

## CHAPTER 6

### The Planetary Week in the First Century B. C.

**T**HERE has not yet appeared any evidence to indicate that the pagan week of days named after the seven planetary deities was in use among the Romans during the period of the Republic. The testimony of both the classical writers and the archaeological discoveries points to the first century before Christ as the time when it was adopted by the Roman people. Not a few are the scholars who think that it came to Rome about the time when Julius Caesar was Pontifex Maximus (68-44 B. C.)

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<sup>1</sup> Here is a partial list of authorities who hold that the astrological or planetary week was introduced into Rome during the first century B. C., or about the beginning of the Christian Era: J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 3, p. 63, art. "Calendar" (Introductory, sec. 8); E. W. Maunder in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Vol. I, p. 299, art. "Astrology"; *The New International Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 23 p. 436, art. "Week"; *Harper's Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities*, p. 1669, art. "Week"; Larousse du XXe Siècle (1933), Vol. 6, p. 287, col. 1, art. "Semaine"; 3. de Witte in the *Gazette Archéologique* (1877), Vols. 2, 3 (Paris); *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5, p. 109, art. "Dominical Letter"; *The World Book Encyclopedia*, Vol. 18, p. 7700, art. "Week"; F. G. Moore, *The Roman's World*, p. 282.

#### Caesar's Other Calendar

It was in the first century before Christ that Rome began to play a big military role in the affairs of Egypt and Asia. The relations between the Romans and the peoples beyond the waters of the Mediterranean Sea then became more intimate. The tide of foreign philosophy, magic, astrology, mysteries, and cults, already rolling westward into Italy and the rest of Europe, increased in volume.

Foreign astronomical science at this time won the respect of the Romans in a special manner. As Pontifex Maximus, it was Julius Caesar's lot to regulate the civil calendar. When he assumed that office, the calendar was found in great disorder and confusion because of the neglect and abuse it had suffered in the hands of his predecessors.<sup>2</sup> The following account of this reform, as described by Theo. Mommsen, is excellent:

"Caesar finally removed this evil, and with the help of the Greek mathematician Sosigenes introduced the Italian farmer's year regulated according to the Egyptian calendar of Eudoxus,<sup>3</sup> as well as a rational system of intercalation, into religious and official use; while at the same time the beginning of the year on the 1st March of the old calendar was abolished, and the date of the 1st January—fixed at first as the official term for changing the supreme magistrates and, in consequence of this, long since prevailing in civil life—was assumed also as the calendar period for commencing the year. Both changes came into effect on the 1st January 709 [A. U. C.], and along with them the use of the Julian calendar so named after its author, which long after the fall of the monarchy of Caesar remained the regulative standard of the civilized world and in the main is so still. By way of explanation there was added in a detailed edict a star calendar derived

from the Egyptian astronomical observations and transferred—not indeed very skillfully—to Italy, which fixed the rising and setting of the stars according to the days of the calendar.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The regulation of the Roman civil calendar was the duty of the Pontifex Maximus and his associates, and they were charged with having confused it for political reasons by abuse of their privilege of making the intercalations necessary to keep it in order. See Cicero, *Pro Murena*, chap. 11, in Loeb Classical Library, *Cicero, In Catilinam I-IV, Pro Murena, Pro Sulla, Pro Flacco*, pp. 175, 177; Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, book 40, chap. 62, in Loeb Classical Library, *Dio's Roman History*, Vol. 3, pp. 501, 503; Plutarch, *Lives*, “Caesar,” chap. 59, in Loeb Classical Library, *Plutarch's Lives*, Vol. 7, p. 581; *Harper's Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities*, pp. 1299, 1300, art. “Pontifex.”

<sup>5</sup> The Egyptian year consisted of 12 months of 30 days each. Five extra days, which were regarded as religious feasts, were added at the end of the twelfth month to make up the total of 365 days. See M. Brodrick, *Egypt Under the Pharaohs*, p. 455. Julius Caesar adapted the Roman calendar to the Egyptian plan of the year, except that he distributed the five extra days throughout the year by adding an extra day to some months.

<sup>6</sup> Theo. Mommsen, *The History of Rome*, Vol. 5, pp. 438, 439.

Caesar's edict about the stars was not liked by some, for Plutarch says: “However, even this furnished occasion for blame to those who envied Caesar and disliked his power. At any rate, Cicero the orator, we are told, when some one remarked that Lyra would rise on the morrow, said: ‘Yes, by decree,’ implying that men were compelled to accept even this dispensation.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Plutarch, *Lives*, “Caesar,” chap. 59, in Loeb Classical Library, *Plutarch's Lives*, Vol. 7. p. 581.

Little is known about that other “*star calendar* derived from the Egyptian astronomical observations,” which Caesar “added in a detailed edict” to the Roman people. It may be that the pagan week of days under the regency of the wandering stars or planets figured as a part of it. We shall see in a later chapter how Dio Cassius expressly declares that the planetary week came to Rome from Egypt.

While the exact date of the adoption of the planetary week by the Romans is not known, it was in use among them in the first century before the birth of Christ. And now we shall note the evidence which shows that this is a historical fact.

### **Pompey in 63 B. C.**

After Queen Salome Alexandra, ruler of the Jews, died in 70 B. C., there arose a dispute about which of her two sons should succeed her. The Pharisees supported the cause of Aristobulus II, while the Sadducees were on the side of Hyrcanus II. Aristobulus appealed by letter to Pompey, the great Roman consul, to arbitrate in the matter. Pompey was at that time occupied in a military campaign in Asia, but when he came to Damascus he received the envoys of the rival brothers. However, he delayed in making a decision, and Aristobulus, becoming impatient, assumed the power at Jerusalem. This act of disrespect angered the Roman general and brought him to a decision at once. He proceeded immediately to the Jewish capital and besieged the city for three months.

Dio Cassius, a Roman historian who wrote in Greek (about 230 A. D.), explains the strategy employed by Pompey in taking Jerusalem. He says:

“If they [the Jews] had continued defending it [the temple] on all days alike, he could not have got possession of it. As it was, they made an exception of what are called the days of Saturn, and by doing no work at all on those days, afforded the Romans an opportunity in this interval to batter down the wall. The latter, on learning of this superstitious awe of theirs, made no serious attempts the rest of the time, but on those days, when they came around in succession, assaulted most vigorously. Thus the defenders were captured on the day of Saturn without making any defense, and all the wealth was plundered. The kingdom was given to Hyrcanus, and Aristobulus was carried away.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, book 37, chap. 16, in Loeb Classical Library, *Dio's Roman History*, Vol. 3, pp. 125, 127.

In passing, the Roman historian also made the following comment upon the Jewish custom of observing the Sabbath: “They are distinguished from the rest of mankind in practically every detail of life and especially by the fact that they do not honor any of the usual gods, but show extreme reverence for one particular divinity. They never had any statue of him even in Jerusalem itself, but believing him to be unnamable and invisible, they worship him in the most extravagant fashion on earth. They built to him a temple that was extremely large and beautiful except in so far as it was open and roofless,<sup>7</sup> and likewise dedicated to him the day called the day of Saturn, on which, among many other most peculiar observances, they undertake no serious occupation.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dio Cassius apparently mistook the open court of the temple for the building proper, for which reason he spoke of it as being roofless.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 17, in Loeb Classical Library, *Dio's Roman History*, Vol. 3, pp. 127, 129.

### **Dio Cassius' Testimony Confirmed**

The important fact for us to note in this story of the capture of Jerusalem by Pompey in 63 B. C., is that the day of Saturn in the planetary week of the pagans then corresponded to the Sabbath or seventh day of the Biblical week of the Jews. The testimony of Dio Cassius is confirmed by that of Josephus, the Hebrew historian, who was a contemporary of the apostles. Josephus's account of the siege runs thus:

Nor had the Romans succeeded in their endeavors, had not Pompey taken notice of the seventh days, on which the Jews abstain from all sorts of work on a religious account, and raised his bank, but restrained<sup>9</sup> his soldiers from fighting on those days; for the Jews only acted defensively on Sabbath days.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> There may seem to be an apparent contradiction between the account of Josephus and that of Dio Cassius about the Roman soldiers and their activities on the Sabbath days. It should be noted, however, that Josephus is speaking of the preparation the Romans made for the final assault. Hence it appears that while the Romans were raising their bank of earth they did not engage in battle with the Jews on the Sabbath days, but when the time for the big attack came round, they chose to make it on the Sabbath day.

<sup>10</sup> Josephus. *Wars of the Jews*, book 1, chap. 7, sec. 3, in *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, p. 618.

“Had it not been for our practice, from the days of our forefathers, to rest on the seventh day, this bank [thrown up by Pompey] could never have been perfected, by reason of the opposition the Jews would have made; for though our law gives us leave then to defend ourselves against those that begin to fight us and assault us, yet does it not permit us to meddle with our enemies while they do anything else. Which thing when the Romans understood, on those days which we call Sabbaths they threw nothing at the Jews, nor came to any pitched battle with them<sup>11</sup> but raised up their earthen banks, and brought their engines into such forwardness, that they might do execution the next day....The city was taken on the third month, on the day of the fast, upon the hundred and seventy-ninth olympiad, when Caius Antonius and Marcus Tullius Cicero were consuls.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See footnote 9.

<sup>12</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, book 14, chap. 4, secs. 2, 3, in *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, p. 413.

Josephus adds, in the same account, that his testimony was confirmed by the writings of Strabo, Nicolaus of Damascus, and Titus Livius (Livy).

Strabo, the Greek geographer who was born perhaps in the year that Pompey captured Jerusalem, wrote thus: “Pompey seized the city, it is said, after watching for the day of fasting, when the Judaeans were abstaining from all work; he filled up the trench and threw ladders across”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, book 16, chap. 2, sec. 40, in Loeb Classical Library, *The Geography of Strabo*, Vol. 7, p. 291.

Herod Agrippa (mentioned in Acts 25 and 26), when urging the Jewish leaders not to rebel against the Roman power in 66 A. D., referred to the capture of Jerusalem by Pompey in 63 B. C., saying: “And if you do observe the custom of the Sabbath-days, ... you will easily be taken, as were your forefathers by Pompey, who was the busiest in his siege on those days on which the besieged rested.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, book 2, chap. 16, sec. 4, in *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, p. 62.

### **Gaius Sosius in 37 B. C.**

In 37 B. C. the state of political affairs at Jerusalem was similar to that existing at the time of Pompey’s intervention. Antigonos, son of Aristobulus II, had been taken with his father to Rome, but later succeeded in escaping and returning to Palestine. He then attempted to make himself ruler over the Jews. The Romans, in the meantime, had lent their support to Herod, their Idumean collector in chief of taxes there. This Herod was the one who later slew the babes of Bethlehem (Matthew 2) in an attempt to destroy the Messiah. With the help of the Parthians, Antigonos seated himself in Jerusalem and tenaciously opposed the ambitious Herod. The latter obtained the help of Antony, the Roman consul, who ordered Gaius Sosius, the governor of Syria, to use the army to support Herod. Sosius, in command of the Roman troops, proceeded to depose Antigonos and establish Herod in Jerusalem. Dio Cassius wrote thus about it:

“This officer...conquered in battle Antigonus, who had put to death the Roman guards that were with him, and reduced him by siege when he took refuge in Jerusalem. The Jews, indeed, had done much injury to the Romans, for the race is very bitter when aroused to anger, but they suffered far more themselves. The first of them to be captured were those who were fighting for the precinct of their god, and then the rest on the day even then called the day of Saturn. And so excessive were they in their devotion to religion that the first set of prisoners, those who had been captured along with the temple, obtained leave from Sosius, when the day of Saturn came round again, and went up into the temple and there performed all the customary rites, together with the rest of the people.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, book 49, chap. 22, in Loeb Classical Library, *Dio's Roman History*, Vol. 5, p. 387.

While Josephus does not mention the day of the week, he does say that this siege of Jerusalem was begun in “summer time” and in “a sabbatic year,” and gives the date in these words: “This destruction befell the city of Jerusalem when Marcus Agrippa and Caninius Gallus were consuls of Rome, on the hundred eighty and fifth olympiad, on the third month, on the solemnity of the fast, as if a periodical revolution of calamities had returned since that which befell the Jews under Pompey; for the Jews were taken by him on the same day, and this was after twenty-seven years’ time.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, book 14, chap. 16, sec. 4, in *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, p. 443.

It should be especially noted that the pagan Roman historian, in referring to the Sabbath, declared that in 37 B. C. it was “the day *even then called the day of Saturn*.”<sup>17</sup> This unmistakably shows that the practice of calling the days after the names of the planetary gods was in some vogue among the Romans *before* the birth of Christ.

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<sup>17</sup> “

ἐν τῇ τοῦ Κρόνου καὶ τότε ἡμέρα ὦνο

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### On the Day of Jupiter

Horace (Q. Horatius Flaccus), the distinguished Roman poet who “was born on December 8, 65 B. C., two years before the birth of Augustus Caesar, and ten years before the first invasion of Britain by Julius, in the consulship of L. Aurelius Cotta and L. Manlius Torquatus,”<sup>18</sup> is our next witness for the antiquity of the pagan week. He is said to have died in November, 8 B. C. “But more remarkable is the fact that Horace (Sat. II, iii. 290), writing about 35 B. C., could represent an ordinary superstitious mother as making a vow for next Thursday (*Jovis dies*).”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., Vol. 11 p. 739, art. “Horace.”

<sup>19</sup> J Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 12, p. 104, art. “Sunday.”

Horace wrote in Latin, and here is the passage referred to above: “‘O Jupiter, who givest and takest away sore afflictions,’ cries the mother of a child that for five long months has been ill abed, ‘if the quartan chills leave my child, then on the morning of the day on which thou appointest a fast, he shall stand naked in the Tiber.’”<sup>20</sup>

The translator, H. R. Fairclough, says in a footnote: “This would be *dies Iovis* [the day of Jupiter], corresponding to our Thursday.”<sup>21</sup> This interpretation agrees with that of Pomponius Porphyrio, a Latin grammarian of the second century A. D., who wrote a commentary on the works of Horace. On this particular point, this Roman commentator said: “On the morning of the day on which thou appointest: *die Iovis* [on the day of Jupiter].”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Horace, *Satires*, book 2, Satire 3, lines 288-290, in Loeb Classical Library, *Horace, Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*, p. 177.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Pomponius Porphyrio, *Commentaries on Q. Horace Flaccus*, discourse 2, chap. 3, line 290, in Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum, *Pomponii Porphyronis Commentarii in Q. Horatium Flaccum*, p. 259, author’s translation.

### “The Sacred Day of Saturn”

Albius Tibullus is another Latin poet who is often quoted to show that the pagan week of days dedicated to the planetary gods was in use among the Romans in the first century B. C. He lived between 54 and 19 B. C., and was a Latin elegiac poet, a contemporary of Horace. In one of his poems he explains why he delayed leaving his beloved Delia, saying: “Either I blamed the birds, or words of bad omen; or that the sacred day of Saturn had held me back.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Tibullus, *Elegies*, book 1, Elegy 3, lines 17, 18, in Loeb Classical Library, *Catullus, Tibullus, Pervigilium Veneris*, p. 206, author’s translation.

The day of Saturn in the pagan astrological week was invariably regarded as an unlucky day (*dies nefastus*) for undertaking matters of importance. This was merely a superstitious notion, and was not based on any regard for Saturday as the sacred Sabbath of the Holy Scriptures. Sextus Propertius (who flourished from 80 to 15 B. C.), also a Latin elegiac poet and a contemporary of Tibullus, shows that this superstitious notion concerning Saturn was current in the astrology of that time. He said:

“Now have men turned the gods to profit and Jupiter is fooled by their gold; to profit have they turned the oft-scanned constellations of the slanting zodiac, the blessed star of Jove, the greedy star of Mars, *the sign of Saturn that brings woe to one and all*, the purport of [the constellation of] the Fish and the fierce constellation of the Lion and [that of] Capricorn, bathed in the waters of the West.”<sup>24</sup> (Italics mine.)

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<sup>24</sup> Propertius, *Elegies*, book 4, Elegy 1, lines 81-86, in Loeb Classical Library, *Propertius*, pp. 269, 271.

### The Sabine Calendar

In 1795 were found the marble fragments of what is known as the Sabine Calendar (*Fasti Sabini*), in a place in central Italy. These portions represent the months of September and October in the Julian calendar.<sup>25</sup> The experts in this type of archaeological finds have declared them to belong to the reign of Augustus Caesar, and that they were in use between 19 B. C. and 4 A. D. (that is, between the years 735 and 757 of the foundation of the city of Rome). The first column, of figures, indicates the days of the month in their numerical order. The second column, of capital letters, shows the seven days of the week in their order, as follows: A, B, C, D, E, F, G. The third column lists in order, by the letters A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H, the recurrence of the market days, which were called *nundinae*. These are thus called because according to common Roman reckoning the market day came around every ninth (*nonus*) day, but according to our common mode of computation they fell every eight days.

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<sup>25</sup> The Sabine Calendar is shown in *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, 1863 ed., Vol. 1, part 2, p. 302.

The following statement by Herbert Thurston, a well-known Roman Catholic authority, makes a very enlightening reference to this Sabine Calendar: “When the Oriental seven-day period, or week, was introduced, in the time of Augustus, the first seven letters of the alphabet were employed in the same way [as done for the *nundinae*], to indicate the days of this new division of time. In fact, fragmentary calendars on marble still survive in which both a cycle of eight letters—A to H—indicating *nundinae*, and a cycle of seven letters—A to G—indicating weeks, are used side by side (see ‘*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*,’ 2d ed., I, 220.—The same peculiarity occurs in the Philocalian Calendar of A. D. 356 [354], *ibid.*, p. 256). This device was imitated by the Christians, and in their calendars the days of the year from 1 January to 31 December were marked with a continuous recurring cycle of seven letters: A, B, C, D, E, F, G.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Herbert Thurston, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5, p. 109, art. “Dominical Letter.”

Sept.

7 s b C ////////////////  
 8 F C C LVDI  
 9 G D C LVDI  
 10 A E C LVDI  
 11 B F C LVDI  
 12 C G N LVDI  
 13 D H E I D IOVI EPVL  
 XIX  
 14 E A F equoR PROB  
 15 F B N ////////////////  
 16 G C C ////////////////  
 17 A D C in CIRco  
 18 B E C in CIRco  
 19 C F C ////////////////  
 20 D G C ////////////////  
 21 E H C ////////////////  
 22 F A C ////////////////  
 23 G B F ////////////////  
 24 A C C ////////////////  
 25 b D C ////////////////

Oct.

//////////  
 10 C C C IVNONI M  
 11 D D M E D N P  
 12 E E A V G N P  
 13 F F F O N T  
 14 G G E N  
 15 A H E I D  
 XVII  
 16 B A F  
 17 C B C  
 18 D C C  
 19 E D A R M  
 20 F E C  
 21 G F C  
 22 A G C  
 23 B H C  
 24 C A C  
 25 D B C  
 26 E C C LVD VIC per  
 SVLL · COMM  
 27 F D C LVDI  
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This fragment of a stone calendar was found in the Sabine territory of Italy, and shows portions of the months of September and October. Archaeologists affirm that it belongs to the reign of Augustus Caesar, and was in use between 19 B. C. and 4 A. D. It registers the market days (*mundinae*) by the letters A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H, and the days of the week by the letters A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. (See *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, 1863 ed., Vol. 1, part 2, p. 302.)

While there is nothing in these fragments of the Sabine Calendar to show that its weekly cycle, which began with the letter A, did start with the day of Saturn, yet we may well suppose that it did, because the natural order in other early calendars and lists places *dies Saturni* foremost in the pagan series of the seven days.

The chief significance of this Sabine Calendar, in so far as our study is concerned, is that it shows that by the time Christ was born, the cycle of the seven days had already begun to figure as a calendar feature in the reign of Augustus Caesar.