

TERTULLIAN AND THE SABBATH

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Although there is no doubt about the respect shown for Sunday by Tertullian of Carthage (fl. early 3d century A.D.), this church father's attitude toward the Sabbath (seventh day of the week) seems quite enigmatical. Where, for example, is the harmony, if any, between a declaration that the law was abrogated by the Creator at the time of John the Baptist and an assertion that Christ kept the law of the Sabbath and furnished the Sabbath with divine safeguards? ¹

In a study of Tertullian's writings it is important to keep in mind several facts: (1) Tertullian, like other Christian writers of the early church, directed his treatises to specific situations and conditions of his time. Unfortunately, the exact circumstances are not always fully apparent to us. Moreover, his writings were of various types: polemical, apologetic, hortatory, practical. The kind of writing, to whom the writing was addressed, and the specific concern being treated must constantly be kept in mind for each of Tertullian's treatises. (2) Tertullian had been trained as a lawyer, and this training, coupled with an apparent natural bent toward both strictness and sarcasm, seems to have made him particularly adept in the use of puns, irony, satirization, quick turns of thought, and other devices which at times complicate for us the meaning of his language—meaning which would undoubtedly be more clear were we fully aware of the background against which these devices were cast or toward which they were directed. (3) Tertullian's own religious outlook after he adopted Christianity did not remain static,

¹ These and other references of similar nature will be treated later.

for he moved from the pale of Catholic Christianity to that of Montanist Christianity during the first decade of the 3d century.² Could his attitude toward the Sabbath have perhaps changed a bit during this transition?

Tertullian mentions the Sabbath in various of his treatises covering a span of some two decades, from about A.D. 197 to 218. Reference to some of his major statements will be given below.

Tertullian's Pre-Montanist Period

Significant Sabbath statements occur in five works which Tertullian most likely produced during the years 197 to 202, prior to his adoption of Montanism: *Answer to the Jews*, *On Idolatry*, *Apology*, *To the Heathen*, and *On Prayer*.³ His most detailed discussion of the Sabbath in any of these works appears in the first-mentioned one, whose chapters 2 through 6 deal with the question of the "primitive law"; the "Law of Moses, written in stone-tables"; circumcision; and the Sabbath. After proposing, in chapter 2, that God's law (or the "primitive law," as he also calls it) antedated the Law of Moses and that the latter was temporary, being

² Tertullian adopted Christianity toward the end of the 2d century. It was possibly Septimius Severus' anti-Christian edict of A.D. 202 that turned his attention favorably toward the Montanists. (The touching martyrdom of the Montanists Perpetua and Felicitas in North Africa took place about this time.) For about five years Tertullian was in tension between the Catholic Christianity to which he still adhered and Montanism which, with its rigorous standards, appealed to him. Finally, about A.D. 207 the official break occurred, and Tertullian became a full-fledged Montanist.

³ Standard patrologies, such as those of J. Quasten and O. Bardenhewer, may be consulted regarding these and other works of Tertullian. I follow here the dates given by E. J. Goodspeed, *A History of Early Christian Literature*, rev. and enl. by Robert M. Grant (Chicago, 1966), pp. 160, 163: *To the Heathen* and *Apology*, A.D. 197; *Answer to the Jews*, *On Prayer*, and *On Idolatry*, between A.D. 198 and 202. F. L. Cross, *The Early Christian Fathers* (London, 1960), pp. 137, 139, 143-145, dates *To the Heathen* and *Apology* in A.D. 197; *On Prayer* between 198 and 204; *Answer to the Jews* between 200 and 206; and *On Idolatry* "perhaps c. 212."

reformed as promised by the prophets, he goes on to say:

Let us not annul this power which God has, which reforms the law's precepts answerably to the circumstances of the times, with a view to man's salvation. In fine, let him who contends that the Sabbath is still to be observed as a balm of salvation, and circumcision on the eighth day because of the threat of death, teach us that, for the time past, righteous men kept the Sabbath, or practised circumcision, and were thus rendered "friends of God."⁴

Next follow references to Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Melchizedek as being uncircumcised and "inobservant of the Sabbath." Lot, too, is mentioned, as "without observance of the law"; and then, in chapter 3, there is a lengthy discussion of Abraham's circumcision. This is followed by further treatment of the Sabbath, in chapter 4, where Tertullian quotes Moses as saying to the people, "Remember the day of the sabbaths, to sanctify it: every servile work ye shall not do therein, except what pertaineth unto life."⁵ Then he continues as follows:

We (Christians) understand that *we* still more ought to observe a sabbath from all "servile work" always, and not only every seventh day, but through all time. And through this arises the question for us, *what* sabbath God willed us to keep? For the Scriptures point to a sabbath eternal and a sabbath temporal. For Isaiah the prophet says, "*Your* sabbaths my soul hateth;" and in another place he says, "*My* sabbaths ye have profaned." Whence we discern that the temporal sabbath is human, and the eternal sabbath is accounted divine; concerning which He predicts through Isaiah: "And there shall be," He says, "month after month, and day after day, and sabbath after sabbath; and all flesh shall come to adore in Jerusalem, saith the Lord;" which we understand to have been fulfilled in the times of Christ, when "all flesh"—that is, every nation—"came to adore in Jerusalem" God the Father, through Jesus Christ His Son. . . . Thus, therefore, before this temporal sabbath, there was withal an eternal sabbath foreshown and foretold. . . .⁶

After the foregoing remarks, Tertullian again mentions Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham, followed by reference to the fall of Jericho and warfare in Maccabean times as

⁴ Ch. 2; in *ANF*, III, 153.

⁵ Ch. 4; in *ANF*, III, 155.

⁶ *Ibid.*

evidence that "it is not in the exemption from work of the sabbath—that is, of the seventh day—that the celebration of this solemnity [of the sabbath] is to consist." ⁷

That Tertullian is negative toward the seventh-day Sabbath in his *Answer to the Jews* is obvious. But the nature of this work as polemic against Jewish attitudes and practices must be borne in mind in assessing this negativeness. What is it that is really disparaged—the day as such, the legalistic Jewish attitude toward it (an attitude which looks upon a *strict* abstinence from work on it as a "balm of salvation"), or both? However this may be, it must be noted that the discussion is *theological* in nature and says nothing about the *practice* of Christians in Tertullian's time.

In a treatise addressed to Christians, *On Idolatry*, Tertullian chides Christians for seeking to follow heathen customs, and in this connection makes the following statement in which the Sabbath is mentioned:

The Holy Spirit upbraids the Jews with their holy-days. "Your Sabbaths, and new moons, and ceremonies," says He, "My soul hateth." By us, to whom Sabbaths are strange, and the new moons and festivals formerly beloved by God, the Saturnalia and New-year's and Midwinter's festivals and Matronalia are frequented. . . . Oh better fidelity of the nations to their own sect, which claims no solemnity of the Christians for itself! Not the Lord's day, not Pentecost, even if they had known them, would they have shared with us; for they would fear lest they should seem to be Christians. *We* are not apprehensive lest we seem to be *heathens*! ⁸

The foregoing statement makes it appear that the seventh-day Sabbath was not observed nor respected by Christians of Tertullian's time because of the reference to Christians as people "to whom Sabbaths are strange." However, in view of the satirical nature of the passage, may there not be some danger in placing excessive confidence in this interpretation? Furthermore, two other of Tertullian's works from his early pre-Montanist period, the *Apology* and *To the Heathen*, provide a somewhat different picture. In the former, reference

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Ch. 14; in *ANF*, III, 70.

is made to certain heathen people who suppose that the sun is the god of the Christians:

Others, again, certainly with more information and greater verisimilitude, believe that the sun is our god. We shall be counted Persians perhaps, though we do not worship the orb of day painted on a piece of linen cloth, having himself everywhere in his own disk. The idea no doubt has originated from our being known to turn to the east in prayer. But you, many of you, also under pretence sometimes of worshipping the heavenly bodies, move your lips in the direction of the sunrise. In the same way, if we devote Sun-day to rejoicing, from a far different reason than Sun-worship, we have some resemblance to those of you who devote the day of Saturn to ease and luxury, though they too go far away from Jewish ways, of which indeed they are ignorant.⁹

The reference in *To the Heathen* to the same belief on the part of certain pagans is longer but just as much to the point. It concludes with the following remark:

Wherefore, that I may return from this digression, you who reproach us with the sun and Sunday should consider your proximity to us. We are not far off from your Saturn and your days of rest.¹⁰

Unless at least some Christians of Tertullian's time were devoting Saturday to "ease and luxury" (to use the words from the *Apology*), the two foregoing statements would hardly make sense, for the point of comparison would be lost.

In his treatise *On Prayer*, Tertullian further clarifies that there were indeed Christians in North Africa about this time who had a certain respect for the Sabbath—by refraining from *kneeling* in prayer on it. Kneeling, as is evident from the statement quoted below, was considered a posture of solicitude and humility unfit for days of divine joy (and therefore to be shunned on "the day of the Lord's Resurrection" and during "the period of Pentecost"). Tertullian refers to those persons who were not kneeling on the Sabbath as "some few" and considers them as bringing dissension, a dissension which was "particularly on its trial before the churches." He states:

⁹ Ch. 16; in *ANF*, III, 31.

¹⁰ I. 13; in *ANF*, III, 123.

In the matter of *kneeling* also prayer is subject to diversity of observance, through the act of some few who abstain from kneeling on the Sabbath; and since this dissension is particularly on its trial before the churches, the Lord will give His grace that the dissentients may either yield, or else indulge their opinion without offence to others. We, however (just as we have received), only on the day of the Lord's Resurrection ought to guard not only against kneeling, but every posture and office of solicitude; deferring even our businesses lest we give any place to the devil. Similarly, too, in the period of Pentecost; which period we distinguish by the same solemnity of exultation. But who would hesitate *every* day to prostrate himself before God, at least in the first prayer with which we enter on the daylight? At fasts, moreover, and Stations, no prayer should be made without kneeling, and the remaining customary marks of humility; for (then) we are not only *praying*, but *deprecating*, and making satisfaction to God our Lord.¹¹

It is interesting to note that in this early stage of his Christian career Tertullian emphasized the need to avoid kneeling and "every posture and office of solicitude" on "the day of the Lord's Resurrection" and during "the period of Pentecost," while apparently feeling that this posture was appropriate for the Sabbath. Thus he made a definite distinction between the Sabbath and the other Christian celebrations he has here mentioned. As we shall see, he apparently later underwent a change in this particular attitude toward the Sabbath—a change which led him to erase this kind of contrast between the Sabbath and the other celebrations.¹²

We may now sum up the data on the pre-Montanist Tertullian as follows: Against the Jews he argued that the Sabbath was no longer to be considered a "balm of salvation" and that men of God before Moses were "inobservant of the Sabbath"; in a satirical passage addressed to Christians he referred to "us, to whom Sabbaths are strange"; in two works addressed to heathen he countered the accusation that Christians worship the sun by pointing out that a pagan "ease and luxury" on Saturday parallels a Christian practice; and in discussing the matter of prayer in a treatise to Christians he mentioned a dis-

¹¹ Ch. 23; in *ANF*, III, 689.

¹² See below, p. 17.

sension in the churches over a practice of not kneeling as versus kneeling in prayer on the Sabbath. It would appear that Tertullian's own attitude was somewhat negative toward the Sabbath, but that there were Christians in his day and in his vicinity who had some sort of special respect for the day.

Tertullian's Early-Montanist Period

One of Tertullian's most elaborate works was his treatise *Against Marcion* in five books. This work may have been begun during Tertullian's pre-Montanist period, but was completed after he had adopted Montanism.¹³ Most attention will be given to books 4 and 5, but first a reference from chapter 21 of book 2 is worthy of notice:

Similarly on other points also, you reproach Him [God] with fickleness and instability for contradictions in His commandments, such as that He forbade work to be done on Sabbath-days, and yet at the siege of Jericho ordered the ark to be carried round the walls during eight days; in other words, of course, actually on a Sabbath. You do not, however, consider the law of the Sabbath: they are human works, not divine, which it prohibits. For it says, "Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work; but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work." What work? Of course your own. The conclusion is, that from the Sabbath-day He removes those works which He had before enjoined for the six days, that is, your own works; in other words, human works of daily life. Now, the carrying around of the ark is evidently not an ordinary daily duty, nor yet a human one; but a rare and sacred work, and, as being then ordered by the direct precept of God, a divine one. . . .¹⁴

In book 4 of *Against Marcion* there is lengthy treatment of the Sabbath. A section of particular interest discusses Christ's defense of His disciples when they picked and ate grain on the Sabbath:

In short, He would have then and there put an end to the Sabbath, nay, to the Creator Himself, if He had commanded His disciples

¹³ Two editions of the earlier parts of the work were first produced, perhaps as early as 198-202. About 207 or 208 a third edition appeared, which included Books I-IV. Book V appeared about 211 or 212. Tertullian fully espoused Montanism *ca.* 207. See n. 2, above.

¹⁴ li. 21; in *ANF*, III, 313, 314.

to fast on the Sabbath-day, contrary to the intention of the Scripture and of the Creator's will. But because He did not directly defend His disciples, but excuses them; because He interposes human want, as if deprecating censure; because He maintains the honour of the Sabbath as a day which is to be free from gloom rather than from work; because he puts David and his companions on a level with His own disciples in their fault and their extenuation; because He is pleased to endorse the Creator's indulgence; because He is Himself good according to *His* example—is He therefore alien from the Creator? ¹⁵

Tertullian here suggests that Christ's act in not causing His disciples to fast on the Sabbath honored the Sabbath and maintained the integrity of the Creator. If Christ had allowed Sabbath fasting, He would then and there have put an end to the Sabbath and to the Creator Himself! Rather than doing this, Christ maintained the honor of the Sabbath as a day to be "free from gloom rather than from work." But what does Tertullian mean by "work"? Obviously, he means the same as in his earlier statement from chapter 21 of book 2, for here in book 4 he goes on to explain as follows:

The Pharisees, however, were in utter error concerning the law of the Sabbath, not observing that its terms were conditional, when it enjoined rest from labour, making certain distinctions of labour. For when it says of the Sabbath-day, "In it thou shalt not do any work of thine," by the word *thine* it restricts the prohibition to human work—which every one performs in his own employment or business—and not to divine work. Now the work of healing or preserving is not proper to man, but to God. . . . Wishing, therefore, to initiate them into this meaning of the law by the restoration of the withered hand, He inquires, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath-days to do good, or not? to save life, or to destroy it?" In order that He might, whilst allowing that amount of work which He was about to perform for a soul, remind them what works the law of the Sabbath forbade—even human works; and what it enjoined—even divine works, which might be done for the benefit of any soul, He was called "Lord of the Sabbath," because He maintained the Sabbath as His own institution.¹⁶

The distinction which Tertullian makes between man's work and God's work is interesting. He continues by referring

¹⁵ IV. 12; in *ANF*, III, 362, 363. The whole section should be noted, though the specific quotation here given appears on p. 363, col. 1.

¹⁶ IV. 12; in *ANF*, III, 363.

again to the Sabbath's not being broken at the destruction of Jericho and then goes on to say:

Now, although He has in a certain place expressed an aversion of Sabbaths, by calling them *your Sabbaths*, reckoning them as men's Sabbaths, not His own, because they were celebrated without the fear of God by a people full of iniquities, and loving God "with the lip, not the heart," He has yet put His own Sabbaths (those, that is, which were kept according to His prescription) in a different position; for by the same prophet, in a later passage, He declared them to be "true, and delightful, and inviolable." Thus Christ did not at all rescind the Sabbath: He kept the law thereof He exhibits in a clear light the different kinds of work, while doing what the law excepts from the sacredness of the Sabbath *and* while imparting to the Sabbath-day itself, which from the beginning had been consecrated by the benediction of the Father, an additional sanctity by His own beneficent action. For He furnished to this day divine safeguards. . . . Since, in like manner, the prophet Elisha on this day restored to life the dead son of the Shunammite woman, you see, O Pharisee, and you too, O Marcion, how that it was *proper employment* for the Creator's Sabbaths of old to do good, to save life, not to destroy it; how that Christ introduced nothing new, which was not after the example, the gentleness, the mercy, and the prediction also of the Creator.¹⁷

One further interesting reference to the Sabbath in book 4 occurs in chapter 30, where a question about healing on the Sabbath is again brought to attention:

When the question was again raised concerning a cure performed on the Sabbath-day, how did He discuss it: "Doth not each of you on the Sabbath loose his ass or his ox from the stall, and lead him away to watering?" When, therefore, He did a work according to the condition prescribed by the law, He affirmed, instead of breaking, the law, which commanded that no work should be done, except what might be done for any living being; *and if for any one, then how much more for a human life?*¹⁸

As we move to book 5 of *Against Marcion*, a different tone with regard to the Sabbath seems to occur. Referring to Paul's reference to the "weak and beggarly elements" (Gal 4:9), Tertullian states:

He tells us himself clearly enough what he means by "*elements*," even the rudiments of the law: "Ye observe days, and months, and

¹⁷ Iv. 12; in *ANF*, III, 363, 364.

¹⁸ *ANF*, III, 400.

times, and years"—the Sabbaths, I suppose, and "the preparations," and the fasts, and the "high days." For the cessation of even these, no less than of circumcision, was appointed by the Creator's decrees, who had said by Isaiah, "Your new moons, and your sabbaths, and your high days I cannot bear; your fasting, and feasts, and ceremonies my soul hateth;" also by Amos, "I hate, I despise your feast-days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies;" and again by Hosea, "I will cause to cease all her mirth, and her feast-days, and her sabbaths, and her new moons, and all her solemn assemblies." The institutions which He set up Himself, you ask, did He then destroy? Yes, rather than any other. Or if another destroyed them, he only helped on the purpose of the Creator, by removing what even He had condemned. But this is not the place to discuss the question why the Creator abolished His own laws. It is enough for us to have proved that He intended such an abolition, that so it may be affirmed that the apostle determined nothing to the prejudice of the Creator, since the abolition itself proceeds from the Creator.¹⁹

How can harmony possibly exist between the statements we have noted from books 2 and 4 and this one from book 5? In looking for harmony, we must first bear in mind that Tertullian's main argument in all of the statements thus far quoted from *Against Marcion* is not really an argument regarding the Sabbath as such. What Tertullian is arguing against is a basic Marcionite position; namely, that there is contradiction between the OT and NT, that the God of the OT was an inferior and bungling Demiurge whereas the God of the NT was the true high God. Marcion had not only written a book of *Contradictions* or *Antitheses* with respect to the NT as versus the OT, but he had also produced a canon of Scripture which consisted of the Pauline epistles and an expurgated form of the Gospel of Luke. In book 4 of his *Against Marcion* Tertullian deals point by point with the Gospel of Luke and Marcion's treatment of it, his endeavor being to show the unity of this gospel with the OT. Thus, Christ as depicted in this gospel manifestly kept the Sabbath according to the kind of works which God originally intended for the Sabbath; the Pharisees were the ones who (like

¹⁹ V. 4; in *ANF*, III, 436.

Marcion too!) misunderstood the Sabbath.²⁰ In book 5, Tertullian deals with the Pauline epistles. The passage quoted above falls within his discussion of Gal, the epistle which, he says, "we also allow to be the most decisive against Judaism."²¹ This anti-Judaistic strain cannot be ignored in assessing the purport of his statement. However, his basic argument is this: The abolition of the law was not new to the NT; it proceeded from the OT Creator Himself. As stated in the last long quotation given above, Tertullian did not feel it necessary at this place in his argument "to discuss the question why the Creator abolished His own laws"; it was enough "to have proved that He intended such an abolition," thus revealing that "the apostle determined nothing to the prejudice of the Creator, since the abolition itself proceeds from the Creator." In other words, the OT and NT are in harmony; the apostle agrees with the Creator; the Creator Himself has foretold and brought about that abolition of the law of which the apostle now speaks!

The following statement also makes the point explicit:

If they [the Galatians] had at all heard of any other god from the apostle, would they not have concluded at once, of themselves, that they must give up the law of that God whom they had left, in order to follow another? For what man would be long in learning, that he ought to pursue a new discipline, after he had taken up with a new god? . . . The entire purport of this epistle is simply to show us that the supersession of the law comes from the appointment of the Creator. . . .²²

Here too it is emphasized that the *same* Creator who gave the law brought about its supersession. So also is the case in further references to the Galatian epistle in book I, where Tertullian speaks of Paul blaming the Galatians for "maintaining circumcision, and observing times, and days, and months, and years, according to those Jewish ceremonies which they ought to have known were now abrogated, according to the

²⁰ Iv. 12; in *ANF*, III, 363, 364.

²¹ V. 2; in *ANF*, III, 431.

²² V. 2; in *ANF*, III, 431, 432.

new dispensation purposed by the Creator Himself, who of old foretold this very thing by His prophets." ²³

But *faith too* was present in the OT, and it remained permanent:

The whole question... was this, that although the God of the law was the same as was preached in Christ, yet there was a disparagement of His law. Permanent still, therefore, stood faith in the Creator and in His Christ; manner of life and discipline alone fluctuated. Some disputed about eating idol sacrifices, others about the veiled dress of women, others again about marriage and divorce, and some even about the hope of the resurrection; but about God no one disputed. ²⁴

The unifying thread in Tertullian's *Against Marcion* is that the very same God was the God of both OT and NT dispensations and that the OT and NT do not contradict each other. With John the Baptist the dividing point between the dispensations came, ²⁵ but there was harmony between the old and the new. A way of faith and grace was foreshown in the OT and retained in the NT, but even the discontinuance of ceremonial observance of the law in the NT had been foretold in the OT itself!

As for the Sabbath in relationship to all this, the following conclusion may be drawn: Tertullian's references in books 2 and 4 of *Against Marcion* indicate a continuance of the *type* of Sabbath-keeping God originally intended, Christ Himself giving an example of that kind which was in harmony with the will of the Creator (the "faith-grace" emphasis); whereas the references in books 1 and 5, dealing with the Galatian epistle, indicate the end of the dispensation of

²³ I. 20; in *ANF*, III, 285. In the context here, Tertullian provides various references from the OT referring to "new covenant." He also cites some OT mentions of feast-days, "Sabbaths," etc., much in the same vein as the references noted earlier from book 5 of *Against Marcion* and from *Answer to the Jews* (see above, pp. 137, 138, 131).

²⁴ I. 21; in *ANF*, III, 286.

²⁵ V. 2; in *ANF*, III, 431: "... Christ marks the period of separation when He says, 'The law and the prophets were until John'—thus making the Baptist the limit between the two dispensations...."

Jewish legalism (the "law" emphasis). In either case, the unity of the two Testaments and the integrity of one God are maintained. On the one hand, *Christ's example* demonstrates true Sabbath-keeping as it was intended from the beginning; on the other hand, *Paul's discussion in Galatians* deprecates a ceremonialism which God in the OT deprecated and whose cessation He had even there predicted.

It is pertinent to note that in conjunction with the emphasis which Tertullian places in book 5 on the supersession and abrogation of the law, he does not fail to observe a "fulfilment" of the law "in that portion of it where it ought (to be permanent)"—loving "neighbour as thyself."²⁶ To Tertullian it is clear that this precept has not ceased together with the law; "we must evermore continue to observe this commandment."²⁷

However, in all of the treatment given to the Sabbath in *Against Marcion*, it must be noted that no evidence is provided as to the *practice* of Christians in Tertullian's time. The discussion is wholly *theological* (in polemical context).

A further statement which probably was written during Tertullian's early Montanist career deserves at least passing attention here, even though it does not mention the Sabbath as such. This statement, which appears in *The Chaplet* (penned either about A.D. 204 or A.D. 211), refers to the "Lord's Day" (Sunday).²⁸ In dealing with the question of whether warfare is proper for Christians, Tertullian raises a number of specific issues relating to the Christian soldier's military duty, among them this: "Shall he [the Christian soldier], forsooth, either keep watch-service for others more than for Christ, or shall he do it on the Lord's day, when he does not even do it for Christ Himself?"²⁹ Tertullian's positive attitude toward Sunday is here manifested, and it can be argued that his failure to mention the Sabbath reveals a

²⁶ V. 4; in *ANF*, III, 437.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *ANF*, III, 93, n. 1, refers to A.D. 204; for the more likely date of A.D. 211, see Goodspeed, *op. cit.*, p. 163, and Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

²⁹ Ch. 11; in *ANF*, III, 99.

negative attitude toward that day. How valid such an argument may be, is difficult to ascertain. It is, of course, an argument from silence. And the fact that the series of questions asked in the context reflects a definite emphasis on the *Lordship* of Christ—the Lord's proclamation that He who uses the sword shall perish by the sword, allusions to the Sermon on the Mount, mention of carrying a flag hostile to Christ, etc.—, makes the absence of any reference to the Sabbath not really strange. It must be remembered that a century or so later, in cases where there is very clear evidence of respect for the Sabbath, only Sunday—and not the Sabbath—is put in the role of relationship to Christ's Lordship. For example, the Sabbath is referred to as a "memorial of creation," whereas Sunday is considered as a memorial of the Lord's resurrection.³⁰

Tertullian's Late-Montanist Period

Tertullian's Sabbath statements thus far noted do not provide evidence of Sabbath practice in his own day, with the exception of the direct statement in *On Prayer* and possibly the more oblique references in *On Idolatry*, the *Apology*, and *To the Heathen*. However, in his *On Fasting*, penned about (or possibly after) 217 or 218 during his mature career as a Montanist, he does furnish one further rather explicit statement regarding practice relating to the Sabbath. He chides the Catholic Christians as follows:

You sometimes continue your Station even over the Sabbath,—a day never to be kept as a fast except at the passover season, according to a reason elsewhere given.³¹

³⁰ So, e.g., *Apost. Consts.* vii. 23 (*ANF*, VII, 469). But also note the statement from Pseudo-Ignatius in *Magnesians* 9 (in *ANF*, I, 62, 63): "Let us therefore no longer keep the Sabbath after the Jewish manner. . . . But let every one of you keep the Sabbath after a spiritual manner, rejoicing in meditation on the law, not in relaxation of the body, admiring the workmanship of God. . . . And after the observance of the Sabbath, let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days."

³¹ Ch. 14; in *ANF*, IV, 112.

In an earlier study I have called attention to the significance of the Sabbath fast as holding a negative connotation for the Sabbath (as is also the case with the posture of kneeling in prayer on the Sabbath).³² It is interesting to observe that Tertullian here gives evidence of Christians who do fast on the Sabbath and that he also reveals his own aversion to the practice. This aversion stands in marked contrast to his attitude manifested some two decades earlier in his treatise *On Prayer*. At that time, it will be remembered, he considered the "some few" who abstained from kneeling in prayer on the Sabbath as dissentients. Now he himself has evidently assumed an attitude parallel to theirs. This apparently new attitude can, of course, already be traced in book 4 of his *Against Marcion*, penned after he had adopted Montanism; for here he emphasized, as we have seen, the importance of Christ's so-called dispensation to His disciples from fasting on the Sabbath.³³ Montanism provided a more rigorous version of Christianity than that of Catholic Christianity, and it seems possible that Tertullian's acceptance of Montanism could well have led him to a more strict interpretation of practices relating to the seventh-day Sabbath.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that Hippolytus, a Roman contemporary of Tertullian who also held rigorous views (though not a Montanist), penned a *Commentary on Daniel* in which he displays a negative attitude toward fasting on either Saturday or Sunday.³⁴ Could it be that at

³² "Some Notes on the Sabbath Fast in Early Christianity," *AUSS*, II (1965), 170-172.

³³ See above, the quotation from *Against Marcion*, iv. 12, taken from *ANF*, III, 363, col. 1. Tertullian earlier in the context actually uses the words "dispensation from fasting," pointing out that Christ "remembered that this privilege (I mean the dispensation from fasting) was allowed to the Sabbath from the very beginning." *Ibid.*, p. 362, col. 2.

³⁴ Cf. my "A Further Note on the Sabbath in Coptic Sources," *AUSS*, VI (1968), 152. The reference is *Commentary on Daniel*, iv. 20, and the pertinent part mentions some people who "give heed to doctrines of devils" and "often appoint a fast on the Sabbath and on the Lord's day, which Christ has not, however, appointed." For

this time certain parties of stricter Christians in both North Africa and Rome (whether Montanist or not) tended to show a particular respect for the Sabbath, which respect was waning or had waned among other Christians who lived in those places?

Conclusions

In this study of Tertullian and the Sabbath it would appear that the following conclusions are warranted: (1) Tertullian in his early Christian career had a negative attitude toward the Sabbath. He preferred a posture considered negative to the joy of the Sabbath; namely, kneeling. (2) At the same time, he furnishes evidence that at least some Christians in North Africa were positive in their Sabbath attitude by refusing to kneel on that day. (3) He furnishes possible further evidence regarding Sabbath practice among Christians in that he can refer to "ease and luxury" on Saturday among heathen as a point of comparison with Christians. (4) Two of Tertullian's most lengthy discussions on the Sabbath, in his *Answer to the Jews* and *Against Marcion*, do not relate to practices of his time but are theological in nature (as well as polemical). Their purposes and major themes must be borne in mind in any effort to deduce from them evidence of Tertullian's attitude toward the Sabbath. (5) With respect to *Against Marcion*, the seemingly conflicting remarks regarding the law and Sabbath find their unity within the context of Tertullian's treatment of the harmony between the OT and the NT. There were aspects in which the law and Sabbath were done away and aspects in which they were retained, but in both cases the OT and NT were in agreement. (6) It would appear that at the time he wrote books 4 and 5 of *Against Marcion*, his opinion was as follows: Christ's example of doing divine works (in contrast to human works) on the Sabbath and of opposing Sabbath fasting was

Greek text and French translation, see Maurice Lefèvre, *Hippolyte, Commentaire sur Daniel* (Paris, 1947), pp. 300-303.

in harmony with the Creator's regulations for true Sabbath observance given in the OT and thus Christ "did not at all rescind the Sabbath." On the other hand, the ceremonialistic and legalistic type of obedience to the law to which the Galatians had fallen prey was out of harmony with the Creator's plan as manifested in the OT and was abolished in the new dispensation just as had been predicted in the OT. (7) Tertullian's attitude toward the Sabbath may have grown somewhat more favorable with his adoption of Montanism. In any event, such a conclusion is not incompatible with his references in book 4 of *Against Marcion*, including those relating to Sabbath fasting. (8) His later reference in *On Fasting* to Sabbath fasting, and (in his opinion) desirable abstinence from it, would seem to indicate that by about A.D. 217 or 218 he had quite reversed his earliest recorded viewpoint regarding postures and acts of solicitude and humiliation on the Sabbath; in at least this respect, his attitude seems to have changed from negative to positive toward the Sabbath. (9) Regarding Sabbath *practice*, apparently there was still dissension in A.D. 217 or 218, as there had been some two decades earlier; but Tertullian, as we have noted, appears to have changed sides. Could it be that the "some few" dissentients referred to in his treatise *On Prayer* were Montanists, whose party he had now joined and whose positions he now fostered and defended? (10) All in all, though Tertullian's references to the Sabbath are mostly of a rather indirect nature as far as Sabbath practices of his own time are concerned, he does give us enough information to indicate that there was a certain type of Christian Sabbath observance in his day and his area. However, as I have pointed out on another occasion, when dealing with the early church we must be careful not to read back into it a modern concept of what "Sabbath observance" means.³⁵ Perhaps the most we can say is that in Tertullian's time we know from evidence given by him

³⁵ "Some Notes on the Sabbath Fast in Early Christianity," p. 168, n. 4.

that there were Christians who showed respect for the Sabbath by various practices such as refusing to kneel on it, refraining from fasting on it, and/or having "ease and luxury" on it. Apparently there were efforts to set the Sabbath apart as a joyous day (a reflection of this may even possibly be seen in Tertullian's reference to Christ's example as setting forth the day as one to be "free from gloom").

It must be admitted that many aspects of Tertullian's Sabbath attitude are not very clear. He still remains an enigma, but it is hoped that the foregoing analysis and reconstruction does bring some semblance of order out of what has too frequently appeared to be only chaos.