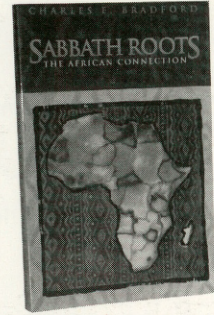


Restoring the True Sabbath in the Ancient Kingdoms

Charles E. Bradford. *Sabbath Roots: The African Connection*. Silver Spring, Md.: Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1999.



Reviewed by Douglas Morgan

Adventists not of African heritage may be tempted to pass over Charles Bradford's *Sabbath Roots: the African Connection*, suspecting that it primarily serves a particular racial agenda. However, I think *Sabbath Roots* is a very important book for all Adventists precisely because it highlights the Sabbath as a potent symbol of liberation that links all people with bonds of equal dignity.

The "African connection" that Bradford establishes shows us that frequently overlooked movements, peoples, and prophetic figures in African history have borne courageous witness to the biblical Sabbath in resistance to institutional expressions of Christendom that had become syncretized with destructive imperial, racial, and ideological loyalties.

It was a similar perspective that put intensity into the sabbatarian convictions of the founders of Seventh-day Adventism in nineteenth-century Protestant America. Beyond simply the desire to adhere to the letter of the fourth commandment, the Sabbath message was for them a "testing truth." The seventh-day Sabbath was a sign of uncoerced loyalty to the pure, apostolic faith, at a time when the "sword" was again being linked with the cross to enforce Sunday observance—a deviation from scriptural teaching and a violation of the U.S. Bill of Rights.

Such an outlook, alloyed as it would become with exclusiveness and legalism, repels many Adventists in the twenty-first century and merely fails to stir others. Persecution over the Sabbath/Sunday question seems at best a remote possibility. Moreover, at the turn of the twenty-first century, 92 percent of the 12 million Seventh-day Adventists in the world live outside North America. Close to a third live in Africa, where the Church in mid-2001 was adding an average of 600 members per day. Furthermore, people of color now or soon will constitute a majority of believers in the Church's nation of origin—the United States.

For even traditionally minded believers, some of the particulars of a message of "present truth" directed to Anglo-Protestant America in the nineteenth-century have limited capacity to sustain passion. Perhaps the foremost significance of *Sabbath Roots* lies in its reformulation of a sabbatarian theology of history for a

church whose historical context and demographic makeup are dramatically different from what they were 150 years ago.

Africa, Bradford contends, has had a unique historical role in sustaining faithfulness to the biblical seventh-day Sabbath. He discloses deep historical currents of such adherence, which became an emblem of a radical Christian alternative to the dominant versions promulgated by the "European ecclesiastical establishment" that came in a package of white supremacy, delivered with the backing of overwhelming military force.

Since culminating a career of church leadership as president of the North American Division from 1979 to 1990, Bradford has devoted much of his time to research, writing, and speaking about the history of Christianity in Africa, particularly the sabbatarian dimension. In *Sabbath Roots*, he lays the foundation for his case with a discussion of biblical history and theology, highlighting the importance of Africa in the Bible and showing convergences between scriptural and some traditional African understandings of God.

Some may find his manner of mixing historical and theological discourse disconcerting initially.

However, Bradford is open and consistent about his methodology. By his own declaration, we see a preacher at work, using scholarly historical research to support theological insights drawn from Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White. His use of "history" is far more thorough, disciplined, and

symbol of freedom, justice, dignity, and equality, both in the Old Testament and in Jesus' proclamation of "an authentic theology of liberation" (59). For the powerless, the Sabbath asserts the right to just and humane treatment. For the powerful, it is a reminder of "their creature status,

southern Africa. Although the story in Acts 8 about the baptism of the Ethiopian treasurer for Queen Candace suggests very early transmission of the gospel message to that land, there is little documented evidence about Ethiopian Christianity until the conversion of King Ezana and the establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia as the national church in A.D. 331.

From that time down to the present, Ethiopian Christianity has sustained a tradition of seventh-day Sabbath observance, although the exact nature and degree of uniformity in Sabbath practices was ambiguous during some periods. Until at least the fifth century, though, worship on the Sabbath (usually on Sunday, as well) was widely practiced throughout the Christian world outside the great centers of Rome and Alexandria. The staying power of some form of Sabbath observance appears to have been greatest in Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Nubia—all centers of dissent from the definition of the nature of Christ agreed upon at the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451. Among these, however, only in Ethiopia did there persist through the centuries a definite and prominent heritage of Sabbath observance.

That brings us to the heart of Bradford's case for a distinctive Sabbath-Africa connection: "African Christians were prepared by their unique position within the community of nations from antiquity, unspoiled by Hellenism and biases of the Latin Church, able to hear all sides of the question. African Christians were prepared to serve as a nexus between European Gentile Christianity and Judaism" (113). Embattled through the medieval and early modern centuries by enemies on all sides—Islamic, Portuguese, and regional

Perhaps the foremost significance of *Sabbath Roots* lies in its reformulation of a sabbatarian theology of history for a church whose historical context and demographic makeup are dramatically different from what they were 150 years ago.

intellectually creative than run-of-the-mill homiletic use of historical anecdotes.

Bradford utilizes the work of leading scholars such as Adrian Hastings, Elizabeth Isichei, and Lamin Sanneh, along with numerous more specialized sources, both Adventist and non-Adventist. Although he draws occasionally on the writings of Martin Bernal, the controversial advocate of Afro-centered historiography, Bradford makes clear that he is not claiming moral exceptionalism for Africans, or Sabbath keepers, for that matter. Nor is he arguing for Africa as the fountainhead of all that is good and great in human civilizations. The goal of his focus on Africa is a more inclusive and accurate understanding of history, as well as the meaning of the Sabbath.

In his biblical exposition, Bradford uplifts the Sabbath as

to save them from the devastating effects of hubris on account of their achievements and accomplishments" and, particularly as amplified by prophets such as Isaiah and Amos, "an antidote for racism and oppression" (60).

Historically, the distinctive role of the Sabbath in Africa centers in Ethiopia. The narratives in the *Kebrna Nagast*, the Ethiopian book of kings, about Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and the eventual transfer of the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia, and, more indisputably, the presence and practices of the Falasha-black Jews in that country, indicate the presence of biblical and sabbatarian influences prior to the Christian era.

Bradford also presents evidence of Hebrew influences, prior to Christian contact, in the indigenous cultures of the Ashanti people of West Africa and the Lemba of

rivals—the Ethiopian kingdom, though weakened, survived with its own form of Christian faith at the center of national identity.

The most dramatic struggle came in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Portuguese empire builders tried to dominate Ethiopia politically and impose Roman Catholicism on it. Sabbath observance and other so-called Judaizing practices were prominent among the issues on which the Portuguese evangelizers demanded change. The Ethiopian king, Susenyos, seeking to forge an alliance with Portugal that would save his throne, accommodated the program of the Jesuit missionaries for bringing the Ethiopian church into conformity with Rome in 1625. Exaltation of Sunday at the expense of the Sabbath was part of the compromise.

However, the allegiance of the Ethiopian people to their heritage of faith proved more powerful than royal decree. Even among Ethiopians who explicitly converted to Roman Catholicism many were “circumcising their children and observing the Sabbath,” according to a Portuguese priest newly arrived in the early seventeenth century (149). When Sosenyos’s son, Fasiladas, took the throne after his father’s death, he was able to channel the powerful current of popular dissent over the attempt to foist Catholic “reforms” on the nation into a successful revolt that smashed the Portuguese-Jesuit project in Ethiopia.

Because of this early success in resisting the European intrusion and later successes that culminated with the victory at Adwa in 1896, which warded off European control at the zenith of imperialism, Ethiopia became a continent-wide symbol of independence and equality. According to historian

Adrian Hastings, it was a symbol of “enormous power,” standing for “independence from European control, Africanness, traditional culture, Christianity” (cited on 159).

Whereas Ethiopian Christianity inspired the entire continent more as a symbol than as a detailed religious program, Bradford points to several instances of African Christian movements that embraced sabbatarianism as a component of a Christianity free from European corruptions and control. Scholars such as Philip Jenkins, in his recent book *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, increasingly stress the centrality of these independent churches to the history of Christianity in Africa.

Instances in the twentieth century where the sabbatarian strand prominent in these movements appears include the Vapostori, which became the largest independent church in Central Africa, and the VaHossana (also known as Apostolic Sabbath Church of God), which became widespread in central and southern Africa.

In Ethiopia itself, Sheikh Zakaryas launched a remarkable movement that began as a reforming endeavor within the Islamic community but ended up in 1910 as a new form of Sabbatarian Christianity. Though theologically similar to Ethiopian Orthodoxy, his followers and their descendants remained a distinct people, centered in the northwestern part of the nation. William Saunders Crowdy, born in American slavery, founded the Church of God and Saints of Christ in 1896. He held the Sabbath to be of central significance for black liberation, and his movement attracted a sizable following in Africa and the West Indies, as well

as in the United States.

Perhaps most remarkable of all the modern African advocates of Christian Sabbath keeping was the Zulu prophet Isaiah Shembe (ca. 1870–1935), who founded the Church of the Nazarites, which by the time of his death was one of the most influential churches in Africa. Shembe proclaimed the restoration of the true Sabbath, which the “ancient kingdoms” had tried to push aside. Shembe regarded these kingdoms and the Sunday they offered as a substitute alien to the spiritual heritage of Africa, and the Sabbath as essential to the freedom and welfare of the Zulu people.

The case for the Sabbath as deeply African as well as biblical obviously addresses the peoples in the African diaspora today with particular force. Bradford brings home the appeal with a view toward the Sabbath as an issue of ultimate loyalty: Sabbath to Jesus meant liberation, freedom, human dignity, and self-worth. This is the true meaning of the proclamation “Jesus is Lord.” Sabbath, therefore, stands for the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Africans on the continent and in the

ADVENTIST GROUP TRAVEL, 2003

with Dr. Merlene Ogden

- Ireland JUNE 15-JULY 3
- Great Britain JULY 3-21
- Spain/Portugal SEPT. 16-OCT. 3

269.471.3781
ogden@andrews.edu

with Dr. Cheryl Jetter

- Dutch Spring Photography Tour
MAY 4-20

269.471.3781
cheryljetter@hotmail.com.

Price, airfare, and itinerary available.

diaspora must bring this critical matter of the day of worship to the biblical test, under the lordship of Christ, as many of their fellow Christians have done. They must follow the testimony of Scripture, even if it means rejecting the traditions of the ancestors (212).

The theme of liberation runs throughout *Sabbath Roots*—liberation that, although not imposed by violent seizure of governmental power, nonetheless takes real world expression in all arenas of societal interaction. Here is where Bradford's work takes on a global significance and presents the Seventh-day Adventist Church with rich opportunity.

In North America at least, the emphasis of Adventist literature on the Sabbath in the final third of the twentieth century tended to move away from biblical proofs of the correct day and warnings of judgment against those who do not accept it or keep it properly. The

shift went toward emphasizing the Sabbath's experiential benefits for individuals and families and its role as a sign of God's grace and mercy toward individual sinners who find salvation through spiritual rest in his all-sufficient atonement. To the extent that this change increased appreciation for the Sabbath as a gift of divine love and sign of Christ's saving work on our behalf, it must surely be welcomed.

Is it possible, though, that preoccupation with a privatized realm of individual blessing, combined with the increasingly dubious relevance of Sunday-law centered end-time "scenarios," on the one hand, and increasing skittishness about any talk of apocalyptic beasts or being a "remnant" on the other, has thoroughly dulled the prophetic edge of the Sabbath message? Moving forward along lines inspired by *Sabbath Roots* could revitalize proclamation of the Sabbath as "present truth."

Non-Adventists have published a great deal of creative and rewarding scholarship on the Sabbath in recent years. For example, Bruce Birch, Richard Laughery, Ched Myers, and others have demonstrated that the weekly Sabbath, linked with the sabbath and jubilee years, gives structure to the entire system for social and economic justice set forth in the Old Testament and amplified in the New. The Jubilee 2000 movement to bring debt relief and economic opportunity to the poorest nations draws heavily on this scholarship.

For a world in which globalization has sharpened the gap between the haves and the have-nots, as well as inequities in access to education, health care, and economic opportunity, the Sabbath points to an obscured but central biblical theme that gives structure and content to liberation and equality. From *Sabbath Roots* we learn about the importance of a non-Western source for the preservation and restoration of the truth that Western Christendom did so much to deny.

For a world increasingly linked by economic structures and cultural influences but more bitterly divided than ever along religious, ethnic, and racial lines, the Sabbath message, which, Bradford demonstrates, owes so much to Africa as well as to the scattered faithful of Europe and Asia through the years, calls into being a community made up of every "race, tribe, language, and nation," united in worshiping "the maker of heaven and earth" (Rev. 14: 6-7), living together in love and justice.

What truth could be more for the present than that?

Douglas Morgan chairs the History and Political Science Department at Columbia Union College.

What have you been hearing from the San Diego Adventist Forum?

available on audio cassette

- Dr. Raymond Cottrell and Larry Christoffel
The "Sanctuary Doctrine" -- Asset or Liability?
- Dr. John Testerman
Stages of Faith Development: Growing Up in the SDA Church
- Dr. Walter Rea
EGW: the Continuing Saga: "The Great Controversy"
- Dr. John Jones
Plural Pathways: The Diversity of Faiths in North America
- Dr. Richard Rice
Forgiveness, the Final Form of Love

Mark your choices and send with check for \$8.50 + S/H per selection to: **Association of Adventist Forums, San Diego Chapter • P.O. BOX 3148 • La Mesa, CA 91944-3148**

To be included on the newsletter mailing roster without charge or to receive a listing of all audio cassettes, please send a post card with your name and address. If you have questions and need fast answers, contact Jim Kaatz, Chapter President, via email at:

<ak-jk@cox.net> or phone (619) 561-2360