

**Prevalence of the  
Sabbath in the  
Early Roman Empire**

**Kelly McDonald, Jr.**



Written/authored by: Kelly McDonald, Jr.  
BSA President  
[www.biblesabbath.org](http://www.biblesabbath.org)  
[www.sabbathsentinel.org](http://www.sabbathsentinel.org)

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## Introduction

The first sustained contact between Roman and Jewish people started in the second century BC. A significant Jewish population had established itself in Rome by the time of Christ. In the early Imperial period, they were recognized and had significant protections. These developments allowed their religious practices to spread throughout the Roman world.

Jewish observances stood in sharp contrast to those of the Romans; one of them was the seventh-day Sabbath. Among Roman authors, it is likely the most mentioned Jewish practice. This makes sense when one considers that the Romans did not have a concept of a periodic Sabbath every seven days or even every eight days (*nundinae*).

This subject has significant implications when one considers early Christian practice. In the New Testament book of Acts, there are several instances where Jews and Gentiles are found together in the synagogue on Sabbath. How did the gospel message influence their Sabbath attendance?

The traditional thought on this subject is that the Gentiles gravitated towards the first day of the week because of the resurrection message. This view is summarized by the following statement: “the first day of the week...began to take the place of the Jewish Sabbath in Apostolic times...” (Catholic Encyclopedia 1911: Sunday).

This assertion must be weighed against evidence in the New Testament itself and historical sources. As simple and straightforward as the traditional view seems, how does it compare to the

New Testament text?

In the book of Acts, there are several instances of Jews and Gentiles in the same worship setting (Acts chapters 13, 14, 17, and 18). These examples serve as a backdrop to a very important question: Why were so many Gentiles in the synagogue in the first place? Could it be that the Sabbath had a significant degree of prevalence in the early Roman Empire?

In this short work, we will examine primary sources on this subject to answer the questions posed in this introduction. This will contribute significantly to the conversation about how Gentiles responded to the Sabbath question after hearing the gospel message.

*In all quotes throughout this short book, all bold emphasis is mine.*

# Chapter 1

## Jewish and Christian Sources

The first group of sources we will examine are those in first century Judaism and second-century Christianity. I chose Christian authors from the second century because they would be the first Christian writings outside of the New Testament from which we could learn about this subject.

Philo Judaeus, also called Philo of Alexandria, lived from approximately 15 BC to 50 AD. He came from a very prominent family; his historical writings are considered extremely valuable. He made some interesting comments about the Sabbath and its prevalence.

“But after the whole world had been completed according to the perfect nature of the number six, the Father hallowed the day following, the seventh, praising it and calling it holy. **For that day is the festival, not of one city or one country, but of all the earth; a day which alone it is right to call the day of festival for all people and the birth-day of the world**” (*On the Creation of the World*, 30).

“And, in short, it is very nearly an universal rule, from the rising of the sun to its extreme west, that every country, and nation, and city, is alienated from the laws and customs of foreign nations and states, and that they think that they are adding to the estimation in which they hold their own laws by despising those in use among other nations. **But this is not the case with our laws which Moses has given to us; for they lead after them and influence all nations, barbarians, and Greeks, the inhabitants of continents and islands, the eastern nations and the western, Europe and Asia; in short, the whole habitable world from one extremity to the other. For what man is there who does not honour that sacred seventh day, granting in consequence a relief and relaxation from labour, for himself and for all those who are near to him, and that not to free men only, but also to slaves, and even to beasts of burden; for the holiday extends even to every description of animal, and to every beast whatever which performs service to man, like slaves obeying their natural master,**

and it affects even every species of plant and tree...but everything is at liberty and in safety on that day, and enjoys as it were, perfect freedom, no one ever touching them, in obedience to a universal proclamation” (*On the Life of Moses*, 2.4).

Josephus was a first-century Jewish historian who wrote just after Philo (lived 37-100 AD). He explained that the Greeks were rather attracted to the Sabbath and other practices common to the Jewish people. His statements echo those of Philo.

“We have already demonstrated that our laws have been such as have always inspired admiration and imitation into all other men; nay, the earliest Grecian philosophers, though in appearance they observe the laws of their own countries, yet did they, in their actions and their philosophic doctrines, follow our legislator, and instructed men to live sparingly, and to have friendly communications one with another. Nay farther, the multitude of mankind itself have had a great inclination of a long time to follow our religious observances. **For there is not any city of the Grecians, nor any of the barbarians, nor any nation whatsoever, whither our custom of resting on the seventh day hath not come,** and by which our fasts, and lighting up lamps, and many of our prohibitions as to our food, are not observed” (Josephus, *Appion* 2.40).

Both Jewish writers state that most or all of the Gentile world had been influenced by the seventh-day Sabbath. These are bold claims! Because these men were both Jewish, one could argue that their statements contain a degree of bias. One the ways we will cross reference the validity of their comments is to compare them to Christian writings on similar subjects in the very next century.

The first statement we will review was made by Theophilus of Antioch. He was the Christian Bishop of Antioch 169-180 AD; he was the sixth Bishop of the city since the time of the Apostles. Our second quote comes from Clement of Alexandria, who lived approximately 150-215.

““And on the sixth day God finished His works which He made, and rested on the seventh day from all His works which He made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because in it



He rested from all His works which God began to create.’... Moreover, [they spoke] concerning **the seventh day, which all men acknowledge**; but the most know not that what among the Hebrews is called the “Sabbath,” is translated into Greek the “Seventh” (ebdomas), **a name which is adopted by every nation, although they know not the reason of the appellation**” (*To Autolycus*, book 2, Chapters 11-12).

**“But the seventh day is recognised as sacred, not by the Hebrews only, but also by the Greeks; according to which the whole world of all animals and plants revolve...”** (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, Book 5, Chapter 14).

These two Christian authors, though writing about 100 or more years after our two Jewish sources, express similar sentiments. Philo and Clement also seem to agree that other things in nature, such as animals, are affected in some way or another by the seventh-day Sabbath or the seven-day cycle. Three of these sources convey that the Sabbath has had a degree of impact upon all nations. Clement mentioned both Hebrews and Greeks as having been impacted.

These four primary sources convey the idea that the Sabbath was recognized as sacred among different nations, but especially among the Greeks. Philo goes so far as to say ‘the whole world.’ Maybe peoples from different nations were affected not just by resting on the day, but also by language or some other custom(s). Theophilus stated that every nation recognized the seventh day by a name in their language for that day (appellation).

It would be difficult to verify what every nation in the first century named the seventh day of the week. However, we can look at two significant examples in this chapter. This means that etymology is another field of study to help us validate these statements.

The Septuagint and the New Testament were both composed in the koine Greek language. This form of Greek began around the time of Alexander the Great (335 BC) and was still common until at least the fourth century AD. During the first few centuries of *koine*, the Greeks had sustained contact with the Jewish people.

The Hebrew word for Sabbath is *Shabbat* or *Sabbat*. The word

*sabbaton* was developed in the koine Greek language to refer to the seventh day Sabbath. We can see that it is phonetically derived from the Hebrew word for the seventh day.

The Eastern Church, which retained the use of Greek, continued to revere the seventh day Sabbath for many centuries after Christ. This fact is reflected by the modern Greek name for Saturday (*sabbato* or *savvato*) and Friday (*paraskevi*, which means day of preparation [for the Sabbath]).

Latin is another language to consider. As a written language, it developed in the last few centuries BC into the early AD period. The name for the day that was anciently called “Saturn’s Day” is *Sabbata* or a variation thereof. Again, we can see the basic phonetic sounds for Sabbat/Shabbat preserved in this word. In fact, there are many languages, both active and dead, that have similar words for Saturday.

Language is one way that we know a practice or word has prevalence in a culture. The culture acknowledged the existence of the practice and reinforced its knowledge by introducing a word to express it.

These sources are very helpful in our search to understand the prevalence of the Sabbath in the early Roman Empire. Alone, they may be enough to confirm its prevalence among non-Jewish and non-Christian peoples. However, these ancient writers had a reason for their statements.

Josephus lived in Rome and was very familiar with the Romans. Philo and Clement lived in Alexandria, which was a hub of knowledge in the ancient world and a center for Hellenistic studies. In other words, their statements were not made in vacuum. They are summarizing the subject matter based upon other extant sources in their times, some of which is available for us to study today. This evidence will bring clarity to their statements and this subject matter.

The next group of sources we will examine are mostly composed of writers from the early Roman Empire.

## Chapter 2

### Roman Sources

Before we can get into the primary sources from the Roman world, we must review a little bit of history (as a side note: the chapter title ‘Roman Sources’ does not mean that all the authors were Roman, but that they lived in the Roman world).

The Jewish people first made major contact with the Romans after the Maccabean revolt (168-165 BC). They defeated the Seleucids and gained religious freedom. They eventually won political freedom as well. According to I Maccabees and Josephus, they sent envoys to Rome to seek a peace treaty with them and to receive recognition as a sovereign state. These appear to be confirmed in later years. (For sources on this, see: I Macc. 8:22-23, 12:1-4; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 12.10.6, 13.5.8, 13.9.2, 14.8.5).

In these early years of contact, it is very likely that trade developed between the two groups (though it is possible that trade was previously developed). About 139 BC, the pretor of Rome, Hispania, expelled all Jewish people from the city who were not citizens. It follows that there was a significant Jewish population at Rome (Jewish Encyclopedia 1905: Rome).

In the 60s BC, a civil war broke out between rivals in the Hasmonean dynasty. The Romans intervened, conquered Jerusalem, and placed the Jewish people under their supervision. Tribute was placed upon them and some Jewish people were taken captive to Rome (Jewish Encyclopedia 1905: Rome). More people were likely taken to Rome when the city was captured by pro-Roman forces again in 37 BC. While in Rome, the Jewish population continued to increase. Some were slaves, but others were free.

These events would have allowed the religious observances of the Jewish people to become known to the Romans. This was true particularly because the Jewish people were so different than the Romans. Later in this chapter, we will briefly summarize their differences.

As time passed, the Jewish population continued to grow and be recognized. In the second half of the first century BC, the Romans gave protections to the Jewish people with regards to their religious practices, including the Sabbath. This trend started in the time of Julius Caesar (Josephus, *Ant.* 14.10.1-26), was continued by Augustus (ibid, 16.6.1-8), and again confirmed by Claudius (ibid, 19.5.1-3; Claudius' decree seems to have been caused by Caligula's poor treatment of Alexandrian Jews). Synagogues existed in Rome during the time of Augustus (30 BC-14 AD).

Josephus is the main primary source for many of these early decrees. Philo provides some corroborating evidence of these protections. He wrote that the Romans upheld the Jewish people's practice of sending money to Jerusalem, made sure that distributions were saved for them until after the Sabbath, and that Augustus made provision for Temple sacrifices (*Embassy to Gaius*, 152-158, 315-317). Furthermore, the following Roman authors confirm religious protections for Jewish people: Seneca (as quoted from Augustine, *The City of God*, 6.11); Tacitus, *The Histories*, 5:4-5; and Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 37.17.1. These Roman sources will all be quoted later in this chapter.

Some of the protections afforded by these emperors relating to the Sabbath continued for centuries later. We find them repeated as late as the time of Justinian. These details are reviewed in another booklet *Sabbath and Sunday Laws in the Roman Empire*, (McDonald, 2020).

This brief account of relations between the Romans and the Jewish people help us to understand that the Romans were exposed to Jewish religious practices for many years before the book of Acts. Moreover, the Roman decrees demonstrate that the magistrates had more than just a fleeting knowledge of Judaism.

For instance, the Augustan law which protected Sabbath observance allowed the Jewish people protection from Friday at 3 pm through the end of Sabbath. This means that there was a recognition that the Sabbath started on Friday sunset/evening time. The law allowed the people enough time to prepare for the seventh-day rest. As another example, consider the decrees which protected the Jewish people's practice of sending money to Jeru-

salem. Magistrates needed to know a significant amount about Jewish people to craft their edicts.

The number of Jewish people in this time period is debated, but it must have been numerous. Synagogues were found in many major cities in the first century AD Mediterranean world. The New Testament text informs us that: “For the Law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath” (Acts 15:21). Below, I have included some Roman sources that describe the numbers of Jewish people in this time period.

Cicero, who lived from 106-43 BC, said that the Jewish people were a great multitude, and they participated in public assemblies: “But to resist this barbarous superstition were an act of dignity, to despise the multitude of Jews, which at times was most unruly in the assemblies in defence of the interests of the republic, was an act of the greatest wisdom...” (*Pro Flacco*, 28)

Tacitus marveled that the Jewish people protected the birth of children so that their numbers would increase: “However, they take steps to increase their numbers. They count it a crime to kill any of their later-born children, and they believe that the souls of those who die in battle or under persecution are immortal. Thus they think much of having children and nothing of facing death” (*Histories*, 5:5).

Dio Cassius, writing about Roman history, remarked multiple times about the number of Jewish people in Rome.

“They have also another name that they have acquired: the country has been named Judaea, and the people themselves Jews. I do not know how this title came to be given them, but it applies also to all the rest of mankind, although of alien race, who affect their customs. This class exists even among the Romans, and though often repressed has increased to a very great extent and has won its way to the right of freedom in its observances. They are distinguished from the rest of mankind in practically every detail of life, and especially by the fact that they do not honour any of the usual gods, but show extreme reverence for one particular divinity” (*Roman History*, 37.17.1-2).

“As the Jews had flocked to Rome in great numbers and were converting many of the natives to their ways, he [Tiberius] banished them” (ibid, 57.18.5).

(speaking of Claudius) “As for the Jews, who had again increased so greatly that by reason of their multitude it would have been hard without raising a tumult to bar them from the city, he did not drive them out, but ordered them, while continuing their traditional mode of life, not to hold meetings. He also disbanded the clubs, which had been reintroduced by Gaius” (ibid, 60.6.6).

Another factor that contributed to the prevalence of the Sabbath (and other practices) were the proselytization efforts of the Jewish people. Dio Cassius noted this twice (quotes above). Horace stated: “...for we are the big majority – and we, like the Jews, will compel you to make one of our throng” (*Satires*, 1.4.142-143). It seems that the Jewish people had a reputation for winning others to their practices. This is attested to in the New Testament. Jesus said: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert...” (Matthew 23:15a).

Between trade, travel, and proselytizing efforts, it is not difficult to understand how Jewish religious practices could have spread in the Roman world. The stark religious differences between the two groups would have allowed Jewish people to stand out more from the general population.

In the rest of this chapter, we will look at primary sources within Roman culture from the first century BC through the second century AD. These quotes will give us important clues to ascertain the prevalence of Sabbath knowledge in the early Roman Empire. Most of these writers composed their works in Latin, though some used koine Greek.

### **Pompeius Trogus (1<sup>st</sup> Century BC – preserved through Justinus’ Epitome)**

“And Moses, having reached Damascus, the birth-place of his forefathers, took possession of Mount Sinai, on his arrival at which, after having suffered, together with his followers, from a seven days’ fast in the desert of Arabia, he **consecrated (sacrauit)** every seventh day (according to the present custom of

the nation) for a fast day, and to be perpetually called a **sabbath (Sabbata)**, because that day had ended at once their hunger and their wanderings” (*Epitome*, 36.2).

### **Horace (65-8 B.C.)**

“Surely you said there was something you wanted to tell me in private.” “I mind it well, but I’ll tell you at a better time. To-day is the **thirtieth Sabbath (tricesima sabbata)**. Would you affront the circumcised Jews? “I have no scruples,” say I. “But I have. I’m somewhat weaker brother, one of the many. You will pardon me; I’ll talk another day” (*Satires*, 1.9.67-73).

### **Strabo (64 BC-22 AD)**

“Pompey seized the city, it is said, after watching for the day of fasting, when the Judeans were abstaining from all work...” (*Geography*, 16.2.40).

### **Ovid (43 BC-17 AD)**

“Nor let Adonis bewailed by Venus, escape you; and the seventh holy-day observed by the Jew of Syria (**Cultaque Iudaeo septima sacra Syro**)” (*The Art of Love*, Book 1, part 3).

“...on the day, too, when the festival recurs, observed each seventh day by the Syrian of Palestine, a day not suited for the transaction of business” (*The Art of Love*, Book 1, part 11).

“And don’t you fear showers; nor let the **Sabbaths (sabbata)** of the stranger detain you...” (*The Cure for Love*, Part 3).

### **SENECA (4 BC to 65 AD)**

Some of Seneca’s writings have been lost, but others have been preserved either through manuscripts or quotes from other ancient authors. The pro-Roman Church writer and thinker Augustine quotes him in the work “The City of God.” In book 6, chapter 11, he records the words of Seneca about the Jewish people.

“What Seneca Thought Concerning the Jews....Seneca, among the other superstitions of civil theology, also found fault with the sacred things of the Jews, and especially the sabbaths, affirming that they act uselessly in keeping those seventh days, whereby they lose through idleness about the seventh part of their life, and also many things which demand immediate attention are dam-

aged. The Christians, however, who were already most hostile to the Jews, he did not dare to mention...When he was speaking concerning those Jews, he said, "When, meanwhile, the customs of that most accursed nation have gained such strength that they have been now received in all lands, the conquered have given laws to the conquerors"...For, he says, those, "however, know the cause of their rites, while the greater part of the people know not why they perform theirs" (idem).

Seneca mocked the lighting of Sabbath lamps. He says it should be banned because the gods do not need light. "Precepts are commonly given as to how the gods should be worshipped. But let us forbid lamps to be lighted on the **Sabbath (sabbatis)**, since the gods do not need light, neither do men take pleasure in soot..." (*Epistle 95.47*).

#### **Petronius (27-66 AD)**

"The Jew may worship his pig-god and clamour in the ears of high heaven, but unless he also cuts back his foreskin with the knife, he shall go forth from the holy city cast forth from the people, and transgress the **Sabbath (sabbata)** by breaking the law of fasting..." (*Poem*, section 24).

#### **PERSIUS (34-62 AD)**

"But when the days Of Herod come, and Superstition sways, When greasy lamps pour forth their smoky flame, And gaudy chaplets solemn rites proclaim; When earthen goblets foam, and the coarse dish, Scarce holds within its rim the spreadish fish; You move your silent lips, your colour's fled, And with the circumcis'd the **Sabbath (sabata)** dread..." (*Satires*, 5.237-244).

#### **Frontinus (30-103 AD)**

"The deified Vespasian Augustus attacked the **Jews on their Sabbath (Iudaeos Saturni die)**, a day on which it is sinful for them to do any business, and so defeated them" (*Strategems*, 2.1.17).

#### **Martial (d. 104 AD)**

"The stench of the bed of a drained marsh; of the raw vapours of Sulphur springs; the putrid reek of a sea-water fishpond; of a stale he-goat in the midst of his amours; of the military boot of a fagged-out veteran; of a fleece twice dyed with purple; of the



breath of fasting **Sabbatarian** (**sabbatariorum**)  
Jews...” (*Epigrams*, 4:4).

**Tacitus (writing approx. 117 AD)**

“To ensure his future hold over the people, Moses introduced a new cult, which was the opposite of all other religions. All that we hold sacred (*sacra*) they held profane, and allowed practices which we abominate...They are said to have devoted the seventh day to rest, because that day brought an end to their troubles. Later, finding idleness alluring, they gave up the seventh year as well to sloth. Others maintain that they do this in honour of Saturn; either because their religious principles are derived from the *Idaei*, who are supposed to have been driven out with Saturn and become the ancestors of the Jewish people ; or else because, of the seven constellations which govern the lives of men, the star of Saturn moves in the topmost orbit and exercises peculiar influence, and also because most of the heavenly bodies move round their courses in multiples of seven. Whatever their origin, these rites are sanctioned by their antiquity. Their other customs are impious and abominable, and owe their prevalence to their depravity...” (*The Histories*, 5:4-5).

**Plutarch (46-119 AD)**

“But the Jews, because it was the Sabbath day (*Sabbaton*), sat in their places immovable, while the enemy were planting ladders against the walls and capturing the defences, and they did not get up, but remained there, fast bound in the toils of superstition as in one great net” (*Superstition*, 8; Plutarch wrote in Greek).

**Juvenal (d. 140 AD)**

“Some chance to have a father who fears the **Sabbaths** (**sabbata**), They adore nothing besides the clouds, and the Deity of heaven: Nor do they think swine’s flesh to be different from human From which the father abstain’d; and soon they lay aside their foreskins: But used to despise the Roman laws, They learn, and keep, and fear the Jewish law, Whatsoever Moses hath delivered in the secret volume: Not to shew the ways, unless to one observing the same rites, To lead the circumcised only to a sought-for fountain But the father is in fault, to whom every seventh day was Idle, and he did not meddle with any part of life” (*Satires*, 14:96-106).

### **Suetonius (69-122 AD)**

“Once more: ‘Not even a Jew, my dear Tiberius, fasts so scrupulously on his **sabbaths (sabbatis)** as I have to-day; for it was not until after the first hour of the night that I ate two mouthfuls of bread in the bath before I began to be anointed” (*Life of Augustus*, 76.2).

“The grammarian Diogenes, who used to lecture every **Sabbath (sabbatis)** at Rhodes, would not admit Tiberius when he came to hear him on a different day, but sent a message by a common slave of his, putting him off to the **seventh day (septimum diem)**” (*Life of Tiberius*, 32.2).

### **Cassius Dio – 155-235 AD**

(describing Pompey’s conquest of Jerusalem) “16 Most of the city, to be sure, he took without any trouble, as he was received by the party of Hyrcanus; but the temple itself, which the other party had occupied, he captured only with difficulty. 2 For it was on high ground and was fortified by a wall of its own, and if they had continued defending it on all days alike, he could not have got possession of it. As it was, they made an exception of what are called the days of Saturn, and by doing no work at all on those days afforded the Romans an opportunity in this interval to batter down the wall. 3The latter, on learning of this superstitious awe of theirs, made no serious attempts the rest of the time, but on those days, when they came round in succession, assaulted most vigorously. 4Thus the defenders were captured on the day of Saturn, without making any defence, and all the wealth was plundered. The kingdom was given to Hyrcanus, and Aristobulus was carried away. 5This was the course of events at that time in Palestine; for this is the name that has been given from of old to the whole country extending from Phoenicia to Egypt along the inner sea. They have also another name that they have acquired: the country has been named Judaea, and the people themselves Jews....1 I do not know how this title came to be given to them, but it applies also to all the rest of mankind, although of alien race, who affect their customs. This class exists even among the Romans, and though often repressed has increased to a very great extent and has won its way to the right of freedom in its observances. 2 They are distinguished from the rest of mankind in practically every detail of life, and especially by the fact that they do not honour any of the usual gods, but show extreme reverence

for one particular divinity. They never had any statue of him even in Jerusalem itself, but believing him to be unnamable and invisible, they worship him in the most extravagant fashion on earth 3 They build to him a temple that was extremely large and beautiful, except in so far as it was open and roofless, and likewise dedicated to him the day called the day of Saturn, on which, among many other most peculiar observances, they undertake no serious occupation” (*Roman History*, 37.16.1-5, 17.1-3).

(describing the Roman conquest of Jerusalem under Herod [the great]) “The Jews, indeed, had done much injury to the Romans, for the race is very bitter when aroused to anger, but they suffered far more themselves. The first of them to be captured were those who were fighting for the precinct of their god, and then the rest on the day even **then called the day of Saturn**. 5 And so excessive were they in their devotion to religion that the first set of prisoners, those who has been captured along with the temple, obtained leave from Sosius, when the day of Saturn came round again, and went up into the temple and there performed all the customary rites, together with the rest of the people. 6 These people Antony entrusted to a certain Herod to govern; but Antigonus he bound to a cross and flogged, a punishment no other king had suffered at the hands of the Romans, and afterwards slew him” (ibid, 49.22.4-6).

While Cassius Dio does not live in the early Roman Empire, he attests to events that happened in that era.

These are fourteen authors from the Roman Imperial period that mention the Sabbath. Many of them were well-known in their time. Notice that most of them used a Latin word that corresponded phonetically to the Hebrew word for Sabbath (*sabbata* or *sabbatis*). Plutarch, writing in koine Greek, used *sabbaton*. Since these writers used this language, it means that the intended audience was more likely than not to be familiar with the term and its corresponding meaning. That would be the main purpose of using the term in the first place. These writers would have contributed to prevalence of the Jewish people and the Sabbath among common people.

Below, I have provided analysis for these authors. I have listed a significant detail relating to the Sabbath and the authors who ref-

erenced it.

- **Knew that the Sabbath related to Jewish people** (all 14)
- **Used a Latin or Greek word that phonetically corresponded to Hebrew word Shabbat or Sabbat** [10]: (Pompeius, Horace, Ovid, Seneca, Petronius, Persius, Martial, Plutarch, Juvenal, Suetonius)
- **Acknowledged that the Jewish people rested/abstained from labor on the day** [9]: (Horace, Strabo, Ovid, Seneca, Frontinus, Tacitus, Plutarch [indirect], Juvenal, Dio [twice])
- **Mentioned the seventh-day of the week as it relates to the Sabbath** [6]: (Pompeius, Ovid, Seneca, Tacitus, Juvenal, Suetonius)\*
- **Moses was mentioned** [4]: (Pompieus, Strabo [who discussed him in the greater context of the quote and has considerable details about him], Tacitus, Juvenal)
- **Knew Jewish people observed as sacred/dedicated to their God** [4]: (Pompieus, Ovid, Plutarch [indirect], Dio)
- **Associated the Sabbath with the Day of Saturn** [3]: (Frontinus, Tacitus, Dio Cassius [twice])
- **Lighting of lamps** [2]: (Seneca, Persius)
- **Knew that there were customary rites performed on Sabbath** (Dio)\*\*
- **Knew that teaching happened on the day** (Seutonius)
- **Knew it was revealed to the Jewish people in the desert** (Pompieus)

\*This point is extremely valuable for the subject matter. As I will explain in another research work, many pagans considered the day of Saturn to be the first day of the week in the pagan planetary week. When these ancient authors mentioned that Saturn's day was the seventh day of the week for the Jewish people, it was an acknowledgement that two seven-day weekly cycles existed in the Roman world.

\*\* Dio was likely referring to the special Sabbath sacrifices in Numb. 28:1-10 and the shewbread in Lev. 24:5-9, both of which were carried out every Sabbath.

Of the fourteen authors that referenced the Sabbath, all of them connected it to Jewish people. Ten of them used a Latin or Greek word which would phonetically match the proper Hebrew word for Sabbath. Nine of them mentioned the Sabbath rest (Plutarch is

listed as being indirect because he refers to their unwillingness to defend Jerusalem on the day). Six of them mentioned the Sabbath as being the seventh day of the week. Scattered among the authors are references to other specific details pertaining to the day such as Moses and the lighting of lamps.

Three authors associated the Sabbath with the Day of Saturn, which we call Saturday today. This is one way that we can identify when the Sabbath is today. Frontinus' quote is of note because he labels the day "Iudaeos Saturni die" or the "Jew's day of Saturn." This description was likely employed to differentiate it from the Roman observance of that same day, which was the first day of the week and dedicated to a different deity.

Of these quotes, several of them directly allude to the prevalence of Jewish worship practices.

Juvenal, while writing a Satire, said: "Some chance to have a father who fears the Sabbaths." Apparently, some Gentiles wanted to marry into a Jewish family. Horace discussed "...one of the many" who did not want to attend to certain matters on Sabbath. The Latin reads: "unus multorum" meaning one of many or one of a multitude.

Cassius Dio wrote: "They have also another name that they have acquired: the country has been named Judea, and the people themselves Jews. I do not know how this title came to be given to them, but **it applies also to all the rest of mankind, although of alien race, who affect their customs.** This class exists even among the Romans, and though often repressed has increased to a very great extent and has won its way to the right of freedom in its observances" (Roman History, 37:16-17). Dio recognized that there were people of different nationalities who practiced Jewish customs; they were also called Jews.

Of these authors, two of them especially stand out: Seneca and Tacitus. As mentioned earlier, Seneca wrote an epistle discouraging people from lighting lamps on Sabbath. Moreover, Augustine quoted Seneca as stating: "When, meanwhile, **the customs of that most accursed nation have gained such strength that they have been now received in all lands, the conquered have given laws to the conquerors.**" He claimed that Jewish customs "were

received in all lands.’ Josephus Philo, and Theophilus expressed similar details.

Tacitus wrote that their practices were sanctioned, which agrees with Josephus and Philo, and that they were prevalent! “Whatever their origin, **these rites are sanctioned by their antiquity**. Their other customs are impious and abominable, and **owe their prevalence to their depravity.**”

What additional factors might have enabled the prevalence of Jewish worship practices, particularly the Sabbath? Notice that Tacitus labeled the ‘depravity’ of these practices as the reason that they spread. Said another way: the novelty and strangeness from traditional Roman worship aided its spread.

Their worship practices stood in sharp contrast to the Roman mindset towards religion. Among these ideals were the following: the belief in one God; no images, statues, or idols; one earthly Temple (instead of many temples); the True God only dwells in Heaven; the seventh-day Sabbath; different festivals based on a different calendar; circumcision; not eating unclean animal meat, including pork; and so forth.

When we consider these differences, one can hardly be surprised that the Jewish people stood out so markedly! This difference aided its diffusion throughout the Roman world.

In Deuteronomy chapter 4, the LORD said, “See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. 6 Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’”

God told the Israelites that His commandments would instruct them in wisdom but also be a witness to other nations. This is certainly true of Roman culture. God’s people were set apart from the nations, and they took notice of the difference.

In summary, the knowledge about the Sabbath certainly did not happen overnight in Roman culture. It developed over time as a

result of contact between Romans and Jewish people. It became common place to understand the ‘Sabbath of the Jews’ as sabbatis or ‘their saturn day.’ The writings of popular authors, such as those listed above, would have propagated knowledge of the Jewish way of life and the Sabbath to the broader public.

In other words, it would be hard NOT to know about the Sabbath!

One factor that may have facilitated the prevalence of the Sabbath in the Roman world was the view that the sign of Saturn was negative/adverse for certain activities. This is reviewed in **Appendix A**.

There is one last reference to discuss in this chapter. I am including it only because it attests to the perpetuation of similar information we have reviewed into the late Imperial period. Rutilius Namatianus lived in the late fourth/early fifth century AD. He was one of the last pagan Roman writers. In approximately 417 AD, he wrote an account of his journey back to Roman Gaul.

“We fling fit answer to the filthy race  
That circumcision shamelessly upholds –  
Dire folly’s root; cold **sabbaths (sabbata)** charm their heart;  
And yet their heart is colder than their creed.  
**Each seventh day (septimal quaeque dies)** to shameful sloth’s  
condemned,  
Effeminate picture of a wearied god!  
Their other fancies from the mart of lies  
Methinks not even all boys could believe.  
Would that Judea ne’er been subdued  
By Pompey’s wars and under Titus’ sway!  
**The plague’s contagion all the wider spreads;  
The conquered presses on the conquering race”**  
(*A Voyage Home to Gaul*, 1.386-398).

His writing upholds many previous ideals expressed by earlier writers. He used the Latin word *sabbata* in reference to the Sabbath. He recognized that it was the seventh day of the week. Lastly, he referenced the prevalence of Jewish practices by how it spreads and presses against the “conquering race.”

Thus, the prevalence of the Sabbath could not only be contained

to the early Imperial period. It went on much longer. This explains the necessity of protections under later Roman Laws, such as those in the Codex Theodosianus and Codex Justinus.

As referenced in other works and as mentioned earlier, the Sabbath continued to be observed by most Christians at least into the fifth century.



## Chapter 3

### The New Testament

In the New Testament, we find a number of references that would confirm the primary sources previously reviewed in this work. We will take a brief overview of them with comments where appropriate.

In Mark chapter 7, Jesus was approached by a Greek woman who was from Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive a demon out of her daughter. She was noted for her faith and the demon was driven out.

In Luke 7:1-10, we learn about a centurion whose servant was sick. He sent Jewish elders to ask Jesus to pray for the servant. In this exchange, the elders confess something powerful about this centurion: “This man deserves to have you do this because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue” (verses 4-5).

The Jewish elders were willing to go to Jesus because this Gentile built their synagogue! That is a powerful testimony to the way that some Gentiles interacted with Jewish people. Funding the construction of a synagogue was not a light undertaking and expressed an appreciation for Jewish practices.

The Gospel of John has two interesting references, both of which will be quoted below:

#### **John 7:35-36**

“35 The Jews said to one another, ‘Where does this man intend to go that we cannot find him? Will he go where our people live scattered among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks? 36 What did he mean when he said, ‘You will look for me, but you will not find me,’ and ‘Where I am, you cannot come?’”

In this first quote, the Jewish people referenced their people who lived among the Greeks. They asked Jesus if He intended to teach the Greeks as well. Why would this statement make sense unless it was understood that at least some Greeks would even want to hear Him?

This thought is supported John 12. In this chapter, Jesus saw some Greeks who had traveled to Jerusalem for Passover. This shows their obvious interest in Jewish religious practices; they wanted to see Jesus.

### **John 12:20-22**

“20 Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” 22 Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.”

The New Testament work which provides the most insight regarding this subject is the book of Acts. Those Gentiles who followed the moral precepts of the Old Testament were called God-fearers or worshipers of God. A similar term *eusebes* (devout) was also used. These terms were used for Cornelius, the Gentile convert in Acts chapter 10.

“At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. 2 He and all his family were **devout and God-fearing**; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. 3 One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!”... 22 The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. **He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people.** A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.” 23 Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests” (Acts 10:1-3, 22-23).

This account connects Cornelius’ devoutness and God-fearing to his relationship with the Jewish people. It would make sense for this man to be among the first known Gentile converts through the Apostle Peter’s ministry. His interest in Jewish religious practices and high credibility among the Jewish people would make his belief in Messiah much easier to accept among Peter’s Jewish friends. In Acts 11:1-18, Peter recounted the story and his Jewish friends seem to immediately receive it (especially see verses 15-18).

In the rest of the book of Acts, the Apostle Paul ministers in Jewish synagogues. While there, he encountered Greeks and other Gentiles. At times, they seemed to be much more interested in the gospel message than some of their Jewish colleagues.

**Acts 13:14-16, 26, 32-33, 42-44, 48, 50**

“14 From Perga they went on to Psidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the Synagogue and sat down. 15 After reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak. 16 Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: “Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship (fear) God, listen to me!...26 “Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent...32 We tell you the good news: What God has promised our fathers 33 he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus...”

“42 As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people (Gentiles) invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. 43 Now when the congregation was broken up, many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas: who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God.44 And the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God...48 And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord...50 But the Jewish leaders incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.”

In these verses, Paul ministered in Psidian Antioch. This city located in the region of Galatia in modern-day Turkey (to be differentiated from Syrian Antioch which is in modern-day Syria). There was clearly a significant number of Gentiles at the synagogue present to hear whatever was spoken on that particular Sabbath. Paul directly addresses them twice (v 16, 26), which means the message was addressed to all in attendance.

What was his message? Paul’s message focused on Jesus being the Messiah, His suffering for our sins, and His subsequent resurrection. How did the people respond?

In verse 42, we learn that Gentiles requested to hear more about this message on the next Sabbath. These verses are among others that dismiss any notion that the Gentiles immediately wanted to abandon the Sabbath when they heard the gospel message. The Gentiles heard the message of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, yet they still wanted to be taught on Sabbath. The first day of the week, which we call Sunday today, was never mentioned.

In verse 43, we learn about religious proselytes. These were Gentiles who had committed themselves fully to all observances of Judaism, including circumcision. In verse 44, almost the entire city came to hear the Word of God on the next Sabbath. When the message about Jesus' resurrection spread, no one hesitated gathering on Sabbath to hear more. This crowd was mostly composed of Gentiles; they heard the message and were excited about this opportunity of new life (verse 48). In verse 50, the Jewish people who did not receive the message conspired to have the disciples expelled.

#### **Acts 14:1-2**

“1 At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that **a great number of Jews and Greeks believed**. 2 But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.”

Once again, notice that a great number of Jews AND Greeks believed. Other Gentiles had to be dissuaded for fear they might accept the message.

#### **Acts 15:19-21**

“19 ‘It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 20 Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. 21 For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.’”

The Jerusalem Council is recorded in Acts chapter 15. While

there is much I could explain here about this council, the conclusion has been very misunderstood. The list of four moral behaviors to avoid in verses 19-20 cannot in anyway be construed as the ‘minimum level of obedience for Gentile converts’ (as I have so often heard). The Apostles in other places affirm a much higher standard than that (see Gal. 5:19-21 for an example).

In this conversation, verse 21 is often overlooked. The Gentiles were reminded that they could learn the Law of Moses in the synagogue on the Sabbath. In other words, nothing was suggested to dissuade them from this behavior. It affirmed a prevalent practice in the Roman world.

Furthermore, no mention of an alternative Sabbath day was mentioned. If you want to hear about Jewish practices or the moral teachings of the Old Testament, two questions have to be answered.

Q: Where would you hear such teachings? A: In the Synagogue.

Q: When would you hear such teachings? A: On the Sabbath.

Sabbath attendance/observance was still encouraged by the Apostles. Since the Bible also tells us a story, this fact is reaffirmed throughout the rest of the book of Acts. We see large numbers of Gentiles in synagogues as the gospel message goes into the Roman world.

### **Acts 16:1-3, 11-15**

“1 Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. 2 The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 3 Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ...<sup>11</sup> From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. 12 From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days. 13 On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. 14 One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple

cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. 15 When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my house.' And she persuaded us...."

According to the NIV study notes, the city of Philippi did not have a Jewish synagogue. It was a Roman colony. Secondly, Paul still found people who were gathered praying on the Sabbath. Of them was a woman named Lydia, who is called a "worshiper of God." This Gentile woman, along with others, listened to Paul's message. She accepted the Word of the Lord.

### **Acts 17:1-4, 10-12, 16-17**

17 When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2 As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said. 4 **Some of the Jews were persuaded** and joined Paul and Silas, as **did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women...** 10 As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. 11 Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. 12 As a result, many of them believed, as did also **a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men...** 16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and **God-fearing Greeks**, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there."

### **Acts 18:1-8**

1 After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. 2 There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, 3 and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. 4 **Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to per-**

**suade Jews and Greeks...7 Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. 8 Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.”**

### **Acts 19:17-19**

**“17 When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. 18 Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. 19 A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.”**

In these accounts from Acts, it is evident that there were not just a few Greeks/Gentiles in the synagogues, but great numbers. Another interesting detail is that those who practiced sorcery burned their sorcery scrolls when they heard the gospel message. This indicates that they understood from the message that they could not retain their ties to other religious practices.

### **Acts 22:12**

**“And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there.”**

Ananias was called devout according to the law and had a good report among the Jews. It is not abundantly clear if he was Jewish or considered reputable because of his lifestyle. The Greek term used for devout in this verse is the same one used of Cornelius (see Acts 10 above). The last verses we will examine in this chapter come from the Apostle Paul.

### **Colossians 2:16-17**

**“16 Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. 17 These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”**

The traditional thought on these verses is that the Apostle Paul is either condemning Old Testament celebrations or licensing any celebrations that one can choose.

In verse 16, the underlying Greek translated as “with regard to” is *en meros*. It means ones’ participation in something. The church of Colossae appears to be mostly Gentile converts (Col. 1:27). He told them to let no one judge them for their participation in the Sabbaths, New Moons, or the Feasts of Leviticus 23.

The Feast Days, New Moon Celebrations, and the Sabbath are mentioned together multiple times before Paul wrote Colossians 2 (see I Chron. 23:31, Nehemiah 10:33, Ezekiel 45:17a for some examples). Thus, we can see that these three special times are used together in the Old Testament. When Paul used these terms in his letter to Colossae, a context of meaning already existed.

The Greek words used for each of these three celebrations bears witness to this as well. The Greek word translated as festival is *heorte*. It is used 27 times in the New Testament; all of them reference the feast days in Leviticus chapter 23. Paul uses the verb form of *heorte* in I Corinthians 5:8 to instruct the Corinthians to keep Passover and Unleavened Bread.

The Greek word translated as New Moon is *noumenia*; it is only used once in the New Testament. It refers to the New Moon celebrations (Numbers 28:11-15). Finally, the Greek word translated as Sabbath is *sabbaton*, and it refers to the seventh-day Sabbath.

The Colossians were being influenced by a philosophy called Asceticism; it teaches that anything physically pleasurable was viewed as morally unapproved or a sin. These three celebratory times were very enjoyable and involved special food and drink. Thus, the ascetics would not have approved of their observance.

Paul’s words confirm that practices traditionally considered Jewish were common in the Gentile world. He affirmed that it is acceptable to honor these days and no one should judge us for our participation in them.

The New Testament text makes it clear that there is no bias presented against the Sabbath, but that its observance continued in early Christianity. This makes sense when one considers the mindset of a Gentile in the Roman world. There was a degree of knowledge and even appreciation for Jewish things such as the



Sabbath.

After reviewing these verses, one can see that the comments of Josephus, Philo, Theophilus, Clement and Roman sources are supported by the New Testament text.

The implications of this research also help us clarify the meaning of another historical text, Pliny's Letter to Trajan, which is discussed in **Appendix B**.

## Conclusion

The Roman and Jewish peoples established contact with one another in the second century BC. The Jewish people, along with their very different religious practices, gradually became known in the Roman world. Among the practices that helped them stand out was the seventh-day Sabbath.

Jewish and Christian sources attest to a substantial degree of Sabbath prevalence in the early Roman Empire. Other writings in the Roman world confirm them with more details. The New Testament brings the previous sources together in a meaningful, profound way. Accounts are given of Jews and Gentiles in the same worship setting. Gentiles showed interest in the Jewish people and their ways. They responded to the message of a Jewish Messiah which was presented on the Sabbath.

From the first century BC through the second century AD, several factors facilitated the spread of Sabbath knowledge in the Roman world:

First of all, Roman cultural views of the sign of Saturn included ideals congruent with some Sabbath observances (discussed in Appendix A).

Secondly, the Sabbath was protected by law. This protection would strengthen Gentile interest in its practice.

Third, popular writers of the period described the difference between traditional polytheistic worship and Jewish religious practices; the Sabbath was prominent in those writings. This contributed to a broader understanding of the Jewish people and the Sabbath.

Fourth, the Jewish people spread to different places of the Empire (through trade and settlement). Where significant numbers of Jewish people lived, synagogues were often constructed. Some-

times Gentiles contributed to these buildings, as we learned in Luke 7:1-5. These Jewish communities and merchants provided accessibility for Gentiles to learn Jewish practices; this enabled the previous three factors to come together in a tangible way.

Fifth, Christians who observed the Sabbath would have deepened Sabbath prevalence. As time passed, this added a second sizable sub-group in the Roman world which observed the same practice.

Sixth, Jews and Christians shared a similar manuscript to derive their beliefs (the Tanakh or Old Testament). This was weakened in some areas starting in the mid-second century. At that time, Gnosticism and Greek philosophy exerted influence upon Christian thinkers in popular learning centers such as Rome and Alexandria.

Of these factors, five of them had long-term effects. Laws protecting the Sabbath were repeated into the sixth century; the writings of popular authors who discussed the Sabbath continued to be copied and propagated; Jewish people continued to be numerous and exert influence; most Christians observed the Sabbath into the fifth century and possibly longer; and the Old Testament still retained importance for both Jews and many Christians.

In light of this research, one can now see that the seventh-day Sabbath was engrained as the day of rest in the first century Roman world. If one wanted a weekly day of rest, there was only one option. The New Testament text confirms that Gentiles expressed interest in Jewish practices, including the Sabbath. When they heard the gospel message, they did not express an interest in replacing or changing it. This has devastating consequences for the traditional view on this subject.

Though ample opportunities are provided, the first day of the week is never depicted as an alternative Sabbath in the New Testament. It also had no protected status in the first century AD. Sunday had very little or no prevalence. In short, none of the six factors described above existed to bolster such an insinuation.

Starting in the mid-second century, Mithraism increased in influence in the Roman world. This development carried with it the idea that Sunday could be a day of rest/celebration. However, this

did not hinder Sabbath prevalence except in areas like Rome and Alexandria where the Roman Church had its greatest influence.

Constantine's 321 edicts certainly promoted Sunday as *another* day of rest, which was congruent with his sun worshiping tendencies/honor of Mithraism. However, his edicts did not ban the Sabbath or reduce its importance. Hundreds of years of engrained Sabbath prevalence did not instantly disappear because of these edicts. As mentioned multiple times, most Christians continued to observe the Sabbath for over one hundred years after Constantine (see p 42 for references).

Constantine also did not specify Sunday as the first day of the week. I have yet to find any imperial document before the 400s AD which acknowledges Sunday as the first day of the week (though by this time many common people did think it was the first day of the week). Sunday was the second day of the week for most pagans in the first century AD.

To assert that Gentile peoples would have automatically gravitated towards the first day of the week or Sunday rests on incorrect assumptions about history and the New Testament. Neither source supports such an hypothesis. The Old Testament was the most common document to guide Christian morality; it certainly did not negate the Sabbath. The New Testament writings do not dissuade Sabbath observance; not a single example links the resurrection with a change in the Sabbath.

The sources and factors discussed in this book help us to understand why the Sabbath remained prevalent for centuries after the book of Acts and continued for most of the imperial period proper.

### **Long-Term Prevalence**

To conclude this work, I would like to provide a glimpse into unpublished research about Sabbath prevalence beyond the Imperial period proper. We hope to publish it in the near future.

In the Western Roman Empire, Sabbath prevalence was weakened by the Roman Church's strong pro-Sunday and anti-Sabbath stances. It was also interrupted and weakened by the Germanic invasions of the fifth and sixth centuries. While Germanic Arians

had tendencies to promote the Sabbath and protections for Jewish people, the constant upheaval and disruption of common life hindered long-term entrenchment of their influence on this subject.

In the sixth century, the Frankish conquests of Arian domains and the efforts of the Roman Church initiated a chain reaction (mainly through church councils) to prevent intermingling between Jews and Christians. This resulted in a reduction in Sabbath prevalence. Simultaneously, the ideal of Sunday rest was being defined and enforced (though not without problems). The establishment of the Holy Roman Empire firmly buttressed these developments.

The situation was much different in the Eastern Empire. The Germanic invasions did not devastate and ruin the East to the degree that the West was affected. Civilization retained its cohesion. Thus, some Sabbath prevalence from prior centuries was allowed to remain in place. For instance, Sabbath protections were retained in the Code of Justinian.

The Sabbath became a weekly feast day in the East. This is juxtaposed to the Western approach, which depicted the Sabbath as a day of mourning. Additionally, the Roman Church taught that the Sabbath was a day of strict fasting from the early fifth century until the tenth century. This major difference between Eastern and Western churches regarding the Sabbath is one reason for their separations in the ninth and eleventh centuries.

Stay tuned as we continue to unveil more discoveries about this subject from the pages of history.

## Appendix A

### Cultural Attitudes Towards Saturn

The Romans viewed the sign of Saturn as a bad omen. Below, we have some quotes in English and Latin with appropriate comments.

#### **Cicero (106-43 BC)**

“Why does an astrologer consider that the moon’s conjunction with the planets Jupiter and Venus at the birth of children is a favorable omen, and its conjunction with Saturn or Mars unfavorable” (On Divination, 1.85).

Latin: “Quid astrologus cur stella Iovis aut Veneris coniuncta cum luna ad ortus puerorum salutaris sit, Saturni Marisque contraria.”

The birth of a child under the signs of Jupiter and Venus were considered ‘salutaris’ which means advantageous, healthful, helpful, or useful. Those born under Saturn and Mars were ‘contraria’ which means opposed, adverse, or the opposite.

#### **Horace (65-8 BC)**

“To thee the protecting power of Jove, outshining that of baleful\* Saturn, brought rescue...” (Odes 2.17.23).

\*Baleful is an English word not used very often. It means threatening or harmful.

Latin: “te Iovis impio tutela Saturno refulgens eripuit voluerisque...”

#### **Tibullus (55-19 BC)**

“Either birds or words of evil omen were my pretexts, or there was the holy day of Saturn to detain me” (*Elegies*, 1.3.17-18).

Latin: “Aut ego sum causatus aves aut omina dira, Saturni **sacram** me tenuisse diem.”

#### **Propertius (50-15 BC)**

“Now have men turned the gods to profit and Jupiter is fooled by

their gold; to profit have they turned the oft-scanned constellations of the slanting zodiac, the blessed star of Jove, the greedy star of Mars, **the sign of Saturn that brings woe to one and all...**" (*Elegies*, 4:1,81-86).

Latin: "nunc pretium fecere deos et (fallitur auro Jupiter), obliquae signa iterate rotae felicesque Iovis stellas Martisque rapaces **et grave Saturni sidus in omne caput.**"

### **Persius (34-62 AD)**

"...and a kindly Jupiter has vanquished for us the malignancy of Saturn..." (Satire, 5:50).

Latin: "Saturnumque gravem nostro Iove frangimus una."

### **Juvenal (d 140)**

English: "And yet your Tanaquil does not herself understand the gloomy threats of Saturn..." (Satire 6.569-571).

Latin: haec tamen ignorat quid sidus triste minetur Saturni, quo laeta Venus se proferat astro, qui mensis damnis..."

These quotes allow us to understand that the Romans had a negative view of the sign of Saturn, which could be tied to the day of the week named such. This sign could affect the way one viewed childbirth or even travel. Tibullus (55-19 BC) discussed the day of Saturn as a 'holy' (sacram) day. Sacram can also mean accursed or set apart for destruction. He expressed an unwillingness to set out on a journey on the sign of Saturn,

The Roman cultural grasp of limitations or prohibitions relating to the sign of Saturn could help them understand Jewish limitations on activities on things such as travel or prohibition of other behaviors like work. Thus, the practice of the Sabbath could have more easily been assimilated into the average Roman's life. This in turn might have facilitated other practices of the Sabbath (such as lighting lamps) to enter into Roman homes.

## Appendix B

### Pliny the Younger's Letter to Trajan

The research in this work could help us understand other documents from early Church history. One of them is Pliny the Younger's letter to Trajan. Pliny served in Trajan's administration and his letters involve an exchange where Christians were discussed. Below I have included an excerpt from Letter 97.

“From Pliny the Younger to Trajan the Emperor: Having never been present at any trials concerning those who profess Christianity...In the meanwhile, the method I have observed towards those who have been brought before me as Christians is this: I asked them whether they were Christians; if they admitted it, I repeated the question twice, and threatened them with punishment; if they persisted, I ordered them to be at once punished: for I was persuaded, whatever the nature of their opinions might be, a contumacious and inflexible obstinacy certainly deserved correction... But this crime spreading (as is usually the case) while it was actually under prosecution, several instances of the same nature occurred. An anonymous information was laid before me containing a charge against several persons, who upon examination denied they were Christians, or had ever been so. They repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered religious rites with wine and incense before your statue (which for that purpose I had ordered to be brought, together with those of the gods), and even reviled [cursing] the name of Christ: **whereas there is no forcing, it is said, those who are really Christians into any of these compliances:** I thought it proper, therefore, to discharge them... Some among those who were accused by a witness in person at first confessed themselves Christians, but immediately after denied it; the rest owned indeed that they had been of that number formerly, but had now (some above three, others more, and a few above twenty years ago) renounced that error. They all worshipped your statue and the images of the gods, uttering imprecations at the same time against the name of Christ...**They affirmed the whole of their guilt, or their error, was, that they met on a stated (fixed) day** before it was light, and addressed a form of prayer to Christ, as to a divinity, binding themselves by a



solemn oath, not for the purposes of any wicked design, but **never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up**; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble, to eat in common a harmless meal. From this custom, however, they desisted after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your commands, I forbade the meeting of any assemblies. After receiving this account, I judged it so much the more necessary to endeavor to extort the real truth, by putting two female slaves to the torture, who were said to officiate in their religious rites; but all I could discover was evidence of an absurd and extravagant superstition...I deemed it expedient, therefore, to adjourn all further proceedings, in order to consult you. For it appears to be a matter highly deserving your consideration, **more especially as great numbers must be involved in the danger of these prosecutions**...In fact, this contagious superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has spread its infection among the neighbouring villages and country. Nevertheless, it still seems possible to restrain its progress. The temples, at least, which were once almost deserted, begin now to be frequented; and the sacred rites, after a long intermission, are again revived...From all this it is easy to conjecture what numbers might be reclaimed if a general pardon were granted to those who shall repent of their error..."

In the exchange, Trajan informs Pliny not to hunt down those who are Christians, but only prosecute those who were reported to belong to the group. Anonymous accusations were not allowed, but specific accusations were investigated. Those brought forth upon such charges were asked that they honor images of the emperor and the Roman gods. By doing so, such a person was acquitted of all charges.

From the excerpt, we learn that Christians were meeting on a fixed day. The Latin reads: "quos essent soliti stato die..." The two key words are stato die. This was a common phrase used in Latin to refer to "a day fixed and appointed" (Kenrick, p 41). In other words Christians did not meet daily or at random times. They met on a day which was fixed.

Why doesn't Pliny use the phrase "The Day of Saturn" or "Dies Sabbato" like the other Roman-Era writers who referenced the

Sabbath? Pliny does not seem to take interest in the Jewish people in his letters (unlike his contemporary Tacitus). Therefore, one cannot be surprised that he did not make such a reference.

As reviewed in chapter 3, the New Testament only discussed recurring gatherings on Sabbath. This is the only clear reference to a 'stated day' among Christians. The first day of the week received only a passing reference as a one-time event. It only happened because the Apostle Paul was leaving the next day (Acts 20:7).

Sunday was a later phenomenon in Christianity; the first indisputable reference to a recurring Sunday gathering is located in the anti-Semitic work the *Epistle to Barnabas* (approx. 130 AD). This was roughly 20 years after Pliny's letter to Trajan. The second indisputable reference is Justin the Martyr (approx. 150 AD).

Later historical works such as the *Apostolic Constitutions* (2.4.36), Augustine (*Letters* 36, 82), Sozomen (*Church History*, 7.18-19), and Socrates (*Church History*, 5.21-22) note that the majority of the Christian world either kept 1) the Sabbath or 2) Sabbath and Sunday. The only two cities described as having totally dropped the Sabbath were Rome and Alexandria; those two cities are not addressed in Pliny's letter. The Eastern Churches venerated the Sabbath hundreds of years even after these sources.

Sabbath was common and entrenched at the time of Acts; Sunday was a later development that started among a few and grew gradually. At the time of Pliny's letter, Sunday observance was not developed and it had not reached that area. It becomes clear that *stato die* could only refer to the Sabbath.

(Side note: Some other precepts from the Decalogue are mentioned as moral precepts followed by these Christians: not committing adultery, not stealing, and not lying).

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**K**elly McDonald, Jr. is President of the Bible Sabbath Association (BSA). He has written many books and booklets on pursuing Christian Living and Church History.