





The Sabbath Planet

Philologos | Fri. Jan 05, 2007

Ze'ev Orzech writes from Corvallis, Ore.: "I am intrigued by the connection between the Hebrew name for the planet Saturn, shabtai, which comes from Shabbat, and the word 'Satur' or 'Saturn's day.'" How, he asks, are we to explain this?

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That there is indeed a connection seems beyond doubt. The question is what came first. Did non-Jews call the seventh day of the week "Saturn's day" because Jews called Saturn shabtai — that is, the Sabbath planet — or did Jews call Saturn shabtai because non-Jews called the seventh day of the week "Saturn's day"?

To answer this question, we have to inquire when the word shabtai was introduced into Hebrew and when dies Saturni, "Saturn's day," entered Latin, from where it eventually spread to other European languages, including English. The earliest Hebrew text containing the names of the planets is Bereshit Rabba, a compilation of midrashim on the Book of Genesis, probably first put into writing in the fifth century C.E. In one place in it, there is mention of

how long it takes the six independently moving celestial bodies of the moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn to orbit the seventh body, the sun. Mercury is called *kokhav h.ama* (“the Sun Star”); Venus, *noga* (“Brightness”); Mars, *ma’adim* (“The Red One”); Jupiter, *tsedek* (“Justice”), and Saturn, *shabtai*. (Uranus and Pluto, which cannot be made out with the naked eye, were unknown to the ancient world.) But while this gives us a latest possible date for the existence of these Hebrew words, it does not give us an earliest one: Although they are undoubtedly post-biblical, they quite conceivably could be considerably older than the redaction of *Bereshit Rabba*.

Looking at it from the Latin side of the picture, we know that the seven-day week reached the Roman Empire through the Christian church, which adopted it from Judaism, so that when the emperor Constantine institutionalized Christianity in the early fourth century C.E., it became part of the official Roman calendar. But the Romans also had a pre-Christian week of their own. Known as the “nundinal cycle,” it had originally had nine, and at a later stage, eight days, each cycle ending with a market day. This day was known as *nundinae*, and the other days were named for the sun, moon and five visible planets, each of which was believed to dominate one of them. Thus, there was *dies solis* or “sun day”; *dies lunae* or “moon day” (English Monday, French *lundi*, Spanish *lunes*); *dies Martis* or “Mars’ day” (French *mardi*, Spanish *martes*); *dies Mercurii* or “Mercury’s day” (*mercredi*, *miércoles*); *dies jovis* or “Jupiter’s day” (*jeudi*, *jueves*); *dies Veneris* or “Venus’ day” (*vendredi*,

viernes); and dies Saturni. (French samedi and Spanish sàbado derive not from dies Saturni but from Latin sabbata, which goes back to Hebrew shabbat).

When did these Latin names come into existence? Our earliest bit of evidence for any of them, to which I was led by a great Hebrew lexicographer, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, is an intriguing one — and most pertinent for our discussion. In the verse of Latin poet Tibullus, who lived in the first century BCE, there is a passage telling of a voyage he made from Italy to Greece despite his premonitions that it would turn out badly, so that, in my Loeb Classical Library translation, he kept searching “in my disquiet for reasons to linger and delay [setting out]. Either [auguries of] birds or words of evil omen were my pretexts, or there was the accursed day of Saturn to detain me.”

Accursed? Or would a better translation be “holy”? Tibullus speaks of dies Saturni sacra, and sacra in Latin can mean either of these two things depending on the context. One way or another, it seems almost certain that, even though he was not a Jew, Tibullus was referring to the Jewish Sabbath — whose ban on travel, if one was looking for a superstitious excuse to stay at home, might deter a non-Jew, too.

A second bit of evidence, also cited by Ben-Yehuda, comes from Tacitus, a Roman historian. Writing in the late first or early second century C.E., Tacitus tells us that the Jews rest every seventh day, and let the earth lie fallow every seventh year, in honor of Saturn, the seventh and highest of the heavenly

bodies. Although he does not say that the Jews worship Saturn, Tacitus does state that it is considered by them to be the planet with the most powerful influence on human life.

Tibellus antedates Bereshit Rabba by 500 years. Tacitus does so by at least 300. It is likely, therefore, that dies Saturni is an older term than shabtai, and that, even before the rise of Christianity, the Romans, aware that the Jews rested every seven days and wondering why they did, attributed this to the role played in their religion by Saturn and referred to the Jewish Sabbath as "Saturn's day." Perhaps the other Latin names for the days of the week — dies solis, dies lunae, etc. — were modeled on dies Saturni and followed in the wake of it. But in any case, in the course of time the term dies Saturni would have influenced Jews, too, to associate their Sabbath with Saturn and to call the latter shabtai. This seems to me the most reasonable hypothesis.