

MEANING of the NUMBER SEVEN

23rd Degree Essay

College of the Consistory

Submitted by

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July 20, 2009

Introduction

Most of what is written here simply reflects my personal view. There is no known substantiation for the earliest use of seven to represent perfection or, more specifically, for the ancients specializing that count. After our development of the subject reaches the historic period (around 3,000 B.C.), citations to the work of others are included.

Background

Seven became symbolic of perfection for western civilization long, long ago. The role of seven to symbolize perfection is perhaps best known from its use in the Holy Bible, specifically from the seven days for creation cited in Genesis, the seven spirits of God identified in Isaiah and the many examples presented in the Book of Revelation. Of course there are more recent examples of seven's symbolic representation of perfection; these are left for enumeration by others, and instead we begin our investigation several millennia before the Biblical period.

Our hypothesis is that seven is symbolic of perfection. The perfection is not derived from the number itself, or from any of its numeric properties ($4+3$, $\sqrt{49}$, etc). Instead seven has become synonymous with perfection by its count (1, 2, 3, etc). What was being counted? When did this all come about?

Of all the things in our world, on earth and in the skies, there is one set of items that has existed since creation, has been observable by all and that is truly unique (individually and in collection). The set of objects is made up of the seven luminaries; the luminaries known to the earliest members of the human race. The seven luminaries are the sun and moon, and the five planets nearest earth: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn.

We have no way of knowing what these most ancient members of our race were able to discern about the luminaries or when nor how they developed a capacity to preserve their knowledge beyond a single lifespan. Surely matters relating to survival and reproduction were given considerable attention and were likely to have been some of the first things passed from father to son, thereby transcending more than a single generation. A brief review of what was visible to those most ancient members of our race and some speculations concerning their interpretations is in order.

The Ancients' Skies

The stars appeared fixed among themselves, surrounding and well above the earth. Some stars were bright and others dim and all seemed to have been arranged in patterns (constellations) depicting various earthly objects. The depictions were coarse like stick figures and may have required some imagination on the part of the observer. The fixed stars in their patterns revolved around the earth once each day and once each year. Seven luminous objects moved about between the earth and the stars; their motions were observed against the stellar background.

Like the stars, the brightest luminary also revolved around the earth once each day; an observation that served to define the day; and, the pathway the sun followed over the celestial sphere was always the same (the ecliptic). Twelve distinct star patterns (the zodiac) enclosed the pathway of the sun. The twelve were assigned equal widths and the sun was observed to spend thirty days crossing each; thus, the month was defined. The sun displayed two types of motion: a daily and an annual revolution about the earth, both being from east to west.

Although the sun and the stars revolved around the earth in the same times: once each day and once each year, it gradually became apparent that the motions of the sun and the stars did not take exactly the same amount of time. For some unknown reason the year of the sun contained one more day than the year of the stars. In fact each day the pattern of the stars advanced 4 minutes in time (1° in space) with respect to the sun. These differences were known, quantified and recorded by the first civilization, the Sumerians, more than 5,000 years ago. The Sumerians, who developed the first written language, recorded their knowledge of astronomy – a knowledge gained long before their written language was developed.

The second brightest luminary moved in a more complex fashion and displayed a variety of shapes (phases) in a well ordered series which repeated itself about every 28 days. The repetition was precise enough to measure time, although the time measured didn't agree exactly with that measured by the sun. The moon was thought to gradually gain its light from the sun. When the moon was new it had no light. Each day thereafter it gained more light until after 14 days it was full and could hold no more. Then the light was released, little by little until after another 14 days it was empty again.

Mercury and Venus moved about the earth in 88 and 224 days, respectively. And, these two always remained fairly near the sun. Mars, Jupiter and Saturn also revolved around the earth but took much longer to do so (1.88 yrs, 11.86 yrs and 29.46 yrs, respectively). The paths of these three planets were very different from those of the other luminaries – these three moved back and forth, first to the west then to the east, and then again to the west. The repeating pattern was followed throughout the time it took for each planet to revolve around the earth. Each planet was observed to move a little more to the east than it did to the west, accounting for its eventual revolution west to east around the earth.

The seven luminaries were each unique in their motions as displayed against the background stars. They also were unique in their brightness and all outshined the brightest stars. And there was another interesting matter. Because the luminaries all moved at different speeds there were times when they seemed to touch each other. The times of their rising and setting were quite different, and there were occasions when some or all of them were below the visible horizon altogether. The sun was seen only during the day and the planets only at night. The moon however was sometimes seen in both. The sun cast shadows by day and the moon cast shadows at night. And, Venus on moonless nights was sometimes seen to cast faint shadows on surfaces of sand and snow. The seven luminaries also displayed a variety of colors and hues.

The luminaries were unlike anything else. These seven objects were really different - very special indeed. Some began to think that the luminaries had minds of their own – perhaps they were more than just objects? Not only did the luminaries seem to have minds of their own, but they also seemed to influence the earth itself and human beings. The sun heated the earth and brought the seasons. The phases of the moon were related to the rise and fall of the sea, that deep and vast sea. And, there were similarities in the time required between successive full moons and the bodily cycle of half the human population. Another curious thing was that some crops seemed to produce more if they were planted at the right phase of the moon, just as fish and wild game were easier to take on one phase than another. It seemed a virtual certainty that the luminaries influenced human events – they were definitely more than just objects. One had to wonder exactly where each luminary was placed at the time of creation, and what might be in store if the seven were ever to regain that particular alignment.

The seven luminaries were determined to be important to human life – no, they were vital to human life. They had been created to be so; and it would be foolish not to pay attention to that fact, and to live accordingly. Another certainty was that each of the seven was very different, and each of the seven was necessary. If six or eight would have worked then six or eight would have been created – no, seven was exactly what was needed, no more and no less.

Now we pass into the historic period, to a time of the more recent ancients who first developed a written language, and for which we have unearthed enormous amounts of credible and sufficient evidence attesting to its existence and thorough use, not only in its region of origin but as an international language used throughout the eastern Mediterranean and mid-east continuously for three millennia.

The Early History of Seven

Given that seven luminaries were created to oversee the earth and its humans, it seemed reasonable that an equal number may have been involved in creation itself; if not, certainly one could expect that seven were engaged in the teaching and development of human beings.

The most ancient myths are attributed to the Sumerians, and concern the antediluvian appearance of a succession of seven extraordinary sea monsters (Bottero, 1992, p.247, citing the ancient author, Berossos.) The sea monsters appeared to these earliest people – a people who, according to Berossos, were living an irreligious life similar to that of animals in Chaldea (Sumeria) at the head of the ancient Persian Gulf. Berossos describes the first of the seven monsters as having two heads, the body of a fish and feet like a man. The monster, having the name Oannes, lived among the people without eating and taught them: writing, science and technology of all types, the foundation of cities, the building of temples, jurisprudence, geometry, the cultivation of grains and how to harvest fruit. Each day the monster returned to the sea at sunset to pass the night.

Many other matters relating to the need for seven to achieve perfection can be found in the early literature. A wonderful example was written by Cicero during the first century B.C. and concerns the sounds made by the seven luminaries. The tone of each was different and changed in an orderly way with the increasing distance of each luminary from the earth. The moon produced the lowest tone and Saturn the highest. The ancients knew that all objects moving through the atmosphere produced sounds. Obvious examples included arrows in flight, balls swung on strings and the flapping of birds' wings. Certainly something as large as the luminaries, and moving as rapidly as they did, would make a sound. Of course, the people did not actually hear these sounds; but that was to be expected. Cicero explained this by analogy. He pointed out that the great sounds of the water at the cataracts of the Nile, so loud to visitors, are not noticed at all by the local population, for they have become used to it. And so it was with the music of the spheres - sounds heard only by the newborn.

Two examples of the association of seven with perfection and the luminaries are the Book of Revelation and Antiquities of the Jews, both written during first century A.D.

The Book of Revelation and the Book of Genesis are tied, and well ahead of all the other writings of the Holy Bible, in their repeated use of the word, seven. According to Amstutz (2008, p.166) John of Patmos wrote the Book of Revelation at the end of A.D. 69, seventy some years after the birth of Jesus. The often quoted use of seven by John of Patmos to symbolize perfection will not be repeated; instead we focus our attention on the finding by John of Patmos of the planet Uranus. For with the discovery of Uranus came what is very likely the most wonderful example of seven as a symbol of perfection in all of the natural world. The orbit of Uranus requires 84.011 years; thus the nominal time for the planet to cross each sign of the zodiac is 7 years (7 years and 8 hours, exactly). The repeated use of seven in the Book of Revelation was a heralding by the author of the excellence produced at creation for man to observe and come to understand.

A further example testifying to the symbolism of seven with perfection and the luminaries was written at the close of the first century. This example was provided by Flavius Josephus when describing the menorah in the Temple in Jerusalem: "... and spread itself into as many branches as there are planets, including the sun among them. It terminated in seven heads, in one row, all standing parallel to one another; and these branches carried seven lamps, one by one, in imitation of the planets."

Conclusion

Mankind's has preserved his first thoughts of the importance of the seven luminaries and their being the natural measure of perfection, in more ways than one. The most obvious being the naming and numbering of the days of the week: Saturday, Sunday, Monday, ...). The tradition of the seven day week may be traced back easily beyond two millennia, well into the time of the ancients.

References

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