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DID SUNDAY WORSHIP COME FROM PAGANISM?

There are many Christians—not only those who meet on Saturday, but many who attend church on Sunday—who assume that Sunday observance originally came from paganism. The basic idea is this: Sunday was the established day of rest, the weekly holiday in the pagan world. On this day each week, the Romans, Greeks, and other pagans, gathered in temples to worship their pagan gods, particularly the Sun-god—hence the term Sun-day. Later, when these pagans professed Christianity, they gradually brought the overwhelmingly popular practice of meeting on Sunday into the “Church.”

The teaching that Sunday worship “came from paganism” has been so often repeated, it may come as a surprise when I tell you this teaching has no basis in fact. It is misinformation. If I can show you—and I believe I can—that Sunday was not a day of rest and worship among pagans, then it should be quite clear that the practice of Christians meeting on Sunday, the first day of the week, did not come from this source.

In the New Testament, “the first day of the week” is mentioned eight times. These references do not give any information about whether or not the first day of the week—Sunday—was a day of rest and worship among pagans. For this we will need to look into history. In doing so, suppose we were to contact highly qualified historians—at great centers of learning like the British Museum, the Smithsonian Institute, and Harvard University—and ask them if Sunday was a weekly holiday in the pagan world. Surely their answers would be weighty.

Well, this has already been done—by D. M. Canright, a Seventh-Day Adventist minister. He sincerely believed Sunday worship came from paganism—this teaching had been passed on to him by equally sincere people. But when he began to look into the subject more fully, he came to a different conclusion. It was at this time—back in 1913-1914—that he contacted these great centers of learning we have mentioned. He carefully avoided giving any idea of his own views or purpose in writing, so as not to influence answers in any way. The responses he received (which I have abridged slightly because of space limitations) are as follows:

From the world renowned British Museum in London, England, Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities:

Sir:

I am commanded by the Assistant Keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities to reply as follows to your questions on the ancient week:

Question 1: Did the pagan Romans and Greeks ever have any regular weekly day of rest from secular work?

Answer: No.

Question 2: Did they have any regular weekly festival day?

Answer: No.

Question 3: Did they have any regular weekly day when they assembled for pagan worship?

Answer: No.

Question 4: Did they have any special day of the week when individuals went to the temples to pray or make offerings?

Answer: No; both for Greeks and Romans the *month* was the unit and not the week. The Greek calendar varied in different states but the month was generally divided into three periods of ten days. The Romans reckoned from three fixed points in the month, the Kalends or first, the Nones fifth or seventh, the Ides thirteenth or fifteenth. These subdivisions in themselves *had no religious significance*. Also in the Roman calendars were nundinal, or market days, at periods of eight days. On these days farm work, etc., stopped and citizens flocked into the town markets. To some extent this may be a regular stoppage of secular work; but it *had no religious significance*.

Question 5: As Sunday was sacred to the Sun, Monday to the Moon, Saturday to Saturn, etc., were those supposed deities worshipped on their own particular days more than on any other days?

Answer: No; the old worship of the gods was disappearing when the seven-day week came about. The significance of the deities' names was *astrological, not religious, e.g.*, if a person were born on Monday, the moon would influence his horoscope, but the moon was never an object of common worship.

Question 6: When was our week of seven days first introduced into the Roman calendar?

Answer: There are traces in the literature of the late republic (first century B. C.) that the Romans used the week of seven days for astrological purposes, in connection with the many Eastern superstitions of

the period. It was probably the third century, A. D. before the seven day week came into common use.

Question 7: From whom did the Romans learn the week of seven days?

Answer: From the Jews, alternately the Assyrians and Babylonians; the names were probably fixed by the Hellenistic Greeks.

Question 8: Did the pagan Greeks ever adopt in common life, or in their calendar, the week of seven days?

Answer: No.

Question 9: Did Apollo, the Sun-god, either among the Romans or Greeks, have any special day on which he was worshipped with prayers or offerings more than on any other day?

Answer: There were certain set festivals at various temples; *these were annual, not weekly.*

Question 10: Did the pagan reverence for Sunday have anything to do in influencing Christians to select that day as their rest day?

Answer: No; it can hardly be said that there was any special reverence for Sunday in pagan times (see answer to Number 5).

—I am, sir, Your obedient servant, F. N. PRYCE.

Concerning this response, Canright says: “You see this historian gives an unqualified NO to all the questions. Notice particularly that the names of the days of the week were all only *astrological*, not religious. There was no religious sacredness attached to a day because it was named after some planet as Sun-day—Sun’s day—or Monday, Moon’s day, etc. The sun was not worshipped on Sunday, nor the moon on Monday, nor Saturn on Saturday, etc. Also notice carefully that Apollo was not worshipped on Sunday... his festival days were *annual*, not weekly.”

From the Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C., Canright received the following response to similar questions:

Question 1: Did the pagan Romans and Greeks ever have any regular weekly day of rest from secular work?

Answer: No.

Question 2: Did they ever have any weekly festival day?

Answer: No.

Question 3: Did they have any regular weekly day when they assembled for pagan worship?

Answer: No.

Question 4: When was our calendar of the week first introduced among the Romans and Greeks?

Answer: The division of the month into weeks was introduced into Rome from Egypt. The date is uncertain, but it was not earlier than the second century, A. D.

Question 5: When was our calendar of the week first recognized in Roman law?

Answer: The earliest Sunday legislation was enacted under Constantine I, 321 A.D. No legislation of earlier date on the division of the month is known.

Question 6: As each day of the week was dedicated to some god, as Sunday to the Sun, Monday to the Moon, Saturday to Saturn, etc., was each of these supposed deities worshipped on one particular day more than any other day?

Answer: No.

Question 7: Did the pagan Romans have any one special day in the week when individuals, if they chose, went to make prayers or offerings to their gods?

Answer: No.

Question 8: Did Apollo have any special day in the week or month more than any other day when he was worshipped with prayers or offerings?

Answer: No.

—Very truly yours, R. RATHBORN.

Canright addressed the same questions to George F. Moore, Professor of Ancient Roman and Greek History, at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Here was his response:

There are two seven-day weeks: the Jewish week, with a Sabbath on the seventh day; and the Astrological week, with days named after the sun, moon, and five planets, in our order determined by the theories of astrology, but *without any day of rest....* The Astrological week first appears in Greek and Latin writings about the beginning of the Christian era....It had no use in ordinary life. Abstinence from labor on the seventh day, or on one day in seven, is a distinctively Jewish institution.

The edict of Constantine (321 A.D.) closing the courts on Sunday and prohibiting some kinds of labor on that day, is the *first* recognition of a seven-day week in Roman law. The ancient Romans had a market day *every eight days*, when the peasants came to town to market, but it was in no sense a day of rest. In the old Roman calendar there were many days when the courts were closed and other public and private business was not done. They had also many festivals on which the people left their ordinary occupation to take part in the celebrations, but these have *no periodicity like that of the week....*

The planetary week in which the days were named from their regents, Saturday, Sunday, etc., was an invention of the astrologers, probably in the second cen-

tury, B. C., and has *no relation to religion or influence upon it*. Saturn, for example, was not worshipped on Saturday, nor Jupiter on Thursday. The festivals of the several gods were *never weekly festivals*. Private persons went to the temples when they had occasion to offer prayers or sacrifices or to make vows, etc. There were no stated days for such visits—though some days were in some temples luckier than others, and there was nothing like a stated day for the assembling of a worshipping congregation except the festivals of the local calendar.

—Very truly yours, **GEORGE F. MOORE.**

The following response was from Professor W. H. Westerman of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin:

Dear Sir: I shall answer your questions briefly, and in the order in which you sent them.

1. The pagan Greeks and Romans never had a weekly day of rest.
2. They never had a weekly holiday or festival day.
3. They never had a special day in the week on which they made offerings or prayers to heathen gods. (Neither the pagan Greeks nor the Romans recognized a seven-day division or week division in the month.)
4. They made no offerings or prayers on Sunday to their gods any more than on other days.
5. The seven-day period of dividing the month or the week was never adopted into the calendar of the pagan Greeks. It appears in the Roman calendar after the time of Theodosius, or after 391 A.D., but the week, or seven-day period, first appears in Roman law in a constitution of Constantine, promulgated in 321 A. D.

In the constitution of Constantine, which spoke of the “venerable day of the sun,” Constantine regards Sunday as venerable undoubtedly from the Christian standpoint...If it was in any way venerable or a holiday to the pagans, so far as my information goes, the pagans must have adopted the practice from the Christians.

Apollo was not worshipped on any stated day of the week or month more than any other. I do not believe that there is any proof that the early Christians were led to observe Sunday by the example of any pagan worship upon that day.

—Very Sincerely yours, **W. H. WESTERMAN.**

These same basic points were confirmed in a letter Canright received from J. W. Moncrieff, Professor at the University of Chicago, who went on to say that the notion Sunday was a weekly holiday among the Romans is simply not true—that “reliable, competent historians, with one accord proclaim this notion to be

a myth, pure and simple...I have consulted sixteen encyclopedias and dictionaries, and they differ in no essential detail in their treatment of the subject.”

These statements from men who have devoted considerable time to the study of history are weighty. As *historians* they could provide answers without any need to uphold, or deny, a *doctrinal* position. And they answered independently of each other. Two other university Professors referred Canright to the book *Roman Festivals* by Fowler. This book, though it describes many Roman festivals, says *absolutely nothing* about any weekly day of rest or worship. Wouldn't this be a strange omission, if indeed Sunday had been their national holiday—the day they assembled every week to worship the Sun-god? Obviously this was not the case! Schaff, in his *Church History*, says: “*The pagan Romans paid no more regard to the Christian Sunday than to the Jewish Sabbath.*”

The Roman Calendar at the time of Christ and the founding of the Christian church, was divided into months, not weeks—that feature was added later. The *Encyclopedia Americana*, article “Week,” says: “The Romans and Greeks...were not acquainted with the week till a late period. The Romans had, however, for civil uses, as the arrangement of market days, a cycle of eight days, the ninth being the recurring one, instead of the eighth as with us.” Accordingly, their days were: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, then 1, 2, 3, etc. Whereas, with a seven day week, the days are: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, then 1, 2, 3, etc.

Now this should be carefully noticed. *IF* pagans gathered on the first day of the week to worship Apollo, Mithra, or some other Sun-god, this would *not* correspond, week after week, to what *we* call Sunday. For example: Suppose our calendar had eight days in a week (instead of seven), and we met for Christian worship at seven day intervals. This would require *a change of day each week!* If we met the first week on Saturday, seven days later we would meet on Friday. Seven days later we would meet on Thursday. Seven days later we would meet on Wednesday, etc. There is simply no way that the first day—of an eight-day cycle—will *consistently* correspond with the first day of a seven-day cycle. This cries out in a loud voice, then, that the pagan Romans did not observe what *we call Sunday as a weekly sacred day!*

The edict of Constantine, A. D. 321, was the very first time in *Roman* law that Sunday was set aside as a holiday. It is pretty obvious then, isn't it, that Sunday had not been the pagan national holiday of the Roman empire before this time!

There are some—atheists, agnostics, etc.—who try

to discredit Christianity by finding parallels in pagan religions. They argue that Christianity, in its entirety, was adopted from paganism. They do this by citing a few similarities while ignoring vast differences. Often, what may appear to be pagan is not pagan at all, when it is studied out completely. Our present subject provides a good example of this. Because the first day of the week is called "Sunday," all someone has to say is that this was the day each week when pagans gathered to worship the Sun-god, and people believe it. From here it is only another step for someone to claim the practice of Christians meeting on Sunday came from pagan sun worship!

Some Christian groups have spent millions of dollars promoting the idea that Sunday worship came from paganism. Some believe that in the end-time all Christians will be forced to worship on Sunday—that this will tie in with the mark of the Beast! I believe, from my studies over the years, these claims are seriously flawed. It is my opinion that there are issues of greater importance—but I am not throwing stones

at anyone! I accept as Christians all who know Jesus Christ as Lord—those who love him and whose lives have been changed by him—regardless of denominational tag. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to speak for many churches and groups—including those who meet on Saturday, as well as many who meet on Sunday. I have fine friends and pastors, for whom I have the highest regard, in both camps.

In this article I have purposely tried to keep the focus on the question, "Did Sunday Worship Come From Paganism?"—without branching out into other details and issues. For the reasons I have briefly stated here, I must reject the idea that Sunday was a well-established, popular, weekly holiday in the pagan world—so popular that church leaders gave in to the pressure, rebelled against God, and adopted it as the day for Christian worship. How could Sunday worship have come from paganism, when Sunday was never a pagan holiday?

—RALPH WOODROW