

PATRIARCHS, RABBIS, AND SABBATH

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Justin Martyr, in his argument with Trypho the Jew,¹ cites Adam, Abel, Enoch, Lot, Noah, and Melchizedek as examples of ancients who were uncircumcized but approved by God, and then he adds: "Moreover, all those righteous men already mentioned, though they kept no Sabbaths, were pleasing to God; and after them Abraham with all his descendents until Moses. . . ."² The assertion that none of the pre-Mosaic saints kept the Sabbath, made in support of Justin's primary point that the Sabbath was only a temporary requirement limited to the Jews, imposed because of their weakness, is repeated by Justin several

¹The identification of Trypho with the famous 3rd generation Tanna, R. Tarphon of Lydda, has been often made and as often denied, but it remains attractive. See, for example, Emil Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 2d ed., Div. 1, 1 (New York, 1886), 377. Ἐρπὼν corresponds well to the Greek Truphōn; in fact, the more Hellenized form טריפון is actually found in Jer. *Bikkurim* 2:1 (64c). Eusebius' description of Trypho as "a most distinguished man among the Hebrews of that day" (*Church History* iv.18; *NPNF*, 2d series, 1, 197) well fits Tarphon's status both as priest (Jer. *Yoma* 3:7) and illustrious teacher (*Sanhedrin* 101a; *Mekilta Bahodeš* 9). When legendary references are eliminated there is nothing to render unlikely the possibility that an aged Tarphon might have fled to Greece after the disaster of 135 (cf. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* i; *ANF*, 1, 194), where it might really have been safer to practice Judaism than in Palestine during the Hadrianic reprisals. But what especially makes Tarphon the likely candidate for Justin's antagonist is his well-known antipathy to Christianity, shown in his vehement declaration: "May I bury my son if I would not burn them [Christian books] together with their Divine Names if they came to my hand. For even if one pursued me to slay me, or a snake pursued me to bite me, I would enter a heathen Temple, but not the houses of these people, for the latter know yet deny, whereas the former are ignorant and deny" (*Shabbath* 116a; Jer. *Shabbath* 16:1). It is also possible that Justin's dialogue is imaginary, and Tarphon's name was merely used by Justin to represent "a typical antagonist," as suggested by I. Abrahams (*Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels*, 1st Series [Cambridge, 1917], p. 101).

²*Dialogue with Trypho* xix; *ANF*, 1, 204.

times;³ and the same argument is echoed almost verbatim by Irenaeus⁴ and Tertullian.⁵

When Trypho not only fails to contest this line of reasoning, but explicitly admits that though the Patriarchs are indeed saved, they kept no Sabbaths,⁶ the reader might be inclined toward surprise, until he realizes that Justin is simply appealing to what was common ground between himself and the prevailing conceptions of Rabbinic Judaism, as seen in the opinions of the post-Jamnian Tannaim and early Amoraim.

Perhaps related to a decline of interest in proselytism and the withering of any incipient tendencies toward universalism was the growth in Rabbinic Judaism of an emphasis on the uniqueness and particularity of the Sinai revelation, though survivals of alternative views were not altogether lacking. Only Israel, said the Rabbis, was willing and able to keep the 613 commands given at Sinai, while the Gentiles could not even manage to keep the most minimal precepts.⁷ The Torah, it was said, is like the wife of another to the heathen.⁸

A rationale for this conception was provided by the doctrine of the Noachian law, which reached its definitive formulation by the second half of the 3d century A.D., especially in the teaching of the Palestinian Amora, R. Levi. Levi's teacher, R. Johanan, taught that six precepts (*mišvôt*) for all mankind were given to Adam.⁹ As slightly modified by Levi, the list included prohibitions against the worship of other gods, blaspheming the name of God, cursing judges, murder, incest, and robbery.¹⁰

³Ibid. xxiii (p. 206—this ch. misprinted as xxxiii); xxix (p. 209); xlvi (pp. 217-18). The link between the asserted Patriarchal nonobservance and Gentile nonobservance is explicit in xxvi.

⁴*Against Heresies*, 4.16.2.

⁵*An Answer to the Jews* 2 (*ANF*, 3, 153); 3 (ibid.).

⁶Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* xlvi.

⁷Ex. R. 27:9; 30:9; Gn. R. 49:2; *Shabbath* 88b; Tos. *Sotah* 35b.

⁸Ex. R. 33:7.

⁹*Sanhedrin* 56b.

¹⁰Gn. R. 16:6.

After permission to eat flesh had been given, Noah received the additional prohibition against eating a limb from a living animal (or eating of flesh with the blood of life in it, Gn 9:4).¹¹ This list became standard, though earlier lists from Tannaitic times exhibit many variations from it.¹² These seven precepts are known as the Noachian law; only these are binding upon all mankind.¹³

It was further taught that additional commands were given to the Patriarchs, as seen in Scripture. To Abraham was given circumcision (Gn 17:9-14), and to Jacob the prohibition of the sinew that shrank (Gn 32:32).¹⁴ But it was not until Sinai that Israel received the whole Torah; the Sabbath was not included in the Noachian law, and consequently it was not binding upon the uncircumcized Gentiles; nor had it been observed by the Patriarchs.

Indeed, the Sabbath was not merely unrequired of non-Jews; it was forbidden to them! Simeon b. Laqish (also known as Resh Laqish, a Palestinian rabbi of the mid-3d century) said: "A Gentile who keeps the Sabbath deserves death."¹⁵ It was a common enough sentiment; earlier Rabbis were just as emphatic:

R. Jose b. Hanina said: A non-Jew who observes the Sabbath whilst he is uncircumcised incurs liability for the punishment of death. Why? Because non-Jews were not commanded concerning it. And what is your reason for saying that a non-Jew who observes the Sabbath becomes liable to the punishment of death? R. Hiyya b. Abba said in the name of R. Johanan: In mundane

¹¹Tos. *Abodah Zarah* 8:4; *Sanhedrin* 56a.

¹²*Sanhedrin* 56a,b; Song R. 1:2:5.

¹³*Sanhedrin* 59a; Song R. 1:2:5.

¹⁴Cf. *Hullin* 7:6.

¹⁵*Sanhedrin* 58b. J. D. Eisenstein ("Gentile," *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 5, 623) believes that this dictum was "probably directed against the Christian Jews, who disregarded the Mosaic laws and yet at that time kept up the observance of the Jewish Sabbath." In view of the fact, however, that all of the maledictions are pronounced specifically on the coupling of Sabbath-keeping with uncircumcision, and of the fact that Christian Jews were called *Minim* but never called Gentiles, while this malediction is expressly upon Gentiles, Eisenstein's remark does not go far enough. Resh Laqish is in fact inveighing against all Sabbath-keeping Christians, certainly not only Jewish Christians.

affairs, when a king and his consort are sitting and conversing together, should one come and interrupt them, does he not thereby make himself liable to punishment of death? So, too, the Sabbath is a reunion between Israel and God, as it is said, "It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel" (Ex. 31:17); therefore any non-Jew who, being uncircumcised, thrusts himself between them incurs the penalty of death. The Rabbis say: Moses declared before God: "Master of the Universe, just because the Gentiles have not been commanded to observe the Sabbath, wilt Thou show favor to them if they do observe it?" God replied to him: "Do you really fear this? By your life if they fulfill all the commandments in the Torah, yet will I cause them to fall before you."¹⁶

The Sabbath was Israel's own bride and belonged to no other. Ex 16:29 was interpreted in an exclusive sense: The Lord hath given *you*—Israel—the Sabbath, but hath not given it to the heathen.¹⁷

This, then, was the prevailing conception, apparently shared by Trypho/Tarphon, of what had become normative Rabbinic Judaism. But there were other views.

The conception that many or all of the Sinaitic laws, and the Sabbath in particular, antedated Sinai is a motif often associated with the apocalyptic strain of Judaism, a strain which was all but destroyed in the debacles of 66-73 and 132-135; but this strain continued to reemerge from time to time, carrying its peculiar views with it. It left a literary deposit typically in the more or less well-known pseudepigraphic works, many of which we now know were closely associated with the movement which produced the Qumran community.¹⁸ It was a movement which most characteristically eschewed the oral tradition of the Pharisees and their successors the Rabbis and which looked rather to visions and revelations as the source of up-dated truth. Yet it has left its imprint here and there in the Rabbinic literature, and

¹⁶Dt. R. 1:21.

¹⁷Ex. R. 25:11.

¹⁸See, for example, James A. Sanders, "The Dead Sea Scrolls—A Quarter Century of Study," *BA* 36 (1973), 129.

even in the Talmud itself.¹⁹

The Book of Jubilees is an early example of this tradition. It teaches the eternal transcendence of the law given at Sinai, which was merely a transcript of what was prescribed on "the heavenly tablets" (Jub 3:30-31 et passim). This law had been revealed bit by bit to the various Patriarchs prior to its revelation as a whole on Sinai.²⁰ In respect to the Sabbath there is a peculiar combination of ideas, for on one side it provides an antecedent for the standard Rabbinic view, and on the other it contains the germ of more universalistic ideas. On the one hand we read that God "kept Sabbath on the seventh day and hallowed it for all ages, and appointed it as a sign for all His works" (Jub 2:1), and that the two higher orders of angels have kept the Sabbath ever since it was instituted (Jub 2:16-20), which are certainly universalizing conceptions of the Sabbath. But on the other hand we read concerning Israel, "Behold, I will separate unto Myself a people from among all the peoples, and these shall keep the Sabbath day . . ." (Jub 2:20-22). We even find the angel telling Moses: "We kept Sabbath in the heavens before it was made known to any flesh to keep Sabbath thereon on the earth. And the Creator of all things blessed it, but he did not sanctify all peoples and nations to keep Sabbath, but Israel alone" (Jub 2:30-33).

Touching more directly on the relation of the Patriarchs to the Sabbath are two parallel works which are based on a 1st-century A.D. Jewish original. Here we read that the archangel Michael told Seth not to mourn for Eve on the seventh day, because on it the Lord rested from all His works, and because "on the seventh day is the sign of the resurrection and the rest of the age to come."²¹ It was, of course, standard in Judaism that

¹⁹A striking example of this is the chiliastic speculation recorded in *Sanhedrin* 97a, b, which can be paralleled, for example, in 2 Enoch 32:2, 33: 1-2.

²⁰A summary with references is given by George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1927), 275.

²¹*Vita Adae et Evae* 51: 1-2; Apoc. of Moses 43: 1-3.

there was to be no mourning or fasting on the Sabbath.²²

Before noting more direct influence of this line of tradition upon later Judaism, it is necessary to see what is said about the Patriarchal Sabbath in two other corpora whose speculations on this subject are difficult to connect with apocalyptic. The first of these is Philo Judaeus, whose motives for giving a universalistic interpretation to the Sabbath can be easily understood. Scarcely could a more universal view of the Sabbath be found than this:

But after the whole world had been completed according to the perfect nature of the number six, the Father hallowed the day following, the seventh, praising it, and calling it holy. For that day is the festival, not of one city or one country, but of all the earth; a day which alone it is right to call the day of festival for all people, and the birthday of the world.²³

The second special corpus to be considered here is the standard Rabbinic materials themselves. In *Yoma* 28b we find the Rabbis struggling with the text, "Because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (Gn 26:5). How did this text square with the doctrine of the Noachian law plus circumcision? Rab (the important early 3d-century Babylonian Amora) boldly concludes that "our father Abraham kept the whole Torah." R. Shimi b. Hiyya more cautiously suggests that the text refers to the Noachian law, or perhaps the Noachian law plus circumcision, but his suggestion is rejected. R. Ashi goes even so far as to say that Abraham kept both written and oral Torahs! R. Johanan, Levi's teacher, asserted that Joseph "early observed" the Sabbath before it was given,²⁴ an inference he draws from Gn 43:16. It is of interest that these speculations come from the same time when the Noachian doctrine was finally developed.

Since by now it will have become clear that the question of whether the Patriarchs knew the Sabbath is bound up with the

²²Cf. Gn. R. 100:7; Lam. R. 1:16:51.

²³Philo, *The Creation of the World* xxx.

²⁴Num. R. 14:2.

question of whether the Sabbath is of universal obligation, it will not be amiss to cite the famous story of the dialogue between R. Akiba and the Roman governor Tinneus Rufus concerning the Sabbath:

The wicked Tinneus Rufus asked R. Akiba: "Why does this day differ from other days?" "Why does one man differ from other men?" he retorted. "What did I ask you and what did you answer me?" inquired he. "You asked me," he replied, "why does the Sabbath differ from all other days," and I answered you, "Why does Rufus differ from other men?" "Because the emperor desired to honor him," said he. "Then this day, too, the Holy One wished to honor." "How can you prove it to me?" "Let the river Sambatyon prove it, which carries stones the whole week but allows them to rest on the Sabbath."²⁵ "You are evading the question," he exclaimed.

Akiba then challenges Rufus to test the truth of the Sabbath through necromancy, "for every day he [the dead] comes up but not on the Sabbath."

He went and made a test with his own father: every day he came up, but on the Sabbath he did not come up. After the Sabbath he brought him up again. "Father," he said, "have you become a Jew after death? Why did you ascend during the whole week but not on the Sabbath?" "He who does not keep the Sabbath among you of his own free will must keep it here in spite of himself." "But what toil have you there?" he demanded. "The whole week we undergo judgment, but on the Sabbath we rest."²⁶

It is clear that the conception set forth by this legend places Gentiles in a precarious position indeed. According to Resh Laqish and Jose b. Hanina, Gentiles are damned if they observe the Sabbath; according to this legend they are damned if they do not observe it. But the threat of punishment for not keeping it is in any case an indirect assertion of its universal obligation.

Finally we turn to a curious Rabbinic work known as *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer*, the final redaction of which is dated by Friedlander at 750 A.D.²⁷ It is clearly dependent upon such earlier apocalyptic literature as Jubilees, 1 and 2 Enoch, the Testaments

²⁵The legend of the River Sambatyon is recounted by Josephus in *JW* 7.5.1.

²⁶Gn. R. 11:5.

²⁷This and the following information is taken from the Introduction to

of the Twelve Patriarchs, and the Apocalypse of Baruch. Here, in a striking way, the apocalyptic tradition has reemerged into Rabbinism. Here also we find a curious juxtaposition of particularity and implied universalism with regard to the Sabbath. On one hand we read: "The day of blessing and holiness which was before Him, He did not desire to give it as an inheritance except to Israel. . . . When the Israelites went forth from Egypt, whilst yet the Torah had not been given to them, He gave them the Sabbath as an inheritance. Israel kept two Sabbaths whilst as yet the Torah had not been given to them. . . ." ²⁸ On the other hand we find R. Judah quoted as saying: "The Holy One, blessed be He, kept the Sabbath first in the heavenly regions, and Adam kept the Sabbath first in the lower regions." ²⁹ It is the view of this work that Adam kept the Sabbath and was the author of Ps 92, but R. Simeon is quoted as saying: "The first man said this psalm, and it was forgotten throughout all the generations until Moses came and renewed it according to its name. . . ." ³⁰ This might imply that the Sabbath itself was forgotten between Adam and Moses. On such a view, Moses was a reviver of the Sabbath rather than an introducer of it.

In fine, it can be said that the Rabbis considered the Sabbath a special privilege for Israelites. They generally denied its obligation for Gentiles, and as an exegetical consequence denied that it had been kept before Moses. Those who doubted this view or differed from it, in whole or in part, were not lacking. But there seem to have been few left in Judaism during the second century of our era who retained the universalistic vision of the second half of Isaiah, which (as Moore points out ³¹) held up for even

Gerald Friedlander's translation of *Pirkē de Rabbi Eliezer* (London, 1916; reprinted New York, 1971), pp. xxi-lv.

²⁸P. R. E. 19 (Friedlander, p. 137).

²⁹P. R. E. 20 (Friedlander, p. 143).

³⁰P. R. E. 18 (Friedlander, p. 126).

³¹*Judaism*, 1, 276.

Gentiles a religious ideal calling for mainly three things: pure monotheism, moral life, and the Sabbath.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
every one who keeps the sabbath, and does not profane it,
and holds fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer. . . .³²

This was lost in the struggle for identity in the face of Gentile oppression. Thus, paradoxically, Jewish observers of the Sabbath and Christian nonobservers shared common ground in their hostility to Christian Sabbath-keepers, whose troublesome existence was acknowledged.³³

³²Is 56:6, 7a (RSV).

³³Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* xlvi. Cf. *supra*, n. 15.

ADDITIONAL NOTE

It is worth noting that the "nonstandard" tradition of Patriarchal Sabbath-keeping has been enshrined in the liturgy of the synagogue. In the Sabbath afternoon service (*Minha*) the following prayer is inserted into the recitation of the Eighteen Benedictions (translation in Samuel M. Segal, *The Sabbath Book* [New York, 1957], p. 122, with slight modification):

Thou art One and thy name is One, and who is like thy people Israel, a unique nation on the earth? Glorious greatness and a crown of salvation, even the day of rest and holiness, thou hast given unto thy people:—Abraham was glad, Isaac rejoiced, Jacob and his sons rested thereon:—a rest vouchsafed in generous love, a true and faithful rest, a rest in peace and tranquility, in quietude and safety, a perfect rest wherein thou delightest. Let thy children perceive and know that this their rest is from thee, and by their rest may they hallow thy name.