

# EXPERIENCING THE DAY OF REST IN THE FIRST CENTURY

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Christians who are used to worshipping every Sunday and keeping this day as a day of rest often wonder how their brothers and sisters in the first century may have observed this day. And they are often *left* wondering, due to the somewhat surprising lack of any information on this topic in the New Testament itself. Left to one's own musings, one is then all too often inclined to project the problems of our own day back onto the days of the ancient past, without adequately accounting for the huge cultural shifts which have taken place since then. All this has led to a persistent myth about the Lord's Day observance of early Christians, a myth which has found its way (at least in Holland) into catechism materials, books and even unguarded comments by several scholars.

The myth can be presented as follows (somewhat dressed up):

Once upon a time, long long ago, at the dawn of New Testament church life, many people fell under the spell of the preaching of the Apostles of Jesus Christ and were led unto the repentance of faith. Motivated by this faith they desired henceforth to worship their new Lord on Sundays. They knew nothing of the Jewish phenomenon of rest days and didn't need to know this either. They had become Christians and were therefore redeemed from the law of Moses. Moreover they all had busy jobs and needed to be at work by 9:00 am. Employers, then as now, were not impressed with the excuse that their employees needed a free day because they had just joined a new religion. For this reason they met together early on Sunday mornings at sunrise for a quick hour of worship before proceeding to work. Only in the fourth century did Emperor Constantine get the great idea to reintroduce a piece of the law of Moses by making Sunday a compulsory day of rest.

Such a story can sound fairly reasonable. All the more so when you consider that a letter from the Roman governor Pliny shows that the Christians at this time did indeed come together at around sunrise on the first day of the week. Most propagators of this myth have the intention of showing what a privilege it is to be able to have a day of rest on Sunday, but at the same time they often wish to emphasise that it is not really a divine commandment. After all, the early Christians didn't keep the day of rest, did they?

What must we say to all this? Let's begin with the only element of the story that rests on any evidence, namely the times of the worship services. We indeed know a few things about the timing of worship services in the new Christian churches, both from sources within the early Christian church and from the habits of the Jewish synagogues out of which the Christians had come. The morning service began around sunrise. Actually this is not surprising. The Jewish synagogues began their morning services on the Sabbath at sunrise too. Not only that, but the sacrificial services in Greek and Roman temples all also started at sunrise.



*Pliny the Younger*

It is perhaps more interesting to consider the length of this worship. Because the first Christian churches were little more than secessions from local synagogues (often with a significant number of "God-fearers" as members), it is likely that the duration of their worship would have been similar to the Jewish synagogues. It is clear and undisputed from a number of different sources that the sabbath morning services in the synagogue lasted – in the words of Philo – "until late in the day." Josephus tells us that we need to think in terms of a service lasting till around noon, when people returned home for a meal.<sup>1</sup> We also know that

1 See S. Safrai, "The Synagogue," in *The Jewish People in the First Century*, ed. S. Safrai *et al.* vol. 2. Compendia

Christians, in addition to the morning service, came back together late in the afternoon for a meal, which also served as their celebration of the Lord's supper.<sup>2</sup>

How does this information relate to the idea that the Christians also needed to work? Is it not remarkable that the problem of work as a possible obstacle to attending worship is nowhere mentioned in the New Testament? That is worth thinking about.

The perceived problem is fortunately not difficult to unravel. It has everything to do with an all too easy retrojection of the economy and problems of *our* time onto the economy of the first century. Having to work on Sundays was in any case not the problem in the time of the New Testament. At that time, both in Israel and in the rest of the Greco-Roman world the basic rule was that the day on which worship (i.e. sacrifice) was rendered ought to be a day of rest. If the Greeks or Romans went for worship to a temple of their god(s), then that day was a day of rest. Public affairs were banned. Worship and rest went hand in hand. The day of worship was dedicated to God. And it was usually just as little a problem for Greeks and Romans as it was for Jews or Christians not to work on that day. In Rome, for example, there were 235 days in the year for the people (days on which work could be done) and 109 days designated as *nefasti*, days dedicated to different gods on which sacrifices in their temples were to be brought. On these sacrificial days one was not permitted to enter public areas. This rule was in order to make room for the religious ceremonies. Whether or not one did work within the confines of his own home was left to the individual. This was not forbidden.<sup>3</sup> We sometimes have difficulty imagining this, but ancient society was very different to ours. Jobs, as we know them, did not exist. The idea that you have a boss and need to work from Monday to Friday (or anytime) is a modern phenomenon. At that time you got a job as a boy with your parents, or perhaps with an uncle. It was always a family business, whether it was a farm or a craft like a cobbler or, as Paul, a leather-worker. If your business became so large that you needed more manpower, then you purchased a slave. This was how society worked. If you only needed additional manpower for a limited time (e.g. at harvest), you went to the market *before* sunrise (!) where there were always people you could hire for a day. This was generally only done on a daily basis. For this reason these workers were called *day-labourers*.<sup>4</sup>

The problem for the churches in the time of the New Testament was not whether one should or could rest on the day of worship. Everyone, ex-Jew or ex-Greek, could respect that point. It was a non-issue for everyone (excepting slaves). The real problem was the celebration of Jewish sabbaths in addition to the Lord's day, namely all those days in the calendar of Leviticus 23. It was the teaching of the Judaizers that all the extra sabbath days in the law of Moses still had to be observed. The background to this observance was the idea that the worship on those days, which took place in the temple, was still valid worship of God and therefore required that the day be honoured with rest and local worship. Many Christians thought that the Judaizers were right. Jesus was after all the Messiah of the Jews of Israel, and it still seemed natural that the worship services and sabbath days of Israel should be kept.<sup>5</sup> New moon days were especially important for the determination of the beginning of the new month in ancient times. For this reason they were often also set apart among other nations as days on which special religious ceremonies were to take place. The temptation for young Christians to celebrate these days must therefore have been great. The apostle Paul speaks against this practice in his letters. All the new moon days and other sabbath days must *not* be celebrated, because

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Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1987) 922. Philo (*Hypoth.* 7,13) mentions synagogue services that lasted until late in the day (dei/llh here refers to 'day' not 'afternoon') cf. Jos. *Apion* 1,209. Heathen sacrificial rituals also began at sunrise and lasted into the afternoon, see John Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, transl. J. Lloyd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) 80ff.

2 See R. D. Anderson, *1 Korintiërs: Orde op zaken in een jonge stadskerk* (Kampen: Kok, 2008) 163-64. From Acts 20:6-7 we learn that Paul had let this late afternoon service drag on long into the night!

3 See further Scheid, *Roman Religion*, 41-59, especially 57.

4 Concerning the ancient economy see M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

5 The word 'sabbath' means 'day of rest' and not 'Saturday'. As such it is also used for the extra days of rest and worship which did not fall on a Saturday, e.g. the day of atonement (Lev. 23:23-32). Even the Romans spoke of the extra rest days of the Jews as 'sabbaths', cf. Horace *Serm.* 1.9.69-70 who describes the new moon days of the Jews as 'sabbaths'. See further Philo *Spec. Leg.* 2.194.

Christ has fulfilled the system of Mosaic law in his death on the cross!<sup>6</sup> This was indeed the real problem area at the time of the New Testament. Partly due to this fact the Christian churches generally denoted the Sunday as “day of the Lord” instead of “sabbath”. The word “sabbath” was often used to mean “Jewish Sabbath”.<sup>7</sup>

The reader will understand that it is therefore necessary to make several critical comments concerning this warmly cherished myth. Firstly, we should note that our starting point is always what God's commandment says: not history, but God's Holy Word. The mythical story is most obviously wrong in its misrepresentation of how society in the first century functioned. Our own modern situation is read back into the days of the early Christian church. The problem that the supporters of this myth raise (that of having to give up one's job to observe a day of rest) does not come from any historical source, but from their own minds. There is in fact not one church father who says anything about Christians who work on Sundays. Is that not that remarkable? There are church fathers who talk about the fact that all Christians *celebrate* the Lord's day. Indeed, they use the word “celebrate” and not “rest”. But, as we have seen, to celebrate in worship and to rest were concepts that went hand in hand both in the Bible and in the general culture of the time. It is inconceivable that if we read that Christians celebrate the day of the Lord, the intention is to communicate that they rose at sunrise, held a short service, and thereupon proceeded to their daily work! This is nowhere stated in the sources. Moreover, our myth-propagators often forget that the working day in that time and culture did not begin at 9:00 am, but also directly at sunrise! And what must we say about the early church service? Sunrise was the normal time for the start of a synagogue service or any temple worship anywhere. The only source of information for Christian worship comes from a letter of Pliny, a Roman governor from the early second century. He wrote to Emperor Trajan how he had interrogated and tortured Christians to find out what they got up to. He reports that they gathered together on the first day of the week around sunrise for worship. Later they gathered together again for a meal. He says no more of relevance to our subject than this.<sup>8</sup> Because of a false assumption it is presumed that the Christians came together at sunrise so that they would still have time to go to work. Pliny does not say this, however. And we know that similar worship services in synagogues lasted until about 12 noon!

In the final analysis this myth appears to be no more than an allegory on the problems of observing the day of rest in our own time. We can see how easy it is to fall into the mistake of reading our own situation back into the context of a Bible passage. When reading of worship, we automatically yet incorrectly think of a worship service lasting about an hour (as we experience them) and we couple that with the unspoken assumption that the working day would have started at 9:00 am. Both assumptions prove to be wrong.

We must therefore remain vigilant and learn to read critically, enabling us to better understand the holy and

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6 In the time of the Old Testament there were many more commandments, which concerned the concept of the sabbath and have been fulfilled in Christ. We may consider the laws concerning sabbath years, the year of jubilee and the extra sabbath days for the national feasts and celebration of the new moon. By means of these laws, at least 20 extra sabbath days per year were ordained. In the time of the New Testament the Judaizers desired to lay these extra sabbath days together with other rituals of the law of the Moses on the Christians as compulsory. Paul reacted against this doctrine in passages such as Gal. 4:8-11 and Col. 2:16-17. Romans 14:5-6 is sometimes brought into connection with these passages, but Paul is concerned there with ‘compulsory’ days of fasting (Monday and Thursday for the Jews and Wednesday and Friday for Christians, as we learn from the *Didache* 8, a document from the Syrian church dating to the end of the first century).

7 The Syriac *Didascalia* (chapter 11), however, from the beginning of the third century, uses the word ‘sabbath’ for the Sunday.

8 The relevant passage (from *Letter* 10.96) reads as follows: *Others who were named by an informer confessed that they had been Christians and then denied it; they said they had been Christians, but had ceased to be so, some for three years, some for a longer time, a few for as long as twenty years. These also all of them paid homage to your statue and to the images of the gods, and also reviled Christ. They declared that the whole of their offence or fault was, that they were accustomed to meet together on a fixed day before dawn and to sing a hymn in alternate parts to Christ as a god, binding themselves by an oath not to commit any crime but to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery, never to break their word, nor disown a trust, when called upon to deliver it up. When they had done this, they said it was their custom to separate and then to meet together again to take a meal, an ordinary and harmless one however. They had ceased to do even this after the publication of my edict, in which, following your instructions, I had forbidden the existence of clubs.* (Transl. by G. B. Allen in *Pliny's Letters* [Blackwell: Oxford, 1963]).

infallible Word of our God. God gives us a weekly day of rest that we may worship Him. Worship and rest stand or fall together.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The combination of worship and rest can be found, for example, in Lev. 23:3.