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978-1-107-48669-0 - The Week: An Essay on the Origin & Development of the Seven-Day Cycle

F. H. Colson

Excerpt

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§ I

THE WEEK IN GENERAL

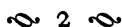
The standards of time-measurement which nature has given us are the year, the month and the day. Primitive observation discovered at an early date that a year was something between 365 and 366 days, and a month something between 29 and 30 days. The relation of year to day did not present much difficulty. Even the pre-Julian year of 365 days without leap-years would not produce much confusion in a single life-time. The introduction of an extra day once in four years set matters right for some centuries and the Gregorian reform by which three leap-years are omitted in four centuries will with very slight adaptation carry us on as long as the world is inhabited. So too by a system of alternations between 29 and 30 days, the month may be made to consist of a complete number of days and yet keep pace with the moon. But the relation of month to year was a more difficult proposition. Since 12 true months have approximately 354 days and 13 have 383, we have had to choose between reckoning by lunar months which run on independently of the year, and artificial months, a fixed number of which will complete the year.

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In Europe we have chosen the second course, but at the price of parting with the moon, so that our 12 months, while forming a convenient subdivision of the year and an adequate guide to the seasons, have no relation to the planet from which they receive their name. We have also subdivided our day into hours and, at a later time, into minutes and seconds, arbitrary subdivisions indeed, but still forming a system, so that a year consists of a fixed number of complete months, a month of complete days, though in varying numbers, and days of a fixed number of complete hours.

Across this ordered system runs that intruder the week, consisting indeed of a fixed number of complete days, but paying no regard to months or years. The moment that begins a new year, begins also a new month, a new day, and a new hour, but only once in five years, at the least, a new week. It is very frequently and indeed, I think, generally assumed that this continuous week somehow represents the four phases of the moon. It is true that the course of the moon naturally to the eye of the observer groups itself into quarters and that if $29\frac{1}{2}$ be divided by 4 the nearest integral number is 7 and the next nearest 8. It is also true that the three early varieties of the week, of which we have any knowledge, the Jewish, the Planetary, and the old Roman, consist of either seven or eight days. But at the same time it is obvious that continuous

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weeks of either of these lengths would be of no use to the moon observer. They would lead him wrong at the very outset. The only way of fitting a seven-day week into the lunar month of 29 to 30 days, or for the matter of that into the artificial month of 30 to 31 days, is to have one week at least of the four longer than seven days, or what is the same thing to intercalate one or more days at the end of the four weeks. Similarly an eight-day week can only be fitted into the month by shortening one at least of the four weeks. Of such a subdivisive or, as I will for convenience call it, a 'lunar' week, there are apparently traces in the primitive records of Babylonia and of ancient Persia¹. But the 'lunar' week differs vitally from the continuous, and, while it is possible that the latter may have been developed from the former, I do not think the possibility rises above the region of speculation. The earliest forms of the continuous week of which we have any knowledge were justified by the nations which used them on grounds which have nothing to do with the moon or the month. There are, as I have said, three such forms, the Roman, the Jewish and the Planetary.

The Roman usage, by which the *nundinae*²,

¹ For Persia *v.* Ginzler, *Handbuch der mathematischen und technischen Chronologie*, I, p. 281; also Hastings, *Encycl. Religion and Ethics*, art. 'Calendar (Persian).'

² For information on the 'nundinae' *v.* *Dict. of Antiquities* or, better, Marquardt, *Römische Staatsverwaltung*, III, p. 289.

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or market-day, recurred every eighth day and thus produced a week which was marked on their calendars by the letters *a* to *h*, as our week is marked in the prayer-book calendar by the letters *a* to *g*, was always explained by them in the same way. The agriculturists worked in the fields for seven days and came into the city on the eighth to sell their produce. This explanation seems reasonable enough. The Jewish week, as we all know, was produced by the recurrence every seventh day of a 'sabbath,' that is a periodical abstention from work, believed to be enjoined by the Deity and observed in honour of him. Here the connexion of the Jews with Babylon and perhaps the fact that the earlier mentions of the Sabbath couple it with the New Moon give some plausibility to the view that it was developed out of the 'lunar' week. But this plausibility falls far short of certainty. If the belief that the Deity demands a 'sabbath' is once established, the needs of human life ensure that it should not recur at too frequent intervals. The Jews themselves had, of course, an explanation of the seven-day interval, which has no connexion with the 'lunar.' The antiquity of this explanation may be doubted, but apart from this the number seven is as likely as any other, and may have been determined by the sanctity which, whatever the cause, from early times adhered to this particular number¹.

¹ *V.* p. 56.

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The planetary week rests on a different principle, namely, the idea that the whole of time is under the control of divine beings, each of whom rules in turn. In this case the length of the week is clearly determined by the number of the divine beings concerned. In the case of the planetary week, these divine beings are the planets¹, and therefore the number was fixed by nature. It is a fact of nature that the number of the planets visible to the ancients was seven, and this fact has no connexion with the phases of the moon or with the lunar week. While it is possible that there may be some prehistoric link between them, such a supposition is obviously quite unnecessary.

Closely connected with the question we have been discussing is the idea that the week is an institution of immemorial antiquity and general diffusion. If we identified the continuous week with the lunar, we might perhaps, in view of the somewhat meagre evidence from Babylonia, admit its great antiquity, though this would not prove its general diffusion. If we consider the connexion between the two forms of week to be problematical, we can only ascribe to the continuous week with any certainty such antiquity as we find in the Roman and Jewish institutions.

¹ To avoid any misconception, I may say once for all that throughout this treatise the word 'planet' is used in the ancient sense, to include sun and moon as well as what we now call the planets.

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The planetary week, we shall find, cannot be traced to a date much prior to our era¹. As for the diffusion, I have been able to find nothing outside these three, or what is derived from them. The Greeks of the Classical period certainly had no week of any kind. No trace of it seems to be found in ancient Egypt. The Persian week, as I have already noted, is of the 'lunar' type, consisting of two weeks of seven and two of eight days. The Indian planetary week, which seems in earlier times to have belonged to esoteric astrology rather than to popular usage, shews signs of being an offshoot of the later Greek, borrowed at a date subsequent to our era. Similarly the Teutonic week is borrowed from the later Roman. It is a matter of common knowledge that the Arabs under Mohammed learnt to observe one day in seven, namely, our Friday, as sacred, but whether anything of the sort existed in pre-Islamic Arabia is a point on which authorities appear to be divided². But at any rate it does not appear that it can be traced back to a time earlier than that at which the Judaeo-Christian week was firmly established in the neighbouring countries.

I imagine indeed that the common belief in

¹ The probability or improbability of a remote origin for this type of week is discussed later, on pp. 55 ff.

² Ginzler (*Handbuch*, I, p. 242) says that it is pre-Islamic, but does not give any evidence as to the time to which it can be traced.

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the primitiveness and universality of the week is largely a survival from the idea, under which I was myself brought up, that paganism was a corruption of revealed truth. Just as the various legends of the Deluge were distortions of the authentic story of Noah, so it was with the week. God had created the world in six days and rested on the seventh; and the descendants of Adam had dimly remembered this, though they corrupted it to idolatrous uses. Thus we used to be told that the Anglo-Saxons gave the names of their own deities to the days of the week. No one asked how they came to have week-days to name, for the week had been from the beginning. Conversely the supposed antiquity and universality of the week was used to confirm the Mosaic record¹. Probably there are many who

¹ A good instance of this may be found in the article on 'Calendar' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, an article which has been reproduced from the 9th into the 11th edition unchanged. The writers tell us that 'although it was not introduced at Rome till after the reign of Theodosius, it had been employed from time immemorial in almost all Eastern countries; and as it forms neither an aliquot part of the year nor of the lunar month, those who reject the Mosaic recital will be at a loss, as Delambre remarks, to assign to it an origin having much semblance of probability.'

As I have seen the statement about Roman use reproduced elsewhere, I may add that I know of no foundation for dating the official introduction of the week at Rome so late as Theodosius' death (A.D. 395). There is a well-known decree of Constantine (321) forbidding legal and commercial business, though permitting necessary field labour, 'on the venerable

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still think in this way, and I am far from wishing to speak contemptuously of them. But I cannot hold such a view myself, and my arguments are addressed to those who share my feelings.

I have felt it necessary to say something about these preliminary points, but I wish to make a very strong distinction between them and what follows. In the following sections I give for the most part the results of my own investigations or, perhaps I should say, of what I have verified. In what has just been said about the evidence or want of evidence for a primitive and widely diffused continuous week, I have necessarily had to retail at second-hand what I have gathered from modern writers, whose value and accuracy I have no means of judging—only oriental scholars can appraise them with any authority. But I am not disturbed by this; for even if later discoveries should shew that the week, whether in the planetary or any other form, was a primitive and general institution in the East, it would not affect my main purpose, which is to shew how the double conception involved in the Jewish and the planetary week took root in the Roman Empire and produced the institution under which we live. When the Graeco-Roman world adopted the seven-day week, it was not

day of the Sun' (*Codex Justiniani*, III, 12, 2): while an inscription from the Danube lands credits the same Emperor with a relaxation of this, so far as to permit 'nundinae' to be held on the Sun's day. (*Corp. Inscr. Lat.* III, 4121.)

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because it was ancient, but because it embodied conceptions which had taken a remarkable hold over the popular mind.

Of these two factors which have produced our week, the Jewish is, at first sight at any rate, the more important. We measure our time in cycles of seven days primarily because the Jews, by the time of our era, had come to attach vast importance to the religious observance of one day in seven; because the first Christians were Jews; because, though Paul at any rate abjured the Sabbath for his Gentile converts, as strongly as he abjured circumcision, the Church still clung to the practice of meeting once every seven days; because thus the Christian Lord's day acquired something of the sanctity of the Sabbath, with which indeed so many people still confuse it; and finally because this religious institution has been found to have a civil value. But the planetary week of the pagan, in which not only one day is sacred, but each of the seven is held to be under the dominion of one or other of the seven bodies which 'wander' through the heavens, has been a contributory factor in various ways and the evidence of this is written unmistakably in the names of the days.

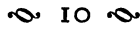
That our week-day names represent the planets may be regarded, I presume, as an accepted fact, though I have come across highly educated people, and indeed distinguished scholars, who were ignorant of it. It is indeed

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somewhat disguised if we take any language separately. The French *dimanche* and *samedi*¹, and more clearly the Italian *Domenica* and *Sabbato*, are ecclesiastical names for the Christian Lord's day and the Jewish Sabbath. But the other five correspond to the names which we still give to our own satellite and four of the planets in the modern use of the term. In Teutonic lands, on the other hand, these same four have been converted into Teutonic deities, whose names do not at first sight suggest a planetary origin, but the moon is there still, while Sunday and Saturday fill up the gap in the South-European languages. Thus between the Latin and the Teutonic we find Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn all represented. The evidence for the planetary character of the week does not stop here, as will be abundantly shewn in Section 3. But before dealing with this let us examine the history of the other factor, the Jewish week.

¹ Dialectically *sabedi*.