

CHAPTER 9

THE SABBATH FROM NEHEMIAH TO CHRIST

Great change in the Jewish people respecting idolatry and Sabbath-breaking after their return from Babylon - Decree of Antiochus Epiphanes against the Sabbath - Massacre of a thousand Sabbath-keepers in the wilderness - Similar massacre at Jerusalem - Decree of the Jewish elders relative to resisting attacks upon the Sabbath - Other martyrdoms - Victories of Judas Maccabeus - How Pompey captured Jerusalem - Teaching of the Jewish doctors respecting the Sabbath - State of the Sabbatic institution at the first advent of the Saviour.

The period of almost five centuries intervenes between the time of Nehemia and the commencement of the ministry of the Redeemer. During this time an extraordinary change came over the Jewish people. Previously, they had been to an alarming extent idolaters, and outbreaking violators of the Sabbath. But after their return from Babylon they were never guilty of idolatry to any extent, the chastisement of that captivity effecting a cure of this evil. [1](#) In like manner did they change their conduct relative to the Sabbath; and during this period they loaded the Sabbatic institution with the most burdensome and rigorous ordinances. A brief survey of this period must suffice. Under the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, the king of Syria, B.C. 170, the Jews were greatly oppressed.

"King Antiochus wrote to his whole kingdom, that all should be one people, and every one should leave his laws: so all the heathen agreed according to the commandment of the king. Yea, many also of the Israelites consented to his religion, and sacrificed unto idols, and profaned the Sabbath."[2](#)

The greater part of the Hebrews remained faithful to God, and, as a consequence, were obliged to flee for their lives. Thus the historian continues:

"Then many that sought after justice and judgment went down into the wilderness, to dwell there: both they, and their children, and their wives, and their cattle; because afflictions increased sore upon them. Now when it was told the king's servants, and the host that was at Jerusalem, in the city of David, that certain men, who had broken the king's commandment, were gone down into the secret places in the wilderness, they pursued after them a great number, and having overtaken them, they camped against them, and made war against them on the Sabbath day. And they said unto them, Let that which ye have done hitherto suffice; come forth, and do according to the commandment of the king, and ye shall live. But they said, We will not come forth, neither will we do the king's commandment, to profane the Sabbath day. So then they gave them the battle with all speed. Howbeit they answered them not, neither cast they a stone at them, nor stopped the places where they lay hid. But said, Let us die all in our innocency: heaven and earth shall testify for us, that ye put us to death wrongfully. So they rose up against them in battle on the Sabbath, and they slew them, with their wives and children, and their cattle, to the number of a thousand people."[3](#)

In Jerusalem itself a like massacre took place. King Antiochus sent Appollonius with an army of twenty-two

thousand,

"Who, coming to Jerusalem, and pretending peace, did forbear till the holy day of the Sabbath, when taking the Jews keeping holy day, he commanded his men to arm themselves. And so he slew all them that were gone to the celebrating of the Sabbath, and running through the city with weapons, slew great multitudes."[4](#)

In view of these dreadful acts of slaughter, Mattathias, "an honorable and great man," the father of Judas Maccabeus, with his friends decreed thus:

"Whosoever shall come to make battle with us on the Sabbath day we will fight against him; neither will we die all, as our brethren that were murdered in the secret places."[5](#)

Yet were some martyred after this for observing the Sabbath. Thus we read:

"And others, that had run together into caves near by, to keep the Sabbath day secretly, being discovered to Philip, were all burnt together, because they made a conscience to help themselves for the honor of the most sacred day."[6](#)

After this, Judas Maccabeus did great exploits in defense of the Hebrews, and in resisting the dreadful oppression of the Syrian government. Of one of these battles we read:

"When he had given them this watchword, The help of God, himself leading the first band, he joined battle with Nicanor. And by the help of the Almighty they slew above nine thousand of their enemies, and wounded and maimed the most part of Nicanor's host, and so put all to flight; and took their money that came to buy them, and pursued them far; but lacking time, they returned: for it was the day before the Sabbath, and therefore they would no longer pursue them. So when they had gathered their armor together, and spoiled their enemies, they occupied themselves about the Sabbath, yielding exceeding praise and thanks to the Lord, who had preserved them unto that day, which was the beginning of mercy distilling upon them. And after the Sabbath, when they had given part of the spoils to the maimed, and the widows, and orphans, the residue they divided among themselves and their servants."[7](#)

After this the Hebrews being attacked upon the Sabbath by their enemies, defeated them with much slaughter.[8](#)

About B.C. 63, Jerusalem was besieged and taken by Pompey, the general of the Romans. To do this, it was necessary to fill an immense ditch, and to raise against the city a bank on which to place the engines of assault. Thus Josephus relates the event:

"And had it not been our practice, from the days of our forefathers, to rest on the seventh day, this bank could never have been perfected, by reason of the opposition the Jews would have made; for though our law gives us leave then to defend ourselves against those that begin to fight with us, and assault us, yet does it not permit us to meddle with our enemies while they do anything else. Which thing when the Romans understood, on those days which we call Sabbaths, they threw nothing at the Jews, nor came to any pitched battle with them, but raised up their earthen banks, and brought their engines into such forwardness, that they might do execution the next days."[9](#)

From this it is seen that Pompey carefully refrained from any attack upon the Jews on each Sabbath during the

siege, but spent that day in filling the ditch and raising the bank, that he might attack them on the day following each Sabbath, that is, upon Sunday. Josephus further relates that the priests were not at all hindered from their sacred ministrations by the stones thrown among them from the engines of Pompey, even "if any melancholy accident happened;" and that when the city was taken and the enemy fell upon them, and cut the throats of those that were in the temples, yet did not the priests run away or desist from the offering of the accustomed sacrifices.

These quotations from Jewish history are sufficient to indicate the extraordinary change that came over that people concerning the Sabbath, after the Babylonish captivity. A brief view of the teaching of the Jewish doctors respecting the Sabbath at the time when our Lord began his ministry will conclude this chapter:

"They enumerated about forty primary works, which they said were forbidden to be done on the Sabbath. Under each of these were numerous secondary works, which they said were also forbidden. . . . Among the primary works which were forbidden, were ploughing, sowing, reaping, winnowing, cleaning, grinding, etc. Under the head of grinding, was included the breaking or dividing of things which were before united. . . . Another of their traditions was, that, as threshing on the Sabbath was forbidden, the bruising of things, which was a species of threshing, was also forbidden. Of course, it was violation of the Sabbath to walk on green grass, for that would bruise or thresh it. So, as a man might not hunt on the Sabbath, he might not catch a flea; for that was a species of hunting. As a man might not carry a burden on the Sabbath, he might not carry water to a thirsty animal, for that was a species of burden; but he might pour water into a trough, and lead the animal to it. . . . Yet should a sheep fall into a pit, they would readily lift him out, and bear him to a place of safety. . . . They said a man might minister to the sick for purpose of relieving their distress, but not for the purpose of healing their diseases. He might put a covering on a diseased eye, or anoint it with eye-salve for the purpose of easing the pain, but not to cure the eye."¹⁰

Such was the remarkable change in the conduct of the Jewish people towards the Sabbath; and such was the teaching of their doctors respecting it. The most merciful institution of God for mankind had become a source of distress; that which God ordained as a delight and a source of refreshment had become a yoke of bondage; the Sabbath, made for man in paradise, was now a most oppressive and burdensome institution. It was time that God should interfere. Next upon the scene of action appears the Lord of the Sabbath.

1 Speaking of the Babylonish captivity, in his note on Eze.23:48, Dr. Clarke says: "From that time to the present day the Jews never relapsed into idolatry." <[Return](#)>

2 1 Mac.1:41-43. <[Return](#)>

3 1 Mac.2:20-38; Josephus' Antiquities, b. xii. chap. vi. <[Return](#)>

4 2Mac.5:25,26. <[Return](#)>

5 1Mac.2:41. <[Return](#)>

6 2Mac.6:11. <[Return](#)>

7 2Mac.8:23-28. <[Return](#)>

8 1Mac.9:43-49; Josephus Antiquities, b. xiii. chap.. i.; 2Mac.15. <[Return](#)>

9 Antiquities of the Jews, b. xiv. chap. iv. Here we call attention to one of those historical frauds by which Sunday is shown to be the Sabbath. Dr. Justin Edwards states this case thus: "Pompey, the Roman general, knowing this, when besieging Jerusalem, would not attack them on the Sabbath; but spent the day in constructing his works, and preparing to attack them on Monday, and in a manner that they could not withstand, and so he took the city." - Sabbath Manual, p. 216. That is to say, the next day after the Sabbath was Monday, and of course Sunday was the Sabbath! Yet Dr. E. well knew that in Pompey's time, 63 years before Christ, Saturday was the only weekly Sabbath, and that Sunday and not Monday was the day of attack. <[Return](#)>

10 Sabbath Manual of the American Tract Society, pp. 214, 215. <[Return](#)>

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