

RECONSTRUCTING THE EXTENT OF CHRISTIAN
SABBATARIANISM IN THE MID-SECOND CENTURY:
OBSERVATIONS FROM *THE DIALOGUE WITH TRYPHO*

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Justin Martyr's *Dialogue With Trypho* reviews theological differences distinguishing Jews and Christians, c. 155 CE. Early in the document, Justin summarizes what he believes is the primary disagreement dividing the two faiths:

Is there any other matter, my friends, in which we are blamed, than this: that we live not after the law, and are not circumcised in the flesh as your forefathers were, and do not observe sabbaths as you do? (10)

Trypho, a Jew, concurs with this analysis:

This is what we are most at a loss about: that you, professing to be pious, and supposing yourselves better than others, are not in any particular separated from them, and do not alter your mode of living from the nations, in that you observe no festivals or sabbaths, and do not have the rite of circumcision... you yet expect to obtain some good thing from God, while you do not obey His commandments. (*Ibid.*)

Details within the document allow us to reconstruct the extent of Christian Sabbatarianism in the mid-second century. First, the above statements intimate that Sabbath observance was uncommon among Christians in the mid-second century, having become a major point of contradistinction between the two faiths. Accordingly, as many chapters as defend the Christian abandonment of circumcision also discuss Sabbatarianism: 12; 18-19; 21; 23-27; 29; 41-42; 46-47; 92.

However, exceptions to the general rule emerge when Trypho asks Justin whether it is possible for one to embrace Christianity and still observe Mosaic institutions (46,47). Justin replies:

If some, through weak-mindedness, wish to observe such institutions as were given by Moses, from which they expect some virtue... along with their hope in this Christ, and [wish to perform] the eternal and natural acts of righteousness and piety, yet choose to live with the Christians and the faithful, as I said before, not in-

ducing them [that is, “those gentiles who have been ‘circumcised’ from error by Christ”] either to be circumcised like themselves, or to keep the Sabbath, or to observe any other such ceremonies, then I hold that we ought to join ourselves to such, and associate with them in all things as kinsmen and brethren.

...

But if... some of your race, who say they believe in this Christ, compel those Gentiles who believe in this Christ to live in all respects according to the law given by Moses, or choose not to associate so intimately with them, I in like manner do not approve of them. (*Ibid.*)

Justin assumes a conciliatory stance towards those Jewish converts to Christianity (“some of your race”) who did not abandon the practice of the Law. (The qualification “some” suggests that a large number of Jews had, by contrast, abandoned Jewish observances.) Justin proposes that such will receive salvation so long as they do not attempt to persuade gentiles to embrace Mosaic observances as obligatory. Of concern is the *spread* of Judaizing tendencies to non-Jews, such as would deny the universal embrace of the Christian gospel (which includes gentiles by grace, and not “the works of the Law”).

Theologically, those individuals approved by Justin evidently believed that Jews were perpetually bound to observe their ancestral Law (a sensitivity Justin refers to as “weak-mindedness”). However, they upheld a distinction between Jews and gentiles (even as members of the same Church) so that only the former class bore the responsibility of Torah. By contrast, those individuals of which he disapproved drew no such distinctions, denying that the salvation offered to gentiles was valid “unless [they] observe these institutions.” (*Ibid.*)

Apparently, some gentiles received their teachings. With regard to this class, Justin adds: “But I believe that even those, who have been persuaded by [Jewish Christians] to observe the legal dispensation along with their confession of God in Christ, shall probably be saved.” (*Ibid.*) Sincerity admits Judaizing gentiles into the fellowship of Justin, despite their compromised faith (which stressed the observance of the “legal dispensation,” that is, the Law entire). Intriguingly, Justin holds Jewish Christians to a higher standard of culpability for spreading heresy, vis-à-vis their gentile counterparts.

However, not all Christian communities responded to these Judaizing tendencies with as much leniency. When Trypho asks, “Are there not some who affirm that [‘Judaizing’ Jewish Christians] will not be saved?” Justin answers in the affirmative: “There are such people, Trypho... and these do not venture to have any intercourse with or to extend hospitality to such persons; but I do not agree with them” (*Ibid.*). Of note, Justin consistently (and exclusively) presents his stance towards so-called “Judaizers” as a personal judgment: “I do not agree” or “in my opinion” (*Ibid.*). By

contrast, the alternative reaction is advanced by “some”—representing an indefinite (but likely, sizeable) segment of the Church.

Driving this divergent response is a sensitivity to the practical denial of faith inherent in placing one’s hope in Jewish observances. Accordingly, Judaizers—even if Jews by birth—are reckoned as practical apostates, receiving that treatment proper to one “sexually immoral or greedy... an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber” (cf. 1 Cor 5:11). This reaction was probably communal (as in 1 Cor 5), with entire local churches shunning Judaizing individuals or factions. (Naturally, all Jewish Christians worshipping in these communities had long since abandoned the practice of Sabbath-keeping.)

Conclusions

Justin’s *Dialogue* provides historians with a broad portrait of Christian Sabbatarianism, circa 155 CE. Its witness, however (as primary evidence from the period) discredits the historical claims of *The Great Controversy*. On p. 52, White indefensibly alleges: “In the first centuries the true Sabbath had been kept by all Christians. They were jealous for the honor of God, and, believing that His law is immutable, they zealously guarded the sacredness of its precepts” (52). Justin’s testimony (and that of all other contemporary records) decisively indicates otherwise.

Regarding the Mosaic Law as a single “legal dispensation” (of which the Sabbath was part), most believers—affirming the abolition of the same dispensation—also deemed the Sabbath obsolete. Accordingly, Sabbath observance was unknown among the preponderance of Christians—a reality that generally distinguished Christianity from Judaism. In fact, a substantial percentage of Christians appear to have been openly hostile to Sabbatarian practice—shunning so-called “Judaizers” as apostates.

Among those few Christians who still observed the Sabbath (among other ceremonial laws), the majority were Jews by race. Even still, many of these did not promote the institution as obligatory for gentiles; gentile Sabbatarians appear only among those factions that did. These gentiles likely observed other ceremonial laws as well (including circumcision), reflecting the same tendency to regard the Sabbath as an inextricable part of the Mosaic Law entire.