

SABBATH IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC ISLANDS

(Article by Ulicia Unruh)

KON-TIKI

In 1947 Thor Heyerdahl sailed on his Kon-Tiki, a balsa wood raft, for 4,300 miles from Peru in South America, to French Polynesia to show that it could have been colonised from South America rather than Asia as commonly thought. It took 101 days for the five man crew to reach the Polynesian Island of Tuamotu Archipelago. While Thor proved it was possible for natives of South America to have sailed to the Polynesian Islands, he also proved that it was long, lonely and perilous, three month journey. The chances of any on-going interconnection between South America and the South Pacific Islands prior to the “age of travel”, were remote.

On the other hand, travel to the South Pacific Islands from Australia is more like a stepping stone adventure.

Approximately 8400 nautical miles stretch between Australia and Peru in South America. Most of the South Pacific Islands that were affected in the IDL shift in the late 1800's are within 4200 miles of Australia, with another 4200 miles of water separating the Islands from South America.

Early Missionaries from various denominations who first brought Christianity to these Islands travelled east from England. They viewed the 1000's of Islands in the South Pacific as one vast mission field and introduced a consistent seven day week, in alignment with Australia and New Zealand, to these Islands.

THE PURITAN'S MEANING OF SABBATH

A little book written by John Williams, 1796-1839; called “*Missionary enterprises in the South-Sea Islands*” published by the Philadelphia Presbyterian board of publication and Sabbath-school work, gives us a glimpse of how these early London missionaries entered this field of Islands.



Notice the name of the publishing organization: “Philadelphia Presbyterian board of publication and SABBATH-SCHOOL work.” The Presbyterian (puritans) of England, in the 16th century, had a dilemma. They claimed to reject Catholic tradition yet they observed Sunday as the day of worship. So they developed a defense for their rejection of the Saturday Sabbath; they defended Sunday as the Christian’s Sabbath. They took their Bibles and claimed all the texts concerning the Sabbath as now referring to the “new” Sabbath, Sunday, sanctified by Christ’s resurrection. They held the fourth commandment as binding, and that the whole day was to be given to worship and cessation of common labor, yet they believed it was changed to fit the Christian era. When they spoke of the Sabbath, they were not referring to the seventh day of Creation (Saturday) but to the seventh day of the resurrection (Sunday) which to their understanding combined creation and re-creation. This is important to understand, for when the London Mission Society introduced the week and the “Sabbath” (Sapate) in the South Pacific, they were keeping SUNDAY. It was a common practise for these Sunday keeping Christians to call Sunday, “the Sabbath”.

EVANGELIZING THE ISLANDS

In the introduction, of the book, W. P. BREED tells us a little about John Williams; we read:

“we see him going like an angel of mercy to and fro from island to island in those far-off seas, and meeting almost everywhere with Pentecostal success among the idolatrous, dark-skinned islanders—in Aitutaki, in Atiu, in Rarotonga, in Mangaia, in Raiatea, in Samoa— “



Many more Islands were also visited as it was the aim of this dedicated man to penetrate all the Islands with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As he and his associates travelled from Island to Island planting missionaries where ever possible and then revisiting the Islands to maintain contact and encourage the laborers there, it would have been enormously inconvenient to have some Islands on one day, while others were a day behind.

In the early 1800's there was no International Meridian, countries tended to count meridians from their capital cities. However, this was England's time of greatness. England's colonial territories stretched around the world. They were the rulers of the seas with many fine map makers drawing accurate maps for the sailors on those seas. They used their capital, London, (Greenwich) as the prime meridian for their maps. So we do have records of ship captains, when crossing the Pacific, and realizing a day was lost or gained en route, at times changing their day at the 180th meridian. It was a matter of convenience.

The interesting point dealing with our subject is that the missionary activity in the early 1800's which involved travelling from Island to Island, was done by missionaries from England and they still had contact with England. English ships brought out new missionaries, and at times English ships helped the missionaries by dropping off mission workers on different Islands where they began a mission station. Yet these captains and sailors on these ships didn't seem to question the day count on the Islands. The idea that these London Society Missionaries simply didn't realize they had crossed the dateline and so failed to change the day, doesn't seem plausible when we realize they were in contact with passing (and visiting) ships on a fairly regular basis. There were ships from different countries including the American whalers and traders as well. If their weekly alignment really was perceived as "a mistake" these missionaries would have been notified early on, and they would not have continued to introduce the same supposedly mistaken week count in island after island in the successive years of their labor.

Yet in 1884 all these Christianized Islands were on the Asian week count (with the exception of Tahiti whose islands were taken by the French in 1842-1846 -- Catholic missionaries planted, the leading London Society missionary exiled, and the American week put in place) But the London Missionaries followed the Asian week in all the Islands they evangelized. What a nuisance it would have been otherwise. It was viewing the Islands as one mission field that made sense to have them all on the same day.

TONGA

The London English missionaries first arrived among the South Pacific Islands in 1797. Though having considerable success in Tahiti and Samoa and many other islands, they weren't very successful in the Tongan Island group. Another mission society, the Wesleyan mission society (also coming from England) had the biggest impact on

Tonga, beginning in 1822. Wesleyan (Methodist) believers also call Sunday “the Sabbath” and believe the commands for Sabbath keeping are moral, perpetual, and binding on the Christian, but the day has supposedly been shifted to the fuller symbolic Christian Sabbath (Sunday). Methodists still keep every seventh day, but it is now every Sunday.

The Wesleyan missionaries experienced tremendous success when Tautafa'ahau, the ruler of Ha'apai, was baptised in 1831. Renaming himself “King George” this native ruler conquered several surrounding territories and brought Christian teaching to his entire expanding “kingdom”. Schools were built, the natives learned to read and write. During the 1850's European settlers began to take up residence in Tonga. Though the only Island group in the South Pacific to escape colonization, Europeans considered Tonga (along with Fiji and Samoa) as the gateway to the Polynesian Islands, and their influence was considerable. In the 1860's Shirley Baker, a Wesleyan missionary had considerable influence with King George, enabling the drawing up of a constitution and a code of laws.

Yet, in spite of a different missionary society bringing the week to the Tongan Islands, helping to develop the government on the Islands, and in spite of the many European contacts the Tongan Islands had in the early 1800's, yet they were still aligned themselves with the eastern week. Surely, if the early missionaries, back in 1797, had made a “mistake” by unknowingly crossing a “dateline”, by the time the Wesleyan missionaries arrived in Tonga 25 years later (in 1822) it would have been known, and they would have established the days in Tonga in alignment with the American day count, not the Eastern day count!



However, it really didn't make sense to have Tonga on a different day from Fiji, did it? The Wesleyan missionaries were also ministering in Fiji. It appears the Wesleyan missionaries had considerable connection between the two Island groups. In 1848, Tongan Prince Ma'afu settled in the Fijian Island of Lakeba, establishing a new foothold for Tonga in Fiji. He was accompanied by Tongan Wesleyan missionaries, who consolidated the earlier work done by English Wesleyan missionaries in Fiji.

So once again we see that these Islands were viewed as one vast mission field and it was simple logic to have them on the same day.

Since Wesleyans (due to their Puritan heritage) called Sunday “the Sabbath” and applied the Biblical commands for Sabbath keeping to their so called Christian resurrection Sabbath (Sunday) it is no great mystery why Tongans call Sunday “Sapate”, and call Saturday “the preparation day”.

According to the Puritans, Sunday was now the Christians “seventh-day Sabbath” whether they were in England, America or in the South Pacific. But it was still the same SUNDAY kept by Catholics, Anglicans and all other Sunday observing Christians.

1884

1884 marks the point of confusion over the Sabbath that came to the Adventist work. In 1884 there was a meeting in Washington, the *International Meridian Conference*, where a group of men from various leading

countries meet together and decided that Greenwich, England would be a good place to start the 0 count on longitudes in order to standardize time and location on an international level. The recommendation was made to accept Greenwich as the Prime Meridian, and though a dateline was never passed as a law or decided upon at the conference, that decision to set an international Prime Meridian turned the eyes of many to the 180th meridian as the default, **international** dateline. "Default" meaning that where there was no other established and recognized day line the dateline would default to the 180th.

The 180th was only accepted as the official nautical date line for ships on high seas in 1917, it was NEVER officially accepted as a terrestrial (land) date line, the countries being allowed to choose their own position in regards to a date line. However, many with the colonial mindset embraced the default line as if it were the legal reality, and were eager to get all the Islands to comply and align themselves to this new system. Thus you see the phrases in old publications saying these Islands had to be "corrected," that "they had the wrong day names," etc.

No, these Islands weren't wrong. Their "day line" was just established in a different place than the colonialists decided it should be. There was a unity of time amongst the islands that was broken by the attempted implementation of the 180th.

The 1890's were a time of uncertainty in the Pacific islands. Colonialism was at a height with Germany, England, France and America all fighting for a piece of the Pacific Islands. Nationals were not all that highly respected by the colonialists, and some, like Samoa, had rather weak, civil war ravaged governments that benefited from compliance with strong foreign pressures. The 180th, though never officially declared a terrestrial (land) dateline was being pushed on the Islands. Slowly different Islands complied. Samoa switched to the American day count in 1892, the Cook Islands in 1899.



However not all Islands caved in to the pressure. The Tongan kingdom refused to go on a different day count from its close neighbors.

ADVENTIST MISSIONARIES ARRIVE

American Adventist missionaries arrived in the South Pacific during the 1890's. So I can empathize with these early Missionaries trying to find some stability. They would have expected the Tongan kingdom to align itself with American time like Samoa did in 1892. It no doubt seemed wise to follow the American week in anticipation of this re-alignment? However, once it became plain that Tonga was not going to let itself be pulled into western time by outsiders, it seems to me that Adventists should have respected that decision and adjusted to Eastern Time. It was obvious that Sunday was the official recognized "Lord's Day" of the other churches and that it was the first day of the calendar week. Even though the day was called Sapata "Sabbath", it was not the seventh day Sabbath of Creation which Adventists believe is the true Sabbath.

Saturday on the Tongan Islands is the same sacred Sabbath hours (Saturday) observed in Fiji. It's the same 24 hours with the same Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. There was no reason to set a precedent for Sunday keeping.

It is this false precedent set by the church in Tonga for Sunday worship that is now spreading to other South Pacific Islands. And it's all built on a decision made by a small group of men in a Washington meeting in 1884 when they chose Greenwich as the Prime Meridian, even though they never expressed any thought of using the meridians to mess with the existing land-based day line.

But we must ask, what was this decision based upon? Why did the 1884 convention choose Greenwich as the Prime Meridian?

Let me share a quote from: International Conference Held at Washington for the Purpose of Fixing a Prime Meridian and a Universal Day. October, 1884. / Protocols of the Proceedings (Kindle Location 2122).

*"It is simply a question of practice - **of convenience**. We all bowed to the rule of **convenience** in selecting the meridian of Greenwich. And why? Because seven-tenths of the civilized nations of the world use this meridian, not that it was intrinsically better than the meridian of Paris, or Washington, or Berlin, or St. Petersburg. Nobody claimed any scientific preference among these meridians. It was simply because seven-tenths of the civilized world were already using the meridian of Greenwich."*

And why were so many looking to the meridian of Greenwich by which to count longitudes for map making? Remember, at that time the sun never set on the British Empire, and the English were masters of the seas, which was due in part to their many accurate maps.

So these men decided to set the prime meridian in Greenwich, England – because **of convenience**. This act of convenience, by default, marked another arbitrary line in the Pacific as the 180th meridian which was being heralded as a "convenient" date line. But for Tonga it was much more convenient to stay in the time zone they were in, and since they had a strong enough self government they choose to remain on Eastern Time when the pressure came to adapt to the new system.

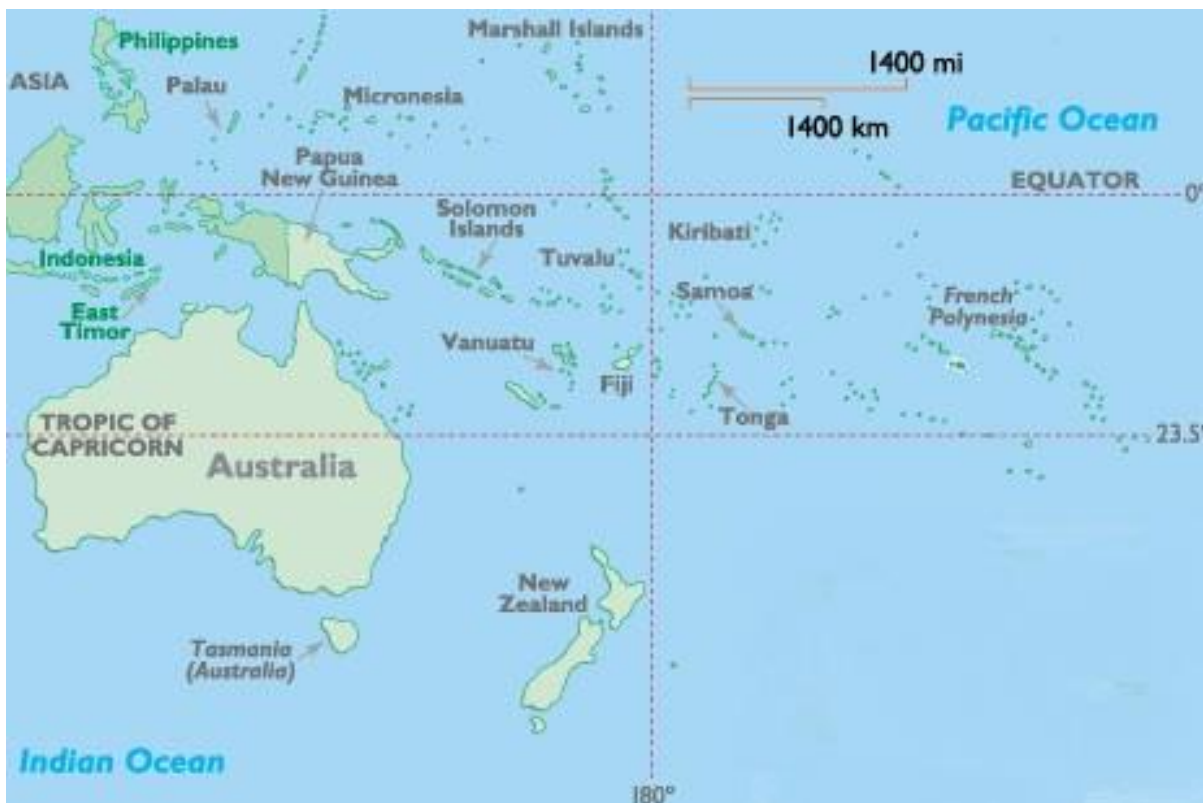
So why question Samoa, which was "inconvenienced" for 120 years by being aligned with a day system out of sync with its bigger neighbors, which has now, for convenience, returned to the Eastern Time count?

By keeping Sunday on these Islands, Adventists are simply accepting the Puritan arguments that Sunday as the seventh day of the resurrection, is an extension of the Sabbath commands and creation account found in the Old Testament, but that it has been adapted for the New Testament Christian.

The eastern week in the Islands prior to 1884 was not a mistake that needed to be corrected. It was the logical pattern of extending the week from Australia and New Zealand to the neighboring Islands.

However, referring to Sunday as the seventh day Sabbath is a big mistake. In spite of all the arguments defending Sunday, it still is NOT the seventh day, it is the first day. Grand and important to our salvation as the resurrection of our Lord is, there is no mention in scriptures that this event sanctified the first day of the week as the new "seventh day" Sabbath.

END



This is a map from the back of our Sabbath School Quarterly depicting the SPD (Green names not part of the Division). Why should the Islands be on a different day than their headquarters? Just think if the time line were still in the same position where it was in 1840, there would be no jumping back and forth in days as administrators travel from Island to Island in their district.

The head office of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Pacific is in Wahroonga, New South Wales, Australia. Within the Division are four Unions: they are the Australian Union Conference (headquarters in Melbourne), New Zealand Pacific Union Conference (headquarters in Auckland), Papua New Guinea Union Mission (headquarters in Lae) and Trans-Pacific Union Mission (headquarters in Suva, Fiji).

Would it not be more appropriate to welcome the Islands that are coming back into the same day count instead of imposing an unrecognized calendar on them that puts them at odds not only with the rest of the world church and their own country, but also keeps them at odds with their own headquarters.

In the years after 1884 the western world tried to pull the dateline into a taunt straight line, but the date line never was meant to be a taunt straight line, rather it is like encircling arms holding territories of similar cultures together. Tonga chose to remain, and now Samoa has chosen to rejoin with their larger close neighbors in their time reckoning. We, as a church, need to accept their choice and recognize that their Saturday is the exact same day, under the same sun as the Saturday at headquarters, and that their Sunday, is the same first day of the week when those who have rejected the Biblical seventh-day Sabbath go to church.