

Chapter 9: The Roots of English Sabbatarianism¹

Bryan W. Ball

The English seventh-day movement, as it began to emerge early in the seventeenth century, did so within the context of history. The Seventh-day Men, as English Sabbatarians were often known in their day, contended that the seventh day of the week had been observed both in England and on the Continent at various periods in the Church's history. One of them, Thomas Bampfield, a lawyer, even argued that the seventh day had been kept in England in unbroken succession until the thirteenth century, and that there had been no law for the observance of Sunday until the time of Edward VI.² Most advocates of the seventh day, however, were content to point to antecedents in the early Church, in medieval and contemporary Europe, or in parts of what is now North Africa, particularly Ethiopia. Later research has revealed clear connections with the Celtic Church in Britain and with the later Lollard movement. The Sabbatarian controversy, originating in the sixteenth century, although initially not concerned with seventh-day observance, undoubtedly provided an immediate background for the emergence of seventh-day convictions, as we shall see. This chapter surveys these antecedents of the English seventh-day Sabbatarians, some of which they cited in the numerous works they published in the attempt to persuade others of the essential correctness of their position. The basic argument, of course, was that the seventh-day Sabbath had been observed by Christians from the very earliest times.

The Early Church

The desire of Protestantism in general and of Puritanism in particular to return to the original purity of New Testament teaching and practice has frequently been noted. The clearest expression of this orientation is seen in Independent and Baptist writers who wanted the Church reformed in all re-

1 Abridged from the first edition of *The Seventh-day Men: Sabbatarians and Sabbatarianism in England and Wales, 1600-1800*, (1st edn., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994). Endnotes, including some titles, have been abbreviated.

2 Thomas Bampfield, *An Enquiry . . . Whether the Fourth Command be Repealed or Altered?* (1692), 117-119.

spects, constitutional as well as theological, according to the first principles of Christ. Saturday Sabbatarians, most of whom were both Independent and Baptist, believed that they were working accordingly in pointing out that the seventh day had been widely observed in the early Church. They were supported in this contention, although for quite different reasons, by those within Anglicanism who opposed all forms of Sabbatarianism, maintaining that the requirements of the Sabbath commandment had not been transferred to Sunday as the Puritans argued, but that the observation of the Lord's Day rested on entirely different grounds. Hence many seventeenth-century writers from quite opposite camps testify to the observance of the seventh day in the first four centuries or so of Christian history.

Theophilus Brabourne, whose writings were seminal to the Sabbatarian cause, presented evidence for seventh-day observance in the early Church in reply to the Presbyterian, John Collings, in 1654. Brabourne cited Athanasius and the Council of Laodicea in support of his argument that the seventh day had been observed at least until the middle of the fourth century. Athanasius had urged that the Sabbath should be kept in a manner which freed it from any taint of Judaizing. "We assemble on the Sabbath day, not as if we were infected with Judaism, but . . . that we may worship Jesus the Lord of the Sabbath".³ The Council of Laodicea (AD 364) finally prohibited the observance of the old seventh day under pain of excommunication: "Christians shall not Judaize and be idle on the Sabbath, but shall work on that day; but the Lord's day they shall especially honour, and, as Christians, shall, if possible, do no work on that day. If, however, they are found Judaizing, they shall be shut out from Christ".⁴ Some twenty years previously Brabourne had been called to account for his earlier writings advocating the seventh day and he now described for the first time how in the discussions between himself and the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud and the Bishop of Ely, Francis White, both the Archbishop and the Bishop had agreed that the Sabbath had been observed in the early Church. Brabourne maintained that it was essentially the evidence presented above which had convinced the prelates.⁵ White eventually conceded a degree of seventh-day observance in the post-apostolic Church in his *Treatise of the Sabbath-Day*, written in 1635 as "a Defence of the Orthodoxall [*sic*] Doctrine of the Church of England against Sabbatarian Novelty" – Brabourne being the chief culprit.⁶

James Ockford (or Oakeford) cited Socrates, the fifth-century Greek Church historian, in support of his assertion that the seventh-day Sabbath had been observed in the early Church for about four centuries. Socrates

3 Theophilus Brabourne, *A Reply to Mr Collings* (1654), 63.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, 65.

6 Francis White, *A Treatise of the Sabbath Day* (1635), 189.

had recorded that for the first two centuries “Almost all churches throughout the world” had kept the original Sabbath every week, with the exception of Rome and Alexandria which, “on account of some ancient tradition”, had ceased observance of the seventh day.⁷ Sozomen, a contemporary of Socrates, confirms the early Sabbatarian tradition by saying, “The people of Constantinople, and almost everywhere, assemble together on the Sabbath, as well as on the first day of the week, which custom is never observed at Rome or at Alexandria”.⁸

Peter Heylyn, one of Charles I’s chaplains, and perhaps the most erudite seventeenth-century historian of Sabbatarianism, agreed that the seventh day had been kept by the early Church and confirmed that some observed both Saturday and Sunday. In support of the claim that “the old Sabbath was kept holy by the primitive Christians”, Heylyn offers as evidence the fourth-century Apostolic Constitutions, Theophilus of Antioch and the Council of Laodicea, adding Gregory of Nyssa, whom he cites as rebuking those who had neglected to observe the Sabbath: “With what face . . . wilt thou look upon the Lord’s Day which hast dishonoured the Sabbath? Knowest thou not that these two days are sisters and that whosoever doth despite the one doth affront the other?”⁹ In Heylyn’s view observance of the seventh day began to decline in the West towards the end of the fourth century, although in the East the seventh day “retained its wonted credit, little inferior to the Lord’s day, if not plainly equal” until Augustine’s day. The seventh day was known specifically as the Sabbath, while the first day was referred to as the Lord’s Day, both being observed as days of rest, but not, it was to be noted, “infected any whit with Judaisme”. Meetings for worship were held on the Sabbath, but the day was not otherwise observed in the strict Jewish sense “like a Sabbath”.¹⁰

Others throughout the seventeenth century, who themselves had no allegiance to the seventh day, recognized that it had been observed in early Christian history. Edward Brerewood, in 1611, emphasized the significance of the seventh day in the Eastern Church “three hundred years and more” after Christ¹¹ and Edmund Porter, a prebendary of Norwich, put seventh-day observance generally “long after Origen’s time”.¹² John Ley, who was greatly disturbed that the Sabbath had “become as a ball betwixt two rackets” argued that the Council of Laodicea had failed to curtail observance of

7 James Ockford, *The Doctrine of the Fourth Commandment* (1650), 27.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Peter Heylyn, *Respondet Petrus* (1658), 60-61.

10 *Ibid.*, 61; *History of the Sabbath* (1636), 73-74.

11 Edward Brerewood, *A Learned Treatise of the Sabaoth* (1630), 77, 101.

12 Edmund Porter, *Sabbatum: The Mystery of the Sabbath Discovered* (1658),

the seventh day and that in the time of Pope Gregory the Great there were still advocates of the old Sabbath, despite Gregory's strictures against them as being antichristian.¹³ Even Ephraim Pagitt, the heresiographer, "willingly" acknowledged that "the Jewish Sabbath" had been observed by "many primitive Christians", although not persuaded that this included Gentiles.¹⁴

William Cave, a noted patristic scholar and Canon of Windsor, wrote at length about the prevailing understanding of his day concerning the Sabbath in apostolic and post-apostolic centuries: "Next to the Lord's day", Cave says, "the Sabbath or Saturday . . . was held in great veneration, and especially in the Eastern parts honoured with all the public solemnities of religion". He explains:

They met together for public prayers, for reading the Scriptures, celebration of the sacraments, and such like duties. This is plain, not only from some passages in Ignatius and Clemens his Constitutions, but from writers of more unquestionable credit and authority. Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria tells us, that they assembled on Saturdays, not that they were infected with Judaism, but only worship Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath; and Socrates, speaking of the usual times of their public meeting, calls the Sabbath and the Lord's day the weekly festivals, on which the congregation was wont to meet in the church for the performance of divine services.¹⁵

Cave notes that in some parts of the Roman Empire the seventh day was observed to accommodate large numbers of Jewish converts, but insists that great care was taken to avoid any impression of Judaism.¹⁶

With a few reservations most Seventh-day Men would have concurred. They might have preferred less emphasis on the dual role of the seventh day and the first day, particularly as a universal custom, and less emphasis on the concessionary nature of seventh-day observance to Jewish converts. For all that, it seems beyond doubt that English Sabbatarians in the seventeenth century recognised that the seventh day had been observed in the early Church for several centuries.

The Celtic Church

Various scholars over the past hundred years or so have consistently maintained that a Sabbatarian tradition persisted for several centuries in the Celtic Church. According to Skene, the Scottish historiographer, traces of observing both Saturday and Sunday in the early Irish Church were also found in Scotland, where they lasted until Margaret, in the eleventh cen-

13 John Ley, *Sunday a Sabbath* (1641), Pref., 166.

14 Ephraim Pagitt, *Heresiography* (6th edn., 1661), 173.

15 William Cave, *Primitive Christianity* (1673), 173-74.

16 *Ibid*, 175-776.

tury, reformed the Church according “to the rules of the true faith (and) sacred customs of the universal church”.¹⁷ Margaret’s reforms were aimed, among other things, at prevailing attitudes to the Lord’s Day, for which she sought more recognition and more reverence.¹⁸ Both Lang and Moffat refer specifically to the practice of observing the seventh day in the early Celtic Church. Moffat says that in keeping “Saturday the Jewish Sabbath” the Celtic Church “obeyed the fourth commandment literally upon the seventh day of the week”. This was “customary in the Celtic Church of early times, in Ireland as well as Scotland”.¹⁹ Lang adds that Saturday was kept strictly “in a sabbatical manner”.²⁰ T. Ratcliffe Barnett noted that it was traditional in the ancient Irish Church to observe Saturday instead of Sunday as the day of rest,²¹ and A. C. Flick points again to the custom of keeping the seventh day as a day of rest and of holding religious services on Sunday.²²

More recent studies of the Celtic Church and relevant extant documents have confirmed these earlier conclusions of nineteenth-century historians. In the 1961 edition of *Adomnan’s Life of Columba*, edited by A. O. and M. O. Anderson, recognition of Saturday as the Sabbath and the dual role of Saturday and Sunday in the Celtic Church are both noted. Adomnan referred to the first day of the week as “Lord’s day” (‘*dominica dies*’ or ‘*dies dominica*’) and called Saturday the Sabbath (‘*Sabbatum*’) or “the day of Sabbath”.²³ Another more recent study points out that Adomnan invariably used the name “Sabbatum” when speaking of the seventh day and always referred to the Sabbath “in a manner betokening a respect which is not detected in writers two centuries later”.²⁴ This fits well with the thesis that the complete Romanizing of the Celtic Church occurred much later than it did in the British Church at large. According to Adomnan, Columba himself distinguished between the Sabbath and Sunday, although there is no clear evidence here that either Adomnan or Columba themselves kept Saturday or Sunday exclusively.²⁵

The deference given to both Sabbath and Sunday is apparent in Adomnan’s reference to the Rule of Columcille, where it is laid down that the allowance of food for Sabbath and Sunday are equal in amount “because

17 W. F. Skene, *Celtic Scotland* (1877), ii, 346, 349.

18 *Ibid.*, 348-349.

19 J. C. Moffat, *The Church in Scotland* (1882), 140.

20 A. Lang, *A History of Scotland from the Roman Occupation* (1900), i, 96.

21 T. R. Barnett, *Margaret of Scotland* (1926), 97. Barnett suggests that Columba’s views regarding the Saturday Sabbath had taken root in Scotland.

22 A. C. Flick, *The Rise of the Medieval Church* (1909), 237.

23 A. O. and M. O. Anderson (eds.), *Adomnan’s Life of Columba* (1961), 120.

24 L. Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain* (1972), 84.

25 Anderson, *Adomnan*, 25.

of the reverence paid to the Sabbath in the Old Testament". The Sabbath differs from Sunday in respect of work only. Other regulations demonstrate further similarities between Sabbath and Sunday.²⁶ Harding cites instances from the *Mediaeval Handbook of Penance* and other contemporary sources which indicate a continuing tension between Saturday and Sunday, demonstrating perhaps a reluctance both to let go of the seventh day and to take hold fully of the Lord's Day with the rest of the Romanized Church in the British Isles.²⁷ That this was a period of transition is clear from Adomnan's reference to early Irish attempts "to persuade Christians to observe Sunday as the Sabbath",²⁸ although the editors specifically note that "the sabbatical Sunday had not yet been accepted by Adomnan or in Iona at the time when Adomnan wrote".²⁹

This lingering ambivalence between Sabbath and Sunday, evident here in the Celtic Church and also at times in the post-apostolic Church, is perhaps one of the stronger evidences of an earlier commitment to the seventh day. Hardinge remarks that "there was a gradual shift from the keeping of Saturday, the seventh-day Sabbath, to the observance of both Saturday and Sunday and then to the celebration of Sunday exclusively".³⁰

Given the measure of respect for the Bible evident Celtic texts, it is not at all surprising that observance of the seventh day occurred in the Celtic Church. Patrick's allegiance to Scripture and his aversion to patristic and conciliar sources are well known.³¹ According to one source, the Bible was accorded paramount authority in Celtic theology and practice and was revered "as the voice of the Holy Ghost addressing his people in the character of a king upon his throne".³² Laistner notes "the pre-occupation of Irish scholars with Biblical exegesis", often following a strictly literal hermeneutic.³³ It seems that particular respect was accorded to the Old Testament, in which connection the *Liber ex lege Moisi* played a prominent role. Patrick is said to have left a copy of "the books of the Law, and of the book of the Gospel" wherever he established a church. The *Liber ex lege Moisi* is the

26 *Ibid*, 120.

27 Hardinge, *Celtic Church*, 84-85, and *passim*.

28 Anderson, *Adomnan*, 27.

29 *Ibid*, 29.

30 Hardinge, *Celtic Church*, 89.

31 E.g., W. Stokes, *The Tripartite Life of Patrick* (1887), ii, 567; Hardinge, *Celtic Church*, 30.

32 W. Stokes and J. Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* (1901-10), i, 389, in Hardinge, *Celtic Church*, 32.

33 M. L. W. Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe, AD 500 to 900* (1957), 146.

only extant Celtic manuscript which fits this tradition.³⁴ Whether or not this is the case, the *Liber ex lege Moisi* exerted a profound influence on Celtic thought. In fact, the *Liber* commences with the Ten Commandments and Hardinge is probably correct in asserting that the observance of the Sabbath of the Old Testament in the Celtic Church was a material outgrowth of an emphasis on Christian obedience inculcated through usage of the *Liber* in exegesis and pastoral instruction.³⁵

The liturgical practices of the early Irish Church as reflected in the seventh-century *Antiphonary of Bangor* may also indicate a lingering devotion to the Sabbath. Hardinge records J. F. Kenney's observation that the *Antiphonary* is "the only record surviving of the old Irish Church services unaffected by the Romanizing movement of the seventh and eighth centuries" and notes that included in it were suggestions for conducting the Divine Office at Easter, on Sabbaths, on Sunday in Eastertide, and on Sabbaths and Sunday throughout the year.³⁶ Hardinge's own conclusions, based on the Celtic regard for Scripture and the accompanying emphasis on the obedient life, are appropriate:

There was no Sabbatizing of Sunday during the Celtic period. The seventh day was kept from sunset on Friday until sunset on Saturday, and even until dawn on Sunday in some places. No work was done on it, as the laws of the *Liber ex lege Moisi* stipulate. While Sunday was also held to possess minor sanctity, and religious services were carried out on it, the daily chores, the gathering of food, the washing of hair and taking of baths, the going on journeys and carrying out of regular business transactions were all permitted on the first day.³⁷

The Lollards

The most cursory survey of the geographical distribution of seventeenth-century Sabbatarian congregations would suggest an affinity with Lollardy. A Seventh-day presence was established in many areas which previously had been Lollard strongholds. London, East Anglia, Buckinghamshire and the Chilterns, the Severn Valley, particularly around Gloucester, Dorset, Wiltshire and Hereford and the Welsh Borders may all be mentioned as typical in this respect. Since the Lollard movement persisted in some of these areas well into the sixteenth century,³⁸ there may have been a much stronger connection than is often granted between Lollard theology and

34 Stokes, *Life of Patrick*, ii, 300 and J. F. Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland* (1929), i, 250.

35 Hardinge, *Celtic Church*, 210, 203.

36 Kenney, *Sources*, 712; Hardinge, *Celtic Church*, 120-121.

37 Hardinge, *Celtic Church*, 203.

38 See A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (1964), 22-37 and Claire Cross, *Church and People, 1450-1660* (1976), 9-52.

that of the more radical reformed groups which flourished in England during the seventeenth century. Claire Cross describes early Lollards as “characterised first and foremost by their biblical fundamentalism”³⁹ and this, added to the rapid dissemination of Lollard ideas, the readiness with which they were received, the provision of the Bible or parts of it in the vernacular and the persistence of a Lollard tradition in many parts of the country, are sufficient grounds for concluding that Lollard influence may well have contributed to the later appearance of seventh-day observance.

This tentative conclusion is confirmed by evidence from original sources. Once again it is reverence for the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments which initially delineates the Lollards as setting a precedent for later Sabbatarian theology. Wycliffe himself had stressed the importance for Christians of obeying the Ten Commandments,⁴⁰ and although the Wycliffite *Lanterne of Light* may not have been his, it nevertheless may be taken as representative of Wycliffe’s thought. *The Lanterne of Light* is typical of Lollard commentaries on the Decalogue. It follows that form of the Ten Commandments used by the medieval Church, citing the third commandment as the Sabbath commandment and referring to the seventh day as the true Sabbath with the injunction: “Have mind that thou hallow this holy day. In six days thou shalt work and do all thine own works, for so the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord”. Several variations of this exhortation to observe the Sabbath are noted, with the gloss that it is the devil who leads men to break the Sabbath.⁴¹ If the *Lanterne of Light* may be taken as typical of Lollard teaching, it is not difficult to perceive how reverence for the Sabbath would have arisen in Lollard communities.

Robert Pope of Amersham and Thomas Taylor of Newbury are both recorded as owning a suspect book containing the Ten Commandments.⁴² Alice Collins, wife of a noted Lollard and herself “a famous woman among them”, had memorized large portions of Scripture and was often invited to recite the Ten Commandments, together with the Epistles of Peter and James, at conventicles in Burford c.1520.⁴³ In 1469 John Cornewe and John Breche, Lollards from Lydney, Gloucestershire, were called to abjure, among other opinions, the view that the authority of the Old Testament was preferable to that of the New Testament: “*Item quod auctoritas veteris testamenti preferenda et melior est novo testamento*”.⁴⁴ According to Cross,

39 Cross, *Church and People*, 16.

40 T. Arnold (ed.), *Select English Works of John Wyclif* (1869-71), iii, 82ff.

41 L. M. Swinburne (ed.), *The Lanterne of Light* (1917), 90-91.

42 Cross, *Church and People*, 33; J. A. F. Thomson, *The Later Lollards* (1965), 76.

43 John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments of John Foxe* (1965 edn.), iv, 238.

44 A. T. Bannister (ed.), *The Register of John Stanbury, Bishop of Hereford*

as late as the early sixteenth century an Essex Lollard confessed to have taught others the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in English.⁴⁵

The case of William Fuer of Gloucester is one of several specific instances now coming to light of Lollard Sabbatarianism. Fuer abjured under duress in 1448, saying that he derived his views from Bristol Lollards, including William Smith, one of the most noted Lollards of the day, who was eventually burnt for heresy. According to J. A. F. Thomson, who records Fuer's case, a considerable number of heresy trials had been conducted in the Severn Valley in the years preceding 1450, in which some of those tried revealed views more heretical than had previously been detected. Certainly extreme Sabbatarianism would have been so regarded and Fuer confessed to holding such views, saying that the Sabbath should be observed as strictly as commanded in the Old Testament with the preparation of food the only permissible activity.⁴⁶ It is not specifically stated that Fuer's Sabbatarianism extended to the seventh day, although given the general direction of Lollard theology, it is not improbable. A movement towards the stricter observance of Sunday appeared in England early in the fifteenth century, arising largely from Lollard convictions which could not overlook the injunctions of the fourth commandment. Gairdner and Spedding observed over a century ago that if Lollards had regarded the observance of Sunday as merely resting on the authority of the Church, they would have classed it with all other "abuses of tradition . . . and other noxious superstitions which they were anxious should be thoroughly rooted out".⁴⁷ William Fuer was clearly of that mind in maintaining a highly developed Sabbatarianism and his obdurate defence of the Old Testament Sabbath is likely to have included the seventh day.

There is no such ambiguity in the earlier case of John Seygno of London, in the light of which perhaps Fuer's own views should be evaluated. In 1402, only a year after Parliament had assented to the anti-heresy Act, *De haeretico comburendo*, John Seygno and two others, Richard Herbert and Emmota Wylly, were brought before the courts on a heresy charge. Seygno had apparently been arraigned on a previous occasion at Canterbury and having been convicted on charges similar to those now brought against him again, had sworn that he had never held views worthy of condemnation. Whether or not the earlier charge had included Sabbatarianism is not recorded, but now he admitted that the Sabbath was to be observed "according to what was observed in the Old Testament". Claiming that he wished to observe "a Sabbath of this kind as described in the old law, that is ac-

(1918), 119.

45 Cross, *Church and People*, 38.

46 Thomson, *Later Lollards*, 36.

47 J. Gairdner and J. Spedding, *Studies in English History* (1881), 295-96.

cording to the customs and rites of the Jews", he indicated that he intended to do so until he could be persuaded otherwise with sufficient reasons.⁴⁸ On the strength of Seygno's case alone, it would seem incontrovertible that seventh-day observance appeared among Lollards within twenty years of Wycliffe's death and, moreover, that a direct connection between Lollardy and the Seventh-day Men is a distinct possibility.

An early fifteenth-century manuscript, now in the British Library,⁴⁹ confirms that the Sabbath issue was openly debated two centuries or so before observance of the seventh day was first established in worshipping communities in England and Wales. The tract is described by one palaeographer as "apparently directed against an aberration . . . that might be expected to follow from principles of Wycliffite scriptural interpretation".⁵⁰ The author evidently felt the need to respond to those who questioned the change of the Sabbath from the seventh day to the first, as may be seen from the tract's title: "A litil tretys agens ye opynyon of sum men yt seyn yat no math hath powr for to change ye Saboth fro ye Satirday to ye Sondag. And here is pleylnly proved ye contrarie, bi Holi Writt, and Doctouris sentence accordynge herwit". The writer, most probably a priest, begins by referring to questions regarding the authority by which such a change in the day of worship could be made. Since there is no human authority which can change the law of God, some doubt had been cast on the validity of Sunday as a day of special significance: "summen douten sith no man hath leewe for to change ye ten comaundementis of God; how myghte we chaunge our Saboth fro ye Satirday to Sondag".⁵¹ The author explains that the law contains ceremonial as well as moral precepts and that, since observance of the seventh day was ceremonial, it was no longer of binding force. Furthermore, the Church has authority to make what changes she deems necessary. In this instance Christ, who has power over all things, had appointed the Lord's Day by his own actions.⁵² The cases of John Seygno and William Fuer suggest that there were at least some in the Lollard fraternity who were not persuaded.

Continental Sabbatarians

Well before the end of the sixteenth century references to seventh-day observance had begun to appear in English Sabbatarian literature. In 1584, John Stockwood published *A Verie Profitable and Necessary Discourse*

48 D. Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae* . . . (1737), iii, 270-71.

49 British Library, MS. Harl. 2339.

50 A.I. Doyle, 'A Treatise of the Three Estates', *Dominican Studies*, 3 /4 (1950), 353.

51 British Library, MS. Harl. 2339, fol. 104v.

52 *Ibid.*, fols. 105r-116r.

Concerning the observation and keeping of the Sabbath Day, extracted from the earlier work of the German theologian Ursinus. Stockwood scathingly referred to Sabbatarians who “obstinately and stiffly” upheld the “ceremonial observation of the seventh day”, which they regarded as immutable and completely binding.⁵³ In 1607 John Sprint explained the two extreme positions in the Sabbatarian controversy. At one end were those who maintained that no Sabbath at all was to be observed as such by Christians, while at the other end were those who held that “the Jewish Sabbath of the seventh day” was to be kept “being no less necessary for us to observe now, than it ever was for the Jews”.⁵⁴ Neither Stockwood nor Sprint state whether they refer to Seventh-day observance in England, although if the 1874 edition of *Chambers Encyclopaedia* can be taken as a guide, it would have to be concluded that the seventh day had been widely observed in England from Elizabethan times.⁵⁵ If, on the other hand, Stockwood and Sprint refer to Continental Sabbatarianism, then they were in good company, for both Erasmus and Luther had drawn attention to the Sabbatarian phenomenon on the Continent, Erasmus to Sabbatarians in Bohemia, “a new kind of Jews”,⁵⁶ and Luther to similar groups in Moravia and Austria, “a foolish group of people who maintained the observance of the Sabbath according to Jewish manner and custom”.⁵⁷ Hospinian of Zurich likewise wrote against the Sabbatarians in 1592, showing that the issue was alive on the Continent for much of the sixteenth century.

The Continental Sabbatarian tradition, in fact, went back considerably further, as was known to at least some English seventeenth-century Sabbatarian controversialists. John Prideaux, Rector of Exeter College, Oxford and Vice-Chancellor of the University on three occasions during a distinguished career, maintained that in the twelfth century the neo-Ebionite Petrobians, under their founder Peter de Bruis (or de Bruys) had been “Jewish in this point”.⁵⁸ The eighteenth-century Church historian Mosheim mentions the Pasagini (or Pasagii) of Lombardy who were distinct on account of their teaching that the law of Moses should be kept in all details except the offering of sacrifices, and their Arian views on the nature of Christ. With regard to the former, they were sometimes known as Circumcisi since they practised circumcision. Mosheim notes that they also ab-

53 John Stockwood (tr.), *A Profitable . . . Discourse Concerning . . . the Sabbath Day* (1584), Ep. Ded., sig. Aiii.

54 John Sprint, *Propositions . . . of the Christian Sabbath, or Lord's Day* (1607), 2.

55 *Chambers Encyclopaedia* (1874), viii, 402.

56 Erasmus, *De amabili Ecclesiae Concordia* (1533), sig. F6v.

57 *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar, 1911), xlii, 520.

58 John Prideaux, *Doctrine of the Sabbath*, Pref. sig. A2r.

stained from unclean meats prohibited by the Mosaic law.⁵⁹ The martyrs of Arras in 1420 were also reported to have kept “the complete law of the Jews” and to have “observed Saturday instead of Sunday” and for this reason are said to have been marked with a yellow cross following the custom of designating Jews during the Middle Ages.⁶⁰ The charge of Judaizing, fairly or unfairly, was never far from the lips of those who opposed seventh-day observance and it persisted throughout the history of the English Seventh-day movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. G. H. Williams records that an extreme movement of this nature arose c. 1470 in the Kiev area of Russia, which lasted well into the sixteenth century, making the Decalogue the basis of its religious life in much the same way as the later Pentateuchalists of Strasburg.⁶¹ While many English Sabbatarians adopted Mosaic dietary laws, few would have rejected the Messiahship of Jesus or the authority of the New Testament as some of these extreme Continental groups are said to have done.⁶²

As the sixteenth century developed there appeared in Europe a more coherent and widespread Sabbatarian movement, identifiable in the main with the Anabaptists of the Radical Reformation,⁶³ although Luther himself had been embarrassed by the Sabbatarian inclinations of Carlstadt. The year 1527-8 is the date usually given for the appearance of Sabbatarian Anabaptists in the Continental Reformation. At about this time Andreas Fischer adopted the Sabbatarian beliefs of Oswald Glait in Nikolsburg, Moravia and became thenceforth Glait's principal co-labourer.⁶⁴ In 1528 they successfully propagated Sabbatarian views in Silesia, where they were opposed in public disputation and in print by Caspar Schwenckfeld. Glait shortly thereafter published *Buchlenn vom Sabbath*, to which both Schwenckfeld and Wolfgang Capito replied in print.⁶⁵ It is possible that Luther's own *Brief wider die Sabbather* (1538) may have been provoked, in part at least, by the Sabbatarians of Silesia and Moravia, since he had known of their existence from 1532, although he also notes the rise of Sabbatarians (*Sabbather*) in Austria during the same period.⁶⁶

English writers of the time were aware of other contemporary Saturday Sabbath-keeping movements, as Cox points out, and references may be

59 J. L. von Mosheim, *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History* (1841), ii, 510.

60 P. Beuzart, *Les Heresies pendant le Moyen Age . . .* (1912), 37-47.

61 G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (1962), 740, 835.

62 *Ibid.*, 252.

63 G. F. Hasel, 'Sabbatarian Anabaptists of the Sixteenth Century', *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 5/2 (1967), 101-21 and 6/1 (1968), 19-28.

64 Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 410.

65 Hasel, *AUSS*, 5/2, 112.

66 *Ibid.*, 107.

found in several well-known seventeenth-century authorities. Samuel Purchas, chiefly known for *Purchas his Pilgrims* (1625), recorded that from the middle of the sixteenth century the Seventh-day Sabbath had been taught in Ethiopia,⁶⁷ a fact confirmed by Baratti's travels in that region, an account of which was published in an English translation in 1670. Baratti, an Italian gentleman, described how "chaplains" at the Imperial Court expounded Scripture in the Emperor's presence "on the Sabbath day . . . according to the ancient manner of the Jews". Saturday, he explained, was the day appointed for public worship in Ethiopia "because God on that day finished the great work of the creation of the world".⁶⁸ In a note on the fly-leaf of his father's *The Insnared Taken in the Work of his Hands* (1677), Joseph Stennett referred to Baratti's account as evidence of contemporary Sabbath-keeping.⁶⁹ Stennett further cited Peter Heylyn's *Cosmography* in which the Melchites of Syria were also described as worshipping "as solemnly on the Saturday as on the Sunday".⁷⁰ These more remote and obscure observers of the seventh day would understandably have been of interest to a man of Stennett's learning and wide interests.

Other areas in which seventh-day observance appeared in the sixteenth century include Poland, particularly Lithuania, Bohemia (as noted by Erasmus) and especially Transylvania, where some Sabbatarians professed Unitarian views and some adopted Mosaic dietary practices.⁷¹ Williams notes that the Transylvanian Sabbatarians persisted at least until 1618, when they were formally excluded from the Unitarian fold.⁷² A widespread Sabbatarian movement thus found expression across the European continent and beyond for much of the sixteenth century and although a detailed survey of its development and theology is beyond the scope of this work, it may be noted that Glait and Fischer, its two most able proponents in central Europe, both emphasized the perpetuity of the moral law in the Decalogue and the example of Christ, the apostles and the early Church.⁷³ These were arguments well known to English Sabbatarians of the seventeenth century and it is rather strange that there are so few references in the English Sabbatarian literature to Continental Sabbatarianism. This may support the conclusion that the Seventh-day cause in England was spontaneous and

67 Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrims* (1625), 1177.

68 G. Baratti, *Travels . . . into Remote Countries* (1670), 46, 135.

69 Edward Stennett, *The Insnared Taken in the Work of his Hands* (1677), BL 1471 de 11.

70 Peter Heylyn, *Cosmography* (1674), iii, 40.

71 Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 414, 686, 730-32; Hasel, *AUSS*, 6/1, 20-21; 5/2, 106-7, 114. See also E. M. Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism* (1952), 106-115.

72 Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 732.

73 Hasel, *AUSS*, 5/2, 116-21; 6/1, 22-27.

self-contained, rather than being derived from Continental Anabaptism, as has sometimes been suggested, although East Anglia may have been susceptible to some Continental influence. It may also be indicative of a desire not to be too closely identified with a movement which, taken as a whole, was frequently characterized as legalistic, Judaistic, or anti-trinitarian.

The Sabbatarian Controversy

It was inevitable that the Sabbatarian controversy, “peculiar to England of all Christendom” in the view of one contemporary,⁷⁴ should give rise to seventh-day observance. This debate, begun in the sixteenth century and extending well into the seventeenth century, frequently vigorous and occasionally acrimonious, continues to be a focus of scholarly attention and although its broad features are sufficiently well known, it cannot be omitted from an objective survey of Seventh-day antecedents. In the light of earlier observations on the Lollard tradition, it is significant to note, as background to the Sabbatarian doctrine defined by Nicholas Bownde in 1595, a consistent emphasis on Sabbath observance, *per se*, from the early years of the English Reformation. In 1548 John Hooper emphasised the Sabbath in *A Declaration of the Ten Holy Commaundements*, explaining that the fourth commandment was essentially moral like all the others and therefore binding, rather than ceremonial, although the specific day of rest had been changed.⁷⁵ In 1552 Hugh Latimer reminded a congregation in Lincolnshire that “God is and remaineth still the old God: He will have us keep his Sabbath, as well now as then”. The Sabbath day is “God’s ploughing day” when the hearts of men are broken up to receive the seed of the gospel.⁷⁶ Thomas Becon, the Anglican scholar, could be read for a thoroughgoing Puritan Sabbatarian when he says that God’s will is that men “should sanctify the Sabbath day” and upon it “quietly meditate in God’s law, read the holy Scriptures, give themselves to divine contemplation, talk of serious matters, pray to God for grace, give him thanks for his benefits, visit the sick and comfortless, and continually be given to works of the Spirit”.⁷⁷

Such views were readily incorporated into the doctrine of the Elizabethan Church and found expression, for example, in the 1563 Book of Homilies:

God hath given express charge to all men, that upon the Sabbath day, which is now our Sunday, they should cease from all weekly and work-day labour, to the intent that like as God himself wrought six days, and

⁷⁴ Bodleian Library, MS. Rawl. D. 846 fol. 42r.

⁷⁵ John Hooper, *A Declaration of . . . Almyghty God* (1548), 341-42.

⁷⁶ G. E. Corrie (ed.), *Works of Hugh Latimer* (1844), i, 473.

⁷⁷ J. Eyre (ed.), *Early Works of Thomas Becon* (1843), 38.

rested the seventh, and blessed and sanctified it, and consecrated it to quietness and rest from labour, even so God's obedient people should use the Sunday holily, and rest from their common and daily business, and also give themselves wholly to heavenly exercises of God's true religion and service.⁷⁸

Parker states that this homily "must be acknowledged as the primary source of Sabbatarian teaching in the Elizabethan and early Stuart period".⁷⁹

It was easy thenceforth for preachers and expositors alike to uphold the idea of the Sabbath even though at the time its observance in practice might have left much to be desired. The Elizabethan "merrie England" was so called largely on account of Sunday diversions such as hunting, hawking, fencing, clowning and morris dancing, not to mention trading and other "flagrant abuses of the Sabbath".⁸⁰ Such laxness and obvious inconsistency with the professed doctrine of the Church gave rise to strictures such as those of Humphry Roberts, *An Earnest Complaint of divers Vain, Wicked and Abased Exercises Practiced on the Sabbath Day* (1572) and John Northbrooke, *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dancing, Vain Plays or Interludes, with other idle Pastimes commonly used on the Sabbath are by the Word of God and ancient Writers reprov'd* (1579). In 1583 Gervase Babington, soon to become Bishop of Llandaff, and later of Exeter and Worcester, published his *Very Fruitfull Exposition of the Commandments*, one of a growing number of works intended to draw attention to the Sabbath problem and encourage more faithful observance of Sunday. In that same year the Puritan John Field took the occasion of an accident at the Paris Gardens near London to press home the gravity of Sabbath-breaking. Many had been killed and several injured in a large audience attending a bear-baiting on Sunday and Field interpreted this as divine judgement on those concerned.⁸¹ And in 1585 Lancelot Andrewes, later Bishop of Chichester (1603), Ely (1609) and Winchester (1619), delivered a series of lectures at Cambridge in which he expounded the doctrine that the Sabbath (Sunday) should be kept as a day of rest and worship on the grounds of the continuing morality of the fourth commandment.⁸²

Thus Nicholas Bownde's *The Doctrine of the Sabbath* (1595), while a classic formulation of the Puritan concept and the immediate cause of the Sabbatarian debate, came from a well-established Sabbath tradition in Eng-

78 *Certaine Sermons appointed to be . . . read for the better understanding of simple people* (1563), ii, fol. 138r.

79 K. L. Parker, *The English Sabbath* (1988), 46.

80 Attributed to James Gilfillan, *The Sabbath Viewed in the Light of Reason, Revelation and History* (1861), 59.

81 John Field, *A godly exhortation . . . concerning the keeping of the Sabbath day* (1583), *passim*.

82 Lancelot Andrewes, *A Patterne of Catechisticall Doctrine* (1630), 234.

lish Reformation theology. Bownde's work remains of significance and his arguments and those of succeeding advocates of the Puritan view may be summarized as follows. The Sabbath was an ordinance instituted at Creation and thus originated with Adam rather than with the Jews. The fourth commandment of the Decalogue was moral, in harmony with the rest of the Ten Commandments and therefore perpetually binding. The Sabbath was also therefore moral and binding and was not ceremonial since it antedated all ceremonies. Christians were thus obliged to keep the Sabbath in the same way the Jews had been obliged to keep the original seventh day, although now, under the New Testament, the Sabbath institution had been transferred from Saturday to Sunday. The change was justified on the grounds that the Sabbath commandment called for one day of rest after six days of labour. The actual day of rest could therefore be changed without affecting the inherent morality of the commandment. This had occurred under apostolic authority, hence the Sunday Sabbath was equally an institution of divine appointment and was to be observed for the entire twenty-four-hour period. The Sabbath was holy time, to be set aside for rest, worship, prayer, meditation and all profitable spiritual exercises.⁸³

Although no Puritan, Richard Hooker epitomizes that view of the Sabbath which, following the Puritan campaign launched with the Dedham debates and the publication of Bownde's book, came to prevail in English religious life for the better part of three centuries:

The moral law requiring therefore a seventh part throughout the age of the whole world to be that way employed, although with us the day be changed, in regard of a new revolution begun by our Saviour Christ; yet the same proportion of time continueth which was before, . . . we are bound to account the sanctification of one day in seven, a duty which God's immutable Law doth exact forever.⁸⁴

To use Hooker's phrase, it was "God's immutable Law" which gave the impetus to Puritan Sabbatarianism. As Patrick Collinson has aptly summarized it, the whole Sabbatarian controversy was based on "the doctrinal assertion that the fourth commandment is not an obsolete ceremonial law of the Jews but a perpetual, moral law, binding on Christians".⁸⁵ Sabbatarianism, in particular seventh-day Sabbatarianism, cannot be understood apart from its nexus in the Decalogue and the continuing authority of the Decalogue as it was perceived to exist in the New Testament. Bownde had emphasized the significance of the law in this respect and the Puritan writers who would follow him in asserting the necessity of the Sabbath would do likewise.

83 Nicholas Bownde, *The Doctrine of the Sabbath* (1595), *passim*.

84 Richard Hooker, *The Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie* (1622), 378-79.

85 P. Collinson, 'The Beginnings of English Sabbatarianism', *Studies in Church History*, 1 (1964), 207.

Finally, some of the more fundamental aspects of the Puritan understanding of the law are essential to an adequate grasp of the wider Sabbatarian movement as well as of seventh-day Sabbatarianism. The moral law as set forth in the Ten Commandments was repeatedly emphasised by Sabbatarian writers as perpetually binding, an expression of the will of the divine Law-giver himself. John White wrote, "The Moral Law, seeing it sets down rules of governing a man as a man . . . is therefore universally and perpetually to be observed".⁸⁶ The moral law was to be distinguished from the ceremonial law, which had been abrogated by the death of Christ. White says again, "from the Ceremonial Law we are wholly freed by the coming of Christ into the world, who is the body of those shadows".⁸⁷ The same was true, in general, of the judicial and social laws of the Old Testament, although some differences of opinion surfaced as to the continuing value for Christians of some aspects of this code.

The moral law was effective in pointing out sin and then of leading the penitent and believing soul to Christ. Samuel Bolton speaks of the law "as a Reprover and Corrector of sin . . . not only to discover sin, but to make it appear exceeding sinful".⁸⁸ And John Flavel, that powerful exponent of Puritan spirituality, admonishes: "Learn hence the usefulness of the Law, to bring souls to Jesus Christ . . . It cannot relieve us or ease us, but it can, and doth awaken and rouse us; its a fair glass to shew us the face of sin; and till we have seen that, we cannot see the face of Jesus Christ".⁸⁹

The moral law was also the recognized measure of conduct and behaviour in the Christian life. John Ball, speaking of the covenant of faith and the obedience required in a godly life, explains that "they which believe God to be their God, must declare the same by obedience to his Commandments". And further, "This is an inseparable consequent: that if we embrace God by faith, we must and ought to follow his Commandments by our deeds, and he that doth not this latter, bewrayeth [*sic*] that he hath not with a true heart and faith received the former".⁹⁰

The moral law becomes internalised in the true Christian life, since it is written in the heart of the believer, tending to natural obedience. The law, which after man's sin was written on tables of stone, is "turned to an internal law again" as God "implants it on the heart as it was at first", and so becomes "inbred" and "effectual" once more.⁹¹ Richard Sibbes explains

86 John White, *A Way to the Tree of Life* (1647), 206.

87 *Ibid.*

88 Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (1656), 119, 121.

89 John Flavel, 'The Method of Grace', in *Workes of . . . John Flavel* (1716), i, 278.

90 John Ball, *A Treatise of Faith* (1632), 32-33.

91 John Owen, *The Nature . . . of Indwelling Sin in Believers* (1668), 16-17.

that the dynamic of the new covenant “is that we may expect from this Lordship of Christ, the performance of the covenant of grace in writing his law in our hearts”. Otherwise the “covenant of grace should be frustrate as the first was”.⁹²

And the moral law would be the standard by which all men, Christians included, would be measured in the last judgement. John Seagar states explicitly, “the certainty of this world’s dissolution should persuade us to be universal in our obedience”, striving “to practise every known duty prescribed in God’s Word, after the example of Zacharias and Elisabeth his wife, who walked in all the commandments of God blameless”.⁹³ Baxter says, “Christ, at that great Assize . . . as he governed by a Law, so will he judge by a Law . . . and the equity of his judgement may be manifest to all”.⁹⁴

Such was the scope and strength of moral law in Puritan theology. As a *force majeure* in the emergence of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Sabbatarianism it was quite irresistible. In retrospect, and given the immense respect for the Ten Commandments across all shades of opinion within the Anglican Church, to say nothing of the earlier and persisting Lollard tradition, it would have been remarkable indeed had the Sabbath not become a prominent issue. It was equally inevitable that, once the Sabbatarian debate had been joined, the question of the seventh day would sooner or later be raised. This possibility seems to have been inherent in an early seventeenth-century comment on the implications of the fourth commandment. “Go through the whole commandment”, say Dod and Cleaver in their popular *Exposition of the Ten Commandments* (1615) and “what one word in all of it hath any note of ceremony? What reason savours of any special thing to the Jews that the commandment should be tied only to them?”⁹⁵ This was a rejoinder, in part at least, to those who had already begun to attack the Puritan Sabbatarian position as an unnecessarily extreme view of the Christian Sunday, the argument being that the ceremonial aspects of the fourth commandment applied only to the Jews. More directly, Francis White remarked that the “errant” advocate of the seventh day, Theophilus Brabourne, had derived most of his arguments from “Principles which the Sabbatarian Dogmatists had lent him”.⁹⁶ White even conceded that if the fourth commandment was indeed moral and perpetually binding “then the Saturday Sabbath of every week must be observed by Christians, and not the Sunday or Lord’s Day in

92 Richard Sibbes, *Christ’s Exaltation* (1639), 145.

93 John Seagar, *A Discoverie of the World to Come* (1650), 46-47.

94 Richard Baxter, *Aphorismes of Justification* (1649), 318.

95 John Dod and Robert Cleaver, *Exposition of the Ten Commandments* (1615), 126.

96 White, *Treatise*, Ep. Ded., sig. A2v.

the place thereof".⁹⁷

It seems incontrovertible that there were precedents for the Seventh-day Men in the Anglicanism of the day as well as in Puritan Sabbatarianism, as there were indeed in other earlier and contemporary antecedents, all of which together were the foundation of seventh-day observance in many parts of England and Wales for the best part of two centuries to come.

⁹⁷ Francis White, *An Examination and Confutation of a Lawlesse Pamphlet* (1637), 4.

