

## Lessons from the French Revolution

The French revolution provides an interesting case study on Sabbath practice as it relates to a change in the weekly cycle. At this time Charles-Gilbert Romme introduced a ten-day week into French society.

By instituting a 10-day week, the French government exerted power over the Roman Catholic Church in her main area of influence: control of time. Throughout the middle ages, the people had been taught to reverence Sunday and lived in fear of the power of the papacy. Even the name of “Sunday” was removed from the new week, the days being numbered instead: Primidi, Duodi, Tridi, Quartidi, Quintidi, Sextidi, Septidi, Octidi, Nonidi, Décadi (First, Second, Third, etc.).<sup>1</sup>

The primary purpose for this change was to destroy the traditional seven-day week, particularly Sunday, the worship day for most of Christendom. When Charles-Gilbert Romme, its chief architect, was asked what the main reason for the new calendar was, he emphatically stated: “To abolish Sunday.”<sup>2</sup> “The *décade* [the new “week”] – or, rather, to be more precise, its ‘peak day,’ *Décadi* – came to be the single most important symbol of the de-Christianization of France.”<sup>3</sup> Churches were forbidden to hold services on any day except for *Décadi* and citizens were not to close their stores on Sunday or acknowledge it by wearing their *habits du dimanche*, or “Sunday best”.<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to observe that this issue of the day of worship was also a problem for Sunday as well as for Sabbath keepers.

So what happened to the keeping of the Sabbath during this time?

Was it kept on the seventh day (*Septidi*) every 10th day so that the Sabbath was aligned with the correct name of the day? Or was it kept every seventh day irrespective of the name of the day? Eg. Seventh, fourth, first, eighth, etc.

To answer this question we need to look to the Jewish community. Consider the following report:

Jews who desired to perform their religious rites and follow their religious traditions - to observe the Sabbath, to wear Sabbath garments, to have separate Jewish cemeteries, and the like - were victims of the general drive against those who were regarded as being opposed to the Revolution. The Colmar Jacobins protested against the Jews' not working on the Sabbath. In Nancy, Tomblaine, Sarrebourg, Metting, and Lixheim (Lorraine) anti-Jewish feeling arose over the Sabbath observance, but no anti-Jewish acts were then noted there. The people of Bordeaux protested against permitting a separate Jewish cemetery. Even in Saint-Esprit-lès-Bayonne (where the Jacobin Club was composed mostly of Jews) Jews were forbidden to wear Sabbath garments or to light Sabbath candles. In order to wreck anti-Republican sentiments and fanaticism, Strasbourg Jews were forbidden, on June 27, 1794, the use of the Jewish cemetery at Rosenviller. The same order forced the Jews to state their means of livelihood, which could be taken as motivated by anti-Jewish feelings. During the Terror the District of Strasbourg took severe measures against the Jews for the practice of their faith. Simon, the agent of the District, spied on the Jews and reported to Mayor Monet that he did not see any Jews at the Temple de Génie, probably because "they are more attached to their Talmud than to the Constitution of the Republic."<sup>5</sup>

These reports demonstrate that during the French revolution the Sabbath continued to be kept despite the change to the weekly cycle by the government of the day. This Sabbath was kept on every seventh day irrespective of what the name of the day was called. This was in harmony with the biblical command to keep holy the seventh day. The Jewish community counted off each seven days as they had always done, even though the French Government had changed the week from seven to ten days, and this created protest and opposition from the local population.

The Church in Tonga, Samoa, Kiribati, Wallis and Fatuna have all experienced a change in their weekly cycle at some time. While it has not been as dramatic as the ten-day week that was introduced by the French Government, it still resulted in a change in the weekly cycle with a 'one off' six day week. This change has forced the church to ask the same questions that many Jews had to ask in the late 1700's, that is, "should the church accommodate the change made by the government and keep Sabbath on the Saturday or should the church continue to keep Sabbath on each seventh day which now falls on Sunday?"

The experience of the French Revolution clearly illustrates that God, not governments, has the final say in which day is the day of worship. In addition, the name of the day is irrelevant when

it comes to Sabbath observance, but what is important is the unbroken seven-day principle as given by God in the beginning when he said, “And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made” Genesis 2:2, 3. And again in Exodus 20.10 “But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God.”

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>French Republican Calendar, <http://www.worldslastchance.com/ecourses/lessons/changing-weeks-hiding-sabbath-ecourse/18/french-republican-calendar.html> Accessed 16 October, 2013

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Gaxotte, *The French Revolution*, London: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932, p. 329.

<sup>3</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Seven Day Circle: The History and Meaning of the Week*, The University of Chicago Press, 1985, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> L’Abbé J. Gallerand, *Les Cultes sous la Terreur en Loir-et-Cher, 1792-1795*, Paris, Grande Imprimerie de Blois, 1928, p. 634; Henri Grégoire, *Histoire de Sectes Religieuses*, Paris, Baudouin Frères, 1828, Vol. 1, p. 240.

<sup>5</sup> El Caudillo, *Jews and the French Revolution*.

<http://s1.zetaboards.com/anthroscape/topic/4306473/1/> May 28 2011,. Accessed 16 October, 2013.