

6 May 1951
CONCERNING THE SYMBOLIC USE OF NUMBERS
IN THE GENEALOGIES OF GEN 5 AND 11

(Translation of Schildenberger, Das Geheimnis
des Cottesworts, S. 264-277)

of I Tim. 1, 4; 1 Pt. 3, 9.
THE SEMINARY LIBRARY
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminar
Mequon, Wisconsin

The man who tells the Primeval History shows by certain individual traits of his presentation that he was conscious of the fact that the events were not to be described in all details as they outwardly arranged themselves nevertheless he wanted to correctly characterize them in every respect in which he was to present them. This is where the anthropomorphisms, the seemingly temporal sequence of the acts of creation, and the use of symbolic numbers in the account of creation, of which we have spoken, belong. In general, however, the writer uses a symbolic chronology, as must now be more carefully explained.

Already in this connection it is important that the List of The Sons of Adam (Gen 5) displays the number of 10 ^{begettings}, just as the account of creation reveals ten creative words of God. By this the author wants to indicate that the list of the patriarchs is complete and finished. It is complete because Noah, mankind's second arch-progenitor stands at its end. Over against that The List of the Semites, Gen 11, 10-26, contains, according to the original, Hebrew, text only 9 begettings; it is not complete. Terah stands at its end. He is not the new hero of his line; that honor is reserved for his son Abraham, who is the 10th. (Note: cf p. 207 and Franz Delitzsch,

Commentar on Genesis, 270f: "In the writer's understanding Abram is without doubt the 10th from Shem, just as Noah is the 10th from Adam: in Abram as in Noah a new beginning comes to maturity, what is old and what is new come to completed separation --zu vollendeter Scheidung--. The quote of the Chronicler corroborates this that Abram is supposed to be the 10th." It is so certain a fact that even the Chaldean tradition held fast to it. -- According to the Septuagint Terah is, of course, the 10th patriarch of the Line of the Semites. Here, however, we have only a mechanical adaptation of this list to the List of the Sons of Adam, Gen 5, by the intrusion of a Cainan in the third place with the numbers of the following Selah. Luke 3, 36 does not demand that the Cainan of the Semites' line be original. For his genealogy Luke simply used the Septuagint text. By using it he expresses the fact that this translation offers an essentially faithful picture of the original text, but does not guarantee that every single variant reading can be taken by itself as original. This is not demanded by the task which Luke wants to use his genealogical table of Christ for. He traces that table back to Adam and to his Creator and wishes thereby to show Jesus as the One Who is related by blood to all of mankind, but to Whom the entire history of mankind also aims as "the second Adam" (Rom 5, 14). The name Cainan also has its mission in this connection, not separated by itself, but in the frame of the entire context in which it stands, namely, in the hidden symbolic numbers which dominate this genealogy. "Inside this register which numbers 3 x 7 generations until Zerubbabel, 3 x 7 until Nathan, 2 x 7 until Isaac, 3 x 7 until Adam, the regularly repeated holy number seven points (according to the Jewish number symbolism) to the "Holy One" (The Messiah)" (Joh. Niederhuber, Das N.T. I, 348). Luke did not have to point to this number symbolism any more expressly than did the other Biblical writers to theirs (cf Gen 5 & 11, 10ff, and many other passages.)

In the list, however, he is simply called the son of Terah. It is significant that Enoch, the Holy One, takes the seventh place in the List of the Sons of Adam.

Already at this point the question can be asked whether the numbers for the ages in these lists contain a symbolism. Father Closen approached this question from another angle, "Geology, the investigation of the earth's

crust, of its age, and of its history makes the interpreter conscious of what significance (number-symbolic significance, not arithmetical-chronological significance) the lists of numbers in the genealogies of the patriarchs (Gen 5 and 11) can have." These indications of age, high as they are, do not by any means extend far enough to cover the time periods for early history which present-day science has reckoned. Many more omitted members and many larger gaps of years must be assumed for the lists than those that are given. But the numbers themselves show that they have symbolic meaning. Father Closen once told me in a conversation that he has partially worked this out in the case of the List of The Semites.

The number of days of a sun-year appears three times in the number-system, Genesis 5-12. The Israelites knew the Egyptian sun-year of 365 years which was not cognizant of its variation from the actual sun-year through leap years. They themselves had a moon year that was pegged to the sun-year and which was brought into line with the sun year by an intercalary month every three years. (1) Abraham journeys forth in the 75th year of his life in response to God's call from Haran to Canaan (Gen 12,4). This is in the 365th year after his progenitor Shem beget his first son, Arphaxad, "a solar year of years after the first post-deluvial birth" (W. Vischer, I, 139). In this way the inspired writer shows that now a new epoch in the history of salvation and of the world is beginning, an epoch which neither he was able to nor wished to express with a superscription "Now these are the generations of Abraham." (Note: cf. p. 295). (2) Enoch's earthly life also amounts to 365 years. That is the shortest earthly life of all the antedeluvian patriarchs, and still his number shows that his life reached its God-intended completion: Enoch went his way over the earth, like the sun, giving light and warmth to all who sat in the shadow of death. (3) According to specific statements in the account of the Flood that belong to the number system of our lists, the Flood and Noah's sojourn in the ark lasted one sun-year: on the 17th day of the 2nd month in Noah's 600th year all who were to be saved entered into the ark and the Flood broke loose (Gen 7,11.1X); on the 27th day of the 2nd month in Noah's 601st year the earth was dry and all left the ark (8,14ff). The time was therefore one year and 10 days, that is, one moon year of 355 days plus 10 days, or one Egyptian sun year of 365 days. The other references to time in the account of the Flood show order and complete numbers: the rain lasts 40 days (7,4.12.17); on the 1st day of the 10th month the peaks of the mountains show themselves (8,5); and on the 1st day of the 1st month of the following year the water begins to subside (8,18). By this author says: Despite its destructive and catastrophic character God's providence determined well-defined limits for the Flood, and in the plan of God the Flood was a force that created order. The story most likely is a combination of two sources. One fits in with the story of Paradise; the other with our genealogical lists (Gen 5 and 11) and the account of Creation. The mention of the 40 days-rain belongs to the first account; the other time references belong to the second source. (Note: It is not a matter of consequence for our question about the literary nature of the Primeval History to find out whether the second source was worked into the first by Moses, or by a later inspired writer in a new edition of the Mosaic work. In any case Genesis as it now stands receives its final impress from its number-symbolism, and the number-symmetry of its toledoth. The Pentateuch certainly contains much that is post-Mosaic, also in Genesis. Apart from explanatory notes --glosses-- later inspired writers made supplements which did not change the Mosaic work in its substance but accommodated the laws to later conditions and, in the case of historical reporting, highlighted the basic structure of the History of Salvation in parts even more clearly. Number-symbolism in itself does not exclude Moses, since

it is very old. For instance, the numbers of 10 antedeluvian patriarchs were known to the Babylonians, and the Egyptians were acquainted with 10 early kings. The Persians also knew of 10 generations before the Flood. The equally symbolic references to ages in the case of Aaron and Moses and of the connection of this chronology with the building of the Temple bespeak a later time. The Pentateuch, as we have it today, is a new edition of the Mosaic work made by an inspired writer in the spirit of Moses, so that the work rightly bears the name of Moses, a name our Lord also applied to it (esp. John 5,45ff). Some people have wanted to find contradictions in these two sources; for, they say, a rain of 40 days could not cause a rising of the waters that lasts 150 days; but if the author intends merely to characterize the history-of-salvation nature of the Flood, then both statements agree; it is only the means of expression that are different.

The numbers in the List of the Sons of Adam and in the List of the Sons of Shem also show a regularity such as does not otherwise occur in the accidental occurrences of human life. This regularity shows itself especially in the Ages-at-Begettings (the ages at which these patriarchs begat the heir to the Promise). To gain an overview first the numbers should be collected in order:

List of the Sons of Adam (Gen 5)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Age at Begetting	Adam 130	Seth 105	Enos 90	Cainan 70	Mahalah 65	Jared 162	Enoch 65	Methuselah 187	Lamech 182	Noah 500
Other yrs	800	807	815	840	830	800	300	782	595	450
Entire life	930	912	905	910	895	962	365	969	777	950

List of the Semites (Gen 11,10ff)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Age at Begetting	Shem 100	Arphaxad 35	Selah 30	Eber 34	Pheleg 30	Reu 32	Sarug 30	Nahor 29	Terah 70
Other years	500	403	403	430	209	207	200	119	135

First of all, in the List of the Sons of Adam, the Age at Begetting falls to 65 years, that is, one half of the age of Adam at the time he begat his son. With that the 1st half of the line is completed. The numbers are all divisible by 5, and differ from Adam's number in a certain periodicity: 25, 40, 60, 65 (or, respectively, among themselves: 25, 15, 20, 5). At the beginning of the second half of the line, with Jared, we have an Age-at-Begetting which exceeds that of Adam by 32 years. This number is not divisible by 5; but this excess of 32 is half of 65, that is, of the preceding and following Age-at-Begetting (half years are not reckoned). With that number the relationship to Adam and to the son of this high age, Enoch, is reestablished. Enoch's numbers do not fit into the periodicity of the rest of the line, which is in keeping with his extraordinary holiness and the reverence accorded him. And still one can look upon his number as the foundation of all the others, which means that God determined everything and guided it all in view of his special favorites (cf. Deut 32,8: "When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel," and Gen 18,24ff; Ex. 33,17; Mt 24,22). For we have already seen: the symbolism of Enoch's life is taken from a factor given by nature, from a sun-year. And if a measuring stick for human life is used that is 80 to 90 years long and which puts the age-at-begetting upwards of 16 years of age, in Enoch's case the Age of Begetting results in 65 years. For Adam, the starting point, the number 65 is doubled: 130 years. Hence Enoch's life (so different from that of the

others) is the hidden foundation of these numbers. If we now skip Enoch in our consideration of the relationship of the numbers one to the other (because he is assumed to be so different from his surroundings) the subsequent variations show themselves again in numbers that are divisible by 5: from Jared the Age-of-Begetting rises (by 25 years to Methuselah); from Jared to Lamech by 20 years. The extraordinarily high number of Noah's Age-at-Begetting is the product of these 2 numbers $25 \times 20 = 500$. The fact that Jared who begins the second half of the line of these patriarchs is a new starting point, like Adam and still based upon Adam, is also shown by the fact that the rest of his years, like those of Adam, are 800 years.

The Age at Begetting in The List of Semites contains even more striking number relationships. If a person subtracts from the number that is the starting point, 100, Shem's age at the time he begat his heir, the number 30 (which occurs three times in the list and which marks the distance of Shem's age at begetting from that of Adam), one reaches the number 70, Terah's Age-at-Begetting. 70, divided by 2, gives 35, Arphaxad's Age-at-Begetting. From this starting point the numbers (not divisible by 10) vary in regular intervals 1,2,3: 34,32,29. Father Closen called my attention to the noteworthy relationships of the numbers in The List of the Semites. In addition, another fact to be noted is that the sum of the numbers that end in even tens taken twice and of the other numbers taken once gives us the number of Adam's Age at Begetting, 130: 100 plus 30; 30 plus 30 plus 70; 35 plus 34 plus 32 plus 29. It is, however, especially significant, as was already mentioned, that the sum of the years from the birth of Arphaxad to Abraham's departure from his home covers one sun-year of years (365), that is, a completed cosmic period, and that, accordingly, a new epoch begins with Abraham's departure from his home. Let it be noted that Peleg (: Divider; a reference to the Dispersion of the Nations; cf. Gen 10,25; 11,8f) stands in the fifth place exactly in the middle of the line, and thus divides it, and that his age reaches only more than half of the years of his predecessors, which is in keeping with the degeneration of the conditions of human life as a result of the growth of wickedness.

The relation of the numbers to Abraham becomes still more clear if we notice that 100 years is not only Shem's age-at-begetting, but that it is also Abraham's age when the son of the Promise, Isaac, was born (Gen 21, 5). Adam's number itself again in all probability, determined by that of Enoch, is the starting point for the numbers of the Age-of-Begetting in the List of Adam's Sons. The numbers in The List of Semites grow out of Shem's and Abraham's numbers, 100, and 30, the interval they differ from Adam's number. To people who had open eyes for the number-symbolism (and obviously these people of the ancient orient were such, as is evident time and again) to such people the author could say by means of the unique relationships of these numbers: the line of the heirs of the Promise --for that is what we are dealing with here-- goes from Adam and is aimed at Isaac in a hidden order that shows that God who has ordered all things according to measure, number and weight (Wisdom 11,20), watches over the line of the Promise with His very special providence and love. These numbers signify the actualization of the Plan of Salvation which is not disturbed by any confusion of human actions and which quietly and peacefully goes on its way in well-ordered purposefulness, the Plan of Salvation which was revealed to the parents of our race in the judgment pronounced upon the serpent in the Protevangelium (Gen 3,15), in the Blessing of Noah (9,26f), to Shem's descendents, and attached to this people by the Promise that came to Abraham in order that one day all nations might be blessed in Abraham's great descendent (12,3; 22,18).

The beautiful order that is expressed by these numbers and which is nothing but the inner, God-given beauty of all this entire development shows itself in this that Abraham is 75 years old at the time of his departure from Haran for Canaan (12,4), 100 years old at the birth of Isaac, (21,5), 175 years old at his death (25,7). The 75 years after the birth of Isaac correspond to the 75 years before his departure from Haran; and then he traversed the Promised Land for 100 years, sanctifying it for his descendants. In the time of Abraham a generation is 100 years (cf Gen 15,13 and 16). Other numbers also show symmetry. Thus Israel's sojourn in Egypt amounts to 430 years (Ex 12,40; according to the Samaritan and Greek texts the sojourn in Canaan and Egypt), whereas the patriarchs spend half of it (215 years) in Canaan. The building of the Temple begins 480 years after the Exodus from Egypt (1 Kgs 6,1), that is, after 12 generations --here reckoned 40 years to a generation as in the book of Judges (cf. Jud 3,11; 4,3; 5,31; 8,28; 13,1 15,20)-- and 1200 years after the birth of Abraham (Note: cf. Gen 21,5; 25,26; 47,9; Ex 12,40; 1 Kgs 6,1; Vischer, Das Christuszeugnis des A Ts, S 222; accordingly this entire symbolical chronology perhaps comes from an inspired writer who supplemented the Mosaic work at the time after the building of the Temple, to which event it is directed).

It is important to note in this connection that the age of the Egyptianized Joseph amounts to 110 years (Gen 50,26). In Egypt this was the complete, ideal age for a person's life. Hence the wise Ptah-hotep says, "What I have done on earth is not inconsiderable. I attained one hundred and ten years of life" (Gressmann, Alt-orientalische Texte zum A T, 33; Fritchard ANET, 414d). In the Papyrus Westcar Dedi of Ded-Snefru is characterized as a complete Wise Man by saying that he is "a citizen of 110 years" (Gressmann, Altorientalische Texte zum A T, 64). A thankful disciple wishes his teacher 110 years as heaven's reward (Erman, Die Literatur der Aegypter, 269). This number wants to say, in the case of Joseph, that he entirely completed his life's task and received a rich measure of earthly prosperity. Joshua likewise is 110 years old (Jos 24,29). That means undoubtedly that this descendent of Joseph was equal to his progenitor; after all, he led the Israelites into the land of Canaan and fulfilled the task given to him by God. The relationship is similar in the case of the ages of Levi and of Amram, the father of Moses and Aaron: Amram counts 137 years, as does his progenitor Levi (Ex 6,16.20); he equals his ancestor in esteem, because he is the father of the great Moses and of the High Priest Aaron. On the other hand, Levi himself does not reach his ancestor Jacob: he has 10 years less than Jacob who dies at the age of 147 years (Gen 47,28). And Kohath, the second of the 3 sons of Levi, to whose lineage Moses and Aaron belong, has 4 years less than Levi (Ex 6,18), and consequently does not reach him. The differences are complete numbers, 10 and 4, and Jacob's life-time is 20 x 70 plus 7. Moses reaches an age of 120 years (Deut 34,7); at the time of his audience with pharaoh he is 80 years old (Ex 7,7). The later Jews obviously proceeded from the same principle of division when they put his visit to his people and his flight from Egypt into his 40th year (cf Acts 7,23). Accordingly three sections of 40 years each, appear, signifying that the life of this greatest of Israel's prophets (Deut 34,10ff) was entirely ordered and complete and, more than that, characterizing his close connection with the 12 tribes nation. Of course, if a person compares these 120 years with the higher age of his father and ancestor Levi, then these numbers indicate that death before entrance into the Promised Land was a punishment for Moses, who moved in unbroken vigor of life (Num 20,12; Deut 3,23ff; 34,7). If he had reached the age of Levi and Amram, 137 years, he would have spent 17 more years (10 plus 7) in Canaan, as Jacob, in reverse order, did in Egypt (Gen 47,9.28).

In the genealogy Ex 6,14-27 it is only in the case of Levi, Kohath and Amram that the years are mentioned; they are not mentioned for the other persons. These three men are thereby clearly distinguished and highlighted from out of the rest as the fathers of Moses and Aaron. Thus it is already significant that in the Lists of the Sons of Adam and of Shem the years are given at all, in contradistinction to the account of the Cainites (Gen 4,17ff). Of course, the holy author took these from another source of tradition. By the manner, however, in which he structures Genesis he says the line of Promise does not count those who were rejected before God. For that reason there is no such a thing as "generations (toledoth) of Cain."

The List of the Sons of Adam still shows in special manner how death is the consequence and punishment of sin. It is only in this list, not in the List of the Semites, that the sum of the years of life are given, and in the case of each patriarch (except, of course, Enoch) the statement is added, "and he died." The mighty strength of life of even these men who come fresh from the original strength of Paradise is finally broken by the power of death. Essentially the line of years of life decreases. The slight increase in the case of the years of Cainan could indicate nature's opposition to this all-subduing might of death. In the case of Jared and Methuselah, however, we find a length of life which surpasses that of Adam: Enoch's father and son are the oldest men, and Enoch himself does not die at all (cf Hebr 11,5). God's goodness excepted this righteous man from the universal law of death and snatched him away, as later also the prophet Elijah (2 Kgs 2,3.5.9.11). These exceptions explain themselves sufficiently only by their fulfilment: they point to Him Who should bring the redemption of all from death and Who is ascended to Heaven." In the case of Enoch the word of the Book of Wisdom (1,15) is corroborated, "Righteousness is immortal", and it is not only Enoch himself who receives the blessing because of his righteousness, but this is transferred also to his relatives, the closer they stand to him. In this manner later Noah, the third oldest man, becomes by his righteousness the one who rescues himself and his family and therewith the race of mankind. The farther man goes away from Paradise and the more sin grows on earth, the more death exercises its sovereignty over life. Enoch's righteousness alone is able to side-track it and restrain it at least a bit for others. That is also an indication of the fact that death came into the world by sin (Rom 5,12). If a person reckons together the years without assuming gaps in the list, Methuselah dies exactly in the year of the beginning of the Flood. This is hardly an accidental coincidence; as little as was Abraham's departure from Haran 365 years after the birth of Arphaxad a coincidence. But just as in the case of Abraham's departure from Haran so also here the author wants to characterize the uniqueness of the deed-of-salvation and not just offer ordinary chronology. We are not, however, justified in presenting Methuselah as one of the sinners who perished in the Flood, as is often done. The numbers do indeed put his death into the year of the beginning of the Flood, but they do also allow for his dying a natural death before the beginning of the Flood; the Flood begins, we know, on the 17th day of the 2nd month of Noah's 600th year. It is certainly no accident that it is just the numbers of Methuselah which are divisible by 17 (187: 11 x 17; 782: 46 x 17; 969: 57 x 17); at the very least a certain symmetry is evident. Methuselah was hardly contaminated by that decline in morals which brought on the judgment, namely, the mixed marriages of the good people with those that were evil. But the author may have wished to express through his coincidence of Methuselah's death with the Flood the fact that it was only the sin of mankind that limited the blessing which went forth from righteous Enoch. On the other hand, it is possible to incorporate Methuselah's years only through Noah's extraordinarily high age-at-begetting along with the second highest ages-at-begetting of Methuselah and Lamech. Since children which are granted

to aged or unfruitful parents indicate in the Holy Scriptures the special and marvelous interference of divine providence (cf Gen 21,1ff; 25,21; Jud. 13,2ff; 1 Sam 1,19; Lk 1,13ff), these high numbers are capable of making a person aware of the fact that it was God Who ordered all blessings that He dispensed for the sake of the Righteous with special love and care in the course of history, no matter how the details of it all might have been. Thus also Jared's high age-at-begetting, so striking in its surroundings, shows that Enoch, the son of this old age, was from the beginning the special choice by Divine Love.

Enoch's life on earth, incomparably more brief in relation to the other lives, is nevertheless presigned as being complete by his number 365, as we have already said: Enoch completely fulfilled his life's mission. Indeed, the relative brevity of this life was a special grace for Enoch; after all, he was taken away from this vale of tears with its dangers and temptations. The author of the Book of Wisdom read the inner history-of-salvation structure of this life aright from the pages of Genesis and showed its universal applicability, "A righteous man, if he dies before his time, will be at rest, for an honored old age does not depend on length of time, and is not measured by the number of one's years, but understanding is gray hair for men, and a blameless life is old age. Because he pleased God well, he was loved by Him, and while living among sinners he was taken up. He was caught up, so that wickedness might not alter his understanding, or guile deceive his soul. . . . Being perfected in a little while he has fulfilled long years, for his soul pleased the Lord; therefore he hurried from the midst of wickedness. The peoples saw yet did not perceive or take such a thing to heart, for favor and mercy are with His chosen, and He watches over His saints." (4,7-15). Thus the life of Lamech, Noah's father, the shortest after Enoch, is characterized as completed and dedicated to God by the number of years; in the numbers of his age-at-begetting and of the rest of his life is hidden the holy number 7 (182: 26 x 7; 595: 85 x 7), and in the entire number of his years it comes to the fore (777) most clearly and openly. Our system of numbers puts his death 5 years before the beginning of the Flood. It was granted him to die in peace without seeing the terrible catastrophe (cf 2 Kgs 22,18ff; Jer 22,10). Gottfried Kuhn (in "Die Lebenszahl Lamechs Gen 5,31, Zeitschrift fuer alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 54 (1936), 309f) made the following observation concerning the numbers in Lamech's life. Lamech lives simultaneously with Adam for 56 years (: 8 x 7), with Seth for 168 years (: 24 x 7), with Enosh for 266 years (: 38 x 7); with Cainan for 361 years (: 51 x 7 plus 4), with Mahalaleel for 416 years (: 59 x 7 plus 3), with Jared for 548 years (: 78 x 7 plus 2), with Enoch for 113 years (16 x 7 plus 1). In his son Noah Lamech expects a kind of Sabbath; after all, "Noah" does mean "Rest." Now the Flood ends at the beginning of Noah's 601st year (Gen 8,13f), that is, at the beginning of the 7th century of his life. Noah lives 350 years more, that is, seven jubilee-periods. His life after the Flood is accordingly a kind of cosmic sabbath (Weltensabbat). In the case of the Cainites the number 7 is the number of retribution and revenge; upon any murderer of Cain God puts sevenfold punishment; the Cainite Lamech wants, in fact, to avenge himself 7 x 70 times (4,15.24); in the case of the Sethites, on the other hand, seven is the number of holiness and fullness of life; the holy Enoch is the 7th in their line; Cainan, corresponding to Cain, has a life of 910 years (70 plus 840) and Lamech, corresponding to the Cainite Lamech, has a life of 777 years (182 plus 595).

The concatenation of the individual members of the Lists of the Sons of Adam, and of Shem; which does not allow for any gaps, also serves, as we have previously said, like the numbers themselves, to characterize the history-of-salvation character of the events. It does not want to mark the numbering as mathematically complete, nor does it wish to deny the gaps. Just as the inspired author limited himself in his account of the Creation to ten words spoken by God because of the symbolic significance of ten, so

he wishes with the same type of symbolism to characterize the List of the Sons of Adam as complete with ten patriarchs, since Noah as a new progenitor brings this list to its completion and close; and by means of the 9 ancestor in the Semitic List he wishes to point to Abraham as the 10th. The internal essential completion and final limitation of this List of the Sons of Adam by Noah and the incompleteness of The List of the Sons of Shem (in which list the name of Abraham is missing) is what the author wants to point to. These history-of-salvation characteristics of both lists were present no matter how many members may have actually been counted. The lack of gaps wants to show that the string of the history of salvation never broke, but that, instead of that; despite all dangers the original revelation and original hope was always, from Paradise on, preserved and transmitted without interruption from generation to generation by a circle of those who were chosen, even if it was often a very small circle. The numbers of the years of life which remain for the patriarchs after the birth of the heirs of the Promise are able to illustrate this in a special way. For they also display order. First of all, they increase past Adam's 800 years by 7, then by 15 (the number of half a month), finally by 40 (a number whose completeness can be demonstrated by many examples: the rain at the time of the Flood last 40 days --Gen 7,12--; Moses is twice 40 days on Mt. Sinai --Ex 24,18; 34,28; Deut 9,18-- the Israelites are in the wilderness 40 years --Num 14,33--; Elijah journeys 40 days to Mt. Horeb --1 Kgs 19,8--). From then on the numbers decrease and, passing by the number 30, the number of a month, they reach in Jared the beginning and starting point of the second half of the list, 800. The symmetry of the following three numbers has already been commented upon. The ordering of the numbers is symbolically illustrative of the inner order in the lives of the antediluvian patriarchs and of the providence which reigned over them. The long duration of the rest of their life-times say, in respect to the History of Salvation, that these patriarchs had the possibility of preserving the original revelation pure in their families. Just how that happened is of no consequence. The numbers only wish to concretely express the one important fact that it happened.

The schematic nature of the numbers shows that they do not intend to give the actual length of lives of these men. Nevertheless the extraordinary length of these numbers is significant, in a history-of-salvation manner, however. Through them these ancient appear both mighty in vigor of life (a vigor which --as one could expect-- is overcome by Death) and venerable in age and majesty. Both things were characteristic of them; after all, it was in them that the human race's source-power flowed and they were the bearers of the hope of salvation and Christ's progenitors. What a painter expresses in the case of a patriarch by giving him a tall, mighty form, a flowing beard, and snow-white hair that our author did by these high numbers. He had to take high numbers if he wished to evoke the correct impression of these venerable progenitors for his contemporaries. After all, the Babylonians assign to each of their 40 antediluvian kings a reign of 18,000 to 72,000 years! In the high numbers of Lamech and Methuselah the blessing that proceeded from Enoch is expressed. Since in general among the Israelites longevity was the quintessence of prosperity --remember the blessing attached to the fourth commandment (Ex 20,12) and in general the long sojourn in the land of promise held out as the blessing for keeping the commandments (Deut 6,2; 30,20)-- in these numbers all benefits which were bestowed on these men are incorporated and graphically illustrated.

A few indications speak loudly for the fact that the actual age of the men mentioned was much smaller. It is indeed understandable that the first men in their primeval power could become much older, also that the power of procreation remained much longer; but even that the fact that the heirs of the Promise get to be so old is striking. Of course, they must not always have been the first-born. Seth certainly was not the first born. In the case of Noah, however, it happened that the 3 sons of his 500th year, Shem,

Ham and Japheth, entered the ark with him at the time of the Flood as his only children and that these themselves at their 100th year had indeed wives, but did not yet have children; otherwise these would certainly have also been taken into the ark, since Noah is said to have been saved together with his entire house (Gen 7,1). Ham's frivolous attitude toward his father (9,22) is understandable as the act of an impetuous young man. It is improbable that Sarah was taken into the harem of the pharaoh (Gen 12,11ff) at the age of 65 years (she was, according to Gen 17,17, 10 years younger than Abraham) and that then later she was taken into the harem of Abimelech (20,2ff) (Note: The lining up of these two dangers obviously followed not chronologically but content-viewpoints: between the Promise of conception and Birth of Isaac and the fulfilment of this promise. Therewith it is shown how God in wondrous wise protected Sarah because she was to be the mother of the heir to the Promise. End of note). Isaac is already 40 years old when he marries Rebekkah (25,20). Should we imagine that Abraham waited so long to get a wife for his son, even though the Promise of God rested expressly on his bodily descendent? Esau is likewise at the time of his first marriage 40 years old (Gen 26,34). And his twin brother of the same age Jacob was at that time unmarried. Moses visited his brethren when he was "grown up" (Ex 2,11). This perhaps was at the age of 20. According to this he would then have spent 60 years in exile in Midian. It came to pass, however, only "after many days" that the king of Egypt who had oppressed Israel and pursued Moses himself died (2,28). The Bible mentions only one pharaoh. This pharaoh had already before Moses' birth begun to oppress the Israelites (1,8ff) and his daughter had adopted the baby Moses as her son. (2,5ff). Neither the reign of Ramses II (1292-1225) nor that of Thutmose III (1501-1447; even including the years of his brother Thutmose II and his sister-spouse Hatshepsut) who come into consideration as the pharaohs of the oppression and who surpass all other subsequent pharaohs in length of reign ~~xxxxx~~ is long enough for such a long, extended oppression. More than that, Moses' sons would have been, at the time he returned to Egypt, men of between 50 and 60 years of age (cf 2,21f) who could have accompanied their father to Egypt. But they both remained in Midian or returned there with their mother (4,20.24). It was Jethro who first brought them together with Zipporah, Moses' wife, to meet Moses in the wilderness (18,2ff). Obviously they were still unmarried. Everything is much more easily understandable if these sons were still children. Even though the length of life of the patriarchs in the List of the Sons of Shem and of the Great Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was much shorter than that of the antedeluvian fathers, and approaches that of an ordinary person's age, it does, nevertheless, still extend far beyond it. To the contrary, however, the records of the Babylonian Kings (Note: cf Meissner, Babylonien und Assyrien II (1925), 443ff; also Father J.M. Voste, O.P., says that the high age of the patriarchs stands in contradiction to all that palaeontology teaches --Angelicum 25(1948), 161f). Father Bea, S.J. (Civiltà Cattolica 1948 April, p 122) says the length of human life was not longer in the palaeolithic or neolithic ages than ours but in all probability shorter) End of note) show that a life-span in the third millenium before Christ was essentially as long as ours today.

In keeping with our principle of interpretation we have in this symbolical chronology taken all details of the accounts as seriously as if everything happened just that way; however, we have always at the same time asked: What do these details mean for the characterization of the uniqueness which these events, persons and things have by virtue of their being history of salvation and religious revelation? Thus we came to a theological evaluation of the details and to the meaning which the inspired author attached to them. Hence we can also determine how far the words are

at the very least

to be understood literally, in other words, what reality they express, if they are supposed to have any meaning at all, and how far they do not call for, or even exclude literal understanding. The author means it, e.g., apparently in the literal sense when he says that Enoch walked before God in great holiness, and in so far as he speaks in connection with Enoch not of his death, but of his "being-taken-away" and his "being-taken up" by God and connects this with his twice-mentioned God-fearing manner of life, he lets it be known that Enoch did not have to see death (cf Hebrews 11,5). What special meaning would his-being-removed have had, if he later nevertheless died? On the other hand, the author does not intend the number of the years to be taken literally but symbolically, as its entire schematic nature already shows. But what this symbolism expresses he wishes to characterize as history-of-salvation uniqueness which actually was present in the events and persons.

(translated by R. Gehrke, June 8, 1959)

Johannes Schildenberger, Vom Geheimnis des Gotteswortes, Einfuehrung in das Verstaendnis der Heiligen Schrift, 1950, F.H.Kerle Verlag Heidelberg.