

Looking at the Use of Biblical Texts in *Dies Domini*

By *Bernard A. Taylor*

Given the focus of the pope's letter, I have been at pains to read it first as a pastor. In so doing, I have found much that resonates with me. Frankly, I can only wish such a theology as is presented here had been in Adventism when I was growing up; but then I expect there will be many Catholics who wish the same for their religion. Clearly, Catholics have made great strides in understanding and formulating a theology of the Sabbath since Vatican II, as Adventists have done, during and since the sixties.

The scope of the document is almost breathtaking. By the end, it has covered numerous major teachings of the Church. In fact it reaches so far and wide, I am left with little doubt that it is the work of more than one individual.

A document of this magnitude invites and deserves comment from numerous angles. My interest lies principally at the level of the biblical text.

First, throughout the letter, unquestioned priority is given to the New Testament. The Old Testament is only accorded relevance through the eyes of the New.

Second, I find no clear hermeneutic such that apart from the Church—or Holy See—and tradition one could take an unrelated issue and come up with an acceptable doctrine on any given issue. In practical terms, the "truth" precedes the arguments. As a consequence, the Old Testament is the handmaiden of the New Testament in a manner I find disturbing. While might makes right, in time right makes might, and the authors remember longingly when Sunday observance was more a matter of enforcement.

Next, though there are only a few references, it is clear that the authors are comfortable with the critical disciplines. Section 8, paragraph 2, says: "According to the Priestly writer of the first biblical creation story. . ." This is not a reference to Moses. Then in section 9, paragraph 1, the letter speaks of: "The poetic style of the Genesis story . . . a hymn to the Creator of the universe" and "a hymn to the goodness of creation."

When consistently applied, these seemingly

casual comments have profound implications for creationism, since interpretation is then not tied to historicity, since one does not exegete a hymn in that manner. Thus they can draw equally from the creation motif and the liberation motif (liberation from Egyptian bondage), something that must warm the hearts of the Church's liberation theologians. Interestingly, Deuteronomy 5 is the only biblical passage in the whole document quoted at length.

Some issues relative to the Sabbath that we as Adventists have traditionally been reluctant to address are included:

1. God finished his work on the seventh day—Adventist appeals to a putative pluperfect ("had finished") notwithstanding. We know this is a long-standing sensitive issue, since both the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Greek Septuagint read "the sixth day" for "the seventh day."

2. What does it mean to "rest" when speaking of God? The authors say: "It would be banal to interpret God's 'rest' as a kind of divine inactivity." In this connection, they quote John 5:17: "My Father is working still, and I am working" (note use of a modern translation), which indicates that the issue was still relevant at the time of Jesus.

Next, I want to look briefly at the document through the Jewish lenses of my graduate education. At first glance, the opening sentence of the introduction excludes Jews and Judaism since it begins not with the Sabbath, but with "The Lord's Day." Further, in the second paragraph, Psalms 118:24—"This is the day the Lord has made"—is hijacked as a reference to Sunday.

However, sections 13 and following return to the Old Testament and Judaism, even if the Jews are shut up within the First Covenant. In this connection the letter speaks strongly of the Sabbath being set in the context of the Decalogue, not the strictly cultic stipulations. These are seen as: "the very pillars of the moral life inscribed on the human heart." Thus placed in the context of ethics, the Sabbath is "a defining and indelible expression of our relationship with God."

At this point I must pause and clarify one issue. There has been an unfortunate mistranslation from the Latin. Section 14 reads in English in the context of the Sabbath: "In the first place, therefore, Sunday is the day of rest because it is the blessed day, etc." The Latin begins this section: *Quietis itaque dies. . .* This is clearly a reference to the Sabbath (*quietis dies*), not Sunday, *dominica dies*, in Latin. It was not intended to claim Edenic origin for the Sabbath, as subsequent comments in the document make clear.

The positive statements about the Sabbath already noted do little to prepare the reader for section 62: "It is the duty of Christians therefore to remember that, although the practices of the Jewish Sabbath are gone, surpassed as they are by the 'fulfillment' which Sunday brings, the underlying reasons for keeping 'the Lord's Day' holy—inscribed in the Ten Commandments—remain valid, though they need to be reinterpreted in the light of the theology and spirituality of Sunday. . . ."

In section 63, Jesus' relationship to the Sabbath is expressly addressed in the context of Matthew 12:9-14, and parallels. Mark 2:28 is quoted recognizing Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath. However, before this paragraph

has ended, it is said of the Church, that she (feminine pronouns are only used for the Church, this is not a gender inclusive document) "felt that they had the authority to transfer the meaning of the Sabbath to the day of the Resurrection." As it turns out, the rest is ultimately from, not in, the Sabbath.

In the final analysis, scripture is illustrative, not definitive, even though scriptural references are kept separate and placed in the body of the text, while all other references are contained in 131 endnotes.

In summary, then, my pastoral heart is warmed by the vibrancy seen not only as possible but essential to a Christian day of worship. In sharp contrast, my heart was chilled by the stark nature of chapter three, "Dies Ecclesiae." Meanwhile my academic persona that grieved after Utrecht, grieves again. Would that the word of God could speak unshackled.

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