

CHAPTER 8

The Planetary Week in the Second Century A. D.

HAVING traced the use of the pagan planetary week among the Romans from the middle of the first century before Christ, we naturally expect to find it a well-established institution in the heathen world at the beginning of the second century of the Christian Era. Such is the case, and the monuments of this period shed considerable light upon the subject.

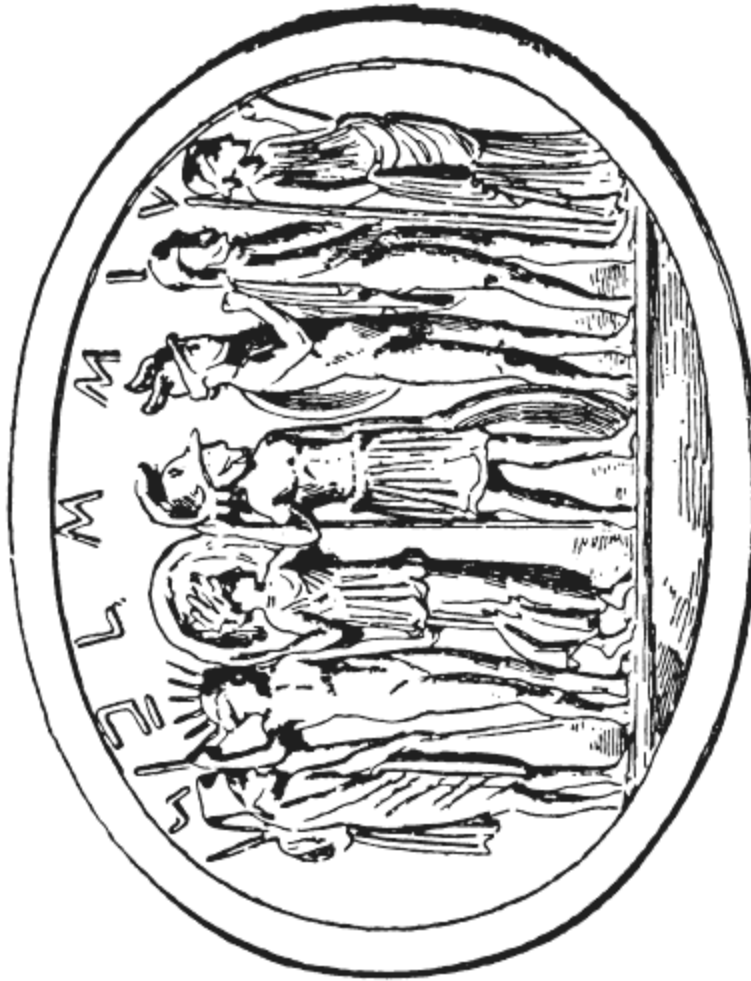
“Named...After the Different Days”

The first item of interest in the second century is a reference to the Roman baths of the emperor Trajan (98-117 A. D.). Aelius Lampridius, a Latin writer who lived at the beginning of the fourth century, wrote an account of the life of the emperor Alexander Severus (222-235 A. D.), in which he said:

“He restored the public works of former emperors and built many new ones himself, among them the bath which was called by his own name, adjacent to what had been the Neronian and also the aqueduct which still has the name Alexandriana. Next to this bath he planted a grove of trees on the site of some private dwelling which he purchased and then tore down. One bathtub he called ‘the Ocean’—and he was the first of the emperors to do this, for Trajan had not done this but had merely called his tubs after the different days.”¹

¹ Aeliu, Lampridius, *Severus Alexander*, chap. 25, in Loeb Classical Library, *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Vol. 2, p. 225.

This engraved stone of Roman times shows the planetary gods of the days of the astrological week in their usual order. Above each god appears the initial letter of his Latin name. From left to right they are: *S* (*aturus*), *M* (*ars*), *M* (*ercurius*), *J* (*ovis*), *V* (*enus*). (See Victor Duruy, *History of Rome*, Vol. 7, part 2, p. 488.)



In this reference to Trajan's bathtubs having been named after "the different days," no specific mention is made concerning their number or their individual names. But it is believed to refer to the planetary names of the seven days of the pagan week, because the days of the months were *numbered* instead of named, and were also too numerous for this purpose.

Plutarch Wrote an Explanation

Plutarch, the celebrated Greek writer whose *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* is a well-known classic of ancient times, also composed a treatise entitled *Symposiacs*, most of which has been preserved unto this day. In this work the author presented a great deal of useful information, using the question-and-answer method so popular in his time. It may properly be regarded as a sort of encyclopedia of information about established customs and practices of that age. Plutarch wrote between 100 and 125 A. D., and doubtless lived for many years a contemporary of the apostle John.

Question 7 in Book IV of his *Symposiacs* is stated thus: “Why the Days Which Have the Names of the Planets Are Not Arranged According to the Order of the Planets, but the Contrary. There Is Added a Discourse on the Position of the Sun.”² Unfortunately, the text of this particular part of the work is lost, and consequently Plutarch’s explanation of the question has not been preserved to us. Nevertheless, the statement of the question itself suffices to show that the practice of calling the days after the names of the planets was in vogue in the world at the beginning of the second century after Christ. We have noted the order of the planets in the geocentric system of astronomy of that period: Saturn (farthest), Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and Moon (nearest). In the cycle of the pagan week the days were named after the planets in the following order: Saturn, Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, and Venus. Information explaining the reason why the order of the planets in the cycle of the week was different from that in the current astronomical concept of the universe, might reasonably be regarded as useful and entertaining for the common people.

² *Plutarch’s Complete Works*, Vol. 3, p. 230.

Tacitus and Saturn’s Day

Tacitus, the annalist whose historical treatises, compiled in Latin, cover the reigns of the Roman emperors of the first century of the Christian Era, apparently wrote during the rule of Trajan (98-117 A. D.). He died early in the reign of Hadrian. He, too, was for a time a contemporary of the apostle John. In relating the story of the capture of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. by the armies of Vespasian and Titus, this historian gives the following absurd explanation of the origin of the Hebrew people:

“It is said that the Jews were originally exiles from the island of Crete who settled in the farthest parts of Libya at the time when Saturn had been deposed and expelled by Jove [Jupiter]. An argument in favor of this is derived from the name: there is a famous mountain in Crete called Ida, and hence the inhabitants were called the Idaei [Idaeans], which was later lengthened into the barbarous form Iudaei [Judaeans].”³

³ Tacitus, *The Histories*, book 5, chap. 2, in Loeb Classical Library, *Tacitus, Histories, Annals*, Vol. 2, p. 177.

This supposition that the Jews came from Crete is connected with the popular myth of that time that the island of Crete was the birthplace of most of the gods. It was believed that Caelus

(*Ouranos*, Heaven) and his wife Terra (*Gaia*, Earth) brought forth a mighty progeny of Titans—six males and six females. The youngest of the male children was Saturn (*Chronos*, Time). Their father hated his offspring, and soon after they were born he thrust them out of his sight by placing them in a cave, apparently in Crete itself. Terra was grieved at her husband's conduct, and she produced "the substance of hoary steel" from which she made them a sickle. Then she aroused her children to rebel against their father. All were afraid, except Saturn. He took the sickle and, waylaying Caelus, mutilated him with it. Thereupon Saturn seized his father's kingdom and ruled with the consent of his brethren, who made him promise that he should bring forth no male children. Therefore Saturn always devoured his sons as soon as they were born. His wife, Rhea, who was also his sister, concealed three of their sons—Jupiter, Neptune, and Pluto—in order that their father might not destroy them. When the other Titans, the brothers and sisters of Saturn, heard that he had male children living, they dethroned him and imprisoned his wife. Jupiter, however, was secretly reared in Crete and later attempted to deliver his father. Saturn, in turn, became unmindful of this kindness on the part of his son and conspired against him. Jupiter then banished Saturn from Crete.⁴

⁴ See W. S. Fox, *The Mythology of All Races*, Vol. 1, pp. 4-10.

The pagan notion that the Hebrew people were devotees of Saturn was based on the fact that the Jews observed the Sabbath as a very holy day, which day in the heathen week was regarded as sacred to Saturn. Thus some of the pagans supposed that the Jews kept the Sabbath out of regard for the planetary god Saturn, and that the Jewish people originally came from Crete. Tacitus, indeed, offered such an explanation concerning the rest which the Israelites observed on the seventh day, saying:

"They were pleased to have a rest on the seventh day, because it brought a release from work. Later, because they became softened by inactivity, the seventh year was also given to idleness. Some hold it to be an honor to Saturn, or perhaps the Idaeans gave them this part of their religion, who [the Idaeans], as we have said before, were expelled together with Saturn, and who, as we have been informed, were the founders of this [Jewish] nation; or else it was because the star [Saturn] moves in the highest sphere, and of the seven planets exerts the principal part of that energy whereby mankind are governed; and indeed most of the heavenly bodies exert their power and fulfill their courses according to the number seven."⁵

⁵ Tacitus, *The Histories*, book 5, chap. 2, in Loeb Classical Library, *Tacitus, Histories, Annals*, Vol. 2, p. 180, author's translation.

The association of the Sabbath day with the planet Saturn, as done by Tacitus, can be explained only by the fact that the seventh day of the Biblical week, which the Jews observed, corresponded to the day of the pagan week that the heathen called "the day of Saturn."

Vettius Valens Used the Planetary Week

"The most extensive of the astrological treatises which have come down to us," says a modern authority, "is the work of a writer from Antioch in the second century A. D., Vettius Valens."⁶

⁶ *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 11, p. 643. See also F. Cumont, *Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans*, p. 62; *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, p. 171.

F. H. Colson, in his interesting work, says this about the astrologer: “His importance lies in the fact that he may most probably be dated as early as the middle of the second century A. D. This is to be inferred from the period within which he sets the dates which he takes as examples for astrological calculation. For instance in his chapter on the week (p. 26, Kroll’s edition), he gives directions by which a person knowing the year and month and day of his birth may calculate on what day of the week it fell. The example he gives is what would be in our calendar 7th Feb. A. D. 119, and no date used in this way is later than 158.”⁷

⁷ F. H. Colson, *The Week*, p. 47.

The astrologer gave directions for finding the day of the week on which the given day of the month of any year fell. He used the Egyptian calendar reckoning, and takes as a starting point the beginning of the Era of Augustus, assuming that it started on Sunday, 1st of Thoth. In one instance he calculates that the 18th of Phamenoth in the 13th year of the reign of Trajan (98-117 A. D.) fell on the day of Saturn. In another example he reckons that the 13th of Mechir in the 4th year of the reign of Hadrian (117-138 A. D.) fell on the day of Venus.⁸ Some have attempted to compute these dates according to the Julian calendar, but the results have been divergent, because there is a variation of opinion about the day of the month of August on which the Era of Augustus began, and about intercalations made in the Egyptian calendar to make up for the leap years. The astrologer wrote in Greek, and although his method of computation may not be fully explained, there still remains the unquestioned fact that he did use the planetary week of the pagans and called the days by the names of their corresponding planets.

⁸ G. Kroll and A. Olivieri, *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum*, Vol. 2, pp. 103-105.

The List of Lucius Ampeius

Lucius Ampelius, who was probably a schoolteacher and lived in the first half of the second century after Christ, wrote in Latin a treatise entitled *Liber Memorialis* in which he presents a sketch of world history up to the time of the reign of Trajan (98-117 A. D.). In this work he says:

“The most powerful stars in the sky are seven: Saturn, Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, which by the Greeks are called planets, but by us are called wandering stars, because of their own volition they wander about and by their movement the doings of men are regulated: and likewise they are borne in a course contrary to that of the heaven.”⁹

While it is true that Ampelius does not specifically mention the week, it is believed that he had in mind the astrological order of the planets according to the days over which they were supposed to preside. No other explanation can be given for his listing the planets as he did, except that he did it according to the order of the days of the pagan week.

Comment by Pomponius Porphyrio

Another Latin writer who lived about this time was Pomponius Porphyrio, who wrote a commentary on the *Satires* of the Roman poet Horace. As already mentioned, Horace said in one passage that the mother of a sick child made a vow to Jupiter that if he would heal her little one of the fever, she would have the boy stand naked in the river Tiber in the morning on the day of the fast appointed by that planetary god.

In his comment on this particular point, Pomponius Porphyrio says: “On the morning of the day on which thou appointest: die Iovis [on the day of Jupiter].”¹⁰ Hence this grammarian explains to the readers of Horace’s *Satires* that the day on which the fast referred to was appointed is the one currently called *dies Iovis*. Otherwise his explanation would have been unintelligible.

¹⁰ Pomponius Porphyrio, *Commentaries Q. Horace Flaccus*, discourse 2, chap. 3, line 290, in *Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graccorum et Romanorum, Pomponii Porphyronis, Commentarii in Q. Horatium Flaccum*, p. 259, author’s translation.

Justin Martyr and the Pagan Week

Thus far our principal ancient witnesses to the early use of the planetary week in the Roman Empire have been pagans. Now we have the first testimony from a professed Christian writer. Justin Martyr, the philosopher, wrote during the latter part of the reign of Antoninus Pius (138-161 A. D.) an apology for the Christian religion, which he addressed to this emperor, to his son, and to the Roman people in general. It was written in the Greek tongue. Telling how Sunday keepers among Christians then celebrated the Lord’s supper, Justin said:

“On that called the day of the Sun an assembly is had of all those dwelling in the cities and rural districts....And the day of the Sun we make an assembling of all together, because it is the first day, on which God, having changed the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour rose from the dead on the same day. For on the [day] before that of Saturn they crucified Him; and on the [day] after the [day] of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught these things just as we have submitted to you for consideration.”¹¹

¹¹ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chap. 67, in 3. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 6, cols. 429, 432, author’s translation; standard English translation in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 186.

Although Justin referred twice to Mithraism—the cult of the Invincible Sun so popular in the Roman Empire at that time—in his *Dialogue With Trypho the Jew* (chaps. 70, 78), he never mentioned the days of the week by their planetary names. There he used the Biblical nomenclature, repeatedly referring to the seventh day as “the Sabbath.” Of the first day of the week he wrote: “For the first day of the week, having continued the first of all the days of the cycle, is called the eighth, and remains being the first.”¹²

¹² Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, chap. 41, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 6, col. 565, author's translation; standard English translation in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 215.

What are we to gather from this? It must be that in each case Justin adapted his language to the class of readers whom he addressed, and that to the pagans the terms “the day of the Sun” and “the day of Saturn” were familiar designations of the days which were first and seventh in the Jewish and Christian week.

Avidius Cassius and the Week

In the reign of Diocletian (284-305 A. D.), Vulcatius Gallicanus, a Roman senator, wrote in Latin a story of the life of Avidius Cassius, the tyrannical general of the armies of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180 A. D.). In the following statement there is what many believe to be a reference to the week:

“On the seventh day he inspected the arms of the soldiers, also the clothing, shoes and leggings. He banished all dissipations from the camp, and he commanded them to spend the winter under the tents, unless they should mend their ways; and they would have done it had they not lived more decently. The exercise of the seventh day was of all the soldiers, that they should shoot arrows and exercise with arms.”¹³

¹³ Vulcatus Gallicanus, Avidius Cassius, chap. 6, in Loeb Classical Library,

Scriptorei Historiae Augustae, Vol. 1, p. 244, author's translation.

“On the Day of Mercury”

Among the Roman sepulchral inscriptions preserved from the second century, there appears one in Latin which states that a certain L. Caecilius was “born in the month of May, at the sixth hour of the night, on the day of Mercury; he lived six years and 33 days, and died on the third day before the Kalends of July.”¹⁴ In the marginal note the collector states that Joseph Scaliger, the noted chronologist, has computed the date to be May 27, 179 A. D., which fell on Wednesday (the day of Mercury).

¹⁴ I J Gruterus, *Inscriptiones Antiquae Togius Orbis Romani*, Vol. 2, p. 965, No. 1.

Clement of Alexandria

We see an allusion to the planetary gods and their respective days in the pagan week in the following passage from Clement, another witness professing the Christian faith. He became a teacher of the Christian school in Alexandria, Egypt, where the influence of Gnosticism was great, and wrote extensively in Greek until about 200 A. D. He said:

“He [the Gnostic] understands also the meaning of the fourth [day] and of the preparation [day]. For they are called, the one, of Mercury, and the other, of Venus. Wherefore, he fasts [or

abstains] throughout his lifetime from the love of silver and from the love of pleasure, from which all evils flow.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, book 7, chap. 12 in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 9, col. 504, author’s translation; standard English translation in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2, p. 544.

Wednesdays and Fridays (the days of Mercury and Venus) were then (and Fridays still are) fast days in the Roman Catholic Church. J. N. Andrews comments thus upon Clement’s statement:

“As in heathen mythology Mercury is the god of commerce and Venus the goddess of beauty and love, playing upon this, Clement justifies the position of the Gnostic, who repudiates literal fasting, and, instead, abstains ‘from avarice and from lust.’”¹⁶

¹⁶ J. N. Andrews, *History of the Sabbath*, p. 352.

In another passage Clement also refers to “the seven days” and “the seven planets,” as follows:

“And the Lord’s day is understood by these [words] in the tenth [book] of *The Republic* by Plato: ‘But after seven days have passed to each one of them in the meadow, having risen up, they are to set out from there on the eighth, and to arrive in four [days].’ By the meadow is understood the fixed sphere, as a tranquil and quiet region, a place of the pious; but by the seven days [is meant] each movement of the seven planets, and all the busy mechanism speeding on to the end of rest. But after the wandering orbs, the journey leads to heaven, that is, to the eighth movement and day. And in four days the souls are gone, he says, showing the journey through the four elements. Not only the Hebrews, but also the Greeks, know the sacred hebdomad, according to which revolves the whole world of all the animal and plant life.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, book 5, chap. 14, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 9 col. 161, author’s translation; standard English translation in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2, p. 469.

Here Clement had in mind the current notion of a geocentric universe, in which the hebdomad of planets revolved around the central earth. Beyond these moved the firmament of fixed stars—the outer sphere. In their journey to heaven—the eighth, or fixed, sphere—the souls of the righteous were supposed to traverse the four elements—earth, water, air, and fire—and the seven heavens of the planets which presided over the days of the week. Thus Clement concluded that the heathen Greeks had received a divine revelation of the plan of the universe and a knowledge of the week.

In another passage Clement alluded to the planetary week, saying: “The robe of the high priest is a symbol of the world of sense. The five stones and the two carbuncles [symbolize] the seven planets, from Saturn to the Moon. The former is southern, and moist, and earthy, and heavy; the latter aerial, whence Artemis [Moon] is spoken of by some as being *aeroctonos* [cutting the air], and gloomy [is] the air. And working together in this creation of things, those that by Divine

Providence are set over the planets are rightly represented as placed on the breast and shoulders; through whom [was effected] the work of the creation, the first week.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Ibid., chap. 6, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 9, col. 64, author’s translation; standard English translation in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2, p. 453.

The Gnostics generally regarded the planets as being the abodes of seven supernatural beings (aeons), who were inferior in nature to the great World Creator (Demiurge), who resided in the eighth heaven (the sphere of the fixed stars). The hebdomad of planetary aeons were believed to be the rulers of the material universe. Gnosticism in the early church was but an attempt to accommodate the Christian religion to the popular science, falsely so called, of that epoch.¹⁹

¹⁹ 1 Timothy 6:20.