

Sabbath and Synagogue:

A Revisionist Understanding

By David W Ponter

Introduction

Revisionism, revisionists, these are two terms that in some circles secure for oneself the sure wrath of the guardians of the truth, the gate-keepers of the old schools of thought. No one likes to have to revise their core beliefs. Revisionists are provocative people for sure. The inclusion of “revisionist” in this title was chosen deliberately, though perhaps a little carelessly. For the very reason it was included is the very reason for this paper. I ask myself, “why do I want to do this?” Or, to ask the same question another way: “What is driving me?” To be sure my motives are mixed. I realise that part of the revisionists psychological makeup is to desire to destroy, to tear down idols. Part of me, while acknowledging that, and the danger that poses, hopes that the motivations of this revisionist contain within them a desire for truth. It is not, it is hoped, just a desire to topple established icons of veneration, but to peel back the layers of mythology and to get to the truth behind the impression of truth. For, I think, some *impressions* are constructions of human tradition.

To borrow from Kantian language, it’s as if there is a historical reality, which is the thing in itself, and then there is the reconstruction of that reality, less than perfect, which is the thing as it appears to us. Not all impressions, as I am calling them, are bad. Many are needed. For like all activity of the thinking person, impressions, images, icons, are all necessary parts of the structures of human thinking. We need categories, filters, in order to process reality as it impinges upon our consciousness. And so we do need historical icons. Icons in the forms of categories and traditions to make sense of the historical world behind us, so to speak. They are windows into the past. However, sometimes these impressions are badly distorted. They have been created, for whatever motive, and yet they are like a window, smeared and stained with mud, dirt, and debris from the passing of bad historiography. Bad historiography is like the speeding truck flinging up mud onto the windscreen of the car behind it.

Revisionists like to stop and point out that it need not be this way, it was not always this way. The more I read from radical theologians and histories, the more I have come to see that revisionists are crazy people. They have their own icons that drive them. I think of men like Van Til, Barth, Calvin, all of which had their quirks, which placed them in harm’s way, either literally or literarily. Enough with the navel-gazing, however. My charge comes to this: Our received views of the Christian Sabbath that have come down to us in the Western Calvinist Protestant tradition are skewed and distorted. When you think of the Sabbath in the Old Testament (OT), what do you normally think of? What do you normally imagine happened on the Sabbath day in, say the days of Joshua, or Ezekiel? If you are like me, you would normally have thoughts ranging from nebulous, “I never really thought about it” to something like, “Why, they went to church,” to which you might add, “Just like we do on Sunday.” Of course, you would not imagine that on this day they did the same things we do on our Sunday. You would import OT Jewish content for the activities performed on the Sabbath.

You would, I assume, think they got together, heard a rabbinic homily, sang some songs, probably the Psalms of David, prayed and recited the *Shema* and other liturgical prayers and recitations. Then at the conclusion, went home. Well, here is exactly where I want to challenge and revise your understanding. I want to show that’s a popular mythology handed down to you from your Protestant forebears. I want in this paper to present a case for what really happened. But here I must state my qualifications. I will not be attempting to trace the genealogy and ancestry of the popular mythology. I will trace it back to one person, at least. Secondly, I will be following the lead of some modern liberal scholarship, though, not to the extent taken by these modern scholars. I have no problem with leaning on the work of modern liberal scholarship. I maintain that in so many ways modern liberal scholarship is way ahead of Evangelical and Reformed scholarship.¹

What drives my own iconoclasm is the desire that we rethink our own present Sabbath day activity. I am going to argue a case, that if I am right about the OT Sabbath, then it follows is that where we are prone to lay down rules, there are no rules. I want to show that the Sabbath day should truly be a day of rest and freedom, but which has been

¹I suspect that this is partly because so often we of the Evangelical and Reformed *academia* are in a constant defensive postures.

turned into something other than that. To me it seems that what many of our fathers did was to convert a day of physical rest into a day of spiritual labour. And at this point, I am not inclined to think that they were right in this. For example, the Directory of Public Worship, states:

The Lord's day ought to be so remembered *before-hand*, as that all worldly business of our ordinary callings may be so ordered, and so timely and seasonably laid aside, as they may not be impediments to the due sanctifying of the day when it comes.

The whole day is to be celebrated as holy to the Lord, both in public and private, as being the Christian Sabbath. To which end, it is *requisite*, that there be a holy cessation or resting all that day from all unnecessary labours; and an abstaining, not only from all sports and pastimes, but also from all worldly words and thoughts.

That the diet on that day be so ordered, as that neither servants be unnecessarily detained from the public worship of God, nor any other person hindered from the sanctifying that day. That there be private preparations of every person and family, by prayer for themselves, and for God's assistance of the minister, and for a blessing upon his ministry; and by such other holy exercises, as may further dispose them to a more comfortable communion with God in his public ordinances.

That all the people meet so timely for public worship, that the whole congregation may be present at the beginning, and with one heart solemnly join together in all parts of the public worship, and not depart till after the blessing.

That what time is vacant, between or after the solemn meetings of the congregation in public, be spent in reading, meditation, repetition of sermons; especially by calling their families to an account of what they have heard, and catechising of them, holy conferences, prayer for a blessing upon the public ordinances, singing of psalms, visiting the sick, relieving the poor, and such like duties of piety, charity, and mercy, accounting the Sabbath a delight.²

The structure of these injunctions do present the perception that the last paragraph contains a continuation of the *requisites*. The Larger Catechism also states:

Q117: How is the Sabbath or the Lord's day to be sanctified?

A117: The Sabbath or Lord's day is to be sanctified by an holy resting all the day, not only from such works as are at all times sinful, but even from such worldly employments and recreations as are on other days lawful; and making it our delight to spend the whole time (except so much of it as is to be taken up in works of necessity and mercy) in the public and private exercises of God's worship: and, to that end, we are to prepare our hearts, and with such foresight, diligence, and moderation, to dispose and seasonably dispatch our worldly business, that we may be the more free and fit for the duties of that day.³

The Shorter Catechism is clear, too, to delineate what cannot be done on the Sabbath:

Q61: What is forbidden in the Fourth Commandment?

²*The Directory of Public Worship* (1645), "Of the sanctification of the Lord's Day," bound with "The Confession of Faith," (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1988), p., 386 [emph., mine].

³*Ibid.*, pp., 205-6.

A61: The Fourth Commandment forbiddeth the omission or careless performance of the duties required, and *the profaning the day by idleness*, or doing that which is in itself sinful, or by unnecessary thoughts, words, or works, about our worldly employments or recreations.⁴

Reading these three documents, it is clear that for the authors of these statements, they considered that the Sabbath day ought to be a day of activity, albeit spiritual activity, but activity no less. Needless to say, I have a little problem with some of this. From my research, my key question has become, how did the Sabbath become so transmuted from what it was in the OT to what the Puritans prescribed for us as *requisite*? There are many partial answers to this. For instance, there is the Puritan idea that the New Testament (NT) Sunday worship replaced the *cultus* of the OT worship. Further, from this flows the idea that now the Lord's Day for the Christian, itself, has some cultic element attached to it as a principle of one day in seven. But even deeper than that, I now believe the Lord's Day was transformed because of a certain Puritan understanding of the Sabbath.⁵ However, one reason I think that has become part of our tradition *mythos* has to do with the other tradition of the Jewish Synagogue. It is often imagined--completely incorrectly--that the Synagogue was as ancient an institution as was the Mosaic Covenant. The same Puritans who drafted the above documents believed that this was indeed the case. For example, the 17th century Scottish Presbyterian, George Gillespie asserts:

After the tribes were settled in the land of promise, synagogues were built, in the case of an urgent necessity, because all Israel could not come every Sabbath day to the reading, and expounding of the law in the place which God had chosen that his name might dwell there.⁶

One of the key proof-texts often cited in popular discussion over the alleged existence of Synagogues as far back as the time of Moses is Lev 23:3. The historic assumption has always been the rabbinic myth based on statements from various Jewish Talmuds and Targums that Synagogues were established in Moses' time. The problems with these claims are manifold. The body of this paper will be to present a polemic against these underlying assumptions. On the contrary, to set out my assumptions, it is my belief that there is no OT evidence of communal Sabbath worship by the non-priestly Jews of Israel. The day was, according to Lev 23:3, a day of feasting and resting.⁷ My belief is that Synagogues cannot be securely dated prior to the second century BC. Further, I also assume a certain rightness about OT spirituality. This is a hard idea to pin down and define. I believe that the OT has a lot to offer the NT believer and so presents to us a valid model of biblical piety. We need to rethink our traditional definitions of piety, which have been so saturated by Puritan neo-Platonic ideas of God, person and worship.⁸

⁴Ibid., p., 304-5; [emph., mine]. Another problem with these documents is the proof-texting. No one doubts that the Mosaic Covenant condemns work on the Sabbath, or the doing sinful things. But the proof-texts against sleeping on the Sabbath (note the citation for that: Acts 20:9, which is just short of ridiculous) and these other detailed imperatives are not derived from explicit NT references. There is no evidence from the Bible that the *entire* Sabbath day must be "sanctified" in this manner.

⁵It is possible (indeed, probable), that the ideas regarding the Christian Sabbath were also shared by non-Puritans. I am using the Puritans as my foil, though, because I would argue they have had the most direct input into shaping our Sabbath-keeping ideas.

⁶George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against English Popish Ceremonies* (Dallas: Naphtali Press: 1993), p., 253.

⁷It is impossible to argue that in Jewish thinking the Sabbath was ever considered a *feast of Yahweh*, but this is exactly what Peter Leithart does assume: "Synagogue or Temple," in *Westminster Theological Journal* 64 (2002) p., 123-4. Leithart further cites, Num 28:18, 29:1; Lev 23:24, but these refer to the offerings in the *cultus*. He attempts to connect Num 10:2-3, the blowing of the trumpets, with the trumpets of the previously cited verses. But again, the context is different. The latter refers to calling general assemblies or the elders, or for warning, while the former refer to actual worship at the cultus. He also claims, without any documentary support: "Levites were scattered throughout the land in the towns, and it seems plausible that they were the ones who led the worship on the Sabbath," (p., 124). He posits suppositional conclusions upon textual misreadings."

⁸For sure, proving this is a paper, indeed, a book in and of itself. But I am convinced more than ever that Puritan Neo-platonism inordinately influenced Puritan piety, such that now what we think of piety is often a

The goal of this paper is the hope that we Reformed theologians who come from and operate from within the tradition of Covenant Theology might rethink our hermeneutic and exercise more caution in our often one-to-one carry over of ideas and proof-texts into the NT from the OT without much forethought as to the true historical and theological contexts of our proof-texts. My thought is that we may begin to see the development of the biblical Covenant of Grace as expressing itself more in terms of frameworks rather than one covenant bleeding into the other.⁹

My method will be to survey the radical revisionist teachings of Heather McKay and some responses to her. McKay has written her dissertation on this very subject, as well as some articles. There have been some attempts to refute her claims at certain levels. The bulk of which in my opinion either fall out of the range or target area I wish to speak to, or simply fail. McKay is a radical feminist liberal. Her feminist liberalism oozes from every page. Her agenda is to even refute the idea that detailed synagogue worship even existed in the time of Christ, to the end that the early synagogues never claimed to be worship-services, or contained detailed liturgical elements. Clearly, McKay goes too far. Her denial of articulate first century synagogue observances is untrue, and unnecessary to my own intent in this paper. However, I do believe that her scholarship in reference to the practice of the OT Sabbath is correct, even her critics cannot fault her for this.

Her main work is from her *Sabbath and Synagogue: The Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism*.¹⁰ What McKay endeavours to do is first outline the actual OT descriptions of Sabbath keeping in the OT, and then, also importantly, survey inter-testamental literature and classical Roman literature regarding the Jews and their Sabbath observances. Very interestingly, what she does is to document the earliest instances of Synagogue life. Her aim is to show that even in early synagogue life, the Jews never considered themselves to be “worshiping” Yahweh. Here I think she is correct. But what is more, she also manages to detail, to some degree, what actually happened in earlier inter-testamental synagogue life, or first and second century synagogue observances. Most of her later polemic is of no concern here. She notes that more and more the synagogue came to be a place of teaching, of debate, of haggling, of prayers (occasional), to the extent that early synagogues were not so much a sacred place of worship, a sort of para-temple *cultus*, but an early Jewish community centre, where Jews would come to exchange the latest ideas. What is fascinating is that from certain documents, she alludes to the idea that it was seen as a place to come and have an argument. What is profound here for Christians is that this idea throws light on Paul’s use of the synagogues as a means to spread the gospel.¹¹

Heather McKay on the Sabbath

Diving in, then, McKay sets out some important distinctions which must be established and kept in mind. Firstly, she delineates that her argument has not so much to do with priestly observance on the Sabbath, that is, what cultic work was performed on the Sabbath day in the Temple or Tabernacle. She is rather concerned with what the non-priestly Jews did on the Sabbath. For the prevailing notion in classic Protestant literature is that the Jews, those who could not travel to Jerusalem, Saturday to Saturday, must have congregated in local and regional areas, to do all that which Gillespie alleges. This means for McKay that she has to define *worship*. McKay:

For the purposes of this study I define worship more specifically as rites and rituals which pay homage, with adoration and awe, to particular god or gods. Worship could include sacrificing plants and animals, dancing, playing music, singing hymns or psalms, reading or reciting sacred texts, prayers and blessings.

strange beast foreign to the OT. I have Michael Payne, John Currid and Ralph Davis for opening up this insight to me.

⁹For myself, I think this aspect needs more work. One of my desires is to read more of Kline and Carlberg on the nature of covenantal progression in the Bible.

¹⁰Heather McKay, *Sabbath and Synagogue: The Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994). This book is based on her earlier dissertation. See also her article: ‘From Evidence to Edifice: Four Fallacies about the Sabbath,’ pp., 179-99, in *Text as Pretext*, ed., by R.P., Carroll, (Sheffield: SAP, 1992).

¹¹Once again, true historical insights throw light on the sacred text.

Instructions, for, or descriptions of, these types of activity in the texts are regarded by me as evidences of worship...¹²

Earlier McKay states that she:

...re-examines the evidence that could show whether Sabbath was a day with special worship practices for the non-priestly Jews, and discover, if possible, what Jews actually did on the Sabbath, and discuss whether these actions may be evaluated as worship or not.¹³

Regarding the Sabbath itself, she notes that it is clear that on that day all work and trade was to cease. McKay: "There is no lack of clarity about the command to do no work on the Sabbath."¹⁴ However, she notes, too, "The Hebrew Bible describes a Sabbath rest for the ordinary people but for the functionaries of the Jerusalem Temple it was a day among other days, on which they carried out religious duties."¹⁵ What happens then, she argues, is that erroneously we moderns somehow fill in the gaps. We assume what happened on the Sabbath in the Temple, in some (unstated) analogous way also was replayed in the surrounding countryside.

So many scholars fill that lacuna from the detail of what is required for the priests, rulers and populace on a variety of religious occasions. Thus, it is often stated in commentaries and works of reference that psalm singing was a part of the people's worship and that--following the first assumption with a second assumption--it took place on the Sabbath day. There are, however, no texts that refer to, or imply, such psalm-singing.¹⁶

The Sabbath in the OT

McKay repeats these enlightening comments with regard to prayer and sacrifice. Indeed, it is a common myth that on the Sabbath, men and women throughout the countryside engaged in sacrificial offering as an ordinary course of Sabbath participation. Seemingly in favour of this popular misconception there are the instances of sacrifice in the wilderness and in the book of Job. Yet she is right to note that while these sacrificial offerings were acceptable before Yahweh, these examples provide for us no evidence or information regarding later Jewish Sabbath observances. As she rightly points out, these instances of sacrifice are later replaced by the centralised activities of the *cultus* in Jerusalem.¹⁷ From here she presses on to address direct OT references to the Sabbath. The Pentateuch makes mention of the Sabbath: Exodus, fourteen times, yet no mention is made of worship; Leviticus, eight times, and it is mentioned in Lev. 23 as a part of the cultic calendar, but yet again no directions for worship are articulated. In Numbers there is one reference, apart from another record of the yearly cultic calendar in chapters 28-29. Deuteronomy speaks of the Sabbath three times but in the context of the fourth commandment.

After this, McKay surveys 2 Kings, where is made mention of the Shunamite's husband, which as McKay grants: "that the Sabbath is a day worth visiting a shrine in search of a holy man--a day when he would be there."¹⁸ Further, in 2 Kings, there are references to the rotation of the guards in the king's house on the Sabbath. This is also followed by a cryptic reference to the covered portal for use on the Sabbath which apparently allowed entrance of the king to the temple. Commentators are divided on the meaning. That noted, there is still no indication of anything regarding the nature of Sabbath worship for the non-priestly Jews.

¹²McKay, p., 3.

¹³Ibid., p., 2.

¹⁴She cites the following key verses: Ex 20:10; 31:14, 15; 35:2; Lev 16:29; Duet 5:1,3 14; and Jer 17:22, 24.

¹⁵Ibid., p., 13.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., p., 14.

¹⁸Ibid., p., 15. 2 Kings 4:23.

1 Chronicles makes mention of the Sabbath twice in connection with the show bread. In 2 Chronicles we see three references to guard duty on the Sabbath. Nehemiah 9:14 speaks of the Sabbath being redeclared to the people of Israel. In chapters 10 and 13 of the same book, there are stated restrictions regarding trade and commerce, but no instructions of any alleged non-priestly Sabbath-day worship. In the book of Psalms, Ps 92, described as a 'song for the Sabbath day,' is the only reference to the Sabbath in that book. The wider theological and historical context of psalm usage, however, indicates that this most probably was used in the Temple cultus worship.¹⁹ From Isaiah we learn of the collections in the Temple. Chapter 56 contains warnings and references to profaning the Sabbath. Chapter 58 speaks about how to enjoy the Sabbath, but makes no reference to "worship" on that day. In chapter 66, the reference is to the future age. In Jeremiah we see chapter 17 containing all the references to the Sabbath in this book (a total of 6). The context is again that of trade and commerce. This holds good for Lam 2:6 as well.

Ezekiel 20-23 refers to the Sabbaths of Yahweh being profaned. Chapter 46 contains two references to the Sabbath and of the people worshipping God. There are also citations of the Sabbath in connection with other holy days.²⁰ In the book of Hosea (2:11) there is one reference to the Sabbath, which says Yahweh will destroy Israel's Sabbath and new moon feasts. Amos references the forbidding of trade on the Sabbath (8:5). From all this, McKay concludes that there is no evidence that outside of the cultic activities of the priests, the Sabbath was a day of worship, for there are no precepts or prohibitions regarding a Sabbatarian non-priestly worship. With respect to the references to the Sabbath in Ps 92 and Ezekiel 46, respectively, the first most probably refers to the activities of the temple choirs, while the latter, refers to the glorious future temple.²¹ In reference to Isa 66, the sense is in the future. It is not teaching about a past or present state of affairs in Israel in regards to Sabbath "worship" for non-priests.

Sabbath and the Exile

R.E. Clements was and is not alone when he pens the sweeping claim:

The expatriated Jews in Babylon had learnt to worship as best they could in their own homes and settlements; the voice of prophecy had not been denied to them.... That those years were spent away from the temple is a key feature to be reckoned with in the new religious and theological attitude which emerged. The synagogues, which became so vital an aspect of Judaism, must certain have had their earliest origin in this period... The existence of regular Sabbath worship, which was practiced by the faithful nucleus of the exiles, if not by the majority, could not have left the people with the feeling that God had utterly deserted them.²²

Against this, McKay now turns her attention. She argues, citing the scholar Talmon, that there is no evidence for this. It is supposition and speculation. She notes, again following Talmon, that what seems to be driving the ideas Clements adduces is our inability to imagine a Jewish community and religious life in the exile existing without any visible external forms or expressions of institutionalised worship. Thus, what drives the popular myth is the simple inability to imagine a situation for the Jews in exile which did not mirror our own present situation or what we idealise should have happened. McKay concurs with the assumption that worship for the OT Jew was specifically defined and ingrained. It was limited to the act of the cultus which was located in the Temple in Jerusalem. In the end, McKay rightly notes that there is no substantive evidence adducible from the exilic and post-exilic biblical literature that indicates that the Jews in the exile considered or performed rites of worship on the Sabbath outside of the temple and nation of Israel.

Sabbath and New Moon

¹⁹See my earlier paper on Psalms in OT worship which sustains this argument.

²⁰Isaiah 44:23; 45:17; 46:1 and 3.

²¹McKay, p., 18.

²²R.E. Clements, *God and Temple* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), p., 130. C.F., McKay, p., 21. Talmon goes so far as to allege that here in the Exile the Jews first learnt to appreciate the full implication of universality Yahweh, that worship of him was not limited to one place and time or to one building made my hands.

Leaving aside some of McKay's discussion relating to the post-exilic and prophetic biblical literature, McKay does take a detour into a discussion of the New Moon rites in relation to the Sabbath rites. Here she posits an intriguing argument. She notes that there is a clear word-pairing in the OT of Sabbath and new moon feasts and rites.²³ Yet, in terms of the sacrifices which were prescribed for each rite, there is a distinct weighting in favour of the new moon rite as being more important. For example, that cultic calendar lists in Leviticus 23, Numbers 28-29 and Ezekiel 45-46 that the new moon sacrifices are considerably larger. Thus in the Numbers calendar, for the Sabbath, 4 lambs were to be sacrificially offered. However, for the new moon sacrifices, 2 bulls, 1 ram, 7 lambs, and 1 goat. In Ezekiel we see that for the Sabbath priestly offering, there was to be an offering of 6 lambs and 1 ram. Yet for the new moon priestly offering there was to be 1 bull, 6 lambs, and 1 ram. In Leviticus 23, for the Sabbath feast, no sacrificial offering is made, nor is there is no reference to a new moon offering as a rite on its own terms. She concludes that in the Jewish cultic calendar, it was indeed the new moon rite that was of more importance in Israel, not the Sabbath. Her argument has some merit, but surely must be offset by the simple realisation that the Sabbath priestly offering would have occurred 4 times per month, whereas the new moon offering was but once a month. The proportion of sacrifices being in favour of the new moon rites would most naturally reflect this corresponding frequency.

The Sabbath in Apocryphal Literature

With respect to the Tobit and Ben Sira, there is no mention of the Sabbath. However the Sabbath is mentioned in Judith and 1 and 2 Maccabees. There is the example of Judith the widow, who fasts except the day before the Sabbath and the Sabbath itself.²⁴ In 1 Maccabees, there is reference to the Sabbath being assaulted and profaned by Antiochus Ephiphanes. In chapter 10 there is a reference to the letter by King Demetrius to the Jews ensuring their freedom from harassment on the Sabbath.

In 2 Maccabees chapter 2, there is the account of the Jewish rebels who refused to fight on the Sabbath and so were destroyed by Antiochus' soldiers. We see this again in chapter 5. Chapter 6 notes that after the intrusion of the cult of Zeus in Jerusalem the Jews now were not permitted to keep the Sabbath. The Jews were forced to meet in caves therein to celebrate it. Chapter 8 details the Jewish victory over their enemies, and the subsequent pursuit of them, which, however, was discontinued the next day because it was the Sabbath. This chapter does document that on the Sabbath the victorious warriors offered a collective thanks-giving to God. But there is no indication that this was a regular feature of Sabbath "worship." Later in chapter 9, Jonathan decides that the rebels *will* fight on the Sabbath thus avoiding another disaster. We see a reference to preparatory purification for the Sabbath which was reinforced by Jason (chapter 12²⁵), and a repetition of the question and issue of whether or not the Jews should fight on the Sabbath (chapter 15). In 1 Esdras we have mention of the restoration of the Jewish cultus and that, too, of the Sabbath and new moon feasts. There is now clear evidence that the Sabbath was now viewed with greater importance.

The problem is that in all the Sabbath citations from the apocryphal literature, there are no indications that the Sabbath was viewed by the people as a time of worship, or even how they explicitly conducted themselves on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath in the Writings of Philo and Josephus

At this point the discussion of Jewish Sabbath keeping takes on a more interesting aspect. For it is only now that we begin to get a glimpse of actual Jewish Sabbath practices in relation to collective activities around the time of the

²³E.g., Isa 1:13, 66:23; Eze 44: 24, 45:17, 46:1; 1 Chron 23:31; 2 Chron 2:4, 8:13, 31:3; 2 Kings 4:23; and Neh 10:33.

²⁴Judith 8:4-8.

²⁵Here too we begin to see extra-biblical intrusions into the Sabbath rite, as Jason enforces the pre-Sabbath preparations, something not found in Scripture. One 'rule' stands out. The new rule that one must prepare for the Sabbath ironically has a direct counter-part with the Puritan idea of pre-Sabbath preparation (see above: Directory of Public Worship). This idea is extra-biblical.

first century AD. And although Philo and Josephus do not represent inspired authors they do give us a window into Sabbath and Synagogue life at the time of Christ.

Philo (20 BC-50 AD)

Philo was an Alexandrian Jew living there as part of the Diaspora. What is important about Philo was that he was a self-declared apologist for Judaism, and as such, many of his comments in defense of his faith are detailed and highly disclosive. His importance is also underscored by the fact that as a Jew living in the Diaspora, his thought-world is that of a Jew living “away” from the Temple in Jerusalem. Thus his “vision” of Jewish life and faith will be marked by that perspective. Having said that, though, it is to be noted that Philo was a syncretist who fused Platonic ideas with orthodox Judaism. Another caveat to keep in mind is that on the Sabbath, itself, Philo has relatively few remarks. We do know that he considered the Sabbath was a day of rest because the number seven was the most peaceful.²⁶ It was a day to be regarded as sacred, along with other divinely instituted feast days. It is a day that should not be profaned or neglected. The seventh day is to be regarded with utmost reverence and awe.²⁷ It was also a day of meeting. Here then is a real positive connection between the Sabbath and collective Jewish activities. Here we see the use of the Greek terms *synagoga*. The Jews, he noted, would gather on the seventh day in conventicles or synagogues (*synagogai*). Philo also tells us what the Jews did at these “synagogues.” McKay:

First, he recounts the Sabbath practice of the Jews saying that they ‘every seventh day occupy themselves with the philosophy of their fathers in their places of prayer (proseuchai) throughout the cities.’ The activities in these he describes as being similar to the philosophical schools of the Greeks, in providing ‘edification and betterment and courage and temperance and justice and also of piety, holiness and every virtue by which duties to God and men are discerned and rightly performed.’²⁸

McKay notes that he paints the same picture in his work *Special Laws*, in which the Jews would come together on the seventh day to read, to study, to discuss philosophy. Regarding the house of prayer situated across the Tiber in Rome itself, Philo documents how the Jews would meet in this house for instruction on the Sabbath. They would also collect money to be sent back to Jerusalem.²⁹ In his tract *Embassy* Philo again makes the point that in the meetings in the prayer-houses, the Jews did not engage in such things as carousing or drunkenness, but that they were “schools of temperance and justice” where the pious men would practiced virtue. They would also manage collections to be sent back to Jerusalem.³⁰

The impression from Philo is that of a school, an academy. The tone of the meeting was reflective, meditative and studious. What can be readily granted is that one of the key terms that was most likely originally used to designate what later came to be called the synagogues was “prayer house.” Yet this should not be construed to prove that those assembled in the prayer-houses were engaged in what could be, indeed, what should be termed ‘worship’ properly speaking. In Jewish thinking, prayer to Yahweh was universal. Prayer could be offered before Yahweh from anywhere. However, cultic worship could only be performed in the Jerusalem *cultus*. Indeed, McKay is ready to point out that there is immediate evidence at hand which demonstrates that the Jews in the Diaspora, and Philo himself, did not attribute cultic status to synagogue activities by pointing out that these synagogues or houses of prayer often contained images and statues of Roman rulers and imperial family. In Alexandria this seems to have been a collective Jewish response to charges that they were disloyal to Rome.³¹

²⁶Philo, *Moses* 2:21-22; cited from McKay, p., 65.

²⁷*Dreams*, 2:123-28; cited from McKay, p., 65.

²⁸Philo, *Moses*, 2:15-16; cited from McKay, p., 66. One problem here is that there is a good probability that Philo is exaggerating somewhat, as a true Greek academy also concerned itself with physical training, not just intellectual. Philo probably emphasised the academic connection as an apologetic tool.

²⁹McKay, p., 71.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p., 72.

³¹*Ibid.*, p., 66-7.

This point must not be lost here. It must be recalled how vehemently the Jews in Jerusalem opposed any attempt to place images or statues in the Temple precinct. Though the Jews did acknowledge a special sanctity to the prayer-houses,³² they did not consider them of such a sanctity that statues and images of Roman rulers were forbidden. Further evidence comes again from Philo who documents that on the walls of the prayer-houses were many tributes to the emperor, shields, gilded crowns, slabs and inscriptions by which the Jews acknowledged the Roman imperial family.³³

The most that can be gleaned from Sabbath-synagogue observances are that Jewish males at these times would engage in argumentation, read the OT scriptures, engage in interpretation, compose psalms and hymns in metre, and listen to homilies. These summary conclusions hold good for the Essenes as well. Philo says that:

...on the seventh day... [they] abstain from all other work and proceed to sacred spots which they call synagogues.³⁴ There, arranged in rows according to their ages, the younger below the elder, they sit decorously as befits the occasion with attentive ears. Then one takes the books and reads aloud and another of especial proficiency comes forward and expounds what is not understood. For the most part their philosophical study takes the form of allegory.³⁵

Josephus (38-100 AD)

When we turn now to Josephus we see that a similar scenario unfolds. On the Sabbath, the Jews, says Josephus, would abstain from all forms of work and other weekly activities. They would come together on the Sabbath and discuss such things as politics and law. For them, the day was sacred. Unfortunately, while Josephus is a good source of historical truth he was also a source of error. He follows the typical rabbinic fable that it was from Moses himself that came the tradition that every seventh day the Jews were to abstain from work and gather together in assemblies to listen to the readings in the law and thereby be instructed.³⁶ In fact, this is contrary to Mosaic command that a Jew was not to travel on the Sabbath but to stay in his own place of abode: "Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no one is to go out."³⁷ This led to such strictures that a man was not to walk more than a 1000 cubits on the Sabbath. The exception being if he is leading his animal to new pasture. Then he may travel 2000 cubits. I would suggest that this is hardly reflective of a mind-set that also allowed for alleged travel to the synagogue every seventh day in Mosaic times.³⁸ The historical inaccuracy aside, his descriptions of synagogue observance is in line with Philo and other sources.

There is also the instance of the political unrest and opposition to Josephus which was resolved in the synagogue in Tiberias. It seemed that some of the local Jews had come to the conclusion that they would be better off if their own citizens was in command of the Jews there. There was a gathering of Jews at a large synagogue and a heated discussion followed. This discussion continued, suspended for the Sabbath noon lunch, was resumed the next day, Sunday.

³²There are examples where neighbouring pagans would sacrifice a chicken or some animal outside the door of the prayer-house, to which the Jews considered a defilement of the building.

³³McKay, p., 70.

³⁴There is some evidence that in Jewish literature of this time, sometimes "synagogue" referred not so much to a physical structure, but to an assembly of people.

³⁵Philo *Every Good Man is Free* 81-83; cited in McKay, p., 75. Some of the more extreme Jews like the Essenes would even abstain from any sexual activity between husband and wife on this day. But this seems to have been a minority opinion amongst mainstream Jewish orthodoxy. The book of Jubilees was a radical rabbinic book that called for extreme Sabbath observance.

³⁶Josephus, *War* 2:147; cited from McKay.

³⁷Exodus 16:29

³⁸Other problems of this nature are also apparent. For example, there is no evidence of synagogue elders, or liturgy or prayers, prior to the second century BC; let alone the complete lack of any archeological evidence.

Josephus, on hearing of this, appeared at this meeting. Such was the rancor that the meeting was resumed again on the following Monday, again at the synagogue. This time, however, Josephus wore his breastplate, and wearing his sword with two of his most trusted bodyguards entered the synagogue and thereby won the day. To the Jews, the Synagogue took on the function of a civic-religious centre.

It is also from Josephus that we learn of the instances where local pagans persecuted the Jews and would often seek to defile the meeting house. In Caesaria, for example, one Sabbath morning the Jews found chicken entrails smattered all across a narrow pathway--the only access to the building. This was an affront to the Jews and prevented them from continuing in their Sabbath synagogue activities.³⁹ Regarding prayer, Josephus notes that the synagogue was also a place of prayer. His comments regarding prayer in the synagogue indicate that these prayers were seen as part of the set of ordinary daily prayers. In the home, Josephus remarks, that the Jews' only formal "rite" was the lighting of the lamps on the Friday, before the sun went down. Later in Judaism this was normally performed by the wife.

To conclude Philo and Josephus, there is no evidence that the Jews considered the Sabbath, even in the time of synagogue and prayer-house attendance, a time of worship, properly speaking. The prayer-house, or synagogue--the name that finally seems to have 'stuck'--was a place of instruction, prayer, debate, arguments, as well as commerce on occasion. It was seen as having a certain sanctity, but not the sanctity of a cultus. For it was a place one could set statues and images of the Roman imperial family.

I would argue, therefore, our Christian tradition arose out of a confluence of movements. There is no OT evidence that the Sabbath was seen as a time of collective communal worship. Scripture is completely silent on this. Nowhere is there any condemnation for anyone not attending a Sabbath *service*. However, by the time of the second century BC in the Diaspora, the practice of coming together in assemblies became popular. These early assemblies were called prayer-houses as prayer was most naturally an activity of the pious Jew. Later these prayer-houses became known as synagogues, as it seems their original functions were modified over time. What is important to remember here is that synagogue, as a place and time of instruction, prayer, and debating, does not have its direct warrant from Holy Scripture. It is something that evolved as an extra-biblical tradition in times of *extremis*. The Christian tradition, then, borrowed the synagogue idea but now Christians truly did offer 'worship' in their synagogues.

Synagogues

This leads us naturally into a brief consideration of the rise of synagogues.⁴⁰ Two things should be noted. Firstly, for the purposes of this paper it should be recognised that the amount of diversity of opinion is as wide as to the dating of the rise of synagogues as there are opinions. The problem that faces this author is the lack of the ability to verify the many and varied claims. What counts as evidence for one archeologist or historian is rejected by another. For example, a rectangular hole in the wall may be sufficient evidence that this was a place where the *Torah* scrolls were located and so this is evidence of a synagogue. But it seems that in the eyes of another equally qualified archeologist, a rectangular hole in the wall is just that, a rectangular hole in the wall. Secondly, aside from the archeological question is the issue of theological integrity as it relates to honest archeology and exegesis. I have heard it argued by one modern Reformed theologian that the regulative principle is right and sound because synagogues can be dated back to Lev 23:3. The basis for this claim is an attempted response to R.J. Gore's argument that given that Jesus attended the synagogues regularly and that there is no express biblical warrant for synagogues, therefore, Jesus did not think in terms of the strict regulative principle.⁴¹ In defence of the regulative principle, and in terms of justifying Jesus' actions in synagogues, some have claimed that synagogues are indeed warranted because Lev 23:3 authorises and institutes them.⁴²

³⁹McKay, p., 82.

⁴⁰It needs to be noted here that I am not an archeologist.

⁴¹See R.J. Gore, *Covenantal Worship* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), pp., 102-6.

⁴²I deal with some of the exegetical questions in another paper, so I will not labour that here.

This line of defensive reason was first posed by Gillespie at the Westminster debates. The problem is that he based his assertions on Jewish fancies. Why I speak of theological honesty is that today we who know much more in terms of Jewish archeology than those of the late 17th century, must respond honestly to the problem Gore poses. The answer is not to fabricate archeology or exegesis but to rethink the question and our answers to that question. This calls for intellectual and theological integrity. Like many sound doctrines of Scripture, the regulative principle is “bigger than us.” That is, it will survive even the problems honest men bring to us. I do not need to engage in historical fabrication to defend it. I may need to rehone it, nuance it, but I do not need to engage in exegetical card-tricks to rebut objections.

As we turn to the theme of revisionism and revisionists, I now draw attention to Howard C. Kee. In 1990, Kee penned the article: *The Transformation of the Synagogue After 70AD C.E.: Its Import for Early Christianity*.⁴³ More recently, Kee, along with Lynn H. Cohick, has followed up his research with the publication *The Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress*.⁴⁴ In this book, Kee presents his case in the light of the many objections to his arguments from his earlier article. And like McKay, Kee does go as far as to challenge the prevalence, development and existence of Jewish Synagogues in the time of Christ. Yet, as with the case of McKay, we do not have to follow Kee all the way down his road. We can take as fairly credible his historical scholarship regarding the developments of synagogues before the first century AD.

Turning now to history: There are three main and common assumptions or positions on the origins of the synagogue. The oldest and most common is that synagogues arose and were established in the time of Moses, if not by Moses himself. The principle source of this idea comes from the Targum Midrash. Today this position has no academic credibility let alone biblical warrant. The second assumption is that synagogues arose out of the *in extremis* situation of the Babylonian Captivity. This has been a more recent position. However, there are no references to synagogues in any the inter-testamental apocryphal writings. This position must read back, or *retroject*—as McKay argues—the claims of the Talmud and Mishnah into previous centuries. Kee makes the important point, which is perfectly sound, that in the 5th AD century, the Jewish synagogues in Israel underwent certain transformations so that they would reflect to some degree the worship *cultus* of the old Temple. But to then retroject that to synagogue observances to times centuries before Christ is unsound.⁴⁵

More recently, Kee notes:

An article little noticed by biblical scholars which offered a radical alternative to these views of the origins of the synagogue is by Solomon Zeitlin. In it he described the synagogue as initially a secular meeting house in post-exilic Judaism.⁴⁶

Kee notes that Zeitlin posited two key challenges, (1) that the synagogues arose out of post-exilic Judaism, and (2) that their original purpose was a sort of secular meeting house. Regarding Zeitlin, his thesis does need some modification. It would seem to me that given that the early “synagogues” were called prayer-houses (*proseuchai*) it is unlikely that the original function was a secular civic meeting house. More likely, they evolved the other way around. These prayer-houses became the local Jewish civic centre. Following these insights, other recent scholars, such as Martin Hengel have argued the case that synagogues arose within the context of Jews in the diaspora. Since then, the question has been about verifying this claim. Kee, being radically revisionist in his approach, wants to locate the origins of the synagogues as late as possible. Further, the question has become from whence first came the synagogues. And here, too, later scholarship seems to be leaning in the direction of Egypt.

⁴³ H.C.Kee, “Transformation of the Synagogue After 70AD C.E: Its Import for Early Christianity” in *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990) 1-24.

⁴⁴ H.C.Kee & L.H., Cohick, *The Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1999).

⁴⁵ Kee, *Transformation*, pp., 3-4. Hans Greeven’s article on *sunagoge* in Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* engages in the same sort of error. Leithart, too, does this, pp., 126-128.

⁴⁶ Kee, *Transformation*, p, 3.

Furthermore, while pre-dating Kee, Lester Grabbe, also assuming the late origin of the synagogue, asks the question: “Why should the synagogue have arisen in the Diaspora?”⁴⁷ He goes on to answer his own question. The extended quotation is instructive:

The standard answer is reasonable enough--that it was in the Jewish communities distant from Palestine that the need for a place of community worship was first acutely felt. But a further emphasis needs to be given to this point, which would also explain why it is only in the Greek period that we first meet indications of the existence of synagogues. This is the significant implication of being a temple-centred religion which focuses on a central temple cult. Most discussions of pre-exilic Judaism still seem to be heavily influenced by the Torah-centred Judaism of post-70 times. Even though the law was important to Judaism at least from the time of Ezra, nevertheless the social and psychological dynamics of a temple religion are quite different from those without a focal holy place. Of course, later Judaism evolved a variety of symbols and substitutes which continued to incorporate elements of temple worship, such as mythical views of Jerusalem, the various elements of the synagogue layout and the architecture evoking the temple, and a liturgy which fulfilled the same spiritual and psychological needs as the original sacrificial cult. Nevertheless, Torah-centred Judaism with the synagogue as its community centre is quite different in important aspects from the worship which had the temple as its domain.

Various factors are likely to have hindered any development of meeting places in the local communities. Even though the synagogue was only meant to complement temple worship, overtones of the old pre-exilic high places could not have been overlooked. There was also the known fact of rival temples such as those at Gerizim and Elephantine. With such considerations, as well as other forces of conservatism, it would hardly be surprising that it took several centuries for the Diaspora to fill a religious need which may have been felt fairly early. Thus the silence of our sources before about 250 [BC] should not be thought accidental or peculiar: There is no reason to think that the Jews would have felt an urgent need for something like the synagogue, contrary to the assumption of some who wish to argue for the early development of the institution.⁴⁸

This is a powerful insight from Grabbe. He is highlighting the error that certain assumptions about Judaism, which have their genesis in post-70 AD Judaism, which was Torah-based, which are then read back into the OT, and into pre-exilic Judaism. As I have been arguing, the emphasis in OT Judaism is that of a balance between *cultus* and *Torah*. After 70 AD, the emphasis shifted completely to *Torah*. That emphasis is then read back even into the times of the exodus, as if the Jews of that time had a felt-need to meet and discourse on the Torah, such that spiritual life without this activity in OT Exodus Judaism was unimaginable. I would argue that this line of reasoning--as posited by men like Gillespie--is because they are, in a sense, themselves, shaped by the post-70 AD emphasis on Torah. As Protestants, we live with an even greater self-consciousness of life apart from the localised worship around the Temple *cultus*.

In terms of archeology, some of the earliest structures generally accepted as evidence of early synagogues, have been found in Dura-Europos, Sardis, Miletus, Priene, Delos, Stobi and Ostia. Yet with the qualifier, Kee notes: “In only one case--Sardis--was the original structure other than a private residence. At Sardis the Jews met in what had been a large Gymnasium complex, which they remodeled for their own purposes.”⁴⁹ Further evidence of early synagogue buildings come from Delos, where a building has been excavated which has been dated as far back as the 2nd century BC. Kee again:

⁴⁷Lester L. Grabbe “Synagogues in Pre-70 Palestine” in *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (1988) , p., 403.

⁴⁸Ibid., p., 403. I think that there could be a good case for saying that the bulk of Israel’s sins in pre-exilic times were sins relating to the *cultus*, that is to attempts to substitute the true *cultus* with pagan ones.

⁴⁹Kee., p., 10.

The original building seems to have been a house, constructed in the second century [BC], and later converted into a formal meeting place perhaps by the middle of the first century [BC]... This conclusion about the architectural history of the site rests on careful, detailed analysis of the archeological remains.⁵⁰

Regarding inscriptions and papyri,⁵¹ the oldest papyri we have that speaks explicitly of the synagogue as a building dates from 291 AD from the Diocletian period. However, we do have some early inscriptions from the reign of Ptolemy (250 BC) which speak of the *proseuchai*.⁵² From Corinth there is an inscription in marble dated from 200 BC to 100 BC. A marble slab has been found at Mursa with a fragmentary inscription speaking of a *proseuche* there.⁵³ There is also the marble plaque found as far as Olba in the Black Sea. The dating of this inscription has not yet been secured. The script probably indicates that this was a Jewish *proseuche*. In Alexandria, an inscription was found on a slab dated to 37 BC which contains the reference to a *proseuche*. Another has been found at Schedia, Egypt, and the inscription dates as far back as 246-221 BC. Again at Xenephrysis, a marble rock inscription dates between 143 BC and 115 BC. At Nitrai, a similarly dated inscription reads: "For King Ptolemy and Queen Cleopatra, his sister and Queen Cleopatra his wife, the Jews of Nitrai [built?] the *proseuche* and the outbuildings." Two more from Athribis read: "For King Ptolemy and Queen Cleopatra, Ptolemy, son of Epikydos chief of police and the Jews of Athribis [built?] the *proseuche* to the Most High God." And another, describing an addition to the *proseuche* reads: "For King Ptolemy and Queen Cleopatra, and their children, Hermes and Philotera his wife and their children [built?] the portico on the *proseuche*."

In Jerusalem itself, there is the famous Theodotus inscription. This inscription, however, is subject to dispute. McKay accepts the evidence presented by Diessmann for a pre-70 AD dating. Kee, however, argues for a post-70 AD dating. The inscription reads:

Theodotus, son of Quentenos (Vettenos) priest and *archisynagogus*, son of an *archisynagogus*, grandson of an *archisynagogus*, built this synagogue for the reading of the law and for the teaching of the Commandments, and the hostel and the chambers and water fittings for the accommodation of those who [coming] from abroad have need of it, of which [synagogue] the foundations were laid by his fathers and by the Elders and Simonides.⁵⁴

This inscription was found at the bottom of a waste pile. The arguments for a pre-70 dating hinge on the assumption that after 70 AD, given the detestation of Jerusalem, it is highly unlikely that such a costly building would have been constructed. Kee challenges this assumption, claiming that there is no real evidence that such reconstruction did not happen after 70AD. The inscription's location is unhelpful, too, as there were no other datable markers within the waste. It seems, though, that the bulk of scholarship is against Kee.⁵⁵

To conclude this section, the evidence is against an early dating of synagogues. The suggestion that Moses founded the institution or that they were established in his time has no support in biblical or extra-biblical literature. The same holds good for the time of Ezra and the restoration from the Babylonian captivity. Here again the apocryphal literature is completely silent regarding synagogues or *proseuchai*. The evidence only arises in post-exilic Diaspora, and the location of the bulk of early evidence in Egypt suggests an Egyptian origin. If this is correct, synagogues were

⁵⁰Ibid., p., 11.

⁵¹It is not my intention here to be exhaustive, but to present a suggestive case for a later 250 BC dating for the earliest known synagogues.

⁵²Grabbe, p., 402.

⁵³McKay, pp., 215-231.

⁵⁴Cited from McKay, p., 223.

⁵⁵See for example, Pieter W. Van der Horst, "Was the Synagogue a Place of Sabbath Worship Before 70 AD" in *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue* ed., by Steven Fine (London: Routledge, 1999), pp 18 and following.

then imported into Palestine. Indeed, Isa 11:11 does speak of the Exiles living in Egypt, from which he would gather them. The most natural thought is that some of these Jews stayed, or that others later migrated there.

It seems best to recall what I have presented so far. My argument has been this. What we have inherited in terms of our “Sunday,” “Lord’s Day” or “Sabbath” worship has really come from multiple sources. The principle of one day in seven to be set apart to Yahweh is most evidently derived from the OT. The idea of Christians meeting and worshipping on Sunday, which still retains the “one day in seven” principle comes down to us from the NT. However, the very NT idea of collective ‘Sabbath’ gathering has distinct extra-biblical origins. There is no evidence that prior to the second century BC the Jews considered the Sabbath as a time of collective or communal “worship.” This idea only arose concurrently with the genesis of the synagogue in the Diaspora. Thus, around the second century BC, synagogues became prominent aspects of Jewish cultural, economic and spiritual life in the Diaspora. In these synagogues, Jews would meet--not only on the Sabbath--for religious instruction and dialogue. This then was imported into Palestine. Side by side with the Temple and the *cultus*, synagogues functioned as a complementary aspect of Jewish religious life, though never with the sense of a competing or alternative function. God, providentially used the rise of synagogues to establish a tradition and practice which he himself used for wise ends.⁵⁶ With these facts behind us, the question of what are the so-called *requisites* for biblical Lord’s day worship is now thrown wide open.

My intention will be to briefly survey some critiques of McKay’s claims.⁵⁷ There have been some critiques of Kee’s arguments, but these only secondarily concern us here. Responses, for the most part, come from reviews and not all of which present anything substantive. There is one essay with which I will interact last. Stefan C. Reif offers the minimal critique. He makes note of McKay’s definition of worship, citing page 3 of her monograph, then commenting:

The problem with McKay’s clearcut conclusion is that her narrow definition... of the kind of worship and worshipers that she regards as relevant to Jewish Sabbath liturgy makes it virtually inevitable. Surely the reading and interpretation of specific passages of scripture, whether from a Torah scroll in the form of a *shema*, in some ceremonial context, have a genuine claim to be regarded as worship. In addition, Jewish communal prayer was, and arguably still is, not a sacramental liturgy performed by a special representative as an essential act of formal communion between the worshiper and God but a set of individual prayers, benedictions, and psalms recited together by a group of Jews led by one of their number...⁵⁸

The immediate problem with these comments is that it is as if Reif has ignored the bulk of McKay’s polemic. That polemic is that there is simply no evidence in the OT or in the Inter-testamental literature that the Jews did either gather together on the Sabbath to do all that Reif speaks of. That is the point. The prayer of the *shema* came later and has to be read back into OT times. Further, for post-70 AD, it is conceded that synagogue worship took on an added *cultic* dimension. This is borne out by the fact that it was not until about the 7th century AD that the Jews even began to sing in medieval synagogues. In the end, I would argue that contrary to Reif, there is no problem. For he has not fully appreciated the import of the Temple *cultus* in pre-70 AD Judaism.

Lee M. Fields proffers a similar judgement challenging McKay’s definition of worship. Yet he does not offer any alternative as Reif does. He does make the point that McKay’s claims regarding Luke, that he read post-70 AD synagogue stories into his Gospel, lacks warrant and evidence.⁵⁹ To this I concur. All I need to say here is that this is an aspect of McKay’s argument that I have no need to *buy* into.

⁵⁶An analogy here would be the classic one: Roman roads and the spread of the gospel.

⁵⁷Unfortunately, I only found three reviews that either were in English or which said anything helpful.

⁵⁸Reif, Stefan, “Sabbath and Synagogue: the Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism: a review,” in *Journal of Theological Studies*, 46 (1995) pp., 611-2.

⁵⁹Lee M. Fields, “Sabbath and Synagogue: the Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism: a review,” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997) 136-137.

With more teeth, Shaye J. Cohen condemns McKay's book for being too long, monotonous and predictable (among other things).⁶⁰ He challenges her for not interacting with Martin Hengel's work on synagogues. He chides her for not accepting that the very name *proseuchai* means house of prayer, "an odd name if they were never used for prayer" he says. His main challenge is to McKay's treatment of difficult verses in Kings, where she merely juxtaposes one English commentator with another. He castigatingly says she seemingly has "competence in everything and an expertise in nothing." These are strong words. Yet strong words aside, Cohen, however, does not give any OT counter-examples to McKay's claims regarding alleged Sabbath worship. The issue of the Shunamite woman is problematic and therefore building a solid argument to the contrary would seem to be an uncertain endeavour.

An essay which presents a more sustained criticism of McKay and Kee⁶¹ is by Pieter W. Van der Horst, entitled, "Was the Synagogue a Place of Sabbath Worship Before 70 AD?"⁶² Horst first states McKay's definition of worship, which he says at first glance seems fair enough, but upon more thorough investigation it is deficient. But then he makes the concession:

In the first chapter McKay shows that, with regard to the Sabbath, the Hebrew Bible requires only that the Israelites do not work, but never that they praise God or pray to him on this day. This seems to me indisputable and does not call for further discussion.⁶³

This is telling. For it shows that at this point, even her most vigorous opponents have conceded to her this component of her argument. For my purposes, this is almost the single point I need to make. But Horst goes on. He even concedes that though in Inter-testamental literature, while there is an increasing emphasis on Sabbath keeping, there is no evidence of Sabbath communal worship.⁶⁴ But he says, we are on more dangerous ground when we come to the Essenes "who distinctly mention a heavenly or angelic Sabbath liturgy."⁶⁵ Readily do I concede that Horst is on firmer ground. But his challenge only affects McKay's wider thesis, and in no way bears upon my narrower thesis. Horst also cites the pseudo-Philonian *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* which contains a very free rendering of the decalogue: "You shall do no work on it [the Sabbath]... except to praise the Lord in the congregation of the elders and to glorify the Mighty One in the assembly of the aged."⁶⁶ Yet Horst does not supply a date or any real commentary on this passage. It is a reflection of Sabbath life at the time of the first century. It is highly doubtful that it can be used to reflect OT Sabbath observances. At best, it only confirms McKay's thesis that Sabbath 'worship' arose as synagogues arose. Again without any really critical evaluation, Horst cites Philo's mention of a senior Egyptian official who chastised the Jews for sitting in their houses of prayer as, "safely reading your books, explaining any obscure point" even if disaster is falling all around them.⁶⁷ Yet Horst in the same paragraph will concede that Philo never mentions any cultic activities in these Egyptian *proseuchai*, only that they engaged in instruction and study of the Torah. Further, Horst almost it seems grudgingly concedes that in the descriptions of synagogue practice there is no real evidence of it containing prayer and praise as a form of worshipful expression.⁶⁸

Concluding his essay, Horst offers four counter claims to refute McKay. His first point is that the very word *proseuche* denotes a house of prayer. Then he tries to stretch the meaning of *proseuche* to include prayers 'sung' but offers not a single piece of evidence for this.⁶⁹ Building on this, he argues that it is illogical that the Jews would have

⁶⁰Shaye J. Cohen, Sabbath and Synagogue: the Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism: a review," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996) 736-737.

⁶¹Perhaps it is worth noting that in the literature, I found no formal connection between McKay and Kee.

⁶²Horst, pp., 23-37.

⁶³Ibid., p., 24.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., p., 25.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp., 27-8.

⁶⁹Ibid., 31.

sung on other days when they met in the *proseuche* but that they did not sing on the Sabbath. His subsequent elaboration of this is beside the point. For the whole of his argument--apart from the suppositional aspect--speaks only to the practice of later synagogue Sabbath observance, and in no way impacts my narrow thesis. Further, that there may have been corporate prayer is not to imply that this was considered equally a form of cultic worship. Horst's real *angst* is with the attempt to locate formal synagogue services as only beginning post-70 AD as both McKay and Kee seek to do.

His second point has to do with the presence of the God-fearers in synagogue services, as described by Luke, indicates that the synagogue had taken on worship functions.⁷⁰ While this is true, it has no bearing on my thesis. His third argument is the argument from analogous continuity. He poses the point that what is more natural than that NT Christian worship 'grew out' from, as it were, the former Sabbath synagogue worship practices.⁷¹ In support of this, Horst highlights the presence of the synagogue *rulers* which was also the model adopted by later Christians. He says:

There is nothing to indicate that these gatherings constituted a radical innovation with regard to Jewish customs. So it seems almost certain that the weekly worship in earliest Christianity was a legacy of Judaism.⁷²

Two things need to be said to this. Even if this were true, it only impacts McKay's wider thesis, but not mine. It does seem to me that this move downplays the actual theological discontinuity between Jew and Christian. For the latter, the true Temple has already come, and he has now ascended to heaven. Hence, the Christian synagogue⁷³ service would have had a completely different theological dimension not analogous to Jewish synagogue services. I would argue that Horst is arguing again suppositionally. His argument for synagogue rulers to elders is perfectly sound, but to extrapolate from that as he does is less than secure.

His fourth argument is to emphasise the importance of the inscriptions.⁷⁴ He stresses that these indicate that the *proseuche* were more than civic centres. However, this is no problem for my narrow thesis. I would not deny that the *proseuchai* existed for such purposes as meeting the spiritual needs of the Jews in the Diaspora. However, there is undeniable evidence that these *proseuchai* were also used to meet the civic needs of these same Jews.

Horst's closing argument does have more substance. He stresses that since the days of Ezra, the Torah began to take on a much greater significance and emphasis in the spiritual life of Judaism. This emphasis gained momentum in the centuries leading up to the time of Christ. Thus the synagogues incorporated into their services the element of Torah devotion (my words), such that now reading and instruction from the Torah, and other rites associated with it, were seen as an act of "worship." Here he cites Reif's comments about the changing *form* of Judaic cultic worship (see above). In response, while that is definitely true post-70 AD, Horst does not provide any concrete evidence that this was true pre-70 AD. His thesis here is unlikely while the Temple stood. He seems to want to read back post-70 AD Judaic attitudes into pre-70 AD Judaism. Lastly, this criticism does not impact my more restrained thesis.

Polemic and Conclusion

I fully admit that the bulk of this paper has been a negative polemic against some prevailing popular views regarding the OT Sabbath. In this paper it is obvious that I am siding in part with two liberals who confess to have no evangelical regard for Scripture. And, too, McKay is especially radical in her overall theology. Yet, I also believe my thesis, narrowed and delineated, though borrowing heavily from McKay, is sustained. Of all McKay's critics, Horst seems to be the most sustained and cutting--Cohen notwithstanding. And yet even he concedes that as for her main polemic regarding the OT Sabbath keeping her argument cannot be gainsaid. Where Horst does seek to present his

⁷⁰Ibid., pp., 32-3.

⁷¹Ibid., p., 33.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³James 2:2.

⁷⁴Ibid., pp., 33-4.

dispute is in terms of second century synagogue practices. The case presented is sound and strong. There is a real need for those of us in the Reformed community to rethink our attitudes about Lord's Day observances. To reduce my objections to the bottom line it is against these two statements with which I strongly take issue:

That what time is vacant, between or after the solemn meetings of the congregation in public, be spent in reading, meditation, repetition of sermons; especially by calling their families to an account of what they have heard, and catechising of them, holy conferences, prayer for a blessing upon the public ordinances, singing of psalms, visiting the sick, relieving the poor, and such like duties of piety, charity, and mercy, accounting the Sabbath a delight.⁷⁵

And Shorter Catechism:

Q61: What is forbidden in the Fourth Commandment?

A61: The Fourth Commandment forbiddeth the omission or careless performance of the duties required, and *the profaning the day by idleness*, or doing that which is in itself sinful, or by unnecessary thoughts, words, or works, about our worldly employments or recreations.

I think we have here two overstatements. The heart of the regulative principle is that we, the church, in no way impose duties, obligations and burdens upon people which cannot be derived and sustained by sound exegesis. There is a real sense where I would cite the confessions own words against itself:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either *expressly* set down in Scripture, or *by good and necessary consequence* may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.⁷⁶

I believe we have to do some rethinking here, especially in contexts where there are some of the Reformed brethren seeking to press home complete conformity to the Westminsterian version of Sabbath observance. Who also, I would, argue, want to transform a day of rest into a day of spiritual labour. Here are the shades of that Puritan Neoplatonism in which the sanctified physicality of Sabbath resting is downplayed and exchanged for an emphasis on the spiritual as something being inherently more meaningful, worthy and godly. Hence, the shorter catechism's condemnation of idle resting, and its emphasis on *spiritual* activity. It would seem that to sleep on the Sabbath is a sin. Another aspect is the reality that men like Gillespie were reading back into the life of OT (even Levitical Judaism) a highly saturated Torah (i.e., Scripture) based spirituality that reflected his own assumptions. Almost paradoxically, this was harmonised with his inheritance in the Western Church the idea that the NT church service replaces the *cultus* of OT worship.⁷⁷

We have also moved away from the OT emphasis on feasting. Lev 23 is not about synagogues. No modern and/or critical commentary supports that. What Lev 23:3 does endorse is the idea that for the people of God, the Sabbath was to be a feast day before Yahweh, a feast day which was celebrated by ceasing all worldly labours, and feasting with family and visitors before the Lord. In Classic Roman times, the Jews were condemned for being lazy and drinkers because on the Sabbath they would drink a wine dedicated for this day. It would be displayed on the inner window sills of Jewish homes. Roman passers-by saw this and would often chide the Jews for being imbibers of wine when they should be out working. I would say we have missed something of the original intent of the Sabbath observance which the Jews in Roman times understood.

⁷⁵*The Directory of Public Worship*, p., 386. Note the extra-biblical assumption of *two* Sabbath day services.

⁷⁶WCF 1:6; [emph., mine].

⁷⁷This idea was mediated to him through Romanism.

From another perspective, Gore's rejoinder to the strict application of the regulative principle--at that point--is sound. The answer is not to lurch back to Gillespie as some are doing. That move can only entail a lack of exegetical, historical and theological integrity. The sudden and desperate recourse to the Targums, with all their historical fabrications, in defense of the regulative principle is a move less than sound. Surely the regulative principle can stand on better ground than that.⁷⁸

The results of my investigations have brought to a sharper focus how we as Reformed Christians exegete. Part of this is the uncritical acceptance of a version of Reformed theology that minimises the discontinuity between the Mosaic and New Covenants. This tradition tends to see Paul's criticisms of the law as criticisms of those who would abuse the law. Mark Carlberg has done some work in this area, following Kline. And it is my intuition at this point that they are heading in the right direction. I think that when the writer of Hebrews says, for example, "For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law,"⁷⁹ I suspect he is speaking of more than some aspects of the law being merely discarded, but that there is a change in the law-covenant, that framework which Moses mediated to the nation of Israel. What this means, exegetically, is that we can no longer simply pluck out a verse from the Mosaic covenantal framework and then, with equal lack of regard, dump it into the NT covenantal framework and then obligate NT Christians accordingly.⁸⁰

Pastorally, what drives me is the recognition that we must ever guard our hearts and the hearts of the people to whom we minister, such that we do not impose a modern legalism that entails Sabbath burdens. For then we truly make man for the Sabbath and not the Sabbath for man. Positively then, it seems that we need to be more judicious in what rules and regulations we predicate to faithful Sabbath keeping. As the NT, for example, is quite minimal on references regarding actual Lord's Day observances. There are only the more minimal references to assembling, the gathering of collections, and regulations about how we are to conduct ourselves in the public assembly. But after this, it is fairly silent. If my framework-covenantalism is right, then we must acknowledge, too, that there are no NT injunctions regarding working, or buying and selling on the Sabbath. Such regulations must be inferred from broader biblical principles.

I am more and more convinced that what was driving Puritan piety was a Neo-platonic understanding of man as person. This shaped Puritan spirituality, which therefore pressed them to emphasise the cognitive.⁸¹ Thus, non-cognitive activities like sleeping, feasting, and resting were down-played as sinful idleness, the devil's work. This had the dual effect of making a person activistic as to his cognitive contribution to Sabbath observances.⁸² Yet also it made a person a spectator in religious worship, as the full engagement of the emotions and will was forbidden. This to me highlights the difference between OT spirituality and Puritan piety. The OT, I would argue, and not the Puritans, should be our baseline for measuring and defining biblical piety. Thus one's Sabbath or Lord's Day observances is shaped by one's underlying assumptions about man as person.

A year ago I began to think about the idea of the Sabbath in the OT and how that compares with the teachings of the Puritan Sabbath. Something back then was telling me that the Puritans had gone too far, transforming rest into work. I believe my research supports these initial concerns and the conclusions of this paper. We need to be careful about imposing burdens--doing the very thing for which the Pharisees were condemned--on people which are not directly derivable from Sacred Scripture. Finally, I would argue that we need to rethink the sources for our assumptions,

⁷⁸Regarding Acts 15:21: "For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath." I see no reason why we must assume that James here meant to imply that he believed synagogues can be dated back to the time of Moses.

⁷⁹Hebrews 7:12

⁸⁰We Reformed also downplay the significance that the Sabbath was a sign of the Mosaic covenant, Ex 31:16.

⁸¹Recall Plato's fear and disdain for poets and musicians in his *Republic*

⁸²With a good measure of induced guilt.

epistemological and otherwise, of our ideas. Are we getting our conceptions of biblical piety and worship from the Bible, from the Old and New Testaments,⁸³ or from an extra-Biblical tradition?

⁸³To stress this, I am convinced more than ever that the OT does offer to us a good model of biblical piety, which is, however, under-rated by us moderns.

Bibliography

Articles:

Grabbe, L.L., "Synagogues in Pre-70 Palestine" in *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (1988), 401-10.

Kee, H.C. "Transformation of the Synagogue After 70AD C.E: Its Import for Early Christianity" in *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990) 1-24.

Leithart, P., "Synagogue or Temple," in *Westminster Theological Journal* 64 (2002) 119-133

Reviews:

Cohen, S.J., Sabbath and Synagogue: the Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism: a review," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996), 736-737.

Fields, L.M., "Sabbath and Synagogue: the Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism: a review," in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997), 136-137.

Reif, S., "Sabbath and Synagogue: the Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism: a Review," in *Journal of Theological Studies*, 46 (1995), 610-12.

Books:

Anderson, G.A., *Sacrifices and Offerings in Ancient Israel*, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1987.

Andreason, N-E., A., *The Old Testament Sabbath*, Tennessee: unpublished ms, 1971.

----- *Rest and Redemption*, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1978.

Binder, D.D., *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period*, Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1997.

Carroll, R.P., (ed) *Text as Pretext*, Sheffield: SAP, 1992.

Carson, D.A., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1982.

Cheyne, T.K., *Jewish Religious Life After the Exile*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1898.

Clements, R.E., *God and Temple*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965.

The Directory of Public Worship (1645), "Of the sanctification of the Lord's Day," bound with "The Confession of Faith," Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1988.

Eskenazi, T.C., *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, New York: Crossroads, 1991.

Fine, S., ed., *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue*, London: Routledge, 1999.

Gillespie, G., *A Dispute Against English Popish Ceremonies*, Dallas: Naphtali Press: 1993.

- Gore, R.J., *Covenantal Worship*, Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002.
- Gowan, D.E., *Bridge Between the Testaments*, Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1976.
- Haran, M., *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel*, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1985.
- Kee, H.C., & Cohick, L., *The Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress* Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1999.
- Klein, R.W., *Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, n.d.
- Millgram, A., *Jewish Worship*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971.
- Mckay, H., *Sabbath and Synagogue: The Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism*, Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1994.
- Strand, K.A., (ed), *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, Washington: Review and herald Publ., 1982.