

Sabbaths, Annual (Ceremonial)

RON DU PREEZ

Raised in a Seventh-day Adventist home in South Africa, Ron du Preez has served in several countries, as pastor, professor, college president, etc. His love of research, especially Scripture, led him to earn three Masters' degrees, a Ph.D., a Th.D., and a D.Min. Author and main editor of several books, Professor du Preez actively promotes healthy living, motivates many to participate in abundant life in Jesus Christ, and enjoys time with his wife, Lynda.

From the era of its pioneers to the present, the standard position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been that the annual ceremonial sabbaths of ancient Israel pointed to the Messiah and terminated when Jesus Christ was crucified, whereas the requirement to loyally observe the seventh-day Sabbath retains its validity as an integral part of the Ten Commandments.

Introduction

Annual (ceremonial) Sabbaths are special days of restricted work in connection with the sequence of the annual appointed seasons (loosely called "festivals"), in contrast with the seventh-day Sabbath of the recurring weekly cycle. Over time different terms, such as cultic, ritual, feast, festal/festival, etc., have been used as descriptive words to refer to these yearly ceremonial sabbaths. Each of these annual times fell on specifically identified days within the first, third and seventh lunar months of the yearly religious calendar of ancient Israel. Of these, only the Day of Atonement is directly labelled a "sabbath" in the original Hebrew language (e.g., Lev 23:32), as it is the exclusive annual ceremonial day on which all work was prohibited (v. 28). The other six sacred occasions were days when only "servile" or "regular" or "laborious" or "occupational" work was prohibited (vv. 7, 8, 21, etc.), thus permitting the cooking of food (e.g., Exod 12:16). While all male Israelites were required to attend the holy convocations held in Jerusalem for the annual pilgrimage festivals (Exod 23:14-17; Deut 16:16; cf. Lev 23), such attendance on the Day of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement was not obligatory. Despite these differences, all seven of these sacred occasions have traditionally been referred to as the "annual ceremonial sabbaths," in contrast with the weekly "Sabbaths of the Lord" (Lev 23:38).

While many may be aware that Scripture differentiates between the seventh-day Sabbath (as in Exod 20:8-11), and the ceremonial sabbaths (as found within Lev 23:4-37), others may inadvertently place both the weekly Sabbath and the annual sabbaths into the same category. On the one hand, some have thus concluded that, since the "sabbaths" in Colossians 2:16, 17 are classified as "shadows" that pointed to Christ and met their fulfillment at the cross, there is no longer any need to observe the weekly Sabbath. On the other hand, some have thus deduced that, since they observe the seventh-day Sabbath, they ought to still keep the yearly festal sabbaths also. Over time, Seventh-day Adventists have sought to explain similarities and differences between

the weekly and yearly sabbaths. As identified in Leviticus, these annual ceremonial days were:

15th day, 1st month—1st day of Unleavened Bread (Lev 23:6-7);

21st day, 1st month—7th day of Unleavened Bread (Lev 23:8);

50th day after “the Sabbath” (of Unleavened Bread)—Pentecost (Lev 23:16-21);

1st day, 7th month—Day of Trumpets (Lev 23:24-25);

10th day, 7th month—Day of Atonement (Lev 23:28-32);

15th day, 7th month—1st day of Tabernacles (Lev 23:34-35);

22nd day, 7th month—8th day, right after Tabernacles (Lev 23:36).

Perspectives of Adventist Pioneers

Joseph Bates, a retired sea captain, health reformer and prominent Millerite, accepted the seventh-day Sabbath in the spring of 1845, through the writings of fellow Millerite preacher Thomas M. Preble. Recognizing linguistic markers, Preble noted that God speaks of the weekly holy day as “My Sabbath,” whereas He refers to annual ones as “her [Israel’s] sabbaths. . . . a clear distinction between the creation Sabbath and the ceremonial.”¹ Convinced of the importance of this scriptural teaching, in August 1846, Bates wrote a book titled, *The Seventh Day Sabbath, a Perpetual Sign*, in which he addressed some essential distinctions between the weekly Sabbath and the annual ceremonial sabbaths of Israel. Bates noted that the seventh-day “Sabbath was instituted to commemorate the stupendous work of creation”² for all of humanity, thousands of years before the Jewish people existed. In contradistinction to the weekly Sabbath, Bates pointed out that the annual sabbaths were established for ancient Israel. Furthermore, in responding to the argument that Colossians 2:14 and 16 indicate that the Sabbath was abolished at the crucifixion, he used texts from Leviticus 23 as well as Hosea 2:11 to show that it was the ceremonial sabbaths that were “nailed to the cross,”³ and not the Sabbath enshrined in the Ten Commandments.

Three years after accepting the Sabbath truth, as a consequence of reading Bates’ book, James White highlighted some distinctions between the weekly and annual sabbaths. For example, while repeating some arguments similar to those of Bates, James White specifically articulated that “the Sabbath of the Lord our God was instituted at the Creation, before the fall,” whereas the ceremonial “sabbaths of the Jews were given at Mount Sinai, more than twenty-five hundred years after, and were a portion of the hand-writing of ordinances of the law of Moses, which was nailed to the cross, at the death of the Messiah.”⁴ The weekly Sabbath was engraved on tables of stone by God, while the annual sabbaths were recorded in a book by Moses. In explaining the “sabbaths” of Colossians 2:16, White appealed to both Hosea 2:11 and Leviticus 23, as had Bates. White added that these sabbaths are associated with the new moons “in the ceremonial law,” and not with the moral

law. These yearly sabbaths “were shadows, which ceased,” but the seventh-day Sabbath “is to be perpetuated to all Eternity.”⁵ Also, White commented on how the definite article “the” is linked to the weekly Sabbath in the Decalogue, in contrast with the term “sabbaths” of Colossians 2:16 which does not have either the word “the” or “day” in the original Greek—thus highlighting a linguistic issue. Extending his semantic argument, and apparently building on Preble’s earlier proposal, White later noted that only the weekly Sabbath is classified with language such as “the Sabbath of the Lord thy God,” or called “My holy day,” by God, in contradistinction to the annual sabbaths of the Jews, which are termed “your sabbath” (Lev 23:32), or “her sabbaths” (Hos 2:11)⁶

In his monumental work *History of the Sabbath* pioneer Seventh-day Adventist scholar John Nevins Andrews set forth several reasons for making a distinction between these annual sabbaths and the seventh-day Sabbath of the weekly cycle. In addition to one of the linguistic arguments noted above, the difference in the timing of the institution of the weekly Sabbath versus that of the annual sabbaths, the distinction in location of the weekly Sabbath (as part of the moral law) versus annual sabbaths (as part of the ordinances), and the fact that the weekly Sabbath is to continue for all eternity versus the annual ones which were a component of the shadows that ceased at the death of Christ, Andrews pointed out that the seventh-day Sabbath was for all humanity, whereas the ceremonial sabbaths were only for Israel. The weekly Sabbath was a “memorial of the Creator’s rest,” while the “annual sabbaths” were memorials of “deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt.” Furthermore, he noted finally, that the full ritual observance of these annual sabbaths lapsed with the permanent cessation of the Temple services at the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.⁷

As already noted, some of what Andrews pointed out, was not original with him. He himself cited the following passage from William Miller:⁸

Only one kind of sabbath was given to Adam, and one only remains for us. See Hosea ii.11: “I will cause all her mirth to cease, her feast days, her new moons, and her sabbaths, and all her solemn feasts.” All the Jewish sabbaths did cease, when Christ nailed them to his cross. Col. ii.14-17. . . . These were properly called Jewish sabbaths. Hosea says, “her sabbaths.” But the sabbath of which we are speaking, God calls ‘my sabbath.’ Here is a clear distinction between the creation sabbath and the ceremonial. The one is perpetual; the others were merely shadows of good things to come.⁹

Miller may have gotten the idea from some Protestant writer before him, such as that of Robert Burnside,¹⁰ for standard Protestant creeds have stated that the Ten Commandments were not abolished.

In fundamental accord with the views of other Adventist pioneers already noted, Ellen G. White contrasted the weekly Sabbath as established at Creation, with “the annual sabbaths of the Jews.”¹¹ In the only place where she mentions Colossians 2:16 in her voluminous writings, she made a passing comment on the apparently usual manner in which early Adventists explained the meaning of “sabbaths” in this challenging passage:

On every side we hear discussion of the subjects presented at the camp-meeting. One day as Elder Corliss stepped out of a train, the guard [i.e., the conductor] stopped him with the request that he explain Colossians 2:16. They stopped, and as the crowd rushed by, the explanation was given, and from Leviticus 23:37, 38 it was shown that there were sabbaths besides the Sabbath of the Lord.¹²

Current Contemporary Consensus

Throughout its history, there has been essential unanimity within official Adventism of the basic distinction between the Creation ordinance of the weekly Sabbath and the annual ceremonial sabbaths of ancient Israel. However, as early as the mid-1930s some questions have been raised regarding the interpretation of the word “sabbaths” in Colossians 2:16—as to whether it identifies annual sabbaths or the weekly Sabbath or even both types of “sabbaths.” The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, reiterating and expanding on the standard view, concluded that Paul was pointing out “that Christians are no longer obliged to carry out the requirements of the ceremonial law,” which contained “commandments for the observance of various holy days.” Based on the phrase “which are a shadow of things to come” (Col. 2:17), this commentary noted that these were “ceremonial rest days,” which “have served their function now that Christ, the reality, has come.” In other words, “in all this argument Paul is in no way minimizing the claims of the Decalogue or of the seventh-day Sabbath,” which “is a memorial of an event at the beginning of earth’s history.”¹³

More recently, the comprehensive volume, *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, has confirmed the contrast between the weekly Sabbath (of Exod 20:8-11) which points back to the Creation, and the annual holy days (of Lev 23:4-37).¹⁴ Though some Adventist academics have proposed other views,¹⁵ the *Handbook* affirms that Paul’s reference to “sabbaths” in Colossians 2:16, deals with the annual sabbaths of the Jewish ceremonial system.¹⁶

The notion that “ceremonial sabbaths” are in view in Colossians 2:16 has remained the primary position of the Adventist Church. For example, a 2016 Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide, made reference to “the ceremonial sabbaths that were a ‘shadow of things to come’ (Col 2:16-17), [which were] pointing forward to the ministry and sacrifice of Jesus and then ending with His death on the cross.”¹⁷ Affirmation of this interpretation of the “sabbaths” in Colossians 2, as well as the broader topic of annual ceremonial sabbaths¹⁸ (which “could not be celebrated without offering sacrifices”¹⁹), can be seen in the significant 2018 volume titled, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, as produced by the Ministerial Association of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This book, which serves as “a biblical exposition of fundamental doctrine,”²⁰ and “as an authentic resource on Adventist doctrine,”²¹ clearly stated:

At the death of Christ the jurisdiction and the function of the ceremonial law came to an end. His atoning sacrifice provided forgiveness for all sins. This act “wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against

us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (Col 2:14; cf. Deut 31:26). Then it was no longer necessary to perform the elaborate ceremonies that were not, in any case, able to take away sins or purify the conscience (Heb 10:4; 9:9, 14). No more worries about the ceremonial laws, with their complex requirements regarding food and drink offerings, celebrations of various festivals (Passover, Pentecost, etc.), new moons, or ceremonial sabbaths (Col 2:16; cf. Heb 9:10), which were only a "shadow of things to come" (Col 2:17).²²

In response to challenges against the historic position regarding the "sabbaths" of Colossians 2:16, a volume produced by the Biblical Research Institute Committee of the Adventist Church has concluded that "the compelling weight of linguistic, intertextual, and contextual evidence demonstrates that the sabbaths of Colossians 2:16, 17 refer to the ceremonial sabbaths of the ancient Israelite religious system."²³ This conclusion, that essentially echoes the original understanding of Adventist pioneers, has been corroborated by extensive doctoral research, which reveals contextual, etymological, intertextual, lexical, linguistic, semantic, structural, syntactical and typological data that the "sabbaths" in Colossians 2 identifies the annual ceremonial sabbaths, and does not refer to the weekly Sabbath.²⁴

Summary and Conclusions

In brief, while the weekly Sabbath was ordained at the close of Creation week for all humanity, the annual sabbaths were an integral part of the Israelite system of rites and ceremonies instituted at Mount Sinai centuries later, which belonged exclusively to the Hebrew people in Old Testament times, which pointed forward to the coming Messiah, and the observance of which terminated with His death on the cross.

As Adventists have pointed out from the days of its pioneers in the mid-nineteenth century and into the twenty-first century, there is no passage in all of Scripture that abrogates the weekly Sabbath—and this includes Colossians 2:16, which identifies the annual ceremonial sabbaths. Hence, it has been concluded that, as an enduring memorial to Creation (Gen 2:1-3), the seventh-day Sabbath remains a valid part of the divinely-inspired Ten Commandments (Exod 20:8-11), a holy day of delight (Isa 58:13)—a twenty-four hour "palace in time," to which all humanity (Mark 2:27) is graciously invited—sacred time to be joyfully celebrated with a gracious Creator, as a glorious foretaste of heaven itself.

SOURCES

Andrews, John Nevins. *History of the Sabbath and First Day of the Week* Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1862 edition.

Bates, Joseph. *The Seventh Day Sabbath, a Perpetual Sign from the Beginning to the Entering into the Gates of the Holy City, According to the Commandment*, 2nd ed. New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1847. For first edition, see

<https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/1036.2#2>

Burnside, Robert. *Remarks on the Different Sentiments Entertained in Christendom Relative to the Weekly Sabbath* London: Joseph Stillman, 1827.

du Preez, Ron. "Is the Seventh-day Sabbath a 'Shadow of Things to Come'?" In *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*. Edited by Gerhard Pfandl, 391–397. Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010.

du Preez, Ron. *Judging the Sabbath: Discovering What Can't Be Found in Colossians 2:16* Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2008.

du Preez, Ronald Alwyn Gerald. "A Critical Analysis of the Word *Sabbatʿn* in Colossians 2:16." Ph.D. dissertation, University of the Western Cape, 2018.

Frey, Mathilde. "The Sabbath in the Pentateuch: An Exegetical and Theological Study." PhD dissertation, Andrews University, 2011.

Gane, Roy E. *Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017.

Giem, Paul. "Sabbatʿn in Col 2:16." *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 19, no. 3 (1981): 195–210.

Himes, Joshua V., ed. *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology, Selected from Manuscripts of William Miller with a Memoir of His Life*. Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1842.

Holbrook, Frank B. "A Reply to 'What Do the Scriptures Say About the Sabbath?'" See <https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/scripturesayaboutsabbath.pdf>

Holbrook, Frank B. "Should Christians Observe the Israelite Festivals? A Brief Statement of SDA Understanding," July 1987. See <https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/israelitefestivals.pdf>

Nichol, Francis D., ed. *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*. 7 Volumes. Revised Edition. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1976-1980.

Preble, Thomas M. *A Tract Showing That the Seventh Day Should Be Observed as the Sabbath, Instead of the First Day, "According to the Commandment"* Nashua, NH: Murry & Kimball, 1845.

Rodríguez, Ángel Manuel. *Israelite Festivals and the Christian Church*, Biblical Research Institute Releases, 3. Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005.

Seventh-day Adventists Believe: An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church 3rd ed. Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2018.

Strand, Kenneth A. "The Sabbath." In *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*. Edited by Raoul Dederen, 493–537. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000.

The Role of Christ in the Community, Adult Bible Study Guide, Lesson 3: "Justice and Mercy in the Old Testament," July 11, 2016, <http://www.ssnet.org/lessons/16c/less03.html#mon>.

Veloso, Mario. "The Law of God." In *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*. Edited by Raoul Dederen, 457–492. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000.

White, Ellen G. "The Australian Camp-Meeting." *ARH*, January 7, 1896, 1-2.

White, Ellen G. "The Sabbath Test—No. 1." *ARH*, August 30, 1898, 549-550.

White, James. *Present Truth*. August 1849, 9-16.

White, James. *Present Truth*. March 1850, 49-56.

Wood, Kenneth H. "The 'Sabbath Days' of Colossians 2:16, 17." In *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*. Edited by Kenneth A. Strand, 338–342. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1982.

NOTES

1. Thomas M. Preble, *A Tract Showing That the Seventh Day Should Be Observed as the Sabbath, Instead of the First Day, "According to the Commandment"* (Nashua, NH: Murry & Kimball, 1845), 5.
2. Joseph Bates, *The Seventh Day Sabbath, a Perpetual Sign from the Beginning to the Entering into the Gates of the Holy City, According to the Commandment*, 2nd ed. (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1847), 6. For the first edition, see <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/1036.2#2>.
3. This intertextual link between Col. 2:16 and Hos. 2:11 had already been proposed by Preble, 5.
4. James White, *Present Truth*, August 1849, 9.
5. *Ibid.*, 10.
6. James White, *Present Truth*, March 1850, 53.
7. John Nevins Andrews, *History of the Sabbath and First Day of the Week* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1862), 86-92.
8. Andrews, *History of the Sabbath*, 87n.
9. Joshua V. Himes, ed., *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology, Selected from Manuscripts of William Miller with a Memoir of His Life* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1842), 161-162.

10. Robert Burnside, *Remarks on the Different Sentiments Entertained in Christendom Relative to the Weekly Sabbath* (London: Joseph Stillman, 1827), 111-117.
11. Ellen G. White, "The Sabbath Test—No. 1," *ARH*, August 30, 1898, 549.
12. Ellen G. White, "The Australian Camp-Meeting," *ARH*, January 7, 1896, 2.
13. Francis D. Nichol, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7 vols., rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1976-1980), 7:205-206.
14. Kenneth A. Strand, "The Sabbath," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 496-498.
15. For example, it is claimed that the text speaks of yearly festivals, monthly new moons, and weekly Sabbaths, but that the focus is supposedly on the sacrifices and not on the days themselves; (see, for example, Paul Giem, "Sabbat?n in Col 2:16," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 19, no. 3 [1981]: 210). Also, based on a similar basic assumption of an annual/monthly/weekly sequence, it is alleged that the focus is on ritual "eating and drinking" and not on the days themselves; (see, for example, Roy E. Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017], 358, fn. 43).
16. Mario Veloso, "The Law of God," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 477, 484.
17. See <http://www.ssnet.org/lessons/16c/less03.html#mon>.
18. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, 3rd ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2018), 279-281, 289-294.
19. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, *Israelite Festivals and the Christian Church*, Biblical Research Institute Releases, 3 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005), 9.
20. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, title page.
21. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, back cover. Although this book, which included the participation of hundreds of leaders, theologians and pastors in its preparation, is not "an officially voted statement" of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (since "only the summary statements [of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs] have been officially voted by the General Conference in session), it may be viewed as a theological exposition, representative of 'the truth as it is in Jesus' (Eph 4:21) that Seventh-day Adventists around the globe cherish and proclaim;" (ibid., vi).
22. Ibid., 280.

23. Ron du Preez, "Is the Seventh-day Sabbath a 'Shadow of Things to Come?'" in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, ed. Gerhard Pfandl (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 396.

24. Ronald Alwyn Gerald du Preez, "A Critical Analysis of the Word *Sabbat?n* in Colossians 2:16" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of the Western Cape, 2018), abstract.

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000