

*Saul hath slain his thousands,
and David his ten thousands*¹

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Abstract

Idioms using thousand/ten thousand may either convey a tone of contest and rivalry (as in Samuel I, 18: 7), or serve as an innocuous literary device, akin to parallelisms. This essay provides examples of both types, ranging from their use in Ugaritic tablets to contemporary literature.

In Franz Kafka's depiction of the life-and-death struggle between Georg and his father (inevitably lost by Georg), the father boasts of his connection with Georg's friend, claiming that the latter has far more information than the son does: "He knows everything a thousand times better!" he cried. "Ten thousand times!" said Georg, to make fun of his father..." (Kafka, 1983, p. 87). One cannot help but recognize in this turn of speech the women's song in the *Book of Samuel I*: "Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (18:7). Kafka's use of a biblical source need not surprise us; many have commented on his broad knowledge of, and interest in Judaism, and on his use of motifs from the Hebrew Bible (see, *inter alia*, Koelb, 1988; Wasserman, 1997).

Many others have employed the 1,000–10,000 formula. Consider, for instance, the following two quotes:

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* I wrote this article while on a sabbatical leave at the University of Warwick, Department of Psychology.

1. A brief version of this article has appeared in *Notes on Contemporary Literature*.

"...not only Northern dead leavening Southern soil -- thousands, aye tens of thousands, of Southerners crumble to-day in Northern earth... we see, and ages yet may see, on monuments and gravestones, singly or in masses, to thousands or tens of thousands, the significant word UNKNOWN", wrote Walt Whitman of the American Civil War (in "Specimen Days", 1977, p. 482). Over a century later Rendell (1990) used the same expression: "The house... was one of those semi-detached villas which sprang up during the thirties in their thousands, in their tens of thousands". (p. 257). Now compare these two examples of the 1,000–10,000 idiom with the use Kafka made of it. While these two instances seem like innocuous figures of speech, Kafka's use of it suggests an atmosphere of contest and mockery. In the following I shall trace the development of the 1,000-10,000 formula, and attempt to distinguish between its two different uses.

I find its first use in Ugaritic cuneiform tablets struck around 1200 B.C.E. Two instances of the parallelism, apparently much liked by the ancients, run as follows (in Gordon, 1965, I, pp. 28-29):

- He casts silver by thousands/ Gold he casts by myriads...
- By the thousand acres/ Yea myriad hectares...

To appreciate the poetical term *myriad*,² chosen by the translator, one has to refer to the original Ugaritic *rbt*, which, akin to its Hebrew cognate *revava*, literally means *ten thousand*.³

Following the Ugaritic tablets, the formula next appears about nine times in the Hebrew Bible (in Hebrew in *Deuteronomy* 32:30 and 33:17, *Samuel I* 18:7, 21:12 and 29:5, *Psalms* 91:7 and 144:13, *Micah* 6:7, and in Aramaic in *Daniel* 7:10), in books dating approximately from the 9th to the 2nd centuries B.C.E. I have already quoted above the most well-known of these, found three times in *Samuel I*, comparing Saul's conquests to those of David. Most exegesists agree that the women singing this verse foretell David's eventual supremacy over Saul, the reigning king.⁴ The remaining biblical cases constitute Ugaritic-type parallelisms,

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2. "The Greek *myrioi* meant countless, before it meant ten thousand", wrote Crumpacker (2007, p. 240). This usage, current to this day, has not stopped Pickering (2008) from writing: "Milton's reasons [for not stooping to profane love] are actually *myriad*, ranging from professional self-interest to natural disposition..."; then he goes on to list five (!) such reasons.
 3. Ten thousand, meaning an undefined large quantity, has wide popularity. It appears in the Jewish Bible and in Christian liturgy, in Shakespeare, in Marlowe and in Moliere, in Kafka and in Rushdie, in ancient Greece and in China. Its current use extends to such different realms as Land of 10,000 Lakes (nickname for the state of Minnesota), Land of 10,000 Trails in West Tennessee and West Kentucky, Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge in Florida, Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes in Alaska, the Ten Thousand Villages fair trade organization in North America, Tempel der zehn tausend Buddhas, Dix Mille matins – an album by Daniel Boucher, Dix Mille ans encore – by Nana Mouskouri, Dix Mille bulles bleues – by Dalida, and many more.
 4. Yet some authorities disagree whether this verse (and, by analogy, all other instances of the 1,000-10,000 formula) indeed represents a contest-like comparison, or constitutes a parallelism, much liked by the ancients; see Barney, 1995, quoting Watters and Gevirtz. If the latter view has validity, then 1,000-10,000 falls into the

such as: "A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand" (*Psalms*, 91: 7), or "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil?" (*Micah* 6:7).

From the Jewish Bible I shall move, for the sake of illustration, to Shakespeare, in whose plays the 1,000-10,000 expression appears several times, always as a parallelism (with the possible exception of the last one, below):

- A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich (*Merchant of Venice* Act 3, Scene 2).
- Methought I saw a thousand fearful wrecks; / Ten thousand men that fishes gnaw'd upon; (*Richard III* Act 1, Scene 4).
- Tut, I have done a thousand dreadful things/ As willingly as one would kill a fly, / And nothing grieves me heartily indeed / but that I cannot do ten thousand more. (*Titus Andronicus* 5:1).

Before reaching (relatively) modern instances, I must mention three far-Eastern uses of the formula under discussion:

- The crane on the back of the tortoise often appears among the ancient symbols of Vietnam, dating back perhaps to the 23rd century, B.C.E. According to a traditional interpretation of the symbol, the crane lives one thousand years and the tortoise ten thousand, thus expressing the blessing: "May you be remembered for one thousand years, and may your cult endure for ten thousand years!" (Thai Van Kiem et al., 1969, pp. 68-72.).
- A Chinese expression, *qian bian wan hua* or "One Thousand Changes and Ten Thousand Transformations", suggests that everything undergoes unending changes⁵ (SYL, 2005).
- While both of these examples favor the parallelism view of the 1,000- 10,000 formula, the following one reinforces its contest-like interpretation: In later Imperial history (starting about the 12th century C. E.) people addressed only the Chinese emperor with the blessing "Ten thousand years!" This restriction caused the adoption of a "one thousand years!" salutation by members of the 15th century Joseon dynasty in Korea, to declare their deference to the emperor (Wikipedia, 2008).

The next step in this chronology finds Joseph Smith, Jr. using the 1,000-10,000 parallelism in several places in the *Book of Mormon* (*Alma* 3:26 & 60:22, 3rd *Nephi* 3:22 and 4:21, and

same category as, inter alia, the 7 – 77 of Genesis 4:24, or even the 7 – 8 of Micah 5:5 and the 3 – 4 that appears several times in Amos 2. Our interpretation matters little: Saul certainly understood this verse as pejorative (see the next verse and the further unfolding of events in Samuel I; the two further appearances of this line lend themselves better to such a reading than to a simple parallelism).

5. Though I have seen it freely translated also as "A woman's heart is fickle."

Helaman 3:24–26). All of these have the form “thousands” and “tens of thousands”; the similarity to language used in the Hebrew Bible (see above) seems obvious. Smith showed the world his alleged translation of an ancient work into English in 1830.

And now to some contemporary uses. The 1,000-10,000 formula does not appear only in Whitman's and Rendell's above quoted lines, but has considerable popularity in a variety of other sources, as well. The following quotes will show the diversity of these:

- Describing the "memory holes" for the disposal of waste paper, Orwell (1985) wrote that "[S]imilar slits existed in thousands or tens of thousands throughout the building..." (p. 37).
- In his famous "Paper Tiger" speech, delivered in 1958, Mao Tse Tung addressed his audience: "Have people not seen or heard about these facts? There have indeed been thousands and tens of thousands of them! Thousands and tens of thousands!" (Mao Tse Tung, 1990).
- Marguerite Yourcenar's story, "How Wang-Fo Was Saved", (possibly based on an old Chinese legend; pp. 11-27 in Yourcenar, 1963), refers to an imaginary, mystical road, "le chemin des Mille Courbes et des Dix Mille Couleurs" (p. 21).
- This story by Yourcenar gave the name for David Eagle & Hope Lee's 1997 project (a collaborative multimedia concert): "One thousand curves, ten thousand colors".

All of these last cited examples illustrate the idiomatic use of this exaggerative parallelism, where either part alone, and both together, signify an indefinitely large quantity of the objects mentioned. This leaves Kafka's expression in *The Judgment*, indicating a bitter contest, practically unparalleled.

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