

## Chapter 8

### Eusebius of Caesarea and the Christian Sunday

**E**USEBIUS is the bridge between the church before and after Constantine. The change from an emperor who either opposed or disregarded the church to one who favoured it created profound changes in its life. Born c. AD 260, probably at Caesarea, Eusebius studied under Pamphilus and was closely connected with the famous library there. He became a great admirer of Origen. This, it will be seen later, is important for our subject. Later Eusebius came to have a great influence over Constantine.

The most important of his writings with regard to the theology of Sunday is in his *Commentary on the Psalms*. This is one of his latest works and was probably written about eight years after Constantine's decree of AD 321 (Quasten, *Patrology* 3, p. 338). The passage occurs in the commentary on Psalm 91(92) (PG xxiii. 1168ff.). It is entitled 'A Psalm for the Sabbath Day':<sup>1</sup>

The righteous men and the patriarchs before Moses did not know or keep sabbaths. The Jews think that in their sabbath they have something excellent, so what is said in this Psalm must be explained to them. The impious cannot keep sabbath, as Psalm 95 shows. The Sabbath of God can be kept only by those who are just and the friends of God, as Abraham was. We must understand what the sabbath signifies. It signifies the rest of God after the creation. This rest is God's converse with sentient and heavenly beings. He 'works' when he deals with the 'non-sentient'. But when he is engaged on things apart from the body he is said to rest and to keep sabbath. So too with men, when they are labouring on physical (psychical) things they labour; but when devoted to the divine and the spiritual they keep sabbath. This is the meaning of 'there remaineth a rest (sabbath-keeping)'. The perfect sabbath and perfect rest will be in the final kingdom of God, from which pain and toil have fled, set free from the things of the body. But in the image (*eikōn*) of that sabbath and thrice blessed rest men of God as they bear themselves on earth make leisure and empty themselves of those things

which separate them from God. Giving themselves entirely to the contemplation of divine things, day and night continually in meditation on the sacred words, they then were keeping a holy rest, sabbaths, and a rest acceptable to God and were sabbatising. And so, suitably, the law of Moses, providing a 'shadow' (*skia*) of those things spoken of and symbols, set aside a day to the multitude in order that they might turn on it from their accustomed works and have leisure for the care of the law of God.

This present Psalm clearly teaches, on this point, that it is necessary that leisure be made for the sabbath and from useless inactivity and that they should come together for this same purpose; that is confession, praise, telling of God's mercy in the morning and telling his truth at night.

So you see how many things the present Psalm exhorts to be done on the day of the Resurrection (Sunday). The Psalm is for the sabbath, but the priests in the temple did many things, so it does not tell us to empty the day. The sabbath was not commanded for the priests; but for those who could not give all their time to the service of God, so that they might have leisure for works pleasing to God. They should do this at intervals of six days. But to those who fill the day with riotous living God says, 'They make false sabbaths' . . . and so repudiating these, the Word, through the New Covenant, has changed and transferred the feast of the sabbath to the rising of the light and handed to us the image (*eikōn*) of a true rest, the Lord's Day, that brings salvation, the first, and the day of light on which the Saviour of the world, after all his works, which had been done among men, and having brought back victory over death, passed the heavenly gates and completed his work, receiving the sabbath which pleased God and the blessed rest when his Father said 'Sit thou on my right hand . . .'

On that day which is the day of the True Light and the True Sun we ourselves have gathered together with intervals of six days, celebrating (*heortazontes*) holy sabbaths and spiritual. We who have been redeemed through him from the nations all over the world, do what the law had laid down for the priests to do on the sabbath. We fulfil this after a spiritual law. We offer spiritual sacrifices (*thysias*) and oblations (*anaphoras*), what are called the sacrifices of praise and rejoicing. We send up the sweet incense, of which it is written, 'Let my prayer. . . .' But also we offer the showbread . . . the cup as a memorial, the blood of sprinkling of the Lamb of God that takes

away the sin of the world. We light the lights of the knowledge of the face of God. . . . In the morning we announce the mercy which comes to us from God towards the rising of the light. . . . All things which it was necessary to do on the sabbath, these we (*bēmeis*) have transferred to the Lord's Day, as being more closely linked to the Lord (*kyriōteras*) in itself and excelling, and the first and more honourable (*timōteras*) than the Jewish sabbath. For on each Lord's Day what God said in the creation of the world 'Let there be light' comes into being and on each the Sun of Righteousness has arisen on our souls. Wherefore it has been handed down to us also that on each (Lord's Day) we should come together and it has been commanded to us to carry out what has been told us in the Psalm.

These things we do each Lord's Day. We are like the Jews who offered hymns on musical instruments on the sabbath day, breaking the inactivity and transgressing the law of the sabbath. For, as Paul says, we are Jews inwardly, not outwardly (Rom. 2 : 28, 29).

v. 5 'Thou hast made me rejoice, Lord, in thy work and in the labours of thy hands I will exult.' Had it been the Jewish sabbath he would have said, not 'in thy work', but 'in thy rest'. What was this 'work of God'? 'This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.' This indicates the day of the Resurrection. 'Let there be light' and 'God called the light day'. On this day God created nothing else except the light,<sup>2</sup> the first Lord's Day, about which he now says, 'Thou hast caused me to rejoice in thy work'. The works of his hands are the other days, the things of the senses. (PG xxiii. 1168ff.).

In this passage, which I have given almost in full, there is the first real attempt to find the relationship between the Jewish sabbath and the Christian Sunday. Are we to take it as wholly mystical? We have faced this question in regard to both Clement of Alexandria and Origen, in whom Eusebius is specially interested. It is clear that there are mystical elements in it, but the references to 'intervals of six days', 'gatherings throughout the world', the allusions to the Eucharist, including the bread and 'the blood of the Lamb which taketh away the sin of the world', the emphasis on 'each Lord's day' several times, all suggest that it is a literal Sunday which Eusebius has in mind. Then there is the contrast between 'the Lord's Day' and the ill-spent sabbath of the Jews. We may conclude that Eusebius has the Christian Sunday in view.

The line that Eusebius takes is to maintain that the real objective of the sabbath was foreshadowed in the creation story. After six days of dealing with the things of the senses, God rested and this rest was his converse with men and heavenly beings. The rest then for man was the knowledge of God and his service. It was on this that the priests were engaged on the sabbath day, and therefore, far from desecrating it, they were in fact carrying out its inner intention. The patriarchs did not know of sabbath days, for 'night and day' they were seeking to know God. The Jewish sabbath was instituted for those who, engrossed in the duties of this life, needed one day in which to concentrate on God; but they so often misused it, spending it in indolence (*argia*) or in riotous living. The institution of the Jewish sabbath was a 'shadow' (*skia*)<sup>3</sup> of that sabbath rest, the ideal sabbath (*to teleion sabbaton*) of the knowledge and service of God. This ideal sabbath will only be experienced in the world to come when we are free from toil and pain. While the Jewish sabbath was a 'shadow' (*skia*) of that perfect sabbath of communion with God, the patriarchs (*ton theou andres*) had an image of it (*eikōn*) in their night and day devotion to God. The Christian too has an image (*eikōn*) of that true rest in the Lord's Day, which the Word, when he transferred the festival of the sabbath to the Lord's Day, handed to us (*paredōken hēmin*). All that was suitable for the Jew to do on the sabbath, as regards the knowledge and service of God, is suitable for the Christian to do on the Lord's Day: 'The Word has exchanged and transferred the feast of the sabbath to the Lord's Day'. Eusebius does not merely say the sabbath was transferred, but 'the feast of the sabbath', apparently intending to introduce this conception into the thought of the Christian Lord's Day.

But it is not so much the sabbath of the ordinary Jew as the sabbath of the priests which is to characterise the Lord's Day. This was a day filled with the temple service, offerings, the showbread, the sacrifice of the lambs, the lighting of the lights—in other words, the service of God. The Christian equivalent of these is seen in the first three verses of this Psalm.<sup>4</sup>

All that God did on the first day was to create the light, 'Let there be light', and called the light 'the day'; the Christian Sunday is the day of light; the Sun of Righteousness has arisen in the Resurrection. On this day God says, 'Let there be light'. It is the day the Lord has made (Psalm 118: 24). We are to rejoice in it, God has made us glad in his work, in the giving of light, the works of the spirit.

The feast of the sabbath was transferred to the Sunday because that

day was 'in itself more closely linked to the Lord'<sup>5</sup> and 'taking the lead, being the first and more honourable'. Elsewhere, Eusebius has said that the change took place because of 'the rising of the light', the resurrection of Christ. It is also 'the Lord's' (*kyriakē*) and the day 'that brings salvation' (*sōtēria*). It is the 'image' of the true rest (*eikōn*).

The conclusion that must be drawn from these expressions is clearly that to Eusebius the Christian Sunday had a connection with the Jewish sabbath in that both were opportunities meant for the knowledge of God. The one was substituted for the other. He does not hesitate to say that 'on that day (Sunday) we ourselves coming together at intervals of six days are celebrating holy and spiritual sabbaths'. To Eusebius therefore the Christian Sunday is the image, the realisation, of that of which the Jewish sabbath was only the shadow. Both would be fully realised in the world to come.<sup>6</sup> The Christian Sunday has taken the place of the sabbath.

Summarising these thoughts then, the Christian Sunday is a day, a feast celebrated at intervals of six days, which has the same object as the Jewish sabbath, the knowledge and service of God, and has taken its place. It is closely connected with Christ and was given by him. It is a foretaste of the true rest of the world to come. All that was suitable for the priests to do on the sabbath is suitable for the Christian Sunday. The change is connected with the New Covenant.

Two questions arise in connection with this very important passage: (i) is this conception something entirely new; and (ii) if it is new, does it owe anything to the decree of Constantine in AD 321?

Dealing with (i) first, Eusebius makes the claim that what he has been saying has been 'handed down' (*paradedotai*) and 'ordered' (*prostetaktai*). Primarily the words are used of the Christian worship customary on the Sunday (PG xxiii. 1172B). But the first word is also used in his argument about Sunday being 'handed down to us' as the image of the true rest by Christ (PG xxiii. 1169C). He seems to suggest that this whole conception has been handed down to the church of his day,<sup>7</sup> a tradition of the church.

In support of this is the fact that if we analyse the conceptions in the passage we find that almost all of them have already appeared in pre-Nicene authors. What Eusebius has done is to think through their relationship and knit them into a coherent whole.<sup>8</sup> Below is a list of some of these conceptions and the references:

- i. The patriarchs had no sabbaths (Justin, *Dial.* 19, PG vi. 516; *ibid.* 27, PG vi. 533; Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 2, 3, PL ii. 601f.;

*Didascalia*, FXF 6.18.16, p. 362; Connolly, op. cit., p. 237).

ii. God did not cease all work on the sabbath day (Tertullian, *Adv. Marcion* 2.21, PL ii. 309; Origen, *Comm. on Num.* 23.4, PG xii. 750; and the constant quotation of the text John 5:17 in this connection).

iii. The conception of a future fulfilment of the sabbath (*Barnabas* 15; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.16.1, PG vii. 1015; Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 6, PL ii. 608; Clement Alex., *Strom.* 6.14, PG ix. 329; Origen, *Hom. Exod.* 7.5, PG xii. 346; Methodius, *Symp.* 9.1, PG xviii. 177).

iv. The sabbath intention, a devotion to spiritual things (Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 4, PL ii. 605; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.16.1, PG vii. 1016).

v. The Christian devoting himself to the contemplation of divine things (Origen, *Contr. Cels.* 8.23, PG xi. 1552).

vi. The sabbath, a day for the multitude to have time for spiritual things (Justin, *Dial.* 19, PG vi. 517; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.16.3, PG vii. 1017; Origen, *Contr. Cels.* 4.31, PG xi. 1076; *ibid.*, 8.23, PG xi. 1552).

vii. The priests do not desecrate the sabbath (Justin, *Dial.* 27, PG vi. 533; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.8.3, PG vii. 995; Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 2.21, PL ii. 309).

viii. There are false sabbaths and true (Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 4.12, PL ii. 384ff.).

ix. Sunday, the image of the true rest (the eighth day) (see the material on the eighth day in chapter twelve).

x. Sunday, the first day, a day of light (Justin, *Apol.* 1.67, PG vi. 429).

xi. The Christian Sunday a keeping festival (*Barnabas* 15; Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 9, PL iii. 262; *ibid.*, 31, PL iii. 337).

xii. The offerings have a Christian equivalent (Justin, *Dial.* 41, PG vi. 564; Origen, *Hom. Num.* 23.3.4, PG xii. 748).

xiii. Sunday excels the sabbath (Justin, *Apol.* 1.67, PG vi. 429; Origen, *Hom. Exod.* 7.5, PG xii. 345; *Didascalia* 6.18, FXF, p. 360, Connolly, op. cit., p. 233).

xiv. The Sun of Righteousness arising (Origen, *Comm. Num.* 23.5, PG xii. 751; *ibid.*, *Hom. Exod.* 7.8, PG xii. 348).

xv. Sunday the day of rejoicing, quotation of Psalm 117(118):23 (Tertullian, *De Orat.* 23, PL i. 1191; Clement Alex., *Strom.* 6.16, PG ix. 364; *Didascalia*, FXF 5.10.1, p. 264; Connolly, op. cit., p. 178).

xvi. The sabbath and Sunday as feasts (Origen, *Hom. Num.* 23.4, PG xxi. 749).

xvii. Sunday is a holy day (Dionysius of Corinth, in Eusebius, *HE* 4.23, PG xx. 388).

Particularly important is the thought of the sabbath rest as being the knowledge and service of God. This has appeared prominently in Clement of Alexandria and in Origen.<sup>9</sup> It stems originally from Philo (*De Spec. Leg.* 2.15 [61–63]).<sup>10</sup> Eusebius' use of it confirms the explanations already given of the passages from Clement and Origen and suggests Eusebius' indebtedness to them. It will be remembered that in Origen's explanation of the feasts he deals with the sabbath and seems to imply the Christian Sunday, and here Eusebius emphasises the 'feast of the sabbath' and says it has been transferred to the Christian Sunday.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps now it is possible to draw a conclusion. Almost all the conceptions in the passage have already appeared. What is new is the way in which Eusebius has linked them together into a consistent whole.

(ii) Does this owe anything to the decree of Constantine? The decree was purely negative. Its intention was to empty the day of ordinary work. There is no trace at all in this whole passage of anything which would suggest that the decree was in Eusebius' thoughts. In fact the emphasis on rejoicing in God's 'working' (*ergasia*) would suggest the opposite. It seems much more likely that Eusebius would have influenced Constantine in this direction, despite the contentions of Rordorf (pp. 162–6) to the contrary. In his *Life of Constantine* (iv. 18) Eusebius suggests that the decree was expressly issued to influence his subjects towards Christianity and that he himself was accustomed to 'honour' (*timan*) the Lord's Day in the imperial palace; while to the soldiers who were Christians he allowed time off (*scholen*), a word used in the *Commentary* on Psalm 91, on that day to continue (*proskarterein*) at the church gatherings, 'teaching them zealously to honour the Lord's Day'. Eusebius may be giving a wholly pro-Christian view of Constantine, but it seems unlikely that the edict of AD 321 (at least four years after the Christian banner had started being carried in front of Constantine's army) was not the result of strong Christian influence and probably of Eusebius himself. The use of the customary name 'Sunday' and the customary Roman concessions to farmers in the edict do not disprove this. The verb 'honour' (*timāō*), which is used both of Constantine's personal attitude and his influence on his soldiers, is a word which has appeared in earlier writings of the Christian attitude to Sunday. Eusebius has spoken of the Lord's Day in the passage we have quoted as 'more honourable', the adjective from the same verb.

It would seem that instead of Constantine initiating this attitude to Sunday it was handed down from earlier practice.

Before drawing this chapter to a close, we shall examine what is contained in the other important fourth-century contribution, the work *De sabbatis et circumcissione* (PG xxviii. 134ff.). It was attributed to Athanasius, but rejected as spurious, with all the other sermons, by Migne. The author probably wrote about the middle of the fourth century and may in fact have been Athanasius himself (Quasten, *Patrology* 3, p. 50).

The last paragraph suggests that he may be speaking at a baptism and probably too on a Sunday. In this material there are some new thoughts which have a bearing on the subject of this chapter.

His argument, stated briefly, is that the sabbath is the end of the old creation. There is a new creation which will have no end, but it does have a beginning. Sunday is the beginning of this new creation. To the new creation God did not command the observance of the old sabbath, but he revealed the Lord's Day to show the end of the old. The sabbath was not meant for idleness but for the knowledge of God, sacrifice and service offered to him. It is not identical with the seventh day, for the Day of Atonement is called a sabbath. So it speaks too of confession and humiliation of soul. God ceased from his work, but owing to Adam's Fall that work must be completed. The old creation ceased in the darkness of the cross; the new began in the rising from the dead the Sun of Righteousness arising with healing in his wings. He did not create another, but renewed the old. The sabbath was the memorial of the old creation; Sunday is the memorial of the beginning of the new creation. It was the day appointed for this renewal. 'This is the day the Lord has made.' This day does not belong to all, but to those who are dying to sin and rising to the Lord. For this reason the Law commanded circumcision on the eighth day. We put off the one who died, on the sixth day, and we are renewed on the Lord's Day (Col. 2 :17). Circumcision was the sign of the new birth through baptism. When the reality came, the sign ceased. As the Lord's Day has come, the sabbath has ceased. Both are directed forwards, and both are the beginning of the creation and the regeneration of man. So the eighth day dissolved the sabbath and not the sabbath the eighth day. Circumcision was the cutting off of the earthly birth, the shame of Egypt, the curse of 'Dust thou art . . .'. Then it was in part, in shadow; now it is fulfilled in the laver of regeneration on the eighth day.

Here is the same conception as we have already seen in Eusebius,

that the real meaning of the sabbath is a spiritual one, the knowledge of God, the service of God and the forgiveness received from God. Moreover it is not tied to the seventh day. He places the two days on a par as memorials of the first and second creations. Though he does not say so directly, the thought is clearly that Sunday represents just those things for which the sabbath stood in the old creation. He uses the same word as Eusebius—'we honour' the Lord's Day. The eighth day was the sign of the final rest and the full knowledge of God. Again his emphasis that in the new creation God did not create another, but renewed the old, suggests that this was also his thought in regard to the day.

As we conclude this chapter, it may be helpful to go over briefly what has been gathered so far. The Jewish sabbath was abolished. The Christians used the expression the 'Lord's Day' for their worship day. It was not merely a 'meal' in which they were interested, but a 'day'. That day, the first day, was also called the eighth day. It was considered as a holy day and a festival. This conception would mean that ordinary tasks were laid aside and there are hints that this was so. The day had affinities with the Jewish festivals in the thought of the Christian church, and with the sabbath conception of a day devoted to God. The original intention of the sabbath was for the knowledge of God. Sunday's close connection with Christ and with the resurrection meant that it became the mark of the New Covenant. In Eusebius these thoughts are gathered together and he claims that as the sabbath was a 'shadow' of a perfect rest and a perfect knowledge of God in the future, so the Christian Sunday was in the New Covenant the 'image' of that rest and to it Christ had transferred the feast of the sabbath. The Christians observed it, not as the ordinary Jews in inactivity, but as the priests observed their sabbath in the service of God. The sabbath was not tied to the seventh day, but signified the opportunity for the knowledge and service of God. Sunday was the memorial of the new creation as the sabbath had been of the old.

11. Eusebius says in 1169c, 'We are celebrating (*beortizontes*) holy and spiritual sabbaths'. We do not have the Greek of the Origen passage. He speaks of the festal day of the sabbath.

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1. I have made a précis of the whole passage and in important sentences I have translated word for word.
2. Cp. Theodoret, *Ps.* 117 (118) (PG lxxx. 1817).<sup>1</sup>
3. The word comes in connection with the sabbath in Col. 2.17.
4. This was probably connected with the conception of the priesthood of all Christians, 1 Pet. 2 : 5; Rev. 1 : 6.
5. I suggest this as the most suitable meaning for *kyriōtera*. It would imply its connection with Christ.
6. Though Eusebius does not mention the eighth day in this passage, the thought is the same, as we have seen elsewhere, that both sabbath and the eighth day were foretastes of the final rest.
7. Is it possible that Eusebius was indebted to Melito of Sardis in any way, e.g., for the transference of the sabbath to Sunday? He knew of Melito's work, *On the Lord's Day* (*peri kyriakēs*). The expressions 'the Word', 'the New Covenant' and 'changing' seem to be favourites of Melito's in his work on the *Pascha*.
8. The same process took place with regard to the Trinity, the Person of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The thoughts were there before, but not yet sorted out.
9. Clement Alex., *Strom.* 6.16 (PG ix. 364); Origen, *Hom. Num.* 23 (PG xii. 75of.); Theodoret's *Commentary* has the same thoughts about the sabbath, in *Psalm* 91 (PG lxxx. 1616); but Augustine, *Pss.* 92(91).2 (PL xxxvii. 1172) treats it in a purely spiritual way.
10. See also p. 10 above.