

Ever since George Smith, curator of the cuneiform tablets in the British Museum, published The Assyrian Eponym Canon (London, 1875), the view has been widely accepted that the weekly Sabbath was observed by the Assyrians.¹ When three years later Wellhausen published his Prolegomena to the History of Israel, he assumed that the weekly Sabbath, based on four stages in the lunar month, had been known in Babylonia and had been carried from there to Israel quite early in that nation's history.² Wilhelm Lotz³ seems to have been the first to connect the days of ill-omen, to which Smith had called attention, with the Babylonian šabattu and to see the latter as the source of the biblical Sabbath. The interrelationship of these three institutions has been taken for granted to this day by many outstanding scholars.⁴

So firmly rooted has this idea become that in 1966 Nahum Sarna was able to suggest, with some measure of

¹ "Among them the first twenty-eight days of every month were divided into four weeks of seven days each, the seventh, the fourteenth, twenty-first and twenty-eighth days respectively being sabbaths; and there was a general prohibition of work on these days." George Smith, The Assyrian Eponym Canon, p. 19ff.

² Julius Wellhausen, Prolegomena to the History of Israel, (reprint: Cleveland, 1955), p. 112ff.

³ Wilhelm Lotz, Questionum de historia sabbati, (Leipzig, 1883), p. 1, n. 1.

⁴ E.g. Ephraim A. Speiser in ANET, p. 68, n. 84; Cuthbert A. Simpson, The Interpreters' Bible, I, p. 489; the entry "Sabbath," Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible, (New York, 1962), pp. 135-140.

confidence, that the absence of the term Sabbath in Gen. 2:2-3 might represent a polemic against the Babylonian šabattu.⁵ On the other hand N.H. Tur-Sinai has insisted on several occasions that the biblical Sabbath was not an importation from Babylonia but a unique Israelite development. He has argued further that the šabattu was a West-Semitic concept, which influenced the Babylonian calendar as well.⁶

It is the aim of this article to inquire how the textual evidence could be subject to such contradictory interpretations, and to what extent may the differences of opinion be rooted in theological prejudices?

The effect of such bias is seen clearly on almost every page of Stephen Langdon's Babylonian Menologies and the Semitic Calendars (London, 1935), which is still quoted as a classic work on the subject.

Langdon began with the assumption that "strict rules about healing, working, travelling on certain days do not belong to early Hebrew religion. They are post-exilic and rather obviously under Babylonian influences."⁷ He does not say why they do not belong to the early religion of Israel. His only proof is that the strict rules belong to the religion of the Pharisees, which is late, man-made, imported and not to the religion of Jesus, which is early, divine, native Israelite. Thus, according to Langdon, the Pharisaic strictures against healing⁸ on the Sabbath and against travelling thereon stem from the taboos set forth in the Akkadian text quoted below.⁹

Whatever room there might be for arguing that one cannot separate theology from scholarship in biblical studies, one cannot justify the next step in Langdon's argument, the folly of which is best demonstrated by direct quotation:

When and where did these rules originate? They are found only in the Assyrian promulgations of the church brevaries of the tenth and seventh centuries. But Babylonia and not Assyria exercised the principal influence upon Judaea. The Jewish calendar was borrowed from Babylonia two centuries after the Assyrian Empire fell in 612 B.C. The editors of the tenth-century calendars state that they had copied the menologies from older copies (p. 85).

⁵ Nahum Sarna, Understanding Genesis, (New York, 1966), p. 21.

⁶ N. H. Tur-Sinai, "Sabbat und Woche," Bibliotheca Orientalis, VIII (1951), pp. 14-24; "Shabbat," Ben-Yehuda's Dictionary, XIV, p. 6877ff. (in Hebrew); Hallahon we-Hassefer, III, (Jerusalem, 1955), pp. 205-232.

⁷ Op. cit., p. 85; cf. Akkadian text cited below.

⁸ Cf. Matthew 12: 10-12; John 5: 5-18.

⁹ P. 18.

Langdon felt obliged, therefore, to conclude that the rules went back to the time of Hammurabi. The implication he drew was that the same Babylonian sources, which lay behind the tablets in Assurbanipal's library, should have found their way into the hands of Jewish priests during the Babylonian exile.

Since Langdon realized that there was no connection between the days of ill-omen (uḫulqallu, ūmu lemnu) - in the regulations for which he saw the origin of the Pharisaic Sabbath laws - and the šabattu,¹⁰ he should have admitted that a most basic link among the three institutions was missing. Rather than blame his own a priori assumption for the defect in his equation, he blamed the ancient Hebrews who, he argued, "seem to have borrowed this word through a complete misunderstanding of the Babylonian calendar."¹¹ Thus the notion has prevailed until today that the Jewish Sabbath was derived from the Babylonian šabattu.¹²

It appears that scholars became so enamored of the three-fold identification of the Sabbath, šabattu, and days of ill-luck that they used the most absurd hypotheses to account for evidence against their reconstruction. Langdon, for example, had to admit that the tenth-century menology recorded on VAT. 10564 and duplicated on the broken VAT. 10503 (published in E. Ebeling, Keilschrifttexte aus Assur Religiösen Inhalts, plates 178, 179) did not recognize any distinction between the 7th, 14th, 21st and 28th and the other days of ill-fortune (1, 9, 19, 29, 30) in the month of Nisan. He argued, therefore, that the septem principle was the great innovation of the reformed calendar of Assurbanipal.¹³ Langdon's admission on page 52 that there was no evidence that this last calendar ever existed in Babylonia completely undermined the argument that he developed on p. 85.

The notion that the days of ill-fortune came every seven days was contradicted by the fact that the Assurbanipal calendar gave the 19th of every month the same status as the 7th, 14th, 21st and 28th. Langdon sought to remove the contradiction by the assumption that this day of ill-luck commemorated the death of Tammuz, which took place on the 19th of Nisan but which so "obsessed the religious

¹⁰ Op. cit., p. 90.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 96.

¹² See, for example, R. North, "The Derivation of Sabbath," Biblica 36 (1955), p. 193ff.

¹³ Op. cit., p. 78.

imagination of Babylonia and Assyria" that "they extended the commemoration to the 19th of every month."¹⁴

Julius and Hildegarde Lewy¹⁵ proposed a theory of the origin of the seven day week and the five days of ill-luck each month, which accounted for all of those five days in the same fashion. First they suggested that the "inclusion of the 19th day (i.e. the 49th day of the preceding month) into this series of multiples of seven indicates that this system of ominous days comprised seven full weeks reaching from the beginning of one month into the next without a break and regardless of lunar phases."¹⁶ Secondly they accounted for the seven-day week by proceeding from the following rather amusing assumption:

The peoples of the ancient Near East chose the time-unit in accordance with the coming and going of the diurnal winds long before they made the sun the subject of systematic observations (p. 6).

If the day was based on the wind, the week, they argued, derived from the seven great wind-deities mentioned in Enūma Eliš IV:47 "he caused to come forth the winds he created, seven of them" !!

Two most compelling arguments against the identification of the cycle of unlucky days in the Assurbanipal Series and the Hebrew cycle of Sabbaths are that (1) Langdon shows that the 21st of Nisan II is marked Lucky in that series¹⁷ (he glossed over this fact); (2) these days of ill-luck refer only to the king¹⁸ as is seen clearly from the following:¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁵ "The origin of the week and the oldest west Asiatic Calendar,"

HUCA 17 (1942), p. 1ff.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 3. Skinner also makes mention of this view (Genesis ICC, p. 38).

¹⁷ Op. cit., p. 80.

¹⁸ Thus, there is a greater difference between the days of ill-luck and the Sabbath than between the latter and the public days of taboo observed in non-Semitic cultures. Cf. Theodor H. Gaster, Festivals of the Jewish Year (New York, 1952), pp. 263-7.

¹⁹ Benno Landsberger, "Der kultische Kalender der Babylonier und Assyrier," Leipziger Semitische Studien VI (1915), p. 120. Cf. Langdon, op. cit., p. 75. The source is K. 2514, ll. 17-22.

rē'û nišē rabāti
 šēru ša ina pēnti bašlu
 akāl tumri ul ikkal
 šubāt pagrišu ul unakkar
 ebbūti ul iltabbaš
 niqû ul inaqqi
 šarru narkabta ul irakkab
 šalṭiš ul itamme
 ašar puzri bārû
 KA ul išakkan
 asû ana marši
 qassu ul ubbal
 ana epēš šibūti
 lā naṭu

The shepherd of the multitudinous people may not eat meat which is roasted (nor) baked bread. He may not change his bodily attire. He may not wear newly-laundered garments. He may not offer sacrifices. The king may not ride in a chariot. He may not speak ex cathedra. The liver-diviner may not in the hidden place. The physician may not treat the patient. Not appropriate for the execution of an enterprise.

It is obvious that on the seventh day anyone besides the king could eat roasted meat and baked bread, could change his garments, and could engage in whatever religious practices were permitted him on any other day.

If the older notions are to be rejected for their lack of internal consistency and for their limited textual support, what may be said of Tur-Sinai's thesis? His radical approach seeks the origin of the seven-day week not in the lists of bad-luck days from the time of Assurbanipal but in the six-day week, to which certain Old Assyrian (Cappadocian) documents allegedly refer.²⁰ That this hamuštu was a unit of six days, one fifth of a thirty-day month and not a unit of fifty days rests on two lines of argument. The first is that hamuštu means always one-fifth when it refers to non-temporal units. Secondly, when it refers to time it "always appears in the sequence hamštum-warḥum-limum (week, month, year)."²¹

Further support for the existence of the six-day week may be found in the division of other units of time into six divisions, e.g. the six hours from sunrise to noon and from noon to sunset, the six months of summer and the six months of winter, which ended abruptly and terminated in

²⁰ Tur-Sinai, "Sabbat und Woche," p. 16; Hallashon wa-Hassefer, p. 210. The documents are published in G. Eisser and J. Lewy, Die alt-assyrischen Rechtsurkunden vom Kültepe, I-II, (1930-5). Some of the Kültepe documents are transliterated with an English translation in Ferris J. Stephens, "Studies of the Cuneiform Tablets from Cappadocia," Culver-Stockton Quarterly II, no. 2 (1925), pp. 11-58. The author of that study offered no explanation for the term hamuštum.

²¹ CAD H, pp. 73-5.

the šabattu in Babylonia.²²

What appears to be Tur-Sinai's most important contribution is his bold suggestion that the belief in YHWH as the One God of Creation could lead to the transformation of the six-day work-week of pre-Israelite culture to the seven-day week. This new unit of time was based, therefore, on the idea set forth in Gen. 2:1-3 that the Sabbath holy to both God and man was also part of the natural order. That the seven-day week, unknown in the Near East and equally unknown in Europe,²³ could have been an innovation of the religion of Israel was untenable to nineteenth century scholarship, which could not conceive that the pre-exilic monotheism was so strong as to have accomplished it nor that the post-exilic hierocracy was so original as to have dreamt of it.

Tur-Sinai's further contention that šabattu appears in Akkadian as a West-Semitic loan word would appear worthy of further investigation in view of the fact that it has no Akkadian cognates, that aside from word-lists it is restricted to a single application while in Hebrew it is limited neither in its grammatical forms nor in its applications.²⁴

According to Tur-Sinai the word originally meant full-moon or fifteenth of the month. It was applied in this sense both in Israel and in Babylon. The term shabbat shabbatōn acquired a wider meaning, while shabbat came to be applied also to the weekly days of rest.²⁵

The objections to this reconstruction are as follows: (1) It is not at all clear that shabbat was ever applied to every full moon either in Israel or in Babylon;²⁶

²² Tur-Sinai, "Sabbat und Woche," p. 23; Hallashon wa-Hassefer, pp. 220-8. Cf. Landsberger, JNES VIII (1949), p. 250ff.

²³ "The Arabs adopted the week from the Jews and Christians." (Hastings, Encyclopedia, p. 127). On pp. 129-130 it is pointed out that neither the Persian Avesta Calendar nor the Balto-Slavic Calendar had a week. Karl Budde, "The Sabbath and the Week," JTS XXX (1928), p. 2 notes that Dio Cassius (ca. 200 C.E.) had remarked that the week was a late innovation introduced to Rome from Egypt. Budde suggests that the Jews of Alexandria had introduced it to the Egyptians, whose ancient calendar had no such institution.

²⁴ See references in note 6 and cf. Landsberger, Der kultische Kalender, pp. 131-6.

²⁵ Tur-Sinai, "Sabbat und Woche," p. 23; Hallashon wa-Hassefer, pp. 220ff.

²⁶ R. de Vaux, Ancient Israel, (New York, 1961), p. 187 also assumes that the 15th of every month was called šabattu but see Gaster, op. cit., p. 264.

(2) The term shabbat shabbatōn is applied to the weekly Sabbath (Ex. 31:15, 35:2; Lev. 23:3), to the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:31, 23:32) and to the sabbatical year (Lev. 25:4) three events---the severity of which is indicated by this emphatic term; (3) There is no indication whatsoever that the term shabbat shabbatōn was ever applied to Pesah or Sukkoth. The term shabbatōn is applied to the New Year (Lev. 23:24), to the first day of Sukkoth (Lev. 23:39) and also to the eighth day but nowhere to Pesah.

One must conclude that Tur-Sinai's attempt to correlate the šabattu with the Jewish calendar fails of proof. One is compelled to agree with him, however, that the Jewish weekly Sabbath was an innovation of biblical religion.