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Sabbath Controversy: Ibn Ezra and Rashbam in the Twelfth Century

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SABBATH CONTROVERSY: IBN EZRA AND RASHBAM IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY

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During the mid-twelfth century, a significant controversy emerged to the issue when Sabbath begins, at evening or in the morning. For the Biblical opening on Creation in time refers to the day's span as "it was evening and it was morning." Rashbam, the acronym for "Shmuel Ben Meir," was the grandson of the famous master of biblical commentary, Rashi, Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac. In contrast to his grandfather's work, he offered the explanation that day began with the morning. For Scripture did not relate "it was night then it was day," but instead stated "it was evening and it was morning." This particular wording in the sentence designates the expiration of light to end the day, to be followed by appearance of light in the morning of a new day. For light already appeared in the first day even though sunlight emerged on the fourth day. Thus, the repeated formula, "there was evening," is set apart from "there was morning." In this manner he sought to introduce his particular exegetical approach to be based on the simplistic meaning, "*peshat*," to be attentive to the syntactical and lexical use of the Hebrew language.

At that time the great Spanish commentator of Hebrew Scriptures was Abraham ibn Ezra, who traveled to France and Rheinland, where the Tosaphists lived. These outstanding scholars were the members of Rashi's family. They welcomed the great master of Scriptures as his fame had preceded him by his meticulous knowledge of Hebrew within the Semitic languages. He was also fully acquainted with early rabbinic authoritative tradition from the Gaonic period and the preceding periods of Talmudic writings. The Tosaphists as well probed carefully the rabbinic works of the past for deeper interpretation of the legal system with its textual, exegetical and structural understanding. Rashbam enjoyed a reputation as a commentator of both the Talmud and Hebrew Scriptures. In both fields of study he assisted his grandfather. However, he sought to change the approach of scriptural interpretation to the primary form of "*Peshat*." Four approaches of medieval exegesis have emerged to hermeneutics, that Nahmanides of the 13th century has codified in his commentary by the acronym PaRaDiSe (*Peshat*, *Remez*, *Derash* and *Sod*). Rashi relied heavily on *Derash*, the rabbinic approach to Scripture in contrast to the Christian use of allegorical interpretation. Rashbam criticized his grandfather's work for his dependence on Midrash. He writes in his commentary to Gen 37:1 that Rashi in his later years acceded to his point of view. In his days, the simplistic approach was also pursued by the School of St. Victor in Paris, with whom Rashbam and his brothers were acquainted and whose erudition the Victorines sought.

Rashbam now was eager to show his commentary to Ibn Ezra, who was known for his harsh criticism of antirabbinic Karaites in pursuit of their simplistic approach to discredit the rabbinic Midrash and thereby the Talmudic tradition. Their motto was "hapishu be'oraytha shapir," only the biblical wording can be excavated for proper meaning. Thus, upon reading the first chapter of Rashbam's commentary, Ibn Ezra severely criticized Rashbam's application of "*peshat*." For he maintained that the phrase "there was

evening and there was morning, one day” was clearly defined linguistically by the early Saboraic school of Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot 2a). They pointed out that the issue of time determination for Shema recitation, evening and morning usher in the night, sleeping time, and then day, wakeful time, as one unit of the day. The Saboraim were the editors of the Babylonian Talmud during the 5th/6th Century that ushered in the Gaonic period during the Islamic times. Ibn Ezra, in addition, issued an open epistle for Jewry on the matter, that led to the censoring the first seventeen chapters of Genesis in Rashbam’s commentary. Only in the past century were these chapters were restored in the recent Schulzinger edition of “Miqrat Gedoloth” (the Rabbinic Pentateuch).

It seems on the surface that the controversy was rooted in the linguistic examination that produces two contrasting views for the simplistic approach to Scripture. However, it also affected the very heart of Jewish praxis that is related to the most sacred institution of Judaism, namely the Sabbath. It cannot be that the very Rashbam interpretation broaches heresy. As some suggest there is a basis for a shift in Sabbath time that ends with the dawn of Sunday, which Christianity advanced with Jesus as the risen Lord. Indeed, the Tosaphists were familiar with Christian teachings and they did not view Christianity as idolatry; in contrast to those in Spanish Jewry who were highly knowledgeable of Islamic religion. Thus, Maimonides viewed Christianity as idolatrous in contrast to Islam as monotheistic.¹ Maimonides was fully conversant in Arabic literature of his days and wrote major works and epistles in Arabic while at the same period, the Tosaphists were directly familiar with Christian practice and writings.

The Tosaphists did not view Christianity as idolatry but as a biblically oriented religion for God’s fearers. So they have commented on the opening Mishnah of Babylonian tractate Avodah Zarah, on relations with idolaters. Rashbam’s view of the Sabbath beginning with dawn offered a unique understanding how the Tosaphists understood the underlying account of Scripture as guide to biblically oriented tradition with its varied forms. The rabbinic tradition of Talmudic study distinguished between Noahide and Jewish praxis. Christianity in its initial form, as viewed by James in Acts 15, advanced a category of Noahide laws governing the life of gentile believers for Paul’s mission. James has stipulated these commandments in a letter to be given to Paul at the Jerusalemian meeting in year 48. Thus, uncircumcised believers, who accepted God as the Creator with the heavenly intercessor Jesus at his right hand, enjoyed the status of Noahide people. This was in contrast to converts to Judaism who are obligated to enter the Torah covenant with its 365 negative and 248 positive commandments. Such entry requires circumcision for male converse to Judaism as the initial commandment.

The issue of Sabbath time became the determining law prior to the Sinaitic Torah covenant, with God’s appearance on the Mount. That day was the seventh of Sivan, on the Sabbath, with the declaration “six days you shall work and the seventh day is Sabbath unto the Lord” (Ex 20:7). The very knowledge of a day’s span was introduced two weeks earlier with the manna episode (Ex 16:22-27). This unique historical event offered the halakhic determination how to prepare for Sabbath time. For on Friday before sunset a double portion of Manna was given from heaven to prepare the three meals for the rest day of Sabbath, beginning with the night. This emerged as a divine marker for Sabbath observance, from sunset to the following night, as biblically defined. However, from the days of Noah following the deluge, the Hebrew Pentateuch offers a Noahidic relationship to God, as biblically oriented, that the day is marked from sunrise to sunrise. Thus, two biblically oriented determinations are presented in the Pentateuch.

¹ See my paper, “The Abrahamic Covenant: Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Medieval Rabbinic Thought,” presented at the 42nd International Conference on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University on May 10, 2007.

God intended for humanity to maintain the seasons of the solar year (Gen 8:22). The very seasons are also specified in ancient Gezer calendar. Moreover in Genesis 8:22, it concluded with the day's span as "day and night will not cease." A biblically oriented determination for Noahides: day begins with sunrise. Their calendar enjoyed a cycle of months consisting of twelve units of 30 days apiece. This is stipulated in the narrative about the Deluge. Gen 8:3 describes the duration of water decreasing, as occurring on the 17th day of the 7th month. Thus, five months are enumerated from the beginning of the Deluge on the 17th day of the 2nd month. These five months are stipulated as each consisting of 30 days. The mythopoeic expression of ancient religions viewed time with reference to gods and goddesses, not only for the days of the week, but also for the months and the five days left over from a year span of 360 days. These five days were especially celebrated in Greco-Roman world.

In contrast with this worldview of Noahide time, the first commandment presented to the Jewish people prior to their exodus as formulated in Ex 12:1, 2. "This month, as lunation², is unto you, for the calendrical count of months." Only ordinal numbers are assigned to the months, with no reference to mythopoeic names of gods. In Hebrew, the word "month" marks a renewal in the cycle of time, also denoting renewal in human history, i.e. Israel as free people. They rejected idolatry upon their departure from Egypt and entered into a particular relationship with God through His covenant. Propitious time is enjoyed with God's providence, leading them to Sinai that spelled out the proselytization process from Noahide to Israelite under God. These two processes are biblically oriented from humanity as God fearers of the Noahide covenant as well as God's people of the Sinaitic covenant.

Judaism evolved out of the Mosaic covenant, that was received finally on the tenth day of Tishri; the very day designated by God as the Day of Atonement for the Jewish people. (Lev. 16: 1-34). For they now received the second tablets of the Decalogue with slight changes, as a replacement for the first tablets (Deut 5:6-18). The former Tablets were broken by Moses forty days after the seventh of Sivan. Moses then sought God as an intercessor for his sinful people to forgive them. He stood in prayer for Israel during another period of forty days (Deut 9:12). Finally God revealed to Moses how a relationship to God can be restored as a forgiving heavenly Father (Exod 34:1-7). This is expressed in a penitential formula of thirteen attributes of God's love and compassion, tolerance and forgiveness. This period occurred from the first of Elul to the tenth of Tishre, as a penitential period of the Jewish people. Elul is acronym for "Ani Ledodi Vedodi Li" ("I am to my lover and my lover is to me," so Cant 6:3) in the Jewish tradition. The Jews prepare themselves to enter the ten awesome days from New Year to Day of Atonement. As a sign of acceptance the covenantal relationship with God, they enjoy the festivities of joy and celebration during "Tabernacles" as recalling their dwelling in God's presence in Tabernacle, ending with the joyous celebration of covenant with the Torah, on the last day of the feast.

The second set of Tablets added to the fourth commandment on the Sabbath the notation, "as Lord God commanded you," namely a reference to its formulation already in the earlier tablets. However, in the earlier version the reason of the commandment is in reference to the creation story (Ex 20:11). The new version of the Sabbath law in the second Tablets refers to the event of exodus. Apparently, the proselytization process of Israel after the exodus led to their human experience of entering the Sabbath by the manna episode at Marah. They enjoyed their freedom from slavery after the splitting of the Reed

² The word month in Hebrew, *Hodesh*, means renewal that is lunation. *Luna* is the moon, not as a goddess in the Bible but renewal in the appearance.

Sea, as they now entered into a restful day with no work in the gathering of Manna for their meals. The law of the Sabbath with reference to forty nine types of human creative works is imposed on them, to celebrate the “set-apartness” of seventh day and its blessings through meals and rest for human need and prayer with Torah study to be in God’s presence.

Thus, two orientations for proselytization emerge, one for the Noahide people and the other for Israel. These orientations are biblically oriented in later centuries, one for Jews and one for Christians. They both share the Pentateuchal teachings as God’s words. As they are guided by the canonical Torah; it offers a particular relationship to God, not only as the Creator and King of the Universe but also as Heavenly Father and Provider. Their theistic faith is expressed in prayer and teachings. The Jews have embraced the Hillelitic rabbinic tradition and the Christians follow Jesus as their redeemer via his teachings and the early tradition of the Apostles and Paul.

The major gift given to the Jewish people and the Christian believers determines their relationship to God in prayer and worship that results from two distinct orientations for Noahide and Israelitic proselytization. The Jews enjoy a relationship to God after He forgave them following the sin of the Golden Calf. It was defined as “sonship,” for God related to them as the heavenly Father who forgave by the expression of His love. It is expressed as thirteen attributes of his compassion. This account in Exod 34:6, 7 was a unique revelation to Moses at the crevice of the Mountain, where he retained the second tablets to deliver to Israel on the Day of Atonement.

This gift was defined by Paul in Romans 9:4, with reference to the Jewish people as “sonship” (*uiiothesia*). Apparently Paul sought to demonstrate that such a gift was also given to the believers in Jesus as the heavenly intercessor. They are gentiles who embrace faith in God of the Bible as Noahidic people. Thus, he stated in his first epistle, Galatians 4:6 “Since you are sons (*uiioi*), God has sent forth the Spirit of the Son (*uiios*) in your hearts, crying (i.e. in prayer) “*Abba*” (=Father).” He repeats that also in Romans 8:15. For this gift he assigned to believing Christians in Jesus as Noahidic fearers of God. They now enjoy a relationship in prayer to the heavenly intercessor, which a Noahide can address. Thus, according to Paul, the gift of *Abba* in prayer can now be shared by Jews and Christians. Both do address God as “*Avinu shbhashamayim*” (Our Father in Heaven), as it is formulated in Matthew 6:9 (so in *Didache*, Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) and early Jewish prayer.

For Jewish praxis, the Sabbath day remains the time when, Jews related to their heavenly Father directly, as a testimony to their covenantal relationship since the manna episode. Sabbath day is not shared with Christians since they enjoy the gift of “*Abba*” via their faith in Jesus, their heavenly intercessor. He then is identified as their “heavenly manna” in Jn 6:48. In contrast, Jews await the coming of the Messiah, in the rabbinic tradition by recalling the manna episode. Thus, “if only the total Jewish people will observe two Sabbaths in succession, the Messiah will come” (b. Sabbath 118b). For their ancestors celebrated two Sabbaths of Manna prior to God’s appearance on Mount Sinai on the seventh day of Sivan. These were the Sabbaths of the twenty second and the twenty ninth of Iyar, the preceding month. On the third Sabbath they experienced the very manifestation of God proclaiming the first two commandments of the Decalogue. “I am the Lord God who took you out of Egypt, the house of bondage” and “Thou shalt not have other gods in my presence.” With this declaration, they enjoyed their absolute freedom, the very promise of Messianic coming. For the Jews eventually faced subjugation, anti-Semitic hatred and death. Yet, they remain bound by the Torah covenant of 613 commandments. Sabbath, after all, is the supreme commandment of observing rest and freedom to be

with the heavenly Father. Sabbath is the invitation to God's time, as they are His children. Thus, rabbinic eschatology points to the final salvation as they enter into the Seventh Millennium. For one day of God's time is a millennium (Ps 90:4). Now we have entered the year 5768 and the millennial count began with the rise of human civilization in the Bible after Noah, with Sumer and Akkad. However, according to the Church the Sabbath day has shifted to Sunday. For at Sunday dawn, a gate to salvation is open to Noahide people to seek their redemption through their intercessor, the Jewish Messiah. Jesus is viewed as the heavenly High Priest after his ascension and at the endtime he will be manifested as the heavenly Temple on earth, according to the homily to "the Hebrews" and in "Revelation" respectively. Thus, the very Sabbath controversy in Middle Ages opened a door to share a unique understanding for the common biblical tradition relating two distinct orientations for Jews and Christians as brothers in faith.

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