DO ROMANS OBSERVE JEWISH CUSTOMS?
(TERTULLIAN, AD NAT. I.13; APOL. 16)

BY

JOHN NOLLAND

From at least the time of Schürer,¹ in studies on Proselytism and looser attachment to Judaism, it has been customary to cite Tertullian Ad nationes I.13 as an evidence of the gentile adoption of certain Jewish practices while continuing to honour their own pagan gods. We are sometimes invited to compare Apol. 16 which parallels Ad nationes I.13 in such a way as to show an evident dependence between the two sections. However because there is a certain obscurity in the Ad nationes passage, while the clearer passage from Apol. lacks the vital list of Jewish customs said to be practised by the pagans, it is usual to relegate these texts to the role of secondary supports for the veracity of the clear statement of Josephus at Contra Apion ii.282.

"The masses have long since shown a keen desire to adopt our religious observances; and there is not one city, Greek or barbarian, not a single nation, to which our custom of abstaining from work on the seventh day has not spread, and where the fasts and the lighting of lamps and many of our prohibitions in the matter of food are not observed."²

Here we would attempt to show that by careful attention to the argument that Tertullian is developing and by comparison of the details of the two parallel passages it is possible to identify with some precision the situation which Tertullian addresses vis à vis the Jewish practices.

In Ad nationes I.13 Tertullian is answering the accusation that Christians worship the sun, which is based on their Sunday observance and their practice of praying towards the east. Tertullian replies by drawing attention to a similar practice of prayer among the Romans, and also to certain "foreign" Jewish customs observed by the Romans. He lists

² Transl. of H.St.J. Thackeray in The Loeb Classical Library 1926.
sabbaths, *coena pura*, lamps, unleavened bread, and "littoral prayers". He then concludes that the case of the Romans is very similar to that of the Christians.

The drift of the argument is not immediately evident and is made impossible if we accept the reading of the b text: *ipsum* in the phrase *ex diebus ipsum praelegistis*, as appears to have been the case in Dr. Holmes' translation. For then we have to wrestle not only with the historical problem of claiming a Roman observance of Sunday, but further and more immediately pressing, with what appears to be an identification of this practise as Jewish, later in the text. The emendation of the text by Oehler (who reads *ex diebus ipso priorem praelegistis*) has been chosen to overcome this problem. He comments *Dies Saturni enim, qui die Solis prior ist, hic significatur.* While Oehler's textual emendation remains doubtful his recognition that the Roman observance here in question is a Saturday observance and not a Sunday observance is correct and remains basic to any modern attempt to understand the text. A. Schneider has shown that the alternative reading offered by Aa "*ex diebus ipsorum praelegistis*" makes perfectly good sense if *ipsorum* is understood as the equivalent of a possessive reflexive adjective (*vestris*). In

---

3 MSS and editions here and elsewhere as in F. Oehler (ed.) *Q.S.F. Tertulliani Opera omnia*, Tomus I (Lipsiae 1853) 304.
5 The practices with regard to the bath etc. on this day are said to be *exorbitantes... a vestris ad alienas religiones*. In the following sentence when the Jewish practices are listed they (i.e. the Jewish practices) are said to be *aliena...a diis vestris*, which seems clearly to be a referring back to the wording of the previous sentence. Thus the practices with regard to the bath etc. are to be regarded as identical to the Jewish customs.
6 F. Oehler, *op.cit.*, 334 and note a. The Latin text is quoted here and elsewhere from Oehler.
7 In his note Oehler (ibid.) cites from *Apol. 16* and italicises the section beginning *secundo loco ab eis sumus qui diem Saturni...* He seems to imply that *secundo loco* refers to the day celebrated by the Christians being one day later than that celebrated by the Romans. This understanding of the text of *Apol. 16* is not here accepted.
8 Rev. C. Dodgson (Vol I, *Tertullian Apologetics and Practical Treatises* (Oxford 1842) 39 note) sees in the observance of the day of Saturn at the corresponding passage in *Apol. 16*, a monthly observance of the 7th day of the month sacred to Saturn as the 7th planet and regarded as an ill-omened day for business and so spent in idleness and dissipation. However *Ad nationes* 1.13 is quite clear that a seven day week is involved. For the development of the Roman planetary week see at note 12.
9 So e.g. W. Rordorf, *Sabbat et dimanche dans l'Église ancienne* (French transl. by E. Visinand and W. Nussbaum) (Neuchâtel 1972)90 n.7.