



Seventeen

In the story of the Universal Deluge it is said: “In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened.” ⁽¹⁾ Five months later, according to the Book of Genesis, on the seventeenth day of the seventh month, the ark rested upon Ararat.

In Egyptian religious belief Osiris was drowned “on the seventeenth day of the month Athyr.” ⁽²⁾ The fast for Tammuz, commemorating his descent into the netherworld, began on the seventeenth of the month named for him. ⁽³⁾ Although the similarity of the Babylonian and Biblical versions of the story of the Deluge was repeatedly stressed, the significance of the number seventeen in the story of Tammuz in relation to the same number in the book of Genesis was not emphasized, or even noticed.

The feast of Saturnalia began “always on the 17th of December” and with time, in imperial Rome, when it was celebrated for three consecutive days, it began on the fifteenth and continued for two more days, until the seventeenth. ⁽⁴⁾

The connection between the number seventeen and the Deluge is thus not confined to the Biblical, Babylonian, and Egyptian sources—we meet it also in Roman beliefs and practices. The significance of the number seventeen in the mystery plays related to Osiris’ drowning and in the festivities of Saturnalia is an indication that these memorials were related to the Deluge.

References

1. Genesis 7:11.
2. Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, ch. 13; cf. also ch. 42. [The coincidence of the Biblical date of the beginning of the Deluge with the date of Osiris’ disappearance, or drowning, was noted by the eighteenth-century scholar Jacob Bryant, who claimed, in addition, that in both accounts the month was the second after the autumn equinox (*A New System or An Analysis of Ancient Mythology*, second edition [London, 1775], p. 334. Bryant also believed that “in this history of Osiris we have a memorial of the Patriarch and the Deluge” (*ibid.*, p. 334, n. 76). The identity of the two dates has been noted by several other authors, among them George St. Clair. See his *Creation Records Discovered in Egypt* (London, 1898), p. 437. On the significance of the date seventeen in Egypt, cf. Griffiths, *Plutarch’s De Iside et Osiride*, p. 312. Cf. H. E. Winlock, “Origin of the Ancient Egyptian Calendar,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 83 (1940), p. 456 n.: “Throughout Coptic and Arab times at least, the night of June seventeenth was celebrated as ‘the night of the Drop’ when it was believed that a miraculous drop fell into the Nile, causing it to rise.”].
3. [According to Langdon, “In Babylonia the god Tammuz was said to have descended to the lower world on the 18th of Tammuz and to have risen on the 28th of Kislev (December).” (*Babylonian Menologies and the Semitic Calendars* [London, 1935], p. 121).

Originally the date had been the seventeenth; but when “the reckoning of time was altered to the extent of making the day begin with sunrise instead of with the approach of night” (M. Jastrow, *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria* [Boston, 1898], p. 78), the 18th day of the month began about twelve hours earlier and encroached upon the daylight hours of the seventeenth day, which were now counted as part of the eighteenth. According to rabbinical sources, the end of the 40 days of rain mentioned in the Genesis account came on the 27th of Kislew—the very same day as the 28th of Kislev in the Babylonian reckoning, when Tammuz is said to have risen.].

4. [Macrobius, *Saturnalia* I. 10. 2f. Cf. Cicero, *Ad Atticum* 13. 52. 1.]

