

# SABBATH OBSERVANCE FROM COPTIC SOURCES

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Most studies of the history of Sabbath observance in the early Christian church have laid stress upon Western traditions which were influenced mainly by Roman and Hellenistic Christians. Although there were numerous contacts between the Western and Eastern churches, the latter group seems to have developed along a separate path influenced mainly by local traditions and ideologies. Of these Eastern churches, the Coptic Church of Egypt was the most conservative and least receptive to new ideas introduced from Rome, Byzantium or Antioch. Its extreme conservatism in maintaining its traditions is well illustrated by the struggle during the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 450) in which it rejected all sorts of compromises to harmonize its stand with that of Byzantium regarding the Monophysite doctrine. The result of this struggle was the complete isolation and severe persecution of the Coptic Church at the hands of the ruling Byzantine Empire.<sup>1</sup> Although the Copts did accept certain traditions and institutions from other Christian churches, yet their hesitancy to give up older traditions caused them on many occasions to incorporate both the old and the new in their canons and church laws. This conservatism on the part of the Coptic church of Egypt is very useful in reconstructing the development of various institutions during the early years of the Christian church.

<sup>1</sup> When the Egyptians refused the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon, Heraclius introduced the monolithic compromise which emphasized the one will instead of the one nature of Christ. He sent Cyrus (Arabic Al-Muqawqas) to enforce it on the Coptic Egyptians. He is reported to have used ruthless and oppressive methods to carry out his mission to the extent that his rule was called "a reign of terror." See Alfred Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt* (Oxford, 1902), p. 189.

The present preliminary study deals with the Coptic Orthodox stand regarding the seventh-day Sabbath as illustrated by the coptic version of the *Statutes of the Apostles*, commonly known in many publications as the *Apostolic Constitutions* or *Canones Ecclesiastici*.

These constitutions are collections of various church laws and ecclesiastical orders professing to have been handed down by the twelve apostles when they met at Jerusalem. Portions of these laws have appeared in various versions in Latin, Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic and Arabic. None of these versions alone includes all the statutes and any one of them is not an exact replica of another. Each bears its own peculiarities including various additions, subtractions and alterations. However, they all have one thing in common: namely, the claim to be the canons of the apostles of Christ; and they share enough resemblances to warrant the supposition of a common lost *Vorlage*.<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult to date the original form of these statutes since the versions at hand have been greatly altered by later editors. Nevertheless it may be safely assumed that the Latin, Greek and Syriac versions (northern group) are based on an edited recension of the original *Vorlage*, while the Ethiopic, Coptic and Arabic (southern group) owe their origin to another recension.<sup>3</sup> Be this as it may, scholars who have examined these various documents seem to agree on setting for their present versions a date during the later part of the fourth century, i.e., after the Council of Nicea and probably before the Council of Ephesus.<sup>4</sup>

Apostolic orders regarding Sabbath observance on the

<sup>2</sup> De Lacy O'Leary, *The Apostolic Constitutions* (London 1906); James Donaldson, "Constitutions of the Holy Apostles," *ANF*, VII (1886); Hans Achelis, *Die Canones Hippolyti* (Leipzig, 1891); G. Horner, *The Statutes of the Apostles* (London, 1904); and Paul Anton de Lagarde, "Canones Ecclesiastici," *Aegyptiaca* (Göttingen, 1883).

<sup>3</sup> C. H. Turner, "Notes on the Apostolic Constitutions," *Journal of Theological Studies*, XVI (1915), 525, 530.

<sup>4</sup> Horner, *op. cit.*, p. vii; Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 530.

seventh day of the week appear almost exclusively in the southern group versions represented by Coptic, Ethiopic, and Arabic, and are included mainly in book VIII of the *Constitutions*, which is missing in the versions of the northern group.<sup>5</sup> This study considers two statutes in the Coptic version, the first prohibiting any work on the Sabbath, and the other calling Friday “the preparation day.”<sup>6</sup> Following is the Coptic statute regarding Sabbath observance:

ⲙⲁⲣⲉⲛ̅ⲟⲗⲙⲁⲗ ⲉⲣⲧⲟⲩ ⲛ̅ⲣⲟⲟⲩ ⲉⲧⲣⲟⲩⲃ. ⲛ̅ⲥⲁⲃⲃⲁⲧⲟⲛ ⲁⲉ  
 ⲙ̅ⲛ̅ⲧⲕⲣ̅ⲓⲁⲕⲛⲓ ⲙⲁⲣⲟⲩⲥⲉⲣ[ⲉ]ⲉ ⲉⲧⲉⲕⲕ̅ⲗⲛⲥ̅ⲓⲁ ⲉⲧⲃⲉⲭ̅ⲓⲥ̅ⲃⲱ  
 ⲉⲧⲙ̅ⲛⲣⲉⲥⲱⲙ̅ⲥⲉⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ. ⲛ̅ⲥⲁⲃⲃⲁⲧⲟⲛ ⲙⲉⲛ ⲭⲉⲛⲧⲁⲛ̅ⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ  
 ⲉⲙⲧⲟⲛ ⲙ̅ⲙⲟⲥⲓ ⲛ̅ⲣⲛⲧⲓ ⲟⲗⲙ̅ⲛ̅ⲧⲣⲉⲥⲉⲕⲛ̅ⲥⲓⲟⲛⲧ̅ⲧⲓⲣⲓ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ.  
 ⲧⲕⲣ̅ⲓⲁⲕⲛⲓ ⲁⲉ ⲟⲩⲱⲟⲥ ⲭⲉⲛⲉⲣⲟⲟⲩⲛⲉ ⲛ̅ⲧⲁⲛⲁⲥⲧⲁⲥ̅ⲓⲥ  
ⲙ̅ⲛ̅ⲧⲭⲟⲉ̅ⲓⲥ. <sup>7</sup>

Let the servants (of the Lord) work five days;  
 On the Sabbath (*Sabbaton*) and the Lord's day (*kyriakē*)  
 let them rest for the church that they may be instructed  
 in piety. The Sabbath because God Himself rested on  
 it when He completed all the creation. The Lord's day  
 because it is the day of the resurrection of the Lord.<sup>8</sup>

The second statute under consideration concerns baptism on the Sabbath day. Perhaps the performance of this ritual on the Sabbath does not mean much towards its observance as a holy day, yet our document refers to the day preceding the Sabbath as *παρασκευη* “preparation day,” similar to the

<sup>5</sup> Reference to the Sabbath in the Greek and Latin versions concerns itself merely with assembling the believers and not abstaining from work. It advises the Christians to assemble together every day and especially on the Sabbath and the Lord's Day. See Donaldson, *op. cit.*, Book II, section LIX.

<sup>6</sup> The Coptic document appears in its original form in the following publications: Lagarde, *op. cit.*, pp. 239ff; Johannes Leipoldt, *Säidische Auszüge aus dem 8. Buche der apostolischen Konstitutionen* (Leipzig, 1904); Horner, *op. cit.*, pp. 459ff.

<sup>7</sup> Statute 75: 24 in Leipoldt, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*; Horner, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

usage of Mt 27:62, Mk 15:42 and Jn 19:31. This statute about baptism is translated by Horner as follows:

... Let them who will be baptized fast on the preparation (*paraskeuē*) of the Sabbath (*Sabbaton*). And (*de*) on the Sabbath (*Sabbaton*), when they who will be baptized have assembled in one place by the direction (*gnōmē*) of the bishop, let them all be commanded to pray and bend their knees . . .<sup>9</sup>

These two statutes clearly reveal that although the Copts of Egypt around A.D. 350 had adopted Sunday observance, they did not abandon the seventh-day Sabbath; apparently they kept it in the same manner as the apostles and the Lord Jesus Christ did, and called Friday "a preparation day." In so doing, they did not worry about being mistaken as Jews or branded as "judaizers."

The Arabic version of these statutes represents almost an exact copy of the Coptic and preserves the word *Sabt*, "Sabbath," to refer to the seventh-day of the week. However, in the Ethiopic version a clear interpolation is added to justify the observance of both days. Excerpts of this apology are produced here as translated by Horner:

Ye and your slaves and your servants, do your work five days. And on the sabbath and first day ye shall not do any work in them; . . .

For on the sabbath day God rested from all his work . . . God rested on the seventh day, and named it the Sabbath, and hallowed it, and magnified it above all the days and blessed it . . .

And see that as sacred to God the rest was named Sabbath . . . And he honored it and blessed it, and it was instituted as a rest for man and beast, and chiefly for a memorial of his glory and his work, that he might be known that he is the maker and creator of all . . .

Then the First day is the day of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. And the first (day) was named sabbath, and both were named sabbaths. And in the prophets also he plainly declares that both are sabbaths, and says: Honor my sabbaths . . . And all of those who honor my sabbaths, and profane them not, and continue in my ordinances, I will bring to my holy mountain . . .

<sup>9</sup> Statute 45; see Horner, *op. cit.*, p. 315. This passage also indicates that the Copts during that time used to practice the ordinance of baptism on the Sabbath day rather than on Sunday.

Attend and understand when he said, My sabbaths, he said (it) of both days . . . .<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the justification for observing Sunday as produced by the Ethiopic version of the *Statutes of the Apostles* does not appeal to either Jews or Christians today, yet it must have sounded reasonable to the Early Christians of the southern group of churches during the fourth century of our era. Nevertheless, the question is: Why did the editor of the Ethiopic version resort to such a justification? The only logical answer to this question is to suppose some sort of complaint on the part of people regarding working only on five days and resting on two. This in turn leads us to think that prior to the fourth century, Christians in Egypt and Ethiopia may have observed only the seventh-day, and that for some reason the Coptic bishops more recently had introduced the observance of Sunday. Being conservative, the Copts in accepting Sunday did not abandon the Sabbath.

This assumption is strengthened by the fact that the Coptic bishop who represented the Copts at Nicea is known to have agreed to hold the Easter festival on Sunday instead of the Jewish passover.<sup>11</sup> It does not seem sensible that they should have honored the resurrection day itself on the Jewish passover if they observed Sunday as a weekly rest.

Comparing this attitude of the southern group of churches to that of the northern group as illustrated by the Syriac version of the *Statutes of the Apostles*, we find a sharp difference of opinion. Referring to a day of rest, the Syriac version mentions only Sunday:

. . . And make not your wordly affairs of more account than the word of God; but on the Lord's day leave every thing and run eagerly to your church . . . .<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Horner, *op. cit.*, pp. 210f.

<sup>11</sup> E. L. Butcher, *The Story of the Church of Egypt*, I (London, 1897), p. 146.

<sup>12</sup> Statute II. 59 in R. Hugh Connally, *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Oxford, 1929), p. 124.

In another statute, the Syriac version clearly attaches the seventh-day Sabbath to the Jews and calls it a "day of mourning."<sup>13</sup>

This clearly reveals that the northern group of churches was mainly responsible for instituting Sunday as a day of rest and abandoning the Jewish Sabbath. In fact the Syriac version justifies the institution of Sunday in the same way as Justin Martyr did and refers to it as the eighth day "which is better than the Sabbath."<sup>14</sup>

It is well known that Sunday was instituted as a day of assembly for Christians as early as A.D. 150.<sup>15</sup> Justin Martyr and Tertullian, theologians characteristic of Hellenistic-Roman Christianity, urged strongly against the seventh-day Sabbath and in favor of Sunday.<sup>16</sup> But the non-Hellenistic southern churches of Egypt and Ethiopia apparently followed a different course and observed the seventh-day Sabbath continuously during the second and third centuries.<sup>17</sup>

The evidence of the Coptic version of the *Apostolic Constitutions* in which both days are designated for rest and worship, and the evidence of its sister Ethiopic version which includes a strong justification for observing the two days (both of which versions appeared after the Council of Nicea) together with the change made at that time in the Coptic practice of observing Easter, all suggest the possibility of a Nicene influence on the southern group of churches by which they accepted Sunday and yet did not reject the Sabbath. Athanasius himself, who was a chief Egyptian delegate at Nicea, in his canons dated around A.D. 366 points out the necessity of observing both days.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. lxxx and 236-7; cf. Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1. 67.

<sup>15</sup> Justin Martyr, *loc. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> *ANF*, I, p. 186 and 3, pp. 155-56.

<sup>17</sup> Indications that the Christians in Alexandria before Nicea used to assemble for worship on Sundays probably refer to Hellenistic Christians and not to native Copts.

<sup>18</sup> See Wilhelm Riedel, *The Canons of Athanasius* (Oxford, 1904),

Later on, the Copts found it difficult to observe two days and gradually Sunday, being the day of the ruling authorities, prevailed over the Sabbath till today the original Sabbath observance is commemorated only by an evening mass in the Coptic monasteries.

It seems possible that Sabbath observance among the Copts in Egypt and Ethiopia may have passed through three stages: 1) Only the seventh-day Sabbath observed—from apostolic times until the Council of Nicea; 2) Sunday and the seventh-day Sabbath both observed—from the Council of Nicea until perhaps a century or two later; and 3) only Sunday designated as a day of public worship—a practice still observed today.

pp. 59, 60, 122 and 139. The Coptic original is on pp. 92 and 113, and the Arabic version on pp. 30, 51.