

*STATISTICS OF SABBATH KEEPING IN
BABYLONIA.*

It has often been stated that the institution of the Sabbath, or weekly rest-day, amongst the Hebrews went back to some pre-Mosaic custom, either "part of the common Semitic tradition" or "borrowed from Babylonia." Before either of these hypotheses can be accepted, we should be sure that Babylonia had it to lend or that Babylonia shared the tradition. At one time, there seemed to be no doubt that the Sabbath was a Babylonian institution, and the supposed fact was regarded as a confirmation of Holy Scripture. Then it was exploited in the interests of orthodoxy against "Higher Criticism," then it was used to explain the origin of the Hebrew Sabbath and now it is denied (in the interests of orthodoxy?) on the ground of statistics. The theological bearing of a fact should make no difference to our method of examination of it, unless perhaps to make us more careful.

The existence of some peculiarity about the 7th, 14th, 21st and 28th days of a month in Babylonia is vouched for by the Hemerologies for the months of Arahsamna and the second or intercalary Elul. This peculiarity was shared by the 19th, which would be the 49th from the commencement of the previous month. Part of that peculiarity was that on these five special days certain acts were forbidden, and the general impression has been that such observances rendered these days a parallel to the Hebrew Sabbaths. The name *šabbattu*, given to some days, seemed a good argument for supposing that this was their name; but it is only proved that the 15th was called *šabattu*. The theory built up on these facts by Schrader, Lotz, Sayce and others is well stated by Professor Driver in his com-

mentary on *Genesis* (p. 34 f.) or in his article "Sabbath" in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible* (iv. p. 391a). The difficulties of accepting these days as prototypes of the Hebrew Sabbaths are emphasized in the article "Sabbath" in the *Encyclopaedia Biblica*.

Lately, Professor Schiaparelli, in his excellent work, *Astronomy in the Old Testament*, has called attention to a statistical method of estimating the degree of observance of the Sabbath in Babylonia. There exist in our museums many thousands of dated documents of all sorts, commercial deeds, contracts, receipts, memoranda, etc. It might be thought that a careful examination of these should show whether there was in Babylonia any marked abstention from business on the days above indicated as possible Sabbaths. If it should prove that fewer documents were dated on those days than on the ordinary days of the month, we might conclude that those days were regarded as not proper for business. This would go some way towards showing that the Babylonians had a Sabbath rest-day, which they kept on the 7th, 14th, 21st and 28th of the month, and also a "Sabbath of Sabbaths" on the 19th. It is not the purpose of this paper to argue concerning the nature of the parallels between the Babylonian and Hebrew Sabbaths, nor to touch on the question whether the Hebrews "borrowed" from the Babylonians. All that is attempted is an examination of the statistics hitherto presented.

Some preliminary considerations deserve attention.

1. It is not certain that the 7th, 14th, 21st, 28th and 19th of every month in Babylonia were *such* Sabbaths as we are to look for. If we find no special observance by abstinence from business for these days, that will only show that the Babylonians did not observe those days in *that* way. It will not show that they were not "Continental Sundays." We will therefore waive the meaning of

Sabbath altogether and examine what, if any, were the days of abstention from business.

2. It is not yet certain that the 7th, 14th, 21st, 28th and 19th were "holidays" in the months not vouched for by the two Hemerologies. It is presumed that they were, and there seems to be no reason why we should not make the assumption for statistical purposes; only we must recollect that if statistics show that these days were not kept free from secular business we may only be showing that these five days were not holidays all through the year. To check the Hemerologies we must confine ourselves to the same months.

3. If at any period the Babylonians did adopt a seven-day week throughout the year, as the Jews did, it is clear that the Sabbaths would not fall on the 7th, etc., in every month. Statistics of the days on which business was done will fail to reveal these holidays altogether. Our examination must therefore proceed on the assumption that the 7th day of *each* month ought to be a holiday. If we find that it shows no abstention from secular business, we may only be proving that the Sabbath did not always fall on the 7th of the month.

4. Babylonia was frequently conquered by foreign races. The Kassite rule lasted nearly 600 years. The Persians may have brought about a neglect of the Sabbath day. The Assyrians adopted Babylonian customs, and in other points are known to have been very conservative; while (under Kassite and other influence) Babylonia abandoned its old customs. If the Sabbath was a Babylonian institution *originally*, we are more likely to find traces of it preserved in Assyria than in Babylonia under the Kassites, or the Persians. If its observance as a holiday from secular business be negatived by our statistics for these periods, we may only be proving foreign influence for those periods and

have nothing to argue from them as to the observance of the Sabbath as a holiday in proper Babylonian times. Here we must remark that if we do find the 7th, etc., of the month marked by abstention from secular business at such periods, we can only conclude that it would have been more marked still in earlier days. Strictly speaking, we ought to confine ourselves to those periods when Babylonia was free from foreign influence. That can only be the period of the First Dynasty of Babylon, the Hammurabi period. It is usually held that this is the period to which the Hemerologies, above referred to, really belong. At any rate, the second Elul is only vouched for then and very much later.

5. Supposing that we are seeking to find out whether the 7th, etc., were observed by abstention from *secular* business, we ought to exclude all dates of records of *religious* acts. No doubt many of us enter and date collections, services, etc., on Sunday. It would be manifestly unfair to collect and quote such dates against our observance of a Sunday rest. The line is difficult to draw for a land like Babylonia, where every contract was sworn to in the temple, and may have been regarded as a religious act. But surely payments of tithe, offerings of gifts to the temple, payments of priests' salaries, for all of which dated receipts were given, ought not to be quoted as evidence that the Sabbath was not observed by abstention from secular business. In fact, the Babylonian temples did a vast amount of business, which we may call secular, on what we are seeking to find Sabbaths. Did they profane the Sabbath and remain blameless? It is naturally the easiest plan to count all dated documents without inquiry as to their nature, and if we find a marked abstention from business on the 7th, etc., we have a positive argument; but, if we include a large number of temple records, the occurrence

of much business done on the Sabbath will prove nothing as against the layman's observance of the Sabbath as a holiday. We ought then to consider carefully the nature of the documents executed on the supposed Sabbaths. Marriages may have been celebrated by preference on the Sabbath. Adoptions, manumissions, dedications, and possibly other deeds, were perhaps executed then because of the larger congregations and greater publicity.

6. When we have collected all the dates and arranged them according to the days of the month on which they fall, we examine whether those on the 7th, etc., are fewer than the average. In taking this average we must remember that the month had not always thirty days. We may divide the total by the average length of the month, say 29.53, the number of days in a lunar month. It is doubtful whether this is quite fair. For example, the number of documents executed on the first day may be 40, while the average does not exceed 10. The number executed on the 7th may be 8. This is not quite fairly said to be slightly below the average, *for a day which is not the first*, as that is only about 9.

Now, so far as the published statistics go, all the above considerations appear to have been neglected; at any rate, they have not been expressly stated as considered. It may be well to record what these statistics are and which consideration invalidates them most.

Lotz, in his *Questiones de Historia Sabbati* (p. 66), gives a table based upon 540 dated tablets, in which the simple average should be 18, where the 7th has 17, the 14th 15, the 21st 34, the 28th only 8, the 19th only 1. Here only the last Sabbath seems to have been observed as a holiday, but the 19th is very strictly observed. The table is worthless on every consideration. The documents examined were a few Assyrian contracts, together with the dates given by

Boscawen from the Egibi tablets, *Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, vol. vi. (1878) pp. 47-77. The latter are of all dates from Nebuchadnezzar to Darius. Foreign influence, the use of a week running consecutively throughout the year, no distinction of secular and temple business, etc., all may have vitiated the results. We cannot even quote the remarkable result for the 19th, because 19 is often written *20 lal 1*, where *lal* means "less," so that the figures are to be read "20 less 1"; while Boscawen read these (as was usual then) as 21. Hence a number of documents really dated on the 19th are counted to the 21st. How many we do not yet know: but there were many more to be credited to the 19th and as many fewer to the 21st. The only unexceptional result is that there were many fewer dates on the 28th than on an ordinary day. Even this is suspicious, for if the documents which did not "profane the Sabbath" be excluded, 8 may not be below the average.

The present writer in his *Assyrian Deeds and Documents* (vol. ii. p. 40, § 69, 1901), gave the results of examining some 700 documents of the 7th and 8th centuries B.C. The result was that the 7th, etc., did not show any marked abstention from business. "They were not kept with puritan respect for the Sabbath, if Sabbaths they really were. On the 19th day, however, we do seem to have a marked abstinence from business." The only documents dated on that day are possibly two. Of these two, the date of the first is doubtful, the second alone is certain. But the latter is a deed of marriage, possibly a manumission for that purpose. The table is superseded, for its own purpose, by the addition of hundreds more documents; but would be valueless for us because no deductions were made on account of the nature of the business.

It does, however, witness to a remarkable abstention

from business for the 19th. No secular business seems to have been done at all on that day. Professor Jensen, in the Berlin *Zeitschrift für deutsche Wortforschungen* (1900), p, 150ff., made use of these results, without appearing to be aware of their exact limitation. But Assyrian custom even at the end of the Empire is better witness to Babylonian custom than any evidence from Persian times, and it points to a very complete abstention from business on the "week of weeks."

Professor R. D. Wilson, in the *Princeton Theological Review* (April, 1903, p, 246), gave the results of his examination of 2,554 Babylonian contract tablets. He found that the 7th, etc., showed no falling off in business. "The nineteenth alone shows up as a true day of rest. Only 8 out of 2,554 tablets are dated the nineteenth of the month, less than one-tenth per cent. of the average." It is rather odd that he should add "This nineteenth was a fast rather than a feast day." The dates at any rate could not prove that. The character of the day could only be deduced from the peculiarities given in the Hemerologies, and the question was whether these showed Babylonian Sabbaths. In any case his figures are valueless because no account is taken of the nature of business. Presumably they were taken from Strassmaier's *Babylonische Texte* and include Persian times. Probably the same mistake is made as Boscawen's above, and the 19th is not properly reckoned but confused with the 21st.

Professor Schiaparelli, in his *Astronomy in the Old Testament* (p. 132 note 1), began with Boscawen's figures and deduced results which in his Appendix III. (p. 175) he himself recognized were ill founded. So he examined instead Strassmaier's *Babylonische Texte* and used 2,764 dates. His results are that the 7th, etc., are not marked by any falling off from the average, and even the "week of weeks"

shows 89 dates as against the average 94. Again we must pronounce the table valueless, because no account is taken of the nature of business, and the period covers the Persian kings. It only would show that the Sabbath was not strictly kept then or that the week ran on through the year without beginning again each month.

It is obvious that a proper examination of this statistical evidence will take a long time, and the present writer has not now the opportunity of examining the question fully. All he can do now is to present a few other results, compiled for a different purpose, and trust that if no one else will do it he may be able to return to the question later.

The First Dynasty of Babylon, though a foreign race, were at any rate Semitic, and therefore probably disturbed Babylonian customs little. To their date probably belong the two Hemerologies. An examination of 356 dated documents, giving an average of say 12 per day, shows only 5 for the 7th, 4 for the 14th, 8 for the 21st, 7 for the 28th and 2 for the 19th. There has been no attempt made to exclude temple business, which would certainly reduce the numbers for these days, but also reduce the total and the average. If any one is so disposed, he may ascribe the partial observance of these days to the "Amorite" influence of the Dynasty; but pending a scientific examination of the whole question, the remarkable extent of the observance is significant enough.

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