

Evidence for the Sabbath in the First Thirty Years of Christianity
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Introduction

When tracing the history of the Sabbath and Sabbath observance in Early Christianity it is customary to consult the New Testament (NT) for evidence from the time and practices of Jesus of Nazareth and those of his immediate followers.¹ To assemble such evidence, one typically examines the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and John, Acts of the Apostles, and other NT materials, especially the writings ascribed to Paul. The question of this paper is: “What is the evidence for Sabbath and Sabbath observance among the followers of Jesus during the first thirty years after his death?”²

The Sources

To address this question, one must first isolate the NT materials that could reasonably provide direct evidence for the time period in question. Because their subject matter deals with the time of Jesus, the four Gospels would seem to be the primary sources for the earliest part of this time period. However, while these texts concern the purported teachings, practices, and life events of Jesus, none were likely written within thirty years of Jesus’ death. The Gospel of Mark, the earliest, appeared in the late 60s or early 70s of the 1st century, just before or after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Assuming the most widely held scholarly view that they used Mark as one of their principal sources, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written in the 80s. The Fourth Gospel did not appear until near the end of the 1st century. Therefore, in their present form the Gospels do not provide any direct, contemporary evidence for Christian teachings and practices regarding the Sabbath before AD 60.

Clearly, Acts of the Apostles describes earliest Christianity before AD 60. However, as their prologues, themes, and quality of language attest, the Gospel of Luke and Acts were written by the same author and were issued about the same time. Thus, like Luke, Acts dates from the 80s of the 1st century. This disqualifies it as providing direct, contemporary evidence for Christian teachings and practices regarding the Sabbath before AD 60.

¹ E.g., D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982); Kenneth A. Strand, ed., *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982).

² Why have I selected the period of thirty years after the death of Jesus? (1) For Christians, the first century CE divides approximately into thirds: the period of the life, career, and death of Jesus; the period of the early development and initial expansion of Christianity; and the period of the consolidation of Christianity as a Gentile phenomenon and most of the writings of the NT. (2) The period of c. AD 30-60, or the first thirty years after the death of Jesus, is the time when the first NT materials, i.e., the genuine letters of Paul, were written. (3) It is also the time when some very important source materials, later used by the writers of important canonical writings of the NT, were created. (4) It is also the possible time when other proto-NT materials were created. (5) This is the formative period of the initial followers of Jesus and the Palestinian-Jewish architects/pioneers of the Jesus Movement after his death, the early expansion of this Movement among Hellenistic Jews, and the first successful missions among non-Jews. (6) All this was well established by AD 60 (=60 CE).

Paul the apostle certainly ministered and wrote letters within the first thirty years after Jesus' death. However, the matter of his letters is complicated. The prevailing scholarly opinion is that not all the letters attributed to Paul were actually written by him. The following letters are usually considered to be genuinely Pauline: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.³ The others, in addition to being considered not directly Pauline, were likely written after Paul's death in the early 60s.⁴ Therefore, we will look only to the undisputedly genuine Pauline letters for evidence of Christian teaching and practices regarding the Sabbath before AD 60. In fact, these letters constitute the only specific documents in the NT that could possibly provide such evidence.

However, there are several other potential bodies of evidence within the text of the NT that we can consider. The first is a Sayings Source that was used independently by Matthew and Luke. The prevailing understanding of the Synoptic Gospels is that Matthew and Luke used Mark as the source of their basic outline and of many of their narrative and teaching units. We call this material the Triple Tradition. Within this body of text, Matthew and Luke freely reorganized the outline and edited the material. However, Matthew and Luke also exhibit evidence that they used another source for a large body of material that they share—sometimes in verbatim form—but which is not found in Mark. Since this shared material consists mostly of saying and teachings of Jesus, we call it the Sayings Source or Q.⁵ Although we have never discovered Q, something like it as one or more written and/or oral phenomena existed and clearly predated Matthew and Luke. Furthermore, its simplicity and primitive characteristics, like its undeveloped understanding of the person and role of Jesus of Nazareth, undoubtedly locate its origin within the first thirty years of early Christianity.⁶

Further elaboration of the above-described two-source hypothesis of the Synoptic Gospels was extended to recognize that, in addition to their use of Mark and Q, Matthew and Luke had their own, unique source or sources, designated M and L respectively. This is known as the Four Source Hypothesis, i.e., the Gospels of Matthew and Luke each had three broadly defined sources: Matthew's sources included Mark, Q, and M; Luke made use of Mark, Q, and L. Thus, the M and L Sources, whether simple or complex, written or oral, are intended to account for the materials which Matthew and especially Luke contain that are not found in Mark or Q. If this understanding of the Synoptic Gospels is correct, sources M and L would by definition predate the final versions of Matthew and Luke respectively. Apart from that *terminus ante quem*, there is no certain way to know the actual or implied dates of M and L. Either or both in whole or in part may have emerged in written and/or oral form before Mark and possibly even before AD 60, i.e., during the first thirty years of Christianity.

³ The order of writing is likely: 1 Thessalonians (c. AD 50); Galatians (c. 53); 1 Corinthians (c. 53-54); Philippians (c. 55); Philemon (c. 55); 2 Corinthians (c. 55-56); Romans (c. 57).

⁴ Some also consider 2 Thessalonians (c. AD 49-51) to be genuine. No other "Pauline" letters are thought to have been written before AD 60.

⁵ Because this material was first identified in 19th century Germany, it is commonly referred to as Q, which stands for the German word *Quelle* ("source").

⁶ Keith F. Nickle, *The Synoptic Gospels: An Introduction*, revised and expanded edition (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001): 102; James D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making*, Volume 1: Jesus Remembered (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003): 159; PHEME PERKINS, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007): 87.

The Fourth Gospel, John, is generally understood by scholars to have also undergone several stages of development. The strongest consensus lies around the identification of the earliest stage, the Signs Gospel.⁷ This is understood to have been an early collection of stories about Jesus' miracles (called "signs" in the text). The Signs Gospel is sometimes seen to have included not only a Signs Source but also a Passion Source. This material is typically dated AD 50-90—most likely just before or after AD 70.⁸ Because of the potential that the Signs Gospel may date from as early as AD 50, it may provide evidence for Sabbath within the first thirty years of earliest Christianity.

Finally, the NT contains a large amount of so-called traditional material, identified as well-known sayings (mostly confessional or creedal fragments)⁹ and parts of hymns.¹⁰ Such materials would, by definition, predate the particular documents that contain them. Accordingly, many of these materials may originally date to the first thirty years of Christianity and, thereby, reflect what Christians of the time considered important, even essential, teachings and practices.

The Evidence

So, what do we learn about the Sabbath in the first thirty years of Christianity from examining the relevant NT material that we have identified above?

From Paul

Let us look first at Paul's genuine letters. Here the evidence is unambiguous. There are simply no references to the Sabbath or Sabbath observance in any of Paul's genuine letters.¹¹ However, Paul does discuss and describe a wide variety of Christian teachings¹² and practices.¹³ The list of such doctrines and praxes is very comprehensive. The absence of any reference to Sabbath is thus very significant.

⁷ The Signs Gospel, according to the text references of the Fourth Gospel, may be listed as follows: 1:6-7, 19-49; 2:1-11; 2:12a and 4:46b-54; 21:1-14; 6:1-14; 6:15-25; 11:1-45; 9:1-8; 5:2-9ab; 11:47-53; 2:14-19; 12:37-40; 12:1-8; 12:12-15; 18:1-11; 18:12-27; 18:28-19:16a; 19:16b-37; 19:38-42; 20:1-10; 20:11-18; 20:19-22; 20:30-31ab. See "The Signs Gospel," Early Christian Writings, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/signs.html>.

⁸ "The Signs Gospel," Early Christian Writings, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/signs.html>.

⁹ E.g., Matt 16:16; 28:18-20; Luke 24:34; John 1:1-18, 49; 6:68-69; 20:28; Acts 2:22-24; 16:31; Rom 1:3-4; 4:25; 8:34; 10:9-10; 1 Cor 8:6; 11:23-26; 12:3; 15:3-10; Eph 4:4-6; 1 Tim 1:15, 17; 2:5-6; 3:1, 16; 4:8-9; 6:15-16; 2 Tim 2:8; 11-13; Titus 3:4-7; Heb 1:1-3; 10:23; 1 Pet 1:18-21; 3:18; 1 John 4:2-3.

¹⁰ E.g., Luke 1:46-55; 68-79; 2:14; 2:29-32; Eph 5:14; Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:12-20; 2:9-15; Rev 4:8, 11; 5:9-10, 12, 13; 7:10, 12; 11:15, 17-18; 15:3-4; 16:5-7; 19:1-8.

¹¹ This statement is also true of 2 Thessalonians.

¹² Eg., Christology (Phil 2); civil responsibility (Rom 13); divine wrath and mercy (Rom 9); ecclesiology (1 Cor 3); eschatology (1 Thess 5); faith (Rom 4); Jesus' second coming (1 Thess 4); justification (Rom 3); law (Rom 7); life in Christ (Rom 12); love (1 Cor 13); marriage and sexuality (1 Cor 7); resurrection (1 Cor 15); salvation for Jews and Gentiles (Rom 10-11); sin (Rom 1-2); spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12); Spirit (Rom 8).

¹³ E.g., baptism (Rom 6); eating food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8); Eucharist (1 Cor 11); giving (2 Cor 8-9); head coverings (1 Cor 11); ministry (2 Cor 3-6); prayer (Phil 4); prophecy, tongues, and worship (1 Cor 14).

Although Paul's genuine letters have no direct references to Sabbath, two of his letters contain what might be considered indirect references.¹⁴ The first is in his Letter to the Galatians, "You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years."¹⁵ Paul does not indicate what he means by these progressive time references or provide any examples.¹⁶ It is clear from the immediate context that Paul is addressing Gentile readers.¹⁷ This suggests that his declaration about "days" etc. refers either to some pagan celebrations that they have resumed (v. 9) or, less likely, to some Jewish observances they have been influenced to adopt (v. 21). Whatever he has in mind here, Paul is not endorsing the renewed practice of his readers to "strictly" observe days etc. On the contrary, he is condemning such a practice as alien to the gospel he has shared with them (vv. 11, 19).¹⁸ Paul does not seem to be referring to Sabbath in Gal 4:10 and certainly not directly or indirectly endorsing its observance among his Gentile readers.¹⁹

The second potentially indirect reference to Sabbath in Paul is in the Letter to the Romans, "Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord."²⁰

The congregation in Rome that Paul addresses here was composed of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Having spoken to each group separately earlier in the letter,²¹ he here addresses both. The congregation is clearly divided and in conflict. Paul is attempting to bring them together in peace and harmony. On the understanding of the gospel, he has sided with the Gentiles. On the importance of the Jewish religious heritage, he has sided with the Jews. He is calling for both groups to accept each other and to be sensitive to each other's different understandings and practices of the gospel. One group—he calls them "weak" (14:1-2; 15:1)—eats "only vegetables," possibly because they want to avoid eating meat that had been sacrificed in idol

¹⁴ Both these ideas are acknowledged by Herold Weiss, *A Day of Gladness: The Sabbath among Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003): 111-31.

¹⁵ 4:10. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

¹⁶ The Greek text does not support the English word "special" in this translation. It conveys, instead, the declaration ἡμέρας παρατηρεῖσθε ("You are strictly observing days").

¹⁷ They "[f]ormerly . . . did not know God," "were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods," and had turned "back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits" (vv. 8-9). He could say such things only to non-Jews. Cf. 3:1-5.

¹⁸ Even if, although unlikely, Paul has some Jewish calendar festivals in mind, the reference to "days" would not necessarily refer to Sabbath. The Jewish ceremonial calendar contained several sacred or cultural holidays, e.g., Passover, Booths, and Day of Atonement.

¹⁹ Weiss (113-21) argues for a broader audience of both Jewish and Gentile Christians to which Paul directed these concerns in general and for a particular understanding of the calendrical string in this text that ultimately derived from the cosmology of Gen 1—an understanding that likely included the assumption of Sabbath in the minds of his opponents. Nevertheless, Weiss concludes that "the debate at Galatia" was not "over the Jewish Sabbath" (121). "Whatever the Galatians were doing, 'observing days and months and seasons and years' was understood by [Paul] to demonstrate that they were not crucified with Christ and, therefore, were still living according to the cosmological foundations of the old aeon" (Ibid.).

²⁰ Rom 14:5-6a. This could be literally translated: "One [person] prefers one day instead of another, another [person] prefers every day; let each be convinced in his own mind. The one who regards the day, regards [it] in [or to] the lord." V. 6 continues, "and the one who eats, eats in the lord for he gives thanks to God; and the one who does not eat, does not eat in the lord and he gives thanks to God."

²¹ It is clear that chapters 1-8 were addressed primarily to Jewish Christians (cf. 2:17; 7:1). Likewise, the Gentile Christians are addressed in chapters 9-11 (cf. 9:3-4; 11:13). Paul speaks to both groups in the rest of the letter.

worship. This group seems also to be those who “judge one day to be better than another” and “observe the day.” This is probably the Jewish Christian group. Paul identifies with the other group (15:1)—the “strong”—who seem to be the ones who “believe in eating anything” (14:2) and who “judge all days to be alike” (14:5). They are probably the Gentile Christians. However, he urges them to join him by putting up “with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” (15:1)

What is Paul talking about when referring to judging “one day to be better than another” and observing “the day”? What “day” does he have in mind? Although there is no way to know for certain, it seems likely that the “day,” like the restrictions about eating, associated with the “weak” group, has something to do with Judaism. Accordingly, it could refer to annual Jewish religious or cultural holidays, designated weekly fast days,²² or the weekly Sabbath. Whatever its meaning, the text is clear that it is the Jewish Christians in Rome, i.e., the “weak” group, that is observing certain days or a particular day. By contrast, the Gentile Christians in Rome—and presumably Paul—do not share this understanding or practice. If this text indirectly refers to the Sabbath, it relates only to the understanding and practices of some Jewish Christians in Rome, neither of which are shared by their Gentile Christian counterparts or by Paul.²³ Paul does not directly refer to Sabbath or Sabbath observance in Romans 14:5-6a. If he had Sabbath in mind without specifically referring to it, he identified with those of his readers who did not consider Sabbath limited to a particular day of the week.²⁴

²² This possibility is attractive if for no other reason than the discussion of food and eating practices in the same context.

²³ Weiss, on one hand, views this more broadly by not dividing the groups along ethnic lines and, on the other hand, by more narrowly holding that this refers in particular to the issue of the seventh day Sabbath. He takes 14:6a to be evidence that both groups in the Roman church, those who observed the Sabbath on the seventh day of each week and those who valued every day, i.e., observed every day as Sabbath, were doing so “with their minds set on the Lord” (124; cf. 126-27, 130). However, what Weiss does not acknowledge is that the rest of v. 6 sets up a double reference to the issue of “eating.” There, the invocation of “the lord” is used for both the person who “eats” and the person who “does not eat.” Both are also said to “give thanks to God.” Therefore, one should not automatically take first part of this verse, “the one who regards the day, regards [it] in [or to] the lord,” to refer to both parties to the dispute over the issue of preference of one day or every day in v. 5. The most reasonable reading is for v. 6a to refer only to the first party in v.5, i.e., the person who prefers one day over another. The preferred day of v. 5 easily equates to “the day” of v. 6a, which thereby limits *κυρίῳ* (“in (or to) the lord”) in 6a to the person who prefers one day over another. However, even if, for the sake of argument, one grants him this point, Weiss concludes that Paul considers the views of each group—both those who prefer a particular day (which he takes to be the seventh-day Sabbath) and those who prefer all days (which he takes to mean that they consider every day to be Sabbath) to be valid because they do it *κυρίῳ* (Weiss 130). If this indeed were the case, it would also be true that Paul would be seen as agreeing with the latter group, i.e., the “strong” (15:1).

²⁴ The following are clear: (1) no form of the word *σάββατον* is found in this or any other part of Romans; (2) there is no compelling evidence that Paul specifically had the Sabbath in mind with these references to *ἡμέρα* in chp. 14; and (3) even if Paul understood *ἡμέρα* to mean Sabbath here, he sided with those who preferred all days over a particular day. Therefore, Romans provides no direct evidence of Sabbath or Sabbath observance during the period we are examining, except the possibility that one group, probably some Jewish Christians, may have practiced weekly Sabbath observance.

From Q

Q,²⁵ which probably predates Paul's letters, consists mainly of sayings and teachings attributed to Jesus. The few narratives include stories about John the Baptist without reference to his birth or beheading, the story of Jesus' temptation, and two miracle stories.²⁶ There is no Infancy Narrative or Passion Narrative. Also, for the purposes of this paper, there are, significantly, no references to Sabbath or Sabbath observance in Q.²⁷ However, Q reflects a wide variety of

²⁵ For the Q Source, I have used *The Critical Edition of Q*, in *Hermeneia*, edited by James M. Robinson, Paul Haufmann, and John S. Kloppenborg (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) and "The Sayings Gospel Q," <http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~kloppen/iqpqet.htm>. Cf. *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*, revised and expanded edition, edited by Robert J. Miller (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), pp. 253-300.

²⁶ The healing of the centurion's slave (Q 7:1-10) and the exorcism of a mute demoniac (Q 11:14-23). It is customary to use references from Luke for the Q Source.

²⁷ Some scholars consider Luke 14:5, that has Jesus ask a question to justify Sabbath healings, to be Q material, which Matthew inserted with different wording into a Triple Tradition story (healing the man with a withered hand) derived from Mark. See Frans Neirynck, *Q-Synopsis: The Double Tradition Passages in Greek* (Leuven: University Press, 1988): 4-5; Weiss (92-93) agrees and adds 13:15 as a Lukan doublet derived from what he considers to be the Q original. Although there is a general, rhetorical similarity to the argument placed in the mouth of Jesus, the three texts are very different in detail. Each consists of (1) an introduction, (2) a generic subject person, (3) one or two possessions of the person, (4) a conditional act relating to the possession, (5) a condition place of the act, (6) a conditional time reference for the act, and (7) a consequential, concluding act by the person regarding the possession. The only common element among these texts is the time—the conditional act and the concluding act in each case occur on the Sabbath. However, even that is different between Matthew and Luke. In the former, the reference is to τοῖς σάββασι (the plural that is commonly used for the singular in the NT), while in Luke, the expressions are singular (ἐν ἡμέρᾳ τοῦ σαββάτου and τῷ σαββάτῳ respectively). Everything else is different between the Matthean and the Lukan texts and, in most cases, between the two Lukan texts themselves. Despite some similarities, the introductions and references to the subject use different language. The person's possessions involve a single sheep in Matthew and a son or ox and an ox and a donkey in Luke's texts. The conditional act of "falling", although related, involves the use of different verbs in Matthew and Luke. The place in Matthew is a "pit"; in Luke it is a "well"—two very different Greek words. Matthew and Luke use completely different words to describe the concluding resolution of the problem. Although Matt 12:11 and Luke 14:5 are loosely parallel ideas referring to pulling some valuable possession from a hole in the ground, Luke 13:15 is totally different, describing instead the release of an ox or donkey from a stall so they can be led to drinking water. Finally, the common elements in these texts are in different orders, especially the time element of the Sabbath. Of the seven elements, Sabbath in Matt. 12:11 is element 5; in Luke 14:5 it is element 7; in Luke 13:15 it is element 3. For these reasons, I am not convinced that these texts represent "three versions" of a Q saying (Weiss, p. 92). The International Q Project agrees with this assessment of these texts and not only does not include them in the critical text of Q in Greek or English but also specifically rejects them (*Critical Edition of Q*, pp. 424-29). Furthermore, it does not list the word σάββατον in the Concordance to Q (*Critical Edition of Q*, pp. 563-81). Cf. *Pap. Q* (Claremont: The Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, 1985): 17. For these reasons, I do not consider these texts as evidence of a reference to Sabbath in Q.

embryonic teachings²⁸ and practices²⁹ that eventually became common within Christianity. As with Paul, the complete absence of any reference to Sabbath is very significant.

From M and L

Despite the uncertainty that the M and L sources used by Matthew and Luke respectively may date from before AD 60, we will explore these materials for any potential evidence of the Sabbath and Sabbath observance in them prior to that date.

The case of M is the easiest. Matthew has nine references to Sabbath,³⁰ all of them in Triple Tradition units where Mark, not M, is the source. Accordingly, M, whatever its date, provides no evidence for Sabbath or Sabbath observance within the first thirty years of Christianity.

The situation regarding L is more complex. Luke refers to Sabbath eighteen times. Nine of these are in units where Mark is the source³¹ and one is in a unit involving only Mark and Luke.³²

However, eight references to Sabbath are in two L units. In chapter 13, Jesus was teaching in a synagogue “on the sabbath” (v. 10). The synagogue leader was angry because Jesus healed a crippled woman “on the sabbath” and told people not to come for healing “on the sabbath day” (v. 14). Jesus replied that because all his hearers untied and watered their animals “on the sabbath” (v. 15), the woman had a right to be freed from her bondage “on the sabbath day” (v. 16).

In chapter 14, Jesus was going to the house of a Pharisee “to eat a meal on the sabbath” (v. 1). On the way, they met a man with dropsy, and Jesus asked his opponents if it was “lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?” (vv. 2-3). Hearing no answer, Jesus healed the man and said to his hosts, “If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?” (vv. 4-5)

These units have a Sabbath setting, a Sabbath healing, the consideration of whether Sabbath healing is legitimate, and the implication that Sabbath healings are permissible. All this pertains to the precepts and practices of Judaism in Jesus’ day and clearly shows that he had a more

²⁸ E.g., discipleship (6:40, 46-49; 9:57-62; 10:2-12; 14:26-27; 17:33; 19:12-26); divine wrath and judgment (3:7-9; 10:13-15; 11:31-32; 10:13-15; 12:4-5, 8-9; 13:24-30); eschatology (12:39-40, 42-46; 14:16-24; 17:22-24, 26-30, 34-35, 37; 22:28-30); evil and sin (11:4; 17:3-4); faith (7:1-10; 12:22-31; 17:6); God as Father (6:36; 11:2, 13; 10:21-22; 12:30; 22:29); heaven (6:23; 10:15, 21; 11:16; 12:33; 15:7; 16:17; 17:29); Holy Spirit (3:16; 4:1; 10:21; 11:13; 12:10, 12); Jesus as Son (4:3, 9; 10:22); kingdom of God (6:20; 7:28; 9:61; 12:31; 13:18-21, 28-29; 16:16; 22:30); love (6:27-36; 7:5; 11:42; 16:13); perils of wealth (16:13); repentance and forgiveness (3:8; 6:37; 10:13; 11:4, 32; 12:10; 15:4-7; 17:3-4); Son of Man (6:22, 45; 7:34; 9:58; 11:30, 34-36, 39-40; 12:8, 10, 40; 17:22-24, 26, 29); temptation (4:1-13); trust (12:6-7; 12:22-31).

²⁹ E.g., baptism (3:7, 16); care for children (17:1-2); demons and exorcism (11:14-26); divorce and remarriage (16:18); non-ascetic eating and drinking (7:33-34); parenting (11:9-13); prayer (6:12, 28; 11:2-4); social responsibility (6:20-26; 7:22; 11:42; 12:57-59; 14:11; 18:14); tithing and giving (11:42; 12:33-34); worship (4:6-8).

³⁰ 12:1, 2, 5, 8 (grain fields on Sabbath); 12:10, 11, 12 (healing man with withered hand); 24:20 (Matthew’s edit of Mark on desolating sacrilege); and 28:1 (the empty tomb).

³¹ 4:16 (Luke’s edit of Mark on rejection at Nazareth); 6:1, 2, 5 (grain fields on Sabbath); 6:6, 7, 9 (healing man with withered hand); and 23: 54, 56 (Luke’s edit of Mark on burial of Jesus).

³² 4:31 (Jesus in Capernaum synagogue).

liberal understanding of Sabbath than his Jewish religious opponents. However, these units, especially given their uncertain date, do not provide evidence of Christian Sabbath doctrine or praxis during the first thirty years.

From the Signs Gospel

The Fourth Gospel contains eleven references to Sabbath. Eight of these are related in one way or another to the Signs Gospel.³³ However, none of these references are part of the Signs Source itself. Two signs stories—the narrative of Jesus’ healing the man at the Pool of Bethesda (originally only 5:2-9b) and the story of Jesus’ healing a blind man (originally only 9:1-8)—contain no references to the Sabbath, yet each has later Johannine elaborative material that identifies the event as occurring on the Sabbath and that describes the resultant religious controversy.³⁴

Sabbath is mentioned in the Signs Gospel only in its Passion Source and only as a time reference in conjunction with the burial of Jesus: “Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath.”³⁵ This has nothing to do with Christian teaching or practice regarding the Sabbath and is, therefore, not evidence of such before AD 60.

From the Traditional Materials

Most of the traditional materials in the NT that we identified are Christological formulas or fragments that focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus, many of which represent the earliest reflections of him.³⁶ These materials also echo a reasonably wide variety of other early Christian teachings³⁷ and practices.³⁸ For the purposes of this study, it is significant to note that none of these or any other traditional material in the NT mention the Sabbath or Sabbath observance. Therefore, these traditional materials, while potentially dating to the first thirty years of Christianity, offer no insights into the teaching or practices of Christians regarding the Sabbath before AD 60.

Conclusion

To address the question of evidence for the Sabbath in the first thirty years of earliest Christianity we have examined all the documents in the NT that are undisputedly deemed to have

³³ For the Signs Gospel, I have used the text found in “The Signs Gospel,” *Early Christian Writings*, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/signs.html>. Cf. *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*, revised and expanded edition, edited by Robert J. Miller (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), pp. 180-193.

³⁴ This includes the reference to Sabbath in 5:9c.

³⁵ John 19:31a.

³⁶ The most comprehensive and important of these is the creedal statement embedded in 1 Cor 15:3-10. See also, Matt 16:16; Luke 24:34; John 1:1-18, 49; 6:68-69; 20:28; Acts 2:22-24; Rom 1:3-4; 4:25; 8:34; 10:9-10; 1 Cor 8:6; 12:3; 1 Tim 1:15; 2:5-6; 3:16; 2 Tim 2:8; Heb 1:1-3; 1 Pet 1:18-21; 3:18; 1 John 4:2-3. Some of the hymns or hymn fragments in the NT also have a Christological theme, e.g., Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:12-20; 2:9-15.

³⁷ E.g., doxology (1 Tim 1:17; 6:15-16); God/God as Father (1 Cor 8:6; 1 Tim 2:5-6); Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3); hope (Heb 10:23); salvation (Acts 16:31; Rom 4:25; 10:9-10; 1 Tim 1:15; Titus 3:4-7); Trinity (Matt 28:18-20; Eph 4:4-6; Titus 3:4-7).

³⁸ E.g., appointment of bishops (1 Tim 3:1); baptism (Matt 28:18-20; Eph 4:4-6; Titus 3:4-7); Christian life (2 Tim 2:11-13); Eucharist (1 Cor 11:23-26); Godliness (1 Tim 4:8-9).

been written before AD 60 as well as all the proto-NT material understood to be embedded in the present canonical text. The former included the genuine letters of Paul; the latter involved the Q Source, the M and L sources, the Signs Gospel, and the traditional creedal fragments and parts of hymns. Despite often reflecting a wide variety of Christian teachings and practices, these variegated materials contain no direct evidence of Sabbath or Sabbath observance among Christians within the first thirty years after the death of Jesus, i.e., before AD 60.

Implications

What are the implications of this conclusion? Before addressing this question, we should note that the NT contains documents written after AD 60, especially the Gospels and Acts, that frequently mention the Sabbath.³⁹ This may indicate evidence of a trajectory of Sabbath and Sabbath observance issues and discussions within various groups of Christians during the latter third of the first century. This trajectory may have moved from the Synoptic Gospels that reflect a debate over *how* to observe the Sabbath to the Fourth Gospel with its movement toward *whether* to observe the Sabbath.⁴⁰

However, the Gospels and their references to Sabbath and Sabbath observance may simply be recollections of the liberal behavior of Jesus of concerning the Sabbath.⁴¹ We may compare to these the Gospel accounts his similar, liberal attitudes and practices regarding fasting⁴² and defilement⁴³ and note that these controversies in the Gospels are appropriately not seen as evidence of later Christian debates.

While my conclusion that there is no direct evidence for Sabbath or Sabbath observance in Christian materials arguably dated before AD 60 seems factually sound, I can make no equally confident statement about what this means for actual Christian teaching and practice regarding the Sabbath during the first thirty years of Christianity. We should not necessarily interpret the silence of these materials as evidence that no Christians—Jews or Gentiles—taught or observed the Sabbath. The earliest Christians were Jews. They continued to believe in many Jewish teachings and engage in many Jewish practices. It is highly likely that Sabbath was among them. In such a case, Sabbath and Sabbath observance may simply have been a given cultural and theological continuity for these people—one that would not need to be highlighted or even mentioned in the earliest Christian oral or written sources.

It is possible that Palestinian Jewish Christians observed the Sabbath as a continuation of their Jewish heritage and not as a component of their Christianity. It may be for this reason that they did not include a doctrine of the Sabbath or refer to observing it among the array of embryonic Christian teachings and practices reflected in their earliest oral or written materials.⁴⁴ However,

³⁹ These documents also include Colossians (AD 62-90) and Hebrews (AD 63-100).

⁴⁰ This is Rudolf Bultmann's view (according to Weiss, 98). These debates and discussions are seen to be displayed in the conflicts between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders over the behaviors of Jesus and his disciples on the Sabbath, especially his practice of healing on that day.

⁴¹ E.g., Mark 2:23-28 and parallels; John 5:1-18.

⁴² E.g., Mark 2:18-22 and parallels.

⁴³ E.g., Mark 7:1-22 and parallel.

⁴⁴ F. W. Beare ("The Sabbath Was Made for Man?" *JBL* 79, no. 2 (June 1960): 136) seems to imply that the silence of these early materials may have been for a different reason: "It is very difficult for us to discern the terms of the

Hellenistic Jewish Christians, especially those who were engaged in missions among the Gentiles, deliberately moved beyond Jewish cultural and religious distinctives. In fact, Paul, who was the most prominent example of such Christian missionaries, built his controversial gospel around the contention that Gentile converts to Christianity did not have to adopt or practice these Jewish distinctives, including the law, food restrictions, male circumcision, or observance of special days—undoubtedly including the Sabbath.⁴⁵

conflict over sabbath observance as it developed during the two or three generations after the death of Christ. The one thing that is clear is that the Christians did not keep the sabbath, and that their attitude brought upon them the fiercest attacks.” However, he aptly cautions, “But it must be said that the materials at our disposal do not permit us to see how the primitive church in Palestine moved in the matter.”

⁴⁵ Paul not only taught freedom from these Jewish beliefs and practices but also identified with his Gentile Christian converts and readers in experiencing this liberty. Cf. Rom 7:4-6; 1 Cor 8; Gal 5:2-6; Rom 14:1-6; 15:1. Cf. Beare, “Sabbath,” 136.