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Bible Reading by Numbers

By Peter Leather peter.leather.4@gmail.com

My father's first reading book was The Bible. By that, I don't mean Bible stories retold for children, or any "up-to-date" paraphrase of The Bible. I mean The Bible, as it was 120 years ago, or, as it is now known, the King James, or Authorised Version. You may ask, "Couldn't he have had anything nicer than that to read?" For one thing, there would probably have been very few other books in the house. And what better book could he have learnt to read than The Bible anyway?

"But what about the old fashioned language?" I hear you ask. It would not have been anywhere near as strange to him as it is to children today. The English second-person singular pronouns – thou, thee, thy, thine – and the forms of the verbs to go with them – "Thou shalt not..." etc - were still in everyday usage, certainly in the Yorkshire mill-towns, where he grew up.

Admittedly, there are many words, which now do seem very strange:

“They called it ‘manna’, for they wist not what it was.” (Ex 16:15),

“He hath holpen his servant, Israel...” (Lk 1:54),

“The wind bloweth where it listeth...” (Jn 3:8).

How, then, should we choose a version of The Bible for the child of the 21st century to learn to read? The choice is seemingly endless. It certainly took us a long time – far too long - to find which translation and edition we thought would be right to give our grandchildren. The one we eventually came down in favour of is the International Children’s Bible, (ICB).

I must confess that, when I first heard of it, I dismissed it with the thought that it would be a paraphrase of another version – New International Version (NIV), perhaps. I was wrong. It states in its preface that it is, *“the only translation solely for children from the original Hebrew and Greek texts. This is the first time that a translation of God’s Word has been specifically prepared for children.”* Sentences are kept short and use appropriate vocabulary for children.

Why am I telling you all this? So far, so good! It all sounds excellent. But, from the Swedenborgian point of view, there is a big snag. The translators have done a very thorough job and translated everything, including the dimensions, weights and measures into metric (SI) units. It is not the units that matter as much as the numbers, which necessarily go with them. Swedenborg emphasises the importance of numbers in the literal sense of the Word and that numbers are to do with the quality of a thing.

Here are three examples.

The dimensions of Noah’s ark are translated as, *“140 metres long, 23 metres wide and 13.5 metres high”*, rather than 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide and 30 cubits high. (Gen 6:15) Swedenborg tells us, *“It is bound to seem strange and very far-fetched to everybody that these details have this meaning; that is to say, that the numbers three hundred, fifty and thirty mean remnants, and in particular that they were few.”* (AC 647)

The quantity of manna to be collected each day is stated as, *“about 2 litres for every person in your family”*, rather than 1 omer for every person in your family. (Ex 16:16) The following verses make it quite clear that when the manna was

measured by the omer – 1 each, - each person received exactly the right amount, without there being any approximation or “*about 2*”.

Goliath is said to have been, “*nearly 3 metres tall*”, rather than 6 cubits and a span tall. (1 Sam 17:4) The point is not that Goliath’s height was nearly 3 (metres) but that it fell well short of being 7 (cubits).

I am not trying to put anybody off using the ICB; I am simply trying to add a health warning. For any readers, who are interested, I have attempted to tabulate every reference to weights and measures in the Word and, using the same phraseology and sentence construction as the ICB, to revert to the numbers and units of the original text. This separate listing is by no means an “E-Read”; it is purely a reference document, listing something approaching 300 texts, with their references. Copies may be obtained here:

https://www.generalconference.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/eread_weights.pdf

If anyone notices a text missing from the list, I should be pleased to know and to correct the omission. (I found the relevant footnotes, in the NIV (1979 edition), invaluable in my search.)