

# SUNDAY

## IN ROMAN PAGANISM

*A history of the planetary week and its  
"day of the Sun" in the heathenism of  
the Roman world during the early cen-  
turies of the Christian Era*

*By*  
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SATURN



SUN



MOON



MARS



MERCURY



JUPITER



VENUS

These are portraits of the seven gods of the days of the planetary week in use in Roman paganism at the beginning of the Christian Era. They are thus depicted in a painting found in the ruins of Herculaneum, a Roman town destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A. D. 79. (See H. Roux, Ainé, and M. L. Barré, *Herculaneum et Pompéi*, Vol. 5, pp. 106-110, plates 57-59.)

## *THE WEEK*

THE Sun still rules the week's initial day,  
The Moon o'er Monday yet retains the sway;  
But Tuesday, which to Mars was whilom given,  
Is Tuesco's subject in the northern heaven;  
And Woden hath the charge of Wednesday,  
Which did belong of old to Mercury;  
And Jove himself surrenders his own day  
To Thor, a barbarous god of Saxon clay:  
Friday, who under Venus once did wield  
Love's balmy spells, must now to Frea yield;  
While Saturn still holds fast his day, but loses  
The Sabbath, which the central Sun abuses.\*

\* By a quaint poet of the last century, quoted by R. Chambers in *The Book of Days*, Vol 1, p. 6.

## **Foreword**

DURING the past hundred years there have been published in divers languages several learned discussions about the week in use among ancient pagan peoples. These discourses have appeared in print mostly in the form of periodical articles, and occasionally as chapters in books treating principally on the subject of the calendar, the Sabbath, and kindred topics. Frequently they have been nothing more than a few paragraphs of passing remarks made in connection with other matters of history. Little has been done thus far to compile such historical material into one volume and make it easy of access for the general public.

The week that was so popular in ancient paganism was an astrological institution, which we shall designate as "the planetary week," because its days were named after a hebdomad of heavenly bodies called "planets," which were worshiped as gods by the heathen.

Modern archaeological research has added a vast amount of data to the world's knowledge of the distant past, with the result that a more comprehensive study of our topic is now possible. Indeed, it is time for the appearance of a book on the subject chosen as the theme of this treatise—"Sunday in Roman Paganism." The reasons why such a work is timely are these:

1. A clearer understanding of the social and religious life of paganism during the early years of the Christian religion helps to solve some of the problems encountered in the study of church history.

2. The new historical data now available afford a more complete story than we hitherto have had of the week of seven days that is in our calendar today, and explain more clearly why the days have the heathen names of *Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday*.

3. A better knowledge of the religious customs of the pagan world of the Roman period gives a sharper perspective to the study of the Sabbath-Sunday question, which is commanding more and more attention and investigation.

4. The agitation on the part of some for governmental laws imposing Sunday observance upon the people calls for a more careful study of the rise of Sunday legislation among the nations.

5. A definite answer is needed to this question: "Was Sunday the day esteemed by the Sun worshipers of Roman paganism as sacred to the Sun?"

The question here raised is one that has been debated much in modern times. Seventh-day Adventists and many others have affirmed that in the Roman Empire Sunday was the day which the heathen regarded as sacred to the Sun-god. For example, Mrs. E. G. White, a writer of authority among Seventh-day Adventists, speaks of Sunday as "the pagan festival,"<sup>1</sup> and declares that it is "a day handed down by the heathen and papists."<sup>2</sup> She also says that it was "the festival observed by the heathen as 'the venerable day of the Sun.'"<sup>3</sup> And in explaining how Constantine (306-337 A. D.) came to issue his famous Sunday law of 321 A. D., she says: "The day of the Sun was revered by his pagan subjects."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 4, p. 391.

<sup>2</sup> *Early Writings*, pp. 255, 256.

<sup>3</sup> *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Are such statements about Sunday true? The main objective of this book is to give a clear answer to this question.

For many years the author has done special research on the history of the Sabbath-Sunday in the first four centuries of the Christian Era. In this investigation he has endeavored to collect the available historical data bearing on the subject and pertaining to the period mentioned, in order that he might write a history of the rise of the Sabbath-Sunday controversy. In order to do this he has consulted many thousands of musty tomes in various languages, ancient and modern, in libraries of the United States, Europe, and Latin America. The material has been gathered from pagan, Jewish, and Christian sources.

A survey of his findings has convinced the writer that the subject chosen ought to be studied from two different angles, and it is his plan to present his material in two sections. This first volume, entitled *Sunday in Roman Paganism*, does not attempt to give the story of Sunday as a church festival. The author's principal aim is to present the history of the planetary week as it was known and used in the pagan world during the early centuries of the Christian Era, and to

show whether or not its “day of the Sun” was then regarded by pagans as being sacred to their Sun-god.

Because Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and other ecclesiastical writers of that period have mentioned the “day of the Sun” in their replies to attacks made by pagan authors, and because Constantine imposed Sunday observance on all the people of the Roman Empire by means of imperial edicts, it has been necessary to discuss to a certain extent the relation of the pagan Sunday to Christianity. This is done briefly and where needed in order to present a clear and true story of the historical facts.

The writer hopes to present later, if God permits, a second treatise, entitled *Sunday in Early Christianity*, which will be a comprehensive study of the Sabbath-Sunday question from the time of Christ to the Council of Laodicea (in the fourth century). This second work will be a strong array of historical data showing how Sunday came to eclipse the Sabbath in the faith and practice of the majority of the Christian people.

The material set forth in this first volume has been drawn from many sources, and the author has faithfully tried to give due credit to those whose laborious investigation of the ancient past has made possible the writing of this book. It is his hope that others will extend the scope of this investigation, for there will doubtless come to light more data on the subject as further exploration is made in this field.

The reader will see that in the light of the evidence we have now, certain theories concerning the origin of the week and its universality in ancient times must be modified or discarded. Too frequently writers have failed to make the proper distinction between the true Biblical week in use among the Jews and the Christians in the first century A. D., and the popular planetary week that was in vogue in the pagan world at that time. Too often has been ignored the fact that in some quarters a certain amount of syncretism was effected between the belief and practices of Christianity and those of heathenism during the early centuries of the Christian church.

For example, the calendar bequeathed to us has come down with the imprint of paganism clearly stamped upon it. It is universally admitted today that the names of the months and those of the days of the week in our present calendar are a legacy from heathenism.

Let us, therefore, in our study of this subject endeavor to get and to give the truth about it. To this end is this little volume issued at this time.

ROBERT LEO ODOM.