

Gnostic Roots of Sunday-Keeping

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Though in some respects Sunday observance became the obvious successor to the biblical Sabbath during the first centuries of the Christian era, this transition was not a simple, straightforward, dead-king-to-new-king type of phenomenon. There was a diversity of doctrine and practice in this matter among Christian bodies, in both a diachronic and synchronic sense. Accounting for this diversity is a complex matter, because sundry causes have often contributed to one effect.

A favorite (but by no means the only) avenue of research into this transition is to follow the “Lord’s day” references in the early Christian literature. The contention of the following pages is that the role of Gnostic Christianity in the rise of Sunday as the “Lord’s day” has been much overlooked in this quest.

Lord’s Day Passages

The evidence for the use of the term “Lord’s day” (*kyriakē hēmera*) in second-century Christian literature has been summarized by R. J. Bauckham, in an often-quoted chapter,¹ as follows:

1. *Didache* 14:1
2. Ignatius, *Magn.* 9:1
3. *Gospel of Peter* 35, 50
4. Dionysius of Corinth, *ap.* Eusebius, HE 4:23:11
5. *Epistula Apostolorum* 18 (Hennecke-Wilson I, 201)
6. *Acts of Peter* (Act. Verc. 29f.)
7. *Acts of Paul* (Hennecke-Wilson II, 371)
8. Melito of Sardis, *ap.* Eusebius, HE 4:23:12 [sic]²
9. Irenaeus, Fragment 7
10. A Valentinian, *ap.* Clement of Alexandria, *Exc. ex Theod.* 63.

¹ “The Lord’s Day,” in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 223.

² There is no mention of Melito in 4:23:12. The correct reference is 4:26.

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Bauckham explains that *Acts of John* 106 (Hennecke-Wilson 2:254) was excluded because “it cannot certainly be dated before the third century.”³ By the same token, however, one should exclude the *Acts of Peter*.⁴ Alternatively, both should be included. This seems preferable, since the main purpose of the list is not to assign documents to particular centuries, but to gather early Christian materials to investigate the “Lord’s day” concept. For this reason the *Acts of John* reference is reinstated below in the list.

Bauckham means to list all occurrences of either the entire phrase *kyriakē hēmera*, or just of *kyriakē* (“Lord’s”) with the sense “Lord’s **day**” (rather than, e.g., “Lord’s **supper**”), whether those occurrences are associated with Sunday or not. The phrase “the Lord’s day” was applied in early Christian literature not only to a weekday, but also an annual feast (Easter day),⁵ an age of the world,⁶ a spatial realm (see below), and perhaps other uses.

If we now analyze the list of occurrences, aided by Bauckham’s discussion in the same chapter, with a view to establishing their eventual relationship with Sunday, we find the following facts:

1. The text of *Didache* 14:1 is problematic. It does not contain the word “day,” even though Bauckham thinks that supplying it explains the apparently redundant or corrupt text (“at the Lord’s [. . .] of the Lord gather together,” etc.) better than other suggestions, such as “according to the Lord’s [doctrine]” or “as the lordly (or sovereign) [assembly] of the Lord, gather together.”⁷ If it did refer to a day, it could just as well mean Easter as Sunday.

2. The only Greek manuscript of *Magnesians* 9:1 explicitly says “living according to the Lord’s **life**” (*kata kyriakēn zōēn zōntes*), not “Lord’s day,” so this reference should be removed.⁸

3. Dionysius of Corinth mentions no day of the week in HE 4:23:11; Bauckham admits that a reference to Sunday here is “not certain,”⁹ and indeed the circumstances suggest rather Easter.¹⁰

³ Ibid. 246 n. 6.

⁴ This has been dated 200-220 A.D. in E. J. Goodspeed, *A History of Early Christian Literature*, rev. R. M. Grant (University of Chicago, 1966), 74; Bauckham’s dating is based on a reference in Tertullian (*De Baptismo* 17) to the *Acts of Paul*, said to depend on *Acts of Peter* (247 n. 38). However, the date of *De Baptismo* is “uncertain” (Hennecke-Wilson 2:323), and the start of the literary career of Tertullian (converted c. 198) falls well within the 3rd century.

⁵ See the evidence in K.A. Strand, *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1982), 346 f., supported by C. W. Dugmore, “Lord’s Day and Easter” in *Neotestamentica et Patristica supplements to Novum Testamentum* (Leiden, 1962) 6: 272-281.

⁶ Augustine, *The City of God* 22.30.

⁷ The term *kyriakē* is the source, by direct phonetic derivation, of the Old English *kirike* (cf. Scottish *kirk*, German *Kirche*), i.e., **church**, the Lord’s sovereign assembly (Matt 18:18-20).

⁸ Bauckham follows an ancient Latin translation, *secundum dominicam*, “according to the Lord’s,” and supplies “day.” However, even this Latin version seems to imply *vitam*, i.e. “life,” in this context; “day” would normally require the text “*secundum dominicum [diem]*.”

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4. “We can infer nothing from the title of Melito of Sardis’ work *Peri kyriakēs*, since only its title survives.”¹¹ This reference, therefore, should also be excluded from the list.

5. Irenaeus, Fragment 7, has been diversely interpreted as Sunday or Easter; “the fragmentary nature of this text makes it difficult.”¹²

Since one should not interpret *obscurum per obscurum*, prudence advises to start researching the clearer texts and then, if possible, proceed to explain the rest. This implies that we should concentrate, for the purposes of throwing light on the rise of Sunday, on the remaining items of the list:

1. *Gospel of Peter* 35, 50
2. *Epistula Apostolorum* 18 (Hennecke-Wilson I, 201)
3. *Acts of Peter* (*Act. Verc.* 29f.)
4. *Acts of Paul* (Hennecke-Wilson II, 371)
5. A Valentinian, *ap.* Clement of Alexandria, *Exc. ex Theod.* 63
6. *Acts of John* 106 (Hennecke-Wilson 2:254)

Sectarian Character of the List

Once so revised, a mere glance at the list proves startling to anybody conversant with the history of post-apostolic literature: without exception, all these references lead to heterodox, Docetic, and even blatantly Gnostic sources or concepts, as will be presently shown. They are also quite late in the second century.¹³

Insufficient stock has been taken of the sectarian character of these references.¹⁴ However, previous researchers should be commended because their confessional stance towards Sabbath or Sunday has not been a factor in this undervaluation. Those who could have jumped at the opportunity of highlighting such heretical associations for the “Lord’s day” concept have not done so, while on the other side of the confessional divide, Bauckham seems quite willing to take in stride the fact that “cross-fertilization of Gnostic and Catholic theology

⁹ Op. cit., 229. Dionysius states only that on the “holy day of the Lord” (*kyriakēn hagian hēmeran*) a letter from bishop Soter of Rome was publicly read in his church.

¹⁰ The usage of the times for bishops points to a paschal letter, hence one read at Easter.

¹¹ Bauckham, *ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 248.

¹³ The *Gospel of Peter* and the *Epistula Apostolorum* have been dated about the middle of the century; Valentinus formed his system about the same date. The other items are still later; some of them may belong to the early 3rd century (see note 4 above).

¹⁴ In Strand, ed., *Sabbath in Scripture and History*, C. Mervyn Maxwell dismisses in a single sentence, as “unwise,” the 1912 suggestion by L. R. Conradi, that Gnosticism was “a major factor in the change of the day” (361). There are no other mentions of Gnosticism in this multi-author, 391 page long volume. S. Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome: Gregorian UP, 1977) 286 f., notes the Gnostic anti-Sabbath positions, but following J. Danielou, considers them derived mainly from the catholic Sunday. The works of L. R. Conradi had emphasized the rejection of the OT by the Marcionite type of Gnosticism. This could hardly explain the rise of Sunday, however, since such a rejection was obviously not followed by the Catholic church.

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continued throughout the bitter struggles of the second century.”¹⁵ The research on the topic should continue in this dispassionate way, wherever the evidence leads.

At this junction, it seems to lead in the direction of Gnostic sects and related ideas, whatever other influences were at work in the rise of Sunday-keeping. Both the *Epistula Apostolorum* (*Epistle of the Apostles*)¹⁶ and the Valentinian follower *ap. Clement of Alexandria* in the list above¹⁷ link the Lord’s day with the spatial “Ogdoad.” In the Valentinian system, the Sacred Ogdoad (i.e., octet) consisted of the first four syzygies (male-female couples) which resulted from the divine essence splitting itself into different aspects. The spatial ogdoad, i.e., the eighth celestial realm,¹⁸ was above the seven celestial spheres of the moon, sun, and planets known in antiquity. In all Gnostic, proto-Gnostic, and associated systems, these spheres, together with the enclosed Earth, were in the power of fallen angelic powers, led by the “prince of this world,” who resided on the seventh and controlled the physical and visible universe. The eighth realm was, of course, the abode of members of the Sacred Ogdoad,¹⁹ and thus spatial and ontological ogdoads were intimately related.

The *Acts of John* also celebrates the Ogdoad. In the famous “Jesus’ dance” passage (94 f.), we read that Jesus

. . . bade us therefore make as it were a ring, holding one another's hands, and himself standing in the midst, he said: Answer Amen unto me. He began, then, to sing an hymn and to say:
“Glory be to thee, Father.”
And we, going about in a ring, answered him: Amen.
“Glory be to thee, Word: Glory be to thee, Grace.” Amen.
“Glory be to thee, Spirit: Glory be to thee, Holy One:
Glory be to thy Glory.” Amen.
“We praise thee, O Father; we give thanks to thee,
O Light, wherein darkness dwelleth not.” Amen.
[95] Now whereas [or wherefore] we give thanks, I say:
“I would be saved, and I would save.” Amen.
“I would be loosed, and I would loose.” Amen. . .
“I would eat, and I would be eaten.” Amen.
“I would be thought, being wholly thought.” Amen. . .
“Grace danceth. I would pipe; dance ye all.” Amen.
“I would mourn: lament ye all.” Amen.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.* 255.

¹⁶ After His resurrection, Jesus tells the disciples, “I am the perfect thought (idea?) in the type. I came into being on the eighth day, which is the day of the Lord, but the whole completion of the completion you will see . . . while I go to heaven to my Father who is in heaven.” The words (translated from the Coptic) “I came into being on . . . the day of the Lord” sound like an allusion to Rev 1:10, *egenomēn . . . en tē kyriakē hēmera*.

¹⁷ “The rest of the spiritual men is in the *kyriakē*, in the ogdoad which is called *kyriakē*, with the Mother [=Holy Spirit], wearing their souls like garments until the consummation.”

¹⁸ So Bauckham, 230, 274, 276.

¹⁹ See above, note 17.

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“The **number Eight** [lit. **the one ogdoad**]²⁰
singeth praise with us.” Amen.
“The number Twelve danceth on high.” Amen.
“The Whole on high hath part in our dancing.” Amen.
“Whoso danceth not, knoweth not what cometh to pass.” Amen.
“I would flee, and I would stay.” Amen. . .
“A lamp am I to thee that beholdest me.” Amen.
“A mirror am I to thee that perceivest me.” Amen. . .

The cross of light shown by Jesus (*Ac. Jn.* 98), which is “. . . sometimes called Word by me for your sakes, sometimes mind, . . . sometimes resurrection, sometimes Son, sometimes Father, sometimes Spirit, sometimes life, sometimes truth, sometimes faith, sometimes grace. . .” is a well-known Gnostic symbol, specifically Valentinian.²¹

In contrast to this intoxicating “Jesus’ dance,” *Acts of Peter* is rather sober. It contains the earliest explicit identification of the “Lord’s day” with the first day of the week in Christian literature. As such, it demands our immediate attention. We will consider the treatment of “Lord’s day” in *Acts of Peter* and then in the other five works listed.

Lord’s Day in *Acts of Peter*

The identification of the “Lord’s day” with a weekly observance on Sunday in this source is not only clear, but also formal. The first (Coptic) extant fragment of the work states in the very first line: “**On the first day of the week, that is, on the Lord’s day**, a multitude gathered together, and they brought unto Peter many sick . . .” The same didactic clarity appears in the sections preserved in the *Acta Vercelli*, such as 29, where “the Lord’s day” arrives “on the next day after the Sabbath.” The doctrine of the Sabbath in *Ac. Pet.* is equally clear: Paul is represented as contending in Rome with “the doctors of the Jews” and affirming that “Christ, upon whom your fathers laid hands,²² **abolished their Sabbaths** and fasts and holy days and circumcision, and the doctrines of men **and the rest of the traditions he did abolish.**”²³

Sunday and Sabbath are carefully contrasted in the narrative. Sunday is the day in which the believers gather together with the apostles (*Act Verc* 29) and present their offerings, as does sinful Chryse (30).²⁴ Even backsliders are con-

²⁰ This is the note of M.R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924) whose translation is reproduced here.

²¹ See the introduction to the *Ac. Jn.* in Hennecke-Wilson.

²² *Sic.* The *Acts of Peter* places this incident (*Act Verc* 1) within twelve years after the resurrection of Christ, hardly the time necessary for even one generation to elapse.

²³ In contrast to the canonical Paul, who circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3) and asked everyone to remain within his or her native identity, Jewish or otherwise, after conversion (1 Cor 7:18), here Paul makes renouncing these “traditions” a condition for justification (*Act Verc* 2).

²⁴ Laughing at the scruples of church members, “Peter” takes in the money, even though women of her kind are excluded from the Eucharist (*Act Verc* 2).

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vened on a Sunday (6 f.). In contrast, Sabbath is the day for meeting those outside the Christian community. On Sabbath the heretical Simon Magus is forced to meet Peter in public (15 f., 18, 22). Other unbelievers “brought unto him also the sick on the Sabbath” (31) and were healed, as well as converted, by Peter. This apostle and the Christians in Rome had no qualms about fasting on the Sabbath (22), a practice controversial even today in Christendom. This elaborate presentation of the topic suggests that Sunday-keeping still needed explanation at the time: the identification of the Lord’s day with Sunday is not assumed or taken for granted.

Though the work has been called “catholic” and a part of the “movement” that considered Peter the first bishop of Rome, at the same time its heretical leanings are recognized.²⁵ This work has a firm stance against marriage, contradicting Paul (1 Cor 7:2).²⁶ It represents the apostles cursing the heavenly powers (cf. Jude 8 f.).²⁷ It employs an abnormal Eucharist, with bread and water only.²⁸ These traits point to a sectarian background,²⁹ such as the Encratite sect led by Tatian, a former disciple of Justin Martyr.³⁰ They are known to have made use of NT Apocrypha, including the blatantly gnostic Acts of John.³¹

More importantly, *Ac. Pet.* is Docetic in its doctrine of Christ.³² Docetism and the traits mentioned above are present in many heretical sects, but the use of

²⁵ Goodspeed, 8 3, 78, 76.

²⁶ In the Coptic fragment, Peter had a daughter who at ten years of age had become “a stumbling block” for many because of her beauty: i.e., men wanted to marry her. Ptolemaeus, an obviously excellent prospect for a husband (he was a believer and “exceedingly rich”) “sent unto her to take her to wife.” But Peter would not hear of it and prayed for God to protect her from the “evil” of marriage. Stricken with palsy on one side of her body, she received healing publicly, but was immediately returned to a palsied state to remove temptation. Since Ptolemaeus still desired her, God struck him with blindness, telling him that his “vessels [sc. bodily organs]” were not intended “for corruption and shame” but at all rates, if he was willing to become “one spirit” with the girl, he could treat her as his sister. He was cured when placing himself at the disposal of Peter, and bequeathed a piece of land to the girl.

²⁷ *Act Verc* 8: “Thou wicked one, enemy of all men, be thou accursed from the Church of him the son of the Holy God.”

²⁸ *Act Verc* 2: “Now they brought unto Paul **bread and water** for the sacrifice, that he might make prayer and distribute it to every one. Among whom it befell that a woman named Rufina desired, she also, to receive **the Eucharist** at the hands of Paul.” Cf. *Act Verc* 5, where “Peter **took bread and gave thanks** unto the Lord. . . . Therefore in thy name do I impart unto him thine **eucharist**, that he may be thy perfect servant without blame for ever” (emphasis added).

²⁹ Hennecke-Wilson’s introduction, 2:275; J. Quasten, *Patrology* (Westminster, ML: Christian Classics, 1990), 1:134.

³⁰ Their usual name, based on *engkrateia*, “continence,” reflects their prohibition of marriage, while alternative names, “Aquarians” or “Hydroparastates,” referred to using bread and water in the Eucharist.

³¹ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 47.1.5.

³² In *Act Verc* 20, “Peter” enters a house and sees that the Gospel was being read. He then explains “in what manner the holy Scripture of our Lord ought to be declared,” since it only contains “that which can be endured to be borne by human flesh.” On the mount of transfiguration he had finally understood that Jesus “did eat and did drink for our sakes, himself being neither an-hungered

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Scripture in this work shows it does not reject the OT completely,³³ in the Marcionite style, though its author could no doubt have taken liberties with those books at least as much as with the canonical NT.³⁴

Lord's Day in the Other References

Ac. Pet. seems related to another forgery, *Acts of Paul*. Though it is customary today to frown at the mention of forgery in connection with pseudonymity in the NT Apocrypha, in this case it is a simple fact. The perpetrator, Leucius Charinus, was deposed from his office in the church of Asia Minor on precisely this account.³⁵ His work counters Gnostic positions, especially in the "3rd Corinthians" epistle embedded in the narrative. This is not to say that the work is free from heretical influence. Its aversion to marital relationships is, if possible, greater than in the *Ac. Pet.*³⁶ This, too, implies a form of dualism, though perhaps not taken to its logical conclusions as in Gnosticism.

As it is to be expected from this background, the concerns of the work differ from those of *Ac. Pet.* The identification of the Lord's day with Sunday is clear, but not emphasized: Paul prays "on the Sabbath as the Lord's day drew near" because he is to confront the wild beasts in the Ephesus theater the next day.

nor athirst." Though God "was moved by his mercy to show himself in another form and in the likeness of man," this was perceived in different ways, "for every one of us, according as he could contain the sight, saw, as he was able." To some blind women who were cured by an apparition, "Peter said: tell us what ye saw. And they said: we saw an old man. . . but others said: We saw a young man; and others, We saw a boy. . . . Peter therefore magnified the Lord, saying . . . God that is constant [immutable] is greater than our thoughts, even as we have learned of these aged widows, **how that they beheld the Lord in divers forms**" (emphasis added).

³³ "Peter" expounded the "prophets" together with the gospel facts (Act Verc 13) and cursed Satan for being the one who "did inflame Pharaoh and compel him to fight against Moses the holy servant of God" (8).

³⁴ In addition to the radical reinterpretation of the Gospels just discussed, and the incompatible presentation of Paul's doctrine, see also *Act Verc 7*, where 1 Tim 6: 16 is modified to "God the Father, . . . whom no man hath seen at any time, neither can see, **save he who hath believed in him**"; of the Gnostic claim attested in 1 Jn 3:6.

³⁵ Tertullian, *De Baptismo* 17.

³⁶ This is obvious from the Thecla stories. Also, "Paul" preaches, "Blessed are they that keep the flesh chaste, for they shall become the temple of God. Blessed are they that abstain [or: the continent], for unto them shall God speak." "Blessed are they that possess their wives as though they had them not, for they shall inherit God" (5). "Blessed are the bodies of the virgins, for they shall be well-pleasing unto God and shall not lose the reward of their continence, for the word of the Father shall be unto them a work of salvation in the day of his Son, and they shall have rest, world without end" (6). "Paul" had to withstand the charges of being "he that . . . maketh the souls of young men and maidens to err, deceiving them that there may be no marriages but they should live as they are" (11); and that "he defraudeth the young men of wives and the maidens of husbands, saying: ye have no resurrection otherwise, except ye continue chaste, and defile not the flesh but keep it pure," (12) as well as the charge of being he "who alloweth not maidens to marry." "Paul" does not contradict these charges, but explains that "the God that hath need of nothing, but desireth the salvation of men, hath sent me, that I may sever them from corruption and uncleanness **and all pleasure** and death, that they may sin no more" (17; emphasis added).

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There is no elaborate Sabbath and Sunday theology in the extant parts (about 70 percent of the original work).³⁷

There is more emphasis on the significance of Sunday in *Acts of John*. The Lord's day is when Christians are expected to meet and celebrate the Eucharist.³⁸ As seen above, *Ac. Jn.* is blatantly Gnostic, rather than merely tinged by Encratism or Docetism.

The *Gospel of Peter* references constitute the earliest (c. 150 A.D.) occurrences of *kyriakē* with an undoubted sense of "Lord's day" in the extant post-Apostolic literature, though its identification with weekly Sunday is not explicit in the text. Bauckham cautions that "the nature of the context makes impossible a final decision between Sunday and Easter,"³⁹ but the fact is that the phrase appears repeatedly at points in the narrative where the canonical Gospels (after which *Gos. Pet.* is obviously patterned) have "the first day of the week."⁴⁰ The author, then, probably considered those expressions as more or less equivalent. Since the only extant fragment is confined to the events between the trial of Jesus and his appearance to the disciples on the Sea of Tiberias, we cannot determine the author's attitude toward the Sabbath.⁴¹ What is clear is his Docetism,⁴² already denounced by Serapion of Antioch in 191 A.D.⁴³

Besides the NT apocrypha, we have in the list the *Ep. Apost.* and the Valentinian references already mentioned. They deal with a spatial, not temporal, concept, so there is no obvious identification with any day of the week as such.

³⁷ Introductions to NT Apocrypha sometimes caution against deriving a "theology" from them, since they aim to entertain rather than to teach. But one can counter that authors of entertainment do not expect to be really believed, or be charged with forgery, as Leucius was.

³⁸ The parting discourse of the apostle is introduced by the words, "John therefore continued with the brethren, rejoicing in the Lord. And on the morrow, being the Lord's day, and all the brethren being gathered together, he began to say . . ." (106). Afterwards he celebrates the Eucharist, orders a grave to be dug out, and steps down into it.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2 29.

⁴⁰ *Gos. Pet.* 35 ff. has the supernatural rolling of the tomb-stone "on the night whereon the **Lord's day dawned**," to be compared with Mt 28:1, "**at dawn** on the first day of the week." *Gos. Pet.* 50 ff. has the appearance of Christ to the Magdalene "**early** on the Lord's day," an incident introduced in Lk 24:1 by the words "on the first day of the week, **very early**" (emphasis added).

⁴¹ In the last extant lines, the discouraged apostles did not take up their nets to resume their life as fishermen until the Sabbath drew to a close, "the last day of unleavened bread" (58), but this could be an inference derived from the canonical report that their fishing took place by night (Jn 21:3 ff.).

⁴² On the cross Jesus "kept silence, as one feeling no pain" (10). The ethereal cross that followed Jesus and the angels as they came out of the tomb (39), and which spoke for Jesus (42), is a Gnostic symbol. See above on the sectarian character of *Ac. Jn.*; cf. also *Epist. Apost.* 16.

⁴³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History* 6:12. Evidence for Docetism in the extant fragment is disputed in Hennecke-Wilson 1:220, on the basis of a highly refined definition, but the next page acknowledges that "Serapion of Antioch established, probably correctly, the presence side by side of 'correct doctrine' and views which deviated from it." The *Ac. Pet.* was probably meant as a sequel to this *Gospel* following the pattern of the canonical NT.

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In sum, all the documents in the list show the influence of dualistic concepts and practices, and the emphasis on Sunday as the Lord's day is especially strong in the documents with Docetic-Encratite emphasis.

Intrinsic Probabilities for Gnostic Roots

In view of the heretical, and mainly Docetic, associations in all these references, we must ponder the intrinsic probabilities of the concept of Sunday as the Lord's day arising in dualistic, matter-despising, and therefore Gnostic, circles.⁴⁴

The relaxation, and eventual abandonment, of Sabbath observance in the early Christian church has been explained as a result of a number of factors, acting singly or in combination.⁴⁵ They might be adequate to explain the abandonment of the seventh-day, but in the absence of any act of institution of a Sunday celebration in the NT, these factors are not equally adequate to explain the rise of the latter.⁴⁶ The Resurrection, for example, by itself can no more support a weekly commemoration (Sunday) than a Nisan 16th festival (which actually has been kept), or a (conceivable) monthly celebration on the day following the full moon. Factors invoked to account for a weekly celebration do not seem easily applicable to the 2nd century,⁴⁷ nor do they explain why it completely substituted for the seventh-day Sabbath in parts of the ancient world.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ The definition of Gnosticism today considered standard in scholarship is "a mythology . . . to convince oneself that the phenomenal [i.e. physical] world is essentially evil, while the true self, the divine spark or seed entrapped in matter, is essentially divine," as opposed to the orthodox Christian view, "that the phenomenal world is essentially good, although disrupted by evil, and that the true self is existentially evil, and only becomes divine by adoption." C. C. Richardson, "The Gospel of Thomas: Gnostic or Encratite?" in D. Neiman and M. Schatkin, eds., *The Heritage of the Early Church* (Rome: Pontif. Instit. Stud. Orient., 1973), 68.

⁴⁵ These factors include anti-Judaism, the conviction that the Christian, though still owing a general allegiance to the Decalogue, is freed in Christ from specific external observances, or the idea that we should sanctify every day of the week.

⁴⁶ Identical objections could be made (and were, in fact, made in antiquity; see Bauckham, 277 ff.), from the viewpoint of convictions inimical to the seventh-day Sabbath, against Sunday as the Lord's day, which resembles the former in its hebdomadary rhythm and in honoring a specific day of the week above other days. While anti-Judaism may help to explain why an already existent practice of Sunday worship was preferred and substituted for Sabbath observance, it cannot adequately explain the inception of such a new practice in view of its obvious resemblance to the Jewish Sabbath.

⁴⁷ Such as, e.g., the need for Christians to meet among themselves, in addition to meeting during the Sabbath with the Jews in their synagogues (as implied in the *Birkath-ha-Minim* decision in the latter part of the 1st century), or the influence of pagan sun worship. On the latter point, see S. Bacchiocchi, "The Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity," in Strand, 132-150, and in his own *From Sabbath to Sunday*, 157-159. The need for intra-Christian meetings in addition to synagogue attendance did not survive long after the close of the apostolic age, while the influence of sun-worship corresponds better to the Christo-paganism of the 4th century than to the intellectual climate of the 2nd.

⁴⁸ In many areas Christians kept both observances for a long time. See Strand, 323-332. The fact that in other areas they did not demands an explanation.

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Gnostic influence upon Christianity can help to account for both the rise of Sunday and its radical substitution for the biblical Sabbath. Not all forms of Gnosticism were necessarily anti-Jewish or totally anti-OT, but their matter-despising dualism always implied an alteration of the biblical doctrines of man, of Christ, and especially of creation.⁴⁹ As a consequence, in these Gnostic circles, honoring the seventh day of creation week became not merely an option that might be dispensed with in the spirit of Christian freedom (as often held today), but one that must necessarily be set aside. The seventh-day Sabbath was for them a celebration of the despised material world, created by inferior and fallen powers,⁵⁰ or at any rate intimately connected with them.

The few proto-Gnostics who apparently tried to preserve a seventh-day Sabbath, such as the sects opposed by Paul,⁵¹ and the Elkesaites at the end of the first century,⁵² found it impossible to relate the Sabbath to the will of the highest God, to maintain the original scope of works to be avoided, or to observe it in the spirit of a celebration: it was, instead, a burdensome tribute, carried far beyond the biblical commandment and unwillingly paid, out of fear, to the *stoicheia*, the fallen supernatural “powers and authorities” of the universe (reasons for which their Sabbath theology is denounced in Col 2:16).⁵³ As an extreme case, these sectarians confirm the absolute impossibility of maintaining a true Sabbath together with a doctrine of Creation altered by dualism.

Most dualistic circles, however, would not bow in fear to the powers controlling the material world, but boldly curse them, as seen above in the *Ac. Pet.* Since these circles freely adapted biblical institutions to their own peculiar theology, as their abnormal Eucharist testifies, they would naturally tend to reshape

⁴⁹ Gnostic cosmology and Docetic Christology were intimately related, as summarized in “3rd Corinthians” (*Acts of Paul*): “There is no resurrection of the flesh, but that of the spirit only: and that the body of man is not the creation of God; and also concerning the world, that God did not create it, and that God knoweth not the world, and that Jesus Christ was not crucified, but it was an appearance [i.e., but only in appearance], and that he was not born of Mary, nor of the seed of David.”

⁵⁰ The early Gnostics spoke of angels or “powers”; later of a Demiurge identified with the God of the O. T. See W. Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 34ff.

⁵¹ Those in Colossae seem to have denied the divine creation of visible things (1:16), dissected the divine essence into separate members (1:19 f., 2:9), worshiped angels (2:18), and erected themselves as judges of permissible acts on the Sabbath (2:16).

⁵² They had Essenian roots, and so observed the Sabbath strictly, forbidding actions allowed not only by other Christians, but also by the Pharisees. They forbade, for instance, baptizing (which they performed repeatedly on other days) on the Sabbath; see Hippolytus, *Ref. All Heresies* 9.11, 2 0. They had also assimilated proto-Gnostic angelological-astrological conceptions, and Encratite-like practices.

⁵³ Cf. Col 2:8, 20; Gal 4:3, 9. The rigorous Sabbath observance of the Elkesaites, also, was based on fear of the fallen celestial powers: “. . . for *Elchasai* speaks thus: **There exist wicked stars of impiety.** This declaration has been now made by us, *O ye pious ones* and disciples: beware of the power of the days of the sovereignty of these *stars*, and engage not in the commencement of any undertaking during the *ruling* days of these. . . . But, moreover, honour the day of the Sabbath, **since that day is one of those during which prevails (the power) of these stars’.**” (*Ref. All Heresies* 9.11; bold emphasis added).

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the Sabbath into a new feast, celebrating a more ethereal creation performed by the highest God, not by lesser powers. A reshaping of the OT institution, rather than a complete dismissal of the same, might be expected especially from these circles, since they did not completely reject the OT but altered it.⁵⁴ This could easily have led to a rival celebration, i.e., Sunday, in conscious opposition to the seventh-day Sabbath.

The act of the highest God so celebrated was the production of light, which we tend to place into the same mental slot as physical matter, while the ancient mind saw it as its opposite. Light signified, for all Gnostic and related systems, the essential nature of the true God—not just His ethical character, as in 1 John 1:5-10.⁵⁵ Matter is the opaque substance that plunges the world into darkness as Earth is interposed in front of the Sun at dusk, and that which everywhere resists light: it is the madness of the powers of darkness.⁵⁶

It is not, then, surprising to read in the Gnostic treatise *On the Origin of the World*, included in the 4th century Nag Hammadi collection (117:35-118:1), that “the first Adam, (Adam) of light . . . appeared on the first day.” In contrast to the “Adam of light,” the Adam created on the sixth day by angelic “rulers” was merely “*psykhikos*,” a term borrowed from the Greek in the Coptic text, and in the NT often translated “animal” in anthropological contexts. There is also a “third Adam” who “is a creature of the earth (*khoikos*), that is, the man of the law, and he appeared on the eighth day.”⁵⁷ After an intriguing lacuna, the passage mentions a rest, “(*anapausis*) which is called Sunday (*hēmera Hēliou*).”⁵⁸ This rest on Sunday apparently left no room for a rival seventh-day rest; in another Nag Hammadi document, the *Gospel of Truth*, we read that Jesus (32:19-30):

Even on the Sabbath, he labored for the sheep . . . in order that you may know interiorly—you, the sons of interior knowledge—what is the Sabbath, on which **it is not fitting for salvation to be idle**, in order that you may speak from the day from above, which has no night, and from the light which does not sink because it is perfect.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ See above on *Ac. Pet.* In a closely related literature, the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* (2.38 f., 51), “Peter” explicitly states that the OT, while inspired by the true God, contains devilish interpolations, so that the Christian must be like a wise money-changer, telling and separating the fake from the true (ANF 8:236-38; cf. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 44.2.6).

⁵⁵ This is why in the “Jesus’ dance” of *Ac. Jn.* quoted above, He describes himself in terms of lighting and enlightening devices such as “lamp” and “mirror,” while the divine essence is summed up as Light at the end of the opening doxology.

⁵⁶ *Ac. Jn.* 84.

⁵⁷ Sunday, as the Lord’s day, is often called “the eighth day” in early Christian literature.

⁵⁸ B. Layton, ed. *Nag Hammadi Codex II*, 2-7, The Coptic Gnostic Library (J. M. Robinson, ed.) XXI, Leiden: Brill, 1989, 71.

⁵⁹ H. W. Attridge, ed. *Nag Hammadi Codex I*, The Coptic Gnostic Library [J. M. Robinson, ed.], XXIII, Leiden: Brill, 1989), 103; emphasis added.

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Similar conceptions appear as the earliest known rationale for Sunday worship, Justin Martyr's.⁶⁰ This rationale is grounded, not in the first place on a commemoration of the Resurrection, but on a celebration of God's creation of the light: "Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world."⁶¹ The orthodoxy or Gnostic character of Justin's doctrine of creation has been debated in the past, with modern opinion pronouncing for the former. It is only fair, however, to observe that, from this isolated passage, one could conclude otherwise.

Matter is here almost identified with darkness, a reality which is not commanded to exist in Gen 1, and was "changed," according to Justin, not by transformation, but by substituting its opposite. Actually, his term *trepsas* may mean something far less vague than "having wrought a change": it denotes also "having overturned, upset."⁶² No doubt it would have been so translated if it applied to darkness alone, but the text includes also matter (*hyle*). This presentation of God's creative act as reversing both darkness and matter might have eyed the pagan presuppositions of his addressees, for whom the idea of a divine creation of matter was foreign, and especially Platonic dualism, which despised matter just as much as Gnosticism did.⁶³ But Justin wrote as a representative of the community that later used and treasured this *Apology*, so his phrase probably reflects the understanding of the Sunday celebration then current in the Roman church.

Selecting Sunday for celebration as being the first day of creation, in preference over the seventh day, suggests that the act of originating fleshly creatures (so abhorrent to Gnostics, who fought reproduction)⁶⁴ during Creation week was also disliked within Justin's community. It seems to acquiesce in the idea that during Creation the production of earthly creatures was a regrettable decline from the introduction of pure and unsullied light into the world on the first day.⁶⁵ A deliberate contrast of this weekly celebration with the biblical Sabbath

⁶⁰ The often-cited Barnabas 15 admits a different explanation; see my "Sabbath and Covenant in the Epistle of Barnabas," AUSS 39 (Spring 2001).

⁶¹ *Apology* I, 67 (ANF 1:186).

⁶² See Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*.

⁶³ Justin quotes Plato (for a different purpose) in the next paragraph (68).

⁶⁴ Hence the prohibition of marriage and foods such as milk and eggs, connected with reproduction (1 Tim 4:3). Gnostic sects either demanded total sexual abstinence (Encratites) or allowed licentious practices cum birth control (Carpocratians, Borborites). Licentious Gnostics practiced "free love" and turned their love-feasts into orgies, but always with *coitus interruptus*, aborting and ritually cannibalizing the product of unintended conceptions. These practices were the excuse for the well-known pagan accusations against, and persecution of, all Christians.

⁶⁵ These living forms are conspicuously absent from Peter's description of creation in the pseudo-Clementine *Homily* 2, 4 5 (ANF 8:237).

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is also evident in the way Friday and Sunday are alluded in this passage,⁶⁶ as if remarking the difference with the seventh-day observance.

Justin, like the Gnostics, believed in fallen celestial powers controlling the *ourania stoicheia*,⁶⁷ but differed with Gnosticism regarding the role of these powers. In Justin, they seem to have only the care (*pronoia*) of the world; a role in its creation is not attributed to them. This proximity to a sectarian concept (the fallen powers controlling the material universe),⁶⁸ coupled with mainstream concepts, is not limited to this issue in Justin. His phraseology often shows the imprint of either the *Gospel of Peter* or a literary tradition common to both.⁶⁹

This sectarian tradition is likely to have contained a Lord's day theology, judging from the extant remains discussed above. After freely re-creating a weekly feast according to their own theology, by the same road used by Justin, and naming it *kyriakē hēmera* in order to prop the concept with an allusion to the Resurrection,⁷⁰ Gnostic sectarians could have spread a Lord's day theology, with varying degrees of success, in this and other Christian circles as part of the "cross-fertilization" mentioned by Bauckham.

The heretical appearance of this Sunday⁷¹ theology as presented by Justin may be explained by assuming that his community had been previously subjected to some Gnostic influence, later corrected (perhaps with the intervention of Justin himself).⁷² Vestiges of the influence, however, would inevitably cling to some of the phraseology and practices in the community,⁷³ more than in other sections of the church to which this Lord's day theology spread later.

⁶⁶ The day in which Jesus was crucified is not designated Friday as such (*Aphroditēs*), but "the day before the day of Saturday (*kronikē*), and after Saturday, that is, on the day of the Sun, after appearing to his apostles and disciples, He taught us these things." *Kronikē*, besides "[day] of Saturn," also connotes "old fashioned, antiquated [day]."

⁶⁷ *Apology II*, 4.2; Greek text from D. R. Bueno, *Padres Apologistas Griegos* (Madrid: B.A.C., 1954), 265.

⁶⁸ The NT speaks of Satan as the prince of this age (*aiōn*, 2 Cor 4:4), who holds authority (*exousia*, Eph 2:2) over the kingdoms of the human world (*oikoumenē*, Lk 4:4), a world-system now coming to an end (*kosmos*, John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). He does not, therefore, control the physical universe as such.

⁶⁹ Goodspeed, 50.

⁷⁰ This could have been an allusion to the yearly Easter festival which was at the time becoming fixed, in spite of the Quartodecimans, also on Sunday in all Christendom, or to the ogdoad in which they thought Christ had entered at resurrection (as in the *Epistula Apostolorum*), and which they thought alluded in Rev 1:10 to the place where John the Revelator was taken in vision, or it could have other origins.

⁷¹ Justin does not use "Lord's day" in his extant writings, but he could hardly be expected to, even if it was customary for him, in an apology addressed to the pagan emperor or in a disputation with a Jewish teacher.

⁷² A similar situation occurred early in the 3rd century when Monarchianism gained a footing in the Roman church, bishops included, as Hippolytus informs us. Incidentally, Monarchian pronouncements appear in *Ac. Pet.* (Hennecke-Wilson 2:275).

⁷³ See differences between the custom observed in Rome and Alexandria, on one hand, and in the rest of Christendom, on the other, regarding Sabbath and Sunday worship, in Strand, 323-332.

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We must therefore conclude that there are no intrinsic improbabilities in the idea that Gnostic dualism had a seminal, though not necessarily leading, role in the development of a Lord's day theology in opposition to the seventh-day Sabbath. On the other hand, mentions of Sunday as the Lord's day in mainstream Christianity during the first two centuries are questionable or ambiguous. In contrast, the earliest occurrences of the phrase "Lord's day" and the clearest instances of its application to Sunday point in the direction of Gnostic Christianity. The sectarian contribution to the concept, therefore, may be an important piece in the puzzle of the early history of Sunday as the Lord's day.

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