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C. Mervyn Maxwell
Andrews University

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WHICH DAY IS SABBATH?

Evidence on an old clay tablet is bringing new insight to the question of twentieth-century Sunday laws.

C. MERVYN MAXWELL

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The proper day Christians should devote to worship is by no means a dead issue in the United States. Both the day itself and the manner in which it should be observed are items of continuing concern.

In Kentucky not long ago a governor vetoed a bill liberalizing the State's ancient Sunday-closing law. He said it was his "considered opinion" that a legislature had no right to "repeal one of the Ten Commandments."

In Florida a Sunday Observance Committee made up of volunteer clergymen attempted to persuade major stores in St. Petersburg to close their doors on Sunday. The committee failed, but before it did so it had secured promises from all but two stores to close "if all the others would." Since not quite

"all" the others did, none did.

In early 1970 Virginia survived a spirited Sunday-law contest in which "law and order" was cited as a reason for the continuance of its ancient blue laws. At last reports the Old Dominion is still arresting citizens for violating its two-hundred-year-old Sunday ordinances.

Even the U.S. Supreme Court has been forced to take up the Sunday law controversy twice in the past decade. In the spring of 1970 it devoted attention to the problem of the weekly rest day as observed in Texas. In 1961 it had upheld (in the *Krown Koshier Super Market* and *Abraham Braunfeld* cases) laws of Massachusetts and Pennsylvania that denied the right of Orthodox Jews to open up on Sunday

if they closed on Saturday. In 1970, however, the court upheld the Texas law, which permitted stores to open on either Saturday or Sunday provided they closed on the alternate day.

In a nation facing grave crises relating to the tension between "law" and "liberty," the authority of one of man's most ancient codes, the Ten Commandments delivered by God in Old Testament times (Exodus 20) and described as the law of liberty in New Testament times (James 2), well deserves our close examination.

Amid all the insight that might be offered on this subject, one of the most informative was brought to light recently by a colleague of mine, Dr. Alger Johns, a graduate of

C. Mervyn Maxwell is professor of church history at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, and author of the regular LIBERTY column "Insight."

Johns Hopkins University and, until his recent death, professor of Old Testament at Andrews University. Dr. Johns supplied a fascinating interpretation of an archeological discovery.

Many archeological finds consist of fragments of things—bits of pottery, pages of papyrus, and so on. Dr. Johns's discovery concerns fragments of time.

Using ancient clay tablets, modern astronomical tables, and "Julian day numbers," he arrived at what is most likely the exact date, and even the precise *day of the week*, on which the city of Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and their vigorous young general, Nebuchadnezzar, in 597 B.C.

In his work, published in the scholarly journal *Vetus Testamentum*, Dr. Johns said that "the publication by Wiseman of the Babylonian Chronicles may well have given Biblical scholarship one of the most well attested dates . . . in Old Testament history. These Babylonian records have pinpointed the capture of Jerusalem . . . as having taken place on the 2nd of [the month of] Adar of Nebuchadnezzar's seventh regnal year."

He went on to say that in the light of other research conducted by other archeologists, whom he names, "there is an extremely high degree of probability that this date is precise, and that the second of Adar was indeed March 16, 597 B.C. Once the Julian date has been determined it is quite easy," he wrote, "to utilize astronomical tables and ascertain the Julian day number. The Julian day number for March 16, 597 B.C., is 1503444. Furthermore, once the Julian day number has been determined, mere arithmetical computation reveals that the Julian day number 1503444, March 16, 597 B.C., was a Saturday."

Dr. Johns further explained that when Nebuchadnezzar be-

gan his third siege of Jerusalem nine years later, he very likely did so on January 15, 588 B.C., also a Saturday, and that he concluded his third siege after eighteen months of hostilities with a final attack on July 29, 587 B.C., *once more a Saturday*.

Dr. Johns's discovery is of great interest and importance for two reasons. First, it reminds us once more that there really is no question about on which day of the week God's Sabbath falls. How many times have I been asked if anyone can be sure which day God had in mind when He commanded us to "remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy"! (See Exodus 20:8.) Can we be certain, people ask, which day of the week God's people kept in Bible times? Does anyone know without a doubt which day Jesus was keeping when "as his custom was," He went into the synagogue "on the sabbath day"? (Luke 4:16.)

The answers from the ancient records—the Babylonian chronological tablets, pagan writers like Dio Cassius and Prontinus, the Jewish historian Josephus, and from the Christian apologist Justin Martyr, to name only a few—all prove that the day God's people kept in Bible times coincided with the day we call Saturday.

The Egyptians under Ptolemy Soter attacked the Jews on a Saturday around 300 B.C. The Seleucids under Antiochus IV did it in 167 B.C. And Roman armies picked a Saturday to attack Jerusalem or to build earthworks against the city walls on three occasions—under Ptolemy in 63 B.C., under Mark Antony in 38 B.C., and under Vespasian in A.D. 70.

The pagan Roman historian Dio Cassius, in his *Roman History*, tells that Pompey used "the days of Saturn" in 63 B.C. to build those earthworks mentioned a moment ago, and he explains that Pompey chose Saturdays because the Jews,

"by doing no work at all on those days," gave the Romans an advantage. Pompey knew that his men could build earthworks right under the city walls on Saturdays in perfect safety provided they followed his strict orders not to provoke the Jews watching from the parapets by shooting an arrow or hurling a spear.

Dio Cassius adds that the Jews were finally captured "on the day of Saturn, without making any defense." Josephus, in his account in *The Jewish War*, makes clear that the days Cassius calls "the days of Saturn" were "the sabbaths," "the seventh day of the week," on which the Jews "refrain from all manual work."

Dio Cassius also informs us that in the times of Mark Antony's attack in 38 B.C. the Jews were accustomed to "rest on the day even then called the day of Saturn," and he states that after the attack was over permission was granted by the Romans to Jewish prisoners to go up to the Temple "with the rest of the people," to perform the customary rites, "when the day of Saturn came round again."

The Roman author Frontinus in his *Stratagems*, a work on military strategy written around A.D. 95, says that in the war that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 the forces of the Emperor Vespasian "attacked the Jews on the day of Saturn, on which it is forbidden for them to do anything serious, and prevailed."

And Justin Martyr, the well-known Christian writer who published a defense of Christianity around A.D. 155, leaves no doubt at all as to which day it was that the Jews called the Sabbath.

Justin says that Jesus was crucified "on the day before that of Saturn; and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun," He appeared to the dis-

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ciples. Justin here says that Jesus was crucified on the day before Saturday and was resurrected on the day after it. The Bible says that Jesus was buried "on the preparation [day], that is, the day before the sabbath" (Mark 15:42), and was resurrected "when the sabbath was past," "very early in the morning the first day of the week" (see Mark 16:1, 2).

Thus there can be no doubt whatsoever that the day which God's people kept as the Sabbath in Bible times, the day on which Jesus Himself went into the synagogue, the day Jesus said was "made for man" (Mark 2:27), coincides with the weekly day we now call Saturday.

The second important thing about Dr. Johns's discovery is the light it sheds on the type of Sabbathkeeping that pleases God.

EIGHT At the time when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, many of the Jews, even though they were the chosen people of God, were corrupted with crime and idolatry. The prophet Jeremiah, a contemporary, rebuked them severely for oppressing orphans and widows, for committing thefts, murder, and idolatry, and for burning their children alive as sacrifices to their pagan gods. (See Jeremiah 7:6-9, 31.) According to various accounts in Scripture it is easy to suppose they had given up Sabbath observance altogether. Indeed, Jeremiah 17:19-27 indicates that they *had* given up the Sabbath to the extent that they moved merchandise freely through the city gates on that day. But Dr. Johns's discovery shows that actually many Jews were keeping the Sabbath with at least sufficient strictness that the Babylonians knew it would be easier to attack them on a Saturday than on some other day of the week.

Indeed, Jeremiah himself shows that many Jews, for all

their sins, still considered themselves worshipers of the true God, carefully placing some idols in God's Temple as well as in their pagan temples (see chap. 7:30). They continued to offer the prescribed sacrifices to God along with their other sacrifices to pagan gods (see verse 21). They often talked about God (chap. 12:2), and they felt better whenever they came up to the Temple of God (see chap. 7:9, 10).

But such attention to the externals of religion, even when associated with a moderate amount of Sabbathkeeping, was not enough to shelter the Jews from the fury of God's anger when, after centuries of deepening rebellion, their "cup of iniquity" was at last filled.

All this history has the greatest significance for the current question of Sunday-closing laws, one of the crucial issues of our century. Much is being said about Sundaykeeping as the Christian fulfillment of the ancient Sabbath commandments, and about the need for a Sunday when families can be together, or men can go fishing, and fans can attend a baseball game—and when, for an hour at least in the morning, religious people can go to church. But all the evidence from the Bible and archeology shows that Sundaykeeping can never fulfill the Sabbath commandment. God commanded us to "remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (see Exodus 20:8). The day He had in mind was Saturday, not Sunday. There is not the least possibility that Sundaykeeping can be a Christian fulfillment, or any kind of valid fulfillment, of the fourth commandment. "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy," said the Lord. The Sabbath coincides with Saturday.

If half-hearted Sabbathkeeping by unconverted and unsanctified people in the sixth century

B.C. could not avert God's wrath, there is no basis to hope that a picnic Sunday, or a golf Sunday, or a baseball Sunday will please the Lord in the twentieth century A.D.

The Jews in 587 B.C. went to church on Sabbath, yet God rejected them and turned them over to destruction. The point is that the Sabbath was not given to men as a mere day of rest. Nor even as a mere day of rest on which to spend some time in worship. The Sabbath was given as a day to be *kept holy*, and it was given as a sign and a memorial.

As a sign of sanctification: "I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord that sanctify them" (see Ezekiel 20:12). The Sabbath is a day to be kept holy or sacred. To keep a day holy a man must himself be holy. Thus the very requirement of true Sabbathkeeping reminds us of our need for heart sanctification, for the transformation of life that only God can provide.

And as a memorial of Creation: "In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested" (Exodus 31:17). The Sabbath reminds us that the God who was able to create the world in six days longs to hear us pray, "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (see Psalm 51:10).

Dr. Johns's fascinating discovery serves to remind us in this day of Sunday-closing laws that the Sabbath of the Lord our God is Saturday and that Sabbathkeeping implies conversion, sanctification, and holiness rather than just a relaxing day with church thrown in. □