



SABBATH AND SUNDAY IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANF *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*
NPNF *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*
MPL *Migne's Patrologia Latina*
MPG *Migne's Patrologia Graeca*

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victory for the church of Rome. The news concerning it must have made Sylvester I smile with great satisfaction, especially when he read this statement in the Roman emperor's epistolary decree to all the bishops of the churches of Christendom:

I myself have undertaken that this decision should meet with the approval of your Sagacities, in the hope that your Wisdoms will gladly admit *that practice which is observed at once in the city of Rome.*²

What would Pius I, Anicetus, and Victor I—those second-century Roman bishops who did not have the sword of the imperial power to compel men to submit to their demands—have thought if they could have risen from their graves to see and hear what Sylvester I did in A.D. 325? And what would Polycarp, Polycrates, and Irenaeus have said?

The largest Sunday-keeping religious organization on earth has preserved what purports to be Sylvester's thinking on the matter. That tradition says that a church council held in Rome in 325, not long after the Nicene Council, decreed:

It is commanded to all the bishops and presbyters to maintain the observance of the Pascha from the fourteenth [day of the] moon until the twenty-first, so that the Lord's day [Sunday] may shine forth.³

Bede, an English monk and ecclesiastical writer (672-735), in one of his treatises on chronology has said:

The week consists of seven days, and the eighth day is the same as the first, to which it returns, and on which the week begins again. The Gentiles gave to these [days] names from the planets, believing that from the sun they themselves had a spirit, from the moon a body, from Mars blood, from Mercury mind and speech, from Jupiter moderation, from Venus sensual desire, [and] from Saturn slowness [of movement]. But the holy Sylvester ordered that they be called *feriae* (calling the first "Lord's day"), imitating the Hebrews, who [named them] the "first from the Sabbath," the "second from the Sabbath," and so the rest by number.⁴

² *Ibid.*, Chaps. XIX and XX. For a discussion of the Council of Nicaea, see p. 267 ff. of this treatise.

³ Appendix to the writings of Sylvester in Mansi, *Concilia*, Vol. II, cols. 1081, 1082; see also *MPL*, Vol. VIII, col. 825.

⁴ Bede, *De Temporibus Liber* (A Book Concerning Times), Chap. IV ("Concerning the Week"), as translated by the writer from the Latin text in

Hadrian I, bishop of Rome (772-795), wrote a letter in 782 to Egila, a bishop in Spain, urging him to resist the efforts of heretics to lead him astray "concerning the sixth day [Friday] and the Sabbath because we say that these two days be given to fasting." He admonished him to hold firmly and without doubting "the rule to fast on the Sabbath" as it had been set forth in the words "of our doctors and holy father, namely of the blessed popes Sylvester and Innocent [and others]."⁵

Rabanus Maurus (776-856), abbot of Fulda and later archbishop of Mainz, Germany, was rated one of the greatest theologians of his age and probably the most cultured man of his time, and exceptionally learned in patristics. Besides, he was a zealous defender of the papacy and its teachings. In one of his works, he says,

Pope Sylvester instructed the clergy to keep the *feriae*. And, indeed, from an old custom he called the first day [of the week] the "Lord's [day]," on which the light was made in the beginning and also the resurrection of Christ is celebrated.⁶

Rabanus Maurus does not mean to say that Sylvester was the first man who referred to the days of the week as *feriae* or who first started the observance of Sunday among Christians. He means that, according to the testimony of Roman Catholic writers, Sylvester confirmed those practices and made them official insofar as his church was concerned. Hence Rabanus says elsewhere in his writings:

Pope Sylvester first among the Romans ordered that the names of the days [of the week], which they previously called after the name

MPL, Vol. XC, col. 281. Similar statements are found in these other works by Bede: *De Temporum Ratione* (Concerning the Computation of the Times), Chap. VIII ("Concerning the Week"), in *MPL*, Vol. XC, cols. 330, 331; *De Ratione Computi* (Concerning the Art of Computation), Chap. V ("Concerning the Week and the Seven Planets"), in *MPL*, Vol. XC, col. 584; and *De Divisionibus Temporum* (Concerning the Divisions of the Times), Chap. X ("Concerning the Ferae"), in *MPL*, Vol. XC, col. 658.

⁵ Hadrian I, Letter to Egila, in *MPL*, Vol. XCVIII, col. 335; G. D. Mansi, *Concilia*, Vol. XII, col. 808.

⁶ Rabanus Maurus, *Liber de Computo* (A Book Concerning Computation), Chap. XXVII ("Concerning Festivals"), as translated by the writer from the Latin text in *MPL*, Vol. CVII, col. 682.

of their gods, that is, [the day] of the Sun, [the day] of the Moon, [the day] of Mars, [the day] of Mercury, [the day] of Jupiter, [the day] of Venus, [the day] of Saturn, they should call *feriae* thereafter, that is, the first *feria*, the second *feria*, the third *feria*, the fourth *feria*, the fifth *feria*, the sixth *feria*, because that in the beginning of Genesis it is written that God said concerning each day: on the first, "Let there be light"; on the second, "Let there be a firmament"; on the third, "Let the earth bring forth verdure"; etc. But he [Sylvester] ordered [them] to call the Sabbath by the ancient term of the law, [to call] the first *feria* the "Lord's day," because on it the Lord rose [from the dead]. Moreover, the same pope decreed that the rest of the Sabbath should be transferred rather to the Lord's day [Sunday], in order that on that day we should rest from worldly works for the praise of God.⁷

Note particularly, he says that "the same pope [Sylvester I] decreed that the rest of the Sabbath should be transferred rather to the Lord's day [Sunday]."⁸ According to this statement, he was the first bishop to introduce the idea that the divinely appointed rest of the Sabbath day should be transferred to the first day of the week. This is significant, especially in view of the fact that it was during Sylvester's pontificate that the emperor of Rome issued the first civil laws compelling men to rest from secular labor on Sunday, and that Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, was the first theologian on record to present arguments, allegedly from the Scriptures, that Christ did transfer the rest of the Sabbath day to Sunday.

In the last year of his pontificate Nicholas I, bishop of Rome (858-867), wrote a letter to Hincmar, archbishop of Rheims, and the bishops in the dominion of Charles the Bald, saying that the Greeks found fault with the Latins among other reasons "because we fast on the Sabbaths."⁹ And he warned:

⁷ ———, *De Clericorum Institutione* (Concerning the Instruction of the Clergymen), Book II, Chap. XLVI, as translated by the writer from the Latin text in *MPL*, Vol. CVII, col. 361.

⁸ The wording in the Latin text reads: "*Statuit autem idem papa ut otium Sabbati magis in diem Dominicam transferretur, ut ea die a terrenis operibus ad laudandum Deum vacaremus.*"

⁹ Nicholas I, *Letter 152* (A.D. 867), to Archbishop Hincmar and the bishops in the dominion of Charles the Bald, as translated by the author from the Latin text in *MPL*, Vol. CXIX, col. 1155; also in G. D. Mansi, *Concilia*, Vol.

Since [the question] concerning the fast of the Sabbath has been discussed and debated enough, in the time of Sylvester the confessor of Christ, and [it has been] ordained that it should be observed by all, and no one after this will have presumed with audacity to come, or presume to mutter in the least, against that decree.¹⁰

Ratramnus (died after 868), a monk of Corbie, in France, who took a prominent part in the theological controversies of his day, was a contemporary of Pope Nicholas I. In defense of the papacy against Greek ecclesiastical writers who attacked it for fasting on the Sabbath, Ratramnus wrote (c. 868):

About which matter, just as Eusebius the historiographer wrote in the booklet *The Life of the Roman Pontiff Sylvester*¹¹ (Book 1, Chapter VIII), the Greeks met with the blessed Sylvester, raising against the Romans the question concerning the fast of the Sabbath, to whom he replied with these words: "It ought to suffice for the authority of our course, that we know that the apostles first regarded it. Nevertheless, since a reason is demanded by your charity, it is to be given: If every Lord's day [Sunday] is regarded on account of the resurrection of the Lord, it is right that every Sabbath day be given over to a fast on account of the burial, in order that those who weep with the apostles concerning the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, may deserve to rejoice with them concerning His resurrection." But the Greeks said that one [day] was the Sabbath of the burial, on which once in the year the fast is to be observed. To whom Pope Sylvester said: "If every

XV, col. 357.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, col. 1157.

¹¹ A footnote in *MPL*, Vol. CXXI, cols. 311, 312, mentions a manuscript of the library of St. German at Prato, in which that *Vita Sancti Silvestri* is found. According to various old writers, that *Life of St. Sylvester* was supposed to have been written by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, who was a contemporary of that Roman bishop during all of his episcopate and survived his death by about five years. Eusebius did write a treatise consisting of biographical sketches of the leading ecclesiastics of the first centuries, particularly of those who had suffered martyrdom (see his *Ecclesiastical History*, Book IV, Chap. XV, sec. 47; Book V, preface; Chap. IV, sec. 2; Chap. XXI, sec. 5). This work has been lost. Moreover, it was written prior to the writing of the *Ecclesiastical History*, which was finished not later than the early part of 325. Therefore, that collection of biographical sketches mentioned in the *Ecclesiastical History* by Eusebius would hardly have included the *Life of St. Sylvester*. It does not appear likely that that booklet was ever appended to the history. It may have been penned by some other person called Eusebius.