

The Biblical Significance of the Number Twelve (12)

The number 12 is an extremely interesting number that has uniqueness in mathematics, in our culture, in music, in art, and in Scripture. We will begin by noting some fun facts about the number 12. We will soon see that the number 12 plays a very vital role in our everyday lives.

Our calendar is set up around the number 12. There are 12 months in a year; there are 12 full moons in one year. Our manual clocks are set up from one to 12.

The largest number in the English language that has only one syllable is twelve. Twelve is the smallest number that can be divided by exactly six numbers: 1,2,3,4,6, and 12.

Before the metric system was introduced, the world used to divide weights and measurements by 12. For example, there are 12 inches in a foot. We still buy commodities, such as eggs and baked goods by the dozen and by the half dozen. A gross is 144 or 12 x 12.

In music, there are 12 major keys and 12 minor keys. There are 12 basic colors on the color wheel. Even in myths and legends, there are 12 Knights of the Round Table, 12 Greek Olympians, the 12 distinct tasks of Hercules, and the 12 days of Christmas.

Our bodies have 12 pairs of ribs, and 12 cranial nerves which control sight, taste, smell, hearing, touch and movement. In Law, there are 12 people on the jury of a criminal trial.

We have cited just a few examples of the use of the number 12 in our world today. Now we will turn to the Scriptural uses and significance of the number 12.

The number twelve is used 187 times in the Bible: 114 times in the Old Testament and 75 times in the New Testament. A closer look at the Biblical meaning of the number 12 reveals that 12 is a perfect number.

In the Bible, the number 12 symbolizes God's power and authority, completeness, and Divine government. Twelve is a number that God chose to identify His Covenant people. Let us follow the unfolding of the use of the number twelve on the Scriptural timeline.

In **Genesis 17:20**, we read about God's promise to Abraham regarding his son Ishmael. Ishmael would be the father of 12 princes who formed the foundation for the 12 tribes of Ishmael.

The core foundational lineage of God's covenant people is established through the 12 sons of Jacob who later become the 12 tribes of Israel. The names of these 12 sons are listed in **Genesis 35:22-26**.

Many uses of the number 12 in the Old Testament refer back to the 12 tribes of Israel. Remember, 12 is a number representing God's Divine authority and government over His Covenant people.

As we journey through the Bible, we read about God's provision for the Israelites during the Exodus. God provided 12 wells in Elim for His people. (**Exodus 15:27**) Moses builds an altar at the foot of Mt. Sinai using 12 pillars which represents the 12 tribes of Israel. (**Exodus 24:4**)

The priests are instructed to place 12 loaves of Shewbread on the golden table in the tabernacle each Sabbath. These 12 loaves represented the 12 tribes of Israel remaining before the Lord. (**Leviticus 24:5-6**)

When the tabernacle is dedicated, the leaders of the 12 tribes made identical offerings over 12 days. This emphasized order and unity among God's Covenant people.

We can read about this process in **Numbers Chapter 7**. Moses sent 12 spies to scout the Promised Land of Canaan, one from each tribe. (**Numbers 13:1-2**) Joshua sets up 12 memorial stones as Israel crosses the Jordan River to possess Canaan. (**Joshua 4:9**) There are many more appearances of the number 12 throughout the Old Testament.

The number 12 continues this same frequency as we travel into the New Testament. Jesus continues the pattern of 12 as a symbol of divine authority and spiritual completeness when He chose His 12 disciples. **(Luke 6:13)**

Jesus summons His 12 disciples and gives them authority to preach and heal. **(Matthew 10:1)** Just as the 12 tribes of Israel were God's people of the Old Covenant, the 12 Apostles were the foundational leaders of the New Covenant.

Other passages where the number 12 appears in the New Testament are the following:

- 1) Jesus was 12 years old when his first words were recorded in **Luke 2:42,49**.
- 2) The woman with the issue of blood that Jesus healed had suffered for 12 years. **(Mark 5:25)**
- 3) Jairus's daughter whom Jesus raised from the dead was 12 years old. **(Mark 5:42)**
- 4) The disciples collected 12 baskets of leftovers following the feeding of the 5,000. **(Matthew 14:20)**
- 5) Jesus promises the 12 Apostles that they will sit on 12 thrones and judge the 12 tribes of Israel. **(Matthe 14:20)**
- 6) Jesus says that 12 legions of angels could come and rescue Him. **(Matthew 26:53)**

Now let's go to the Book of Revelation where the number twelve appears 22 times. Since the Book of Revelation records the consummation of the New Everlasting Covenant, we can understand the frequent appearance of the number 12.

The first time the number 12 appears is in **Revelation 12:1**. This description parallels the dream of Joseph in **Genesis 37:9-11**. The stars in Joseph's dream represented his eleven brethren. The 12 stars on the head of the woman represent the 12 tribes of Israel.

In **Revelation Chapter 21**, we read a detailed description of the New Jerusalem which features the number **12** throughout. In **Revelation 21:12**, we read about **12** gates with the names of the **12** tribes of the children of Israel. This gives honor to the faithful patriarchs of the Old Testament.

It was the Old Testament Prophets who prophesied about the coming Messiah. Jesus said, ***“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the father but by me.”*** (**John 14:6**) Jesus is the door. (**John 10:9**)

In **Revelation 21:14**, we read about the wall of the city has **12** foundations. The names of the **12** Apostles are written on them. This symbolizes the foundational role of the Apostles in establishing the Church.

The city’s wall is built upon the teachings of the Apostles with Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone. (**Ephesians 2:20-22**) The **12** gates with the names of the **12** tribes and the **12** foundations with the names of the **12** Apostles shows the unity of the people of God throughout the Bible.

In **Revelation 22:2**, we read about the Tree of Life which bears **12** manner of fruits. We know that Jesus is the Tree of Life. (**John 15:5**) The **12** manner of fruit symbolizes the eternal sustenance, the constant divine provision, and the perfect unending abundance of God’s presence.

This comes when we believe and obey the teachings of the **12** Apostles. This fruit is for the healing of the nations which symbolizes the redemption from sin death and the promise of eternal life.

When the Apostle John is shown a “holy city” coming down from heaven does not imply that God is marrying a piece of real estate. John is shown the “Bride of Christ”.

He is shown and describes the Holy City which is the New Jerusalem. (**Revelation 21:2-3**) Our study of the appearance of the number **12** in John’s description of the New Jerusalem adds credence to this point. The New Jerusalem represents the ultimate assembly of God’s people. It is the home for the redeemed. The Scriptures tell us that the New Jerusalem is the Church, the assembly of the First born. (**Hebrews 12:22-23**)

Conclusion

Throughout Scripture, the number **12** appears in moments connected with God's people, His Kingdom, and His Covenant purposes. The recurring appearance of the number **12** reminds us that God's purposes are complete, His promises are fulfilled, and His Kingdom will endure forever.

The number **12** always represented God's divine authority and spiritual completeness. The fact that the repetition of the number **12** used to describe the New Jerusalem simply emphasizes the fact that the Kingdom of God is complete and Eternal and is here today.

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