

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society, 9/1–2 (1998): 141–149.
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Faith Under Pressure: The Sabbath as Case Study

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[The following paper was a plenary address at the Jerusalem Bible Conference.]

The Adventist insight into the cosmic conflict provides us unusual advantage in understanding why such antipathy surges around us between God's ways and what often is favored by our culture. A review of the experience of Sabbath-keepers in the past will help us learn what to anticipate in the future, and not only with the Sabbath, but other of God's truths as well.

All of us are sadly familiar with persistent conflicts in human relations, whether interpersonal, family, intra-societal, inter-societal, or, in this century, massive, continent-wide conflicts. A similarly checkered career has marked God's great revealed truths. Each can be traced, one by one, through the valley of the shadow, only to be elevated in another setting.

Sabbath in Hebrew Scriptures. It is remarkable how little discussion of the Sabbath is found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Contrast, for example, the ample attention given to themes such as idolatry. The Sabbath is given at Creation, where it is the crowning act of God, tied directly to the concept of His rest. In fact its observance is not fleshed out in detail, although since the Creator Himself is introducing it to His newly fashioned human creatures, we can assume with confidence that His introduction was a thorough one. We can only imagine what means God employed in orienting the new humans to a totally fresh existence. The Sabbath was a part of it.

Mention of the Sabbath does not occur in the Flood narrative or the Abraham/Isaac/Jacob/Joseph reports, even though it must have been an element in God's revealed plan. We are told that Abraham kept God's charge, commandments, statutes, and laws (Gen 26:5). Just how God's people fared under circumstances unfavorable to Sabbath observance, such as Joseph in Potiphar's service, we are not told.

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With the Exodus the Sabbath comes to the forefront. Manna is given every day with exception of the Sabbath, with explicit instructions about how to relate to it (Ex 16). The law with its Sabbath commandment is given at Sinai, with additional incidents and laws relating to the Sabbath. Deuteronomy traces the reintroduction of the Sabbath back to the Exodus experience. Of course there are additional references to the Sabbath, but long gaps in Hebrew history pass without reference to it. However it is clear that the Sabbath remains a part of the covenant walk with God, designed as a blessing to God's people. At times it appears to have been reduced to ritual formality, a hindrance to ambitious plans, often not good, compelled to wait until sunset to be resumed. Nehemiah insists that the Sabbath be restored among those who returned from the Exile, and there is no question that it remains a part of God's plan (Neh 13:15-22). As a general observation, however, its profile remains unexpectedly low.

Sabbath as Case Study. In the New Testament we find frequent references to the Sabbath because the way it is to be observed became a matter of controversy. At times Jesus seemed to cooperate with the prevailing patterns governing Sabbath observance, at other times deliberately to provoke controversy in order to teach a new understanding of its purpose. Cases of these two are easily seen. Sabbath passages occur especially in the Gospels and Acts, much less so in the Pauline and general epistles. The reference to the Lord's day in Revelation (1:10), although debated, should best be interpreted in light of previous clear usage of the term, where it refers to the Sabbath, rather than the later application to Sunday found in the church fathers.

Jewish-Christian Relations. The hostility between Jews and early Christians reported in the New Testament appears to stem from Jewish leaders, not the common people. The Gospel of John outlines this most clearly, although its frequent reference to "the Jews" is interpreted by some as Johannine bias against all Jewish people. This idea appears to be read into the context, however, for John cites no cases of hostility by the ordinary populace. The clashes arise from rabbinic and priestly leaders. As a historical report of the early church, the book of Acts reports numerous clashes.¹ There is increasing exclusion of Christians from the synagogues, also noted in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (I Thess 2:14-16). Christian responses were sometimes provocative, such as the assertion that in no other name can salvation be obtained (Acts 4:12).

Based on the extant evidence, it appears that many Christians, particularly those of Jewish ancestry, continued to attend Sabbath worship in synagogues. These appear in the New Testament as a party continuing practice of the Jewish laws, of which the Sabbath remained a keystone. The Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15) was called to meet certain issues raised by this group, and we find Paul addressing them directly in his epistles to the Galatians and Romans.

¹ Acts 13:50; 14:5, 19; 17:5, 13; 18:13; 19:9; 20:3; 23:12; 24:1-9.

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Relations between Jewish-Christians and the Jewish community continued to deteriorate, following a sporadic pattern. There is today a scholarly revival of interest in how the two groups, Jews and Christians, arrived at final division. Current opinion identifies both doctrinal and social factors: doctrinal in the role of the Messiah, social in the fact that Jewish identity and covenant were at stake. Who is a Jew and who is not one? Could the Jew who accepted Jesus as the center of God's outreach to humanity continue to be treated as a full brother or sister, or something else?

With the advance of Christian faith into the Gentile world, it seems clear that by A.D. 50 the numerical balance began to tip away from Jewish to non-Jewish Christians. Jewish-Christians, increasingly in the minority, are identified by early church historians as Ebionites, themselves divided into mediating and rigorous parties.

The book of Acts clearly presents the Jerusalem church as the mother congregation, with even Paul returning from his journeys to bring reports to the Jerusalem congregation. Such prestige must have served to maintain the standing of the Jerusalem church as membership increased elsewhere.

Two events of the 60s sharpened distinctions between Jews and Jewish-Christians, although there is no evidence whatsoever that they differed over the Sabbath. James, brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem congregation, was executed, apparently about A.D. 62.² The second came when in A.D. 68 the Christian community fled besieged Jerusalem in response to the warning of Jesus (Matt 24:15-22). This must have been interpreted by the city's defenders as abandonment at just the time of urgent need. The damage of relationships was irreparable.³

Although Jerusalem was rebuilt, it was a much weaker city, stripped of temple, Sanhedrin, and most of its former religious and political structures. Whether any kind of sacrifices were restored in the rebuilt city remains a matter of scholarly debate, but there is little evidence of immediate return by substantial numbers of Christians.

The center of gravity in Jewish life was itself shifting from priestly to rabbinic. In less than one generation rabbinic councils, notably at Jamnia, were busily restructuring the actual format of Judaism. In the process of separation between Jews and Christians, a remarkable fact stands out that presents serious problems for those who claim that Christians early abandoned the Sabbath to substitute Sunday in honor of the resurrection. In all the sources, both biblical and extrabiblical, there appears no support anywhere for the apostolic Sunday observance. Clearly, which day is the holy day was not an issue between Christians of the Apostolic Era and Judaism.

² Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1.

³ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.5.3.

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Considerable attention has been given the Jamnia council's inclusion of an anathema in the daily prayer, *Shemoneh Esreh*. Added around A.D. 90, it pronounced a curse upon Nazarenes and Mimim. Probably its purpose was to draw strong distinction between Jews and Christians. If so, it was successful, being cited by Justin, Epiphanius, and later Jerome, who complains, "Three times daily in all the synagogues under the name of Nazarenes you curse the name of the Christians."

It seems clear that in the Jerusalem church, and Judea in general, the fate of Christians was bound up with wider Jewish fate, for strong Jewish affinity continued among Christians.⁴ Christian historians report a period of relative toleration by Jewish leaders between A.D. 70 and the end of the century. After 120, however, we have reports of tension and a developing anti-Christian persecution as extremists gained ground in Jewish community. Bar Kochba's claim to Messiahship, supported by Rabbi Akiba, and the revolt of 131-135, would end in disaster and termination of the Jewish nation. To the degree that Christians identified with Judaism, they too suffered.

Rome and Judaism. Although completed 28 years ago, Samuele Bacchiocchi's study of the abandonment of the Sabbath and adoption of Sunday in the early church remains the definitive work in its field. His argument ties the beginning of Sunday observance to the declining status of Jews in the Roman world, and his conclusions correspond well to the evidence.

By the first century A.D. Jews comprised an important segment of the empire, not so much by reason of numbers as from the diaspora network that planted a Jewish community in virtually every major city, particularly in the East. Their adeptness brought them influence beyond their actual numbers, at the same time engendering envy and resentment. Among these Jewish communities Paul and other Christian workers often began their work.

Jewish separateness and different customs, their religious inflexibility, an often contentious nature, and economic success attracted special attention. Their trademark characteristics were circumcision and Sabbath observance. Resentment developed early in Rome. The sometimes-gossipy historian, Suetonius, reports that in 49 Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. In Corinth Paul encounters two of these displaced Jews, Aquila and Priscilla. The reason given for the expulsion: Jewish rioting incited by or over a certain Crestus, a name tantalizingly similar to Christ.⁵ Dio Cassius adds that Jews also were prohibited from following their customs.⁶

We can be certain that at this early date the Romans recognized little or no distinction between Jews and Christians. No such distinction is made by Gallio, brother of Seneca, before whom Paul was brought in Corinth. For him it is but

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.27.3.

⁵ Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4; Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.

⁶ *History* 60.6.

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another dispute among Jews on matters of "your own law" (Acts 18:15), in which he refuses to become involved.

In a few years, however, Roman officers acknowledged a separation, although the Jewish origins of Christianity remained clear. Possibly the insight came to Nero through his wife, Poppea, who Josephus reports was a proselyte to Judaism.⁷ Although the early Nero was relatively benevolent, Tacitus reports that by 64 he was torturing Christians, whom he held responsible for a great fire that for days burned through ramshackle wooden tenements in Rome,⁸ and it was he who ordered the execution of Paul, and, if we are to trust tradition, Peter.

From A.D. 49 Jewish fortunes sank. Roman officials suppressed Jewish riots in several of the great cities. Two years before his untimely end, Nero sent Titus to Jerusalem to deal with the major rebellion there. Its end brought total demolition of the city with exception of the Antonia, the Roman fortress well inside the city. The following 30 years saw a series of persistent Jewish riots in the East, testing Roman patience and alienating the Roman populace. Ostracism grew. Titus abandoned his plans to marry Berenice, sister of Herod Agrippa II. A new capitation tax was levied on Jews. Suetonius reports that in time the tax was extended also to those who "live as Jews."⁹ Following the death of the crazed Domitian, his successor, Nerva, revoked the tax on Christians, by doing so tacitly acknowledging their difference from Jews.

With the turn of the century Jewish fortunes continued almost in free fall. Critics attacked, maligned, gossiped about, and ridiculed Jews. Tacitus, Horace, Cicero, Juvenal, Dio Cassius, and Ovid satirized Jews and cast them in the most unfavorable light. It became chic to mock Jews. Dramatists portrayed Jews as mean, penurious, despicable characters, liars, thieves, treacherous, low life types. The late Menahem Stern has collected in three formidable volumes all the known classical references to Jews.¹⁰ It comprises a sorry lot. To cite only one example from Tacitus:

All their customs, which are at once perverse and disgusting, owe their strength to their very badness. . . . They regard the rest of mankind with all the hatred of enemies. They sit apart at meals, they sleep apart, and though as a nation they are particularly prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women."¹¹

Josephus' greatest work, *Antiquities of the Jews*, was his attempt to renovate and, if possible, lift the pall of public scorn against Jews.

⁷ *Ant.* 22.8.11. *vita* 3.

⁸ *Annals* 15:44.

⁹ Suetonius, *Domitian*.

¹⁰ Menahem Stern, ed., *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976-1984).

¹¹ *Histories* 5.5.

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It was at this point, as noted earlier, that Bar Kochba arose with messianic claims. As he was endorsed by the respected Akiba, Palestine's Jews, chafing under taxes, indignities, and Roman scorn, in large part accepted him, leading to a major revolt. Hadrian, a hard military man famed for his penchant for action and interest in boys, seized the opportunity to eliminate once for all the festering Jewish problem. Again Jerusalem was devastated and Palestine's Jewish population essentially depleted by mass removal. Hadrian's new city on the site of Jerusalem, Aelia Capitolina, centered around a temple to Jupiter, and Jews were prohibited from the city. Throughout the empire the practice of Judaism was banned.

Sabbath to Sunday. It is not by accident that our earliest verified reports of weekly Sunday observance come from this very time. Bacchiocchi gives special attention to the Jerusalem congregation, noting that up to Hadrian's destruction of 135, all the bishops of Jerusalem included on Eusebius' list were "of the circumcision." The city was rebuilt as a non-Jewish community, and Eusebius notes a resurgent Christian presence, with the church now under non-Jewish leadership. Bacchiocchi concludes, "The more probable explanation . . . is that after the disappearance of the bishops of the circumcision (ca. A.D. 135), a group of Judaeo-Christians, desirous of re-integrating themselves in the majority, adopted the observance of Sunday in addition to the Sabbath."¹² Note that Bacchiocchi acknowledges by this time a substantial Sunday observance outside Jerusalem.

Hadrian's destruction was final. From 135 there was total cessation of sacrifices, dismantlement of Israel as a nation, and prohibition of Sabbath observance.¹³ Although the decree against Sabbath observance was rescinded by Hadrian's successor, Antoninus Pius, (138-161), the weight of social disapproval led to increasing Christian abandonment of the Sabbath.

We are struck by the failure among Sunday advocates to construct a strong rationale in defense of Sunday. Uniformly, the early patristic arguments focus on the evils of Jewish practice rather than the merits of Sunday observance. The abandonment of the Sabbath with its consequent adoption of Sunday stands as a classic example of religious capitulation in the face of hostile social disapproval.

With the turn away from its original Hebrew roots, Christianity advanced rapidly toward Hellenization. Greek dualism displaced the biblical understanding of reality and rapid changes followed.

It is true that Christians faced severe disadvantages by persisting in Sabbath observance, at times even illegal status. The older religions of the empire had served to create social bonds that held together society. Christianity focused in a different direction. As is well known, early Christians intentionally distanced themselves from the state and its social structures. Christians did not serve in the

¹² Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: Anti-Judaism and the Origin of Sunday* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1975), p. 29.

¹³ *Babylonian Talmud*, Rosh Hashanah 19a.

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army, refused the festivals of the state gods, and refused to enter into any form of political leadership or civil service. They appeared to their peers as atheists, a charge often made against them. To bear the social burden of the Sabbath as well seemed overwhelming to many. As Sabbath observance declined, in its place arose the honoring of Sunday, a practice far more compatible with the traditional state religions. Social pressure had overcome biblical truth, and the church entered a new trajectory.

Lightfoot's classification of the apostolic fathers' attitudes toward Judaism is helpful. The Didache, Hermas, and possibly Papias are favorable, Epistle of Barnabas and Epistle to Diognetus negative, the remainder mediating. Not surprisingly, the critique of things Jewish found in Ignatius (A.D. 115) develops to Barnabas' open rejection of Sabbath for its Jewish connections (A.D. 135). The earliest detailed description of a Sunday worship service appears in the final section of Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (c. A.D. 153). William Shea's study of Barnabas outlines his anti-Jewish bias, but in a recent paper Shea provides persuasive evidence that the Sunday passage in Justin bears telltale marks of an interpolation.¹⁴

Social Force and Christian Faith. We have traced briefly steps by which Sabbath observance, despite its solid biblical basis, capitulated under pressure from public ostracism and the desire to be accepted. Our review does not address how Sunday observance became the accepted substitute despite its complete lack of biblical support.

Religious history is replete with similar changes. A striking example is the case of conversions to Islam, especially in the seventh century. In rapid succession total populations once nominally Christian changed to an Islam sponsored by the new ruling class, this under the influence of minimal physical, but substantial social coercion.

Some of the most penetrating studies of the interplay between faith and society come from Jacques Ellul. As he observes, "Each generation thinks it has finally discovered the truth, the key, the essential nub of Christianity by venerating itself with the dominant influence and modeling itself on it."¹⁵ Ellul sees the original Christian faith as radical in the sense of making absolute claims. Christ's kingdom was not of this world, but cued to an entirely different authority—God. However, those who were attracted soon saw the utility of using social structures. Early Christianity bought into the legal spirit (Roman), the prevailing philosophical understanding of the world (Greek), and the mode of action (political, institutional). Christianity contextualized, abandoning its radical differences to absorb foreign elements for pragmatic purposes. This insight leads him to cite an example which Adventists can appreciate.

¹⁴Shea, "The Sabbath in the Epistle of Barnabas," *AUSS* 4 [1966], 154-65; and unpublished paper on the Sabbath passage in Justin Martyr [1998].

¹⁵Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 18.

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A familiar example for the mutation to which revelation was actually subjected is its contamination by the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul. I will briefly recall it. In Jewish thought death is total. There is no immortal soul, no division of body and soul. Paul's thinking is Jewish in this regard. . . . The body is the whole being. In death there is no separation of body and soul. The soul is as mortal as the body. But there is a resurrection. . . . God creates anew the being that was dead. This is a creation by grace; there is no immortal soul intrinsic to us. Greek philosophy, however, introduces among theologians the idea of an immortal soul. The belief was widespread in popular religion and it was integrated into Christianity. But it is a total perversion. . . . All Christian thinking is led astray by this initial mutation that comes through Greek philosophy and Near Eastern cults. . . . This idea completely contaminates biblical thinking, gradually replaces the affirmation of the resurrection, and transforms the kingdom of the dead into the kingdom of God.¹⁶

Adventists are committed to the Scriptures as the source of truth. I wonder, however, whether we are sensitive to the way social forces invade and mutate the faith originally given to the saints. The Christian church moved, step by step, led by a series of leaders persuaded that their choices represented enhancements of the faith, absorbing elements alien to the revealed Word.

The religions of the Roman world were civic religions, social bonds that held society together. Jesus introduced a freedom not before seen, an escape from the bonds of the past, personal, hope-oriented. From civic cement, religion became grace, joy, liberty. In absorbing Roman law Christianity returned to natural law and structure rather than the life validated by God. Greek philosophy turned theology into a search for abstract "truth" where the Scriptures turn us to a search for the Author of truth. God's revelation is historical, to be found in God's intervention in human experience.

The Bible is a series of stories, but not myths intended to unveil abstract truths. The stories are history, the history of God's interchange with His people—temporal. God reveals Himself in action. Profoundly historical, even eternal things appear in temporal garb. The mistake of the early church that haunts us still today is its willingness to absorb alien elements on the premise that they will enhance the growth of God's work. That very process stains the footsteps of a church eventually captured by the very elements it absorbed.

The results: the church became the structural ideology of continuing society—once more the basis for social integration. From a personal walk with God it became a collective ideology. Christianity's prophetic freedom came to be molded into a new garb that outlines a social structure.

Adventists today are in desperate peril that our faith will slip from the person in communion with God into parameters of a cultural subset, something

¹⁶ Ellul, 25n.

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called Adventist life or lifestyle. As in ancient Rome, religion will have become once more a mere social cement.

It was this perversion of faith that made it necessary for everyone to become a Christian. To defect was to threaten the whole. So saintly men such as Bernard of Clairvaux could pen glorious words such as, "Jesus the very thought of Thee with sweetness fills my breast, but sweeter far thy face to see, and in thy presence rest," only to mount a crusade of torture against heretics.

Not even Luther or Calvin detected fully the perversion represented in such religion, but certain of the Radical Reformers did, and it is to their insights that we today owe a debt of gratitude. In their attempt to return to the New Testament church, they carried us again to the freedom conferred by Jesus. Almost Luther found it in his *Freedom of the Christian Man*, but soon it was smothered under a magisterial church.

From the beginning God set humans free and made them responsible. It was that way in the first Eden: it will be that way in the New Jerusalem.