

Witney Way Advent 2014

SEVEN – UP

If you were asked to choose a number between one and ten, the number most often chosen would be seven. In many ancient civilisations, seven was the name given to what we now call Earth. To the Chinese, it symbolises wisdom. In the West too, seven represents wisdom, but also truth. Wiccan spirituality and New Age philosophy hold seven to be a divinely imbued number; hence, in the Harry Potter stories, seven is the most powerfully magic number.

3000 years before Jesus' birth, the Babylonians used a mathematical system based on 60; seven is a prime number, and also the first number which does not divide evenly into 60; hence neither will it divide equally into 360 (the number of degrees in a circle) so the circle cannot be broken, therefore seven was regarded as otherworldly. The Greeks used to chant the seven vowels of their language, as an incantation. In Greek mythology, the Pleiades were the seven daughters of the titan Atlas; they are to be found in the night sky as the brightest cluster of stars in the constellation of Taurus; but probably more easily recognised, are the seven brightest stars in the constellation Ursa Major, known as The Plough. The title or phrase Seven Sisters, is used all around the world, for public houses, cliffs, mountains, movie studios, law firms, skyscrapers ...

There are seven hills in Constantinople, and in Rome too, where there are also seven fountains; we have a fizzy drink called "7-up", there are seven colours of the rainbow; seven notes of the Western musical scale; in Britain, cats are said to have nine lives, but in many countries they only have seven; there were seven Wonders of the Ancient World; there are seven modern Liberal Arts; there were Seven Brides for Seven Brothers; Snow White had Seven Dwarfs; there was The Magnificent Seven – an update of the Seven Samurai, and Marilyn Monroe had The Seven Year Itch! In fact, Amazon lists 40 movies with seven in their titles. In 2004, Tony Banks, the keyboard player with the rock group Genesis, composed a classical work entitled, "Seven – A Suite for Orchestra."

The seventh son of a seventh son, is reputed to possess mystical powers, either from God, the gods, or indeed from Satan; in many countries of South America, he would be deemed to be a werewolf. We can sail the seven seas, or stride the seven continents in our seven league boots. The Bard lists The Seven Ages of Man as, the mewling, puking infant, the whining schoolboy, the sighing lover, the honourable soldier, comfortable middle age, shrinking old age, and the return to childhood. The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, was a group of young Christian men who were entombed in a cave, persecuted by - or perhaps

punished by - the Roman emperor Decius, around 250CE. Tradition has it that they awoke 300 years later under the now Christian rule of Theodosius 11, and lived happy ever after!

Now seven is used in The Bible as a representation of perfection. As we read in the Book of Genesis, God created the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land, *“And God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it”* (Genesis 2:3); and again in Genesis (4:15) the Lord said that anyone who kills Cain, *“... will suffer vengeance seven times over.”* In celebration of The Passover we read, *“Unleavened bread shall be eaten seven days ...”* (Exodus 13:7) In the sin-offering, the appointed priest, *“... shall sprinkle the blood seven times before the Lord.”* (Leviticus 4:6) And of course we all know the story of Joshua and the Battle of Jericho, *“Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams’ horns before the ark; and the seventh day ye shall compass the city seven times ... so the people shouted, and the priests blew with the trumpets ... and the wall fell down flat.”* (Joshua 6: 4, 20) Then there is Salome, daughter of Herodias, who was married to King Herod Antipas, it was she – Salome that is, not Herodias! - who performed the notorious Dance of the Seven Veils – except that she never did! (read carefully Mark 6:22 - It is pure spin, added much later, reflecting the story of the Babylonian fertility goddess Ishtar, visiting her sister in the Underworld; to do so she had to pass through seven gates, and at each she had to shed one garment until she was naked, and was imprisoned by her sister Ereshkigal.)

There are in fact over 150 occasions in The Bible, where the word seven is used; seven years of plenty and seven years of famine; Pharaoh’s dreams of seven fat oxen, seven ears of corn; candlesticks with seven branches, (Menorah); *“... seven things are an abomination to the Lord”* (Proverbs 6:16), and there were seven pillars of the House of Wisdom (Proverbs 9:1). In the Gospel According to Matthew (15:34) there were seven loaves – and a few small fishes. Peter asked Jesus if he should forgive those who sinned against him seven times? (Matthew 18:21); Jesus uttered seven last words, or sayings, before his death on the cross. In the Acts of the Apostles (6:3), they asked the multitude of disciples to find, *“... seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.”* The Book of Revelations, talks of seven churches, seven spirits, seven stars, seven lamps, seven angels, seven plagues; the list goes on. In fact the Romans regarded Judaism sufficiently highly, to change their eight day week to a seven day week.

Traditionally in the Catholic Church’s teaching of the Queenship of Mary, there are seven stars in the Crown of Immortality, used in the logo of Our Lady of the Angels, signifying the Seven Joys of Mary, the Seven Sorrows of

Mary, the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy, as well as the Seven Virtues, and the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit.

So, when you are replete with Christmas fare and mulled wine, in addition to listing the above, you could also try to find the Seven *Spiritual Acts* of Mercy, the Seven Sacraments*, Oh, and of course, the Seven Deadly Sins – did you know there used to be nine?

Amen (Seven-fold – Sir John Stainer 1840-1901)

* (In 1521, 12 years into his reign, King Henry V111, a devout Catholic, wrote "Assertio", his defence of Papal Supremacy and of The Seven Sacraments. For this he was granted the title, "Defender of the Faith", by a grateful Pope Leo X.)

A very blessed Christ-Mass.

Howard Brayton