

# **Constantine and the Sabbath**

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# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	6
Constantine’s Vision in 312.....	8
Constantine’s Sunday Laws.....	21
The Council of Nicaea.....	28
Did Constantine Change the Sabbath?.....	34
Breakthrough Discovery on Constantine and the Sabbath.....	38
Conclusion .....	44
Appendix A: Coins From Constantine’s Reign.....	49
Appendix B: Other Roman Celebrations .....	51
Appendix C: The Council of Laodicea .....	53
Appendix D: Sabbath Keeping in 300/400 AD.....	55
Bibliography .....	61
More Materials .....	69

## Introduction

One of the most popular, intriguing, and yet confusing subjects regarding Sabbath history is the role of Roman Emperor Constantine. After reading many books, academic articles, and encyclopedia articles on this subject, I have found that there is a variety of views on this topic, some of which are totally contradictory. Some people claim that Constantine banned Sabbath observance. Others claim he put Christians to death over its practice. Others claim that no such thing happened. How do we settle discrepancies concerning this topic?

When we undertake a scholarly review of a subject, primary source material can greatly help us. A primary source is a person or object that records historical facts about the period being examined. This includes people who lived in the time we are studying, inscriptions, coins, and other documentation.

If someone wrote a book or article and claimed that “Constantine changed the Sabbath” or “Constantine never changed the Sabbath” then that claim’s validity can be considered only if it is supported by primary source evidence. Otherwise, the claim is speculative.

From primary sources, we can draw a degree of certainty about events that happened in a period. Theoretically, the more primary sources we discover, the greater degree of certainty that can be reached about events (but new evidence can always update our understanding). As it pertains to Constantine and the Sabbath, the primary sources are broken down into three categories: 1) contemporary writers who recorded events important to his life; 2) the laws of the time; 3) and preserved documentation and writings about ancient church councils.

Other history and archaeology can be brought in to elaborate on certain details pertaining to Constantine. We want to attempt, as

much as possible, to give a holistic perspective on his policy towards the Sabbath. This includes looking at movements, fads, and traditions that could have influenced and motivated Constantine to act as he did. Doing so will enable us to gain greater clarity on the subject and unearth major discoveries.

Did Constantine change the Sabbath? Did he pass a law to prohibit people from keeping it? Did he work with the Church of Rome to pressure people to observe Sunday?

In this book, we will sort out the confusion and provide greater clarity on Constantine's reign. This research will also unearth new, exciting paradigms for this subject.

# Chapter 1

## Constantine's Vision in 312

Before we delve into Constantine's relationship to the seventh-day Sabbath, it is vitally important for us consider his relationship to Christianity. It has long been claimed in Encyclopedias and other academic works that Constantine was the first Christian Emperor. On the other hand, there are those who deny he ever converted. The answer to this quandary is important for our discussion. If he converted to Christianity, then we have a potential motivation for his actions concerning the Sabbath. If he did not, then there must be alternative motivations for his actions.

Those who hold that Constantine was a Christian often point to one major event either as his moment of conversion or the beginning of that process: a vision he had in 312 AD. In this chapter, we will the review historical evidence surrounding this event.

In 312, Constantine fought Maxentius for control of the Western Roman Empire at a battle commonly called the battle of Milvian Bridge. Just before it, two contemporary witnesses claim that he had an experience that changed his life and the course of history. We will briefly review them.

The first account was written by Lactantius, who was the personal tutor of Constantine's son, Crispus. He wrote just a few years after the victory. He claimed that Constantine had a dream with a heavenly sign where he was instructed to put the Greek letters *chi* (which looks like an X) and *rho* (which looks like a P) on the shields of his soldiers. Lactantius claimed that these letters were shorthand for Christ. He attributed Constantine's victory in part to the use of these letters in the battle.

He wrote: "At length Constantine, with steady courage and a mind prepared for every event, led his whole forces to the neighbourhood of Rome, and encamped them opposite to the Milvian bridge. The anniversary of the reign of Maxentius approached, that is, the sixth of the kalends of November, and the fifth year of his reign was drawing to an end...Constantine was directed in a dream to cause the heavenly sign to be delineated on the shields



of his soldiers, and so to proceed to battle. He did as he had been commanded, and he marked on their shields the letter X, with a perpendicular line drawn through it and turned round thus at the top, being the cipher of Christ. Having this sign (**XP**), his troops stood to arms..." (*Of the Manner In Which the Persecutors Died*, 44).

The second account comes from Eusebius, an early Christian historian. The events leading up to the vision and those just after it are recorded in his work *The Life of Constantine* (1.27-31). This work is the only known biography about Constantine; it was composed in about 330. His account of these events is rather lengthy, so I will provide an excerpt followed by a summary.

"...Reflecting on this, and well weighing the fact that they who had trusted in many gods had also fallen by manifold forms of death, without leaving behind them either family or offspring, stock, name, or memorial among men: while the God of his father had given to him, on the other hand, manifestations of his power and very many tokens: and considering farther that those who had already taken arms against the tyrant, and had marched to the battlefield under the protection of a multitude of gods, had met with a dishonorable end (for one of them had shamefully retreated from the contest without a blow, and the other, being slain in the midst of his own troops, became, as it were, the mere sport of death ); reviewing, I say, all these considerations, he judged it to be folly indeed to join in the idle worship of those who were no gods, and, after such convincing evidence, to err from the truth; and therefore felt it incumbent on him to honor his father's God alone..."

"...Accordingly he called on him with earnest prayer and supplications that he would reveal to him who he was, and stretch forth his right hand to help him in his present difficulties. And while he was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven, the account of which it might have been hard to believe had it been related by any other person. **But since the victorious emperor himself long afterwards declared it to the writer of this history**, when he was honored with his acquaintance and society, and confirmed his statement by an oath, who could hesitate to accredit the relation, especially since the testimony of after-time has established its truth? He said that

about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, 'Conquer by this'. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle..."

"...He said, moreover, that he doubted within himself what the import of this apparition could be. And while he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning, night suddenly came on; then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies..."

"...At dawn of day he arose, and communicated the marvel to his friends: and then, calling together the workers in gold and precious stones, he sat in the midst of them, and described to them the figure of the sign he had seen, bidding them represent it in gold and precious stones. And this representation I myself have had an opportunity of seeing..."

"...Now it was made in the following manner. A long spear, overlaid with gold, formed the figure of the cross by means of a transverse bar laid over it. On the top of the whole was fixed a wreath of gold and precious stones; and within this, the symbol of the Saviour's name, two letters indicating the name of Christ by means of its initial characters, the letter P (RHO) being intersected by X (CHI) in its centre: and these letters the emperor was in the habit of wearing on his helmet at a later period. From the cross-bar of the spear was suspended a cloth, a royal piece, covered with a profuse embroidery of most brilliant precious stones; and which, being also richly interlaced with gold, presented an indescribable degree of beauty to the beholder. This banner was of a square form, and the upright staff, whose lower section was of great length, bore a golden half-length portrait of the pious emperor and his children on its upper part, beneath the trophy of the cross, and immediately above the embroidered banner..." (idem, 1.27-31).

Before the battle with Maxentius, Eusebius claimed that Constantine pondered the failure of past emperors. The narrative goes on

to say that Constantine chose to dedicate himself to the deity of his father. Sometime before the battle, Eusebius wrote that the future emperor saw a cross of light appear above the sun (about noon that day). It had an inscription attached to it: “Conquer by this.”

At first, the emperor did not understand the vision. Eusebius then alleged that Christ came to Constantine at night and instructed him to make a cross with a vertical spear, a gold bar horizontally across it and precious stones adorning it. Additionally, the Greek letters *chi-rho* were to be placed on it. He claimed that Constantine used this symbol in his armies.

When we compare the accounts of Lactantius and Eusebius, we find significant differences and some similarities.

The first problem is that the accounts do not completely agree. Lactantius said that Constantine had a dream with the *chi-rho* alone, whereas Eusebius wrote that he had a daytime vision with an elaborate cross above the sun. He was then informed about the meaning in a dream.

The second problem with both stories is the use of the chi-rho. The use of this symbol alone cannot be the definite confirmation of any conversion experience. These letters were used together as a symbol many centuries before Christianity. The emperor Ptolemy III, who ruled Egypt from 246-225 BC, minted the Chi-Rho with the likeness of Zeus on some of his coins. An eagle with chi-rho between its legs is depicted on the opposite side. A sample of this coin is listed below:



The chi-rho was also used by the ancients to denote something excellent and was even used as a marker for important passages in manuscripts (Mitchell, pp 34-35).

The third problem is found in another work by Eusebius. He initially wrote about Constantine's victory over Maxentius in the 320s in a work titled *Church History*. In it, he never mentioned a vision, dream, or any similar experience. If this experience was such an essential part of Constantine's life and the battle, then why did he leave it out?

The fourth problem is similar. When Eusebius finally recorded Constantine's vision almost 20 years after the event, he said that Constantine **only told him** about the vision. He further confessed that the emperor conveyed it long after the events occurred. "But since the victorious emperor himself **long afterwards declared it to the writer of this history...**" (ibid, 1.28; emphasis mine). If Constantine **only** told him long afterwards, then why would Lactantius have written a version of the events two decades before?

The fifth problem, also found in Eusebius' version, is the mention that Constantine chose the deity that his father worshiped: "...therefore **felt it incumbent on him to honor his father's God alone**" (ibid, 1.28; emphasis mine). The author implies that Constantine's father worshiped the Christian God. What deity did his father actually adore?

Historical and archaeological evidence shows that Constantine's father, Constantine Chlorus, was not known to worship or honor any one deity. The coins he minted just before his death depicted the god Jupiter, the deified Hercules, and the god Genius (Sear, pp 233-264). These were all common coin issues. More evidence of his religious allegiance is found in a panegyric from his reign. A panegyric is formal speech given to honor the virtue of a person and exalt praises for him/her.

In one of these speeches, Jupiter and Hercules were proclaimed as patron deities for the government; Chlorus was described as divine (Nixon and Rodgers, pp 113-114). Right after his death, a panegyric was delivered that praised him for being "divine" and described him as being taken to heaven by the chariot of Sol, the

sun god (ibid, p 209). This evidence strongly conflicts with the notion that Chlorus worshiped the God of the Bible or any one deity.

The sixth problem is the use of the cross. This symbol was not commonly used by the earliest Christians; it pre-dates Jesus for hundreds, if not thousands of years. It is originally derived from polytheistic worship in Assyria and Babylon (for general information see: Encyclopedia Britannica 11<sup>th</sup> edition article “Cross”; for Assyrian reference, see: Layard’s Nineveh Inscriptions *plate 59*; for cross usage with the god Tammuz, see the alabaster relief in the *Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany*). The use of this symbol was controversial in the early church. Tertullian defended cross usage among Christians from the accusation of pagan worship (see his work *Against the Nations*, 1.12).

Also consider the opulence with which the cross was adorned in Eusebius’ version. The cross was a symbol of Christ’s suffering. It was made of wood. It is neither suggested to be replicated nor adorned in the New Testament. The method in which it was embellished in the vision is more reminiscent of polytheistic idols – which were sometimes created with gold.

Lastly, we must consider another contemporary account of the emperor’s life from a non-Christian source. In the year 310, about two years before the vision at the battle of Milvan Bridge, an orator delivered a panegyric before Constantine. This speech alleged that Constantine had a vision of himself as Apollo with the goddess Victory holding a wreath in her hand. The speaker then inferred that, like Apollo, Constantine would one day rule the whole world (meaning the whole Roman world). Constantine then gave gifts and riches to the temple of this deity (Nixon and Rodgers, pp 249-250). Apollo was the god of sun and light.

As we consider the three accounts, Lactantius, Eusebius, and the panegyric, it seems that Constantine had a reputation for having visions. Which vision did Constantine really see before the battle with Maxentius? Did Lactantius and Eusebius edit his real experience? Did Constantine even have a vision? It is entirely possible that Constantine could have seen a cross and *chi-rho* but attributed the vision to the sun god (Apollo or Sol Invictus).

While we cannot know the heart of someone, Jesus instructed us to look at a person's fruit (Matthew 7:16). If Constantine had an experience with Jesus that changed his life and these symbols were part of it, then his behavior would bear witness to it. We would expect to see these symbols prominently displayed with Christian meaning attached to them.

Constantine won the battle with Maxentius and became ruler over the Western Empire. An inscription dating to the next year was dedicated to Mithras, which was connected with sun worship (Vermaseren, p 508; CIMRM no. 523).

Within a few years of Milvan Bridge, he dedicated a special commemorative Arch to honor the victory over Maxentius – it is commonly called the Arch of Constantine. No symbols of the cross or *chi-rho* were carved anywhere on the arch. No honor is given to Jesus Christ or the God of the Bible. The inscription on top of it does not honor them for the triumph. However, there are carved medallions on each end. One end depicts Apollo (or Sol Invictus), the sun god being drawn about by the quadriga. The other end depicts Diana, in honor of the moon (Frothingham, pp 368-389; Platner, pp 36-38). Recall from earlier that Constantine's father was described in a speech as being taken to heaven by Sol and the quadriga. Sol was connected to the worship of Mithras.

**Below, we have a picture of the Sol and quadriga medallion from this arch.**



Image is in the Public Domain

Following the example of previous emperors, Constantine minted coins of Sol Invictus early in his political career (as early as about 307). These continued far beyond the date of 312, perhaps being made as late as 325/326 AD. Over one-hundred coin types with Sol Invictus were created during his reign. Other gods were also depicted on his coins: The god Mars was inscribed on coins from 307-317; Jupiter was depicted on coins from 306-324; and the goddess Victory was depicted on coins throughout his reign (information on coins in this paragraph taken from Sear, pp 363-491).

To view more coins from the Constantinian era, see **Appendix A** in this work.

One coin from Constantine's reign may be instructive about his view of any previous vision. In 316, about four years after his victory, he had a coin made with Sol Invictus and the symbol on this cross on it. This coin is depicted at the bottom of this page.

On one side of the coin, you can see Constantine's face. The inscription reads **IMP** (short for Imperator) **Constantianus PF** (short for Pius and Felix, or Pious and Happy) **AVG** or Augustus. On the other side is the sun deity, Sol Invictus, with the inscription: **SOL INVICTO COMITI**, which means "Sol Invictus, my companion." There is also a cross symbol beside the sun deity. He is holding the world in his hands—which sends the message that Constantine may viewed Sol as having the ability to give the world to him.



Two types of Sol Invictus coinage issued between 320 and 325 are also instructive about his reign. One depicted Sol giving Constantine the world (with the goddess victory standing on top of the world). The second depicted Sol crowning Constantine Emperor. During this period, he defeated his brother-in-law Licinius to become sole ruler of the Roman world. Could these coins depict what Constantine viewed as the fulfillment of the panegyric from years before? Possibly.

He did eventually create coins and medallions with the *chi-rho* symbol – but there is no indication that he clearly intended or understood this to be a Christian symbol. One of the coins we previously discussed, the Ptolemy III coin from 246-225 BC, depicted Zeus on one side and the *chi-rho* on the other side. Zeus was named Jupiter in the Roman pantheon. Jupiter also happens to be another common coin issue from Constantine’s reign (see **Appendix A** for two examples).

It seems clear that Constantine’s devotion to Sol and other gods were the pre-imminent religious influences in his life. His actions before and after Milvian Bridge seem like one bridge connecting a consistent religious ethic. Christian influence on these events seems absent from his perspective. Eusebius and Lactantius reinterpreted certain events, most likely from his past, and imposed Christian meaning on them. But his devotion to other gods did not stop with the events just after Milvian Bridge.

In 330 AD, Constantine dedicated Constantinople, which he viewed as the second Rome, using pagan and Christian customs. He even placed a chariot to the sun god in the city. Sozomen (mid-fifth century) and Zosimus (late fifth/early sixth century) wrote about the city’s dedication. We have quotes from them below:

“The brazen images which were skillfully wrought were carried to the city, named after the emperor, and placed there as objects of embellishment, where they may still be seen in public places, as in the streets, the hippodrome, and the palaces. Amongst them was the statue of Apollo which was in the seat of the oracle of the Pythoness, and likewise the statues of the Muses from Helicon, the tripods from Delphos, and the much-extolled Pan” (Sozomen, *Church History*, 2.5).



“Having thus enlarged the city, he built a palace little inferior to that of Rome, and very much embellished the hippodrome, or horse-course, taking into it the temple of Castor and Pollux, whose statues are still standing in the porticos of the hippodrome. He placed on one side of it the tripod that belonged to the Delphian Apollo, on which stood an image of the deity...he erected two temples; in one of which was placed the statue of Rhea, the mother of the gods...In the other temple he placed the statue of the Fortune of Rome. He afterwards built convenient dwellings for the senators who followed him from Rome...” (Zosimus, *History*, 2.31.1-3).

Another way that Roman Emperors venerated the sun was through the chariot races in the circus maximus. As discussed in another work, *How Did Sunday Become the First Day of the Week?*, we discussed how this monumental structure was devoted to the sun (idem, pp 39-40). The early Christian writer Tertullian recorded this detail as well; he rebuked Christians for going to the event because of the pagan images which stood in it (*De Spectaculis*, 7-8). The circus maximus continued to have chariot races under Constantine and decades afterwards.

The Calendar Philocali, which dates to the 350s, recorded the days throughout the year in which chariot races were held in the circus maximus. 60 days throughout the year were marked for circus races. Some days had more races than others. The second and third greatest number of races were dedicated solely to the sun (36 races to the sun were held on Oct. 22 and 30 races to Sol Invictus on Dec. 25). Obviously, these celebrations were established years beforehand. Constantine allowed these chariot races to continue during his reign. Information on the Calendar Philocali taken from: *Inscriptiones Latinae Antiquissimae Ad C Caesaris Mortem*. Edited by Theodorus Mommsen. Berlin, 1863. pp 332-358. Also found in: Migne, J.P. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*. Series Latina. vol. 13. Paris, 1845. pp 675-687.

Constantine also had an Egyptian obelisk, which was dedicated to the sun, brought down the Nile so that it could be placed in Rome. He died before it was transferred, but his son Constantius completed the task in 357. As to be expected, it was placed in

the circus maximus (Platner, pp 367-368). Even later in life, Constantine made coins which depicted him as the sun god. Among the coins made at the time of his death is one declaring him as divine and depicting him as being taken up to heaven by the quadriga of Sol. This is reminiscent of the panegyric given after his father's death many years prior.

The evidence suggests that Constantine interpreted the vision to mean that the sun god gave him the vision and the victory.

### **The Edict of Milan**

After his victory to become Western Roman Emperor, Constantine and his brother-in-law Licinius issued a joined decree called the Edict of Milan in 313. It was considered a formal end to the Great Persecution, which started 10 years earlier. Some people have used this edict as another proof to declare that Constantine was the first Christian emperor. We have an excerpt from this edict below:

“Copy of the imperial decrees translated from the Roman tongue ‘Perceiving long ago that religious liberty ought not to be denied, but that it ought to be granted to the judgment and desire of **each individual to perform his religious duties according to his own choice**, we had given orders that **every man, Christian as well as others, should preserve the faith of his own sect and religion**....When I, Constantine Augustus, and I, Licinius Augustus, came under favorable auspices to Milan and took under consideration everything which pertained to the common good and prosperity, we resolved among other things, or rather first of all, to make such decrees as seemed in many respects for the benefit of **every one; namely, such as should preserve reverence and piety toward the deity. We resolved, that is, to grant both to the Christians and to all men freedom to follow the religion which they choose, that whatever heavenly divinity exists may be propitious to us and to all that live under our government...**”

“...We have, therefore, determined, with sound and upright purpose, **that liberty is to be denied to no one, to choose and to follow the religious observances of the Christians, but that to each one freedom is to be given to devote his mind to that religion which he may think adapted to himself**, in order that the Deity may exhibit to us in all things his accustomed care and fa-

vor. Since this has been granted freely by us to them, your devoutness perceives that **liberty is granted to others also who may wish to follow their own religious observances**; it being clearly in accordance with the tranquillity of our times, that **each one should have the liberty of choosing and worshipping whatever deity he pleases**. This has been done by us in order **that we might not seem in any way to discriminate against any rank or religion...**” (Edict of Milan, transcribed by Eusebius in *Church History*, 10.5.2, 4-5, 8; emphasis mine throughout. This can also be found in Lactantius, *Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died*, 48).

First of all, this edict was similar to the one by Galerius to grant relief to Christians about two years before (Lactantius, *Of the Manner*, 34, 35). Secondly, Constantine and Licinius allowed the freedom of worship to all religions. I have placed some parts of the edict in bold to emphasize this point. Christianity was specifically mentioned due to the persecutions that impacted them in the past – especially the Great Persecution. The edict also does not specify any specific branch or sect of Christianity; at this point Constantine was not partial to the Roman Church.

There were obvious political reasons for his decision. The empire was in a precarious situation, and he needed all available assistance to prevent its collapse. He could not afford to alienate religious groups as had previous emperors. His nuanced approach involved gaining allies and utilizing their influence to solidify his reign.

As one would expect, many Christians rejoiced at the thought of religious freedom. And this would be completely reasonable! Constantine was extolled by many writers in that era – although this was taken too far at times. They did not see that Constantine, being the clever politician, used this newly gained favor to control Christianity. We will review this aspect of his reign more in chapter four.

Constantine allowed all religions to worship as they desired. He gave “...all men freedom to follow **the religion which they choose**, that **whatever heavenly divinity exists** may be propitious to us and to all that live under our government” (emphasis mine). He wanted people to seek any and every god so that every

deity would have favor upon the empire.

The Catholic Encyclopedia admits: "...many of the emperors yielded to the delusion that they could unite all their subjects in the adoration of the one sun-god who combined in himself the Father-God of the Christians and the much-worshipped Mithras; thus the empire could be founded anew on unity of religion. Even Constantine, as will be shown farther on, for a time cherished this mistaken belief.... Many other actions of his also have the appearance of half-measures, as if he-himself had wavered and had always held in reality to some form of syncretistic religion..." (Article: Constantine the Great)

Consider the events that followed the battle. Constantine made an inscription to Mithras. The Arch of Constantine honored the sun and moon gods. On many coins, Sol was depicted as his Comitii or companion. These actions continued later into his life.

In the next chapter, we will review the known Sunday laws from his reign. When we read these decrees from a Roman perspective and with the understanding that he revered the sun, it will allow us to see them more accurately.

## Chapter 2

### Constantine's Sunday Laws

Constantine issued at least three known laws pertaining to Sunday. These laws have been the source of serious conjecture, especially as it pertains to the Sabbath. Were they meant to upend the Sabbath? Did they affect it at all? The information from the last chapter will be imperative for us understand potential motives behind them. He decreed two from the year 321 and another one from an unspecified year.

#### **The First Law – March 7, 321**

The first of Constantine's Sunday laws was issued on March 7, 321. This one is particularly famous because it is widely considered the first known Sunday law in human history. On this day, he approved the "day of the sun" as a day of rest for the Western Roman Empire. An English translation of this law is provided below:

"All judges and city people and the craftsmen shall rest upon the venerable day of the sun. Country people, however, may freely attend to the cultivation of the fields, because it frequently happens that no other days are better adapted for planting the grain in the furrows or the vines in trenches. So that the advantage given by heavenly providence may not for the occasion of a short time perish" (Codex Justinian 3.12.2 [some list as 3.12.3]. Latin from Krueger, p 127; English from Ayer, pp 284-285).

As we look at this first law, there are no references to the God of the Christians or Jesus. In the fourth century, the Roman Church emphasized the use of the phrase "Lord's Day" to refer to Sunday. It is missing from the law. It did not force anyone to worship anything. Moreover, it contains no references to the seventh-day Sabbath of the Bible.

In Latin, the phrase translated as "venerable day of the sun" is *venerabili die solis* (Krueger, p 127). Constantine's law was based upon honoring and esteeming the celestial body we call the sun. The law applied to those in the cities, not the country - farmers were not required to comply.

## **The Second Law – July 3, 321 AD**

On July 3 of the same year, Constantine issued a second law: “Just as it appears to Us most unseemly that the Day of the Sun (Sunday), which is celebrated on account of its own veneration, should be occupied with legal altercations and with noxious controversies of the litigation of contending parties, so it is pleasant and fitting that those acts which are especially desired shall be accomplished on that day. 1. Therefore all men shall have the right to emancipate and to manumit on this festive day\*, and the legal formalities thereof are not forbidden” — July 3, 321 (English: Pharr, p 44; Latin: Haenel, p 207).”

*\*The Latin translated as festive day is “die festo.”*

This second Sunday law gave people freedom from most kinds of legal business. However, proceedings to free slaves were allowed. Notice again that no mention of Christianity, Jesus, God (of the Bible), or Lord’s Day. These two Sunday laws display an astonishing lack of linguistics evidence for any Christian influence.

In the past, I tended to view Constantine’s Sunday laws from a Roman Church perspective. But that perspective entailed certain assumptions, some of which were refuted in the previous chapter. Upon further review, there is no Christian meaning in these laws. We also cannot assume that there would be any such meaning intended. As discussed in the last chapter, he venerated the sun in multiple ways. Furthermore, the Roman Church did not have a developed theology about Sunday rest in 321. How then should we view these Sunday laws?

At the time these laws were enacted, Constantine was Western Roman Emperor. He also held the title pontifex maximus, which carried with it certain responsibilities that impact this subject. We often forget these two facts, but this information will unlock a better way to view the 321 laws.

The Romans had established religious traditions that spanned many centuries prior to his reign. For instance, the early Roman religion employed a college of priests called pontiffs; the head of it was titled pontifex maximus. Their duties included, but were not limited to, regulation of the sacred calendar of festivals. They

determined and announced when they occurred each year.

In the 40s BC, Julius Caesar wielded the title of the pontifex maximus in addition to having the political titles of Consul and Dictator. Using his religious authority, he made major changes to the calendar. During the imperial period, many emperors followed his example of taking on the position of pontifex maximus. They held the title until sometime in the 370s/380s, which was decades after Constantine. Though emperors did not always follow the pontifical regulations with precision, they often used it properly to change the length of festivals or institute new ones (to learn more about this subject, see *Ancient Roman Celebrations and Their Adaptation by Early Christianity* by McDonald, pp 16-24).

Since Constantine held the title pontifex maximus, it means that he would be responsible for making certain decisions to govern the ancient religious traditions of the Roman people. One clear instance of this occurred on December 17, 320. He issued a law which permitted and defined the behavior of the pagan haruspices; it was received on the day after his first Sunday law (March 8, 321; CT: 16.10.1). Tacitus, writing a couple of centuries earlier, explained that pontiffs were involved with overseeing the haruspices. An excerpt is located below:

“The Senate accordingly passed a decree enjoining the priests to consider what portions of the soothsaying art should be retained or amplified.’ Claudius then brought before the Senate the subject of the college of ‘haruspices,’ that, as he said, ‘the oldest of Italian sciences might not be lost through negligence’... A resolution of the Senate was accordingly passed, charging the pontiffs to see what should be retained or reformed with respect to the ‘haruspices’” (*Annals*, 11.15).

Religious tradition was also a serious concern to the Romans and the college of priests. Cicero, who lived from approximately 106 to 43 BC, was a major contributor to Roman thought as a statesman and lawyer. In his work *On Law*, he described special characteristics of the ancient Roman celebrations.

“Next, our provision for holidays and festivals\* ordains rest from lawsuits and controversies for free men, and from labour and toil for slaves. Whoever plans the official year ought to arrange that

these festivals shall come at the completion of the various labours of the farm..." (idem, 2.12[29]).

*\*The latin reads: "feriarum festorumque dierum."*

The principles described by Cicero continued to be applied to Roman festivals during the imperial period. This included the Saturnalia (Dec 17-24) and the Kalends of January (Jan 1-3). To read more about how these Roman religious concepts were applied to the festivals, see the **Appendix B** at the end of this book.

Constantine's Sunday laws matched the anticipated patterns for festivals described by Cicero and other Roman authors. The issues of work and agricultural toils were addressed in the first law (March 7). While farmers were not granted rest on the day, they were discussed to be consistent with other *festo*. Many annual festivals related in some way to the harvest cycle. It was not logical to allow farmers off on Sunday since there was not a weekly crop. In the second law, most legal proceedings were suspended and freedom for slaves were addressed (July 3). The Latin word *festo* was employed in it.

Another factor to be considered with this topic is the prevalence of sun worship. In the century leading up to Constantine's reign, the Empire experienced the elevation of sun worship in the entity of Sol Invictus. At times, Sol was the highest object of worship. To read about the gradual elevation of sun worship by Roman emperors, see *How Did Sunday Become the First Day of the Week?*, pp 36-42.

Aurelian (early 270s) honored Sol with the title 'lord of the Empire.' He instituted annual games to the sun that were still celebrated in Constantine's time (and decades afterwards). By the time Constantine became Western Emperor in 312, reverence for Sol Invictus was an imperial heritage (albeit nuanced). We discussed Constantine's relationship to sun worship in the last chapter.

The importance of sun veneration, the pontifex maximus, and Roman *festo* help us to better understand these Sunday laws. The Christian influence is absent. Instead, Constantine simultaneously merged two Roman ideals; one was older and the other newer.



He utilized the old title pontifex maximus to establish a *festus* on Sunday. Between the two laws, he discussed the necessary subjects according to ancient custom: labor, agriculture, and courts. At the same time, the focus of the law was the sun or Sol, which was a more recent development. This continued the newer custom.

There are two other examples that exemplify his use of pontifex for this subject. One involved a third Sunday law. The second involved emperor worship.

### **The Third Law – Unknown Date**

The ancient Romans employed an eight-day weekly cycle called the *nundinae*. Every eighth day was a market day (not a Sabbath). In an inscription found in the Balkans region, we learn that Constantine adjusted the ancient Roman *nundinae* or market day so that it would occur every *dies solis* instead of every eighth day (Orellius, p 140). This was hardly a move to support any sort of Sabbath-rest on Sunday, but it did reinforce the seven-day weekly cycle in a culture accustomed to an eight-day market week. By relegating the *nundinae* to *dies solis*, he placed the more recent veneration of the sun within the ancient framework of *nundinae*. This finding reinforces his pontifical merger of the old and new systems.

Later in his life, Constantine utilized pontifical authority to order a temple to be built and a priesthood established for the worship of his family lineage. This continued the ancient imperial cult which started with Octavian Augustus (Roman Civilization, *Selected Readings*, pp 579-580).

Constantine's Sun-day laws were qualitatively different than other Roman celebrations in that they established and regulated a weekly festival. The name Sun-day was a common name for this day of the week among pagans who adhered to the astrological planetary week.

None of his laws labeled Sunday the first day of the week or the Lord's Day, which would be expected if Roman Church influence were present. Also, there was no mention of congregational gatherings. *Dies solis* was the second day of the week in the planetary weekly cycle. To learn more about the planetary weekly cycle and

how the days of the week became named, read our free book *How Did Sunday Become the First Day of the Week?*, pp 8-32,42-48, for free download on [www.sabbath.blog](http://www.sabbath.blog) on the **Free Resources** page.

We will briefly discuss how this new paradigm impacts our view of Christian writers who were contemporary to Constantine. Starting with Eusebius, Christian writers (especially pro-Roman Church) tried to attach Christian meaning to the 321 Sunday laws. This started with his work the *Life of Constantine*, which was composed about sixteen years later (*idem*, 4.18).

In it, Eusebius misrepresents the content of the Sunday laws by adding Christian meaning to them. In his earlier work, *Church History* (320s), he did not reference these Sunday laws at all. At that point, he did not have a developed view on the subject. To my knowledge, he was the first Christian-affiliated writer to propose the idea of transferring the Biblical Sabbath to Sunday in about 330 (*Commentary on Psalms 92*; Odom, 291-292).

While many people who study this subject assume Constantine was influenced by Christians like Eusebius, the evidence points to the opposite. Eusebius most likely derived his views on Sunday rest at least in part from the 321 Sunday laws rather than the other way around. In other words, he used these laws as an opportunity to further his ‘Sabbath transference’ agenda. Nearly 16 years later, He added embellishments to the description of these laws that would fit his viewpoint.

One might be tempted to introduce P.Oxy. 3407 and P.Oxy. 3759 as evidence that these Sunday laws had Christian meaning. These are the oldest papyri which discuss people abstaining from work on ‘The Lord’s Day’ (Kraus and Nicklas, pp 50-52). They date to about 325 AD. The fact that *dies solis* also happened to be called the Lord’s Day by many Christians in Egypt and even areas influenced by Christians does not change the outcome of how Constantine viewed the subject (which is the goal of this work).

The emperor never ascribed Christian meaning to these enactments. He did not even try to make Sunday an imitation day of the Biblical Sabbath because key elements, such as requiring rest for all people, mandating worship gatherings, or mention of the

Christian God, are absent. The necessary elements from Roman tradition were addressed. No penalties were prescribed for those who violated it. As we will address in chapter five, Constantine was not involved in the ‘Sabbath transference’ theology of Eusebius.

Eusebius established a precedent which would be followed by future Christian historians (see Sozomen, *Church History*, 1.8) for centuries to come. People ascribed meaning to these laws that cannot be derived from the language used in them or the example of the person who enacted them. Instead, they superimposed a meaning that would fit their agenda.

After this analysis we are left with the conclusion that Constantine was not inspired by the Bible or any Christian leader to enact Sunday laws. He exercised the authority of the pontifex maximus to establish Sunday as the weekly festival. In doing so, he considered ancient traditions regarding *festus*. Additionally, he incorporated the newly popularized adoration of Sol. The issue of Sunday rest was not completely settled in the Roman Catholic Church for centuries later. Nevertheless, some Christian authors used his laws to their advantage to push for Sunday observance as a replacement for the Biblical Sabbath.

By viewing these laws from the viewpoint of Roman history, a new paradigm is established to interpret his behavior on this subject with more historical accuracy.

## **Chapter Appendix**

### **Other Possible Sunday Laws**

Eusebius wrote that Constantine required all his troops to pray on Sunday (which he called the ‘Lord’s Day’ – *Life of Constantine*, 4.18-19). We have no corroborating evidence to verify this claim by the writer. As reviewed previously, Constantine continued to honor other gods decades into his reign and he was not baptized until just before his death. Moreover, Eusebius was an ardent opponent of the Sabbath (Odom, *Sabbath and Sunday in Early Christianity*, 292). When put together, these details make it difficult to conclude that Constantine would force anyone to pray to the one particular god on Sunday. He may have mandated prayer on Sunday, but it would have been to any god (per the Edict of Milan) or to Sol (if any one deity was chosen).

## Chapter 3

### The Council of Nicaea

The Council of Nicaea in 325 is the next event which is pertinent to this subject. It has been alleged that the Sabbath was changed by Constantine at this gathering. To fully understand what happened at this meeting, we must discuss the events leading up to it.

Several emperors prior to Constantine expressed hostility towards Christianity. What caused this resentment? In times of crisis, emperors would force the general population to dedicate themselves to the gods of Rome. They viewed this action as the key to gaining divine favor and intervention. This placed Christians and other non-conformists in opposition to the empire; the results were devastating to them. This will be discussed in a future work titled *Persecution in Early Christianity*, which we hope to release in 2022. Be sure to check for updates on [www.sabbath.blog](http://www.sabbath.blog).

In 303, the Great Persecution started. Among the ways that Roman officials harassed Christians was to require that they hand over important texts of the faith, such as the writings of the first Apostles and early church writers. Those who handed over these writings were called the *traditor*, which is from the Latin root *tradere* meaning ‘to hand over.’ This is the origin of the modern English word traitor.

During and after the Great Persecution, there was controversy concerning those who handed over these writings. Should they be admonished? Should they be allowed to hold positions of authority? In the north African city of Carthage, there was a bishop named Mensurius who was a *traditor*. He ordained a man named Caecilian to take his place – who may have aided his actions as a *traditor*. Seventy leaders gathered in North Africa and refused to accept this ordination because it was conducted by a *traditor*. They placed another leader, Majorinus, in the position instead.

This was a significant issue for multiple reasons, but I will mention two for our purposes. First, Christians in Carthage and other areas needed to know who to trust as their legitimate spiritual leader. Secondly, this position concerned great influence, financ-

es, and property. This debate impacted other cities, as some chose a bishop loyal to Caecilian and others loyal to Majorinus.

In 313, the two sides appealed to Constantine to help sort out the mess (Augustine, *Letter* 43.4). He was the highest civil official in the Western Empire. According to Eusebius and Augustine, Constantine appointed bishops from other regions who were not affected by this conflict to help judge which person should be bishop of Carthage.

The Council of Rome was convened in October 313 to make the final decision. A man named Donatist had succeeded Majorinus by that time. It was decided by the bishops appointed to the case and the bishop of Rome, Miltiades, that Caecilian was innocent and should remain bishop. They also determined that Donatist should be removed from his position. All those cities with two bishops were ordered allow the one with the longest standing to remain.

The Donatists, as they came to be called, appealed this decision on the basis that only nineteen bishops decided the Council of Rome, but seventy bishops in North Africa previously decided the issue. They argued based on the number of bishops that the first ruling was more correct.

Constantine then ordered a meeting with Christian bishops of many different cities in the Western Roman Empire. Representatives from these regions convened at Arles, a city in modern-day France, in August 314. Miltiades had died by the start of the council; Sylvester took his place.

This was the first time a council with representation from so many different places was held. While the Donatist issue remained the central focus of the meeting, it was also utilized by the Roman Church to force greater uniformity among all churches with regard to church practice and discipline.

For instance, Roman Church leaders used this meeting to impose upon all the churches one and the same practice for the Pascha observance. Pascha was observed at different times in different locations. To learn more about Passover in early Christianity, look for an upcoming work titled *The Quartodeciman Controversy*.

sy, which will likely be released in 2022. Be sure to check for updates on [www.sabbath.blog](http://www.sabbath.blog).

The next episode in this saga occurred at the Council of Nicaea in 325. The year before this event, Constantine gained control of the entire Roman Empire by defeating his brother-in-law Licinius. The circumstances surrounding the Council of Nicaea were very similar to that of the Council of Arles.

The two main subjects which caused Nicaea to be convened were Arianism and the Meletian Schism. These controversies required decisions from Christian bishops of the highest stature and civil authority. What were these issues?

In the early fourth century, Arius of Alexandria began to teach about the nature of God and Christ in a way that was contrary to the Roman Church. This caused a serious division among the churches, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean world. His followers were called Arians.

A similar division occurred with a group called the Meletians. Like the Donatists, they disagreed with the laxity with which the Roman Church addressed apostasy during and after the Great Persecution. The group was also known as the Church of the Martyrs.

Hosius of Cordova was a religious advisor to Constantine and presided over the council until the emperor arrived. Hosius was likely the one to convene it and invited the emperor to participate and make final decisions – in a manner similar to Arles. The emperor arrived about a month into the proceedings.

At the council, decisions were made concerning Arius and the Meletians. Twenty canons, or church principles, were passed. None of them mention the seventh-day Sabbath.

At the end of the meeting, there is a letter supposedly written by Constantine which mandated that all churches follow the Roman rite as it comes to the observance of Pascha. This composition is the basis for those who claim that Constantine changed the Sabbath. We have an excerpt from it below (In the translation, I have substituted the word Easter for Pascha to retain more historical

accuracy; the term Easter was not known to be used until about the seventh century).

“At this meeting the question concerning the most holy day of Pascha was discussed, and it was resolved by the united judgment of all present, that this feast ought to be kept by all and in every place on one and the same day. For what can be more becoming or honorable to us than that this feast from which we date our hopes of immortality, should be observed unfailingly by all alike, according to one ascertained order and arrangement? **And first of all, it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul. For we have it in our power, if we abandon their custom, to prolong the due observance of this ordinance to future ages, by a truer order, which we have preserved from the very day of the passion until the present time. Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd; for we have received from our Saviour a different way...**”

“...A course at once legitimate and honorable lies open to our most holy religion. Beloved brethren, let us with one consent adopt this course, and withdraw ourselves from all participation in their baseness. For their boast is absurd indeed, that it is not in our power without instruction from them to observe these things. For how should they be capable of forming a sound judgment, who, since their parricidal guilt in slaying their Lord, have been subject to the direction, not of reason, but of ungoverned passion, and are swayed by every impulse of the mad spirit that is in them? Hence it is that on this point as well as others they have no perception of the truth, so that, being altogether ignorant of the true adjustment of this question, they sometimes celebrate Pascha twice in the same year...”

“...Why then should we follow those who are confessedly in grievous error? Surely we shall never consent to keep this feast a second time in the same year. But supposing these reasons were not of sufficient weight, still it would be incumbent on your Sagacities to strive and pray continually that the purity of your souls may not seem in anything to be sullied by fellowship with the customs of these most wicked men. We must consider, too, that a

discordant judgment in a case of such importance, and respecting such religious festival, is wrong. For our Saviour has left us one feast in commemoration of the day of our deliverance, I mean the day of his most holy passion; and he has willed that his Catholic Church should be one, the members of which, however scattered in many and diverse places, are yet cherished by one pervading spirit, that is, by the will of God. And let your Holinesses' sagacity reflect how grievous and scandalous it is that on the self-same days some should be engaged in fasting, others in festive enjoyment; and again, that after the days of Pascha some should be present at banquets and amusements, while others are fulfilling the appointed fasts. It is, then, plainly the will of Divine Providence (as I suppose you all clearly see), that this usage should receive fitting correction, and be reduced to one uniform rule." (*Life of Constantine*, 3.18; emphasis mine).

A portion of this quote, which I have placed in bold, is most often used to claim that the Sabbath was changed by the emperor. However, the purpose of this letter was to force uniformity for the observance of Pascha. The opening section of the letter makes that clear. Particularly, Constantine opposed keeping the day in any manner like the Jewish people. The subject matter of this letter had nothing to do with the Sabbath.

While it appears that Constantine was against keeping Pascha in a manner like Jewish people, there is also no record of any laws to punish people for non-compliance. Thus, we must not misconstrue his ruling to have the weight of the imperial government behind it. He did not issue this letter as a Christian leader, but as a civil ruler adjudicating between two disputing parties. He left it up to the Christian congregations and their leaders to enforce its rulings. Being an emperor, he probably thought that they had the ability to force compliance regarding their own religious rites.

At this point, it is important to understand how many of the Councils of this time worked. The Roman Church did not have the power of civil authority to force compliance. Instead, these Councils are attempts to affirm what they viewed to be 'orthodox' or accepted teaching and bring about greater uniformity among Christians. At the very least, many of these councils express the will of the Roman Church.



Those who refused to comply with their wishes would be threatened with not having financial or spiritual support, recognition, and communication with the Roman Church. At first, this meant very little. As the Church of Rome grew in influence, these councils had greater weight. The Roman Church could refuse to help another diocese in time of need if they did not meet their demands.

As time passed, civil rulers increased their interest and involvement with Roman Church councils. Roman Church officials appealed to temporal rulers to intervene on their behalf. Constantine set the precedent.

Lastly, the rulings at Nicaea did not stop people from keeping Pascha in a manner like the Jewish people. References to Christians keeping Passover like the Jewish people are found decades later in writers such as John Chrysostom (*Eight Homilies Against the Jews*) and Epiphanius (*Panarion*, sections 50 and 70) as well as church councils such as the Councils of Antioch (341) and Laodicea (364).

Many people are not aware the Nicaea addressed many of the same issues as the Council of Arles eleven years earlier. This knowledge and the proper context of Constantine's letter help us to understand that Nicaea had zero impact on the Sabbath.

Another church council often connected to the life of Constantine is that of Laodicea. We have addressed the dating and proceedings of it in **Appendix C** of this work.

## Chapter 4

### Did Constantine Change the Sabbath?

So far in this book, we have looked at three categories of primary sources: 1) Contemporary writers who recorded Constantine's reign, 2) the laws of the time period, and 3) preserved writings about the councils of Arles and Nicaea. What have we learned so far and what does it tell us about Constantine and the Sabbath?

The primary sources regarding laws passed during the reign of Constantine are chiefly contained in two annals of Roman Law. The first is called the *Codex Theodosianus*, and it was issued by Theodosius II in 438. The second is the *Codex Justinianus*, which was issued by Justinian in the 530s. These codices are compilations of Roman laws categorized by subject matter. English versions of them are available. While we reviewed the Sunday laws in chapter two of this work, none of his other laws prohibit observance of the Sabbath.

The historian Eusebius wrote a brief history about Constantine's life and reign called *The Life of Constantine*. Another man named Lactantius, who was the personal tutor for Constantine's son Crispus, also recorded events from his life. Neither primary source alludes to Constantine banning or curbing Sabbath observance or punishing people for observing the seventh day.

The Councils of Arles and Nicaea were explained in the last chapter. To view the proceedings of this council in Latin (with some notes in Greek), one must view volume 2 of *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collection* edited by Joannes Dominicus Mansi in 1759. It is listed under the title "Sanctum Concilium Nicaenum Primum Generale" starting on page 635. To review details from this council in English, read *A History of the Christian Councils from the Original Documents* by Charles Joseph Hefele, translated into English by William R Clark, vol. 1, second edition from 1883. The historical background starts on page 231, but the canons (with commentary) are found on pages 375-435. As aforementioned, not a single ruling or decision from Nicaea referenced the Sabbath.

## Setting the Record Straight

It is time to set the record straight. Firstly, no one can change the Sabbath. Think about that assertion for a moment. The Sabbath has been and **always** will be Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. No one can change that eternal truth. Secondly, primary sources indicate that Constantine did not attempt to ban or forbid Sabbath observance. How did confusion arise concerning this subject? There's misunderstanding because Constantine's actions **indirectly** affected the Sabbath. Let's explore this concept further.

As reviewed in chapter two, Constantine enacted Sunday laws to promote the idea of resting on *dies solis*. Constantine's Sunday laws created a government-mandated imitation day of rest beside the true Sabbath. The Sabbath was still being observed by most Christians. Thus, generations of Christians (in urban areas) grew up honoring the seventh-day Sabbath because of the Bible but also resting on Sunday because it was civil law. In other words, people were socialized to rest on Sunday. One might even call these events the first development of a five-day work week followed by two days off.

It is also important to note that there is no record of any penalties for breaking these Sunday laws. The idea that people were punished or put to death because they did not follow them is non-existent. Only in recent history did this claim come about.

Another important development during his reign, that is often not discussed, was the interweaving of the Roman Empire with the Roman Church. Constantine paid the expenses of Church councils (Eusebius, *Church History*, 10.6). He ruled that clergy and their families did not have to pay taxes (CT: 16.2.10, Pharr notes that this law properly belongs to 320). By law, people were allowed to leave property to the Catholic Church at death (CT: 16.2.4 [321]). It is not abundantly clear that the term 'Catholic Church' means all churches or any specific one. However, this latter decree allowed the Roman Church to accumulate incredible amounts of wealth and influence over the centuries.

In 326, he decreed that the Roman Church special privileges. All other Christian groups were not allowed these privileges and were bound to public service (CT: 16.5.1). The same year, He regulat-

ed the number of clergy in Christianity (16.2.6). The wealthy were prevented from serving in the clergy; only the poor could serve in those positions (16.2.6 [326 or 329]). He prevented clerics from being summoned to municipal councils for public service (16.2.6, 16.2.7 [330]). Secular judges were required to enforce the decisions of bishops; when a bishop testified or judged, their witness was considered supreme and voided all others (CS: 1 [333]).

This development opened the door for a deeper, more intertwined relationship between the Roman Church and the Roman imperial government, which occurred about 50 years after the time of Constantine. Theodosius I (379-395) strengthened these ties. He attempted to force people to submit to the authority of the Bishop of Rome. Moreover, he passed onto this bishop the title of pontifex maximus. The Roman Church was gradually made an institution under the supervision of the state.

As the Roman Church and Roman State intensified their ties, stringent Sunday laws with added Christian significance were enacted. This started in 386 and continued for centuries into the future. Over time, these laws attempted to define what it meant observe Sunday because there was no external text to guide its observance. Said another way, they changed over time and gradually more stringent as the idea of Sunday rest became more defined by the Roman Church and as the state and church became more intertwined.

To read more about these Sunday laws, see the book *Sabbath and Sunday Laws in the Roman Empire* (2020), which you can download for free from our website [www.sabbath.blog](http://www.sabbath.blog) on the **Free Resources** page.

Despite these influences, most Christians continued to honor the seventh-day Sabbath into the 400s AD. Read **Appendix D** to learn more.

We can safely conclude that Constantine did not try to change the Sabbath or attempt to ban or curb its observance. Some of his decrees and political activity **indirectly** impacted the Sabbath over a long period of time. His laws intertwining church and state laid the foundation for later emperors, who actually claimed to be

Christian, to enact Sunday laws supported by the Roman Church. Many Christians were socialized in a culture that observed both days to some degree.

As the centuries passed, the Roman Church became more influential in the political realm. At that time, they persuaded temporal authorities to enforce stringent Sunday laws. Constantine influenced the Sabbath indirectly in ways that developed over centuries and in some ways has lasted down to our modern times.

In the next chapter, we will explore a surprising new discovery on this subject!

## Chapter 5

### Breakthrough Discovery on Constantine and the Sabbath

I will admit that for many years I studied this subject with the assumption that Constantine tried to change the Sabbath. This work is in part a result of deconstructing my own beliefs to seek the truth about this matter through the eyes of primary sources. When one determines to seek out evidence for a subject without looking at pre-suppositions, great discoveries can be made. Such is the case when it comes to Constantine and the Sabbath.

As we have pointed out in previous chapters, not a single early Church writing or piece of legislation from his reign ever hints at a direct attack upon the Biblical Sabbath (Friday sunset to Saturday sunset). More recent research into writings about Constantine's life combined with a study of Roman law have produced a breakthrough discovery in understanding the relationship between his reign and the Biblical Sabbath.

A very important writing on this subject comes from Eusebius. As discussed earlier in this work, he was a pro-Roman Church writer in the early fourth century. He composed one of the primary sources about the Constantine's life.

The traditional translation of *The Life of Constantine*, 4.18.2 is as follows: "...his earnest desire being gradually to lead all mankind to the worship of God. Accordingly he enjoined on all the subjects of the Roman empire **to observe the Lord's day, as a day of rest, and also to honor the day which precedes the Sabbath**; in memory, I suppose, of what the Saviour of mankind is recorded to have achieved on that day" (emphasis mine throughout).

Eusebius refers to the first day of the week as "The Lord's Day" and notes that Constantine enjoined subjects of the Empire to rest on that day. We discussed these laws in chapter two of this work. The author also mentioned that Constantine caused people to rest on the day which proceeds the Sabbath, which is Friday. This statement is strange; not a single Roman law of any era agrees

with it.

Many English translations of early church works were written in the 1700s or 1800s. Most of them **have not** been critically reviewed to make sure the translation and original manuscripts agree with each other.

In the late 1990s, the first and (to my knowledge) only critical edition of the *Life of Constantine* was translated by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (who were at King's College in London). Several other Universities and scholars contributed to this monumental work.

Among their findings is that the first translations of *The Life of Constantine* 4.18.2 included an added word which changed the meaning of the sentence. I have independently researched their statements about this subject and found that their assertion is true! We will review their translation and then show you the explanation from the original documents. We will also provide corroborating evidence from before and after Constantine's time to reaffirm the correct manuscript translation.

Here is the translation provided by Stuart and Hall of *The Life of Constantine*, 4.18.2. "The Blessed One urged all men also to do the same, as if by encouraging this he might gently bring all men to piety. He therefore decreed that all those under Roman government should rest on the days named after the Saviour, **and similarly that they should honour the days of the Sabbath**, in memory, I suppose, of the things recorded as done by the universal Saviour on those days" (Stuart and Hall, p 159; emphasis mine).

The accurate translation of this section conveys that Constantine provided protection for Sabbath observance. We will now provide evidence from the original manuscripts to show you how this error occurred in the 1800s.

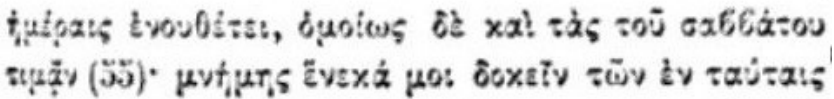
First, a little history. In the 1800s, J.P. Migne, a priest in the Catholic Church, made copies of existing manuscripts of the early Church writings. These early manuscripts were written in either Greek or Latin. The works composed in Greek had a Latin translation placed beside them on the opposite page so that the Roman

priests could read them in the liturgical language of the Roman Church (Latin).

The original works of Eusebius were composed in Greek. In the *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*. Series Graeca, vol. 20, published in 1857, we find Eusebius' work copied from the original manuscripts in Greek. As discussed, there is also a Latin translation on the opposite page.

On Page 1165, we find the copy of the original Greek for chapter 18 from Eusebius' work. Below is a picture from this page which has the sentence in question.

### Picture 1:

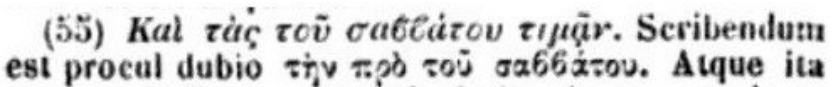


From the first comma, the Greek transliteration reads: “,OMOIOS DE KAI TAS TOU SABBATOU TIMAN (55).”

An English translation would be: “,and similarly honor they the days of the Sabbath,”

Notice in the picture above that there is a footnote ‘(55)’ after the first sentence. This is a foot note made by the copyist. The footnote, which is on page 1166, is in the picture below.

### Picture 2:



The footnote starts out with the Greek phrase: “DE KAI TAS TOU SABBATOU TIMAN” which was part of the original text. The copyist then adds a note in Latin which says: “*Scribendum est procul dubio*” which is roughly translated as “It would be far from doubtful to write” then he gives an edited version of the original Greek phrase. It now says, “TEN PRO TOU SABBATOU.”



The scribe has confessed to adding the Greek word **PRO**, which means before (in time, position, rank, etc.). This one word changes the meaning of the sentence to say that Constantine enjoined Roman subjects to close on **Friday** (literally, before the Sabbath), which is **not correct!**

The copy of the original Greek manuscript on Page 1165 (see **Picture #1** above), does **not** have **PRO**! In the Latin translation, the copyist added the word *pridie*, which makes the Latin now say “est pridie sabbati...” or in English “the day before the Sabbath.”

Thus, the correct translation is that Constantine protected Sabbath observance in the Roman Empire. Does this corroborate with other primary sources? YES.

The first group of primary sources are eye-witness accounts that say two things about the Sabbath in the fourth through fifth centuries: 1) that the seventh day was still observed and that 2) most Christians still honored it. Primary sources which affirm this include Augustine, John Cassian, Epiphanius, Socrates, and Sozomen. You can read these quotes in **Appendix D**.

The second group of sources to confirm this finding is Roman Law. In the Codex Theodosianus three laws which protect Sabbath observance for Jewish people (CT: 2.8.26, 8.8.8, and 16.8.20). This protection was extended to Christians, as explained in *Sabbath and Sunday Laws in the Roman Empire* (idem, pp 10-11). It is available for free download from [www.sabbath.blog](http://www.sabbath.blog) on the **Free Resources** page.

The dates for these laws are 409 and 412. They are repeated in the Codex Justinianus (CJ: 1.9.13), which means that Justinian extended the same protections in the sixth century. Of these laws, CT: 16.8.20 referenced rulings of earlier Roman Emperors that protected Sabbath observance. The law, which was issued by Honorius and Theodosius, reads:

“1. Moreover, since indeed **ancient** custom and practice have preserved for the aforesaid Jewish people the consecrated day of the Sabbath, We also decree that it shall be forbidden that any man of the aforesaid faith should be constrained by any summons on that

day, under the pre-text of public or private business, since all the remaining time appears sufficient to satisfy the public laws, and since it is most worthy of the moderation of Our time that the privileges granted should not be violated although sufficient provision appears to **have been made with reference to the aforesaid matter by general constitutions of earlier Emperors**” (English: Pharr, p 469; Latin: Haenel, p 1601; emphasis mine).

This law made a reference to earlier “constitutions” (plural) made by other Emperors (plural). The earliest mention of protections for Sabbath observance go back to the time of Julius Caesar and Octavian Augustus. Octavian gave the Jewish people freedom to keep the Sabbath from Friday at 3 pm until the Sabbath ended (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 16.6.2). Claudius apparently had the same ruling (ibid, 19.5.3).

At the very least the references to “general constitutions of early Emperors” refers to the decrees of Augustus, Claudius, and Constantine. There may have been others which are now lost. This law and the statement which concludes it is further proof that Constantine continued to provide protections for Sabbath observance.

The Latin text from the opening sentence of this law reads: “*At cum vero iudaeorum memorato populo sacratum diem sabbati vetus mos et consuetudo servaverit...*” The Latin word translated as ‘ancient’ is *vetus*, and it means former, long-standing, old, aged, or ancient. In the fifth century, Roman rulers recognized that the Jewish people honored the Sabbath from ancient times.

Moreover, the law described the Sabbath using the Latin word *sacratum*, which refers to that which is sacred or intrinsically set apart for religious purposes. Roman writers began to identify the Biblical Sabbath with the Latin word *sacra* as early as the first century BC (see Pompeius Trogus, *Epitome*, 36.2.14; Tibullus, *Elegies*, 1.3.17-18; Ovid, *The Art of Love*, 1.3, 1.11 and *The Cure for Love*, part 3). To learn more about the Roman and Greek view of the Sabbath, download our free book *Prevalence of the Sabbath in the Early Roman Empire* from [www.sabbath.blog](http://www.sabbath.blog) on the **Free Resources** page.

The Latin word *sacra* or similar words were never used in Roman law to refer to Sunday. This term is one way to know that the imperial government viewed Sabbath as an older and separate institution than Sunday. The first day of the week was never considered holy by the Roman Empire proper. The term *faustus* was used, which means a lucky omen. To learn more about Sabbath and Sunday laws in the Roman Empire, see *Sabbath and Sunday Laws*. The use of *faustus* is discussed, pp 16-17, 42-43. It is available for free download from [www.sabbath.blog](http://www.sabbath.blog) on the **Free Resources** page.

The 409 and 412 laws do not mention that the Sabbath law was re-instituted, but simply a continuation of previous imperial policy. With the correct translation of *The Life of Constantine*, we can now add Constantine to the list of emperors that protected Sabbath observance.

Eusebius' adds an interesting statement to the end of 4.18.2: "... in memory, I suppose, of what the Saviour of mankind is recorded to have achieved on that day." Eusebus added a Christian meaning to the protection granted for Sabbath rest. Since Jesus and the early disciples also kept the Sabbath, he could not deny that the day had Christian meaning.

## Conclusion

The research in this book has unearthed important innovations for better grasping Constantine's relationship to the Sabbath. This emperor never displayed the type of fealty and loyalty to Christianity as is implied when authors and speakers refer to him as the 'first Christian emperor'. He certainly issued decrees that favored Christianity, but this cannot be mistaken as conversion.

The history and archaeology connected to Constantine's reign support the idea that he attributed his victory at Milvian Bridge and other successes to Sol Invictus, the invincible sun god. This deity remained prominent on coins and other monuments deep into his reign. Sol was the emperor's companion. Constantine viewed him as the one who granted triumph and eventually sole rulership of the Roman Empire. Other gods were also honored during his tenure.

The Edict of Milan supports the concept that Constantine enabled all religions to worship freely. The specific mention of Christianity had to do with the fact that it was targeted by previous persecutions, especially the Great Persecution. It was preceded by the Edict of Galerius, which was issued about two years earlier. At best, Constantine viewed the God of Christianity as just another god among others.

This work establishes a new paradigm by which his Sunday laws can be viewed. Veneration for Sol was a newer development in the Roman religious ethic and became very popular among Emperors about a century or so before Constantine. The pontifex maximus was an ancient institution for the Romans; he held this title. The three known Sunday laws from his reign are consistent with the idea of a pontifex maximus that simultaneously upheld sun worship.

Constantine utilized his title as pontifex maximus to institute a weekly *festus* to Sol and adjusted the *nundinae* to fall on *dies solis*. In this way, he merged two religious concepts – the newer one in sun adoration and the older one with the pontifex maximus. This is more consistent with the sources rather than the perspective which tie these enactments to cooperation with the Roman Church.

This research also unearths another discovery in Christian sources. Eusebius wrote *Church History* and recorded events in Constantine's reign all the way through his victory over Licinius. He curiously leaves out both the vision/dream from 312, though Lactantius does not, and the Sunday laws. Later, towards the end of the emperor's life, Eusebius suddenly discussed both and adds Christian meaning to them.

The Roman Church did not have a developed theology regarding Sunday rest, in the exact manner of the Biblically prescribed Sabbath rest, up to that point. The first church council discussing this issue is that of Laodicea, which dates to well after Constantine. This confirms the lack of Roman Church influence in the Sunday laws. Instead, Eusebius was mostly likely influenced by these laws to introduce the concept of Sunday rest into Roman Church theology. This is first witnessed in his work on Psalms 92, which was written about 330. This explains the lack of mention of these laws by him in the mid-320s and then his sudden recasting of them in the mid to late 330s.

In addition to these Sunday laws, Constantine gradually brought the Roman Church under the control of the state. The two became intertwined much deeper during the reign of Theodosius (379-395), which would pave the way for more stringent Sunday laws with Christian meaning attached to them. This certainly affected the development of Sunday as a day of rest among the common people of Europe. However, it would take many years of development for it to be considered like the Biblically prescribed Sabbath.

The Council of Nicaea is another event connected by some authors to this subject. To clarify its connection or lack thereof to the Sabbath, one must review a series of events which led to the council's convocation and read its contents in context.

Early in Constantine's reign, he was asked by Christian leaders to resolve an internal dispute between the Donatist party and the Roman Church concerning the *traditors*. A council was held at Rome to resolve the problem. The Donatist party was ruled against, but they appealed to have another trial.

Constantine then asked bishops in various places throughout the western part of the empire to help resolve the issue at the Council of Arles. The Donatists lost again. This incident is important because it serves as background for the Council of Nicaea, as the circumstances leading up to it were very similar.

At Nicaea, three major issues were addressed. The Meletian schism occurred; it had many similarities to the Donatist controversy because it involved a debate concerning the *traditors*. The Arian controversy also was a major focus because it involved an argument over orthodox teaching. Lastly, the observance of Pascha was discussed.

In the proceedings of Nicaea, no mention is made of the Sabbath. This would be expected since the council of Arles, which Nicaea was modeled after, also did not mention this subject. One thing to keep in mind is that Christian leaders had influence and control over considerable amounts of property and money. Involving the emperor, who was the highest civil authority, was a way of bringing finality to certain issues.

Constantine's role at both councils was that a civil magistrate who resolved a case between two contending parties with material interests at stake rather than as a spiritual guide. After all, he did not arrive at Nicaea until about a month into its proceedings. Another discovery is connected both meetings.

The Roman Church used the Councils of Arles and Nicaea as an opportunity to bring about greater uniformity of practice in Christianity. At the former, representatives from various parts of the west were present and at the later, many representatives from the east and west were present. Twenty-two canons were decided upon at Arles; twenty canons were decided upon at Nicaea. Thus, the initial reason for the gathering became an opportunity by the bishop of Rome to bring about conformity to the Roman Church

standard. The initial reasons to convene these councils were taken as opportunities to achieve other goals. This course of action yielded results for centuries for the Roman Church. Though one must wonder if Constantine viewed these gatherings as an extension of his authority of the pontifex maximus.

A deeper analysis of Eusebius has yielded a breakthrough discovery on the emperor's relationship to the Sabbath. A closer examination of the copies made from original manuscripts of the *Life of Constantine* show the emperor protected freedoms for Sabbath observance.

Further research reveals that emperors as far back as Octavian Augustus and as far forward as Justinian allowed the same protections. One such law, CT: 16.8.20, which was enacted in the early fifth century, mentioned that earlier emperors had granted protections to the Jewish people for the Sabbath. We can conclude that Constantine was among the emperors who protected Sabbath observance, especially considering the large number of Christians still observing this day in his time and in the century which followed (see **Appendix D**). The same freedoms given to Jewish people on this day would have been extended to Christians. As discussed in *Sabbath and Sunday Laws*, anyone who engaged in practices labeled Jewish were sometimes called Jewish, though they were in fact not (*idem*, pp 10-11).

A review of these primary sources for Constantine's life yields no information that he directly influenced the Sabbath. There are no reprimands for its observance or attempts to ban or curb it. Constantine was a clever politician who needed as many allies as possible to hold together the empire. He favored Christians, not as one of their own, but as a civil ruler desperately needing assistance.

His Sunday laws made an indirect impact upon the Sabbath in that many Christians in urban areas were socialized to observe Sabbath as a believer, but also observe a degree of Sunday rest due to civil law. Well before this time, some Christian communities had already moved towards Sunday gatherings or added them to Sabbath observance. These new Sunday laws provided some convenient support to their existing practice. In some places, the two days were observed together for many years into the future,

as discussed in **Appendix D**.

In Eastern Christianity, the Sabbath retained significance at least into the ninth century. In Western Christianity, Roman Church leaders worked to diminish and repress any observance of the seventh-day Sabbath for centuries to come.



## Appendix A

### Coins From Constantine's Reign

In this chapter, we will look at other coins from Constantine's reign. All of them will depict his likeness on one side. Our interest is in the symbols engraved on the opposite side.

The first is a coin depicts the likeness of Jupiter. The Latin around Jupiter reads, *IOVI CONSERVATORI*, which means Jupiter conserves or upholds. The first coin on this page was made in 313 and the one below it as late as 324. Both coins indicate that Constantine acknowledged Jupiter for conserving or maintaining his imperial reign.



The first coin on this page is another issue with Sol Invictus, similar to the one discussed in chapter one. Coins with this imagery start early in his reign and continue for many years. The one below is from 317. On it, the emperor acknowledges Sol Invictus as his companion. Sol is holding the world in his hands.



The next two coins were issued in 327 and the 330s, respectively. The first one depicts the goddess Roma. The Latin inscription around her reads, *GLORIA ROMANORUM* or for the glory of Rome. The second depicts soldiers with their battle standards. The Latin reads *GLORIA EXERCITUS* or for the glory of the army.



Deep in his reign, Constantine continued to acknowledge other gods for his success and status.

## Appendix B

### Other Roman Celebrations

Constantine's Sunday law mirrors other ancient Roman celebrations such as Saturnalia and the Kalends of January.

Lucian of Samosata, who lived (125-180 AD), wrote about the celebration of Saturnalia (it started December 17). At times, this celebration was held for just a few days. In later years it was extended for up to seven days. Saturn was the main deity remembered during this time, but others were also extolled. Lucian commented on the freedom from work and business were granted to the people during it.

“To begin with, it only lasts a week; that over, I am a private person, just a man in the street. Secondly, during my week the serious is barred; no business allowed. Drinking and being drunk, noise and games and dice, appointing of kings and feasting of slaves, singing naked, clapping of tremulous hands, an occasional ducking of corked faces in icy water – such are the functions over which I preside... therefore the merry noise on every side, the song and the games; therefore the slave and the free as one...All business, be it public or private is forbidden during the feast days...all men shall be equal, slave and free, rich and poor, one with another...” (*Saturnalia*, sections 2, 7; *Chronosolon*, sections 13-14).

Marcobius wrote about the issue of legal proceedings. It seems that at times lawsuits were barred just on a few days during this seven-day extravaganza (*Saturnalia*, 1.10.4-5).

Libianus, who lived from 314 to 394 AD, described the widespread celebration of the Kalends of January. Paganism was still strong in the Roman world of that time. This celebration was held from January 1 through 3. He wrote:

“The festival of the Kalends, is celebrated everywhere as far as the limits of the Roman Empire extend...A stream of presents pours itself out on all sides...The highroads and footpaths are covered with whole processions of laden men and beasts...As the thousand flowers which burst forth everywhere are the adornment

of Spring, so are the thousand presents poured out on all sides, the decorations of the Kalends feast. It may justly be said that it is the fairest time of the year...The Kalends festival banishes all that is connected with toil, and allows men to give themselves up to undisturbed enjoyment. From the minds of young people it removes two kinds of dread: the dread of the schoolmaster and the dread of the stern pedagogue. The slave also it allows, as far as possible, to breathe the air of freedom..." (quoted from Miles, pp 168–9).

Constantine's actions as pontifex maximus in the creation of Sunday laws matched the treatment given to other festivals in the imperial period.

## Appendix C

### The Council of Laodicea

The Council of Laodicea is sometimes connected to the life of Constantine. After reviewing the primary sources from his reign, I have concluded that there is no evidence to place it at such an early date. If Constantine was involved in it, then we would certainly be informed of this detail by Eusebius and the proceedings of the council. How should we date it?

Some of the decrees of this Council are curiously uncharacteristic to be allowed by Constantius, the son of Constantine who ruled from 337-361. It also would be uncharacteristic for it to be held under Valens, who ruled the East from 364-378. These two rulers were favorable towards Arianism. This was the main Christian group in the Eastern Roman Empire, and these rulers would have likely suppressed any meeting of pro-Roman Church bishops in the region.

From 361-363, Julian reigned as emperor for a short time. He attempted to return the empire to devotion to the traditional gods and was given the title “the apostate” for his efforts. After his death, Jovian came to power. He was known to favor those teachings which were considered ‘orthodox’ by the Roman Church. His short reign (only about 8 months) is the most likely time for this council, which dates it to 363-364. I am willing to consider other dates, but my point is that no legitimate dating can place the Council of Laodicea during Constantine’s time.

The canons, or final decisions, released by the council reflect a mixture of values which were common to Western Christianity (supported by Rome) and Eastern Christianity (supported by Constantinople). The canons pertaining to the Sabbath, Sunday, and Passover reflect this mixture of beliefs. We have some quotes from this council below:

**“Canon 16:** The Gospels are to be read on the Sabbath [i.e. Saturday], with the other Scriptures.

**Canon 29:** Christians shall not Judaize and be idle on Saturday,

but shall work on that day; but the Lord's day they shall especially honour, and, as being Christians, shall if possible, do no work on that day. If, however, they are found Judaizing, they shall be shut out from Christ.

**Canon 37:** No one shall accept festal presents from Jews and heretics, or keep the festivals with them.

**Canon 38:** No one shall accept unleavened bread from the Jews, or take part in their profanity.

**Canon 48:** During Lent, the bread shall not be offered, except on Saturday and Sunday.

**Canon 51:** During Lent, no feasts of the martyrs shall be celebrated, but the holy martyrs shall be commemorated on the Saturdays and Sundays of Lent.”

### **What do we learn from the council?**

Some people claim that this council shows the Sabbath was ‘instantly’ changed to Sunday. This is incorrect. Most Christians in the east, and many in the west, still observed the Sabbath after this council was held and many decades into the future! This detail is discussed further in **Appendix D** of this work.

As discussed at the end of chapter three, the Roman Church did not have the civil authority in the fourth century to force compliance on anything. Even if they did, it would take much time and effort to promulgate these rulings. The council's canons certainly reflect some people's view of the Sabbath at that time. The fact that they attempted to stop people from observing the Sabbath is a proof that many Christians still practiced it.

However, the council did attempt to retain some importance for the Sabbath as the Scriptures were still required to be read on that day and bread could be offered on it during lent. This was likely an attempt to reconcile differences of opinion regarding the Sabbath between western and eastern leaders.

## Appendix D

### Sabbath Keeping in the 300s-400s AD

Among the predominant myths about the Sabbath is that its practice ceased in early Church history. As appealing as this conclusion may be to some people, no primary sources hint at it. The Sabbath is not heavily discussed in Christian literature produced in the first two centuries after the first Apostles.

As we arrive in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Sabbath becomes a more commonly discussed subject. During these centuries, Roman Church leaders argued against Sabbath observance while most of the Christian world still honored it. The Roman Church leadership advocated forced fasting on the Sabbath to denigrate it. Below, I have listed quotes from these two centuries which clarify that most Christians still honored the seventh day.

#### **363/364 AD – Council of Laodicea**

“**Canon 16:** On Sabbath [Saturday], the Gospels and other portions of the Scripture shall be read aloud.

**Canon 29:** Christians shall not Judaize and be idle on Saturday, but shall work on that day; but the Lord’s day they shall especially honour, and, as being Christians, shall if possible, do no work on that day. If, however, they are found Judaizing, they shall be shut out from Christ.” (Quoted from: Hefele, pp 302-319)

As discussed in **Appendix C**, this council was held at a time when Arians were a strong political and religious entity in the Eastern Roman Empire. Sabbath observance was condemned at the meeting, but the Sabbath still retained some significance. Despite its canons, the council did not change the strong Sabbath keeping tendencies of the times. In fact, they are evidence of Sabbath observance. As discussed at the end of chapter three, such councils only expressed the will of Roman Church; they did not have the power to force others to comply with such decrees.

#### **360s AD – Pseudo-Athanasius**

“They met on the Sabbath, not that they were infected with Judaism, but to worship Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath...” (*Homilia*

*de Semente*, quoted by Bingham, p 43).

### **360s AD – Epiphanius**

He wrote that the Apostles set services for the fourth day of the week, the evening of Sabbath and the Lord's Day. He also admits that there were Christians who still met on the Sabbath. We have an excerpt from this work below:

“On the apostles’ authority services are set for the fourth day of the week, the eve of the Sabbath, and the Lord’s Day...It continually enjoins prayers to God at the appointed night hours and after the close of the day, with all frequency, fervor, and bowing of the knee. In some places they also hold services on the Sabbaths, but not everywhere” (*De Fide*, 22.1, 24.6; Translated by Frank Williams, pp 679, 681).

It should be noted that no assemblies for teaching or exhortation were commanded by the Apostles for the fourth day and first day of the week. Epiphanius cites no Scriptures to support this view. In another work called *Panarion*, he provided a quote about a group called the Nazoreans. This was the original name given to the followers of Jesus. They still existed in his day; they also observed the Sabbath.

“For these people did not give themselves the name of Christ or Jesus’ own name, but that of ‘Nazoraean.’ But at that time all Christians alike were called Nazoraean. They also came to be called ‘Jessaean’ for a short while, before the disciples began to be called Christians at Antioch... They are different from Jews, and different from Christians, only in the following ways. They disagree with Jews because of their belief in Christ; but they are not in accord with Christians because they are still fettered by the Law—circumcision, the Sabbath, and the rest” (*Panarion*, 29.1.2-3, 7.5-6, Translated by Frank Williams, pp 123, 128-129).

### **Late 300s AD**

The *Apostolic Constitutions* was a series of books written to describe the practices of some Christians. The first several books were composed in the third century. The seventh and eighth books were composed in the later part of the fourth century. We have a quote from it below. The Sabbath was honored as a day of rest and sacred convocation. Fasting on the day was forbidden –



this reflects Eastern influence rather than Western influence.

“O Lord Almighty You have created the world by Christ, and hast appointed the Sabbath in memory thereof, because that on that day You have made us rest from our works, for the meditation upon Your laws...On this account He permitted men every Sabbath to rest, that so no one might be willing to send one word out of his mouth in anger on the day of the Sabbath. For the Sabbath is the ceasing of the creation, the completion of the world, the inquiry after laws, and the grateful praise to God for the blessings He has bestowed upon men” (idem, 7.36).

### **380-390s AD – John Chrysostom**

“**There are many among us now**, who fast on the same day as the Jews, and **keep the Sabbaths in the same manner...**” (*Commentary on Galatians*, 1:7).

Another ancient witness about Sabbath keeping comes from a man named Augustine. He is venerated by the Catholic Church as a saint; he lived in North Africa. Two of his letters, one written in 396 AD and the other written in 405 AD, described the widespread influence of Sabbath observance.

### **396 AD - From Augustine to Casulanus**

“This question I would wish to see him investigate, and resolve in such a manner as would not involve him in the guilt of openly speaking against the whole Church diffused throughout the world, with the exception of the Roman Christians, and hitherto a few of the Western communities. Is it, I ask, to be endured among the entire Eastern Christian communities, and many of those in the West, that this man should say of so many and so eminent servants of Christ, **who on the seventh day of the week refresh themselves soberly and moderately with food**, that they are in the flesh, and cannot please God; and that of them it is written, “Let the wicked depart from me, I will not know their way; and that they make their belly their god”, that they prefer Jewish rites to those of the Church, and are sons of the bondwoman; that they are governed not by the righteous law of God, but by their own good pleasure, consulting their own appetites instead of submitting to salutary restraint; also that they are carnal, and savour of death, and other such charges, which if he had uttered against even one servant of God, who would listen to him, who would not

be bound to turn away from him?” (Letter 36, 2.4)

#### **405 AD – Letter from Augustine to Jerome**

“For if we say that it is wrong to fast on the seventh day, we shall condemn not only the Church of Rome, but also many other churches, both neighbouring and more remote, in which the same custom continues to be observed. **If, on the other hand, we pronounce it wrong not to fast on the seventh day**, how great is our presumption in censuring so many churches in the East, and by far **the greater part of the Christian world!**” (Letter 82, sec. 14)

The greater part of the Christian world still considered the Sabbath a day of rest and enjoyment, whereas some of the Western Churches considered it a fast day.

#### **Sozomen (late 300s-420s AD)**

“Likewise some meet both upon the Sabbath and upon the day after the Sabbath, as at Constantinople, and among almost all others. At Rome and Alexandria they do not. Among the Egyptians, likewise, in many cities and villages, there is also a sacred custom among all of meeting on the evening of the Sabbath, when the sacred mysteries are partaken of” (*Church History*, 7.19).

#### **Socrates Scholasticus (late 300s-430s AD)**

“The Arians, as we have said, held their meetings without the city. As often therefore as the festal days occurred — I mean Saturday and Lord’s day—in each week, on which assemblies are usually held in the churches, they congregated within the city gates about the public squares...” (*Church History*, 6.8)

“For although **almost all churches throughout the world** celebrate the sacred mysteries on the **Sabbath** of every week, yet **the Christians of Alexandria and at Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, have ceased to do this...**” (ibid, 5.22)

Socrates wrote two things that are important to highlight. First, nearly all churches honored the Sabbath. Secondly, Rome and Alexandria were the two cities that ceased to gather every Sabbath. He recorded that Rome and Alexandria **ceased** to honor the Sabbath; this means at one time they honored it. Lastly, he noted

that they stopped honoring it because of a tradition, not Scripture. Jesus warned us about the traditions of man that contradict the commandments of God (Matt. 15:1-20).

The typical Roman Catholic view of the fourth century was that tradition served as the basis for Sunday observance (see Eusebius, *Exposition on Psalm 92*, in Odom, p 292). The two days became observed so closely in the Eastern Roman Empire by the late fourth and early fifth century that they were sometimes referred to as sisters of each other and mothers of the church in that on those days believers were taught. This meant that Christians in the East still had a very strong connection to the Sabbath.

### **Gregory of Nyssa (370s)**

“With what eyes can you behold the Lord’s day, when you despise the Sabbath? Do you not perceive that they are sisters, and that in slighting the one, you affront the other?” (Maxson and Parkinson, p 177)

### **Asterius of Amasia (375-405)**

“A beautiful lesson is presented to the Christians and the industrious in the conjunction of these two days; I mean the Sabbath and the Lord’s Day, which revolving time brings round each week. These days, as mothers or nurses of the church, both assemble the people and seat the priests before them as teachers. And they lead both learners and teachers to care for their souls. So the discourse of yesterday is still ringing in my ears, and the things that concerned us then linger in my memory...” (*Homily 5, On Divorce*)

These statements are fascinating because in church writings and councils of that time, the two days are often mentioned together, as has been presented in this work. The last quote we will look at is from John Cassian.

### **John Cassian (420-429 AD)**

**“And throughout the whole of the East it has been settled, ever since the time of the preaching of the Apostles, when the Christian faith and religion was founded, that these Vigils should be celebrated as the Sabbath dawns... And so, after the exertion of the Vigil, a dispensation from fasting, appointed in like manner for the Sabbath by apostolic men, is not without reason enjoined in all the churches of the East...”**

...” (*Institutes*, 3.9)

These primary sources indicate the obvious truth that Sabbath keeping was retained by the greatest portion of Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries. In the Eastern Churches, some degree of Sabbath keeping would remain the majority practice for hundreds of years into the future. In Western Europe, Sabbath keeping gradually became a minority practice. Forced fasting was one of the practices that diminished its importance.

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## **Conclusion**

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### **A Beginner's Guide to the Sabbath**

The Sabbath is a weekly celebration from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. This delight was given to mankind to help us spend more time with God and our family. In this booklet, you will learn answers to basic questions such as “What is the Sabbath?”; “When is the Sabbath?”; and “How Do We Keep the Sabbath?” You will also learn important reasons to keep this holy day and ways to practice it so that you can be in tune with God’s Sacred Rhythm.

### **A Beginner's Guide to Understanding the Bible**

This booklet will help you understand the Bible on a very basic level. It will give you practical tips to help you understand God’s word. These simple tips will transform your view of the Bible and your walk with God.

### **Defending the Ten Commandments**

There is a general hostility towards the commandments of God (see Matthew 24:12). Many people believe that the Law of God is done away with, including the Sabbath. People try to use verses from Jesus and the Apostles Paul to try and explain them away. This booklet will explain these verses and other questions people have about God’s Law. This resource will teach you to defend your faith. It is also a way to reach out to other believers and help them understand the truth of God’s Word.

### **How Do We Know Jesus Lived?**

Imagine for a moment that you did not have a Bible to learn about Jesus. How would you know that He ever lived on earth? Would it be possible to prove His existence? In modern times, there has been skepticism about the historical validity of Jesus’ existence and the New Testament account. In this book, we will address the historical, archaeological, and textual evidence to see if Jesus and His earliest followers ever existed.

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### **A Brief History of the Sabbath in Early Christianity**

Many people who attend Church today meet on Sunday. In the New Testament, the early Church met on Sabbath, which is from Friday sunset through Saturday sunset. Did you know that most Christians 400 years after Jesus still honored the Sabbath? In this informative booklet, you will learn the seven major historical factors that affected the Sabbath in the early Church.

### **Prevalence of the Sabbath in the Early Roman Empire**

When the Gentiles heard the early gospel message, how did they respond as it relates to the Sabbath? Were Gentile converts persuaded to keep the Sabbath like their Jewish counterparts? Did they seek to abandon it? In this work, the author reviews two Jewish, two Christian, fifteen Gentile primary sources, and the New Testament to examine the prevalence of the Sabbath in the early Roman Empire. The answer will surprise you!

### **Sabbath and Sunday Laws in the Roman Empire**

In the Roman Empire, a series of laws were passed concerning the Sabbath. Hundreds of years later, Sunday laws were also passed. These laws help us to understand the protection of Sabbath observance in broader Judaism and Christianity as well as the development of Sunday as a day of rest in the Roman Church.

### **How Did Sunday Become the First Day of the Week?**

How did the first day of the week, which does not have a name in the Bible, come to be called Sunday? How did the other days of the week come to have their names? In this work, you will learn about the history of two seven-day cycles in the early Roman Empire: The Biblical week and the planetary week. This study will also reveal insight into the development of Sunday as a day of gathering among certain groups in early Christianity.



Constantine is among the most controversial figures in Christian history. Did he try to change the Sabbath? Did he pass a law to prohibit people from keeping it? Did he work with the Church of Rome to pressure people to keep Sunday? In this book, we will sort out the confusion and provide clarity on Constantine's reign. This research will also unearth new, exciting paradigms for this subject.



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