

The Biblical Sabbath: The Adventist Perspective

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I. Introduction

In this paper we will use the final form of the biblical text to develop an Adventist view of the biblical Sabbath. Scholars commonly use the historical critical approach when dealing with this subject. They have been mainly interested in the origin and historical development of the commandment¹ and consequently they concluded that only the historical critical methodology is able to produce adequate results. In our case the primary interest is theological and doctrinal. We would like to move beyond a biblical theology that is conceived as a descriptive historical discipline. John J. Collins is right, "Historical criticism, consistently understood, is not compatible with a confessional theology that is committed to specific doctrines on the basis of faith."² Perhaps that is one of the reasons Pope John II used in the Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* the biblical text in its final canonical form to develop the theology and modern relevance of the Sabbath/Sunday "commandment."

The Adventist view of the Sabbath commandment as designating the seventh day as a day of rest required by God for fellowship and communion with Him is based on the facts that it originated during creation week, it was observed by Jesus and the apostles and there is no evidence in the biblical text to support the claim that the commandment was transferred from the seventh day to the first day of the week.

II. Creation Sabbath and the Sabbath Commandment

A. Gen 2:1-3 and the Sabbath

According to the biblical creation narrative the Sabbath originated at the end of creation week as an expression of the divine will (Gen 2:1-3). Protestants commonly argue that Gen 2:1-3 does not prescribe a Sabbath commandment, but that it simply describes what God did on the seventh day. It is argued that the Sabbath commandment was given to the Israelites through the covenant; it is a Jewish law. Here we agree with *Dies Domini*: "If the first page of the Book of Genesis presents God's 'work' as an example for man, the same is true of God's 'rest.'"³ That conclusion can be supported on several different grounds.

¹Adventist scholars have looked into the different attempts and theories proposed to explain the origin of the Sabbath and have concluded with most scholars that at the present time there is not enough evidence to prove any of the theories proposed. Among Adventist scholars who have examined this important issue we find, Niels-Erik A. Andreasen, *The OT Sabbath: A Tradition-Historical Investigation*, SBL Dissertation Series 7 (Missoula, MT: University of Montana, 1972), who concluded that "the Sabbath is older than the OT, and probably older than Israel, but with our present sources we cannot trace the Sabbath beyond the OT itself . . . We do not know the forces which were at work in the beginning to motivate the origin of the Sabbath." (p. 264); Samuelle Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness* (Rome: Pontifical Press, 1980), pp.22-26; *idem.*, "Remembering the Sabbath: The Creation-Sabbath in Jewish and Christian History," in *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Tamara C. Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington, Jr., and William H. Shea, eds. (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp. 69-97. Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Sabbath in the Pentateuch," in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, Kenneth A. Strand, ed. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), pp. 21-22; *idem.*, "Sabbath," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 850-51, where he concluded that "in spite of the extensive efforts of more than a century into extra-Israelite Sabbath origins, it is still shrouded in mystery. No hypothesis whether astrological, menological, sociological, etymological, or cultic commands the respect of a scholarly consensus. . . It is, therefore, not surprising that this quest has been pushed into the background of studies on the Sabbath in recent years" (p. 851).

²John J. Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*, William Henry Propp, Baruch Halpern, David Noel Freedman, eds. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), p. 14.

³*Dies Domini*, I.11

1. Humans as the Image of God and the Sabbath

The creation narrative describes humans as unique intelligent creatures within a world brought into existence by God. The uniqueness of humans within creation is located in the fact that they were created in the image of God (1:27). They were to reflect the actions of God, the character of God and to represent Him within the rest of creation. The idea that God rested from His works ascribes to God a human need in order to demonstrate to humans how He planned to supply it for them.⁴ The anthropomorphic language clearly points to God's concern for humans who do not only need to work but also to separate a particular time to enjoy deep personal communion with the Creator. God's action—His rest—, reveals His willingness to enjoy fellowship with humans during the seventh day. It is the Creator, not the creature, who determines the time of rest.

Adventist theologian Hans K. LaRondelle stated, "Without the divine communion and fellowship on the seventh day, without man's entering into God's rest on that day, the whole creation would be cut off from its Maker and necessarily have to find its purpose and sense in itself. Then God's rest indeed would rather be the cryptic indication of God's return to the aseity (the absolute self-existence) of the inner glory of His being and existence, leaving man and the world to themselves." He adds, "God's rest then means His ceasing the work of creation *in order to* be free for the fellowship with man, the object of his love, for the rejoicing and celebration of His completed work together with his son on earth, the *imago Dei*, his festive partner."⁵

2. God Blessed the Sabbath

In the creation narrative God is described as blessing the seventh day. That probably means, as suggested by the use of the same verb in Exod 20:11, that "through it [the Sabbath] he [God] mediates the divine blessing to the person who keeps it."⁶ The blessing itself is undefined and that has led some to conclude that what defines it is the next verb in the sentence, God "sanctified it."⁷ That is to say, the blessing is to be understood in terms of holiness in the sense of separation and election.⁸ But the combination of the two verbs found in the text is unique in the Old Testament and unless there are very compelling reasons to consider them to be synonyms it is better to keep them apart as expressing two different actions.⁹ If the verb "to bless" (*brk*) expresses the basic idea of bestowing benefits upon something or someone,¹⁰ then when God blessed the Sabbath He bestowed it with benefits that would be enjoyed by those who will keep it. A day that is not blessed is a day deprived of positive content for human beings (Jer 20:14).¹¹ The blessing pronounced by God on the seventh day was not for His personal benefit but for those who were present with Him, enjoying communion and fellowship with him, within the fraction of time called seventh day.

⁴Roy Gane, "Sabbath and the New Covenant," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 10.1, 2 (1999): 312-313.

⁵Hans K. LaRondelle, *Perfection and Perfectionism* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1971), p. 72.

⁶Josef Scharbert, "Brk," in *Theological Dictionary of the OT*, vol. 2, G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 295.

⁷See Franz Josef Helfmeyer, "Segen und Erwählung," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 18 (1974): 209-210.

⁸That idea has been accepted by some evangelicals; see for instance, Harold H. P. Dressler, "The Sabbath in the Old Testament," in *From Sabbath to the Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, D. A. Carson, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), p. 29.

⁹Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "to Bless" in the Old Testament* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1987), pp. 64-65, quotes Exod 32:29 as a parallel passage in which *brk* is defined by the verb *qdš*, but the problem is that the verb *qdš* is not used in that particular passage.

¹⁰This is suggested by Mitchell, p. 165.

¹¹Mitchell, p. 117, commenting on Jer 20:14 writes, "The day is blessed by God, and so is a source of blessing for man. The day of a stillbirth would be considered 'arûr, cursed, because a tragedy occurred on it." Unfortunately he does not allow for the use of that same meaning in Gen 2:3.

3. God Declared Holy the Seventh Day

The declaration of the seventh day as holy time is intriguing. The Bible contains rituals for the sanctification of persons, things and places but there is no ritual prescribed for the sanctification of the Sabbath. Only the creation story informs us that its holiness is the result of a divine declaration. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament the holiness of that day is presupposed. For the Old Testament writers as well as for the people of God the creation Sabbath was the same as the seventh day Sabbath mentioned in the commandment. Humans did not declare that day holy but they were responsible to keep it holy, to preserve its holiness, by obeying the commandment. That particular day participates in a unique way of the holiness of God because He rested on it and endowed it with holiness.

The holiness of the Sabbath is not described in the text as a provisional status that was to wear out at the end of the day. There is no de-sanctification ritual for the seventh day after God declared it holy. By sanctifying it God placed it permanently apart for a particular religious use. Since according to the creation narrative Adam and Eve had been created on the sixth day, they experienced the holiness of the seventh day with God. When the Creator made the seventh day holy by separating it from the six workdays, He “provided a gift for the whole of mankind for all time. The person who keeps the seventh-day Sabbath holy follows the Exemplar’s archetypal pattern (Gen. 2:3) and meets with Him on that day of rest.”¹² We should emphasize that “the seventh day is the very first thing to be hallowed in Scripture, to acquire that special status that properly belongs to God alone. In this way Genesis emphasizes the sacredness of the Sabbath. Coupled with the threefold reference to God resting from all his work on that day, these verses give the clearest of hints of how man created in the divine image should conduct himself on the seventh day.”¹³

B. Exodus 16 and the Sabbath

The first biblical reference to the observance of the Sabbath commandment is recorded in Exod 16 where instructions are given concerning the observance of the Sabbath in the context of the provision of manna. On Friday the people gathered twice as much as during the other days in order to have enough for the Sabbath (16:22-26). The ease of the flow of the narrative and the almost casual way in which the Sabbath is introduced have suggested to a number of scholars that the narrative presupposes the

¹²Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Sabbath in the Pentateuch,” in *Sabbath in Scripture*, p. 26.

¹³Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), p. 36. See also Samuel A. Meier, “The Sabbath and Purification Cycles,” in *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Tamara C. Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington, William H. Shea, eds. (New York: Crossroad, 1991), who refers “to the function of the Sabbath as a conductor of holiness” (p. 9). He also suggests that the fact that the seventh day in Gen is not called “sabbath day” and that it is associated with the idea of holiness indicates that its primary function is to provide a rationale for the cycles of seven found in the cultic materials of the Old Testament. He does not give due weight to the fact that Gen 1 is dealing with the first week mentioned in the Scripture and that the day of rest is called several times “the seventh day.” Meier may have a point in using Gen 1 to clarify the significance of the purificatory cycles in the cultus. But he seems to misread the evidence when arguing that the fundamental question in Gen 1 is, “Why are cycles of seven-day periods so especial?” (p. 4). That cannot be the case because in Gen the seventh day is a day of rest for God while in the non-weekly cycles of seven days the idea of rest does not seem to be present at all; only the idea of holiness is found there. It would be better to say that the question the text is answering appears to be, “Why do the Israelites cease activities on the Sabbath?” Meier does not deny that this question is also important in the present text but considers it secondary. In fact, the basic question is, “Why is the Sabbath a holy day?” It is that fundamental question that allows for the other two questions to be raised and answered. The Sabbath is holy because God sanctified it by resting on the seventh day after His work of creation during the previous six days. That explains why the Israelites cease to work on the seventh day and why the number “seven” itself becomes in the Old Testament a symbol of completeness and perfection. Such symbolic meaning of “seven” is used in the cultic purification cycles to point to the completeness of the cleansing process that leads to sanctification. In other words, the symbolic meaning of “seven” is transferred and applied to other non-weekly purificatory cycles of seven days in order to clarify the significance of those cycles.

Sabbath institution.¹⁴ When the leaders observed the people gathering a double portion on the sixth day they went to Moses and reported it to him. Moses reminded them that the next day was the Sabbath day (16:22-23).

The fundamental issue in the narrative is not that now for the first time the Sabbath was given to Israel but rather how to keep the Sabbath holy in the context of the experience of the manna. In other words, the story deals with a very practical issue related to proper Sabbath observance.¹⁵ The present canonical form of the text suggests that the only way to explain the existence of the Sabbath during the exodus is by going back to Gen 2:1-3.

C. Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15: The Sabbath Commandment

At Sinai the Sabbath commandment was officially entrusted to Israel (Exod 20:8-11; Deut 5:12-15). In Exod 20:8 the people are commanded to “remember the Sabbath day,” while Deut 5:12 says, “observe the Sabbath day.” The use of different verbs does not introduce any significant change in the commandment. It is well known that the verb “to remember” (*zkr*) is used in legal contexts in the sense of “to keep, to observe”¹⁶ (cf. Ps 103:18). The verb “to remember” has not only a retrospective connotation—recalling a past event to commemorate it—but also a prospective one¹⁷—to keep in mind in order to obey it. In both cases the recalling implies a present significance, which in this case consists in keeping the Sabbath holy. That verb is also important in that it suggests that the Sabbath “commandment is not given to Israel for the first time at Sinai (cf. 16:22ff.), but at Sinai Israel is only exhorted to remember what had been an obligation from the beginning.”¹⁸

According to Exod 20:8, the Sabbath commemorates the fact that God is the Creator who rested on the seventh day. It explains the origin of the Sabbath by locating it in the divine rest after creation.¹⁹ Therefore, “keeping the Sabbath holy is an emulation of God’s actions at the time of creation.”²⁰ The reason why the Sabbath must be observed is that on that day God rested and that He blessed and sanctified it. Consequently, “Israel could hardly do otherwise.”²¹ In fact the Sabbath rest is extended to all; “it is not simply something for Israel to keep; even animals and strangers are to honor it. Yet the

¹⁴According to Nahum M. Sarna, in Exod 16 the Sabbath “is assumed to be in force. . . This text assumes the Sabbath to have been an established institution before Sinai” (*Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* [New York: Schocken, 1986], p. 147). This is denied by Dressler, “Sabbath,” p. 24, but he does not provide any information to support his argument. He simply states that “the passage allows the view that the institution of the Sabbath was unknown to the people of Israel at this time.” The only supporting evidence he provides is a reference to Martin Buber, *Moses* (Oxford: East and West Library, 1946), p. 80; but Buber himself wrote on p. 81, 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.”

¹⁵Brevard S. Childs commented, that in the story “the existence of the Sabbath is assumed by the writer. But his was a natural question. If the manna fell every day and could not be stored, what happened on the Sabbath? The story answers this question . . . In the verses which follow Moses explains in detail the nature of the Sabbath and what it entails. It stems from a command of God; it is a day of special rest; it is set apart from the ordinary and dedicated to God. . .” (*The Book of Exodus: A Critical and Theological Commentary* [Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1974], p. 290). George A. F. Knight comments, “This passage does not deal with Ex’s idea of the origin of the weekly Sabbath referred to in the ‘Fourth Commandment’” (*Theology as Narration: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976], p. 118).

¹⁶Andrew Bowling, “*Zākar*,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke, eds. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 241; H. Eising, “*Zākar*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 4, G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 68; Leslie C. Allen, “*Zkr* I,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 1, Willem A. VanGemeren, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), p. 1102.

¹⁷Eising, pp. 66-67; also Hasel, “Sabbath in the Pentateuch,” p. 30.

¹⁸Childs, p. 316.

¹⁹Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), p. 69.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 68.

²¹John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), p. 290.

divine rest is more than a humanitarian gesture or a paradigm for creaturely resting—because God did so, the creatures should. It is a religious act with cosmic implications.”²²

The version of the commandment recorder in Deut 5 introduces new ideas in order to emphasize the purpose and reasons to observe the Sabbath rather than its origin as is the case in Exodus.²³ One of the reasons given for keeping the Sabbath holy is that “the Lord your God commanded you” to do that (5:12). Its origin and normative force is grounded in God’s loving will for His people. But more specifically, the Sabbath is to be kept holy in memory of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. This is different from what we found in Exodus where the reason given is “that the sabbath has been a holy day since creation.”²⁴ According to Deuteronomy, obeying the command accomplishes two purposes: “You will remember the redemptive work of God on your behalf, and you will provide rest for the slaves under your control. So in the case of Exodus, the community is called to remember and to obey out that memory; in the Deuteronomistic form, the community obeys to keep alive the memory of redemption and to bring about the provision of rest from toil for all members of the community.”²⁵

Deuteronomy introduces into the commandment a soteriological dimension that constitutes it into a memorial of redemption. Consequently the theological significance of the Sabbath commandment has been greatly enriched. Now “the fundamental significance of the Sabbath is both to remind us of God’s creation (Ex. 20:8-11) and to bring to remembrance the freedom from servitude of any form, achieved by God and extended to all human beings (cf. Ex. 23:13).”²⁶ One should not conclude that in Deuteronomy the Sabbath was instituted because of the Exodus; it is rather that “because of the deliverance from Egypt, Israel is urged to observe the Sabbath . . .”²⁷ D. Mark 2:27: Jesus and Creation Sabbath.

One of the passages in the New Testament that locates the origin of the Sabbath commandment in the creation story is Mark 2:27: “The Sabbath was made [*ginomai*] for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” There are two main details in the text that deserve our attention. The first one is the term “man.” Some have argued that since the text is an aphorism the term “man” does not refer to the Jews or to humanity in general. The passage, it is argued, is not addressing that question or establishing those distinctions.²⁸ Nevertheless, even if the saying was an aphorism, and that is not certain, it is difficult to deny that the Greek term *anthropos* is being used here in a generic way to refer to humans and not to a particular race (e.g. Jews).

Second, the verb *ginomai* should not be understood as “simply a circumlocution for God’s action.”²⁹

²²Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1991), p. 229. He goes on to develop that idea: “God’s resting is a divine act that builds into the very created order of things a working/resting rhythm. Only when that rhythm is honored by all is the creation what God intended it to be. The sabbath is thus a divinely given means for all creatures to be in tune with the created order of things. Even more, *sabbath-keeping is an act of creation-keeping*. To keep the sabbath is to participate in God’s intention for the rhythm of creation. Not keeping the sabbath is a violation of the created order; it returns one aspect of that order to chaos” (p. 230).

²³Tigay, p. 69.

²⁴J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), p. 116.

²⁵Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990), p. 80.

²⁶Hasel, “Sabbath in the Pentateuch,” p. 32. See also the useful discussion of Michel Sales, “The Fulfillment of the Sabbath: From the Holiness of the Seventh Day to God’s Resting in God,” *Communion* 21 (Spring, 1994): 30-35.

²⁷Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 309. Deuteronomy is not primarily dealing with the question, why do we rest on the Sabbath, the seventh day?, but rather with the question, what do we remember on the seventh day? What does it memorialize? Exodus answers that question saying that the Sabbath is a memorial of creation—God is remembered as the source of existence. But Exodus also answers the question, why do we rest on the seventh day? The answer is, because God sanctified, blessed and rested on that day. Therefore there are two reasons for observing the Sabbath (Meier, p. 4), but one reason for resting or keeping the Sabbath on the seventh day.

²⁸D. A. Carson, “Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, D. A. Carson, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), p. 65.

²⁹*Ibid.* Carson is attempting to demonstrate that Jesus was not referring to the creation Sabbath.

Such generalization is too vague and leaves unanswered the question of the specific divine action the biblical writer had in mind. The verb can and should be translated here “was made/created.” This is one of the possible usages of the verb in the New Testament and nicely fits the present text.³⁰ Besides, the parallelism between “the Sabbath was made for man” and the implicit use of the same verb in the second part of the verse—“man was not [made] for the Sabbath”—strongly suggests that the verb means “was created.” The text’s starting point is the creation account, the moment when humans were created and the Sabbath was instituted.³¹ God’s intention was that the Sabbath “be a blessing to man, a day of physical rest, but also a day devoted to spiritual exercises. The Pharisees treated the day as though man were created to serve the Sabbath, rather than the Sabbath meeting the needs of man.”³² In Mark Jesus was restating the true nature and purpose of the Sabbath commandment by taking his readers back to the creation origin of the Sabbath.³³

E. Summary

The biblical text places the origin of the Sabbath in God’s work during the creation week. His work, followed by rest, anticipated and modeled what was to be the experience of the human race. The Creator in His own activity revealed the interaction of work and rest that will characterize the mode of existence of humans. He did not have to create in six days and then rest on the seventh, but by doing that He was establishing a pattern for His intelligent creatures.

It was God who blessed and sanctified the Sabbath endowing it with benefits for those who observe it and setting it apart as a day not only for physical rest but also as a day for communion with the Holy One. The day was intended to be of great benefit for the human race. This was reaffirmed by Jesus at a time when the commandment was overloaded with regulations that made its observance a heavy burden. The original joy of Sabbath observance was restored by Jesus by pointing to the true nature of the creation Sabbath and its significance in his redemptive work and Messianic authority.³⁴

³⁰Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2000), p. 197. See also Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 242.

³¹Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1:-8:26* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), p. 124.

³²Walter F. Specht, “The Sabbath in the New Testament,” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, Kenneth A. Strand, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1982), p. 96. Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1983), p. 74, comments that Mark 2:27 “grounds Sabbath law in the welfare of humankind, making explicit the essential humanitarian argument for the preceding counter question. It challenges every legalism which makes of the Sabbath a burden to bear rather than renewal for the road.”

³³Willy Rordorf, *Sunday: The History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Era* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1968), p. 63, argues that in Mark 2:27 the Sabbath is being set aside by Jesus. He acknowledges that when God instituted the Sabbath he intended it to be a blessing for humans and not a hardship. When it became a hardship, that is to say, when it “failed in its divine purpose” then “rebellion against it or disregard of it was no sin.” He seems to ignore that the misuse of the commandment does not nullify it. What was needed was a restatement of God’s original purpose and, according to Mark that was what Jesus did. Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), argued that Mark intended the saying “to be understood in as comprehensive a way as possible and no doubt regarded it as setting to one side the relevant Mosaic regulations” (p. 119). But then he adds that the early Christian communities did not clearly understand the radical implications of Jesus’ statement. One wonders, whether it is Banks himself who has exaggerated the implications of the Markan passage. It is more logical to conclude that the gentile community to which Mark was writing did understand him correctly as saying that Jesus was not setting the Sabbath commandment aside.

³⁴After analyzing Jesus’ healings on Sabbath Banks concluded that “there is nothing to support the view that abrogation of the sabbath was at the heart of his teaching, not even that he was approving occasional breaches of the sabbath law in the face of some special need. More adequate is the claim that his authority over it was employed to bring to realization its original and fundamental purpose. What Jesus, in fact, takes up, however, is not a particular orientation towards the sabbath-law, but the demand that the sabbath be orientated towards, interpreted by, and obeyed in accordance with, his own person and work. This is more than a return to the original purpose of the sabbath in creation, for it is linked with the re-creation of man that is taking

The fact that the Sabbath originated during creation week clearly implies that it was instituted for the benefit of the *human race*. No particular group or race has control over the blessedness and sanctity of the Sabbath. The sequence of work and rest on the Sabbath established by God at the beginning belongs to the human race. The observance of the Sabbath by “all flesh,” that is to say by humankind, becomes in Isaiah an eschatological expectation that will become a reality in the new heavens and the new earth (Isa 66:23).³⁵

It is true that at Sinai God entrusted the commandment to the Israelites but He also made it clear to them that its origin was located in the divine rest on the seventh day after His six days of work. In the context of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt the theology of the Sabbath was significantly enriched by including in its observance a theology of redemption. The Sabbath became a memorial of God’s creation and of His redemptive work on behalf of His people—an act of recreation. The Christological basis for Sabbath observance was already anticipated in the Old Testament when the Sabbath was directly associated with God’s salvific activity.

III. Perpetuity of the Sabbath Commandment

There are no hints in the Old Testament that the Sabbath commandment, as preserved in the Decalogue, was to be terminated or modified. Yet, Christianity is seriously divided concerning the validity of the Sabbath commandment for Christian believers. Adventists believe that there is no clear evidence in the New Testament to support the idea that biblical Sabbath keeping was changed to Sunday observance. We recognize that the change did take place soon after the apostolic era, but an examination of the New Testament passages dealing with the subject reveals that the Sabbath commandment was observed in the apostolic church.

A. Jewish Christians and Sabbath Observance

There seems to be widespread agreement among scholars that the Jewish Christian communities of the New Testament observed the Sabbath. It is nevertheless necessary for us to summarize the evidence in order to explore its implications.

1. Jesus and the Sabbath

We should begin with Jesus. According to Luke 4:16, Jesus went to Nazareth and, “as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read.” It is irrelevant whether one takes the phrase “as was his custom” to refer to Jesus’ habit of teaching in the synagogue (4:15)³⁶ or to

place through his own ministry” (*Jesus and the Law*, p. 131).

³⁵Gerhard F. Hasel and W. G. C. Murdoch, “The Sabbath in the Prophetic and Historical Literature of the Old Testament,” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, Kenneth A. Strand, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1982), comment, “In the realm of the new creation beyond history there will be total restoration of the break brought about by sin. ‘All flesh’ in the sense of all mankind, the redeemed remnant of all times, will worship before the Lord Sabbath after Sabbath. As the Sabbath was the climax of the first creation and destined for all mankind (Gen. 2:1-3), so the Sabbath will again be the climax of the new creation and destined again for all mankind in the new heaven and the new earth” (p. 49). Ole Chr. M. Kvarme, a Lutheran theologian, comments that Isa 56:6-7 “looks forward to a time when gentiles will serve the Lord and keep the Sabbath” (“From Sabbath to Lord’s Day?” *Mishkan* 22 [1995], p. 37).

³⁶E.g., I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 181; John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), p. 195; and B. Chilton, “Announcement in Mazara: An Analysis of Luke 4:16-21,” in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, vol. 2, R. T. France and D. Wenham, eds. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), pp. 152-53. Max M. B. Turner, “The Sabbath, Sunday, and the Law in Luke/Acts,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, D. A. Carson, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), p. 103, argues that since the reference is primarily to Jesus’ habit of teaching in the synagogue the passage “provides little real evidence of *theological* commitment on behalf of Jesus . . . to Sabbath worship.” The distinction he is making presupposes that at the very beginning of his ministry Jesus had already decided that the Sabbath commandment was no longer binding on him and his followers, but there is no evidence to support such speculation. As we will see the Sabbath controversies between Jesus and the Jews do not support that conclusion.

his practice of going to the synagogue during the Sabbath.³⁷ The fact remains that the passage is stating, in agreement with the rest of the New Testament, that “Jesus participated in the sabbath worship,”³⁸ that is to say, he was obedient to the commandment.

The gospels demonstrate that Jesus did not anticipate or announced the abrogation or modification of the Sabbath commandment during his ministry or after his resurrection. In fact the saying found in Matt 24:20—“Pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath”—suggests that he expected his disciples to keep the Sabbath long after his resurrection and ascension.³⁹ “Christians were exhorted to pray that their flight would not have to occur on the Sabbath day out of respect for their observance of that day. They could flee on that day if they had to, but they were to pray that they would not have to in order to keep that day as a day of rest and worship, not a day of travel.”⁴⁰

The Sabbath controversies between Jesus and the Jews also indicate that he was not setting the Sabbath aside or pointing to the time when it will be transmuted into something else. Studies have shown that before 70 AD one of the most important issues of discussion concerning the Sabbath in Jewish circles was precisely what could be done during the Sabbath.⁴¹ The discussions and disagreements did not have the purpose of questioning the validity of the Sabbath commandment. Jesus addressed the issue in order to liberate the Sabbath from the regulations imposed on it by Jewish

Possibly one of the best answers to that type of reasoning comes from Paul Jewett: “There can be little doubt, then, that Jesus, as devout Jew, observed the Sabbath. To feature him as the grand innovator, who swept it aside in the name of liberty, is to remake Jesus in the image of the Enlightenment” (*The Lord’s Day* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971], pp. 34-35).

³⁷E.g., Gerhard F. Hasel, “Sabbath,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, p. 854; Leon Morris, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 115; and Walter L. Liefeld, “Luke,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), p. 866.

³⁸W. Beilner, “*Sabbaton sabbath; week*,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 3, Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 220; and Walter Specht, p. 94. It has been argued by Heather A. McKay, *Sabbath and Synagogue: The Question of Sabbath Worship in ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), that the synagogue was not considered to be a place of worship before the third century of the Christian era. Pieter W. van der Horst, “Was de synagogue voor 70 een plaats van eredients op sabbat?” *Bijdragen* (1999): 125-146, has demonstrated that the synagogue was a place of worship even before 70 AD. See also Niels-Erik Andreasen, “Sabbath and Synagogue: Postexilic Israelite Religion,” in *Creation, Life, and Hope: Essays in Honor of Jacques B. Doukhan*, edited by Jiří Moskala (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 2000), pp. 233-250.

³⁹The most recent study of this saying was prepared by Yong-Eui Yang, *Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew’s Gospel* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997), pp. 230-241. He lists nine different interpretations of the Sabbath in that passage, evaluates all of them and concludes that the best option is that it is referring to serious physical obstacles that would make the flight during the Sabbath difficult for Christian believers (e.g., the gates of the city would be locked, difficult to obtain provisions, suspension of traveling services). But such difficulties have been exaggerated by him. William H. Shea reacted, “The physical obstacles to a mandatory flight on the Sabbath day would have been minimal. People from inside Jerusalem could have exited through the eastern gates of the temple which also served as gates of the city. Other gates probably were open in peace time to permit worshippers to take the most direct route to the temple area. . . . When the actual ‘physical obstacles’ are studied in detail and not left in generalities, it can be seen that these were not major considerations in determining whether to flee on Sabbath or not” (“The Sabbath on Matthew 24:20,” unpublished manuscript, n.d.). It is better to be cautious and conclude that, “While the point of the reference to the sabbath is hardly clear, probably what is meant is that an urgent flight on the sabbath would make any sabbath observance impossible. . . . This apparently would still have been a serious matter for the Jewish-Christian membership of Matthew’s church” (Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* [Dallas, TX: Word, 1995], p.702); cf. Daniel A. J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 337, who comments that “for Matthew and his community Sabbath observance remained a live issue.” See also his “Sabbath Tensions: Matthew 12:1-14 and Other New Testament Texts,” in *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Tamara C. Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington, William H. Shea, eds. (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 56, where he clearly states, “Matthew’s insertion of ‘on the Sabbath’ presupposes that the Matthean community was still observing the Sabbath.” W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), p. 350, suggest that in Matthew the Sabbath was still in force (see also, vol. 2, pp. 304-28). Cf. Michel Sales, p.38.

⁴⁰Shea, “Matthew 24:20,” p. 11; cf. Specht, p. 103.

⁴¹See Anthony J. Saldarini, “Comparing the Traditions: New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 7 (1997): 197-199.

traditions. Let us briefly examine the passages describing the controversies recorded in Mark with parallels in Matthew and Luke.

Mark 2:23-26//Matt 12:1-8//Luke 6:1-5: The disciples were walking through the grainfields on the Sabbath picking the heads of grain and eating when the Pharisees accused them and Jesus of violating the Sabbath. The Torah prohibited harvesting during the Sabbath (Exod 34:21), but it would be difficult to argue that the disciples were behaving like farmers harvesting during the Sabbath.⁴² The law allowed plucking ears of grain from a field (Deut 23:26), but this was forbidden by the Jews during the Sabbath.⁴³ According to the Pharisees Jesus and the disciples had violated the Jewish tradition.⁴⁴

In order to justify the behavior of the disciples Jesus refers to two exceptional cases; one related to David and the other to the priests and the temple. Most probably the reference to David was used to show that providing for human need can under certain circumstances override the law.⁴⁵ This is supported by the saying in verse 27, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." Matthew adds the experience of the priests who worked in the temple during the Sabbath (12:5). The point is that if the priests are not guilty of violating the Sabbath, "how much more innocent are the disciples, who are 'serving' Jesus, 'one greater than the temple.'"⁴⁶ In fact, Mark states that Jesus is "Lord even of the Sabbath," that is to say it is he who determines how the Sabbath is to be kept.⁴⁷ But there is more to it. The statement "not only affirms the authority of Jesus, the Son of man, to reinterpret Sabbath law, but asserts also that the Sabbath remains God's day. Designed for the welfare of men and women, the proper use of the Sabbath is determined by the Son of man. As a human figure, he best knows human needs; as a divine figure, he has the authority to say how the Lord's day should be used."⁴⁸

⁴²D. A. Carson, "Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels," p. 61, comments, "In this instance the disciples are neither farmers nor housewives who are trying to slip in a little overtime on the sly; they are ex-fishermen and ex-businessmen, itinerant preachers doing nothing amiss." See also Henry Efferin, "The Sabbath Controversy Based on Matthew 12:1-8," *Stulos Theological Journal* 1 (May 1993): 44, who suggests, "Actually the disciples were not reaping on the Sabbath, as was forbidden by the Mosaic Law (Exod 34:21), but were simply satisfying their hunger according to the provision of Deuteronomy 23:25."

⁴³Beilner, p. 220; see, *M.Šabb.* 7:2, and Yang, p. 174.

⁴⁴See John Mark Hicks, "The Sabbath Controversy in Matthew: An Exegesis of Matthew 12:1-14," *Restoration Quarterly* 27 (1984): 81, comments that the accusation of Jews "is not based directly on the Torah, but is rooted in oral tradition."

⁴⁵Specht, p. 95, and Harrington, "Sabbath Tension," p. 48. It has been argued that since Mark does not say that the disciples were hungry the connection with the need of David and his soldiers for food is not clear. Hence our suggestion, it is argued, is not valid (e.g., S. Westerholm, "Sabbath," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, eds. [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992], p. 717). But that argument is seriously weakened by the fact that the disciples obviously were hungry and in need of food, as is made clear in Matt 12:1. We do not deny that the reference to David may also have some important Christological implications (see Yang, pp. 175-176).

⁴⁶Davis and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 2, p. 313. This is a case where a controversy over the Sabbath provides the occasion for Jesus to raise the question of his messianic authority (this is argued, among others, by Yang, pp.180-181). Yang goes too far when he concludes that Jesus fulfilled the typological significance of the temple and of the Sabbath, thus fulfilling the ultimate goal of the OT (pp. 109, 182). In the story the discussion is not whether the Sabbath is in some way valid or invalid for the disciples but about the Jewish traditions and Jesus' authority to define proper Sabbath observance.

⁴⁷See for instance, Hicks, p. 89. According to Yang, the OT indicates that God was Lord of the Sabbath. Surprisingly, now in the NT Jesus declares himself Lord of the Sabbath. He goes on to argue that the Lordship of Jesus over the Sabbath implies that "now the matter of real importance is no longer merely keeping the literal regulations of the sabbath law, but accepting Jesus as the messiah and receiving the eschatological rest (= redemption) present in him" (pp. 193-194). Although in principle what he is saying is right that does not weaken in any way the normativeness of the Sabbath commandment. The fact that in the OT God was Lord of the Sabbath was not incompatible with the observance of the commandment by the people.

⁴⁸Williamson, Jr. p. 74. D. A. Carson, "Sabbath in the four Gospels," p. 66, *speculates* when he argues that the fact that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath "raises the possibility of a future change or reinterpretation of the Sabbath, in precisely the same way that His professed superiority over the Temple raises certain possibilities about ritual law. No details of that nature are spelled out here, but the verse arouses expectation." Such speculation is not supported by the text. Concerning the temple, Jesus made clear that the temple and its services will come to an end through the institution of a new system of worship and

Mark 3:1-6//Matt 12:9-14//Luke 6:6-11: The story is about the healing of a man with a withered hand. The discussion is concerning what is lawful or permitted during the Sabbath and its main purpose is to demonstrate that Jesus is indeed Lord over the Sabbath, that is to say that he is the one who determines how the Sabbath should be kept.⁴⁹ In the process the law is not challenged or set aside by him. The Jewish halakah allowed for healing during the Sabbath when life was being threatened.⁵⁰ According to Mark Jesus considered “withholding the cure of the man’s paralyzed hand, even for a few hours, tantamount to killing him, and performing the cure immediately tantamount to saving his life.”⁵¹ Doing good cannot wait for the Sabbath to end because doing good is not incompatible with the Sabbath! His messianic mission was to restore fullness of life to suffering humanity and the Sabbath witnessed to that redemptive activity. Human traditions were not to impose limits to his work on behalf of suffering humanity.⁵² Matthew is more explicit in the rejection of halakhic regulations by asking whether a person whose sheep fell into a pit during the Sabbath was not willing to lift it out of the pit (12:11).⁵³ The point is that humans are more valuable than a sheep and the conclusion he draws from it is that “it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Obviously Jesus was not rejecting or modifying the commandment but determining how it should be properly kept.⁵⁴

John 5:1-18: In the gospel of John we find two important incidents dealing with Sabbath controversies. The first is the healing of the lame man by the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath. When charged with violating the Sabbath Jesus justified his action saying, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working” (5:17). Several comments on that statement are in order. First, it was accepted by the Jews that God’s work is not interrupted by the Sabbath and that His role as Judge and Sustainer of the world never stops.⁵⁵ Jesus justifies his work of mercy during the Sabbath by identifying it with the work of his Father, thus making a profound Christological statement concerning his relationship with the Father. They are both performing a work of redemption.⁵⁶

the actual destruction of the building (John 4:21-24; cf. Matt 24:1-2), but he never said anything similar concerning the Sabbath. See also Efferin, pp. 47-48, who states, “So the issue here is not whether or not we should retain the Sabbath, but that the Sabbath should be reassessed in light of Christian motivation. Jesus Himself kept the Sabbath in vigorous joy (Luke 4:16), and worship was the breathing of His soul.”

⁴⁹Eduard Lohse, “*Sabbaton*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 7, Gerhard Friedrich ed, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 24.

⁵⁰Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 2, p. 318, and Yang, p. 200.

⁵¹Marcus, p. 252. He adds, “If Jesus is ‘the holy one of God,’ whose holiness implies the apocalyptic destruction of demons and disease (cf. 1:24), then his Sabbath-day healing of the man with the paralyzed hand is a fulfillment rather than an infraction of the commandment to ‘remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy’” (pp. 252-253).

⁵²Davies and Allison believe that in this case Jesus was not countering “God’s will as declared in the written Torah but rather ‘the precepts of man’. Scripture nowhere prohibits healing on the sabbath, especially if nothing more is involved than asking a man to stretch forth his hand. . . . Jesus evidently sought opportunities to illustrate how the casuistry of the oral halakah could contradict the demands of love” (*Matthew*, vol. 2, p. 318).

⁵³Jewish traditions on this issue are ambivalent. Some taught that it was correct to feed the animal while in the pit but not to pull it out of it; while others believed that it was correct to get it out of the pit. Some even suggested that it would be permissible to throw in something that the animal could use to get itself out of the pit. See, Lohse, p. 25, and Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 2, p. 320.

⁵⁴Harrington, “Sabbath Tensions,” pp. 49-50, comments, “The general principle is that it is permitted to do good on the Sabbath. This principle assumes that the Sabbath is still observed by the Matthean Christians but that the Sabbath regulations can be overridden by the need to do good.” It is better to find here a clarification of the true nature of Sabbath observance.

⁵⁵See Lohse, p. 27.

⁵⁶The work that Jesus is referring to is not the work of creation but the work of re-creation or redemption, as demonstrated among others by Mario Veloso, *El compromiso cristiano: Un estudio sobre la actualidad misionera en el evangelio de San Juan* (Argentina: Zunino Ediciones, 1975), pp. 122-130. Samuelle Bacchiocchi comments, “Christ appeals to the ‘working’ of His Father not to nullify but to clarify the function of the Sabbath. To understand Christ’s defense, one must remember that the Sabbath is linked both to *creation* (Gen 2:2-3; Ex 20:11) and *redemption* (Deut 5:15). While by interrupting all secular

Second, the fact that God works “until now” shows that God’s work of mercy and redemption was never considered by Him to be incompatible with the human observance of the Sabbath commandment. By implication Jesus’ work of redemption during the Sabbath is not incompatible with proper Sabbath observance. Hence Jesus was not abolishing the Sabbath.⁵⁷ Through his action he was stating that “the sabbath command does not mean doing nothing (*aria*), but the doing of the work of God.”⁵⁸

Third, the debate between Jesus and the Jews on this incident was resumed in 7:19-24, where Jesus explicitly argues that Sabbath observance is compatible with works of mercy and love. He justified his work on the Sabbath by reference to the law of circumcision that in some cases allowed it to be performed during the Sabbath, superseding the commandment. The point is that “if circumcision, involving only one of a man’s members, is allowed, how much more the healing of the whole man!”⁵⁹ What John is showing is that “Jesus’ work of healing on the sabbath cannot even be regarded as breaking the Law. Jesus is fulfilling God’s deepest intentions, recognizable in the Torah itself.”⁶⁰

John 9: Jesus healed the blind man on the Sabbath by kneading clay with his saliva, placing it on the eyes of the man and sending him to wash it off at the pool of Siloam. Raymond F. Brown lists four reasons why the Jews charged Jesus with not keeping the Sabbath. First, Jesus could have waited until after the Sabbath to heal him; the man’s life was not threatened. Second, kneading was forbidden on Sabbath; third, in some cases anointing the eyes on Sabbath was condemned; and finally, one may “not put fasting spittle on the eyes on the Sabbath.”⁶¹ This shows that Jesus was breaking the Sabbath only in the eyes of the Jewish leaders, but the implication is that he himself was not violating the Torah; he was performing the works of God (9:3). What John is disputing “is the manner, not the fact, of Jesus’ Sabbath observance.”⁶²

2. Other Jewish Christians

Our brief review of the Sabbath controversies in the gospels has demonstrated that at least the Matthean community, formed mainly by Jewish believers, was keeping the Sabbath. There is no indication that would support the view that according to Mark and John Jesus abolished the Sabbath commandment. Even Luke explicitly states that the women who followed Jesus to the cross saw where he was buried and then “returned and prepared spices and perfumes. And on the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment” (Luke 23:56). We also read about Paul’s practice of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath, which does not simply mean that he went there to make Christian disciples but also because as a Jew he kept the Sabbath (Acts 13:14, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4). It is true that the “freedom claimed by Jesus with respect to the Sabbath constitutes, in all the Gospels, one of the main grievances that the scribes and Pharisees have against him. There is, however, no indication that Jesus had broken or even that he had merely wished to break with the observance of the third commandment

activities the Israelite was remembering the Creator-God, by acting mercifully toward fellow-beings he was imitating the Redeemer-God. . . . On the basis of this theology of the Sabbath admitted by the Jews, Christ defends the legality of the ‘working’ that He and His Father perform on the Sabbath” (*The Sabbath Under Crossfire* [Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspective, 1998], pp. 164-165).

⁵⁷D. A. Carson, “Sabbath in the Four Gospels,” p. 82. His argument is that Jesus was not here dealing with the question of whether the Sabbath should be kept or not.

⁵⁸W. Stott, “Sabbath,” in *New International Dictionary of NT Theology*, vol. 3, Colin Brown, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), p. 409.

⁵⁹Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 2 (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), p. 134.

⁶⁰*ibid.* This is also the opinion of Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John 1-12* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 317, who suggests that “John succeeds better than do the Synoptic in unfolding the purpose of healing on the Sabbath. It was not primarily a question of a sentimental liberalization of a harsh and impractical law. His miracles on the Sabbath were the accomplishment of the redemptive purpose for which the Law was given.”

⁶¹Brown, *John 1-12*, p. 373.

⁶²Harrington, “Sabbath Tensions,” p. 55. According to him, John takes “the institution of the Sabbath as a ‘given’” (p. 54).

of the Decalogue. Nor is there any evidence that he asked or even permitted his disciples to do so. Quite the contrary is the case.”⁶³

B. Gentile Christians and Sabbath Observance

Did Gentile Christians observe the Sabbath during the time of the apostles? As indicated above scholars are willing to grant that Jewish-Christians kept the Sabbath but that its observance was not required from Gentile converts. The conclusion is primarily based on the silence of the New Testament concerning any such requirement for Gentiles. But the argument from silence is not decisive because it could also be interpreted as suggesting that Sabbath observance by all Christians was taken for granted. It is true that the commandment is not quoted in the New Testament but neither is the commandment against the worship of images explicitly mentioned or cited anywhere in the apostolic writings.

Some have found it significant that the apostolic decree recorded in Acts 15:20, 28-29 do not mention the Sabbath as a requirement for Gentile Christians. We should recall that the purpose of the council was not to determine what was to be expected of Gentiles with respect to the Torah, but to regulate their behavior in order not to be offensive to Jewish Christians. Hardly anything else would have created more friction between Gentile and Jewish believers than the Gentile Christians violation of the sanctity of the Sabbath. There is no evidence in the New Testament to demonstrate that such controversy was going on.⁶⁴

We should also recall that at this early period in the history of the church most of the Gentiles who became Christians were “Godfearers” who were seriously attracted to Judaism and who attended the synagogue and were observing the Sabbath before they became Christians (Acts 16:14; 18:2, 4).⁶⁵ In addition many Gentiles who converted to Judaism, proselytes, also became Christians and they obviously were Sabbath keepers (13:43). It is difficult to imagine that these new Christian converts were taught that Sabbath observance was irrelevant for them, particular when there is no evidence from the New Testament to support it.

There is also evidence indicating that some type of Sabbath observance was practiced among Gentiles who were not attached to Judaism in any way but who were attracted to some of its ideas. On account of the Diaspora the Jews had become very visible throughout the Roman Empire⁶⁶ and probably quite influential. The state recognized the importance the Sabbath had for the Jews and exempted them from military service, from appearing in court during the Sabbath, and they were not required to work during the seventh day.⁶⁷ Their Sabbath observance became well-known and many non-Jews, under the influence of the Jews, did not work on the Sabbath, perhaps because they thought it was a day of misfortune or for other superstitious reasons.⁶⁸

If Gentile Christians were not expected to keep the Sabbath we should be able to find some evidence of it in the New Testament. What we find is the opposite. If we go back to the Sabbath controversies in

⁶³Sales, p. 37.

⁶⁴The debate over circumcision in the New Testament illustrates what happened when a fundamental mark of Jewish identity was rejected by the apostles. A similar rejection of the Sabbath commandment would have created a much more tense and difficult controversy. Cf. Turner, “Law in Luke/Acts,” pp. 127-128.

⁶⁵Cf. Horst Balz, “*Sebomai worship, revere,*” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 3, p. 236. Where a God-fearer is defined as “a Gentile sympathetic to the synagogue who does not, however, observe the Torah in its entirety and who above all does not submit to circumcision.”

⁶⁶This is recognized by Strabo in *Antiquities* XIV.7, 2; cf. Sibyl Or III.271.

⁶⁷See Jean Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'empire romain, leur condition juridique, économique et sociale*, vol. 1 (Paris: Geuthner, 1914), pp. 409-430; and M. J. Cook, “Judaism, Hellenistic,” in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, Keith Crim, ed. (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1976), p. 506.

⁶⁸See Rordorf, 29. On the influence of the Sabbath on the gentile world see Victor A. Tcherikover, “The Sambations,” in *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 43-53.

the Gospels it would not be difficult to realize that the question debated between Jesus and the Jewish leaders was not whether it was necessary to keep the Sabbath but how the Sabbath was to be observed.⁶⁹ This is something that we would expect to find in the Gospel of Matthew, written to Jewish-Christians, but it is also found in Mark and Luke whose primary gentile audience is not questioned. We acknowledge that in those controversies other theological issues are involved and that in some cases the Sabbath is a foil for deeper theological issues like, for instance, the authority of Jesus and his Messianic role. However, the fact that the Gospel writers selected the Sabbath controversies to convey their message also indicates that the topic was very much alive in the communities they were addressing. More significantly, the way they dealt with the subject of the Sabbath presupposes that the communities, Jewish and Gentiles alike, were in need of instruction concerning *Sabbath observance*. The fundamental issue appears to have been whether they should follow the Jewish traditions in Sabbath keeping or not. The Gospel writers used the ministry and experience of Jesus to instruct them on how to keep the Sabbath as Christians. In the Old Testament God modeled Sabbath observance after His work of creation, now in the New Testament Jesus is presented as the model to be followed in proper Sabbath keeping.

A brief look at the Gospel of Luke, written to Gentile Christians, supports our main argument. The word “Sabbath” appears in Luke twenty one times and eight additional times in Acts. Luke introduces (4:16) and closes Jesus ministry (23:54) with references to the Sabbath and then adds that the women rested on the Sabbath “according to the commandment” (23:56). Luke describes Jesus and his followers as habitual Sabbath keepers.⁷⁰ If we examine the Sabbath controversies in the Gospel it would not be difficult to identify one of the key issues in the discussions. In 6:2 the Pharisees asked Jesus, “Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” In the second incident recorded in 6:6-11, Jesus asked the Pharisees, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath?” In both cases the concern is proper Sabbath observance and not whether the Sabbath should be kept or not. The same applies to the Sabbath controversies that are unique to Luke. In 13:16 Jesus asked, “Should she not have been released from this bond on the Sabbath day?,” implying that it was lawful to heal her on the Sabbath. In the final case, recorded in 14:1-6, we find the more traditional question, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” It is obvious that with respect to the Sabbath the fundamental issue was defining proper Sabbath observance.

When Jesus says in Luke 6:5, “The Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath,” Luke is saying that he has “the right to authoritatively represent the divine intention for the sabbath. . . . In this new situation the Son of Man is able to open up the full potential of the sabbath as God’s gift to humankind.”⁷¹ The Sabbath is for him a day of liberation from suffering and needs, a channel for loving actions. The references to the

⁶⁹Specht, p. 94, correctly states, “What then was the issue? Plainly it was the manner of keeping the Sabbath. The question was not, Should the Sabbath be kept? Rather, it was, How should the Sabbath be kept?” This concept has been carefully explored by Harold Weiss, “The Sabbath in the Synoptic Gospels,” *Journal for the Study of the NT* 38 (1990):13-27. His introductory comments are worth quoting: “Most studies have argued that he [Jesus] openly challenged what is designated as ‘Jewish Sabbath observance’ and some have further argued that by doing so he had declared the ‘Jewish Law’ obsolete. This paper attempts to show that the evidence on the Sabbath in the Synoptic materials does not support this contention. To the contrary, the traditions preserved in the Synoptic make clear that the early Christians who followed Jesus took for granted the validity of the Sabbath law. What the stories in the Synoptic show us is that they continued to debate which activities were permissible on the Sabbath” (p. 13). Saldarini, “Rabbinic Literature,” has demonstrated that debates concerning the Sabbath in Jewish circles were centered on how to keep the Sabbath and that particularly “the Gospel of Matthew fits into this developing tradition of specifying the nature of Sabbath observance” (p. 199). He adds, “Matthew does not attack Sabbath observance as such but rather certain interpretations of Sabbath law which are at variance with the interpretations handed on in the name of Jesus. . . . He disagrees with other Jewish teachers about the exact requirements of Sabbath observance” (p. 203).

⁷⁰See Bacchiocchi, *Sabbath Under Crossfire*, pp.149-150.

⁷¹Nolland, *Luke 1:-9:20*, p. 258.

Sabbath in the gospels clearly show that the Christian communities were concerned about it. One could argue that perhaps the issue was whether one should or should not observe the Sabbath, or that there was a conflict between the church and the synagogue,⁷² but the evidence clearly supports the conviction that the Gospels are instructing Jews and Gentile Christians on how to keep the Sabbath as Christians.⁷³

C. Summary

The New Testament contains irrefutable evidence to the effect that Jesus and his disciples observed the seventh day Sabbath. It is also clear that the Jewish Christian communities also kept the Sabbath during the apostolic period. Such practice should not be explained away arguing that it was the result of a poor understanding of the implications of the gospel of Jesus on the Jewish law. Jesus, according to the Gospels, observed the Sabbath and made it a day in which he brought rest to the sick and to those oppressed by evil powers. He expected his followers to enjoy the benefits of true Sabbath observance.

The Sabbath controversies recorded in the Gospels had the fundamental purpose of instructing the Jewish and Gentile communities to which they were sent on proper Sabbath observance.⁷⁴ Jesus' attitude and ministry during the holy hours of the Sabbath modeled for them Christian Sabbath keeping and demonstrated that the burdening approach of the Jewish traditions was not to be followed by his church.

There is no indication in the teachings and ministry of Jesus that would support the conviction that he was setting the Sabbath apart as irrelevant for the church or that he was instituting or planning to institute a new day of rest for his church. He did anticipate the end of the temple services and the sacrificial system, what is usually called the ceremonial or ritual law. But the Sabbath law was upheld by him as a permanent revelation of the will of his Father.

IV. Controversial Texts

Are there hints in the New Testament pointing to the possibility that the Sabbath commandment was either fulfilled in Christ, giving Christian believers freedom from the commandment, or that a new Christian day of worship was slowly being introduced in Christian worship? The debate among Christians on those issues continues without indications of a final resolution. Yet the questions that are raised are of great importance since they deal with the expression of God's will for His church. We will briefly examine the passages usually employed to indicate that during the New Testament era the Sabbath was being set aside by the church.

A. Romans 14:5: A Matter of Conscience

Some have used Rom 14:5 to argue that, according to Paul, Sabbath observance was optional, a matter of personal choice in accordance to one's conscience.⁷⁵ That statement has serious implications

⁷²See Braddock, p. 176, who is undecided.

⁷³"In other words, at least some Christians, of Jewish and Gentile origin inside and outside Palestine, continued to carry on their worship service on the Sabbath, and, like all other Jews and Godfearers of the time, were engaged in defining what kinds of other activities could be performed lawfully on that day" (Weiss, "Synoptic Gospels," p. 23).

⁷⁴On some specific details concerning Sabbath observance based on Jesus' redemptive work, see Bacchiocchi, *Sabbath Under Crossfire*, pp. 170-172.

⁷⁵E.g. D. R. de Lacey, "The Sabbath/Sunday Question and the Law in the Pauline Corpus," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, D. A. Carson, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), p. 182; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1994), p. 224; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), p. 805, believes that Paul is discussing a dispute among Christians at Rome concerning the Sabbath but admits that the nature of the disagreement is not clearly stated by Paul. Nevertheless, he suggests that verse 5 is referring "to a concern on the part of some Jewish Christians and others who had been proselytes or God-worshippers lest they abandon a practice of feast days and sabbath commanded by scripture and sanctified by tradition, a central concern lest they lose something of fundamental importance within their Jewish heritage" (p. 806). Dunn argues that in this particular case "what was at stake was nothing less than the whole self-understanding of the new

for the Sabbath commandment in the Christian church. It would suggest that during the time of Paul the commandment was not considered binding on Christians and that a transition from its observance to its rejection was already in process. It would also suggest or imply that the church was being left free to select any particular day for worship. We should examine the passage more carefully.

1. Paul Was Not Describing Biblical Practices

Some presuppose that Paul is discussing in that passage Old Testament practices that are now considered by him of little or no value for Christians. That is not the case. Notice that some of the recipients of the letter to the Romans believed that one should abstain from eating meat and drinking wine (14:2, 21). However, the Old Testament does not require total abstention from animal flesh but only of the flesh of some animals (Lev 11).⁷⁶ Neither does the OT consider grape juice improper for ingestion.⁷⁷ It was forbidden only to the High Priest and the Nazirite. Paul is discussing food that was considered common (*koinós*, the term used in 14:14) and therefore not proper for consumption under certain circumstances. The reference is not to regulations found in the Torah that could or could not be followed based on the conscience of the individual.

Paul says that the weak values one day more than another but he does not explicitly state the reason for the distinction. There is not an explicit statement from Paul indicating what was done during that day or whether the day was considered holy. There are no references in the chapter to the holy days of the Old Testament. Whatever it was, the strong valued every day as the same for the purpose or activity that he or she had in mind. Hence, the problem was not the activity but deciding which day was the best day to perform a particular activity. Those to whom he wrote understood clearly what he had in mind, but we should be judicious and not jump to unsubstantiated conclusions, e.g. that Paul is dealing here with the Sabbath commandment.⁷⁸ That is not stated or suggested by the text and the simple mention of the word “days” does not justify that conclusion. The discussion is not about the Old Testament Torah.

2. Paul Was Not Emphasizing the Days⁷⁹

Paul dedicates only two verses to the subject of “days” and about 21 to the issue of food. Had he been discussing the Sabbath he would have had to develop his thought much more because of the potential controversial nature of this subject. This suggests that for Paul selecting one day over another was a personal matter and not an issue he wanted to regulate for the church. Therefore the issue is not

movement of which Paul was a chief apostle, in other words, the definition of Christianity itself” (p. 810). Now, if the issue was so serious, why did Paul deal with it in such a casual way, giving the impression that it was not that important and that it was finally a matter of personal opinion?

⁷⁶Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, p. 801, acknowledges that Jewish dietary laws did not require vegetarianism, but goes on to suggest that Paul was “probably thinking of the whole complex of food laws together, and so expresses the issue in terms which cover them all.” It is safer to stay with the language Paul uses in order to avoid unnecessary speculations. Brenda Byrne, *Romans* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), correctly comments that “what is alluded to in Romans 14 goes well beyond normal Jewish practices” (p. 404).

⁷⁷Ernst Kaesemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 367, rules out Jewish orthodoxy “because general abstinence of meat and wine is not found there.”

⁷⁸Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, p. 805, believes that the reference is to Jewish feast days and the Sabbath; Byrne, *Romans*, p. 412, a little more judiciously states the Paul is “more likely” referring to the Jewish Sabbath and other festivals. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), suggests that “days” designates “the observance of the special days of the OT ceremonial law (possibly also with the change from Sabbath to Lord’s Day)” (p. 705); Douglas Moon, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), states that “pinning down the exact nature of this disagreement over ‘days’ is difficult since Paul does not elaborate. . . . Whether the specific point at issue was the observance of the great Jewish festival, regular days of fasting, or the Sabbath is difficult to say” (p. 842). But he, then, speculates, “But we would expect that the Sabbath, at least, would be involved, since Sabbath observance was, along with food laws (cf. Vv. 2-3), a key Jewish distinctive in the first century, and surfaced as a point of tension elsewhere in the early church (see Gal. 4:10; Col 2:16)” (Ibid.).

⁷⁹This is also recognized by Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, p. 805.

keeping the Sabbath or not keeping the Sabbath but the use of days for some other reason or purpose. In fact, there is nothing in the context about “observing/keeping” a day; it simply deals with “preferring/selecting one day to another” for some particular purpose.⁸⁰ We should remember that during the New Testament period the Sabbath was a communal day of worship. Was Paul, then, saying that Christians could now come to worship any day they want based on personal preferences? Would not this create serious confusion in the church? If the other apostles selected a particular day for communal worship, would not that be in opposition to Paul’s advice in Rom 14? Why select another day if all are of equal significance?

3. Paul Was Not Facing Legalism

Paul is addressing a problem in the church based on differences of opinion among the members on matters he did not consider a threat to the gospel. Whatever church members were doing, they were not going against God’s revealed will; therefore he does not condemn the practices but gives advice on how to accept the differences in Christian love. The fundamental issue is the unity of the church and the preservation of that unity in spite of diversity of opinion in some unimportant areas. Paul is not attacking false teachers who are promoting legalism among believers.

What should we conclude? Different suggestions have been given concerning Paul’s reference to “days,” none of which have gained general support.⁸¹ That intimates that the text does not contain enough information to allow us clearly to understand the problems addressed by Paul. We can only offer hypothesis, as Kaesemann recognizes.⁸² We have shown that it is easier and safer to exclude possibilities (e.g., the Sabbath commandment) than to argue for particular hypothesis. Nevertheless, the reference to “days” in the context of abstention from certain foods suggests days of fasting. This is the conclusion reached by some Adventist⁸³ and non-Adventist⁸⁴ scholars.⁸⁵ According to them Paul was probably addressing the practice of days of fasting during which certain foods were considered common and

⁸⁰The Greek phrase *krinein + para* expresses the idea of selection or preference; the verb itself could be translated “to prefer/choose”; see Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 567; Cranfield, *Romans*, vol. 2, p. 704; and Ernst Harald Riesenfeld, “*Para*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 5, Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friederich, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 734.

⁸¹Harold Weiss, “Paul and the Judging of Days,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft* 88 (1995): 137, list the following different views: “a) The dispute has *primarily* to do with popular pagan concerns about establishing whether a day was *fasto* or *nefasto*. b) The dispute cannot be characterized as centering on a pagan or a Jewish question. Superstitious concerns about the peculiar powers of different times were part of the religious syncretism characteristic of that age. At issue were the inroads of a syncretistic propaganda. c) The question of days was related to the question of foods, also mentioned in Romans 14. The days in question, therefore, were fast days which were observed by pagans, Jews and Christians for not totally dissimilar purposes. d) At issue, primarily, was the Jewish sabbath.”

⁸²*Romans*, p. 368.

⁸³Raoul Dederen, “On Esteeming One Day Better Than Another,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 9 (1971): 16-35; Bacchiocchi, *Sabbath Under Crossfire*, p. 252.

⁸⁴E.g. M. Rauer, *Die ‘Schwachen’ in Korinth und Rom nach den Paulusbriefen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1923), pp. 180-182; F. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York: World publishing, 1961), pp. 348-349, who writes, “Since nothing suggests that we have here to do with Judaizers, we shall not regard this as an allusion to the Sabbath but to practices of abstinence and fasting on regular fixed dates;” and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Paul, In Other Word: A Cultural Reading of His Letters* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1990), p. 69; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 690, does not totally exclude the possibility that the reference is to Sabbaths, new moons, feasts and jubilees, but argues for fast days.

⁸⁵Against this position it has been argued that “the parallelism in verse 2, 5, and 6 suggests that it is the strong and not the weak who observe ‘days’” (De Lacey, “Sabbath/Sunday,” p. 182), but the truth is that “Paul does not explicitly relate this dispute over days to the ‘strong’ and ‘weak.’ but we may be relatively certain that the ‘weak’ believer was the one who was ‘judging’ ‘one day to be more important than another day,’ while the ‘strong’ believer was ‘judging each day to be the same’” (Moo, *Romans*, pp. 841-842). De Lacey also comments that if fasting is what Paul had in mind then the clause, “another chooses every day as a fast day” would have to be distorted to mean, “. . . any day. . .” (Ibid., p. 194). He overlooked the fact that the Greek adjective *pas* does not only mean “every” but also “any.”

improper for consumption. This would explain the dispute over food. In addition some individuals considered certain days as good days for fasting while others considered all to be of equal value.⁸⁶

B. Col 2:16-17; Gal 3:10: Special Days

Colossians 2:16-23 is exegetically one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the New Testament. Part of the problem is the difficulties one faces in understanding the terminology used there and the extent to which Paul is quoting from his opponents. The other problem is defining the type of false teaching that was being promoted among church members. There is no scholarly consensus on those issues. Those who believe that the polemic is aimed mainly at Judaism find in the passage evidence to argue for the irrelevance of the Sabbath commandment for Christians.⁸⁷ But recent studies have supported the more traditional conviction that in Colossians we are not dealing with traditional Judaism but with a syncretistic movement in which Jewish elements are present.⁸⁸ The Jewish elements are usually found particularly in the phrase “in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day.”

For our purpose one of the key terms in that sentence is “Sabbath day.” Is it referring to the seventh day Sabbath of the Old Testament or is it designating something else? Some Adventists have argued that the reference is not to the commandment because the Sabbath could not be described as “shadow of what is to come” (2:17); it was instituted before sin came into the world. It has been common to argue that the Greek term for Sabbath used here is plural in form (*sabbatōn*) and that it is better to apply it to the ceremonial Sabbaths associated with the Israelite festivals.⁸⁹ They could properly be described as shadows pointing to the work of the Messiah. This view has been recently and ably defended based on linguistic and syntactical analysis, solidly grounding it in the Scripture.⁹⁰ But for those who may still want to argue there are other interpretational options compatible with the permanent validity of the Sabbath. It has been suggested by some Adventist scholars that the term “Sabbath” in Colossians is referring to the Jewish halakah, the “teachings of men” mentioned in the context (2:22).⁹¹ Others argue that the list is designating the sacrifices offered during those religious occasions and not to the occasions themselves.⁹² The sacrifices were a shadow of the sacrificial death of the Messiah.

The reference to the Sabbath has been problematic for all interpreters because of the context in which it is found. Although the common tendency among scholars has been to find in it a reference to

⁸⁶Commenting on fast days Fitzmyer, *Romans*, p. 690, give as examples of days of fasting “in NT times, Mondays and Thursdays (Luke 18:12; *Did.* 8.1). Judaism also developed in time a text called *Megillat Ta’anit*, ‘Scroll of Fasting,’ that listed days on which it was not permitted to fast or to mourn. In time, early Christians too came to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays (*Did.* 8.1; *Herm. Sim.* 5.3.7). It appears that Jews did not fast during the Sabbath.

⁸⁷E.g. De Lacey, “Sabbath/Sunday,” pp. 182-183; N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 118-119; and James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles of the Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 171-175.

⁸⁸E.g. Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1995); Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), pp. 10-13; and Victor Paul Furnish, “Colossians, Epistle to,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, edited by David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 1092.

⁸⁹E.g. Kenneth H. Wood, “The ‘Sabbath Days’ of Colossians 2:16, 17,” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, Kenneth A. Strand, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1982), pp.338-342.

⁹⁰Ron du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath: Discovering What Can’t Be Found in Colossians 2:16* (Berrien Spring, MI: Andrews University Press, 2008).

⁹¹Richard W. Coffen, “Colossians 2:14-17,” *Ministry* 45 (August 1972):13-15.

⁹²Paul Giem, “*Sabbatōn* in Col 2:16,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 19 (1981):195-210. The suggestion is based on the fact that in practically all the places in the OT where festival, new moon and Sabbath are mentioned together the main emphasis is on the sacrifices offered on those religious occasions (Ezek 45:17; Neh 10:33; 1 Chr 23:31; 2 Chr 2:3; 8:13; 31:3). The only exception is Hosea 2:13.

the commandment, there are still those who, based on the fact that the sequence is yearly, monthly and weekly, consider it possible and probable that the reference is not to the commandment itself but to the week. In other words, the term *sabbatōn* should be translated “week,”⁹³ a usage found elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g. Luke 18:11; Mark 16:9).⁹⁴ That possibility “cannot be ruled out completely (in which case the phrase would refer to weekly, monthly, and probably annual festivals).”⁹⁵

But even if we were to concede that the term *sabbatōn* designates the seventh day, the Sabbath, we should be extremely careful concerning the significance we attach to that usage. It can be legitimately argued that the term is employed in the context of a syncretistic “heresy” and therefore its original biblical significance has been altered. Paul is reacting to syncretistic practices promoted by the false teachers with respect to eating, drinking and festivals. In that case the verb “to judge” in 2:16 would be very important. When Paul says, “no one is to act as your judge in regard to,” he would be in fact saying, “Let no one determine or regulate your eating, drinking . . .”⁹⁶ In other words the false teachers would not have been requiring submission to those practices but determining the way they should be performed on the basis of their own teachings. Paul correctly designates those regulations as “commandments and teachings of men” (2:22; cf. 2:8).

Paul would be in fact warning “the Colossians not against the observances of these practices as such, but against ‘anyone’ (*tis*) who passes judgment on how to eat, to drink, and to observe sacred times. The judge who passed judgment is not Paul but the Colossian false teachers who imposed ‘regulations’ (Col 2:20) on how to observe these practices in order to achieve ‘rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body’ (Col 2:23).”⁹⁷ What Paul would be rejecting is not “the teachings of Moses but their perverted use by the Colossian false teachers.”⁹⁸ It has been pointed out Paul does not have in view “the Jewish observance of these days as an expression of Israel’s obedience to God’s law and a token of her election . . . What moves him here is the wrong motive involved when the observance of holy festivals is made part of the worship advocated at Colossae in recognition of the ‘elements of the universe’, the astral powers which direct the course of the stars and regulate the calendar.”⁹⁹

Therefore, even if we were to accept that the term Sabbath would include the seventh day, it could be concluded that Paul is simply condemning “not the principle of Sabbath keeping but its perversion” or

⁹³Norberto Hugedé, *Commentaire de l’épître aux Colossiens* (Geneve: Labor et Fides, 1968), pp. 143-144; cf. MacDonald, p. 110.

⁹⁴See Beilner, p. 222.

⁹⁵MacDonald, p. 110.

⁹⁶The verb *krinō* expresses the idea of “to pass judgment upon (and thereby to influence) the lives and actions of other people” (Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 567). Robert B. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translators Handbook on Paul’s Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1977), remark, “The verb *krinō* means primarily ‘to judge’ (see, for example, in similar context, Rom 14.3). Here the more general *make rules* may be more appropriate” (p. 65). The passage does not identify the specific regulations promoted by the false teachers, but see the list of religious activities listed in 2:16.

⁹⁷Bacchiocchi, *Sabbath Under Crossfire*, p. 245. Curtis Vaughan, “Colossians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, Frank A. Gaebelin, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), p. 203, acknowledges that “the false teachers at Colossae laid down rigid restrictions with regard to eating and drinking and with regard to the observance of the religious calendar,” but he goes beyond Paul when he adds that “the Colossians were to let no one ‘judge’ their standing before God on the basis of their observance or nonobservance of the regulations of the Mosaic law.”

⁹⁸Bacchiocchi, *Sabbath in the NT*, p. 130.

⁹⁹Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 90. See also Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1971), pp.115-116; and Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982) p. 139: “At Colossae, however, the sacred days were to be kept for the sake of the ‘elemental spirits of the universe,’ those astral powers who directed the course of the stars and regulated the order of the calendar. So Paul is not condemning the use of sacred days or seasons as such; it is the wrong motive involved when the observance of these days is bound up with the recognition of the elemental spirits.”

“superstitious observance.”¹⁰⁰ We have already indicated that such type of Sabbath observance may have been quite common outside Jewish circles. Therefore, one cannot theorize, based on Col 2:16, that Paul was promoting or teaching the abolition of the Sabbath commandment.¹⁰¹ He would have been rejecting the attempt of the false teachers to impose their views on believers concerning how to observe it.¹⁰² They were misusing the commandment but its misuse does not invalidate the commandment itself.¹⁰³

In the case of Gal 4:10 we are also dealing with superstitious observance of days and not with the proper observance of the biblical Sabbath. Scholars have debated whether when Paul says, “You observe days and months and seasons and years” he was referring to the Jewish calendar of religious days or to pagan practices.¹⁰⁴ Several comments are in order. First, there is no explicit mention of the Sabbath in the text, although one could *presume* that it is included under the plural “days.” But the fact that the

¹⁰⁰Bacchiocchi, *Sabbath in the NT*, p. 133.

¹⁰¹If we argue that Col 2:16-17 does not set aside the seventh day as the day of rest, the obvious question is whether the festivals and new moons are still required from Christians. We should keep in mind that in that passage Paul is not defining for us the religious days that the church should keep or not keep. He is simply describing the situation as he faced it in the church at Colossae. The distinctions between the validity of the Sabbath and the end of other Israelites practices would have to be established on other portions of the Bible. We have argued for the perpetuity of the Sabbath and have suggested that Col 2:16 does not question that perpetuity. But when it comes to the religious services directly dependent on the Israelite temple, the NT makes it clear that their typological significance was fulfilled in Christ (e.g. Heb 8:1-5; 10:1-10; John 4:19-26; Matt 26:26-28). Cf. Nello Casalini, *Del simbolo alla realta: L'espiazione dall'Antica alla Nuova Alleanza secondo Ebr 9:1-14* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing, 1989).

¹⁰²Paul undermines the authority of the regulations promoted by the false teachers saying, “Things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ” (2:17). Two comments are necessary. The first one is related to “things” or “these are:” What is the antecedent of the Greek relative pronoun? The tendency is to interpret it as designating the religious practices listed in 2:16, but it is better to take it as referring to the “regulations” promoted by the false teachers “as a *sine qua non* for salvation” (Lohse, *Colossians*, p. 116). This suggestion can be supported by two main arguments (see Bacchiocchi, *Sabbath Under Crossfire*, pp. 247-248): (a) Paul’s main concern in 2:16 is the regulations that the false teachers are attempting to impose on Christians; he is not challenging the validity of the religious practices he is listing. Therefore, the ground or reason he gives to reject the work of the false teachers must refer to the regulations they are trying to impose on others as indispensable for their incorporation into the fullness of God. (b) In the following verses (2:18-21) Paul continues to develop the topic of the regulations of the false teachers by mentioning concrete examples of their teachings but that is done after he, in 2:17, pronounced an indictment against the regulations by calling them “shadow.”

The second comment on 2:17 is concerning the meaning of the phrase, “shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.” The contrast is between “shadow” (*skia*) and “body” (*sōma*, rendered, “substance”), that is to say, between that which lacks content and that which is real and substantive; between what is really important, Christ, and what is not important. This contrast appears to be different from the typological use of *skia* in Hebrews used in contrast to *eikōn* (10:1). In Col the phrase “a shadow of what is to come” is used to indicate that with respect to what was to come the regulations of the false teachers were empty shadows; what was to come is already here in Christ, who is the “body,” that is to say, the real substance for believers. There is also the probability that the false teachers in Colossae were arguing that their teachings were a “shadow of what is to come,” full participation in the divine *plērōma*, but Paul used the same phrase and interpreted “shadow” as that which lacks substance and proceeded to identify Christ as the true reality to which we can be subjected (see Bacchiocchi, *ibid.*, p. 248; and Lohse, *Colossians*, pp. 116-117). Paul is saying that the *plērōma* is already here in Christ and therefore no one needs to submit him/herself to the principalities and powers of the world through obedience to the regulations of the false teachers.

¹⁰³Craig Blomberg, “The Sabbath as Fulfilled in Christ: A Response to S. Bacchiocchi and J. Primus,” in *The Sabbath in the Jewish Christian Traditions*, Tamara C. Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington, and William H. Shea, eds., p. 127, concludes that Col 2:16-17 is the best text to demonstrate that only the principles of the commandments are of value for Christians. According to him Paul was not “jettison the pagan and preserving the Jewish.” It seems to me that such conclusion should be demonstrated and not presupposed. If he is willing to accept that Paul was dealing with a syncretistic observance of the Sabbath, then, the rejection of such usage does not mean that Paul was rejecting the commandment itself.

¹⁰⁴See Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1979), pp. 217-219; and Troy Martin, “Pagan and Judeo-Christian Schemes in Gal 4.10 and Col 2.16,” *New Testament Studies* 42 (1996): 105-119.

plural is used suggests that Paul did not necessarily have in mind the issue of Sabbath keeping.¹⁰⁵ Second, one could argue that since the conflict in Galatians is against some Jewish practices the passage under consideration must be referring to Jewish holy days that would include that Sabbath. But even if that were the case, the observance of the Sabbath is not necessarily being rejected. Paul would, then, be reacting *only* to religious practices that threatened the integrity and effectiveness of the gospel of salvation that is exclusively through Christ. It would be difficult to argue that Paul is here rejecting all types of holy days.

Finally, the verb *paratērein* (“observe”) suggests that we are not dealing here with a wholesome observance of Jewish religious days but with superstitious beliefs. The verb *paratērein* is not the verb used in the LXX or the rest of the New Testament to refer to the observance, for instance, of the Sabbath. That verb expresses not only the idea of carefully observing the cultic calendar but also the action of calculating the arrival of the days and the seasons. This verb “seems to have the sense of anxious, scrupulous, well-informed observance in one’s own interest, which does not fit the traditional celebration of the Sabbath or other Jewish feasts but does fit regard for point or spans of time which are evaluated positively or negatively from the standpoint of the calendar or astrology. Naturally it is conceivable that Jewish feasts, especially in the Hellenistic sphere, were regarded and celebrated superstitiously.”¹⁰⁶ The calendar rejected here is most probably of pagan origin and consequently we should not read into it proper Sabbath observance.¹⁰⁷

C. Matt 11:28-30 and Heb 4:1-11: Eschatological Rest and the Sabbath

1. Matthew 11:29-30

It has been argued that the rest promised by Jesus to his followers in Matt 11:28-30 was the eschatological Sabbath rest already present and available in Jesus’ work of redemption for those who come to him.¹⁰⁸ This presupposes that the Old Testament Sabbath had a typological function that was already being met in Jesus and implies that true Sabbath observance is a life of rest in him.¹⁰⁹ The

¹⁰⁵Contra F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 206; and Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), p. 182. Harald Riesenfeld, “*Paratēreō*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 8, Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 148, is more careful by acknowledging the uncertainty of the reference to the cultic calendar: “Paul is either arguing against keeping the Sabbath and the feasts prescribed in the Mosaic Law, which he regards as a loss of freedom or he has in view apocryphal Jewish speculations about lucky or unlucky days and seasons whose superstitious observance expresses inner bondage.” H. Balz, “*Paratēreō*,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 3, p. 35, is undecided concerning the type of calendar being promoted by Paul’s opponents.

¹⁰⁶Harald Riesenfeld, “*Paratēreō*,” in *Dictionary of NT Theology*, vol. 8, p. 148. Cf. Dieter Lührmann, *Galatians: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis, MA: Fortress, 1992), pp. 84-85.

¹⁰⁷Troy Martin, “Time-Keeping,” has argued that Gentile converts adopted the Jewish calendar as evidenced in Col 2:16, but in Gal 4:10 some of them are in the process of returning to their pagan calendar. He bases his opinion on the immediate context of Gal 4:10, particularly verses 8 and 9, where Paul “asks them how they can desire their former life again. He then proposes their observance of the time-keeping scheme in 4:10 as a demonstrative proof of their reversion to their old life. Considering only the immediate context of Gal 4.10, the list must be understood as a pagan temporal scheme” (pp. 112-113). Martin recognizes that the larger context implies Jewish influence on Gentile Christians but suggests that Paul’s opponents are requiring them to be circumcised. “Confronted with circumcision as a requirement of the true Christian gospel, the Galatians most likely apostatize and return to their former status as Gal 4.8-11 plainly states” (p. 115).

¹⁰⁸A. T. Lincoln, “Sabbath, Rest, and Eschatology in the New Testament,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, D. A. Carson, ed., p. 202.

¹⁰⁹Lincoln, p. 215, concludes, “Thus the true Sabbath, which has come with Christ, is not a literal, physical rest but is seen as consisting in the salvation that God has provided. . . . In short the physical rest of the Old Testament Sabbath has become the salvation rest of the true Sabbath. Believers in Christ can now live in God’s Sabbath that has already dawned.” Craig Blomberg, “Sabbath as Fulfilled,” pp. 122-123, comments that since the law was fulfilled in Christ “Christians are not *commanded* to do anything special on one day out of seven, though they may voluntarily choose to do so.” If that suggestion were to be accepted

question is whether that is a correct reading of the text in its context.

First, the idea that the Sabbath had a typological function in the Old Testament pointing to a future eschatological rest does not seem to be based on clear biblical evidence. Articles on the Hebrew word *šābbat* in the Old Testament do not even mention the possibility that the Sabbath was used to designate the eschatological rest in the future world.¹¹⁰ There is no eschatological Sabbath in the Old Testament although, as we already mentioned, there are references to the fact that in the future world the Sabbath was to be kept.¹¹¹ However, the concept is found in Rabbinic literature¹¹² and the tendency has been to read it back into the OT. But even if the Sabbath had an eschatological content in the OT, it is clear from Isa 66:23 that the realization of that hope in Israel was not perceived to mean or imply that the weekly Sabbath rest will come to an end.

Second, Jesus' statement, "I will give you rest" should be interpreted by the context in which it is used.¹¹³ This rest is offered by him to the "weary and heavy laden," mentioned in 11:28. The verb "heavy laden" (*phortizō*) is also used in Luke 11:46 to refer to Jewish interpretations of the law which have

by Christians it would create great confusion or disorientation among believers. Does he mean that new converts can select any day they want to meet for worship independent of other believers? On what basis is the day to be chosen? How can ecclesiastical order be preserved if there is no basis for the selection of a particular day of worship? Will those who join a church that voluntarily had chosen to meet on Friday be required to worship also on that same day or would they be asked to select any day they wish? What would happen if they want to meet on Tuesday? Should they be allowed to do it independent of the rest of believers who had decided to meet on Friday? It would appear that Blomberg did not think through the implications of his suggestion. God was certainly wise in the selection of one day in seven, the seventh day, for the collective worship of His people.

¹¹⁰F. Stolz, "Šbt to cease, rest," in *Theological Lexicon of the OT*, vol. 3, Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, eds. (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1997), pp. 1297-1302; Hendrik L. Bosman, "Sabbath," in *New International Dictionary of OT Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 4, Willem A. VanGemeren, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), pp. 1157-1162; Victor P. Hamilton, "Shābat cease, desist, rest," in *Theological Wordbook of the OT*, vol. 2, R. Laird Harris, ed. (Chicago, IL: Moody), pp. 902-903. E. Hagg, "Šabbāt," in *Theologische Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, vol. 8, Heinz-Josef Fairy and Helmer Ringgren, eds. (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1993), p. 1056, points to a series of prophetic passages in Isaiah (56:2, 6; 58:13; 66:23), Jeremiah (17:21-22, 24, 27) and Ezekiel (20:12-13, 16, 20-21, 24; 22:8, 26; 23:38; 44:24; 45:17; 46:1, 3-2, 12) in which the eschatological horizon of Sabbath keeping functions as a sign of the Israelites' confession of faith in the salvation historical revelation of Yahweh and its fulfillment. He does not find an eschatological rest prefigured in the Sabbath commandment.

¹¹¹Jon Laansma, 'I Will Give you Rest: The Rest Motif in the New Testament with Special Reference to Mt 11 and Heb 3-4' (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1997), asked whether there was an eschatological Sabbath in the OT and he answered, "The simple and short answer to this question is, 'no'" (p. 65), but then, he goes on to argue that the root of the idea is present there by using the celebration of the Sabbath mentioned in Isa 66:23 to support his suggestion. He concludes, "Without reading later notions back into the OT, maybe we may say that the characterization of the 'hereafter' as a day which is 'wholly Sabbath' finds some justification in the OT, even its starting point, although it is a formulation lacking there" (p. 67). It appears to us that the real issue is not the lack of a specific formulation in the OT but the absence of the concept of an eschatological Sabbath in the OT.

¹¹²See Laansma, *Rest Motif*, pp. 122-129; also Bacchiocchi, *Sabbath under Crossfire*, pp. 140-147; and *idem.*, "Sabbatical Typologies of Messianic Redemption," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 17 (1987): 153-176. The tendency has been to interpret the OT concept of "rest" (*mēnûhâ*) in terms of the Sabbath and read into it the eschatological rest. But it is not clear whether *mēnûhâ* has in the OT an eschatological component. F. Stolz, "Nûah to rest," in *Theological Lexicon of the OT*, vol. 2, p. 724, comments that the idea that Yahweh gives rest to his people from their enemies is used eschatologically in the OT, and gives as references Isa 14:3; 32:18; cf. Laansma, *Rest Motif*, pp. 58-59. But it is doubtful that the concept is present in those passages. H. D. Preuss, "Nûah," *Theological Dictionary of the OT*, vol. 9, G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren and Heinz-Josef Fairy, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), states categorically, "Despite the importance of 'rest' in Israelite spirituality, it is interesting to note that it never appears as an aspect of eschatological hope in the OT" (p. 285).

¹¹³There is no valid reason to argue that in Matt 11:28-30 Jesus is referring to the fulfillment of the OT Sabbath rest by citing Isa 61:1 and 42:1-4 (Laansma, *Rest Motif*, p. 229). Those passages do not even mention the weekly Sabbath rest. Isaiah 61:1 could be referring to the sabbatical year of jubilee, but not to the Sabbath commandment. Laansma seems to feel a little uncomfortable with his own suggestion and timidly comments, "We should also avoid the other extreme of too closely identifying Jesus' rest with the Sabbath" (p. 230).

become a burden for the people.¹¹⁴ This interpretation is supported by the reference to the light “burden” (*portion*) that Jesus places on his followers (11:30).¹¹⁵

The term “yoke” is also important. It was employed by the Jews and in the New Testament to refer to the Law (cf. Acts 15:10; Gal 5:1).¹¹⁶ In Matt 11:29-30 Jesus is offering to his followers “his teachings as the definite interpretation of the law”¹¹⁷ and describing them as easy and light. The nature of that “yoke” is illustrated in the Sabbath controversies recorded in Matt 12:1-14¹¹⁸ where the rigidity of the Pharisees’ regulations is contrasted with Jesus’ views on the Sabbath and his concern for the well-being of the people. One could suggest that “the easiness of the yoke and the lightness of the burden are based on relationships with the meek and humble Jesus, which brings rest in the present. Though Jesus can hardly be accused of laxity, his teachings about Sabbath observance in the following pericopes (Matt 12:1-8, 9-14) distinguish him from the Pharisees by their ‘lightness’ of burden.”¹¹⁹ Such ideas should not be divorced from the meaning or significance of the rest he is offering his followers.

The “rest” that Jesus is offering is an eschatological rest in the sense that in him the end of the old age and the beginning of the new one is already a reality. In context that rest liberates from the burdensome impositions of human regulations and frees the individual to enjoy the true intent of the law in submission to him. “This rest is not idleness but the peace and contentment and fullness of life that come with knowing and doing the truth as revealed by God’s Son, who is always with his people.”¹²⁰ The connection between Matt 11:28-30 and the Sabbath controversies in the following chapter suggests that the rest Jesus is offering includes the full enjoyment of the Sabbath rest. Therefore the rest he brings is not one that liberates from the Sabbath commandment but the rest that also includes the enjoyment of the commandment liberated from the burden of human regulations. Neither is his rest the eschatological fulfillment of the Sabbath rest that liberates the believer from the literal observance of the commandment.¹²¹ What Jesus offers “is not a vacation from the law but a less burdensome way of fulfilling it. . . The ‘rest’ is made possible through the provision of a new yoke.”¹²²

¹¹⁴Horst Balz, “*Phortizō*,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 3, p. 437.

¹¹⁵Laansma, *Rest Motif*, pp. 241-243, suggests that “the more likely explanation is that the heaviness consisted in or maybe better, resulted from the absence of mercy, justice, and faith as the controlling principles of Pharisaic religion (23,23). The people are thus ‘weary and heavy laden’ along the lines of 23,4 because, according to Matthew, socially and religiously they feel the brunt of what Judaism had become.” That is a valuable insight and was possibly part of the “heavy” burden, but contextually the emphasis seems to be on the traditions.

¹¹⁶Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, p. 324.

¹¹⁷Ibid.; W. Schenk, “*Zygos* yoke; pair of scales,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 2, p. 104, clarifies that “yoke” in Matthew “belongs to the terminology of the Matthean understanding of discipleship, in which one follows Jesus’ interpretation of the law rather than that of the Pharisees.”

¹¹⁸With Harrington, “Sabbath Tensions,” p. 47.

¹¹⁹Harrington, *Matthew*, p. 169.

¹²⁰Davis and Allison, *Matthew*, vol. 2, p. 289.

¹²¹Bacchiocchi argues that the Sabbath had a typological significance that was fulfilled in the redemptive work of Jesus but he adds that Sabbath observance was not terminated but was enriched by becoming a celebration of the redemptive work accomplished by Jesus (*Sabbath Under Crossfire*, pp. 170-173). For him the typological function of the Old Testament Sabbath and actual Sabbath observance after its fulfillment in Jesus is not a theological contradiction.

¹²²Hare, *Matthew*, pp. 128-129. Carson takes the rest mentioned in Matt 11:28-30 as the “gospel rest to which the Sabbath had always pointed” and that “was now dawning” (“Jesus and the Sabbath,” p. 75). By that he means that the Sabbath was a symbol of the gospel rest and ended when it was fulfilled in Jesus. It is impossible to reach that conclusion by reading the passage within its present context. He relied on Jewish traditions concerning the Sabbath as an eschatological rest. Laasman, *Rest Motif*, pp. 230-231, considers that Carson is “probably correct” in his remarks, but then adds that “Matthew does not take us beyond a good hint of this.” We wonder how much can be built on a hint based on an eschatology of the Sabbath that is not clearly present in the context. Concerning the presence of the concept of the eschatological rest in Matthew, Laasman is only able to speak about “the likelihood that the idea of eschatological rest—as foreshadowed in the OT—was in Matthew’s mind” (p. 232). Yet, he builds so much on that “likelihood.”

2. Hebrews 4:1-11

This section of the epistle to the Hebrews has been interpreted as evidence for the observance of the Sabbath commandment in the Christian community,¹²³ but also as evidence for a new Christian understanding of the Sabbath in terms of discharging our “duty of Sabbath observance . . . by exercising faith” and not through literal obedience to the commandment.¹²⁴ Others have concluded that “this passage tells us nothing about Christian observance or non-observance of the Sabbath.”¹²⁵ This simply shows that the connection made in the text between God’s offer of rest to His people and the reference to the Sabbath is not as clear as some may think and that therefore we should be careful not to read into the text more than it allows.

First, we should recognize that the main purpose of Heb 3:7-4:11 is to emphasize the need for perseverance and faithfulness in the Christian community.¹²⁶ The discussion of God’s rest is subordinate to that more specific goal. That explains why there is not a detailed discussion of the nature of the rest that God offered His people in the past but that is still available to them “today.” It also clarifies the emphasis found throughout Heb 4 on the problem of unbelief and disobedience and the need for diligence in the Christian life.

Second, the ultimate purpose or goal of perseverance and faithfulness is to make sure that believers will enter God’s rest. The exodus generation did not enter that rest, even though it was available to them, because of their unbelief. In fact it had been available to God’s people since the creation of the world. The fact that the people of God in the Old Testament did not enter God’s rest means that it is still available to Christians. But they should learn from the Exodus generation and avoid hardening their hearts with unbelief.

Third, the rest is basically an eschatological promise that, though offered to the Israelites, has not yet been realized. It remains to be fulfilled (4:1, 9) and believers are exhorted to make every effort to enter this rest (4:11). Yet the rest seems to be at the same time a present experience: “For we who have believed enter that rest” (4:3). Probably what we find here is the New Testament tension between the “already/not yet” of Christian eschatology. Hebrews emphasizes what God has done for us through Christ as our sacrifice and high priest but at the same time there is the recognition that “God’s people are still pilgrims and strangers on this earth on the way to the heavenly goal, living by hope. That is, the gospel comes to us as both fact and promise. So it is with rest in 4:1-11. God’s people even now may enter it, but they will experience rest in its fullness only at the second coming.”¹²⁷ We are obviously

¹²³Bacchiocchi, *Sabbath Under Crossfire*, pp. 124-125, interprets the Greek term *sabbatismos* as referring to the literal observance of the seventh day and then concludes that “the Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God (4:9) is not mere day of idleness, for the author of Hebrews, but rather an opportunity renewed every week to enter *God’s rest*—to free oneself from the cares of work in order to experience freely by faith God’s creation and redemption rest” (p. 169).

¹²⁴Lincoln, “Sabbath, Rest, and Eschatology,” p. 213; A. G. Shead, “Sabbath,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), p. 749; and also William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1991), p. 102, who remarks, “The Sabbath observance now demanded of the community is diligence to enter God’s rest through the exercise of faith in the word of promise and the response of obedience to the voice of God in Scripture.”

¹²⁵Laansma, *Rest Motif*, p. 317. Judith Hoch Wray, *Rest as a Theological Metaphor in the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Gospel of Truth* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1998), argues that “the rest spoken of by the writer of Hebrews is neither an entering into the land nor the ritual rest practiced each Sabbath by the people.” It “means entering into God’s rest and a resting from their works as God rested from God’s work. . . . A full description of such rest is never offered. . . . The theme . . . is never again heard on the lips of this preacher” (p. 91). From this she concludes that “the metaphor of rest functions as an extended and effective sermon illustration” (p. 92).

¹²⁶See Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1989), p. 22; and Laansma, *Rest Motif*, p. 260.

¹²⁷William G. Johnsson, *Hebrews* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1994), p. 94. For a discussion of the meaning of the present tense in 4:3 see David A. DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle ‘to the Hebrews’* (Grand

dealing here with the eschatological significance of the biblical concept of rest.¹²⁸

Fourth, although the rest is not clearly defined by the author, it follows from what we have said that in its broadest sense it is the “bliss of salvation in Jesus Christ, into which we enter by faith in Him—a joy that is already a reality of Christians but that will attain an even deeper dimension in our eternal home with God.”¹²⁹ Since Hebrews does not explore the specific nature of that rest, we should avoid unnecessary speculations.¹³⁰

Fifth, Ps 95:11 is used to demonstrate that the promise of rest found in the Old Testament has remained unfulfilled not because of God’s unwillingness to fulfill it but because of the unbelief of His people. Therefore it cannot be identified with entrance into the land of Canaan.¹³¹ The Sabbath rest is not being equated with the eschatological rest but is being used to suggest that, like the Sabbath rest, the eschatological rest “finds its roots and essence in God’s own primordial Sabbath.”¹³² From the perspective of the author, the eschatological rest and the Sabbath are both temporal and historical experiences.¹³³

Sixth, the Sabbath rest illustrates the nature of the rest that is still available as a rest that requires cessation from one’s works. This is a characteristic of both the seventh day and the eschatological rest. One could say that Heb 4:10 “models the rest after the Sabbath of Gen 2,2; it is a ‘rest from works.’”¹³⁴ The works Hebrews is referring to are not specifically identified but it could be suggested that contextually they are not the works of the law. The Pauline discussion of justification by faith versus justification by the works of the law is foreign to the argument of the epistle.¹³⁵ Based on Heb 3:6, one could suggest that the works Hebrews mentions are probably the result of “the evil, unbelieving heart, hardened by sin, that brings forth rebellion, disobedience, and unfaithfulness. In contrast to this way that marked ancient Israel, God holds out for us the way of faith, one that trusts God and goes forward with patience and perseverance.”¹³⁶

Seventh, the rest that remains—*sabbatismos* (4:9)—is the rest that was left unfulfilled in the Old Testament—*katapausis*.¹³⁷ But the word *sabbatismos* makes its own contribution to the discussion in

Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 153-156.

¹²⁸Cf. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, p. 98.

¹²⁹Johnsson, *Hebrews*, p. 95.

¹³⁰For a discussion of the different suggestions made concerning the meaning of that rest consult Attridge, *Hebrews*, pp. 126-129. He uses the soteriology of Hebrews to define God’s rest and writes, “The imagery of rest is best understood as a complex symbol for the whole soteriological process that Hebrews never fully articulates, but which involves both personal and corporate dimensions. It is the process of entry into God’s presence, the heavenly homeland (11:16), the unshakable kingdom (12:28), begun at baptism (10:22) and consummated as a whole eschatologically” (p. 128).

¹³¹See Paul Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 247.

¹³²Laansma, *Rest Motif*, p. 317.

¹³³Niels-Erik Andreasen, *Rest and Redemption: A Study of the Biblical Sabbath* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1978), p. 114.

¹³⁴Laansma, *Rest Motif*, p. 296; cf. Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 279: “The people of God look forward to receiving the glory and honor for which God created them (Ps 8:4-6; Heb 2:5-9), and the ‘Sabbath’ is a fitting way to envision the realization of this promise.”

¹³⁵Johnsson, *Hebrews*, pp. 96-97.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹³⁷Since *katapausis* in the LXX designates “rest” and “resting place” (the land as the resting place for the people and the temple as God’s resting place), Otfried Hofius has argued that in Hebrews the local sense is the right one: “The author understands the *katapausis* mentioned in the Psalm [94:11] to be the heavenly dwelling of God, which God has appointed as the eschatological *resting place* . . . for his people” (“*Katapausis* rest (noun); resting place,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 2, p. 266). He takes *sabbatismos* to designate not a resting place but “the eternal sabbath celebration of salvation, i.e., the perfected community’s worship before God’s throne” (“*Sabbatismos* sabbath observance; sabbath rest,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 3, p. 219; see also Laansma, *Rest Motif*, p. 277). *Sabbatismos* is not interchangeable with *katapausis*, but

that it clearly defines the eschatological *katapausis* (“rest”) as God’s Sabbath-like rest. That is to say, the Sabbath rest is used to illustrate the nature of the eschatological rest.¹³⁸ This is important in that it suggests that for the author of Hebrews the theology of the Sabbath was so meaningful that he used it to interpret God’s eschatological rest.¹³⁹ The context does not support the suggestion that the Sabbath commandment had been fulfilled in the “rest” of salvation that Christ brought, making it unnecessary for Christians to obey it.¹⁴⁰ The offer of the Sabbath-like rest in the Old Testament did not require the people to set aside the literal observance of the Sabbath commandment. The eschatological rest is like the Sabbath but does not replace it; they are not incompatible. Besides, entering God’s rest in Heb 4 does not mean that the Sabbath is superseded. In order to enter God’s rest the text only requires perseverance and faithfulness, ceasing from our works, not the rejection of the Sabbath commandment. Finally, it is important to mention that Heb 4 has absolutely nothing to say about instituting a new day of rest, e.g. Sunday.

D. The First Day of the Week in the NT

We should examine a number of passages in which the first day of the week is mentioned in order to determine whether or not they provide evidence for an apostolic practice of meeting for worship during that day. Most of the references are found in the gospels.

1. Resurrection Appearances in the Gospels

The first reference to the first day of the week is found in Matt 28:1: “Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week . . .” Matthew is simply dating the moment when the two women came to the tomb of Jesus. When the Greek improper preposition *opse* is used with the genitive, as in this particular case, it usually means “after (the Sabbath).”¹⁴¹ The women waited until the

“designates more closely what the people of God should expect when they enter the *katapausis* of God” (ibid.). It is true that *katapausis* could mean “resting place,” referring to the temple, but that meaning does not seem to be required in Heb 4, particularly since apparently Christians seem to experience it already while looking forward to its consummation in the future; for an evaluation of Hofius’ view see Albert Vanhoye, “Trois ouvrages recents sur l’Eptre aux Hebreux,” *Biblica* 5 (1971): 68. The noun *sabbatizmos*, documented for the first time in Greek literature in Hebrews, means “Sabbath observance” and the verb, used in the LXX, means “to celebrate/observe the Sabbath.” Hebrews is comparing the eschatological rest to a Sabbath observance in the sense that those who enter it rest from their works, as indicated in 4:10. Whether the term is also designating the joyful celebration of the eternal Sabbath of salvation before the throne of God is contextually less certain, although not impossible (cf. Heb 12:22, 23). It is well known that “in Jewish tradition generally the sabbath was not simply a time of quiet inactivity but of festive praise and celebration” (Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 131).

¹³⁸Nello Casalini, *Agli Ebrei: Discorso di esortazione* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1992), comments, “Il *sabbatizmos* di 4,9 indica il riposo rituale sabbatico. Mai poiche e referito al riposo di Dio, lo si deve considerare una metafora o immagine di questo.”

¹³⁹Johnsson, *Hebrews*, p. 96, writes, “In my judgment, Heb 4:1-11 gives us the strongest evidence in favor of the seventh-day Sabbath in the entire New Testament. Yet it does so without a direct appeal or invitation to keep the Sabbath. A direct appeal might suggest that the Hebrew Christians were debating which day to observe. But Hebrews introduces the Sabbath indirectly, in a nondefensive but highly positive manner. Our rest in Christ, says the author, has the *quality* of the Sabbath. It is *like* the Sabbath. . . . Two conclusions seem inescapable. First, for him and his readers, the Sabbath had a positive connotation. If they had considered it a burden, the last remains of a religion of bondage, the author would have lost his audience at this critical moment. Second, both he and his audience were keeping the Sabbath. They had no thought about any other day. Certainly they weren’t debating the merits of Sabbath versus Sunday. Only in such a context could he call rest in Christ a *sabbatizmos*.”

¹⁴⁰Lane states that in Hebrews “the Sabbath observance now demanded of the community is diligence to enter God’s rest through the exercise of faith in the word of promise and the response of obedience to the voice of God in Scripture” (*Hebrews*, p. 102). But such conclusion is totally unwarranted because Hebrews 4 is not interested in promoting or defining how should the Sabbath commandment be observed. His position has been criticized as being “a blatant introjection of the old ‘faith’ versus ‘works’ dichotomy (one that is itself in need of nuancing in light of the recognition that Paul opposes not ‘good works’ but ‘works of Torah’ in the sense of ethnic-boundary-maintaining marks) into Hebrews” (DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, p. 137).

¹⁴¹Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 746; and Harrington, *Matthew*, p. 408.

Sabbath ended and then early on Sunday morning went to the tomb. There is no indication in the text that when Matthew wrote the gospel Sunday had become a special religious day for Christians.¹⁴²

According to Mark the women waited until the Sabbath was over to buy spices and then “very early on the first day of the week they came to the tomb” (16:2). The sequence is clear: Rested on the Sabbath, after the Sabbath went and bought the spices and then early on Sunday morning went to the tomb. The longer ending of Mark makes clear that the resurrection of Jesus took place “early on the first day of the week” (16:9), that he appeared to Mary Magdalene probably that same day, to two disciples who “were walking along on their way to the country” (16:12; cf. Luke 24:13-35), and that “He appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at the table” (v. 14). In none of these apparitions of the resurrected Lord is it explicitly indicated that it was Sunday or that there was a religious activity directly associated with that day.

Luke uses the expression “first day of the week, at early dawn” to date the moment when the women went to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body (24:1). According to Luke, the reason they waited until the first day was because “on the Sabbath day they rested according to the commandment” (23:56). If Luke were here promoting the religious observance of a particular day, that would be Sabbath and not Sunday. Interestingly, when the two men appeared to the women they referred to the resurrection of Jesus as taking place on “the third day” (24:7).

Late on the first day of the week Jesus appeared to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. In the incident the first day is not mentioned but the context indicates that it was Sunday because Luke introduces the narrative stating that it took place “on the same day,” the day when Jesus resurrected (24:13). Besides, the disciples said to Jesus, “It is the third day since these things happened” (24:21). They avoided any explicit reference to the “first day of the week” calling it the “third day.” As an act of hospitality they invited the stranger to stay with them that evening to eat. During the meal Jesus took the bread, blessed it and gave it to them (24:30). At that moment their eyes were opened and they recognized in the stranger their Lord; then he “vanished from their sight” (24:31). This is hardly a celebration of the Eucharist and neither does it provide the “basis for making a connection with an invocation for the risen Lord to be present in the eucharistic celebration.”¹⁴³ In Luke, meals are often “the site for revelatory discourse and the prospect of genuine fellowship characteristic of the kingdom of God. Also in keeping with other meal scenes in the Gospel of Luke, once he is at the table, Jesus’ role shifts. He is no longer the honored guest but the host of the meal, and it is in this role that he distributes the bread.”¹⁴⁴ The incident serves to reaffirm the fact that the Jesus who died is the same one who is now alive. That message was conveyed by the two disciples to the eleven who were in Jerusalem.

The time for Jesus’ apparition to the eleven disciples narrated in 24:36-49 is not given. Jesus asked for food not as a religious act, for instance to celebrate the Eucharist, but to demonstrate that he was alive, that he had resurrected from the dead (24:41-42).¹⁴⁵ There is no evidence here of a religious act celebrated during a sacred day. Luke “has used the well-attested tradition of Jesus’ eating with his

¹⁴²In Matt 28:9 and 16 two appearances of Jesus to the disciples are mentioned but it is not indicated in which day of the week they took place. The first one was probably on the resurrection day but interestingly there is no explicit mention of that day.

¹⁴³Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, p. 1206.

¹⁴⁴Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 849. J. C. Laansma, “Lord’s Day,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), p. 680, comments that in this particular case “we may with some confidence take this as an allusion to the Last Supper,” but in the same paragraph he transforms the uncertainty of the allusion into a fact: “From the standpoint of Luke’s Gospel we have a celebration of the Lord’s Supper on the day of the resurrection (the two are not unrelated), specifically, ‘on the first day of the week.’”

¹⁴⁵With R. J. Bauckham, “The Lord’s Day,” in *From Sabbath to the Lord’s Day*, D. A. Carson, ed., p. 234.

disciples after the resurrection (Jn. 21:13; Acts 1:4; 10:41) to stress the reality of his presence with them, and he has not developed allusions to the feeding of the multitude or the Last Supper.”¹⁴⁶

John records a visit of Mary Magdalene to the tomb of Jesus “on the first day of the week” (20:1). Later on, in “the evening of that day, the first day of the week” (20:19), Jesus appeared to his disciples who had gathered together in a room “for fear of the Jews.” This was not a religious meeting taking place during a Sunday evening religious service. Thomas was not present at this occasion and when informed by the others about the resurrection of Jesus he was doubtful. “After eight days” Jesus appeared to the disciples again and Thomas was with them (20:26). This would have probably been the following Sunday night.¹⁴⁷ All other manifestations of Jesus to the disciples had taken place during the same day he was resurrected but this one is dated to a week later on the first day of the week. If John was assigning a particular significance to that fact he did not express it, giving the impression that he was simply dating the event.¹⁴⁸ Again the disciples were not celebrating a religious service but hiding behind locked doors. However, we should not conclude that Jesus appeared to the disciples only during the first day of the week. John tells about another manifestation of Jesus to the disciples without informing us concerning the day of the week in which it took place (John 21:1-14). The chief purpose of this particular apparition was “to reinstate Peter as a legitimate member of the apostolic band after his tragic betrayal of the Master.”¹⁴⁹ The day had no particular significance in itself.

Most of the references to the “first day of the week” in the gospels designate the specific day in which Jesus was resurrected and appeared to the disciples. There is only one case in which it designated another Sunday but there is no evidence that this was done in order to identify that day as a particularly sacred day. The fact that not all of Jesus’ manifestations to the disciples occurred on the first day of the week should alert us against claiming that the day was holy because of his post-resurrection appearances on that day.¹⁵⁰ Jesus was with the disciples forty days after his resurrection but there is no hint in the New Testament to suggest that during that time he met with them during the “first day of the week.” We have not found any evidence in the gospels to support the idea that the early apostolic church associated the “first day of the week” with religious services or activities, or that the day was beginning to replace the seventh-day Sabbath.

2. Acts 20:7-12: Meeting at Troas

The first day of the week is mentioned in Acts in the context of Paul’s short stay in Troas on his way to Jerusalem. This was unquestionably a religious gathering for the purpose of breaking bread. A significant number of scholars find here clear evidence of the early Christian practice of having religious services on the first day of the week. But a look at the text indicates that the issues are much more

¹⁴⁶Marshall, *Luke*, p. 903.

¹⁴⁷G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), p. 385.

¹⁴⁸Notice the strong effort that Laansma makes to find a special significance on that detail: “Is it only coincidental that the next appearance of Jesus in the midst of his gathered disciples is exactly one week later (Jn 20:26), that is, on the first day of the week? This must be phrased as a question, for the *matter is left unclear*, but the suggestion is very strong. We need only *suppose* that ‘the first day of the week’ had already come to carry a special meaning in the gatherings of John’s churches to appreciate how this passage would have resonated with them” (“Lord’s Day,” p. 681; italics mine). The argument is based on suppositions that are not provided by the text but that are provoked by preconceived convictions coming from a later historical period.

¹⁴⁹Specht, “Sunday,” p. 122.

¹⁵⁰It is important to remember that the first day of the week is never called in the New Testament “the resurrection day.” The use of that term to designate Sunday is a later development; see, H. Riesenfeld, “Sabbat et jour du Seigneur,” in *New Testament Essays: Studies in the Memory of Thomas Walter Manson*, A. J. B. Higgins, ed. (Oxford: Manchester University Press, 1959), p. 212. Here the remarks of Bauckham are appropriate: “Since the Reformation to the present day a long and impressive series of writers have found reason to identify the origins of Sunday worship in the period of the resurrection appearances of Jesus. But we should note immediately that no early Christian document explicitly claims this” (“Lord’s Day,” p. 233).

complex and that consequently we should be more careful before drawing conclusions.

First, we have to ask, was that meeting a regular church meeting? The evidence shows that it was not. The church came together to listen to Paul who was leaving the following day. To conclude that this incident describes what was the habitual practice of the church is to read into it later ecclesiastical practices which were not followed in the apostolic church.

Second, at what time of the day was the meeting held? The passage suggests that it did not take place Sunday morning or even Sunday afternoon. It was an evening meeting. "The reference to the use of lights and to the prolongation of the service past midnight, even till daybreak, plus the deep sleep of Eutychus, make it obvious that this was a night gathering."¹⁵¹ The fact that the breaking of the bread took place after midnight also suggests that this was an evening meeting, otherwise they could have broken the bread during the day.

Third, to which day of the week is the phrase "first day of the week" referring? This may sound like a strange question, but it is necessary to raise it because the meeting took place during the evening. The answer will depend on the system that Luke used to reckon the day. Was he using the Jewish system according to which the day begins and ends at sunset? In that case the service took place on what we would call today Saturday night. Did he follow the Roman system that reckoned the day from midnight to midnight? In that case the meeting took place on Sunday night but the breaking of the bread would have occurred after midnight, on early Monday morning. What is the correct answer? The text is not clear and therefore we should be very careful not to use it to support a particular theory of Sunday observance in the early church. Luke 23:56-24:1 suggests that Luke used the Jewish system rather than the Roman. The women rested on the Sabbath from sunset to sunset and after the Sabbath bought the spices.¹⁵² But, whatever is the case, the fact remains that the text does not consider Sunday to be a holy day during which the church met for religious activities.

Finally, was the breaking of the bread a celebration of the Lord's Supper, a fellowship dinner or both? It may have been a celebration of the Lord's Supper but that is not totally clear since it took place after midnight and there is no mention of prayers or wine. In any case there are so many unknowns in the passage that we should avoid building too much on it. As we have stated, there is no certainty "regarding the night involved: Was it Saturday-Sunday or Sunday-Monday? In either case, the gathering was exceptional—a farewell gathering for the great missionary and his traveling companions. Nor is it certain that the Lord's Supper was celebrated. The expression 'to break the bread' could refer to the beginning of a farewell supper. But granting the possibility that this was more than a farewell fellowship meal, there is no evidence that this had become a weekly practice."¹⁵³

3. 1 Corinthians 16:1-2: Collection and the First Day of the Week

This is probably the earliest reference to the first day of the week in Christian writings and is mentioned in the context of Paul's collection for the saints in Jerusalem. Paul urged the Corinthians to have the offering ready before his arrival: "On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come" (1 Cor 16:2). The obvious

¹⁵¹Specht, "Sunday," p. 122.

¹⁵²David J. Williams, *Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), p. 347, argues that Luke was using the Roman system because "Luke speaks of 'sunrise' as 'the next day' (cf. vv. 11 and 7)." But the Greek term translated "next day" is *epaurion* which means "in the morning." Granted that it could designate in the New Testament "the next day," but in this particular case it is explained by the parallel noun *augē*, "dawn, the break of day" in v. 11. The text is saying that Paul was planning to leave "in the morning" (v. 7) and he departed exactly in the morning, that is to say "at dawn" (v.11).

¹⁵³Specht, "Sunday," pp. 123-124; cf. Bacchiocchi, *Sabbath Under Crossfire*, pp. 36-37. Even though Laansma argues that the incident strongly suggests that such gathering was customary on Sunday, he has to acknowledge that the passage "does not establish that there was a weekly pattern of holding a special meeting on Sunday" ("Lord's Day," p. 681).

question is, why did he select Sunday as the day when the money was to be set apart? Some find here “the first piece of evidence to show that Christians observed that day, though there is no reason to doubt that it was their custom from the first.”¹⁵⁴ But the answer to the question is not that simple.

First, there is absolutely nothing in the text or its context to suggest that Paul considered the first day of the week a special holy day for Christians to assemble for worship. Closer to the truth are those who argue that “it is doubtful whether there is any liturgical significance in this mention of *the first day of every week*, except that the week was plainly introduced to the Gentile churches from the earliest days.”¹⁵⁵ It is a special pleading to suggest that one should not exclude from the text the possibility of a regular assembly on that day.¹⁵⁶ Second, setting the money apart was to be done at home and not in a public meeting. In fact nothing is said about taking the money to the Christian assembly on that very same day.¹⁵⁷ It is true that the collection is a religious act of worship (Rom 15:27),¹⁵⁸ but Paul is not saying that this is connected in any way with the religious nature of the first day. One should not presuppose that religious acts were limited to one day a week in the church. Third, the reason for separating the money at home was that Paul did not want a “last-minute, superficial scraping around for funds as an unplanned off-the-cuff gesture.”¹⁵⁹

We still have to deal directly with the question of the specific reference to the first day of the week. The truth is that no specific reason is given by Paul for the selection of that particular day. Whatever reason we may give will be imported into the text from some other sources or from our own preconceived ideas.¹⁶⁰ The text itself, as we suggested, does not indicate that its selection was based on the sacredness of the day. Hence the suggestion made by some that the reason may have been of a pragmatic nature—that day may have been a pay day in imperial Rome.¹⁶¹ It could also be that by “first day of the week” Paul simply meant every week; in other words, he was “encouraging others among his churches to set aside funds weekly in an orderly fashion so when he arrived there would be a full allotment for the saints.”¹⁶²

E. Revelation 1:10: The Lord’s Day

The common opinion among scholars is that the phrase “the Lord’s Day” in Rev 1:10 designates Sunday as the day when John had his first vision. Obviously that would not mean that in John’s time

¹⁵⁴Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 232. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 1321, writes, “Verse 2 provides a very early explicit reference to *every Sunday* as a worship day.”

¹⁵⁵F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Greenwood, SC: Attic Press, 1971), p. 158.

¹⁵⁶Laansma, “Lord’s Day,” p. 680. Hans Conzelmann claims that “even if the collection is not made during the community meeting, it may be concluded from this statement of date that the Sunday is already the day of meeting” (*1 Corinthians: A commentary* [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1975], p. 296). That claim lacks exegetical verification and reveals his own preconceptions.

¹⁵⁷Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, p. 158.

¹⁵⁸Laansma, “Lord’s Day,” p. 680.

¹⁵⁹Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, p. 1324.

¹⁶⁰One can see this phenomenon at work in the following statement by Bauckham: “Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:2 are perhaps not entirely unambiguous evidence for Sunday observance in the Pauline churches, but seen in the light of later evidence there is a strong presumption that they should be so understood” (“Lord’s Day,” p. 233). Laansma comments, “In view of the absence of any other explanation for the selection of this day, it is no matter of eisegesis to find hints of ‘resurrection day’ in Paul’s use of the expression in 1 Corinthians 16:2” (“Lord’s Day,” p. 680). Interestingly, when Paul refers to the resurrection day he calls it “the third day,” not “the first day of the week” (1 Cor 15:4).

¹⁶¹See Specht, “Sunday,” p. 125, with bibliographical information.

¹⁶²S. McKnight, “Collection for the Saints,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), p. 143; also, J. M. Everest, “Financial Support,” in *Ibid.*, p. 298. It is also possible that what Paul is suggesting is that since the first day of work was the first day of the week he wanted them to separate some money that very first day and not to wait until the end of the week. They should give priority to this project.

Sunday had already replaced the seventh-day Sabbath as a day of worship. Others have argued that the phrase is referring to Easter Sunday¹⁶³ or to the eschatological day of the Lord,¹⁶⁴ but both views have been questioned.¹⁶⁵ Two main reasons are adduced to support the Sunday theory. The first one is that already during the apostolic period the first day of the week was being used by Christians as a day of worship to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord. But as we have suggested the biblical evidence does not support that conclusion. It is also important to observe that in the rest of the New Testament Sunday is called the “first day of the week” and never the “Lord’s Day.” John himself, in his gospel, refers to Sunday as “the first day of the week” (John 20:1, 19). It is particularly striking that John will use the traditional designation for Sunday in the gospel and then in Revelation, written at approximately the same time, use a totally new name for Sunday; a name that as far as we know was not being used by the apostles to refer to Sunday.¹⁶⁶ The term used by John, *kyriakos* (“belonging to the Lord”),¹⁶⁷ was known and used among Christians as evidenced by the fact that in 1 Cor 11:20 Paul calls the Lord’s Supper *kyriakon deipnon* (“the Lord’s Meal”),¹⁶⁸ but it was not used to designate the first day of the week.

The second argument used to support the theory that “the Lord’s Day” designates Sunday is that Christian writers from the second century believed that Rev 1:10 was referring to Sunday. That is to say, they used the phrase “Lord’s day” as a designation for Sunday. But the fact is that the evidence available from the first part of the second century is not as conclusive as some have suggested. Take for instance *Didache* 14.1. The phrase *kata kyriakēn de kyriou* (“according to the Lord’s [!] of the Lord”) is a complex and difficult one and consequently different interpretations have been given to it.¹⁶⁹ The truth is that “no really convincing explanation of this old phrase . . . has yet been suggested.”¹⁷⁰ Notice that the noun “day” is not found in the text and that has led some to conclude that the adjective *kyriakē* is used here as a technical term for “Lord’s Day.” But there is no linguistic evidence to support the theory that at the beginning of the second century the meaning of *kyriakē hēmera* was transferred to *kyriakē*. We find it counter-productive to use this obscure passage to clarify what John had in mind in Rev 1:10.

The next use of the term *kyriakē* is found in Ignatius’ letter to the *Magnesians* 9.1, but the passage is also difficult to interpret. The Greek reading differs from the Latin¹⁷¹ and scholars in general have opted for the Latin text. Again the word “day” is not present in the text. The difficulties with the passage are

¹⁶³E.g., C. W. Dugmore, “The Lord’s Day and Easter,” in *Neotestamentica et Patristica* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), pp. 271-281; and Kenneth A. Strand, “Another Look at the Lord’s Day in the Early Christian Church and in Rev. i.10,” *New Testament Studies* 13 (1966-1967):174-181.

¹⁶⁴E.g., Bacchiochi, *From Sabbath*, pp. 123-131.

¹⁶⁵Against the Easter Sunday interpretation see Rordorf, *Sunday*, pp. 208-215; and Bauckham, “Lord’s Day,” pp. 230-231, and p. 232 against the eschatological interpretation.

¹⁶⁶See Bacchiochi, *From Sabbath*, pp. 117-118.

¹⁶⁷*Kyriakos* is an adjective derived from the noun *kyrios* (“owner, lord”), and means “belonging to the lord;” see Werner Foerster, “*Kyriakos*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 3, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 1095-1096. The adjective is common in secular Greek; see Cestas Spicq, “*Kyriakos*,” in *Theological Lexicon of the NT*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), pp. 338-339.

¹⁶⁸Rordorf, *Sunday*, p. 221, has suggested that there was a direct connection between the “Lord’s day” and the “Lord’s Supper” in the sense that the day in which the Lord’s Supper took place came to be known as the “Lord’s day.” This is a speculation that has been satisfactorily refuted by Bauckham, “Lord’s Day,” pp. 226-227.

¹⁶⁹Bacchiochi, *From Sabbath*, p. 114, lists three basic interpretations. (1) Deleting the term *kyriakē* and writing in its place *hēmera*, “day.” In that case the phrase would read, “On the day of the Lord come together . . .” (2) *Kyriakē* refers to Easter Sunday and not to the weekly day. (3) The noun implied in the text is not “day” but “teaching, doctrine” (*didachēn*) and the sentence could then be rendered, “According to the sovereign doctrine of the Lord.” We find this last view more persuasive than any of the others.

¹⁷⁰Bauckham, “Lord’s Day,” p. 227.

¹⁷¹Bauckham, “Lord’s Day,” p. 228 writes, “This passage has provoked textual debate since the only Greek manuscript extant reads *kata kyriakēn zōēn zōntes*, which could be translated ‘living according to the Lord’s life.’”

such that even some of those who read it as a reference to Sunday feel uncomfortable with it. One of them asks, “Can we be sure that *kyriakē* here means Sunday and not Easter? Since the emphasis is on ways of life, we cannot too easily infer that Ignatius *must* be referring to a *weekly* day of Christian worship to balance the weekly Sabbath . . . The reference to a weekly Lord’s Day would seem more natural, but with the evidence of this text alone we cannot be quite sure.”¹⁷² It would be better to acknowledge that Ignatius is not dealing with days but with ways of life, the Jewish way of life and the new life of Christians symbolized in the resurrection of Christ.¹⁷³ The passage under consideration does not seem to make any contribution toward the understanding of *kuriakē hēmera* in Rev 1:10.

The apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* 35 and 50 uses the term *kyriakē* to refer to the day of the resurrection of Jesus but this “cannot be definitely construed as allusion to Sunday observance.”¹⁷⁴ This particular document does show that by the end of the second century *kyriakē* was being used as a technical term for at least Easter Sunday.¹⁷⁵ The *Acts of Peter* appears to use the expression “Lord’s Day” to refer to weekly Christian Sunday,¹⁷⁶ and the same applies to the *Acts of Paul*.¹⁷⁷ Possibly the first unambiguous use of the term “Lord’s Day” to designate the weekly Christian Sunday is found in Clement of Alexandria.¹⁷⁸ It is clear that by the end of the second century *kyriakē* was being used to refer to Sunday.¹⁷⁹

This brief overview of the use of the term “Lord’s Day” during the second century illustrates the challenges we confront when attempting to determine the particular meaning of a phrase used in Rev 1:10 by employing later writings. The fundamental question could very well be a methodological one. Is it appropriate to transfer the meaning of a term from late second century to a document from late first century? The least we can say is that such an approach is questionable. We have already indicated that in the gospel of John, Sunday is called “first day of the week.” Why did not John use the term “Lord’s Day” in the gospel to refer to Sunday? What did he have in mind when using the expression “Lord’s Day?”

If instead of looking into post-apostolic writings to understand Rev 1:10 we use biblical inter-textual analysis it would not be difficult to find an answer to our questions. On the basis of the analogy of the Scriptures we can suggest that “the Lord’s Day” is another way of referring to the seventh-day Sabbath. The evidence can be summarized as follows:

The Sabbath was set apart for sacred use at Creation (Gen. 2:2, 3). The intermediate agent in that creation, according to several New Testament passages, was the Lord Jesus Christ. The fourth of the famous Ten Words describes the seventh day ‘as a sabbath to the Lord your God’ (Ex. 20:10ff.). In the book of Isaiah God calls it ‘my holy day’ and ‘the holy day of the Lord’ (Isa. 58:13). All three of the Synoptic Gospels quote Jesus saying, ‘The Son of man is lord even of the sabbath’ (Mark 2:28; cf. Matt. 12:8; Luke 6:5).¹⁸⁰

¹⁷²Buckham, “Lord’s Day,” p. 229.

¹⁷³Samuelle Bacchiocchi, *Anti-Judaism and the Origin of Sunday* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1975), pp.90-93.

¹⁷⁴Laansma, “Lord’s Day,” p. 683.

¹⁷⁵See the text in W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: University Press, 1991), pp. 224-225.

¹⁷⁶*Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 285.

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 252. There is an intriguing passage in the *Acts of John* where the “Lord’s Day” seems to designate Saturday. See *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, reprint 1978), p. 561.

¹⁷⁸*Miscellanies* v.14 (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, pp. 569-570).

¹⁷⁹See Kenneth A. Strand, “The ‘Lord’s Day’ in the Second Century,” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, p.350.

¹⁸⁰Walter F. Specht, “Sunday in the New Testament,” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, p. 127. The same approach is now taken by Bacchiocchi, *Sabbath Under Crossfire*, pp. 40-41.

John would be simply echoing Jesus' claim to be the Lord of the Sabbath who as Lord decided to give John this revelation on a Sabbath day. Having said that we recognize that "there is not sufficient data given in the book of Revelation to be certain of the correct interpretation of the phrase 'Lord's Day' in Revelation 1:10. The popular attempt to equate it with Sunday does not rest on evidence supplied by the Scriptures but upon post-apostolic usage of the phrase, long after John's time."¹⁸¹ Usually it is methodologically better to work from within the Scriptures itself in trying to understand the intent of a biblical writer.

F. Summary

Our study of the controversial passages in the New Testament on the question of the Sabbath and the origin of Sunday observance reveals that there is no evidence to support the suggestion that Christ fulfilled the redemptive meaning of the Sabbath and that consequently Christians have been liberated from the literal observance of the commandment. Neither did we find any evidence that will support the popular conviction that already in the New Testament the Sabbath was being set aside as a holy day and Sunday was being introduced as the Christian day of worship.

It could be argued that when the passages we have studied are evaluated individually the evidence for Christian Sunday may not appear to be too significant but that its true persuasive power is located in their cumulative effect. But we ask, how could the individual pieces of evidence lead to a conclusion that they were not aiming at or even addressing? The perceived cumulative effect of the evidence may appear to some to be valid only because what they are trying to demonstrate—that some type of Sunday observance was already developing in the apostolic church—is already presupposed, based on later developments in the history of the church. The fact remains that the biblical evidence itself does not support that particular conclusion.

V. General Conclusion

Adventists believe that the seventh-day Sabbath originated in God who instituted it at the end of the creation week by setting it apart, blessing and sanctifying it. That fact was also recognized by Jesus. Therefore we can conclude that the observance of the seventh day Sabbath is a privilege entrusted by God to the human race and not only to a particular ethnic or religious group. At Sinai the preservation of the commandment was placed in the hands of the Israelites when God incorporated it into the covenant made with them. It was a memorial of God's creative and redemptive power.

The commandment was observed by Jesus himself who in his own ministry demonstrated the redemptive significance of that day. During his Sabbath controversies with Jewish leaders he reaffirmed the commandment, divested it from the burdens of human traditions and used it to display his redemptive power by bringing rest to those who were oppressed by evil powers and sicknesses. In the gospels Jesus is depicted as a faithful Sabbath keeper who nowhere hinted at the possibility of dismissing the commandment through the fulfillment of its redemptive meaning in his own person or by simply initiating a development that will lead to the institution of Sunday as the day of worship.

The New Testament demonstrates that Jewish believers observed the seventh day Sabbath as a day of rest and worship long after the ascension of Jesus. A careful reading of the Sabbath controversies, particularly in the gospels of Mark and Luke, indicates that Gentile Christians also kept the seventh day Sabbath. The fundamental question in the Sabbath controversies recorded in the gospels was not whether the Sabbath should be kept but how should it be kept. The gospel writers used those controversies to instruct Jewish and Gentile Christians alike on how to observe the commandment.

¹⁸¹Specht, "Sunday," p. 127. When Everett Ferguson states that with respect to Sunday "the common Christian designation was 'the Lord's Day'" he is not representing first century Christianity but probably late second-century beliefs ("Sunday," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, edited by Everett Ferguson [New York: Garland Publishing, 1998], p. 1095).

The idea that for Paul keeping the commandment was a matter of a personal conviction that was not to be forced on others lacks New Testament support. Romans 14 is not dealing with Sabbath observance and Gal 4:10 and Col 2:16 are addressing a misuse of the Sabbath. A misuse of a principle or a divine commandment does not nullify the principle or the commandment itself.

The first day of the week is primarily mentioned in the context of the narrative of the resurrection of Jesus on the third day. It is never called “resurrection day.” None of the references to that day in the New Testament suggest that it already was a day celebrated by the Christian community to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus or a day in which the church met to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. It is true that those passages are read by most scholars as hinting at the early importance of Sunday as a Christian day of worship. But it is probably fair and correct to suggest that “the emphasis on the ‘first day of the week’ in the tradition of the Resurrection narratives is such that, when Sunday worship was practiced, Christians must have connected it with the Lord’s resurrection on a Sunday. Whatever the origin of Sunday worship, it is evident that, once it became the custom, Christians familiar with the Gospel traditions would very soon have come to see it as commemorative of the resurrection.”¹⁸² In other words, the references to the first day of the week in the New Testament were read through the lenses of post-biblical developments.

But perhaps the fundamental question is the one of authority: Who has the authority to significantly change a biblical commandment? If neither Jesus nor the apostles specifically, clearly and unambiguously set aside the seventh-day Sabbath commandment, could their authority be extended to others who on their behalf would do what they did not do? The question is a difficult one with a long history of debate and analysis, deserving careful study.¹⁸³ However, concerning the Sabbath, Adventists have given priority to the biblical witness.

¹⁸²Bauckham, “Lord’s Day,” p. 236.

¹⁸³See, for instance, the statement of John F. Baldwin, made in the context of his discussion on the Sabbath liturgy, concerning this problem: “I have no intention of denying the normative role of Scripture in matters both doctrinal and practical, but at the same time post-Enlightenment thought has demonstrated the impossibility of treating Scripture as though it were a norm that does not need interpretation and as if were not read from the point of view of contemporary questioners. In other words, it seems to me that I must affirm God’s continual guidance of the community (correctly understood this is what infallibility means), and this is what Christians call the role of the Holy Spirit. Confidence in this pneumatic guidance of the church should lead us to be wary of regarding Scripture (whether the Hebrew Scriptures and/or the New Testament) as containing extrinsic positive divine commands for human beings” (“Sabbath Liturgy: Celebrating Sunday as a Christian,” in *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, p. 197). In response to Baldwin’s paper William H. Shea commented, “It seems to me that regardless of the religious tradition that one is examining, whether Buddhism, Confucianism, or Christianity—the place where one begins looking for normative rule of belief is with the words of the founder of that religion and with the canonical writings that have been handed down by the recorders or writers nearest to that time. This still appears to me to be the most sound procedure to follow” (“A Response to L. Hoffman and J. Baldwin,” in *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, p. 235).

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