

## CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA AND THE LORD'S DAY

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Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 A.D.)<sup>1</sup> has been credited with being “the first Church Father whose extant writings use the term ‘Lord’s day’ to apply to the weekly Christian Sunday.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, several authors have connected a particular passage in the writings of Clement with such a weekly celebration.<sup>3</sup> However, Clement’s words do not seem to bear out such a connection. The passage at issue occurs in *Stromata* V. 14, in a section entitled “Greek plagiarism from the Hebrews,”<sup>4</sup> which endeavors to demonstrate parallels between the Greek poets and philosophers, on one hand, and the Scriptures, on the other. The passage states:

And the Lord’s day Plato prophetically speaks of in the tenth book of the *Republic* in these words: “And when seven days have passed to each of them in the meadow, on the eighth they are to set out and arrive in four days.” By the meadow is to be understood the fixed sphere, as being a mild and genial spot, and the locality of the pious; and by the seven days each motion of the seven planets and the whole practical art which speeds to the end of rest. But after the wandering orbs the journey leads to heaven, that is, to the eighth motion and day. And he says that souls are gone on the fourth day, pointing out the passage through the four elements. But the seventh day is recognized as sacred, not by the Hebrews only, but also by the Greeks. . . .<sup>5</sup> The elegies of Solon, too, intensely deify the seventh day.

Clement applies this quotation from the *Republic* to the experience of preexisting souls, who have to incarnate or “pass through the four elements.” According to this concept, shared by his disciple Origen,<sup>6</sup> human souls have been created in a distant past and come to this world by

<sup>1</sup>*Floruit*, ca. 190-202 A.D.

<sup>2</sup>K. S. Strand, *Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 346.

<sup>3</sup>A footnote of the English editor of Clement assures the reader about the “bearing” of the passage on the issue of Sabbath and Sunday.

<sup>4</sup>ANF 2:469.

<sup>5</sup>Several examples are given by Clement in quotation.

<sup>6</sup>Expounded in *On First Principles*.

incarnation, here conceived as a descent from a place above the planets. On the same page of *Stromata*, we read that “the path for souls to ascension lies through the twelve signs of the zodiac, and [Plato] himself says that the *descending pathway to birth* is the same” (emphasis added).

In the *Republic* passage, Plato (428-348 B.C.) places in Socrates’ mouth a verbatim report of the words of Er,<sup>7</sup> a Pamphylian hero who, after dying in appearance, revived while awaiting cremation. Er is here telling the experiences of disembodied souls, which he learned as he traveled to the place where souls enter and exit this world. As usual in antiquity, “heavens” are conceived in this tale as a series of eight concentric, transparent, hollow bodies, the outermost of which carries the fixed stars, while the other seven turn at different speeds bearing the “planets” (i.e., the nonfixed “stars,” including the sun and the moon).

What is peculiar in the tale of Er/Socrates/Plato is its description of the whole set of concentric star-carriers as one integrated whorl (i.e., flywheel of a spinning spindle operated by one of the goddesses of Fate). This mechanism is the “practical art” mentioned by Clement. The idea that the thread of our lives is spun by the goddesses of Fate is an extremely ancient Greco-Roman myth,<sup>8</sup> here given an astrological twist (no pun intended) by Plato.<sup>9</sup> Er states repeatedly that the time the souls have to await before incarnating is measured in periods of one thousand years.<sup>10</sup> Since a common spindle is set in movement against the torsion of the thread, “the whole practical art” periodically comes “to the end of rest.” In the same way, says Clement, the celestial spindle comes to rest periodically—every one thousand years, one might infer.

As Clement understands the tale, after “seven days” in a “meadow” (a pleasant place in the “fixed sphere” of stars girded by the zodiac), souls have to pass “through the four elements” of physical matter. This transformation of the “four days” of Plato into “the four elements” of physical matter certainly looks like a highly allegorical way to read a text,<sup>11</sup> but Clement is not so cavalier as the English translation makes him appear. Plato did not actually

<sup>7</sup>Clement here identifies this Er (“Eros”) with Zoroaster.

<sup>8</sup>The Moirai (Lat. Parcae) were Clotho (Nona), the Spinner of the thread of life; Lachesis (Decuma), the Allotter, who dispensed lengths of the thread; and Atropos (Morta) the Inflexible, who cut the thread and so determined death. The myth is attested in a simple form in Homer, acquiring its classical form in the times of Hesiod (eighth century B.C.).

<sup>9</sup>The concept of the visible heavens as part of the spinning mechanism of the Fates tends to give credibility to the astrologers’ claims to read human destinies in the stars.

<sup>10</sup>These the gods reckon as ten life-spans of one century each. Plato, *Republic* 10. 615.

<sup>11</sup>Strand, 346.

write "in four *days*," but rather used the term *tetartaious*<sup>12</sup> ("in the fourth," which can also be rendered as "fourthly"),<sup>13</sup> an ambiguity of which Clement avails himself and thus gives the term the import "by means of the four [elements]." This passing through matter (i.e., the birth into this world) is necessary for souls to reach the highest "heaven, that is, the eighth motion and day." In order to incarnate, they must leave their pleasant abode next to the fixed stars and descend beyond "the wandering orbs" of the planets<sup>14</sup> until they reach the earth.

Thus, the "seven days" of this tale, as understood by Clement, can hardly be weekdays, since they refer to the heavenly existence of souls in need of incarnation. Clement states that the days represent "each motion of the seven planets and the whole practical art." Thus he means astrological ages, which correspond to the millennial periods referred to by Plato. These seven "days," then, may be compared to the seven millennia of *Barn.* 15:8 that precede "the eighth day, that is, the beginning of another world," or Augustine's concept of seven ages of this world that come before an eighth age called "the Lord's day"<sup>15</sup> of perfect rest.

The "Lord's day" that Clement sees in Plato's "prophecy" has the same import as the "Lord's day" in Augustine. It refers to a time, after the successive ages of history, when human existence will acquire a heavenly quality. Indeed, it is difficult to find a clear link between either the "seven days" or the "Lord's day" of Clement's passage and any day of the regular week. He explicitly applies both expressions to the experience of souls in heaven (not to our ordinary life in this world). Thus, the "seven days" refer to a long preincarnation period and the "eighth day" to eternal time, not to the first day of the week.

It is true that the eternal time, referred to here as "the Lord's day," comes after seven historical ages, just as later ecclesiastical writers argued that Sunday follows the seventh day (though by all reasonable counts it precedes the latter by six days) as an "eighth day," even if there is no such eight-day cycle. But concluding that this parallel implies Sunday begs the question, because the reverse could also be true. Later writers, bent on raising the importance of Sunday, could have used a preexisting "Lord's day" phrase that referred to postmillennial time as a catchword in order to represent Sunday as a kind of "Lord's day" by means of the dubious argument that it follows the seventh

<sup>12</sup>*Republic*, 10. 616.

<sup>13</sup>Taking it as an accusative of manner.

<sup>14</sup>The Greek *planetes* means "wandering."

<sup>15</sup>The seven ages are respectively initiated by Adam, the Flood, Abraham, David, the Deportation, the Incarnation, and the Second Coming; see Augustine's *The City of God* 22.30 *in fine*.

day just as eternity begins after the "seven millennia." Whatever the case may be, this passage from Clement cannot serve as a first attestation for equation of the "Lord's Day" with "Sunday."

At the end of the passage, Clement goes on to sundry parallels in the Greek literature for the "sacred" seventh day, here meaning the seventh day of the week. But it is not clear what kind of association, if any, Clement established between the earlier part of the paragraph and its end. *Stromata* (Miscellanies), as the very title implies, is quite disjointed. He could have associated the biblical week, which is determined by the Sabbath, with the seven millennial periods above, or he could just be passing on to another topic. In any case, this implies nothing about Sunday.

Therefore, there is need for additional research about the first extant occurrences of expressions like "eighth day" and "day of the Lord" in the Patristic literature. We must carefully guard against reading into these authors later meanings for the terms they use.<sup>16</sup> The question of who first gave "the Lord's day" the meaning "Sunday" remains open.

<sup>16</sup>See my article "Sabbath and Covenant in the Epistle of Barnabas," *AUSS* 39 (2000): 117-123.