

The Old Jewish Sabbath

It might be old, but is it really Jewish?

By Cliff Goldstein

For thousands of years Jews have suffered for the Sabbath. Gentiles too faced persecution for keeping the seventh-day holy. The fourth-century Synod of Laodicea warned that “Christians must not Judaize by resting on the Sabbath, but must work on that day, rather honoring the Lord's day. . . . But if any shall be found to be Judaizers, let them be anathema from Christ.”(1) In Europe, Christians who kept Jewish customs, including the Sabbath, faced penalties, even death.(2) In America, both Jewish and Gentile Sabbath keepers have faced fines and jail for working on Sunday. Though Sunday blue laws have been in retreat for years, their resurgence—especially during an economic crisis—could again cause problems for those who keep what has been commonly called “the old Jewish Sabbath.”

A major problem exists, however, for those who refer to the Sabbath as Jewish. The seventh-day Sabbath, as far as its origin, purpose, and meaning are concerned, is not Jewish. The Jews have been associated with the seventh-day Sabbath only because they have observed it for millennia. New Yorkers have observed Christmas for hundreds of years. Is, therefore, Christmas an exclusive New York holiday? No; Christmas was not made specifically for New Yorkers, and neither was the Sabbath specifically for Jews. Christmas is celebrated by others besides New Yorkers, as Sabbath is celebrated by others besides the Jews. The seventh-day Sabbath, therefore, no more belongs to Jews than Christmas does to the Big Apple.

Birthday of the World

Many Christians, attempting to justify Sunday keeping, insist that the seventh-day Sabbath is for Jews only. “The biblical view is unequivocal,” writes Harold Dressler in a polemic on Sunday: “The Sabbath originated in Israel as God's special institution for His people.”(3) The Bible is unequivocal about the origin of the Sabbath, and it had nothing to do with the Jews. God blessed and sanctified the seventh-day at the end of the Creation week, more than 2,000 years before the Hebrew nation existed! The word *Hebrew* itself doesn't appear in the Bible until applied to Abraham in Genesis 14, who isn't mentioned until about 2,000 years after the biblical Creation. The first Jews, technically speaking, were the children of Judah—Abraham's great-grandson!

In verse 2 and 3 of Genesis 2, still in Creation week, the Bible reads: “And God finished on the seventh day his work which he had done; and he rested on the seventh day from

all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because on it he rested from all his work which God created and made.”(4)

Here, the seventh-day is set apart, blessed, and sanctified at the end of Creation week. The command at Sinai, when the Jews received the Ten Commandments, merely points back to the Creation account already given in Genesis. “Because in six days the Lord made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day,” says Exodus, “Therefore the Lord *blessed* the Sabbath day and *sanctified* it” (Exodus 20:11, italics supplied).

The Hebrew word for “blessed” and “sanctified” used in Exodus to describe what God had done to the seventh day are from the same root words used in Genesis 2 to describe what God had done to the same day.

The Sabbath commandment repeats what God had already completed in Eden. Sinai didn't originate the Sabbath; Sinai merely pointed back to what had been in existence thousands of years before.

“The seventh day,” writes historian J.N. Andrews, “as hallowed by God in Eden, was not Jewish, but divine; it was not the memorial of the flight of Israel from Egypt, but of the Creator's rest.”(5)

Some Jews too regard the Sabbath as universal. “But after the whole world had been completed according to the perfect nature of the number six,” writes Philo Judaeus, a Jewish scholar who lived during the Roman Empire, “the Father hallowed the day following, the seventh, praising it, and calling it holy. For that day is the festival, not of one city or one country, but of all the earth; a day which alone is right to call the day of festival for all people, and the birthday of the world.”(6) In the twentieth century, Jewish philosopher Martin Buber explained that the Sabbath is “rooted in the very beginnings of the world itself,” and that it “is the common property of all, and all ought to enjoy it without restriction.”(7)

Manna Mania

Nevertheless, for centuries people have insisted that the seventh-day is exclusively a Jewish institution, inaugurated at Mount Sinai. John Bunyan, who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, explained that “the seventh-day Sabbath, therefore, was not from Paradise, nor from nature, nor from the fathers, but from the wilderness and from Sinai”(8) Poet John Milton wrote: “That the Israelites had not so much as heard of the Sabbath before this time [the wilderness], seems to be confirmed by several passages of the Prophets.”(9) According to Christian theologian Gerard von Rad, “Israel learns of it [the Sabbath] only at Mount Sinai.”(10)

How, then, do they explain the Sabbath keeping that occurred at least two weeks before Sinai? According to the Bible, while the Israelites were in the wilderness of Sin, *before* they reached Sinai, God commanded that they gather manna every day, but on the sixth day they would gather “twice as much” (Exodus 16:5). Why? Because the next day, the seventh, was the Sabbath, and God didn't want them working on His holy day. “And Moses said, Eat today, because today is the Sabbath day of the Lord, and you will not find it in the field. Six days you will gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, it will not be there” (verse 25; 26).

But some Israelites went out looking for manna on the Sabbath anyway, and for that act they were rebuked. “And the Lord said to Moses, How long do you refuse to keep my commandments and laws?” (verse 28). The Israelites must have known something about God's laws and commandments, otherwise why would they have been chastised for continually disobeying them? And one of those laws dealt with the Sabbath, for the next verse says, “See, for the Lord *gave* you the Sabbath, therefore he *gives* you on the sixth day the bread of two days; return each man to his place and don't go forth from his place on the seventh day. And the people rested on the seventh day” (verses 29, 30).

These verses say that the Lord “gave you the Sabbath.” In the Hebrew, the root word *give* (ntn) is vocalized to make it past tense. Clearly; the Jews already had the Sabbath before they entered the wilderness of Sin, which occurred before Sinai.

Exodus 16, writes Christian Old Testament scholar Gerhard Hasel, “reveals that the Sabbath institution was known before the giving of the law on Mount Sinai and before its appearance in the wilderness of Sin.”(11)

Jewish theologian Martin Buber agrees, for he writes that the Sabbath “is not introduced for the first time even in the wilderness of Sin, where the manna is found. Here, too, it is proclaimed as something which is already in existence.”(12)

The fourth commandment at Sinai hints that the Sabbath was already known. It starts out with the word *Remember*. Apparently, the Sabbath was something that they already were aware of. God simply wanted to remind them of it.

Silence Is Golden

Unfortunately, some base their theology not on what is written, but on what isn't. Because the Bible doesn't mention the Sabbath from after Creation until the Exodus, they suppose this silence proves that the seventh-day Sabbath was not kept holy until Moses. Yet not until the book of Leviticus does the Bible give specific commandments against incest or bestiality. Did God allow His people to do these things before the prohibitions were specifically mentioned in Scripture?

Also, from after Moses until King David, 500 years, the Bible says nothing about the Sabbath. Was it not mentioned during the patriarchal period, or the 500 years from Moses to David, because the Sabbath wasn't observed or because it was simply assumed that it was kept? During the patriarchal period no record exists of a ban on adultery and murder either. Can one assume that God allowed adultery and murder, as well nonobservance of the Sabbath, simply because they were not specifically banned in Scripture?

“First, we have a similar example of silence regarding the Sabbath between the books of Deuteronomy and 2 Kings,” wrote Sabbath scholar Samuele Bacchiocchi on the question of Sabbath during the patriarchal period. “Such silence can hardly be interpreted as nonobservance of the Sabbath, since when the first incidental reference occurs in 2 Kings 4:23, it describes the custom of visiting a prophet on the Sabbath. Second, Genesis does not contain laws like Exodus, but rather a brief sketch of origins. Since no mention is made of any other commandments, the silence regarding the Sabbath is not exceptional.”(13)

Guilt by Association

The seventh-day Sabbath, though meant for all mankind, has been associated with the Jews because the Jews have been the only ones who have, for thousands of years, consistently kept it. A few centuries after the death of Jesus and Paul (both seventh-day Sabbathkeepers), Sunday replaced Saturday as the “Christian” Sabbath, despite no evidence in the New Testament for the change.

James P. Westberry of the *Lord's Day Alliance*, an organization devoted solely to Sunday worship, admits: “There is no record of a statement on the part of Jesus authorizing such a change, nor is there such a statement on the part of the apostles.”(14) A recent book published by the *Lord's Day Alliance* states: “We must admit that we can point to no direct command that we cease observing the seventh day and begin using the first day.”(15)

Harold Lindsell, when editor of *Christianity Today*, one of the most widely read Christian magazines in America, admitted that “there is nothing in Scripture that requires us to keep Sunday rather than Saturday as a holy day.”(16)

Nevertheless, millions of Sunday keepers aren't going to let a plain “Thus saith the Lord” stand in the way of tradition. Some aren't even content to let conscience determine which day to observe. They seek laws that would, in their own words, “protect the people from those who would rob them of the Lord's day,”(17) that is Sunday blue laws.

Thus they would add bad laws to bad theology. It hardly seems a good way to settle an

old controversy.

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Footnotes

- (1) *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. XIV, 14. Cf. Marcel Simon, *Versus Israel* (Paris, 1964), p. 382.
- (2) Kenneth Strand, ed., *The sabbath in Scripture and History*, D(Washington, D.C., Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1982), p. 196.
- (3) D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, Harold Dressler, "The Sabbath in the Old Testament," (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1982). p. 23.
- (4) All Bible quotations in this article are translations done by author.
- (5) J. N. Andrews, *History of the Sabbath*, (Battle Creek, Mich.: Stearns Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Pub. Assn, 1873), p. 26.
- (6) Philo Judaeus, "The Creation of the World," as quoted in Andrews, p. 27.
- (7) Martin Buber, *Moses*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 85.
- (8) John Bunyan, *Complete Works* p. 895, as quoted in H. M. . Riggle, *The Sabbath and the Lord's Day*, (Anderson, Ind.: Gospel Trumpet Co., 1918), p. 24.
- (9) As quoted in Riggle, p. 23.
- (10) Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1966) p. 101 as quoted in Carson, p. 28.
- (11) Strand, p. 27.
- (12) Buber, p. 80.
- (13) Samuele Bacchiocche, *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness*, (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1980) p. 35.
- (14) James P. Westberry, "Are we Compromising Ourselves?" *Sunday*, April-June, 1976, p. 5.
- (15) *The Lord's Day*. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), p. 100.
- (16) Harold Lindsell, "Consider the Case for Quiet Saturdays," *Christianity Today*, Nov. 5, 1976, p. 42.
- (17) Westberry, "Are We compromising Ourselves?" p. 4.