

CHAPTER 3

The Planetary Week in Mesopotamia

IN Mesopotamia we find two striking examples of the use of the planetary week, and both of them strongly support the belief that it is of Babylonian origin. In each instance Chaldean names of the planets are used to designate the days. In the one case it is the use of such a week by a people wholly pagan. In the other such a week is employed by a Gnostic sect that adheres to a hodgepodge of pagan, Jewish, and Christian beliefs. The one example is that of the pagan Harranians, and the other is that of the Mandaeans.

The Pagan Harranians

The first example is that of the heathen of Harran. Among the Romans this city was known as Carrae or Charrae. "It is said to be in Mesopotamia (Genesis 24:10), or, more definitely, in Padan-aram (Genesis 25:20), the cultivated district at the foot of the hills, a name well applying to the beautiful stretch of country which lies below Mount Masius, between Khabour and the Euphrates. Here, about midway in this district, is a town still called Harran, which really seems never to have changed its appellation, and beyond any reasonable doubt...is the Haran or Charran of Scripture. Harran lies upon the Belilk (ancient Bilichus), a small affluent of the Euphrates, which falls into it nearly in longitude 39°. It is now a small village, inhabited by a few families of Arabs."¹

¹ W. Smith, *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 362, art. "Haran."



Were Not True Sabians

It was in connection with the Harranians that the term *Sabaism* was coined many years ago to designate that worship which was principally given to the Sun, the Moon, and the five visible planets, or rather to the planetary spirits believed to have their abode in these heavenly bodies. Because the Harranians were especially given to this kind of star worship, and were at first believed to be true Sabians, the term *Sabaism* came to be used particularly for reference to their cult.

Abu Yusuf Absha'a al Qathi'i, a Christian writer of the ninth century, tells how the Harranians came to be called Sabians. He says that when the Moslems overran that territory in 830 A. D., the people of Harran were told that they must give up either their heathenism or their lives. They might embrace either Mohammedanism or one of the creeds tolerated in the Koran. Seeking counsel from an astute Mohammedan jurist, they learned that there existed in Mesopotamia at that time a Gnostic sect which was tolerated by the Koran. These Gnostics were called Sabians. The lawyer advised the Harranians to profess to be followers of this Gnostic sect and thus be spared from the Moslem sword. Notice was sent at once to the Caliph Ma'mum, the leader of the Mohammedan army that was then marching against the Byzantines, telling him that they were not pagans but Sabians. From that time forward the Harranians were generally referred to as Sabians, although they were and continued to be heathen, practicing their pagan rites until the Middle Ages.²

² *The New International Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 20, p. 283, art. "Sabians"; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., Vol. 19, p. 790, art. "Sabians."

The Founding of Harran

The story of Harran begins far back in the past. It starts with Ur of ancient Chaldea, for it was there that "Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran....And Haran died before his father...in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees." Archaeologists have thoroughly explored the ruins of the old city of Ur, and their excavations show that it was a very popular seat of Chaldean Moon worship.⁴ This revelation that Ur was a pagan city harmonizes with the statement of Joshua that the original ancestors of the Hebrew people "dwelt on the other side of the flood [the Euphrates] in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods."⁵

⁴ R. W. Rogers, *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, pp. 83, 84; C. Leonard Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees*.

⁵ Joshua 24:2.

Thus Ur of Chaldea was a pagan city at that early date (about 2000 B. C.), and it was doubtless for this reason that Abraham was directed to leave there.⁶ Josephus says that the Chaldeans became hostile toward Abraham because he steadfastly refused to believe in their heathen notions.⁷

⁶ “After the dispersion from Babel, idolatry again became well-nigh universal.... Abraham had grown up in the midst of superstition and heathenism. Even his father’s household, by whom the knowledge of God had been preserved, were yielding to the seductive influences surrounding them, and they ‘served other gods’ (Joshua 24:2) than Jehovah.”—E. G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 125. Hence Abraham “was directed to leave his idolatrous nation.”—E. G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 1, p. 93.

⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, book 1, chap. 7, sec. 1, in *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, p. 42.

From Ur of Chaldea went Abraham, accompanied by his father, Terah, and by his surviving brother, Nahor, and settled in the place afterward known as Harran. Lot, the son of Haran, came with them, for his father had died in Ur. It is probable that this new settlement was named after Haran, Abraham’s deceased brother.

After the death of Terah, Abraham and Lot moved from Harran to Canaan.⁸ Nahor remained in Harran and became the progenitor of the Syrian branch of the Semites.⁹ Hence Harran was also called “the city of Nahor.” Although they professed belief in the true God, Nahor and his family still clung to their idolatry.¹⁰ It was by Jacob’s marriage with the daughters of Laban, grandson of Nahor, that idolatry first got a foothold in the family of Israel.¹¹ Jacob finally purged his household of its heathen practices,¹² but Harran went from bad to worse and finally became a city wholly given over to paganism.¹³ It is an interesting fact that Harran, like Ur of Chaldea, became a notorious seat of the worship of Sin, the Chaldean Moon-god. This form of worship may have been brought from Ur with the household of Terah and Nahor.¹⁴

⁸ Genesis 11:27-32; 12:1-5.

⁹ Genesis 24:10, 15; 25:20; 27:43; 28:5.

¹⁰ Genesis 31:19, 30-35. It may be rightly said of the family of Terah, Abraham’s father, that “with their idolatry they united the worship of the true God,” and that Abraham’s brother, Nahor, “with his household clung to their home and their idols.”—E. G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 127.

¹¹ Genesis 31:19, 30-35; 35:2,4.

“There were false gods in the camp, and idolatry had to some extent gained a foothold even in his household.”—E. G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 205.

¹² Genesis 35:2-5.

¹³ 2 Kings 19:12; Isaiah 37:12.

¹⁴ “The Sin-cult had a strong hold at an early date also at Harran in Mesopotamia. For even as early as the sources derived from Boghazköi (middle of the 2d mill B. C.), Sin of Harran is mentioned. Here also a name readily applied to him is Bel-Harran, ‘lord of Harran.’”—J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 2, p. 311, art. “Babylonians and Assyrians.”

Used the Planetary Week

According to Mohammedan writers, the Harranians had temples dedicated to the planetary gods, in which they offered even human sacrifices as late as the ninth century. Their worship was accompanied by the most revolting ceremonies.¹⁵

¹⁵ W. Smith and H. Wace, *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines*, Vol. 4, p. 573. art. “Sabians.”

It is not surprising, therefore, that “the Harranians are said to sacrifice to the gods of the seven weekdays, whose names are partly Babylonian, partly Greek.”¹⁶

¹⁶ J Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 6, p. 520, art. "Harranians." See also G. Rawlinson, *The Five Great Monarchies*, vol. 1, p. 124 (footnote), 138 (footnote); T. K. Cheyne and J. S. Black, *Encyclopedia Biblica*, Vol. 4, art. "Week"; D Chwolohn, *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus*, Vol. 2, pp. 2, 611.

The Orientalist Eberhard Schrader points out that "the Sabaeans in Mesopotamian Harran were acquainted with the seven planetary deities of the weekdays in the order with which we are familiar: Sun, Moon, Nergal (Mars), Nebo (Mercury), Jupiter (Bel), Venus (Beltis), Saturn (Kronos)."¹⁷

¹⁷ Eberhard Schrader, *The Cuneiform Inscriptions and the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, pp. 20, 21.

The observation of S. H. Langdon is a very apt one: "The adherents of the cult of Sin at Harran were known as Harranians or Ssabeans among Arabic and Syriac writers, and their doctrines were transformed by Greek philosophy and Gnosticism. Their week of seven days is certainly not of Christian origin, but probably a direct inheritance from Babylonia. The first day was sacred to Ilios, the Greek Helios, the second to Sin, the third to Ares, the fourth to Mercury, called Nabûg (Nebo), the fifth to Bâl (Bêl-Marduk) or Jupiter, the sixth to Baithi (Bêlit) or Venus, and the seventh to Cronus (Ninurta) or Saturn. The remnants of Babylonian deities in these planetary names of the Harranian week prove that Babylonian mythology was the basis of this remarkable cult."¹⁸

¹⁸ S. H. Langdon, *The Mythology of All Races*, Vol. 5, pp. 154, 155.

The Mandaean—the True Sabians

In the Koran, the sacred book of Islam, mention is made several times of a sect called Sabians, which the Moslems tolerated and considered as a body separate and distinct from the Christians.¹⁹ This group has been designated by various names, such as Sabians, Sabeans, Tsabians, Ssabeans, Subjas, Subhas, Sabeists, Sabaists, Sabbi, St. John's Christians, Nasorae ans, Mendaeans, Manclaeans, and so forth. They are not the Sabeans mentioned in the Old Testament as dwelling in Arabia.

¹⁹ Koran 2:59; 5:73; 22:17; 27:24.

According to J. P. Arendzen, they are "pagan Gnostics who shortly before the rise of Christianity, formed a sect which flourished in Mesopotamia and Babylonia, and which was one of the foremost religions in Western Asia in the early years of Mohammedanism."²⁰

²⁰ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10, p. 705, art. "Nasoraean."

These Mandaean are a distinct people from the inhabitants of Harran. They have flourished in Mesopotamia, especially around Basra and Khuzistan. A Jesuit missionary reported that in 1652 there were about twenty thousand families of them, but their numbers today appear to be less

than five thousand.²¹ They are the only truly Gnostic sect of today that dates back to the early days of Christianity, when Gnosticism became manifest in numerous groups in the second and third centuries. The people call themselves *Mandaye*, an Aramaic term meaning “Gnostics,” or literally “those who have knowledge.” They are also known as Tsabians or Tsabaists (baptizers), because they baptize themselves often. The more enlightened of the sect are called Nasoraean. When they were first discovered by Roman Catholic missionaries after the Middle Ages, they were called the Christians of St. John, because of their emphasis on baptism.

²¹ *The New International Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 14, p. 778, art. “Mandaeans”; *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7, p. 315, art. “Mandaeans.”

While today the Mandaeans speak Arabic or Persian, their old religious works are written in an Aramaic tongue somewhat similar to that in which the Babylonian Talmud was composed.

An Astral Cult

It is not surprising that the Mandaeans obtained favor with the Mohammedans, because Gnosticism, like the chameleon, could manifest the color most convenient to its needs. This particular sect has borrowed some elements from the Hebrew and the Christian religions. This is not to be wondered at, because the Gnostics looked upon all religions as having some truth in them, and from them they chose whatever most suited their fancy. The more prominent Christian aspects of their religion were acquired in more modern times. The religion of the Mandaeans, according to all reports, is more pagan than anything else. “In the Gnostic basis itself,” says one source of information, “it is not difficult to recognize the general features of the religion of ancient Babylonia, and thus we are brought nearer a solution of the problem as to the origin of Gnosticism in general. It is certain that Babylonia, the seat of the present Mandaeans, must be regarded also as the cradle in which their system was reared; it is impossible to think of them as coming from Palestine, or to attribute to their doctrines a Jewish or Christian origin.”²²

²² *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., Vol. 17, p. 557, art. “Mandaeans.” See also *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 7, p. 146, art. “Mandaeans.”

Indeed, the Mandaeans manifest a hostile attitude toward Christ, and in their writings He is spoken of as an evil sorcerer. Sometimes He is regarded as Mercury.

In their astrological beliefs there are seven planets, one for each heaven of the Chaldean system. There are also 360 aeons (‘Uthre) which correspond to the 360 days of the calendar year, which contains 12 months of 30 days each. Five intercalary days are added between the eighth and the ninth months every year to make up the total of 365. The names of the seven planetary gods are Il (Sun), Sin (Moon), Nirig (Nirgal or Mars), Enba (Nebo or Mercury), Bil (Jupiter), Estera (Ishtar or Venus), and Kewan (Saturn). The Sun is also referred to as *Adunay* (Adonai), which means “lord.”²³ “As lord of the planetary spirits his place is in the midst of them.”²⁴ “The Sun, as the greatest, stands in the central or fourth heaven.”²⁵ They also speak of a Demiurge (World Creator). In all these things they appear to have a system that is basically of Babylonian origin.

²⁵ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., Vol. 17, pp. 555, 557, art. "Mandaeans."

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 556.

²⁷ J. M'Clintock and J. Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. 6, p. 82, art. "Mendaeans."

Their Planetary Week

Kay Kessler says of them: "These planets were set in the seven heavens; the Sun is the ruler and is in the middle (fourth) heaven. They were intended by the creator to be helpers of man, but instead sought to do him harm."²⁶

²⁸ *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 7, p. 148.

Speaking of their planetary week, J. P. Arendzen declares: "Not the Mohammedan Friday, or the Jewish Sabbath, but the Christian Sunday is their weekly holyday. This, however, is not a conscious imitation of the Christians, whose 'Carpenter-God' they hate as a son of the devil."²⁷ And Kessler says that they observe Sunday by abstaining from work and by attending at divine service, in which the priest reads the Scriptures.²⁸ "The most pious among them are baptized every Sunday," says another writer. "The Lord's Supper is always connected by them with baptism; for it they use paste, prepared in the church by the priest, instead of bread, and water in the place of wine."²⁹

²⁷ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10 p. 707, art. "Nasoraean."

²⁸ *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 7, pp. 148, 149, art. "Mandaeans."

²⁹ J. M'Clintock and J. Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. 7, p. 83, art. "Mendaeans."

Thus we see an admixture of Christian practices with their paganism. Since the Mandaeans hold Christ in such low esteem, what is the real basis of their Sunday observance? Does it seem reasonable to suppose, in the light of the facts, that they have always celebrated Sunday after the fashion of Sunday-keeping Christians?

The explanation is that this Sunday keeping after the modern fashion is a thing of late practice among the Mandaeans. Jesuit missionaries went into the region about Bosra in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Portuguese extended their power in that direction, and attempted to convert the Mandaeans to the Roman Catholic faith. Their tactics were very similar to those employed by the Jesuits who went into Ethiopia in those days to bring the Coptic Church under the control of the Vatican. Their preaching failed to persuade the Mandaeans. In order to achieve their ends, the missionaries resorted to other means. Note these words by W. Brandt:

"Thereupon the missionaries, bent upon gaining their end, induced the pasha to order the Sabbi, under threat of fines or bodily penalties, to attend the Roman Catholic place of worship and observe Sunday according to the Christian practice of resting from servile work on that day. In this way the work of conversion was set on foot, supported, however, by doles of food and clothing to the children of the poorer Mandaeans."³⁰

³⁰ J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 8, p. 391, art. "Mandaeans."

Thus the Mandaeans outwardly began to observe Sunday after the practice of Sunday-keeping Christians in order to avoid persecution, but in reality they were still pagan Gnostics at heart.

More About Their Planetary Week

J. H. Hottinger quotes an old Arabic writer, Muhammed ben Isaac, as saying that the Mandaeans called the Sun "the Great Lord." And he quotes another writer, Au Said Vaheb, as saying that the days of the week in the Mandaean system were dedicated to the Sun, the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn. The title he gives to the first day of the week is thus: YWM 'L'CHD LLSHMS (day the first to Shamash).³¹ *Shamash* is "Sun" in the Babylonian tongue. In a similar way the second day of the week is called after the Moon. The sixth day contains the planetary name of BLTHY (Baithi), which refers to the Babylonian Beltis (Venus).

³¹ J. H. Hottinger, *Historia Orientalis*, book 1, chap. 8, p. 177. See also A. Barnes, *Notes on the Book of Job*, Vol. 2, pp. 119, 120, comment on Job 31:26. 27.

A French writer says that the Mandaeans' religion teaches that "a heptad of gods presided over the seven days of the week. In the *Fihrist-el-Ouloum* of Mohammed ibn Ishaq-en Nedin they bear the names partly Hellenic and Greek of Ilios (Helios), Sin, Ares, Nabuq, Bal, Baithi, Krons."³²

³² *La Grande Encyclopedie*, Vol. 29, p. 6, art. "Sabéisme."

The best testimony on this point is that of E. S. Drower, a modern writer who has personally and thoroughly investigated the Mandaean social life at first hand in their native country. Her statement concerning the Mandaean planetary week clearly sets forth its Chaldean aspects. She says:

"Each day is governed by a planet. The day is divided into two parts of twelve, twelve day-hours and twelve night hours. Certain *melki* [rulers] also govern the days, and hence have a planetary character; for instance, Sunday, which is governed by Shamish, is also associated with the personified Habshaba, First-Day-of-the-Week, a *malka* who is sometimes identified with other savior-spirits. He 'takes purified souls in his ship to Awa-thur and to the World of Light. The gate of the World of Light is ajar on this day and Hoshaba (Habshaba) takes the souls by means of electricity into the midst of the world of light.'

"I was told that 'Hoshaba' descends into Mataratha (Purgatories) on Sunday, returning with seven Mandaean souls to the world of light.....

"Writings preserved by the priests enumerate the planetary aspects not day by day but hour by hour, so that life may be conducted successfully. To quote from one:

“*The Day of Habshaba*. The First Hour is of Shamish. Favorable (*shapir*) for building a new house, going on the road, putting on a new garment, eating bread, approaching kings and governors, drinking wine, buying and selling. The Second Hour is of Libat (Venus). Sit in thy own city. Favorable for being with thy wife, eating new bread, riding horses, visiting physicians,’ etc.

“Not every hour of Sunday is good; for instance, on the sixth hour of Sunday night a traveler is likely to fall among thieves; for Nirigh (Mars) governs this hour, although the general aspect of the day is sunny.

“Monday (Trin Habshaba) is governed by Sin; Tuesday (Thiatha Habshaba) by Nirigh; Wednesday (Arba Habshaba) by ’Nbu; and Thursday (Hamsha Habshaba) by Bil (Bel), also by Melka Ziwa ‘from the morning of Thursday till Friday noon, when Liwet has power.’ Friday (Yuma d Rahatia) is the day of Libat, and Yuma d Shafta or Saturday is the day of Kiwan. Friday afternoon and night are supposed to be unlucky and under the general influence of the King of Darkness.”³³

³³ E. S. Drower, *The Mandaean of Iraq and Iran*, pp. 74, 75.

The Day Begins at Sunrise

In a letter to the author, written from Baghdad, Iraq, on November 31, 1943, Lady Drower says that “the Mandaean day, unlike the Semitic day, begins at sunrise, not at sunset on the previous day. The hours are simply called the *first*, *second*, and so on. The days are assigned stars: Shamish (the Sun), Sunday; Sin (the Moon), Monday; Nirigh (Mars), Tuesday; ’Nbu (Mercury), Wednesday; Bel (Jupiter), Thursday; Libat (Venus), Friday; and Kiwan (Saturn), Saturday. The first hour of a day is under its planet, that is, the first hour of Sunday is under Shamish, the second under Sin, and so on.”

The planetary week in use among the Harranians and the Mandaean of Mesopotamia strongly supports the belief that it is of Chaldean origin, as suggested by the Babylonian names used to designate the days.