

Two Views on *A Day of Gladness*

A Welcome Alternative in Sabbath Studies

Review by John Brunt

It is not easy to review the work of one's own admired professor, but it is a privilege to be reminded why his classes were always so interesting and thought provoking.

This work is a critical study of Sabbath in early Christianity and in the Judaism contemporary with it. It presents a view of the Sabbath during this period that is quite different from the theses of two major works, Willi Rordorf's *Sunday: the History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church*, and the work edited by Donald Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical and Theological Investigation*.

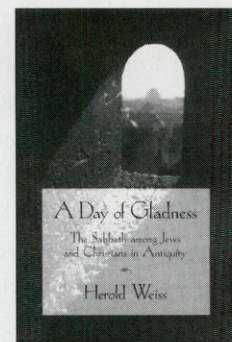
Rordorf holds that Jesus radically abolished the Sabbath law and that eventually in the Church the significance of Sabbath rest was assigned to Sunday gatherings in commemoration of the Resurrection. The authors in Carson's work hold that there was no transfer of the qualities of Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, but that Christians are liberated from Sabbath observance in favor of a rest every day of their lives. Both of these works find their way onto many of the anti-Seventh-day Adventist Web sites that have become ubiquitous.

In contrast, Weiss concludes that the New Testament does not have a polemic against the "Jewish" Sabbath (177). Rather, the New Testament shows that the Sabbath occupied a

prominent position in early Christian communities even though there were significant debates concerning the Sabbath, and even though Sabbath was understood in different ways. Weiss's work is clearly not, however, an apology for the Sabbath in early Christianity. This will probably disappoint many Adventists as they read the book.

Weiss makes it clear at the beginning that his work does not seek to get drawn into the "fruitless arguments" between those who believe that the Christian Sabbath is Sunday and those who hold Sabbath as the seventh day of the week (3). Rather than being an apology for Sabbath observance, Weiss's study is a critical study that uses critical methodologies—such as form criticism, tradition criticism, reduction criticism, and so forth—to try to understand what the texts show about the Sabbath.

A number of Adventists will also be disappointed with many of Weiss's conclusions, especially with regard to the diversity he sees in various New Testament views about Sabbath. However, Weiss has always been known for rigorous honesty in setting forth conclusions as he sees them, and that must be appreciated and commended, even where one disagrees.



Herold Weiss,
*A Day of Gladness:
The Sabbath
among Jews and
Christians in Antiquity.*
Columbia: South
Carolina University
Press, 2003.

Weiss begins by tracing a diversity of views concerning Sabbath among the early Jewish Rabbis, Philo, the Samaritans, and Josephus. The book would be well worth the price if this were all it contained. Weiss shows the diversity of views that existed among various Jewish groups, even though all were committed to the observance of Sabbath.

If in some ways this section on the Jewish material seems more convincing than the main body of work on the early Christian material, it is probably because there is much more data in the former, whereas many of the early Christian works contain only brief references to Sabbath.

What then is the diversity that Weiss sees in the New Testament with regard to Sabbath? The reader might be aided by looking at Weiss's summary on page 180 before reading the book. It is a very clear overview of his conclusions.

First, with regard to Jesus, Weiss concludes that because so much of the material in the Sabbath stories within the Gospels is traditional material, it is impossible to reconstruct Jesus' position on the Sabbath. Therefore, Weiss does not attempt to do so. He looks instead at the different writings to see the view of the Sabbath found in each one.

With regard to the Synoptic Gospels, Weiss concludes that the Christian communities they reflect took for granted the legitimacy of Sabbath rest. Although they did have debates over what kinds of activities could lawfully be done on Sabbath, they clearly assumed that Sabbath would be observed (96). The exegesis that leads Weiss to these conclusions is convincing and clear.

Weiss sees quite a different picture with regard to the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Thomas. (In the debate over whether the Gospel of Thomas is early or is a later Gnostic work, Weiss sides with the former). According to Weiss, the Johannine community had interpreted Sabbath within the framework of its realized eschatology. Its members believed that Jesus did not abolish the Sabbath, but rather established the eschatological Sabbath among them. They saw themselves as enjoying Sabbath rest while doing the work of God every day of their lives. Thus, Sabbath retained a significance for John, but was not tied to a single day of the week (104).

Because of its break with Judaism, the Johannine community had to reconstruct its symbolic universe, which changed its understanding of Sabbath. This community did not leave Sabbath behind as a relic of

the past to be repudiated; rather, it was given new significance in their lives (110).

The Gospel of Thomas presents a similar picture. Here the view is that one's whole life is lived in a perennial Sabbath, where the Sabbath has been released from the weekly chronological cycle (107-8).

For his understanding of Paul, Weiss focuses on two passages: Galatians 4 and Romans 14. He treats Colossians 2 in a separate chapter, since he does not hold that Paul wrote Colossians. According to Weiss, the difference between the weak and strong in Rome was that some continued to keep Sabbath specifically as a day of rest, whereas others were more like the Johannine community and observed all days alike.

The dispute was not over whether they should pay attention to the Sabbath, but whether the day was present to them in repeated twenty-four-hour periods within a weekly cycle, or present in all days of the week (129). According to Weiss, Paul saw both as valid ways to be obedient to the Lord (130). Paul's interest was in a new creation, and in that new creation Sabbath is no longer bound to its original calendric limits. He claims this does not take the Sabbath away, but eschatologizes it (131).

The picture in Colossians is quite different for Weiss. Colossians 2:16 has generally been interpreted to say that opponents were imposing Sabbath on the Colossians. Weiss, following the exegetical work of Troy Martin, concludes quite the opposite. Rather than imposing Sabbath, these opponents were criticizing their observance of Sabbath.

The author of Colossians is defending the legitimacy of this continued observance of Sabbath by Christians. The author sees observances such as Sabbath as anticipations of the eschatological realities in which Christians have their hope (141). This is what the author means when he says these observances are shadows of things to come. The opposing teachers wanted to do away with what they considered Jewish. The author of Colossians defends those who continue to observe Sabbath against those who would condemn them for doing so.

Finally, Weiss examines Hebrews and the letter of Barnabas, and concludes that they are similar. According to Hebrews, God entered into his rest at the beginning of creation, and when those who have faith and hope



cease from their labors they will enter God's rest. But it is an eschatological hope, not a present reality (158).

The situation is somewhat different with Barnabas, who also eschatologizes Sabbath rest, but sees that even God cannot enjoy perfect Sabbath rest now because of evil in the world (160). Weiss concludes that the authors of Hebrews and Barnabas disconnect themselves from the weekly Sabbath by eschatologizing its true nature (161). However, for both, the Sabbath is the ultimate experience to which they should aspire (162).

Weiss concludes that there is as much diversity in the New Testament as there is in Judaism with regard to Sabbath. However, rather than disregarding Sabbath, the early Christians, who found it difficult to abandon Sabbath, understood it in different ways.

How should we assess Weiss's work? First, it is a welcome alternative to the critical views presented in works such as those by Rordorff and Carson. Weiss's basic view that the New Testament does not contain an invective against the Jewish Sabbath is both welcome to Seventh-day Adventists and supported by the evidence Weiss presents.

The primary problem in Weiss's work rests in the speculative nature of some of its conclusions. I will cite the two examples.

Weiss's weakest section seems to be his discussion on Paul. He bases his conclusions on only two passages, and yet he has to admit that Sabbath observance was only "likely" involved in Galatians, but was not explicit (121). I would argue that there is even less evidence that Sabbath was involved in Romans 14.

Although Weiss surveys four different positions on the meaning of "days" in Romans 14, he dismisses three of them and concludes that the issue in Rome had to do with the Sabbath. One of the views he dismisses is that of Max Rauer, who argued that the days discussed in Romans 14 are not Sabbath days or worship days, but fast days. Weiss calls Rauer's view an argument from silence. But in fact Rauer's work is much more than that. His evidence is more persuasive than Weiss gives credit.

In fact, when Weiss expresses disappointment that Paul did not elaborate more on the question of days, as he did with the question of food (129), the answer may well be that Paul's elaboration about food is at the same time an elaboration about days, since the whole

chapter involves eating, both what to eat and when to eat. This view makes the whole flow of the argument in Romans 14 much more sensible. Therefore, when Weiss concludes on page 127 that it is clear that the debate at Rome was not whether or not to observe the Sabbath, but which day was Sabbath, he goes far beyond what the evidence warrants.

Therefore, the whole chapter on Paul is based on two questionable passages that may not have anything to do with Sabbath at all. It seems dangerous to speculate when the data are so slim. Imagine, for instance, how different our understanding of Paul's view of the Eucharist might be if we had all his letters except First Corinthians. Since we are dealing with occasional literature, topics that may have been very important to Paul may have gone unmentioned if no situation warranted discussion of the topic.

With regard to the Johannine writings, Weiss interprets the community's view of the Sabbath in light of its realized eschatology. And yet the redaction of the Gospel of John we possess includes not only a strong realized eschatology, but also a real future eschatology as well. In John 6, Jesus says, "The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him/her up on the last day." If the futuristic aspect of eschatology is included in one's understanding of the Johannine community as well, this might make a difference in the way Weiss interprets the Sabbath in that community.

In spite of these criticisms, however, Weiss's work is one that cannot and should not be ignored. His overall thesis should take its place among the other critical studies as a helpful alternative, and his exegesis of specific passages should evoke interesting and useful conversations from a variety of perspectives.

In the end, although the work is a critical study, Weiss's own regard for and appreciation of the Sabbath cannot be hidden. He ends by saying, "Even if the tragedy of 70 C.E. made it easy for Christians to separate themselves from the temple in Jerusalem, it has not been that easy for them to break away from the Jewish temple in time. Its sanctity is based on the vision of reality that transcends the material world ruled by the sun, moon and the stars. It is based in an unshakable world in which God now rests and humans hope to live."

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