

CHAPTER 2

Is the Planetary Week of Babylonian Origin?

ALTHOUGH many authorities on matters of antiquity have expressed their firm belief that the planetary week is of Babylonian origin, no definite and conclusive evidence has been presented thus far to show *when* and *where* it first sprang into use. It appears certain that its original basis was the Chaldean astrology, and there are good reasons for supposing that it is a legacy bequeathed to us by the Babylonians.

Franz Cumont, who has made a wide study of the subject, says: "It was probably first introduced into the sidereal cults of Mesopotamia and of Syria, thence passed to Alexandria, and it is about the age of Augustus that it began to supplant in Latin countries the old Roman *nundinum* of eight days, and it ended by replacing all local calendars."¹ This is the opinion of many.

¹ F. Cumont, *Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans*, p. 165.

Chaldean Planet Worship

Because the planetary week is an astrological institution, it is fitting to note the pagan astronomy of the Chaldeans as it relates to the subject in hand. Planet worship has been traced far back into Babylonian history, even to the distant days of the Sumerians.² At an early date the inhabitants of lower Mesopotamia were noted for their study of the stars. They were able to compute the eclipses of the Sun and the Moon by means of the saros. They used the signs of the zodiac as we have them today, and divided the circle of the heaven into 360 degrees. Herodotus says that the Greeks learned from the Babylonians the use of the sundial, the sunclock, and the division of the day into 12 hours.³

² *Babylonian Expedition of the University of Pennsylvania* (Series A, Cuneiform Texts), Vol. 29, part 1, pp. 33-38.

³ Herodotus, *History*, book 2, chap. 109, in Loeb Classical Library, *Herodotus*, Vol. 1, p. 309. See also C. J. S. Thompson, *The Mystery and Romance of Astrology*, chaps. 1-4.

The Babylonian Ziggurats

A striking example of the influence of astrolatry on Babylonian religious thought is seen in the plan followed in building some of their most famous temple towers known as ziggurats. That of Birs-i-Nimrud (the temple of Nebo at Borsippa) was disclosed by Sir H. C. Rawlinson, who carefully examined the ruins.

The great tower was erected upon a platform made of crude brick and raised a few feet above the level of the surrounding plain. The first stage, erected upon the platform, was an exact square

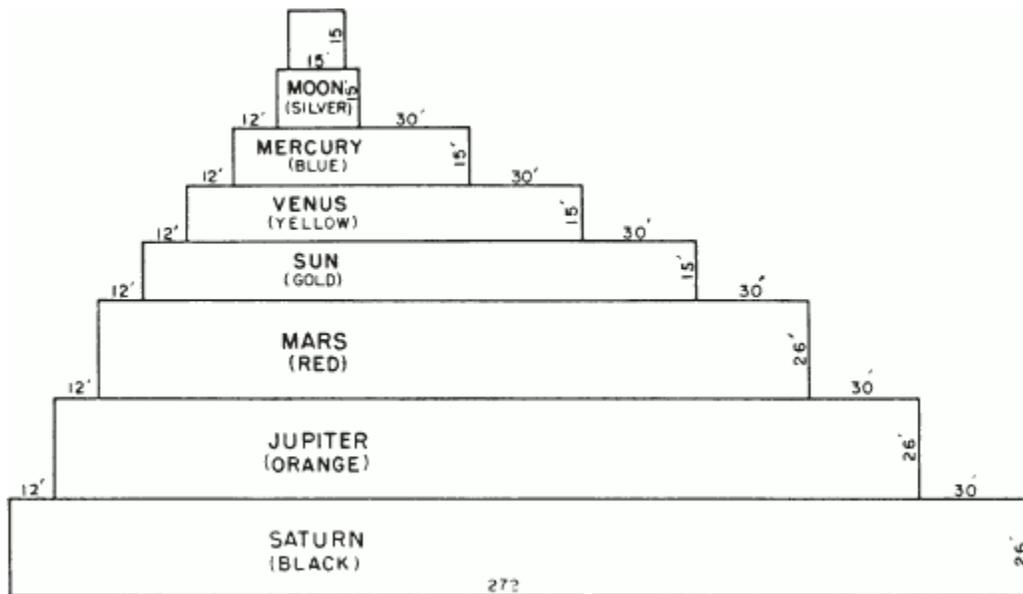
of 272 feet each way and about 26 feet high. Upon this was built the second stage, which was of the same height as the first, and was a square of only 230 feet each way. It was not placed exactly in the center of the stage below it, but was farther from its northeastern than its southwestern edge, so that it was 12 feet from the one and 80 feet from the other. The third story, built upon the second, was also 26 feet high, although it was a square of only 188 feet each way.

The uniformity in the plan of the building was altered at this point, for the height of the fourth stage was about 15 feet instead of 26. It was otherwise diminished proportionately with the lower stages, being a square of 146 feet each way. The fifth stage was a square of 104 feet each way, the sixth was one of 62, and the seventh was one of 20, all three of them being 15 feet high. On top of the seventh stage was built a shrine. The entire structure is estimated to have had a height of about 156 feet, allowing three feet for the height of the crude-brick platform at the base.

This temple was patterned after the pagan conception of the planetary arrangement of the universe. The following description by G. Rawlinson is typical:

Dedicated to the Planets

“The ornamentation of the edifice was chiefly by means of color. The seven stages represented the Seven Spheres, in which moved (according to ancient Chaldean astronomy) the seven planets. To each planet fancy, partly grounding itself upon fact, had from of old assigned a peculiar tint or hue. The Sun was golden; the Moon silver; the distant Saturn, almost beyond the region of light, was black; Jupiter was orange; the fiery Mars was red; Venus was a pale Naples yellow; Mercury a deep blue. The seven stages of the tower, like the seven walls of Ecbatana, gave a visible embodiment to these fancies.



This is the plan of the famous Babylonian ziggurat of Borsippa. With the shrine at the top representing the terrestrial center, the plan of the tower, as viewed from above, is laid out in accordance with the ancient pagan conception of a geocentric universe.

“The basement stage, assigned to Saturn, was blackened by means of a coating of bitumen spread over the face of the masonry; the second stage, assigned to Jupiter, obtained the appropriate orange color by means of a facing of burnt bricks of that hue; the third stage, that of Mars, was made blood-red by the use of half-burnt bricks formed of a bright red clay; the fourth stage, assigned to the Sun, appears to have been actually covered with thin plates of gold; the fifth, the stage of Venus, received a pale yellow tint from the employment of bricks of that hue; the sixth, the sphere of Mercury, was given an azure tint by vitrification, the whole stage having been subjected to an intense heat after it was erected, whereby the bricks composing it were converted into a mass of blue slag; the seventh stage, that of the Moon, was, probably, like the fourth, coated with actual plates of metal. Thus the building rose up in stripes of varied color, arranged almost as nature’s cunning arranges hues in the rainbow....Above this the glowing silvery summit melted into the bright sheen of the sky.”⁴

⁴ G. Rawlinson, *The Five Great Monarchies*, Vol. 2, pp. 546, 548.

Nebuchadnezzar’s Inscriptions

Note particularly that the planetary order followed in the building of the ziggurat was thus: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon. The planet Saturn, whose orbit was supposed to be the longest, had the lowest and largest stage. The Moon, whose orbit was the shortest, was given the seventh and smallest stage.

In the corners of the third stage of this tower were found cylinders and inscriptions written by order of the great Nebuchadnezzar of Biblical fame. He spoke of the edifice as being “the Temple of the Planet, which is the Tower of Babylon.”⁵ He called it “the Temple of the Seven Planets, which is the Tower of Borsippa which former kings had built and raised it to the height of forty-two cubits, but had not finished its upper part.”⁶ He also said “To astonish mankind, I reconstructed and renewed the wonder of Borsippa, the Temple of the Seven Spheres of the World [Universe].”⁷ And in the India House Inscription this monarch calls it “the Temple of the Seven Spheres.”⁸

⁵ Society of Biblical Archaeology, *Records of the Past*, Vol. 7, p. 75.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁷ F. Lenormant, *A Manual of the Ancient History of the East*, Vol. 1, p. 483.

⁸ Society of Biblical Archaeology, *Records of the Past*, Vol. 5, p. 121. See also Eberhard Schrader, *The Cuneiform Inscriptions and the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, pp. 109, 110.

The Temple of Belus

In the city of Babylon itself was situated the Temple of Belus, which was about one third the size of the ziggurat of Borsippa. Herodotus describes it thus: “In the midmost of the other [wall] is still to this day the sacred enclosure of Zeus Belus, a square of two furlongs each way, with gates of bronze. In the center of this enclosure a solid tower has been built, of one furlong’s length and breadth; a second tower rises from this, and from it yet another, till at last there are eight.”⁹ The eighth was a shrine or astronomical observatory.

⁹ Herodotus, *History*, Book 1, chap. 181, in Loeb Classical Library, *Herodotus*, Vol. I, pp. 225, 227.

The Ziggurat of Khorsabad

The system of planet worship among the Assyrians was similar to that of the Babylonians. At Khorsabad, a suburb of Nineveh, there was a ziggurat in the sumptuous palace of the Assyrian kings. “The fourth quarter of the palace enclosure,” says A. T. Olmstead, “was devoted to the priesthood. Here was the ziggurat, a solid mass of brick nearly 150 feet high. Around it ran a ramp with easy ascent and on its top were two altars on which sacrifice was offered to the gods. With its varied colors,—each of the seven stories bore the color of the planet to which it was dedicated,—and its lofty height, it must have been a most imposing spectacle.”¹⁰

¹⁰ A. T. Olmstead, *Western Asia in the Days of Sargon of Assyria*, p. 184. See also P. S. P. Handcock, *Mesopotamian Archeology*, pp. 138, 139.

The Chaldean School of Astrology

In the book of Daniel particular mention is made of a body of Babylonian wise men known as “the Chaldeans.” They were consulted by the kings of Babylon concerning mysterious matters that might have some religious significance.¹¹ Diodorus Siculus (the Sicilian), who lived in the days of Julius and Augustus Caesar, has left in Greek an interesting account of the Chaldean astrologers and the profession they made. It runs thus:

“Now the Chaldeans, belonging as they do to the most ancient inhabitants of Babylonia, have about the same position among the divisions of the state as that occupied by the priests of Egypt; for being assigned to the service of the gods they spend their entire life in study, their greatest renown being in the field of astrology. But they occupy themselves largely with soothsaying as well, making predictions about future events, and in some cases by purifications, in others by sacrifices, and in others by some other charms they attempt to effect the averting of evil things and the fulfillment of the good. They are also skilled in soothsaying by the flight of birds, and they give interpretations of both dreams and portents.¹² They also show marked ability in making divinations from the observation of the entrails of animals, deeming that in this branch they are eminently successful.

¹¹ Daniel 2:2, 4, 5, 10; 3:8; 4:7; 5:7, 11.

¹² Note that this statement agrees with what the book of Daniel says about their profession.

“The training which they receive in all these matters is not the same as that of the Greeks who follow such practices. For among the Chaldeans the scientific study of these subjects is passed down in the family, and son takes it over from father, being relieved of all other services in the state. Since, therefore, they have their parents for teachers, they not only are taught everything ungrudgingly but also at the same time they give heed to the precepts of their teachers with a more unwavering trust. Furthermore, since they are bred in these teachings from childhood up,

they attain a great skill in them, both because of the ease with which youth is taught and because of the great amount of time which is devoted to this study...

“Now, as the Chaldeans say, the world [universe] is by its nature eternal, and neither had a first beginning¹³ nor will at a later time suffer destruction; furthermore, both the disposition and the orderly arrangement of the universe have come about by virtue of a divine providence, and today whatever takes place in the heavens is in every instance brought to pass, not at haphazard nor by virtue of any spontaneous action, but by some fixed and firmly determined divine decision.

¹³ Note that the doctrine of time eternity of matter is a pagan tenet that is very old. It is diametrically opposed to the Biblical doctrine of the creation of matter by God.

“And since they have observed the stars over a long period of time and have noted both the movements and the influences of each of them with greater precision than any other men, they foretell to mankind many things that will take place in the future. But above all in importance, they say, is the study of the influence of the five stars known as planets, which they call ‘Interpreters’ when speaking of them as a group, but if referring to them singly, the one named Cronus [Saturn] by the Greeks, which is the most conspicuous and presages more events and such as are of greater importance than the others, they call the star¹⁴ of Helios [Sun], whereas the other four they designate as the stars of Ares [Mars], Aphrodite [Venus], Hermes [Mercury], and Zeus [Jupiter], as do our astrologers.

¹⁴ Saturn was often regarded by the ancients as being the star spokesman for the Sun.

“The reason why they call them ‘Interpreters’ is that whereas all the other stars are fixed and follow a single circuit in a regular course, these alone, by virtue of following each its own course, point out future events, thus interpreting to mankind the design of the gods. For sometimes by their risings, sometimes by their settings, and again by their color, the Chaldeans say, they give signs of coming events to such as are willing to observe them closely, for at one time they show forth mighty storms of winds, at another excessive rains or heat, at times the appearance of comets, also eclipses of both Sun and Moon, and earthquakes, and in a word all the conditions which owe their origin to the atmosphere and work both benefits and harm, not only to whole peoples or regions, but also to kings and to persons of private station.

“Under the course in which these planets move are situated, according to them, thirty¹⁵ stars, which they designate as ‘counselling gods;’ of these one half oversee the regions above the earth and the other half those beneath the earth, having under their purview the affairs of mankind and likewise those of the heavens; and every ten days one of the stars above is sent as a messenger, so to speak, to the stars below, and again in like manner one of the stars below the earth to those above, and this movement of theirs is fixed and determined by means of an orbit which is unchanging forever.¹⁶ Twelve of these gods, they say, hold chief authority, and to each of these the Chaldeans assign a month¹⁷ and one of the signs of the zodiac, as they are called. And through the midst of these signs, they say, both the Sun and Moon and the five planets make their course, the Sun completing his cycle in a year and the Moon traversing her circuit in a month.

¹⁵ A. H. Sayce makes the following comment on this point: “Diodorus (ii. 30) states that the ‘councillor gods’ were only thirty in number; but the list of planetary stations discovered by Hoinmel in WAI. v. 46, shows that the text must be corrected to thirty-six. Indeed, Diodorus himself adds that every ten days there was a change of constellations, so that in a year of 360 days there must have been thirty-six constellations in all.”—*The Religions of Ancient Egypt and Babylonia*, p. 237.

T. C. Pinches points out that the Babylonian account of creation says that Merodach “caused three stars to be assigned to each of 12 months.” That would make a total of 36. See J. Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 191, art. “Astronomy and Astrology.”

¹⁶ There was one counselor god for every 10 days, or degrees, of the circle of the year of 360. The 36 counselor gods were distributed three to a sign around the equatorial belt of the heavens, which is known as the zodiac. Half of them are always above the horizon while the other half are below it. In the course of the year all 36 of them would be seen overhead, for while one was rising in the east another was setting in the west.

¹⁷ The solar months were determined by the time that the Sun appeared to spend in each of the 12 constellations of the zodiac, which was 30 days.

“Each of the planets, according to them, has its own particular course, and its velocities and periods of time are subject to change and variation. These stars it is which exert the greatest influence for both good and evil upon the nativity of men; and it is chiefly from the nature of these planets and the study of them that they know what is in store for mankind. And they have made predictions, they say, not only to numerous other kings, but also to Alexander [the Great], who defeated Darius, and to Antigonus and Seleucus Nicator who afterwards became kings....Moreover, they also foretell to men in private station what will befall them.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*, book 2, chaps. 29-31, in Loeb Classical Library, *Diodorus Siculus*, Vol. 1, pp. 449-453.

Oppert’s Find

Jules Oppert, a noted Assyriologist, reported¹⁹ the discovery of a list of Babylonian planetary gods in the order of the days of the week, and this find has been cited by some writers to support the belief that the planetary week is of Chaldean origin.

¹⁹ Jules Oppert, *Expédition Scientifique en Mesopotamie*, Vol. 1, p. 206 ff.

It is now some time since first M. Oppert, and then more fully Dr. Schrader (in the *Studien und Kritiken*, 1873), pointed out the Babylonian origin of the week. Seven was a sacred number among the Accadians, and their lunar months were at an early epoch divided into periods of seven days each. The days were dedicated to the sun and moon and five planets, and to the deities who presided over these....In one of the newly found fragments which recount the Chaldean version of the Creation, the appointment of the stars called ‘leaders of the week’ is expressly mentioned.”²⁰

²⁰ A. H. Sayce, “The Chaldean Origin of the Sabbath,” in *The Academy*, London, Nov. 27, 1875, p. 554.

Divergent Opinions

Other authorities disagree with Sayce's interpretation of the text in question, and there are divers versions of it extant. R. W. Rogers, who presents an excellent picture of the tablet, gives the following translation:

“He [Marduk] made the stations for the great gods; the stars, like them, as the *lumashi* he fixed.”²¹

²¹ R. W. Rogers, *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, p. 128.

Thus he left the debated term untranslated. In a footnote he offers the following comment on it: “The word *lumashi* in the astronomical texts designates a series of seven stars. There is a very pretty controversy as to the meaning and identification of these stars. Oppert translates *spheres*; Sayce, ‘twin stars, literally, twin oxen,’ and explains that ‘seven of them were reckoned.’ Zimmern says that they were not identical with the signs of the zodiac. Delitzsch does not commit himself, and King translates ‘zodiac.’ Jeremias in *Das Alte Testament im Lichte des alten Orients*, p. 27, translates it *Tierkreisbilder* [circle of the zodiac], while in his later brochure (*Das Alter der Babylonischen Astronomie*, p. 28) he renders *Mashigestirne* [Mashii Stars]. This illustrates the doubtfulness of the word itself, and shows how uncertain is the whole astrological scheme of Winckler and Jeremias. It is a small point, indeed, but an instructive one.”²² Thus the matter stands in a state of uncertainty.

²² *Ibid.*, pp 128, 129.

Brown's Summary

Francis Brown, in an article entitled “The Sabbath in the Cuneiform Records,” sums up the results of the work of Jules Oppert and Eberhard Schrader, in these words:

“Oppert found in an astronomical tablet a connection between the Sun, Moon, and five planets, and the days of the week; and Schrader argued at length for the week of seven days as original with the Babylonians....

“Oppert was the first to call attention to a cuneiform tablet containing a list of stars, seven in number, connected each with a deity, the whole list corresponding to the deities whose names our days bear; the list concludes, according to him, with the words: ‘These are the seven chiefs of the days of the week (*masi*).’ But this translation for *masi* was not accompanied by any proof of its correctness, and Schrader, who took up the general idea of Oppert, wisely sought to lay a firmer foundation. He starts from the position that the Arabians owed the seven-day week to the Jews, and that among these and their ancestors, the old Hebrews, it had been known from time immemorial....

“Thus we are pointed back to the early home of the Canaanites (Hebrews and Phenicians) in Babylonia. After thus noticing the historical probability, Schrader then brings in the inscription

which Oppert had translated, laying stress upon the order and names of the gods to whom the stars were said to belong: *Shamash*, Sun; *Shin*, Moon; *Nergal*, Mars, Zivis (Tiv); *Nebo*, Mercury, Wodan; *Merodach*, Jupiter, Thor; *Ishtar*, Venus, Freia; *Adar*, Saturn. The inference is that the names of the seven week days originated in Babylonia.”²³

²³ Francis Brown. “The Sabbath in the Cuneiform Records,” in *The Presbyterian Review*, October, 1882, pp. 689-691. See also Eberhard Schrader, “The Babylonian Origin of the Week of Seven Days,” in *Theologische Studien und Kritiken*, 1874, p. 143 ff.

From a Byzantine Writer

Johannes Laurentius, a Byzantine writer (490-565? A. D.) born in Lydia (and frequently referred to as Lydus, “the Lydian), not only held for a time a high office in the government under Justinian I, but also wrote on antiquarian subjects. It is said that “the chief value of these books consists in the fact that the author made use of the works (now lost) of old Roman writers on similar subjects.”²⁴ In his treatise *De Mensibus*, in which he gave an account of the festivals of the months of the year, he said “that with Zoroaster and Hystaspes the Chaldeans and the Egyptians received the days in a hebdomad from the number of the planets.”²⁵

²⁴ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed, Vol. 14, p. 516 art. “Lydus.”

²⁵ Johannes Laurentius Lydus, *De Mensibus*, book 2, chap, 3, in *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, Vol. 30, p. 14.

Zoroaster and Hystaspes were Persians. Thus this old writer declares that the planetary week was anciently in use among the peoples of those three great nations—the Persians, the Chaldeans, and the Egyptians. Unfortunately, he does not give us the source of information on which he bases that assertion.

Observations

Our knowledge of the usages of the Babylonians through the many centuries before Christ is still meager. It may be that archaeological research will yet turn up something more definite and certain concerning the relation of the planetary week to Chaldean astrology. Such reasons as have been given in this chapter for believing that it is of Babylonian origin will be corroborated by other indirect and circumstantial evidence as we proceed in our study.