbers of the Bible, but, as has been shown, it is found in the works of Hugo of St. Victor, who designates it as symbolic of transgression outside of measure. Therefore, it is fitting that Falsehood receives a confinement in connection with eleven, that number which describes his actions.

"And þei3 falshed hadde follwid þe þis fiftene wynter . . . ." (III.38) The number fiftene, though not symbolic in itself, is, of course, the sum of ten and five, or the product of five and three. As the former product, fifteen

signifies complete worldliness. As the product of three and five, it also signifies complete worldliness, for three is also a number of completion, as is ten. Five symbolizes the worldly, physical being as opposed to four, the spiritual being. Therefore, Langland suggests that Falsehood, a product of the world, may follow one throughout his life.

"She may nei3 as muche do in a moneþ ones / As 3oure secre sel in seue score dayes." (III.134-135) Lady Meed, again, is the topic of discussion. Here, seven shows Langland's concept of the perfection in time. Lady Meed may do as much in a month as the sacred seal may do in seven score days. Seven is the perfection of the universe in spirit (three) and matter (four).

"Þou hast honged on myn half enleuene tymes. . . ." (III.168) Here, Meed is speaking to Conscience and reproving him for his charity with the Meed's treasure. Thus, with the use of the number eleven (transgression outside of measure number), one concludes that this type of charity is a sin without measure.

"'Þere arn to maner of medis, . . .'" (III.218) The number two, again, signifies union, weakness, and antagonism. Though there are two types of meed, they are united in one. This one, then, produces antagonism, not only within itself, but also within the world.

"And o cristene king kepe vs ichone." (III.265) One symbolizes for Langland the unity and strength necessary to combat the antagonism which is present with meed.

"And takiþ me but a taile for ten quarteris otis. . . ." (IV.45) Peace is telling of the complete destruction of his property by Wrong. The number ten, significant in medieval thought of all earthly and spiritual creation, is employed by Langland, here, to show how the physical and spiritual possessions of Peace were completely destroyed by Wrong.

"He shal not þis seue 3er se hise feet ones!" (IV.75) Wrong is to be jailed for his misdeeds and the seven, which again refers to perfection, shows how perfect will be Wrong's incarceration.

"Thomas he tau3te to take two staues. . . ." (V.28) One recalls, again, that two symbolizes the union of spirit and matter. With this union of two, then, Thomas is to bring home his wife.

"Wiþ þat he shulde þe satirday, seue 3er þerafter . . . ." (V.56) Since the sacred number seven symbolizes perfection, here, seven is used by Langland to suggest perfection in punishment.

"In a torn tabbard of twelue wynter age. . . ." (V.111) Twelve is a symbol of the people of God or of the penetration of matter with spirit. One associates twelve with the colors of Joseph's coat, the tribes of Israel, the age of Christ when

He went to Jerusalem with His parents, or the number of the apostles. The number twelve, then, in application to a garment ("torn tabbard"), is symbolic of the penetration of Covetousness with the spirit of God. After the penetration, Covetousness states, "Ferst I lernide to leiȝe a lef oþer tweiȝe. . . ." (V.117)

He then says of his ware that "It hadde be unsold þis seue ȝer. . . ." (V.122) Again, seven symbolizes perfection; the goods of Covetousness were perfect in the quality of being unsaleable. He has cheated others, for he says he measured out goods "Til ten ȝardis oþer twelue tollide out þrittene." (V.128) Thirteen is considered an unlucky or evil number usually associated with Judas Iscariot, who, as the thirteenth apostle, betrayed Jesus. Thirteen, being a number outside of twelve (the children of God), was, then, representative of something that is thoroughly evil.

"Sheo haþ yholde huxterie elleuene wynter." (V.141) Here, Envy alludes to his cheating wife and expresses the seriousness of her crime in his use of the number eleven. Envy's wife was, therefore, a huckster or a cheater for such a period of time that she had so transgressed as to be outside the benevolence of repentance or forgiveness.

"'Shal no sonneday be þis seue ȝer, but seknesse it make. . . .'" (V.222) Here, Sloth makes a vow to reform his wayward life. Using the sacred seven as a symbol of

perfection, Sloth states that on every Sunday in the perfection of time, except if he be sick, he will go to church.

"A þousand of men þo þrongen togideris. . . ." (V.251) Thousand is ten to the third power. Ten is completion or the universal whole; three is the divine number which also refers to completion; therefore, ten times ten times ten refers to all mankind. Thousand, since it incorporates the use of three, refers to the godly, while hundred and its use of two refers primarily to the worldly. For example, "An hundrit of ampollis on his hat seten. . . ." (VI.8) Here, ten times ten (the use of ten twice) equals one hundred, or absolute completion in the matters of the spirit and the flesh, in combination.

Piers says of Truth: "I haue ben his folewere al þis fourty wynter. . . ." (VI.30) Forty, which is an associational number in the Bible, symbolizes man's trial, humiliation, and desolation. It has a possible three-fold association with the days of the flood, the years of the Israelites in the desert, or the days of Christ in the wilderness.

"Two stokkis þere stonde. . . ." (VI.63) Two, one recalls, is symbolic of the union of spirit and matter, or of the union of two opposites in the formation of an entity.

"Happily on hundrit wynter er þou eft entre." (VI.101) Hundred is ten times ten. Since ten is symbolic of completion, ten times this amount would be representative of an absolute

completion. Therefore, if one willingly denied the companionship of God, he would have to endure the completion of time before he could again have an opportunity to enter God's grace.

"Ac þere arn suene sistris þat seruen treuþe euer . . . ." (VI.104) Seven, in this passage, is used to refer to the perfection in the goodness of those who serve Truth, individuals who are perfect in their truthfulness and who are incorruptible.

"And þoruȝ þe helpe of hem two, hope þou non other . . . ." (VI.122) Again, the union of two produces the more powerful, significant one, a number greater in every way than the divisible two.

"For þou shalt ȝelde in aȝen at one ȝeris ende. . . ." (VII.43) One recalls that one is symbolic of the unique, the self-sufficient, and the indivisible. This period of time, thus, is that by which a person may be tested to his capacity.

"And ȝaf it hym in haste þat hadde ten before. . . ." (VII.226) Ten, again, is the number of completion. One who has ten, thus, has the complete quality, thing, or state of being.

"Noþer gees ne gris, but two grene chesis. . . ." (VII.265) Since two is symbolic of spirit and matter, Hunger in his enumeration reveals that he has but two green cheeses,

but also five other items of food. The style of speaking in this passage is reminiscent of the story of the feeding of the five thousand in the Bible. Altogether, Hunger has seven items of food, and seven signifies perfection in the quality of food; in other words, Langland is saying that there is enough food in the seven items to feed all of creation, a symbol of which is also seven.

"Or fyue 3er be fulfild such famyn shal arise. . . ." (VII.305) Five is the symbol for the secular state of the world. Therefore, the flesh or the world (also possible meanings of five) would be controlled by such a famine.

"In two lynes it lay & nou3t o lettre more. . . ." (VIII.93) Langland emphasizes that the pardon which Piers receives is contained in exactly two lynes. Two is symbolic of the union of spirit and matter and, also, symbolic of Christ (one) who becomes two (spirit and matter). Two is also symbolic of antagonism to the world; thus, Christ shows antagonism to the world's ways through His teachings.

The next instance of number symbolism is that which occurs in the Biblical account of Joseph: "And þe enleuene sterris hailsiden hym alle." (VIII.144) Here, eleven is not as important as the number twelve, the number of Jacob's children, including Joseph. Jacob's family was chosen by God to enter the Promised Land, and since his family numbered twelve sons, twelve becomes symbolic of God's chosen people.

In this passage, Langland's eleven refers to those brothers of Joseph who transgressed by selling Joseph into slavery.

"Soulis þat han ysynned seue sibes dedly." (VIII.162) Seven, one recalls again, is symbolic of perfection, and in this one passage of souls perfect in the quality of performing deadly sins.

"Þei3 þou be founde in þe fraternite among þe foure ordris. . . ." (VIII.176) Although four may symbolize worldliness, the context of the poem does not refer to this definition at this point. Nevertheless, four also refers to the spiritual state of the world (the Trinity and their Creation, the world), and may be applicable here in this meaning.

"Til it befel on a Friday two Freris I mette. . . ." (IX.8) Two is associated with antagonism to the world and, also, the union of two opposites (for example, spirit and matter) to form one entity (man).

The following four instances of the use of number symbolism all are concerned with the number seven: "Seue sibes, seiþ þe bok, synneþ þe ri3tful. . . ." (IX.18) "'How seue sibes þe sadde man synneþ on þe day. . . .'" (IX.23) "Synnes þe sad man seuene sibes in þe day." (IX.39) "'I haue sewide þe seuen 3er; sei3e þou me no ȝaþere?'" (IX.66) Seven indicates the beginning and the end of a cycle which may be either holy and sacred, or profane and evil. Seven

also symbolizes a state of perfection and, therefore, the cycle is "perfect" in its sinfulness; hence, the man has sinned in the perfect and complete cycle of seven.

The next three number symbols concern the use of three: "Arn þre faire vertues, & ben not fer to fynde." (IX.70) "'And opere wise & ellis nouȝt but as þei þre assente.'" (IX.100) "Þouȝt & I þus þre dayes we ȝeden . . . ." (IX.107) One recalls that three is symbolic of the Diety, Divine Nature, or attributes of the Godhead. Three is also the Pythagorean number of completion (the beginning, the middle, and the end). Therefore, any action or being to which three may be attributed is considered to be perfect, complete, and holy.

The following three number symbols occur, as well, in their proper numerical order: four, five, and six. "In a castel þat kynde made of foure skenis þinges." (X.2) Since even numbers in the Bible refer to things of the world and since four was considered to be the first real even number, four itself signifies the world or its worldliness. Four also stands for the world itself because it is what exists as a result of the creative process of the Trinity.

"And haþ fyue faire sones be his furste wyf. . . ." (X.18) One remembers, again, that five is symbolic of the flesh or imperfection. "Þise sixe ben yset to saue þe

castel. . . ." (X.22) Six, on the other hand, is symbolic of perfection in earthly matters.

Langland's conclusion within the poem of the Biblical story of Noah and the flood contains the use of associational numbers. "Hymself & his sones þre & siþen here wyues. . . ." (X.167) "Til fourty dayes be fulfild, þat flood haue ywasshe . . . ." (X.169) "Outtake þe ei3te soulis, & of iche beste a couple. . . ." (X.175) Three, one recalls, is the number of completion; forty is associated with earthly trial, humiliation, and desolation; eight is associated with immortality, since Christ rose on the eighth day of the week, which arising was symbolic of entrance into a new state or condition of the soul.

"And can telle of tobie & of þe twelue apostles. . . ." (XI.25) Twelve, one remembers, is the symbol for the chosen people of God. Here, the use of the number is associational, for it refers directly to the apostles. Twelve is also symbolic of the blending of the spiritual and the divine, the renewing of the world and man, and the uniting of man and God in an intimate relationship.

"Þonne telle þei of þe trinite how two slowe þe þridde . . . ." (XI.40) Two, symbolic of spirit and matter, refers, here, to God the Father (Creator of matter) and the Holy Ghost (Giver of spirit), who was a union of spirit and matter.

> He [Clergy] hab weddit a wif wibinne bise
> woukes sixe,
> Is sib to be seuene ars bat scripture is
> nempnid.
> Ðei two, as I hope, aftir my besekyng,
> Shuln wisse be to dowel. . . . (XI.106-109)

Six, one remembers, symbolizes earthly perfection, as also does seven. Two, again, is the symbol for spirit and matter. It is only through the use of two that one can find Do well.

"Ðat þinkeþ werche wiþ þo þre þriueþ wil late. . . ." (XI.156) Three, a favorite medieval number symbol, is the Pythagorean number of completion, symbolic of the Diety or its attributes.

"Godis flessh, & his fet, & hise fyue woundis. . . ." (XI.215) Here, the number five is used in an associational sense. Five is symbolic of the flesh or imperfection and is associated with the five wounds of Christ, since they represent His suffering in the flesh.

"Helpiþ nou3t to heueneward at one 3eris ende. . . ." (XI.227) One recalls that one is symbolic of the unique, the self-sufficient, and the indivisible. This period of time, then, symbolizes that time span in which God may pass judgment on man.

"For he seiþ it hymself in his ten hestis. . . ." (XI.253) Ten, one remembers, is symbolic of completion, for it embraces all created things (seven) and the Godhead (three), and it is also the sum of the first four numbers.

"And 3et haue I forgete ferþer of fyue wyttis teching . . . ." (XI.293) Five, here, is used by Langland associationally. Five symbolizes the flesh or the secular state of the world, as one recalls. Five is easily associated with the five senses of man and the five wounds of Christ, each of which relates to the flesh or physical being.

"Þat was austyn þe olde & hi3este of þe foure. . . ." (XI.303) As one remembers, four is symbolic of the world or of worldliness. It also symbolizes man himself since, one recalls, the first letters of the Greek words for the directions form the name, Adam.

"And asked Iesu on hy þat herden hit an hundred." (XII.27) One recalls that hundred symbolizes absolute completion since it is the product of ten (completion) times ten.

"And þanked hure a þousand syþes with þrobbant herte." (XII.48) One recalls that thousand is ten times ten times ten. Since ten symbolizes completion, ten to the third power is divine completion, because of the use of three, which signifies the divine.

"I am masager of deþ; men haue I tweyne. . . ." (XII.83) One remembers that two is symbolic of spirit and matter; therefore, the two men of death alluded to, here, may deal with either the death of the spirit of an individual or the death of his body, or his complete death in both body and soul.

In summary, the number seven, the perfection number, is that which is used as a symbol most frequently by Langland, for seven occurs as a symbol a total of fourteen times. The next most popular number symbol is two, the union symbol, which appears eleven times. Three, the symbol of the Divinity or completion, and five, the symbol of worldliness or imperfection, occur six times each. One hundred (eternal completion) appears in five instances, while four (the world), ten (completion), and eleven (transgression outside of measure) appear four times each. One (power or sufficiency) occurs three times, but six (earthly perfection), twelve (children of God), and forty (trial, desolation, or humiliation) occur only twice each. Eight (immortality), thirteen (evil), fifteen (complete worldliness), and ten thousand (all humanity or all creation) appear once each within the lines of the poem.

A study of medieval number symbolism is valuable to the literary scholar. As the popular method of instruction in the medieval Church, it is evident in many of the literary works of the time. Although one may feel he has a complete understanding of a work without a knowledge of medieval number symbolism, his understanding will be immeasurably enhanced and deepened with this additional knowledge. Because number symbolism began when man first conceived of universal order, it embraces ideas from the earliest pagan era to the medieval

Christian era, when priests infused religious doctrines into their practical symbolism. Therefore, the modern reader who understands the functioning of this number symbolism will have increased his knowledge of the historicity of the work in question.

When one who knows medieval number symbolism approaches a work from this period, he receives the same basic understanding of the author's purpose as does a scholar who studies the work with a conventional approach to allegory; however, he also has an understanding of the basic concepts and beliefs of the author, otherwise available to him only through the most intense conventional study. A knowledge of number symbolism, therefore, gives one a more immediate comprehension of the significance of a work, indeed, an understanding of the author's personal religious convictions, and an increased and deepened understanding of the people and their manner of living during medieval times, as this present application of medieval number symbolism Langland's Piers Plowman has attempted to show.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Examples of popular medieval number symbols are the following:

One	Uniqueness, self-sufficiency, indivisibility
Two	Diversity of spirit and matter, union or combination
Three	Completion, the Trinity
Four	Physical world, spiritual state of the Creation of the Trinity
Five	Incompletion, imperfection, the secular state of the world, worldliness
Six	Earthly perfection
Seven	Perfection, union of spirit and matter through the Creation or world
Eight	Regeneration, immortality
Nine	Extention of three, perfect completion
Ten	Perfection, completion
Eleven	Transgression outside of measure
Forty	Trial, desolation, humiliation
Seventy	Transition