

Kinematics of the Sabbath

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THE LORD'S DAY ON A ROUND WORLD

By Robert Leo Odom

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Anyone who has bothered, or dared, to consider the problems associated with the definition of the biblical Sabbath will be familiar with most of them. One class of problems, of course, is *theological* and includes those questions posed by "higher criticisms." Another class is primarily *historical*, and deals with the preservation of the weekly cycle. Other questions can be classed as *kinematical*. Some examples in this class are: (a) How is the Sabbath to be defined in the extreme northern and southern latitudes? (b) How is the Sabbath to be defined by the astronaut or the space colonist? (c) What is the significance of the international date line and longitude 180 degrees?

Those who consider such questions to be of the "chicken and egg" variety, or too legalistic to merit attention, will have little interest in Robert Leo Odom's book, *The Lord's Day on a Round World*. Those who consider that such questions merit attention, and who seek rational and ethically satisfying answers, will likewise have little interest.

Odom attempts, and indeed purports, to provide logical answers to many questions of the kinematical class. Herein he fails. In his determination to produce explanations and to establish the rationality of these explanations, unintentionally he succeeds only in establishing the absurdity of the attempt. Beyond this basic flaw, the book is not pleasant reading. The text consists largely of quotations. Their relationship to the principal theme is often obscure at best; if these quotations are pertinent at all, they would be better treated as footnotes.

Early in the first chapter Odom points out that the day, month, and year are basically *natural* time periods and that the week, hour, minute, and second are *unnatural*. After explaining the basis of the natural time periods, in the third chapter he develops his first solution to the kinematical problem:

Let us designate as X the unknown meridian at which nightfall first occurred on earth and thus marked the beginning of creation week's first day. Furthermore, let us remember the fact that evening — or sunset — does not now, and did not then, happen simultaneously at all meridians of the globe. For example, when night was falling at meridian X, day was breaking on the extreme opposite side of the world. Hence, any given meridian, except meridian X, had to wait until the rotation of the globe turned it to the dividing line between light and darkness in order for the first *complete* day of creation week to begin at that specific locality. It did, however, experience an incomplete day before its first evening occurred to mark the beginning of its first *full* day. The length of the partial day depended on the distance the meridian happened to be from the terminator.

Was the partial day counted as the first day or as the second day for such regions? Neither. It was not counted at all in the time reckoning. God started the time count

for the world with the beginning of the first *whole* day that came to any given meridian. The description of the first day of creation week — “The evening and the morning were the first day” — proves it [p. 23].

Now if such a problem really requires an answer, it would seem only fair to point out that there may be other answers than the one suggested. With some control over the extent and intensity of the illumination (which I presume Odom would not deny the Creator), no “partial day” would ever have had to occur. This is especially so if the source of the illumination were not the sun, but some other “light” provided by God. Further, if the sun is meant to be implied as the source of the illumination, Odom does not reconcile this with the biblical record, which is variously interpreted within the Seventh-day Adventist church to state that the sun was either created or “revealed” on the fourth day of creation week.

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More interestingly, in Odom’s terminology, X must equal 180 degrees, to make the book’s thesis complete, even though he states that “the Holy Scriptures do not reveal it [the meridian of the first nightfall]. God has not considered it essential that we know it.” This would seem to be a conclusion consistent with Odom’s acceptance (although more implied than explicit) of longitude 180 degrees as the *natural* location of the international date line:

The reason for the date line goes far back in history. After the Noachian Flood the human family began to multiply in the Middle East and to spread both toward the east and west. Because of the world’s spherical shape, naturally the two waves of people would eventually meet. And they did [p. 65].

Adam’s descendants spread both eastward and westward over the globe. . . . Starting from the mountains of Ararat, the descendants of Noah spread eastward and westward until the two streams of migrants finally met [p. 87].

In spite of the implications apparently intended by the above statements, the history of the permanent setting of the initial meridian (longitude zero), through the center of the transit instrument at the Royal Astronomical Observatory of Greenwich (proposed in 1884), and the resulting confirmation of longitude 180 degrees as the international date line, is fairly well documented. In fact, the political origin of the international date line is explicitly noted in chapter eight: “The date line, which runs north and south in the Pacific Ocean, is the point on the earth’s surface where the world’s governments consider the day to officially begin and end” (p. 90). “Not a law of God, but rather an agreement between the nations, fixed the date line’s precise location” (p. 91). The implication is still present, however, that at least the *general* location of the international date line is a natural phenomenon.

Although Odom points out in chapter seven that “the nations agreed to make the date line swerve a little either to the west or to the east as the case should demand, to avoid crossing any populated land masses” (p. 78), the primacy of longitude 180 degrees in his thinking seems obvious when he discusses the situation in the Tonga Islands. Situated between longitudes 174° W and 176° 10’ W, these islands nevertheless lie *west* of the international date line, which swerves, in those latitudes, to follow longitude 172° 30’ W. This deviation from longitude 180° — so that the Tonga Islands, a part of the United Kingdom, would lie west of the date line — is

probably related to a desire to simplify commercial relationships with Australia and New Zealand, as Odom points out. Seventh-day Adventists on Tonga, however, do not accept the governmental agreements relating to the location of the date line, preferring to use longitude 180° as their reference. The result is that Adventists worship on the same day as other Protestants and Catholics — the day officially recognized as Sunday.

Odom considers the Adventist position in Tonga justifiable and correct, and resorts to some slight distortion of the facts to support this position. In chapter fifteen are the following two statements: "The time count in the Friendly Islands [Tonga] [is] out of kilter in relation to that of *all other peoples east of the 180th meridian* [Odom's emphasis]. . . . We should not be surprised to see the Tongans of the Friendly Islands rectify their time count and fall into line with other Christian peoples in their relationship to the international date line" (p. 167).

Neither of these statements is strictly correct. Portions of Siberia on the Bering Strait lie east of the 180th meridian, but the date line there swerves east to longitude 169° W, so that this portion of Siberia bears the same relationship as Tonga to the 180th meridian and the international date line. As for the second statement, the Tongans *are* in accord with all other peoples in their relationship to the international date line; it is the Adventists who are not.

For those travelers puzzled by the time adjustment required when crossing the date line, Odom offers in chapter eight, a set of "how-to-do-it" examples that illustrate most clearly the impossibility of any rational definition of the Sabbath, although that certainly was not his intention. In apparent recognition of the difficulties, however, he states that "the logical thing to do is to *keep the Sabbath at a given place when it comes there*" (his emphasis) (p. 97). Unfortunately, he fails to note at this point that *when it comes* depends on accepting (a) the international date line, or (b) the 180th meridian, or (c) some other reference. And he seems unable to state clearly and without ambiguity that, as far as we mortals know, *any* such reference, although necessary, is *quite* arbitrary.

Where does this leave us? The recognition of inability to define rationally the Sabbath, and thus the Sabbath commandment, paradoxically, just may help to clarify our relationship to the Sabbath and to the God who commands that we keep it. Seventh-day Adventists believe that the Sabbath will be a crucial issue — or perhaps more correctly, the *symbol* of a crucial issue — in last-day events. "The Sabbath will be the great test of loyalty."¹ Isn't it possible that the very irrationality of the Sabbath commandment enhances its ability to be *the* great test of loyalty? If we could answer with irrefutable argument all the kinematical objections to Sabbath observance, and lay to rest with geometric certainty all lingering doubts as to its precise definition, where would be the need of faith and trust in the Creator? Did Abraham view God's command to slay his only son Isaac as rational? If God had presented Abraham with a logical justification for this act, would it have been the great test of faith that it otherwise was? As Robert Short says:

Both love and faith can never give a *reason* for their love; they can only say, "This is my beloved" (Song of Solomon 5:16). But perhaps this is just as well; for if the lover, or believer, could give us a "reason" for loving his love, such as her great

"beauty" or "charm" or "wealth," then it is quite obvious that the lover would not actually be in love with his "love," but that his *real* heart's desire would be beauty or charm or wealth or *whatever* his "reason" might be for loving the supposed object of his love. Thus it is impossible for one to have this kind of ulterior motive and remain a *true* lover, whether on the divine *or* human level; this is why the Christian faith finally is "dogmatic" on one side of the coin, "confessional" on the other.²

Can we do any more (or any less) than say: "My God, whom I love, has asked me to do this thing. I cannot explain it; I cannot otherwise justify it. But he has asked me to do it; and since I love him, I will do it to the best of my ability and understanding." This is an act of faith, and of love, and of loyalty. And by this faith we shall be justified.

Odom closes his book with the following quotation: "Do not allow your mind to wander from the main points of the truth for this time, to grasp unimportant theories and problems. If anyone gives you unessential problems to solve, tell him that God has placed in your hands a work to be done. Tell him that you are doing a great work, and cannot come down to try to solve the problem of the day line."³ One could wish that the author had followed this advice.

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REFERENCES

- 1 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1950), p. 605.
- 2 Robert L. Short, *The Gospel According to Peanuts* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press 1965), p. 118.
- 3 Ellen G. White, letter 11 (written to Dr. M. G. Kellogg, January 21, 1901).