

## THE ORIGIN OF THE HEBREW SABBATH.

By Rev. J. T. NICHOLS,  
Olympia, Washington.

The important place the Sabbath holds in our social and religious life, and the present interest in the subject, furnish a sufficient warrant for any investigation into the origin of this ancient institution. Yet weightier reasons are found in the recent progress in Old Testament study and the discovery of Babylonian inscriptions bearing on this question. I wish to consider the origin of the Sabbath with special reference to the new light\* thrown on the subject by the observances of the ancient Babylonians on the seventh day as revealed by the newly-discovered Elul Calendar.

When we approach the question of the origin of the Sabbath from the side of external history, we find much to prove its existence at the earliest times of which we have any record.†

The week of six days, with the seventh day of rest intervening, now prevails as a measure of time over most of the world. It is found in all Christian and Mohammedan regions and in India. The most notable exceptions are China and Japan, which have a division of ten days. Most Christian nations have received the Sabbath and also the week, along with Christianity, but not all. The Germans used the weekly division of time before they received Christianity, getting it probably from the Romans. Our week, then, has its origin in two different lines, one from Christianity and the other

\* I have used in the study of this question most of the books and magazine articles which bear upon it. Among them mention should especially be made of Lotz, "Quæstionum de Historia Sabbati;" Sayce, "Records of the Past" and "Hibbert Lectures;" Schrader, "Cuneiform Inscriptions;" Ewald, "Jewish Antiquities," Wellhausen, "History of Israel," and W. R. Smith's articles in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

† Though I recognize the Sabbath as a divine institution, yet in its development human agency has been employed. So, while not forgetting the hand of God which is working in all the affairs of men, I intend to confine myself in the following discussion to the origin of the Sabbath viewed from the human standpoint only.

from the Romans, who got it at a time not far from the beginning of the Christian era, from the Eastern astrologers and Jews. This ancient astrology had its seat in South-Western Asia. Both lines, then, from which our Sabbath has its origin, lead us back to the Semitic nations as the source of this institution.

Outside of these nations we find few indications of a week of seven days which did not have its origin with them. We have noticed already that India has such a division of time, but this is probably derived from the Arabs or Mohammedans. The Chinese and Japanese, though they have no seven-day week, hold the first, fifteenth, and twenty-eighth days of their lunar month in especial esteem. This, however, as we shall see later, can be explained in a natural way.\*

Among the Semitic nations, we find the week observed by the Egyptians and the Ishmaelites. The Ashantees and Gallas of Africa seem to have had the week from a very early time.† The nation where we find (aside from the Hebrews) most clear evidence, not only of a week, but also of a Sabbath, is the Babylonian. We find that among these people, as among the Israelites, the number seven was especially prominent and sacred. Thus seven is the number of the spirits who came from the depths. The number of knots tied by the women who sit by the bedsides of their husbands to conjure the evil spirit is seven or twice seven. "Week" means the city of seven spheres. The mythical serpent mentioned in their hymns has seven heads, and the sacred tree has seven branches. There were seven gates to the lower world; seven or fourteen gods are mentioned frequently; the evil spirits are seven; cleansings or sprinklings were repeated seven times; seven planets were recognized, studied, and held to be among the gods.

Furthermore, upon the Babylonian monuments recently discovered mention is made of a week of seven days ending with a seventh day on which no work was to be done or sacrifice offered. This seventh day was a day of rest and abstinence from the usual employments. This is shown by

\* The ancient Peruvians also seem to have had a seven-day week.

† Cf. Tutschek, *Grammar of Galla language*, p. 59.

the register tablet of the intercalary month of Elul. We read there that the seventh, fourteenth, nineteenth, twenty-first and twenty-eighth days were Sabbaths. Directions are given in this tablet for the observance of the day by the "ruler of the great nations." He must not eat certain kinds of food, nor change his garments, nor offer sacrifices. So, too, the riding on a chariot and issuing of royal decrees was forbidden. It was not proper then for one to curse or an augur to mutter his divinations. This tablet shows us only the nature of these Sabbaths as kept by the king and priests, but it is probable that a similar, though, perhaps, not so strict a Sabbath, was observed by the citizens.

We cannot but notice how much this Sabbath of the Babylonians resembles the Hebrew Sabbath of the Levitical law.\* We notice also that the word for Sabbath in the form *Sabatû* was known to the Assyrians, and is explained as meaning "a day of rest for the heart." The Babylonian day of rest differs from the Hebrew in not being always on the seventh day, for their month followed the moon,† and as the full lunar month has from twenty-nine to thirty days, the last week must be eight or nine days long. Moreover, there is the unaccountable observance of the nineteenth day as a Sabbath in the same way as the seventh, fourteenth, twenty-first and twenty-eighth. Notwithstanding these differences, this calendar shows that a Sabbath similar to that of the Hebrews was known to the Assyrians and Babylonians.

Whence did the Babylonian week and Sabbath arise? If we can answer this question, we shall then perhaps be able to get nearer the origin of the Hebrew Sabbath. An examination of the Elul Calendar mentioned above shows that the word used for unlawful day, *dies nefastus*, is Accadian. The occurrence of this and many other expressions and technical phrases shows that this calendar was of Accadian origin. In the words of Sayce,‡ "It was borrowed by the Semites along with the rest of the old Turanian theology and science. The original text must have been inscribed at some time before

\* Cf. Gen. 2 : 3 ; Ex. 31 : 13, ff. 35 : 2, 3 ; *vid.* also Is. 58 : 13.

† Cf. Sayce "Hibbert Lectures."

‡ "Records of the Past."

the 17th century B. C., when the Accadian language seems to have become extinct." If this is true, we have traced the Sabbath to its source among the nations of South-Western Asia. From the Accadians it was passed on to their successors, the Babylonians, and was carried also from Accadia by Nahor and his descendants into Palestine.

The question of the origin of this seven-day division of time among the Accadians now meets us. If it was not derived from astrology, whence did it arise? The earliest and most natural division of time among all nations has been the lunar month. This has preceded the year, and it is a natural supposition that the week arose from a division of the lunar month. We know that the ancient Accadians were worshipers of the moon,\* and the new and full moons were observed as festivals. These festivals made two natural divisions of the month of about fourteen days in length. Convenience and ease in reckoning would call for a shorter division, and what would be more natural than that each of these two divisions of fourteen days should be divided into two smaller sections of seven days each marked by the quarters of the moon? A difficulty with this division of the month into four weeks of seven days each will naturally suggest itself. The average month has twenty-nine and a half days, so that in this division one and one half days would remain on the average after the four weeks in every month. In order to make the new moon conform with the beginning of the week and month, the length of the weeks would have to be varied, three out of every eight being eight days long. Such a course would be in harmony with their method, reckoning, as we see, from their practice of intercalating a month when necessary to make the lunar months correspond with the yearly seasons. It seems probable, however, that the conformity of the week and month was brought about in another way. With their imperfect knowledge of astrology it would be impossible for these early people to know beforehand on which of two days the new moon would be first observed. So the festival of the new moon would be extended over two days.† *Cf.* 1 Sam. 20: 27, where the new moon of the second

\* *Vid.* Schrader "Assyrian Inscriptions."

† Lotz "Quæstionum de Historia Sabbati."

day is spoken of (*cf.* Judith 8: 6). If this was the case, there would be but one week of eight days in the two months.

The theory of an intimate connection of the moon with the religious observances of the ancestors of the Hebrews, and its connection especially with the Sabbath, gives a meaning and force to the many passages in the Bible referring to the observance of the moon. The many places where new moons and Sabbaths are mentioned together would suggest, if there were no other reasons, that Sabbaths and the course of the moon had had at some time a very close connection. That the new moon was observed as a festival among the Hebrews is shown by many passages. It was observed by feasting and ceremonial cleanness (1 Sam. 20: 5, 18, 24, 27). The new and full moons were greeted with blasts from trumpets (Ps. 81: 3; Num. 10: 10). There were special offerings for these days (Num. 28: 11; Ezek. 46: 6). The time of the new moon was an occasion for special events (Ex. 40: 2, 17; Num. 1: 18; 29: 1; Deut. 1: 3). It had especial connection in the thought and religious observances of the Hebrews with the Sabbath (2 Ki. 4: 23; 1 Chron. 23: 31; 2 Chron. 2: 4; 8: 13; 31: 3; Neh. 10: 33; Is. 1: 13, 14; 66: 23; Ezek. 45: 17; 46: 1, 3, 6; Hos. 2: 11; Amos 8: 5; compare also Col. 2: 16). The many places where new moons and Sabbaths are mentioned together are significant.

The common Hebrew word for month is *hodhesh*, the word for new moon. The only month known among them was the lunar month. Their year was twelve lunar months or 354 days, and began with the new moon just preceding the ripening of the barley. The first sheaves were carried to the altar at the feast of the Passover, which was on the first full moon of the year (Lev. 23: 9-14). When the first full moon seemed likely to come before the barley was ripe, an extra month was intercalated. The cycles of time seem to have been regulated rather by the moon than the sun. This we see was the case with their feasts and their periods of sowing and reaping with which they were intimately connected.

Each month was begun with the feast of the new moon. So, too, the Arabs greeted the new moon before they received their Sabbath from the Syrians. Their term for this time of

joy was "ahalla," which is connected with the Hebrew word for festal joy "hallel"—showing that the greeting of the new moon was such an ancient and universal custom that the word used for that occasion became the common word for all festival rejoicing (Judges 9: 27).

It is plain also that the full moons had a religious significance to the Hebrews. Then were celebrated the great feasts of the nation. The first full moon of the year at the beginning of the harvest was the Passover, on the fourteenth of Abib or Nisan (Ex. 12: 16, 18; Lev. 23: 5; Num. 9: 3, 5; 28: 16, 17; 33: 3; Josh. 5: 10; 2 Chron. 35: 1; Ezek. 6: 19).

Lev. 23: 11 seems to show that the Passover was originally a Sabbath, and the offering of the sheaves followed it. In connection with the fact that the Passover was celebrated at the full of the moon it is suggestive to notice also that it was a nocturnal feast. The supper was at evening (Ex. 16: 12; Lev. 23: 5; Num. 9: 3; 5: 11, etc.). Is. 30: 29: "Ye shall have a song in the night when a holy feast is kept," and Hos. 2: 11: "I will also cause her mirth to cease, her feasts, her new moons and her Sabbaths" indicate that the nights following these feasts were passed in singing, mirth, and merriment. We notice, too, that if by reason of any uncleanness some were prevented from participating in the feast, the substituted celebration was observed not the next week, but on the next full moon (Num. 9: 11; 2 Chron. 30: 2, 15).

Not only the harvest festival, but the vintage feast as well, was celebrated at the full of the moon, the feast of Tabernacles coming on the full moon of the seventh month (Lev. 23: 34; Num. 29: 12; Ezek. 45: 25). Jeroboam when he wished to institute a feast to take the place of this at Jerusalem chose the full moon of the eighth month (1 Ki. 12: 32, 33).

In the course of Jewish history, though the Passover and Tabernacle feasts were continued and observed at the full of the moon, yet their connection with the moon lost its significance, and the new moon celebration eventually disappeared entirely.

We have seen already that the Babylonian Sabbath had its origin in Accadia and was probably connected with the wor-

ship of the moon, Accadia being the seat of moon worship. We now see that the Hebrew Sabbath also is intimately connected with the changes and celebrations connected with the moon, indicating that the Sabbath had originally its source in moon worship. It remains to connect the Hebrew Sabbath with the Accadians and so with the Assyrian Sabbath. The means of making this connection are not lacking. We have traced the Babylonian Sabbath to at least as early a date as 1700 B. C., when the Accadian language became extinct. To have embodied itself in technical and stereotyped phrases which outlived the rest of the language, and to have so stamped itself upon the social life of the people that it lived as an institution long after the nation was dead, the Sabbath must have been observed by the Accadians for many centuries. There can then be no reasonable doubt but that some sort of a Sabbath was observed by them previous to 2000 B. C., at about which time Terah and his family emigrated from among them. For it seems probable from the results of the latest investigation that the home of Nahor was in Accadia. Ur Kasdim of Gen. 11: 21 has been identified with Ura of the Cuneiform inscriptions, a place in South Babylonia. This Ura, we learn from the inscriptions, was the seat of the worship of the moon god.\* The other city mentioned in the Bible as a tarrying place of this family is Haran in Mesopotamia. This city also, we learn from the same source, was the seat of the worship of the moon god, Sin.

So the first and second homes of the migrating ancestors of the Hebrews were places where the worship of the moon was especially cultivated, and where the Sabbath in a developed or germinal form was probably known.

It seems probable, then, from the results of this investigation, that the Hebrew Sabbath and the weekly division of time is a very ancient pre-Mosaic institution not originating with the Israelites, but brought by them from South Babylonia.

\* Schrader "Cuneiform Inscriptions."