

A FURTHER NOTE ON THE SABBATH IN COPTIC SOURCES

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The Sabbath in Coptic sources has been treated on two previous occasions in *AUSS*. In the inaugural issue, Wilson B. Bishai presented an article entitled "Sabbath Observance from Coptic Sources," in which he concluded:

It seems possible that Sabbath observance among the Copts in Egypt and Ethiopia may have passed through three stages: 1) Only the seventh-day Sabbath observed—from apostolic times until the Council of Nicea; 2) Sunday and the seventh-day Sabbath both observed—from the Council of Nicea until perhaps a century or two later; and 3) only Sunday designated as a day of public worship—a practice still observed today.¹

This article deals primarily with two statutes in the Sahidic version of what is commonly known as the *Egyptian Church Order*—one indicating that slaves (Bishai translates "servants [of the Lord]") should work five days but have leisure on the Sabbath and the Lord's day for church attendance, and the other calling for baptismal candidates to assemble on the Sabbath.² In addition to these, Bishai also quotes from an interpolation to the first passage as found in the Ethiopic version. This interpolation, which declares that *both* the seventh day of the week and the first day were "named sabbaths" (apparently the first documentary evidence we have of Sunday being called a "sabbath"), he sees as an attempt to justify rest on *two* days—on a newly introduced Christian Sunday in addition to the older Sabbath ("prior to the fourth century, Christians in Egypt and Ethiopia may

¹ Wilson B. Bishai, "Sabbath Observance from Coptic Sources," *AUSS*, I (1963), 31.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 28.

have observed only the seventh-day").³ In short, Bishai sees divergence between northern and southern Christians with respect to the Sabbath:

Justin Martyr and Tertullian, theologians characteristic of Hellenistic-Roman Christianity, urged strongly against the seventh-day Sabbath and in favor of Sunday. But the non-Hellenistic southern churches of Egypt and Ethiopia apparently followed a different course and observed the seventh-day Sabbath continuously during the second and third centuries.⁴

The second treatment of the Sabbath in Coptic sources in *AUSS* is Robert A. Kraft's "Some Notes on Sabbath Observance in Early Christianity," in which he has marshaled abundant evidence from the early sources to show that there was, in fact, no such dichotomy in early Sabbath-Sunday practice between northern and southern groups of Christians as Bishai had proposed.⁵ Rather, "from its very beginnings, 'Coptic Christianity' observed both Sabbath and Sunday, because such was the practice taught in its adopted traditions!"⁶ Kraft has called attention, for example, to the fact that the Coptic reference to Sabbath-and-Sunday rest for slaves is paralleled in *Greek* in *Apostolic Constitutions* viii. 33.⁷

Kraft's treatment is mainly concerned, however, with the "northern sources" from the Greek and Syrian East, rather than the "northern sources" from the West. Inasmuch as the *Egyptian Church Order* is identified as a version (or versions) of the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus of Rome, it becomes a matter of interest to investigate whether its allusions to the Sabbath may have stemmed from Hippolytus. Kraft has observed that "there is no guarantee that the dual observance [of Sabbath and Sunday] was part of the original form of the *Ap. Trad.*, but the burden of proof would seem to rest on the

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵ Robert A. Kraft, "Some Notes on Sabbath Observance in Early Christianity," *AUSS*, III (1965), 18-33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 22.

person who *denies* this; in any event, the dual observance was already in the Greek form of the tradition, as we have seen.”⁸ Willy Rordorf cites from the Ethiopic text of the *Egyptian Church Order* as evidence for Hippolytus, as well as calling attention to the polemical remark against Sabbath fasting in Hippolytus’ *Commentary on Daniel*.⁹ Hippolytus’ favorable attitude toward the Sabbath, as manifest in this latter reference,¹⁰ might well lead us to suspect that indications of Sabbath observance in the *Egyptian Church Order* are there because they were present in the original Greek text of Hippolytus.¹¹

In exploring the evidence relating to this question, we will

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25, n. 23.

⁹ Willy Rordorf, *Der Sonntag* (Zürich, 1962), pp. 144, 147. He mentions an item from the Ethiopic text regarding special instructions for the eucharist on the Sabbath and Sunday. In addition to our own treatment of this item below, cf. also the opinions of Burton Scott Easton, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* (Cambridge, Engl., 1934; Archon Books reprint, 1962), p. 58, and Gregory Dix, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome*, I (London, 1937), 43, n., both of whom look upon the item as an interpolation. Dix’s reason for doing so seems inadequate, however: “Saturday was not a liturgical day at Rome in the third century, but it has been so in the Ethiopic Church as far back as we can trace.” Is not this taking for granted the very thing which is to be proved or disproved by the evidence?

The reference to the Sabbath fast is in Hippolytus, *Comm. on Dan.*, iv. 20.3, and refers to certain persons who give heed to “doctrines of devils” and “often appoint fasting on the Sabbath and the Lord’s day, which Christ did not appoint, and thus dishonor the Gospel of Christ.” For Greek text and French translation, see Maurice Lefèvre, *Hippolyte, Commentaire sur Daniel* (Paris, 1947), pp. 300-303.

¹⁰ The Sabbath fast was a negative factor in relationship to Sabbath observance; hence opposition to it would be favorable to the Sabbath. See my article “Some Notes on the Sabbath Fast in Early Christianity,” *AUSS*, III (1965), 167-174.

¹¹ Hippolytus wrote in Greek, and *may possibly* have spent his youth in the East. Greek fragments and portions of a Latin translation of the *Apostolic Tradition* are extant. See Easton, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-32, and also n. 12, below. Cf. also standard patrologies such as those of J. Quasten and O. Bardenhewer. Useful information on Hippolytus is also given in E. J. Goodspeed, *A History of Early Christian Literature*, rev. and enl. by Robert M. Grant (Chicago, 1966).

place certain statements from different texts of the *Egyptian Church Order* in parallel columns. For this purpose we will use G. Horner's English translation of the Sahidic, Arabic, and Ethiopic texts, which texts are removed from the original Greek in that particular order (Sahidic translated directly from Greek, Arabic translated from Sahidic, and Ethiopic translated from Arabic, though the latter two are not necessarily based on the particular Sahidic and Arabic texts represented here in translation).¹² The reference given by Bishai to slaves' rest on two days we omit; but his reference to the assembling of baptismal candidates on the Sabbath we include, inasmuch as he has given insufficient context for a clear picture of what was involved.

Sahidic, 45, 46

Arabic, 33, 34

Ethiopic, 34, 35

<p>Let them who will be baptised fast on the preparation (paraskeuē) of the sabbath (sabbaton). And (de) on the sabbath (sabbaton), when they who will be baptised have assembled in one place by the direction (gnōmē) of the bishop, let them all be commanded to pray and bend their knees. And when he has laid his hand upon them, let him exorcise (exorgize) all alien spirits to flee away from them, and not to return to them henceforward. . . . And let them spend all the</p>	<p>And they who wish to be baptised shall fast on Friday (jumah), and the bishop shall assemble those who are to be baptised on the day of the sabbath in one place, and shall command them all to pray and prostrate themselves. And having laid his hand upon them, let him exorcise every alien spirit, that they may flee away from them and never return to them henceforth . . . and let them keep watch all their night, and let them read to them and admonish</p>	<p>And those who desire to be baptised shall fast on Friday, and the bishop shall assemble all those who shall be baptised on Saturday into one place, and shall command all of them (to make) prayer and prostration; and when he has laid his hand upon them, let him exorcise the unclean spirit that he may flee away from them and not enter into them again. . . . and they shall read to them the Scriptures, and exhort them. . . . [35] At the time of cock-crow they shall</p>
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¹² G. Horner, ed. and trans., *The Statutes of the Apostles or Canones Ecclesiastici* (Oxford, 1915). For information on these and other translations, see the "Introduction" and "Description of the Manuscripts," pp. vii-xxxix. Cf. also Easton, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-32; and Dix, *op. cit.*, pp. lii-lxvi.

night in vigil, reading to them and instructing (kathēge) them.... [46] At the hour, then (de), when the cock will crow, let them first pray over the water.... And ye shall first baptise the little ones....¹³

them.... [34] At the time of cock-crow, let him pray first over the water ... and they shall begin by baptising the little children first....¹⁴

first pray over the water.... And they shall baptise the little children first.... And on the sabbath and on the first day of the week if it be possible the bishop himself with his own hand shall deliver to all the people while the deacons break the bread....¹⁵

Sahidic, 31 (cf. 64)

Arabic, 21 (cf. 52)

Ethiopic, 22 (cf. 53)

The bishop shall be ordained (kheirodonei) according to the word which we said before. ... When he has been named (onōmaze) and they are pleased with him, the whole people (laos) shall assemble themselves together, and the presbyters with the deacons on the Lord's day (kyriakē)....¹⁶

The bishop shall be ordained, as we have already said.... When they have made mention of him and are satisfied with him all the people shall assemble together, and the presbyters and the deacons, on Sunday....¹⁷

The bishop shall be ordained as we have already spoken; one who has been chosen by all the people together, with the presbyters and deacons on the day of the sabbath....¹⁸

In the first set of quotations above, the three texts agree with respect to Friday as a day of fasting for the baptismal candidates and with respect to the Sabbath as a day for assembling them. There would seem to be no reason to doubt that this statement of procedure stems from Hippolytus. However, the Ethiopic text has omitted the reference to the night vigil, which was evidently a *Saturday night* vigil. The actual rite of baptism, it would seem, took place on Sunday

¹³ Horner, *op. cit.*, pp. 315, 316.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 252, 253.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 151-157.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 306 (cf. p. 340).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 244, 245 (cf. p. 273).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 138 (cf. p. 197).

morning (not on the Sabbath, as Bishai thought).¹⁹ Nevertheless, a respect is shown for *both* days—a respect perhaps not far different from that manifest in the eastern sources of the time.²⁰

Again, with regard to the first set of quotations, the Ethiopic text contains at the end of its Chapter 35 an interesting addition with special instructions regarding the celebration of the eucharist “on the sabbath and on the first day of the week.” Is this an interpolation in the Ethiopic, or does it represent original material which was lost in the Sahidic and Arabic? The tertiary nature of the Ethiopic text would speak in favor of the former alternative, as would also the fact that the other two texts agree. In addition, there *may* be a relationship between this statement in the Ethiopic text and the peculiar emphasis of the same text in the earlier-mentioned reference to both the Sabbath and the first day of the week as “sabbaths.”²¹ And still further support for our conclusion may present itself as we proceed to analyze the second set of quotations above.

In that second set of quotations, which refers to the ordination of bishops, the Ethiopic text again stands alone in its reading of “sabbath” (in both Statutes 22 and 53) in contrast to the reading “Lord’s day” or “Sunday” of the Sahidic and Arabic. In this case, however, we have two other sources as independent checks: the Latin version of Hippolytus’ *Apostolic Tradition*, 2, and the Greek of *Apostolic Constitutions*, viii. 4. Both of these agree with the Sahidic and Arabic as against the Ethiopic.²² In view of the Ethiopic interpolation which

¹⁹ See Bishai, *op. cit.*, p. 27. He refers to “the performance of this ritual on the Sabbath.”

²⁰ Cf., e.g., the sources called to attention by Kraft, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-24.

²¹ See above, p. 150, and the excerpts quoted by Bishai, *op. cit.*, pp. 28, 29.

²² Easton, *op. cit.*, p. 33, translating from the Latin: “Let the bishop be ordained after he has been chosen by all the people. When he has been named and shall please all, let him, with the presbytery and such bishops as may be present, assemble with the people on a Sunday.”

speaks of both Sabbath and Sunday as "sabbaths," there is, of course, the possibility that the term "sabbath" as used here in the Ethiopic *might* mean Sunday. But if not, the Ethiopic represents a variation from all the other sources, and quite definitely depicts a practice different from that described by Hippolytus.

The foregoing analysis of Sabbath-Sunday statements in the *Egyptian Church Order* suggests that there is a minimal amount of evidence for a dual observance of some sort which should very likely be traced to Hippolytus. This small amount of evidence, together with Hippolytus' polemical remark concerning the Sabbath fast, is, however, most interesting, for it opens up to us the possibility that there was in third-century Rome a greater respect for the Sabbath than has been commonly thought. It has long been known, of course, that Rome is the place which gives us the earliest (second-century) clear evidence for Christian Sunday observance as well as anti-Sabbath attitude.²³

The foregoing analysis would also suggest that Bishai may not have been entirely wrong in seeing some sort of dichotomy in the Sabbath-Sunday practices of early Christianity, while at the same time it provides one further evidence in substantiation of Kraft's conclusion that there was no such dichotomy between Bishai's northern and southern groups. Indeed, the place where the dichotomy existed was within the southern groups themselves!

But why the peculiar emphasis of the Ethiopic text, which distinguishes it from both the Sahidic and Arabic (as well as from the Greek and Latin sources where these are

ANF, VII, 481 (*Ap. Const.* viii.4): "...let the people assemble, with the presbytery and bishops that are present, on the Lord's day. ..." The words in question as given in the Greek text are ἐν ἡμέρᾳ Κυριακῆ (*MPG*, I, col. 1072), but they also appear in a Latin translation as *in die Dominica* (*MPG*, I, col. 1071).

²³ In Justin Martyr, *Apology*, I, ch. 67; and numerous references to the Sabbath in *Dialogue with Trypho*, including ch. 23.

available)? Any attempt to answer this question will lead only to conjecture. But it may not be amiss to call attention to Bishai's solution, which, if limited to the community or communities using the Ethiopic text rather than generalized for Coptic Christianity, is not without merit as one possible answer:

Perhaps the justification for observing Sunday as produced by the Ethiopic version of the *Statutes of the Apostles* does not appeal to either Jews or Christians today, yet it must have sounded reasonable to the Early Christians of the southern group of churches during the fourth century of our era. Nevertheless, the question is: Why did the editor of the Ethiopic version resort to such a justification? [Bishai has just quoted at length from the interpolation which claims that both the Sabbath and the first day of the week were named "sabbaths."] The only logical answer to this question is to suppose some sort of complaint on the part of people regarding working only on five days and resting on two. This in turn leads us to think that prior to the fourth century, Christians in Egypt and Ethiopia [this should definitely be more limited] may have observed only the seventh-day, and that for some reason the Coptic [rather, "Ethiopic" or "some Ethiopic" ?] bishops more recently had introduced the observance of Sunday. . . .²⁴

²⁴ Bishai, *op. cit.*, p. 29.