

## SOME NOTES ON THE SABBATH FAST IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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In a recent issue of the *AUSS* Robert A. Kraft presented a discussion of Sabbath observance in early Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Through its richness of allusion, his article suggests various further areas for investigation.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, that very richness may in some instances inadvertently leave an erroneous impression, for who could possibly treat so complex a matter so comprehensively without such a risk? The following notes are addressed to a possibility of this kind.

From certain incidental remarks made by Kraft, as well as the third point in his summary,<sup>3</sup> it would appear that Sabbath *fasting* and Sabbath *idleness* are of one and the same stock, representing a Jewish sort of observance against which

<sup>1</sup> "Some Notes on Sabbath Observance in Early Christianity," *AUSS*, III (1965), 18-33.

<sup>2</sup> *E.g.*, Quartodeciman practice in the East, particularly after the so-called "Asian settlement" of the late 2d century; analysis of the precise meaning of Sabbath "observance" and Sunday "observance" in the early Christian centuries (a matter too frequently ignored by investigators, but toward which Kraft has already taken a significant step in *op. cit.*, p. 23; see further in our note 4, below); the relationship of the Sabbath fast to developments regarding Sabbath and Sunday in the early church (one facet of which will be briefly treated in the present article); the role, significance and influence of Judaizing practices and anti-Judaizing sentiment in the whole process; the meaning of the term "sabbatizing"; the effect of Roman-Jewish, Roman-Christian and Jewish-Christian relationships; geographical factors involved in the historical picture; the matter of the annual Easter Sunday in relationship (or in lack of relationship) to the weekly Sunday; etc. Some of these areas have, of course, been explored; but most, if not all, of them still leave much work to be done.

<sup>3</sup> For the incidental remarks see his article, pp. 24, 28; for the summary statement, p. 32.

there was considerable Christian reaction.<sup>4</sup> In his summary statement, for example, he declares that

some Christian communities observed *both* Sabbath *and* Sunday at least from the 3d century, and probably earlier, but there was a widespread attempt to divorce Sabbath observance from the ideas of solemnity (fasting) and idleness by making it a day of meditation and rejoicing (like Sunday)—that is, Sabbath “rest” was interpreted in a much wider sense than Rabbinic Judaism would permit.<sup>5</sup>

In essence, the foregoing statement is correct, but from it may arise a faulty impression of the origin and role of the Sabbath fast.<sup>6</sup> Although idleness and various Sabbath restrictions adopted by certain Christians may indeed have been borrowed from the Jews and thus have become the object of anti-Judaizing polemic,<sup>7</sup> the same can hardly be said regarding the Sabbath fast. Rather, the Jews themselves appear to have made the Sabbath anything but a day of fasting. The Book of Judith, for example, pictures Judith as fasting “all the days of her widowhood, except the eves of

<sup>4</sup> We will frequently use the term “Sabbath observance” herein, and it should be noted that when this term is applied to usage in the early church it is intended to imply what was involved in *that* practice, whatever it may have been, rather than what may be involved in any modern definition of “Sabbath observance.” Kraft has already (*op. cit.*, p. 23) taken an important step in clarifying this point, but it should be remembered that his definition derives from the official position expressed in canons of the Council of Laodicea (middle to late 4th century) and thus represents *one* particular locale at *one* particular time. Although other sources would indicate wider application of definitions similar to that of Laodicea, there is no reason to suspect any monolithic uniformity or homogeneity. In fact, as Kraft himself has made clear (see p. 24 of his article; also our own further discussion below), there was historical development with respect to concepts and practices.

<sup>5</sup> See his article, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> The term “Sabbath fast” as used herein will signify a *weekly* fast on the seventh day of the week, unless the context indicates otherwise. As we shall note presently, this practice was far from universally observed in the early church. There was, however, also an annual Sabbath fast which does seem to have been observed universally in early Christendom. It occurred on the Sabbath of the Passover/Easter season.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. note 15, below.

the sabbaths, and the sabbaths, and the eves of the new moons, and the new moons, and the feasts and solemn days of the house of Israel." <sup>8</sup> Even the strictest sects of the Jews at approximately the beginning of the Christian era evidently refused to consider the Sabbath as a fast day, as may be inferred from the Book of Jubilees (known to have been in use among the Qumran sectarians) <sup>9</sup> and possibly also from the *Damascus Document*. <sup>10</sup> That the early Christian church recognized the "non-Jewishness" of the Sabbath fast is evidenced, for example, by Augustine's rhetorical remark, "Did not the tradition of the elders prohibit fasting on the one hand, and command rest on the other?" <sup>11</sup> And as late as the 11th century the pattern appears to have been the same, for Cardinal Humbert in his *Adversus Calumnias Graecorum* could, as R. L. Odom has pointed out, <sup>12</sup> have the Roman observer of the Sabbath fast chide the Greek non-observer in the following words:

Therefore, in such observance of the Sabbath, where and in what way do we [Latins] have anything in common with the Jews? For they are idle and keep a holiday on the Sabbath, neither plowing nor reaping, and by reason of custom do not work, but they hold a festivity and a dinner. . . . But we [Latins] observe none of these things, but we do every (sort of) work, as (we do) on the preceding five days, and we fast as we (are wont to) fast on the sixth day [Friday] <sup>13</sup> next to it.

However, you [Greeks], if you do not judaize, tell (us) why you have something in common with the Jews in a similar observance of the Sabbath? They certainly observe the Sabbath, and you observe (it); they dine, and always break the fast, on the Sabbath. <sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Judith 8 : 6.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Jubilees 50 : 10, 12, 13.

<sup>10</sup> *CDC*, xi. 4, 5. The normative tradition also, of course, prohibited Sabbath fasting. Josephus (*Life*, 54) makes mention of the requirement in his day to eat the noon meal on the Sabbath.

<sup>11</sup> Ep. 36 (To Casulanus), par. 6.

<sup>12</sup> "The Sabbath in the Great Schism of A.D. 1054." *AUSS*, I (1963), 77, 78.

<sup>13</sup> Wednesday and Friday were regular fast days in the early Christian church, as is evident from the *Didache* (8 : 1), Tertullian (*On Fasting*, chap. 14), the *Apostolic Constitutions* (V. 15. 20), and other sources.

<sup>14</sup> The translation is from Odom, *op. cit.*, pp. 77, 78.

The foregoing should make abundantly clear the distinction between Sabbath *idleness* and Sabbath *fasting*. The former, along with walking measured distances and other Sabbath restrictions,<sup>15</sup> could be (and was) considered Judaizing, but the latter was looked upon quite differently. The former concept did indeed derive from a Jewish background, but the idea of the Sabbath fast originated and developed in a Western Christian context and was in reality quite foreign to Jewish thought. The Christian East did not adopt the Sabbath fast in the early Christian era,<sup>16</sup> and even in the 11th century the matter was, as we have seen, a cause for dispute between East and West. On the other hand, in the earliest Christian centuries the practice had gained a foothold in the West, particularly in Rome. There were, however, important areas even in the West that did not observe it, such as Milan at the time of Ambrose (d. 397),<sup>17</sup> and certain churches and regions of North Africa at about the same time, as Augustine makes clear.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Augustine further describes the pattern of adherence to the Sabbath fast as being "the Roman Church and some few other churches near to or distant from it."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, with respect to North Africa, Tertullian had approximately two centuries earlier indicated the existence of a similar divergence regarding the matter of kneeling on

<sup>15</sup> The "measured distance" or "prescribed space" is mentioned, for example, in the interpolated form of Ignatius, *To the Magnesians*, chapter 9. The Sabbath-day's Journey is treated in detail in the *Mishnah*, tractate "Erubim"; and numerous other Sabbath restrictions are found in the tractate "Shabbath." The Talmud, of course, has much added detail.

<sup>16</sup> Cf., e.g., the citations from Augustine in note 19, below; John Cassian, *Institutes*, III. 9. 10. etc.

<sup>17</sup> See Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii*, chap. 38; also Augustine's Ep. 36 (To Casulanus), par. 32, and Ep. 54 (To Januarius), par. 3, where is related Ambrose's counsel for Augustine's mother to fast or not fast according to the custom prevailing where she might be, just as Ambrose himself fasted on the Sabbath in Rome but not in Milan.

<sup>18</sup> Ep. 36 (To Casulanus), par. 32.

<sup>19</sup> Ep. 36 (To Casulanus), par. 27. Somewhat similar descriptions are given in the same epistle, par. 4, and Ep. 82 (To Jerome), par. 14.

the Sabbath <sup>20</sup>—a practice which, being considered a mark of humiliation, seems to have been closely allied in meaning to that which the fast signified. <sup>21</sup>

It would appear that the point of origin of the Sabbath fast was Rome, from where it spread in the West; but the sources are in conflict as to how or why the practice arose in the first place. Possibly the annual Sabbath fast of the Passover/Easter season <sup>22</sup> was simply extended to become a weekly observance, as Tertullian seems to have thought, <sup>23</sup> and as may also be deduced from words attributed to Pope Sylvester I (early 4th century). <sup>24</sup> On the other hand, one persistent tradition current in Rome itself even in the time of John Cassian (d. ca. 440) links it to a fast which the apostle Peter was said to have observed on Saturday in preparation for his encounter with Simon Magus. <sup>25</sup> Cassian's own comment was that such a fast was not intended to be canonical but had been observed simply because of the particular emergency of the time; in fact, if the need had demanded, Peter would undoubtedly have fasted on Sunday (a day, of course, on which the Romans never fasted)! <sup>26</sup>

We may now sum up what has been said thus far by stating that although in one limited sense Sabbath idleness and Sabbath fasting can be classified together, in other and probably more significant ways they are virtually in opposite camps; for they differed in origin and basic intent, and they patterned differently historically (with Christians who fasted regularly on the Sabbath still uttering polemics against Judaizing <sup>27</sup>). We may now also add that they undoubtedly

<sup>20</sup> *On Prayer*, chap. 23.      <sup>21</sup> *Loc. cit.*      <sup>22</sup> See note 6, above.

<sup>23</sup> Tertullian, *On Fasting*, chap. 14. Tertullian himself (*loc. cit.*) opposed fasting on the Sabbath, except at the Passover season.

<sup>24</sup> See the reference in Humbert's *Adversus Calumnias Graecorum* as quoted in Odom, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>25</sup> *Institutes*, III. 10.

<sup>26</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> We have already referred to Cardinal Humbert. We may just add that Gregory the Great in his epistle *To the Roman Citizens* also has a striking anti-idleness polemic.

differed, as well, in ultimate effect with regard to the subsidence of Sabbath observance itself as a Christian practice. The Judaizing emphasis was at least an effort (though misguided) to respect the Sabbath, whereas the fast tended to strike a deathblow to the Sabbath by placing it in utter disrespect as a day of sadness and gloom rather than of Christian joy.<sup>28</sup>

The anti-Judaizing emphasis in the early church could (and did) emanate from both East and West, but the anti-fasting emphasis could arise only in circles (primarily Eastern) not observing the Sabbath fast and presumably seeing danger in this innovation. In at least the earliest period (as Kraft has aptly pointed out with respect to the Ignatian statement in *Magnesians* 9<sup>29</sup>), the anti-Judaizing or anti-Sabbatizing emphasis may not have been involved with the matter of days at all, but rather with a manner of worship or way of life; namely, Christian liberty as versus Jewish legalism.<sup>30</sup> When this sort of polemic was first clearly applied to days (again in the early period), it was used in an effort to encourage a Sabbath observance of spiritual, rather than merely formal and legalistic, quality.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, the Sabbath fast was ever (even from its very beginning) directly related to a *particular day* and *the particular treatment given that day*. Indeed, Christians who were themselves anti-Judaizers were undermining the real significance of Sabbath observance by

<sup>28</sup> In fact, it is not impossible that the Sabbath fast was *one* significant element (certainly there were others as well) in bringing about the ultimate ascendancy of Sunday over the Sabbath in Christian worship, as well as effecting the final disappearance of the Sabbath in certain areas, for in places where the Sabbath fast was observed it became customary regularly week by week to have a Sabbath day of gloom followed by a Sunday of joy. The effect of such a procedure, especially on the youth of the church, can readily be surmised.

<sup>29</sup> See his article, p. 28.

<sup>30</sup> This emphasis appears, of course, not only in the Fathers but also in the NT. Cf., e.g., Col 2 : 14-17; Gal 4 : 9-11; and Rom, chap. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Kraft, *op. cit.*, p. 24, quotes the expanded version of Ignatius, *To the Magnesians*, chapter 9, which bears on this very point.

making the Sabbath a fast day. And thus, we may conclude, that whereas the anti-Judaizing polemic was directed against a legalistic "Jewish" way of life and/or a legalistic "Jewish" mode of observing days, the anti-fasting polemic was directed against a non-Jewish innovation which held within it seeds that would tend to destroy the Sabbath itself.

One further observation may be made in conclusion: The whole question of Sabbath and Sunday observance in the early church—including the history of the rise of Sunday as a Christian institution, the eclipse of Sabbath observance, and the relationship between the two days when they were both observed side by side <sup>32</sup>—is indeed a complex one, deserving analysis of many interrelated factors; but in the procedure, care must be taken not to overlook (as has too frequently been done) geographical considerations as well as chronological, political, theological and other concerns. Developments moved unequally from place to place, as well as from time to time, and it is here suggested that a thorough analysis which gives due regard to this fact may uncover some very striking facts and illuminating insights regarding developments in early Christian history. This sort of an approach to the history of Sabbath and Sunday in the early church is, to my mind, still an important desideratum. <sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> There is abundant evidence of "observance" of both days in the early period. See, e.g., Sozomen, *H.E.*, VII. 19; Cassian, *Institutes*, V. 26; *Apost. Consts.*, V. 20; VII. 23; VIII. 47, can. 64; etc. There appears to be further supporting evidence from the history of the Greek lectionary, whose lections for Sabbath and Sunday originated earlier than those for the other five days of the week. (Cf. C. R. Gregory, *Canon and Text of the New Testament* [New York, 1907], pp. 387, 388, as well as the standard work of E. C. Colwell and D. W. Riddle, *Prolegomena to the Study of the Lectionary Text of the Gospels* [Chicago, 1933]). A detailed analysis of this intriguing line of evidence as it pertains to the question of the relationship of Sabbath and Sunday in the early church would indeed be of interest.

<sup>33</sup> Kraft's article, by virtue of its limited scope, can hardly have been expected to accomplish this. But I have yet to see a full-scale treatment of the subject that does justice to geographical considerations. Walter E. Straw, *Origin of Sunday Observance in the Christian*

*Church* (Washington, D. C., 1939), has indeed outlined a history of the rise of Sunday observance on the basis of geographical considerations, but he has read into his sources a preconceived theory rather than derived from them a pattern of development. His opinion is that Rome and Alexandria introduced Sunday observance from paganism through Gnosticism, whereas Asia and Syria maintained a Sabbath practice in harmony with apostolic precedent. Possibly his thesis originated through an impression from a statement of Sozomen to the effect that in the Christian world of Sozomen's time (5th century) there were assemblies on both Sabbath and Sunday, except in Rome and Alexandria (see *H.E.*, VII. 19). But the method by which this information is read back into the earlier centuries is totally unsound. Justin Martyr, *e.g.*, is noted (p. 29) as giving evidence for Alexandria (dubious indeed!), and is referred to (p. 50) as endeavoring to bring to Christians a more sympathetic feeling toward the Greek and Oriental philosophies (the very proof of this—*Apol.*, II. 13—proves in fact, the opposite; namely, that Justin was showing to pagans the superiority of Christianity!). Indeed, the sources are altogether too frequently read without due regard to either literary or historical context. This type of treatment is certainly far different from that which is really needed.