

The Earliest Form of the Sabbath.

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THE older theories of the origin of the Jewish Sabbath (connecting it with Egypt, with the day of Saturn, or in general with the seven planets) have now been almost entirely abandoned.¹ The disposition at present is to regard the day as originally a lunar festival, similar to a Babylonian custom (Schrader, *Stud. u. Krit.*, 1874), the rather as the cuneiform documents appear to contain a term *šabattu* or *šabattum*, identical in form and meaning with the Hebrew word *šabbatōn*. This identification is called in question by Professor Jensen (*S. S. Times*, Jan. 16, 1892), who holds that the Bab.-Assyr. term signifies not "rest," but "propitiation" (that is, of the deity), and that not every seventh day, but only certain days in the month (the 7th, 14th, 19th, 21st, and 28th) were marked off by specific prohibitory regulations; he adds, however, that these days bear a general resemblance to the Jewish Sabbath. Professor Jastrow² maintains the substantial identity of the Babylonian-Assyrian and Hebrew institutions. He defends the cuneiform reading *šabattum*,³ holds it to be defined by the expression *ūm nūh libbi* (= "day of propitiation"), and takes it to be identical in form and meaning with the Hebrew *šabbatōn* (a designation of the weekly Sabbath, the first and eighth days of the festival of Ingathering or Booths, the day of Atonement, and the Sabbatical Year). He concludes that the Hebrew *šabbat* was so called because, like the Babylonian "unfavorable" days, it was a day of propitiation, a ceremony rendered necessary by the restrictions attached to it. The Hebrews, he points out, modified the older conception of the day in two particulars: they detached it from connection with the moon, making it fall on every

¹ See Lotz, *Hist. Sabbat.*; Wellhausen, *Proleg.* (Eng. transl. *Hist. of Israel*); Nowack, *Arch.*

² In the *Amer. Journ. of Theol.*, for April, 1898. His article contains a number of interesting remarks.

³ This reading is regarded by some Assyriologists as doubtful.

seventh day in continuous computation; and further, discarding other conditions, they emphasized abstinence from work, and thus made the day a day of rest, and finally a pivotal institution of religion.

It seems probable that, as Professor Jastrow says, it was the Hebrews who abandoned the lunar reckoning of the Sabbath, and made it fall on every seventh day, and this was an immense gain. Whether they inherited it as an old Semitic custom, or derived it from the Babylonians directly or indirectly (through the Canaanites) is a question difficult at present to determine. But, however it may have come to be a Hebrew usage, certain facts make it probable that for its origin we must go back to the periods of restriction which arose at a very early stage of religious history—it appears, that is, to have been originally a taboo day.

The existence of periods of restriction among many early peoples is well established, and the wide diffusion of the custom makes it probable that it had its origin in simple ideas and social conditions. In all the cases known to us the restrictions are of the same general character—they refer to occupations, food, dress. In Babylonia it was forbidden to cross streams or to eat certain forms of food on certain days; the restrictions imposed on the king for five days in the month Elul were peculiarly onerous—he was not to eat food prepared by fire, to put on royal dress, to offer sacrifices, to hold court, or, if he were sick, to consult a physician.⁴ The Egyptians likewise had a similar list of days, among the things prohibited on certain days being the care of fire and the doing of everyday work.⁵ During the Roman public *feriae* all kinds of business were suspended, except that, according to some ancient authorities, works of necessity and mercy might be performed; the ferial day was so like the Sabbath that, when Christianity became the religion of the empire, the former day was naturally replaced in part by the latter. On all *dies nefasti* the courts of law and the *comitia* were closed. In the Hawaiian Islands it was unlawful, on certain days, to light fires or to bathe, and no animal was allowed to utter a sound; particular sorts of fishing were prohibited during parts of the year; at certain times the king withdrew into privacy, giving up his ordinary pursuits.⁶ In

⁴ Jastrow, *Relig. of Bab. and Assyria*, p. 376 ff.

⁵ Chabas, *Le Calendrier des jours fastes et néfastes*, etc. (discussion of the Sallier Papyrus); Maspero, *Études égypt.* i. p. 28 ff.; Wiedemann, *Relig. of the Egyptians*, ch. 10.

⁶ Alexander, *Short History of the Hawaiian People*.

Borneo work was forbidden on certain days in connection with the harvests. In Polynesia the periods of the great religious ceremonies, the time of preparation for war,⁷ deaths, and the sickness of chiefs were seasons of restriction.⁸

The similarity of these observances to those connected with the Hebrew Sabbath is obvious; what is common to all is the prohibition of ordinary work on special occasions.⁹ In many cases, also, the taboo period is followed by a ceremony of propitiation.¹⁰

The duration of these seasons of abstinence among various peoples and in various ages has varied greatly — they lasted sometimes for days, sometimes for months or years. In many cases a particular day only was involved; in Hawaii the catching of certain species of fish was forbidden for half the year; the Borneo harvest taboo lasts for weeks or days; there is mention in a Maori legend of a taboo of three years.¹¹

The origin of these times of restriction must be referred to a remote antiquity, lying back of our historical monuments. In the earliest form in which we find them they are established customs, resting on precedent, and not supposed to need explanation. We can only surmise that they arose from various experiences; in some cases (as in agriculture and fishing) they may have been dictated by convenience, and, in general, observation might show that certain times were favorable or unfavorable to certain occupations. At first, such observation would be vague and unorganized, but, in the course of time, certain definite periods would be set apart as improper for certain occupations, and the latter would be prohibited at such times. All these conceptions would naturally be brought into the sphere of religion, every bit of ill-fortune would be ascribed to a god, and observations and experiences would gradually be tabulated and formed into a system, and a process of organization would begin.

The duration of the taboo seasons appears to have undergone revision. Whether the longer or the shorter periods were first established, or both came into use together, it is hardly possible to say. But it seems likely that the tendency was toward abbreviation; this

⁷ Cf. the Hebrew custom, 1 Sam. 21⁵.

⁸ Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*.

⁹ For some curious survivals of such usages in Mediaeval Europe see Carl Meyer, *Der Aberglaube des Mittelalters*, etc., 1884, p. 205 ff.; and cf. Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, p. 184 f.

¹⁰ Frazer, art. "Taboo," in *Encycl. Brit.*; Shortland, *Maori Religion*.

¹¹ Alexander, *op. cit.*; Shortland, *op. cit.*

would follow from the increasing demands of convenience, the increasing facilities of work, and the spread of intelligence. Every progressive society endeavors to throw off oppressive restrictions.¹² The longer seasons of abstinence would often be dropped or shortened; unlucky days may, in some cases, be the remains of long, unlucky periods. But, for various reasons, a long period would sometimes be retained; examples are the old Hawaiian fish taboo, and the Hebrew Sabbatical Year (and cf. the Roman *novendiales feriae*).

As science and religion advanced, taboo calendars would be formed. We find certain days associated with certain gods, as in the Babylonian lists, and in Hesiod (*Works and Days*, 763 ff.). Astronomical observation led to the construction of lunar calendars, as in Egypt, Babylonia, the west coast of Africa, Hawaii, and New Zealand.¹³ Certain days of the month came to be stamped as lucky or unlucky, and, among some peoples the unlucky or taboo days were connected with definite phases of the moon, and were made seasons of abstinence from certain forms of work, or certain acts. In Babylonia, the days seem to have been the 7th, 14th, 19th, 21st, 28th¹⁴; in Hawaii they were the 3d-6th, 14th-15th, 24th-25th, 27th-28th. The disposition to establish four regular taboo periods in every month was a natural result of the division of the month into weeks — a division found in early stages of civilization.¹⁵

Such a calendar the Hebrews may have inherited, or may have received from Babylonia or from some other source. The further modifications introduced by them — the selection of every seventh day, and the special stress laid on abstinence from everyday work — were in the interests of simplicity and convenience. Such a movement, as is pointed out above, is of the sort that may be expected in a progressive society; but the creation of the Hebrew Sabbath was a singular achievement of the religious genius which, at a later time, gave the day its higher significance.

The essential idea in the Sabbath thus appears to have been abstinence. Propitiation was only an incident, not uncommon in taboo seasons, since, in early times, the unluckiness of a day was connected with the anger of a deity which had to be appeased.

¹² Cf., for example, the abrogation of Hawaiian taboo by the native rulers.

¹³ See A. B. Ellis, *Tshi-Speaking Peoples*, ch. 15, and cf. Gill, *Myths and Songs from the Pacific*, p. 316 ff. (Hervey Islands).

¹⁴ We have mention of them in the month Elul only, but it is probable that the same rule existed for the other months.

¹⁵ See Ellis, *op. cit.*

But, as the two ideas were closely associated, it is not difficult to see how the Babylonians could equate the expressions *sabattum* (if that be the right reading) and *ūm nūh libbi* (propitiation). It is quite possible that the Babylonian theologians interpreted the former term to mean "the cessation (or removal) of the god's anger," but it would not thence follow that this was the original sense of the word. As to Hebrew *sabbatōn*, all the occurrences of the term in the Old Testament seem to be satisfactorily explained by taking it as = "rest" or "season of rest" (= "abstinence"). Such a sense applies, of course, to the weekly Sabbath. The prohibition of work on the first and eighth days of the Feast of Tabernacles (the great harvest season of the year) has its parallel in the Borneo harvest taboo, and would be, in early times, a welcome holiday to the harvesters. The sin-laden goat (to which there are so many parallels elsewhere¹⁶) indicates that the Day of Atonement was based on some old custom, in which a taboo day may well have found a place; and, apart from this, abstinence from work was appropriate and natural on so solemn an occasion, especially as such abstinence was already familiar in the weekly Sabbath. Long taboo periods, like the Hebrew seventh year, have been referred to above; the Hebrew custom was not improbably a definite organization of earlier sporadic customs. It is by no means certain that the word is a technical term; that it is not applied to other periods than the four above-mentioned (for example, to days in Passover and Pentecost) may be an accident. It would seem that, when *sabbat* came to designate the weekly day of abstinence from work, *sabbatōn* was used in the more general sense of "a season of abstinence," or perhaps "season of complete abstinence." It is not likely that there is substantial difference of meaning between שבת and שבתון. The former may be an intensive or a causative, = "cessation" (that is, "time of cessation"), or "[the time] which causes cessation," or, if the dagesh be regarded as euphonic, the term = "cessation"; the latter probably means "that [time] which is connected with (or defined by) cessation."

Professor Jastrow (*op. cit.*) is probably right in taking צרה and צרת to mean "period of restriction"; the latter term is a designation of the eighth day of Passover (Dt. 16⁸) and the eighth day of Tabernacles (Lev. 23³⁶ Nu. 29³⁵), and seems to be a synonym of שבתון. There may have been other terms expressing the same idea, these two (or three) alone surviving.

¹⁶ Frazer, *Golden Bough* ii. 182.