

CHAPTER 12

The Sunday of Sun Worship

IT has been shown in this treatise that since the middle of the first century before Christ there was in use among the Romans an astrological week of seven days named after the planetary gods. In that week there was one day over which the Sun was supposed to preside as lord, and which was regarded as sacred to the Sun-god. It was called *dies Solis*, “the day of the Sun.” Moreover, because Sun worship was so popular throughout the Roman Empire in the first centuries of the Christian Era, it is only reasonable to suppose that Sun worshipers would regard the day of the Sun as the most sacred of the seven days of the planetary week.

Modern Authorities Concur

That Sunday was the sacred day of Mithra, the Invincible Sun, is a fact known and taught by many outstanding authorities of modern times.¹ For example, a well-known Roman Catholic work, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, not only states that in Mithraism “the seven days of the week were dedicated to the planets,” but also declares, “Sunday was kept holy in honor of Mithra.”²

¹ See C. P. Bollman, *Sunday—Origin of Its Observance in the Christian Church*.

² *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10, pp. 403, 404 art. “Mithraism.”

And the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* mentions that “the sanctification of Sunday and of the 25th of December” was a special feature of Mithraism, and says: “Each day of the week was marked by the adoration of a special planet, the Sun being the most sacred of all.”³

³ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., Vol. 15, pp. 620, 621, art. “Mithras.”

Comparing Mithraism and Christianity, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* affirms, “Both regarded Sunday as sacred.” It also remarks: “So, too, the Sun, Moon, and planets were objects of regard. Babylonian influence wove into Mithraism its theories of the control by each of the planets of one day in the week.”⁴

⁴ *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 7, pp. 419, 421, art. “Mithra, Mithraism.”

And *Chambers’s Encyclopaedia* notes: “Parallels to Christianity in Mithraic legend, in Mithraic ceremony, and in Mithraic belief will have been apparent, and other resemblances, as the sanctification of Sunday and of the 25th of December, the birthday of Mithra, might be cited.”⁵

⁵ *Chambers’s Encyclopaedia*, 1926 ed., Vol. 7, p. 241, art. “Mithra.”

The Testimony of Franz Cumont

Franz Cumont is considered by scholars a great authority on the subject of Mithraism. He has repeatedly declared that in this cult Sunday was the sacred day of the worship of the Sun. Speaking of the Mithraic religion, he says: “Each day of the week, the planet to which the day was sacred was invoked in a fixed spot in the crypt; and Sunday, over which the Sun presided, was especially holy.”⁶

⁶ F. Cumont, *Mysteries of Mithra*, p. 167.

He goes as far as to declare: “The pre-eminence assigned to the *dies Solis* [the day of the Sun] also certainly contributed to the general recognition of Sunday as a holiday. This is connected with a more important fact, namely, the adoption of the week by all the European nations. We have seen that in the astrological system each day was sacred to a planet. It is probable that the worshiper prayed to the presiding star of each day. We still possess the text of these prayers addressed to the planets in the East as in the West. We have some in Greek, but of a late date, and the most curious are those of the pagans of Harran, near Edessa, which an Arabic writer has transmitted to us.”⁷

⁷ F. Cumont, *Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans*, p. 163.

He says, too, that “the *dies Solis* was evidently the most sacred of the week for the faithful of Mithra and, like the Christians, they had to keep the Sunday holy and not the Sabbath.”⁸

⁸ F. Cumont, *Textes et Monuments Figurés Relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra*, Vol. 1, p. 119.

Certainly our study of the pagan planetary week confirms the following opinion by Doctor Cumont: “It is not to be doubted that the diffusion of the Iranian mysteries has had a considerable part in the general adoption, by the pagans, of the week with the Sunday as a holy day. The names which we employ, unawares, for the other six days, came into use at the same time that Mithraism won its followers in the provinces in the West, and one is not rash in establishing a relation of coincidence between its triumph and that concomitant phenomenon.”⁹

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

It seems as if some spiritual genius having control over the pagan world had so ordered things that the heathen planetary week should be introduced just at the right time for the most popular Sun cult of all ages to come along and exalt the day of the Sun as a day above and more sacred than all the rest. Surely this was not accidental.

Doctor Cumont says again: “Each of the planetary bodies presided over a day of the week.”¹⁰ Also: “Like the latter [the Christians], they [the Mithraists] also held Sunday sacred, and celebrated the birth of the Sun on the 25th of December.”¹¹

¹⁰ F. Cumont, *Mysteries of Mithra*, p. 120.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

He tells us that the crypt in which the Mithraists worshiped was regarded as a symbol of the universe, and mentions, in connection with their ceremonies, “the seven planets, which presided over the days of the week, and which were the object of a very special worship.”¹² And again: “He [the worshiper] should also recite the traditional prayers, for example, in honor of the planets on their sacred days, and carry out the sacrifices, of which the character seems to have been very variable.”¹³

¹² F. Cumont, *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines*, Vol. 3, part 2, p. 1952, art. “Mithra.”

¹³ *Ibid.*

All of this agrees very well with the spiritist message given by the oracle of Apollo, which said: “Invoke Mercury, and the Sun in like manner on the day of the Sun, and the Moon when her day comes, and Saturn also, and Venus in succession, with unuttered prayers.”¹⁴ Apollo not only was a Sun-god, but was esteemed as the god of prophecy by the pagans.

¹⁴ Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, book 5. chap. 14, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 21, col. 348, author’s translation.

Prayer to the planets on their respective days was a part of the worship of the heavenly bodies. It may seem somewhat contradictory to say that they should be *invoked* with *unuttered* prayers. However, Tertullian has explained, as we shall note, that in praying to the heavenly bodies the heathen did not utter their prayers aloud, but merely moved their lips in silent supplication in the direction of the deity addressed. Those who have traveled widely have observed that a similar practice in the recitation of prayers is followed by the devotees of the images venerated in Roman Catholic churches.

Mithraism and Planet Worship

It was probably after the Persian conquest of Babylon in the sixth century that the Mithraic cult assimilated the astrological elements of the Chaldean star worship, and the Sun was assigned the place of pre-eminence among the planetary gods.

In a note of comment on the worship of Mithra, M. Guizot, the French scholar, says that in the Persian religion “Mithra is the first of the genii, or *jzeds*, created by Ormuzd; it is he who watches over all nature...the Chaldeans appear to have assigned him a higher rank than the Persians. It is he who bestows upon the earth the light of the Sun. The Sun, named Khor (brightness), is thus an inferior genius, who, with many other genii, bears a part in the functions of Mithra. These assistant genii to another genius are called his *kamkars*; but in the *Zendavesta* they are never confounded. On the days sacred to a particular genius, the Persian ought to recite, not only the prayers addressed to him, but those also which are addressed to his *kamkars*; thus the hymn or *iescht* of Mithra is recited on the day of the Sun (Khor) and vice versa¹⁵

¹⁵ M. Guizot in a footnote to Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 1, chap. 8, pp. 233, 234.

A Mithraic Chapel in Ostia

It has already been stated that the Mithraist stood in a fixed or determined spot to worship a given planet on its day. A notable example of this is seen in the mosaic pavement of a mithraeum uncovered in Ostia, near Rome. In the floor may be seen the seven semicircles, one for each god, indicating the spots where the worshiper should stand to render his devotions. Guido Caiza, the Italian archaeologist in charge of the excavations at Ostia, is the author of this description:

“In the mosaic pavement are seen seven semicircles corresponding to the seven celestial spheres, and a sacrificial knife [is seen] lying beside a hole which was perhaps used for the blood of the victim or for a strange ceremony of initiation. The mosaic of the vertical walls of the podia [elevated platforms] opposite the entrance has two torchbearers with flaming torches and in Oriental costume; and on the sides, along the corridor [there appear], on the left: the Moon, Mercury, and Jupiter; and on the right: Mars, Venus and Saturn—representing the six planets from which have been taken the names of the days of the week; the last day, the *dies domini Mithrae* [the day of the Lord Mithra], was represented by a bas-relief at the end [of the corridor] with Mithra stabbing the bull. In its place there stands a plaster paris copy of the relief which is now in the Vatican, and which was perhaps taken from here. On the thick front of the podia, almost above the middle, are carved two small, square, vaulted niches. On the projecting ledge of the mosaic beneath the podia are depicted the signs of the zodiac. At the right are those of the winter: the Balance, the Scorpion, the Archer, the Goat and the Water-Carrier [the Fishes]; at the left are those of the summer: the Ram, the Bull, the Twins, the Crab, the Lion, and the Virgin.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Guido Caiza *Ostia—Guida Storico-Monumentale*, pp. 117, 118. See also Karl Baedeker, *Central Italy and Rome*, 15th ed., p. 492; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., Vol. 16, p. 958, art. “Ostia”; *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 2, p. 181.



This bas-relief of white marble, discovered at Boulogne, France, shows Mithra, the popular Romanized Sun-god of Persia, slaying the bull. Above him are seen figures of the planetary gods (right to left) as follows: Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Sun. (See Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, p. 151, Fig. 37. The photo-engraving and permission to use it have been supplied by the Open Court Publishing Co., Chicago, Illinois.)

L. Paschetto, who has made drawings of the planetary gods of this Mithraic chapel, describes them thus:

“The planets are represented on the two sides of the central corridor, under the vertical walls of the podia. Each of the deities is standing upright with a black background representing a niche or

tiny chapel. There are seen in order at the left: The Moon with her brow adorned with a lunar crescent, and holding in her right hand an arrow, and in the other an oval object which may be an offering cup. Next is Mercury with a short staff (the rod mentioned by Homer), a primitive form of wand, which in our drawing is added to that. Then follows Jupiter with the scepter and the lightning. To the right and in front of the other figures, are found in order: Mars with his helmet and breastplate, staying himself upon a lance and holding a shield. Venus is naked down to the waist, and has a veil fluttering about her head. And the sixth personage is bearded and has a cape pulled over his mantle. His attributes are lacking because the mosaic is in bad condition, but it cannot be doubted that it is Saturn.”¹⁷

¹⁷ L. Pastheto, “Ostia: Colonia Romana,” in *Dissertazioni della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia*, Series 2, Vol. 10, part 2. See also F. Cumont, *Textes et Monuments Figurés Relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra*, Vol. 2, pp. 244, 24k, No. 84.

Considerable speculation has been made concerning the peculiar arrangement of the planets in this chapel, for they do not appear in either the order of their supposed revolutions in the heaven or that of the days of the pagan week. However, the Sun (Mithra) does hold in this instance the traditional central position, which is the dominant one.

A Mithraic Bas-Relief

Among the various photographic illustrations presented by Franz Cumont, there appears one which very clearly shows a Mithraic arrangement of the planetary gods in the order of the days of the week. It is a bas-relief of white marble from Boulogne, France, in which Mithra, the Sun-god, is shown stabbing the bull. Above him are seen in a row the seven planetary gods. Here is Doctor Cumont’s description of them:

“Thus upon a marble stone from Boulogne (Mon. 106) the upper border of the grotto is decorated with the busts of the radiant Sun, of bearded Saturn doubtless wearing a veil, of Venus wearing a diadem, of Jupiter Serapis holding a basket, of Mercury with a winged hat on his head, of Mars wearing a helmet, and finally the Moon with a crescent mounted above her brow. The order in which those gods are placed is that of the days of the week over which they presided, but in order to establish the concordance, you must read that symbolic line, not from left to right, but from right to left. That arrangement, which is contrary to what you would expect, perhaps makes allusion to the retrograde movement of the wandering stars, which provoked so much comment in ancient times.”¹⁸

¹⁸ F. Cumont, *Textes et Monuments Figures Relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra*, Vol. 1, p. 114. See also *Mysteries of Mithra*, p. 151, fig. 37.

Read from right to left they are: Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, and Sun.

The Mithraic Sunday in China

A. Wylie, who did considerable research on the antiquity of the week in China, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, became much interested in some Chinese almanacs published at the time of his residence in that country, in which Sunday was designated by the words *mih jih*. When his attention was first called to this matter, he did some research on it. He says: "When at Amoy I procured a copy of the almanac in question, where the *mih jih* was certainly recorded throughout under every Sunday."¹⁹

¹⁹ A. Wylie, "On the Knowledge of a Weekly Sabbath in China," in *The Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal*, June, 1871, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 5.

Thereupon he relates in detail his findings in the study of the matter, and here is the information he gives:

"Turning then to the imperially authorized manual of astrology, *Kin ting hee ke peen fang shoo*, I find the passage in question is a verbatim copy of one of a long series of articles, which were presented in a memorial to the throne in 1740, praying for a thorough revision of the contents of the national almanac. It reads thus:

"In the *she heen shoo*, "Imperial Almanac," the *Fuh-twan*, "suppressed" days, the *Mih* days, and the *Tsae e* "Cutting-out-clothes" days, are all calculated according to the occurrence of the constellations. We find on investigation, that the method of selecting times by the twenty-eight constellations of the zodiac, came from Central Asia. The suppressions depend upon the pairing of the days with the constellations, theoretically similar to the *Seun kung*, "decade blanks," and *Loo kung*, "road blanks," and are consistent with principle. As to the *mih* days, they are marked by the four constellations *Fang*, *Heu*, *Maou*, and *Sing*, which correspond among the seven planets with *Jih*, "the Sun," called in the language of the West, *mih*, the ruler of joyful events; so that in China interments and the opening of mortuary sheds are avoided on those days. Now we find by examination that in Central Asia, the twenty-eight constellations are apportioned in rotation among the seven planets, for registering the days; each day being suitable for certain things and unsuitable for others; entirely different from the customs of China. Merely to adopt the *Mih* day from among these is utterly indefensible. Finally, to say that the thirteen days marked by the constellations *Keo*, *Kang*, *Fang*, *Tow*, *Neti*, *Heu*, *Peih*, *Kwei*, *Low*, *Kwei*, *Chang*, *Yih*, and *Chin*, are suitable for cutting out clothes, has no reason in it; so that both these ought to be rejected.'

"From this passage we see that the '*Mih* day' is actually and literally 'Sun-day,' and we learn also that it was formerly marked in the almanacs issued by the Supreme Board at Peking. Probably the Chin-chew publication is the only almanac that still retains it, and it is remarkable that *it* should continue to publish its condemnation also."²⁰

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 6.

An Explanation

While Mr. Wylie could clearly see that the name *Mih jih* literally meant “Sunday,” and that it came into China from Central Asia, he did not discern its particular place of origin and significance. When he published his report, others saw at once the solution to the mystery. Hence, J. Dudgeon, in an editorial note, remarks:

“It is somewhat strange that the natural origin of the word [*Mih*] should have escaped him [Mr. Wylie], viz., the Persian word *Mitra*, *Mithra*, *Mithras*, for the Sun, as suggested by our ‘facile princeps’ in philology, the Chinese having evidently caught hold of the first syllable of the word, a practice not uncommon in transferring foreign words into the Chinese language. This derivation is so self-evident that it does not require proof. It is evidently the same as ‘*mitra*,’ *M* one of the names of the Sun in Sanscrit. The same root appears in many Persian words.”²¹

²¹ Editorial, *The Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal*, December, 1871, Vol. 4, No. 7, p. 195.

Joseph Edkins, who was associated with Mr. Wylie in other research work in China, also says:

“Some Chinese almanacs call Sunday the day of *Mit*, the Persian ‘Mithras,’ a name for the Sun. *Mit* is spoken of as a *Hwei-hwei* word. This term *Hwei-hwei* is one of the names for the Persian language among the Chinese. It is the word *ouighour*.”²²

The term *Mih* is merely a Chinese transliteration of the Persian name *Mihr* (Mithra). Thus the planetary week, particularly the name of the day of the Sun, spread from Central Asia, perhaps from Persia itself, into China and was used there to the extent that it figured in the Imperial Almanac until the Chinese government in 1740 was asked to purge the calendar of all foreign titles and holydays.

Celsus Versus Sunday-keeping Christians

About 170 A. D. a Roman philosopher named Celsus, a Stoic, wrote a powerful treatise against Christianity, which he entitled *The True Discourse*. The result of his work was to place the Christian in a very unfavorable light in the eyes of the Romans and their rulers. It probably had much to do with influencing the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (161-180 A. D.), also a Stoic philosopher, to act against Christianity. One of the things that Celsus delighted in doing was to charge the semipagan Christians with aping the heathen.

Celsus’ work is not extant, but many passages from it are quoted in the reply which Origen wrote (about 230 A. D.) to it. One particular quotation from that pagan treatise, as given by Origen, is significant because it refers to Mithraism and the planetary gods:

“After this, Celsus, desiring to exhibit his learning in his treatise against us, quotes also certain Persian mysteries, where he says:

“These things are obscurely hinted at in the accounts of the Persians, and especially in the mysteries of Mithras, which are celebrated amongst them. For in the latter [the Mithraic mysteries] there is a representation of the two heavenly revolutions,—of the movement, viz., of the fixed stars, and of that which takes place among the planets, and of the passage of the soul through these. The representation is of the following nature:

‘There is a ladder with lofty gates, and on the top of it an eighth gate. The first gate consists of lead, the second of tin, the third of copper, the fourth of iron, the fifth of a mixture of metals, the sixth of silver, and the seventh of gold. The first gate they assign to Saturn, indicating by the “lead” the slowness of this star; the second to Venus, comparing her to the splendor and softness of tin; the third to Jupiter, being firm and solid; the fourth to Mercury, for both Mercury and iron are fit to endure all things, and are money-making and laborious; the fifth to Mars, because, being composed of a mixture of metals, it is varied and unequal; the sixth, of silver, to the Moon; the seventh, of gold, to the Sun,—thus imitating the different colors of the two latter.’

“He next proceeds to examine the reason of the stars being arranged in this order, which is symbolized by the names of the rest of the matter.²³ Musical reasons, moreover, are added or quoted by the Persian theology; and to these, again, he strives to add a second explanation, connected also with musical consideration.”²⁴

²³ What the original Greek word translated “matter” may be is not known for certain, because the manuscripts do not concur.

²⁴ Origen, *Against Celsus*, book 6, chap. 22, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, p. 583. Celsus (*ibid.*, chaps. 24-33) devoted arguments to the Ophites and their belief in the seven planetary heavens, showing that the heretical Gnostic Christians borrowed from paganism.

Mithraic Planetary Theology

Celsus plainly shows that Mithraism incorporated into its teachings the doctrines of planetary theology. The two celestial revolutions mentioned are (1) the apparent movement of the planets and the celestial sphere of fixed stars from east to west, and (2) the seeming retrograde movement of the planetary bodies from west to east. There was supposed to be a gate for entrance into each planetary sphere; and the top gate, the eighth, was thought to open into the heaven of the fixed stars. This latter heaven was believed to be the abode of the just. In his remarks Celsus does not list the planetary gods in the order of their supposed revolutions in the heavens, i. e., Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and Moon. He names them in the inverse order of the Christian week. He probably did this because Saturn was the outermost planet. He lists them thus: Saturn, Venus, Jupiter, Mercury, Mars, Moon, Sun. But reading Celsus’ list in the reverse order, you have: Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn! This is the order of the planetary names of the days of the week.

Origen says that Celsus explained “the reason of the stars being arranged in this order.” Unfortunately, he did not preserve Celsus’ statements on this point. He does mention, nevertheless, that the pagan writer did adduce “musical reasons” for it, and that he set forth “a second explanation” too. It should be recalled that Dio Cassius also gave two explanations for the order of the planetary names of the days of the week, and that one of them was based on a

theory of music. We may well suspect that Celsus was drawing parallels between Mithraism and Sunday-keeping Christianity, comparing the practices of the one with the other. Indeed, he says of Celsus: “He compares inconsiderate believers to Metragyrtae, and soothsayers, and Mithrae, and Sabbadians, and to anything else that one may fall in with.”²⁵

²⁵ *Ibid.*, book 1, chap. 9, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, pp. 401, 402.

It is striking, too, that Origen did not attempt to answer charges on this point, whatever they were, but merely sought to evade them, saying:

“But it seems to me, that to quote the language of Celsus upon these matters would be absurd, and similar to what he himself has done, when, in his accusations against Christians and Jews, he quoted, most inappropriately, not only the words of Plato; but, dissatisfied even with these, he adduced in addition the mysteries of the Persian Mithras, and the explanation of them. Now, whatever be the case with regard to these,—whether the Persians and those who conduct the mysteries of Mithras give false or true accounts regarding them,—why did he select these for quotation, rather than some of the other mysteries, with the explanation of them? For the mysteries of Mithras do not appear to be more famous among the Greeks than those of Eleusis, or than those in Ægina, where individuals are initiated into the rites of Hecate. But if he must introduce barbarian mysteries with their explanation, why not rather those of the Egyptians, which are highly regarded by many, or those of the Cappadocians regarding the Comanian Diana, or those of the Thracians, or even those of the Romans themselves, who initiate the noblest members of their senate? But if he deemed it inappropriate to institute a comparison with any of these, because they furnished no aid in the way of accusing Jews or Christians, why did it not also appear to him inappropriate to adduce the instance of the mysteries of Mithras?”²⁶

Sunday Keepers Mistaken for Mithraists

A plausible suggestion can be given to explain why Celsus, the pagan philosopher, should choose to compare Sunday-keeping Christianity with Mithraism instead of with some of the other heathen cults of that day. Tertullian, it must be remembered, wrote his apologies in reply to pagan charges against Sunday-keeping Christians about 200 A. D., not long before Origen’s defense was made, and not long after Celsus published his accusations. Although Tertullian does not specifically mention Celsus by name, it is probable that he had this pagan’s *True Discourse* in mind when he wrote. It is very clear, from Tertullian’s own statements, that somebody had been mistaking Christian Sunday keepers for Mithraists. For example, Tertullian said: “Others, indeed, with more culture and ruthfulness, believe that the Sun is our god. We shall be taken for Persians, perhaps, although it is not permitted that we worship the Sun depicted on the linen, having him everywhere in his disk. The reason for this, I suppose, is that it is known that we pray towards the east. But also most of you at times, in affectation of worshiping the heavenly bodies, move your lips toward the sunrising. Likewise, if we devote the day of the Sun to festivity (from a far different reason from Sun worship), we are in a second place from those who devote the day of Saturn to rest and eating, themselves also deviating by way of a Jewish custom of which they are ignorant.”²⁷

²⁷ Tertullian, *Apology*, chap. 16, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 1, cols. 369-372, author's translation; standard English translation in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, p. 31.

In another treatise he answers the pagan critics in a similar manner. He speaks thus: "Others, certainly more cultured, think the Sun is the god of the Christians, because it is known that we pray toward the east and make a festivity on the day of the Sun. Do you do less? Do not most of you, in affectation of worshiping the heavenly bodies, at times move your lips toward the sunrising? You certainly are the ones who also received the Sun into the register of the seven days, and from among the days preferred it, on which day you leave off the bath, or you may defer it until the evening, or you may devote it [the day] to idleness and eating [*Vos certe estis, qui etiam in laterculum septem dierum Solem recipistis, et ex diebus ipsum proelegistis, quo die lavacrum sub trahatis, aut in vesperarn, differatis, aut otium et prandium curetis*]." ²⁸

²⁸ Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, book 1, chap. 13, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 1, col. 579, author's translation; standard English translation in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, p. 123.

Tertullian's Statements Analyzed

Let us analyze these statements by Tertullian. Note, first, what is said of the Sunday-keeping Christians of that time. (1) The cultured and sincere among the heathen thought them to be Sun worshipers too, devotees of the Persian cult of Mithra. (2) These professed Christians had "the Sun depicted on the linen, having him everywhere in his disk," in connection with their worship. (3) They, too, prayed "toward the east," the sunrising. (4) And they devoted "the day of the Sun to festivity." In these things the Sunday keepers whom Tertullian represented were like the heathen Sun worshipers.

In the New Testament we find nothing said about such practices being a part of the Christian religion, and for this reason we must regard them as heathen usages adopted by Gentile Christians without the sanction of Christ or His apostles.

Let us note, also, what he says about the pagans. (1) The reference to Persians clearly indicates that Mithraism is the form of Sun worship particularly referred to. (2) The pagans worshiped "the heavenly bodies." (3) In their worship they moved their lips in silent prayer. (4) Their prayers were directed toward the east, the sunrising. (5) They had a week of "seven days." (6) They had a calendar²⁹ or "register of the seven days." (7) Of all the seven days of the pagan week, the heathen "preferred" Sunday. This shows that they esteemed Sunday as a day sacred above all others.

²⁹ "It is you, at all events, who have even admitted the Sun into the calendar of the week."—*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, p. 123.

The testimony of Tertullian throws light on the question of *how* Sunday was observed by the heathen. (I) They made "a festivity on the day of the Sun," observing it as a joyous festival. (2) On this day they "leave off the bath, or...defer it until the evening." It is not known why they did this. The fact that the bath could be taken in the evening (*vesperam*), that is, after sunset, seems

to indicate it was deemed improper to bathe on Sunday while the Sun, the lord of the day, was visibly present and looking down upon his devotees. (3) Some of the heathen devoted the day of the Sun “to idleness” (*otium*), that is, by abstinence from labor deemed improper. (4) The day might also be devoted to “eating” (*prandium*). Because people eat every day of the week, there is no significance to Tertullian’s remarks unless he means that on Sunday the heathen made eating a special part of the festivity. (5) In the light of the facts found in our study of Sun worship, it appears that the principal religious devotions of the heathen were performed in the early morning, at the sunrise hour. The heathen observance of Sunday in Tertullian’s time apparently differed little from the way the day is now observed in parts of Europe. After the early morning masses and devotions in the churches, the people pass the rest of the day in festivity (dances, visits, games, excursions), fairs, trading, political meetings, elections, and various kinds of work (usually until about noon) not looked upon as unlawful. The Anglo-American notion of Sunday observance after the Biblical order of the Sabbath rest began with the Puritanism in England in the sixteenth century.

Meichiades, Bishop of Rome

In his work *The Lives of the Popes*, Platina says that “Meichiades ordained, that no Christian should keep a fast upon a Sunday or a Thursday, because those days were so observed and kept by the pagans.”³⁰

³⁰ B. de S. Platina, *The Lives of the Popes*, Vol. 1, p. 68.

Meichiades was bishop of Rome between 311 and 314 A. D. It was in his time that Constantine triumphed over Maxentius at the battle of Milvian Bridge, and decreed freedom for the Christian religion in the Roman Empire.

In the *Liber Pontificalis* we read concerning Melchiades: “He decreed that no one of the faithful should in any wise keep fast upon the Lord’s day or upon the fifth day of the week, because the pagans celebrated those days as a sacred fast.”³¹

³¹ L. R. Loomis, *Book of the Popes (Liber Pontificalis)*, p. 40.

The Latin text for the last clause reads, “*quia eos dies pagani quasi sacrum jejunium celebrant.*” The word *quasi* means, in comparisons, “as if.” It has already been noted that on Sunday the heathen abstained from bathing. It is probable that there was abstinence from the use of wine on Sunday by certain groups. Justin Martyr says that water instead of wine was used in the celebration of the Mithraic communion service, and it was doubtless this practice that was borrowed by the Gnostic sects which substituted water for wine in the celebration of the Lord’s supper.

Writing early in the second century A. D., Plutarch says “As for wine, those who serve the god in Heliopolis bring none at all into the shrine, since they feel that it is not seemly to drink in the daytime while their Lord and King is looking upon them. The others use wine, but in great

moderation. They have many periods of hoivy living when wine is prohibited, and in these they spend their time exclusively in studying, learning, and teaching religious matters.”³²

³² Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, chap. 6, in Loeb Classical Library, *Plutarch's Moralia*, Vol. 5, p. 17.

In an “Epistle to the Bishops of Spain,” that is ascribed to Meichiades, we also read: “But the fast of the Lord’s day and of the fifth day no one ought to observe, in order that between the fast of the Christians and [that] of the Gentiles [heathen], indeed of the believers and of the unbelievers and heretics, a true and not a false distinction may be had.”³³

³³ P. Labbe and O. Cossart, *Sacrosancta Concilia*, 1617 ed., Vol. 1, col. 1398.

The fifth day of the week (Thursday) was the day of Jupiter and was really a fast day among the pagans since the time of the poet. Horace, in the first century B. C. This we have noted already in Chapter 5. We also see that among the heathen Sunday was a day of abstinence from bathing, from work, and perhaps from wine.



LATIN TEXT

IMPERATOR CONSTANTINUS AUG. HELPIDIO: OMNES
JUDICES, URBANÆQUE PLEBES ET CUNCTARUM AR-
TIUM OFFICIA VENERABILI DIE SOLIS QUIESCANT,
RURI TAMEN POSITI AGRORUM CULTURÆ LIBERE
LICENTERQUE INSERVIANT, QUONIAM FREQUENTER
EVENTIT, UT NON APTIUS ALIO DIE FRUMENTA SULCIS
AUT VINÆ SCROBIBUS MANDENTUR, NE OCCASIONE
MOMENTI PEREAT COMMODITAS CÆLESTI PROVI-
SIONE CONCESSA.

TRANSLATION

CONSTANTINE, EMPEROR AUGUSTUS, TO HELPIDIUS:
ON THE VENERABLE DAY OF THE SUN LET THE
MAGISTRATES AND PEOPLE RESIDING IN CITIES REST,
AND LET ALL WORKSHOPS BE CLOSED. IN THE COUN-
TRY, HOWEVER, PERSONS ENGAGED IN AGRICULTURE
MAY FREELY AND LAWFULLY CONTINUE THEIR PUR-
SUITS; BECAUSE IT OFTEN HAPPENS THAT ANOTHER
DAY IS NOT SO SUITABLE FOR GRAIN SOWING OR FOR
VINE PLANTING; LEST BY NEGLECTING THE PROPER
MOMENT FOR SUCH OPERATIONS, THE BOUNTY OF
HEAVEN SHOULD BE LOST.

Latin text and translation from Schaff's "History of the
Christian Church," Vol. III, sec. 75, par. 5, note 1.