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In Search of the ORIGIN of the SABBATH

(Part I)

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NOTE: Dr. J. H. Meesters has written a book on the Sabbath entitled *Op zoek naar de oorsprong van de sabbat*. Translated into English this means *In Search of the Origin of the Sabbath*. Since the book is written in the Dutch language, few of us are able to read it. However, Dr. Earle Hilgert has written a lengthy review of the book for our journal so that our ministry may have available some of the interesting material that it contains. We are treating the review as an article, the first part of which follows.—EDITORS.

DR. MEESTERS is a Dutch Old Testament scholar. The concern of his study and his point of view are set forth as follows in the introduction to his book.

"The subject of this study is the sabbath. It, even as the seven-day week, is a typically Israelite datum for which—as this investigation will emphasize—no parallel can be shown. In Israel this period of time first marked the face of the calendar and from Israel the seven-day period spread out over the world. Numerous calendrical systems, among them the planetary week of the Romans and the Christian reckoning of time have felt the influence of this seven-day period and have been partially determined by it.

"But the sabbath—the conclusion of the week which returned in unbroken rhythm—remained in the ancient world a unique, distinguishing institution for Israel, which as such was taken over by no one and at most aroused amazement, derision or incomprehension."—Page 1.

Meesters divides his study into two main parts. The first, entitled "The Question of the Original Significance of the Sabbath," provides an orientation into and evaluation of the considerable scholarly literature that has grown up over the last three quarters of a century in regard to the origin of the Sabbath. This literature, strange to say, has been almost entirely

bypassed by Adventist students and writers, although a brief survey may now be found in the *SDA Encyclopedia*, pages 1111-1113.

Working with the methodology of a critical Biblical scholar, Meesters studies each of the various theories that has been propounded in regard to Sabbath origins.

First consideration must be given to the meaning of the Hebrew word *shabbath*, "sabbath." Scholars have commonly thought to relate it to an Arabic word *sabata*, "to cut off, be done with something, rest" (so Gensenius-Buhl), or with the Akkadian *sapattu*, possibly meaning "to stop," and have sought to relate it to certain Babylonian days on which the king was to refrain from his royal duties. After a careful linguistic analysis, Meesters rejects these and concludes that "we cannot say that our etymological research has brought us nearer to the original meaning of the sabbath. . . . There remains nothing else than the conclusion that we have to do here with an underivable Hebrew verb."—Pages 14, 15.

The "Sabbath" and "New Moon"

If etymological analysis leads nowhere in determining whether Israel received the Sabbath from others, it next becomes important to consider the nature of the Hebrew calendar in the possibility that the frequent combination of "sabbath" and "new moon" (cf. 2 Kings 4:23; Amos 8:5; Hosea 2:11; Isa. 1:13; 66:23, etc.) may point to an internal connection between these that indicates a Mesopotamian origin for both—since the Akkadian *sapattu* was a full-moon day. In this con-

nection Meesters rejects the recent view of Mlle. A. Jaubert that the original calendar of Judah was a solar rather than a lunar calendar.¹ He finds her arguments "hardly convincing" (p. 19) and points to the lack of any historical indication of a necessary corrective mechanism to bring her 364-day calendar into line with the actual solar year. He emphasizes that Israel did indeed share with her neighbors the fact of a calendar based on the moon; the difference, however, lay in the fact that while among many of the former the new moon was a time of taboo, with Israel it was a feast.

For a quarter of a century (1905-1930) Johannes Meinhold² championed a theory of Sabbath origin that, in its basic position at least, has been defended by a good number of scholars. This is that the sabbath, so often mentioned in connection with the new moon, was originally the day of the full moon. Meinhold noted that the "sabbath" never appears in pre-exilic literature apart from the new moon (except for Ex. 20 and Deut. 5); in view of this he argued that it did not achieve its position at the consummation of the seven-day week until the time of the Babylonian captivity and is first recognized as such in Ezekiel.

Meesters rejects Meinhold's position for several reasons: (1) There is no explanation of how a feast day recurring only once a month on a lunar basis could have changed to a rest day at the end of a weekly cycle. (2) The juxtaposition of "new moon" and "sabbath" also appears in post-exilic passages (e.g. Eze. 45:17; 46:1-3; Neh. 10:33, etc.). (3) The full-moon day is never called "sabbath," while the Sabbath is repeatedly identified as the seventh day. (4) Nowhere in the Old Testament is there any memory of a celebration of the full moon, though the observance of the new moon is clear (1 Sam. 20). Meesters accounts for the combination of "sabbath" and "new moon" instead simply by the fact that they both were regularly recurring festivals.³ "They were days that more than any other date stood fast within the calendar."—Page 34.

Turning once more to the question of an Akkadian origin of the word *shabbath*, Meesters finds that not only is there no demonstrable etymological relationship between the words *shabbath* and *sapattu*, but the nature of the days represented is different: (1) *sapattu* was governed by the phases of the moon, while the Sabbath

recurred on a seven-day cycle. (2) The restriction of certain activities on the *sapattu* applied only to certain people, not to all as with the Sabbath.

Other scholars have thought to find an Akkadian origin for the Sabbath in the *ume lemnute*, or evil days, on which restrictions were also placed on certain leading officials and which recurred at approximate—but not exact—weekly intervals (the 7th, 14th, 19th, 21st, and 28th days of the month).⁴ Again Meesters rejects this theory, and for the following reasons: (1) The *ume lemnuti* are tied to the month, while the Sabbath was not. (2) They were unlucky days; the Sabbath was a day of joy.⁵ (3) At Nimrud at least, the seventh day was a fast day; the Jews purposely avoided fasting on Sabbath. (4) The *ume lemnuti* were restricted to certain persons; the Sabbath was for all. (5) On the Mesopotamian seventh day the soothsayers were forbidden to speak; in Israel men sought out the prophets on Sabbath (2 Kings 4:23).

The "Kenites" and the Sabbath

Another widely accepted theory has been that of B. D. Eerdmans.⁶ It has often been noted that three of the four texts that prescribe how the Sabbath is to be kept (Ex. 35:3; Num. 15:32; Ex. 16:23; the fourth is Exodus 16:29) specify that no fire is to be kindled, or reflect that specification. This led Eerdmans to conclude that the Sabbath originally was a day of fire-taboo, and to point to the Levites as its locus of origin. The name "Kenite" is probably from the root *qyn*, a rare word in Hebrew appearing only in 2 Samuel 21:16. It is probably related to the Aramaic *qyn'h* and Arabic *qain*, "smith." Furthermore, in Genesis 4:22 Tubal-cain, the ancestor of smiths, is given as their progenitor. Israel's initial contact with them was favorable and intimate: according to Judges 4:11, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, was a Kenite; later (1 Sam. 30:29) they are seen as dwelling within the borders of Judah. Eerdmans theorized on the basis of the probable meaning of their name, that the Kenites originally were desert-dwelling blacksmiths, for whom therefore a day of fire-taboo was tantamount to a day of rest from work. He saw Moses as having adopted the Sabbath from the Kenites through his personal relationship with them and their close association with Israel.

H. H. Rowley⁷ has developed this view further—though Meesters does not bring it into his discussion—with the proposal that Yahweh-worship and the “Ritual Decalogue” of Exodus 34, which includes the Sabbath, came to Israel from the Kenites. Since Moses’ mother’s name, Jochebed, is probably compounded from the name Yahweh, Rowley thinks that “there was a Yahweh-worshiping strain on his mother’s side,” and that when he fled to Jethro, he was fleeing to her relatives⁸ (as Jacob later fled to his mother’s family).

The great problem with the Kenite theory, as Meesters points out, is that it rests on such tenuous Biblical evidence. Nothing about it can be proved: that the Kenites were smiths, that they worshiped Yahweh, that they were related ancestrally to Moses, or that they observed the Sabbath—conjecture, though brilliant, remains conjecture. Meesters does think it possible, however, that the Israelites may have brought the Sabbath as a fire-taboo day out of Egypt, where there is evidence of such days’ having been observed.

Saturn and the Sabbath

Several other theories may be dismissed with less consideration. Karl Budde⁹ builds on Eerdman’s theory, and on the basis of Amos 5:26 thinks that during the sojourn in the wilderness Israel worshiped Saturn (Sakkuth, Amos 5:26, R.S.V., the Babylonian god Ninurta, whose planet was Saturn). But the question arises here as to whether Amos really refers to practices in the wilderness period; as the R.S.V. indicates, the clause probably is better translated as referring to the future.

Since classical times, the fact that the Jewish week and the Graeco-Roman planetary week coincided, with Sabbath always falling on the day of Saturn, has aroused comment.¹⁰ The question has arisen whether one influenced the other and with which the priority may lie. Meesters prefers to think that the Jewish week underlies the planetary, that the day of Saturn was perhaps the first day to be identified with a planet owing to the accretion of absurd notions in regard to Sabbathkeeping and that in this context at a later time the other days of the week were identified with planets, thus forming the classical planetary week: “If the planetary week must thank its origin solely to a knowledge of the seven planets, it is a riddle why the traces of a planetary week

can nowhere be traced back to Babylon. Only the seven weekdays which we know exclusively from the calendar of Israel gave to the planetary week its form and shape.” —Pages 59f. There is no clear evidence of a planetary week before the second century B.C. In this connection the recent important work of W. Rordorf may be cited.¹¹ He shows good evidence for thinking that already in the first century B.C. Jewish Sabbathkeeping may have been influenced by a superstitious regard for the planet Saturn.

Another theory, proposed especially by Hutton Webster,¹² holds that the Sabbath originated as a market day (cf. Amos 8:5; Neh. 13:15). While it is true that many parallels of market-rest days can be drawn from other societies, the texts cited are too late to be definitive for the origin of the Sabbath, and there is no evidence of the Israelites’ having had specially designated market days.

The most recent major theory of Sabbath origin is that propounded by Julius and Hildegard Lewy¹³ and popularized by Julius Morgenstern in his unfortunate article in the *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (IV, 135-137). Meesters traces the development of this theory and its general abandonment in view of recent discoveries. As this same material has been sketched in the *SDA Encyclopedia*, pages 1112f., we will not detail it here.

(To be continued)

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- ¹ A. Jaubert, “Le calendrier des Jubilées et de la secte de Qumran. Ses origines bibliques,” *VT* III (1953), 250-264.
- ² J. Meinhold, *Sabbat und Woche im Alten Testament*, Göttingen, 1905; “Die Entstehung des Sabbats,” *ZAW* XXIX (1909), 81-112; *Sabbat und Sonntag*, Leipzig, 1909 (M. works so designated have not been seen by this reviewer); “Zur Sabbatfrage,” *ZAW* XXXVI (1916), 108-110; “Zur Sabbatfrage,” *ZAW* XLVIII (1930), 121-138.
- ³ See K. Budde, “The Sabbath and the Week,” *JTS* XXX (1929), 1-15; “Antwort auf J. Meinholds ‘Zur Sabbatfrage,’” *ZAW* XLVIII (1930), 138-145.
- ⁴ First noted in a text discovered in 1869 by George Smith and published by H. C. Rawlinson, *The Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia* (London, 1891), IV, R. 32.
- ⁵ But note Meesters’ remark later when he defends the possibility that Sabbath may have started in Israel as a fire-taboo day brought from Egypt: “The history of religions provides other examples of how an originally evil day undergoes a complete metamorphosis and becomes preeminently a feast-day” (p. 52).
- ⁶ B. D. Eerdmans, “Der Sabbath,” *Vom Alten Testament* (Festsch. K. Marti), *BZAW* XLI (Giessen, 1925), 79-83(M); *Sabbatsviering I-II*, VPRO-Uitgave No. 66-67. Huis ter Heide, 1929(M).
- ⁷ H. H. Rowley, “Moses and the Decalogue,” *BJRL* XXXIV (1951-2), 81-118; see esp. pp. 97-102; cf. *From Joseph to Joshua* (1950), pp. 159f.
- ⁸ “Moses and the Decalogue,” p. 97, n.2.
- ⁹ Karl Budde, “The Sabbath and the Week,” *JTS* XXX (1929), 1-15.
- ¹⁰ Tibullus I, 3, 17f; Dio Cassius 37.16; 49.22; 66.7.
- ¹¹ Willy Rordorf, *Der Sonntag* (Zurich, 1962), pp. 30-37.
- ¹² Hutton Webster, *Rest Days* (New York, 1916).
- ¹³ J. and H. Lewy, “The Origin of the Week and the Oldest West Asiatic Calendar,” *HUCA* XVII (1942-3), 1-152.