

TRICESIMA SABBATA: Horace's
"Thirtieth Sabbath" (*Satires* I,9)
and Jewish Festival Days

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In *Satires* 1,9,69, Horace refers to the *tricesima sabbata*, which has been variously interpreted, usually either as a Sabbath which was also a New Moon, or as the "thirtieth Sabbath" in a yearly cycle of Sabbaths. It will be suggested that the actual evidence for Jewish festivals and the form of the phrase itself forbid either of these interpretations. Rather, in the context of the joke being played by Aristius in the Satire, it is probably a misspoken reference to the New Moon festival, wrongly called a "Sabbath" by Horace's refined Roman friend, to whom Jewish customs are known, but not too well.

Several references in the works of Horace show a surprising awareness of Jewish customs.¹ It has even been proposed that Horace was of at least partial Jewish extraction himself, although there is no hard evidence for this assertion.² In one passage, the famous satire on the persistent boar (*Satires* I,9), Horace's friend Fuscus Aristius refuses to help the poet escape from an awkward situation, since he finds the situation humorous, preferring to leave Horace to try politely to rid himself of the impertinent man. When Horace suggests that he and Aristius have business to discuss alone, Aristius responds jokingly that he cannot engage in business that day: *hodie tricesima sabbata: vin tu curtis Iudaeis oppedere?* In addition to the reference to circumcision, both the mention of *tricesima sabbata* and the knowledge that this day would be inappropriate for business among those with the appropriate religious scruples show a solid familiarity with Jewish culture on Horace's part. Furthermore, the manner in which these details are used in the satire suggests that they were common knowledge to those for whom Horace was writing.

¹ *Satires* I,4,140-43; I,5,100-03; I,9,68-72; *Epistles* II,2,183-89.

Nevertheless, it is not at all clear to us what is meant by *tricesima sabbata*. To be specific, what is being counted by *tricesima*? Is it the thirtieth day of the month, which is also a Sabbath? Is it somehow the thirtieth Sabbath of the year? Our gaps in knowledge regarding Jewish practices in Horace's day perhaps forbid us from reaching a definite conclusion. Yet, it is possible to work towards a probable solution by integrating the Jewish calendrical data with the specific wording of Horace's phrase, *tricesima sabbata*.

The solution best supported by the ancient commentators is to relate this phrase both to the Sabbath and to the New Moon, based on the employment of both *tricesima* and *sabbata*.³ Pseudo-Acro states: *Tricesima sabbata quae Iudei Neomenias dicunt . . . tricesima sabbata dicuntur, quando veniunt Kalendae in prima luna per sabbata, qui dies maxime a Iudeis observatur, aut quia tricesima sabbata religiosius colebantur*. Thus, *tricesima sabbata* refers to a New Moon which happens to fall on a Sabbath, this day being thought of as especially holy to the Jews (there is no real evidence that the Jews regarded such Sabbaths as more holy).⁴ Porphyrio comments: *sabbata lunaria significat, quae vulgares homines ferias sibi adsumunt*, likewise suggesting a convergence of the New Moon and the Sabbath, adding an unbelievable piece of information about the general recognition of the Sabbath, as if he actually took Aristius at his word. The overall strength of this position is that it identifies the phrase with two observances which we know to have existed among the Jews at that time. The weakness,

² For bibliography, see: Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974): 321-22.

³ The most common form for one Sabbath in the LXX is $\sigma\acute{\alpha}\beta\beta\alpha\tau\alpha$ (perhaps Aramaic שַׁבָּתַת ? Cf. פֶּסַח -- $\pi\alpha\sigma\chi\alpha$ --*Pascha*), thus the Latin *sabbata* for a single Sabbath.

⁴ The Mishnah reports that while the Temple still stood, messengers who were going forth to announce the New Moon could profane the Sabbath for that purpose (M. Rosh Ha-Shanah 1.4). This highlights the importance of the New Moon, but it does not necessarily mean that such convergences between the Sabbath and the New Moon were considered especially holy. In fact, since the Mishnah indicates that, after the sacrifices ceased, the number of New Moons on which one could profane the Sabbath was reduced to the required number to establish the set feasts, one can surmise that Jews in antiquity might have preferred never to have had such convergences, so that the Sabbath would never have to be profaned by witnesses of the New Moon.

however, is the actual phrase itself. As pointed out by Kiessling and Heinze, although *tricesima* can stand alone as a substantive, it is inconceivable that the adjective and noun *tricesima sabbata* could refer to a single day which is both the thirtieth (of the month) and also a Sabbath.⁵

Therefore, despite the fact that the connection with the New Moon would be quite obvious in the context of Jewish festival days, it seems unlikely that *tricesima sabbata* can be read as “a new moon festival which is also a Sabbath.”

Another possibility, one which deals rather straightforwardly with the meaning of *tricesima sabbata*, is that the “thirtieth Sabbath” signifies simply the thirtieth Sabbath in some larger series of Sabbaths. Lambinus, having addressed the theory of the lunar month, and having added the suggestion that *tricesima sabbata* could refer to the first Sabbath of every month (which Lambinus surmised may have been held in special regard, although there is no evidence for this), relates how he consulted a certain Jew with regard to the Sabbath and the Jewish reckoning of the years and months. Lambinus’ Jewish source took *tricesima sabbata* to be the thirtieth Sabbath from the start of the new year, the most prominent of which for him was the first of Tishri.⁶ As Lambinus reports:

*collegi, tricesima Sabbata ea esse intelligenda, quae ab iis maxima religione coluntur atque observantur: quo die agnum immolant seu mandunt potius et comedunt. quod Sabbatum (ut barbare loquar) tricesimum est ordine, si Sabbata a principio anni numeres. annus enim apud illos initium capit a mense Septembri.*⁷

Having started with the first of Tishri, Lambinus’ source seems to have counted approximately thirty Sabbaths forward to Passover, which involves a lamb and is observed with

⁵ Adolf Kiessling and Richard Heinze, *Q. Horatius Flaccus Satiren* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1921): 154.

⁶ According to Mishnah Rosh Ha-Shanah 1.1, there are four “New Year” days, depending on the purpose for which the reckoning is being done. The first of Tishri is one of the “New Year” days, along with the beginnings of Nisan, Elul, and Shevat. Whereas Tishri 1 is “New Year” day for the reckoning of years, Nisan is the first month for the counting of festivals and months (cf. Exodus 12:1, Numbers 28:16ff., Palestinian Talmud Rosh Ha-Shanah 56a).

⁷ Dionysius Lambinus, *Q. Horatium Flaccum*, Part II, Editio Nova (Impensis Jacobi Hoelscher, 1829), 134.

great piety. Thus, if Lambinus' Jewish source were correct, the phrase *tricesima sabbata* would refer to the "thirtieth Sabbath" of the year, namely Passover.⁸

This reasoning, however, is very problematic, and its flaws may be applied to all similar solutions. First, it is not necessarily the case that Tishri would have been considered the first month of the year for such a counting of Sabbaths. Nisan might be a better guess.⁹ In fact, Nisan seems to be the month presupposed as the first month of the year according to the reasoning of Orellius, who says:

*Recte inita temporis computatione sabbata ab initio anni sacri tricesima incidunt in ipsum primum diem scenopegiorum . . . Etenim sex menses lunares ab Aprili ad Octobrem complectuntur sabbata viginti quinque.*¹⁰

Starting from Nisan, Orellius reaches to the Festival of Tabernacles by approximately the thirtieth Sabbath, a festival for which, Orellius argues, all of the days were known as "Sabbaths."¹¹ Yet, this still does not solve the main problem faced also by Lambinus, namely, that the variegation of the calendar renders all of these calculations possible for a given year, but not necessary or even typical. If such calculations were behind Horace's reference to *tricesima sabbata*, we would have to assume that both Horace and his audience were quite well-informed as to the status of the Jewish calendar in a given year. If this were so, then it might be possible to date *Satires* I,9 on the basis of this reference. Quite obviously, nothing of the sort can be imagined, and such attempts to find in the "thirtieth Sabbath" of the year a major Jewish festival must be abandoned as arbitrary and overly-specific for the context of Aristius' joke.

⁸ Lambinus concludes his discussion first by mentioning the "New Moon" interpretation of the passage, and then by chastising Plutarch (*Symposium* IV.5) for the false etymology of *Sabbata* which he gave: *ignoracione linguae Syriacae errat*.

⁹ See note 6.

¹⁰ Gaspar Orellius, *Q. Horatius Flaccus*, vol. II (Berolini, 1892), 127.

¹¹ Orellius recognized that whatever festival he put forward as a suggestion would have to have been known to Romans generally, and he cited Plutarch, *Symposium* IV,6,2, as evidence that this was the case for the Feast of Tabernacles. Orellius' suggestion that all of the days of this festival are "Sabbaths" is based on Leviticus 23:33ff. (Numbers 29:12), where work is forbidden not only on the first day of the festival, but on all seven days.

Furthermore, it is questionable whether the Jewish community as a whole even counted Sabbaths in this fashion at all. On this question, Joseph Baumgarten argued using evidence from the Qumran Angelic Liturgy and from Masada to suggest that Sabbaths were numbered in the Qumran liturgical calendar.¹² Baumgarten takes Horace's *tricesima sabbata* as a possible example of the numbering of Sabbaths outside of the Qumran community, along with a later passage from the Samaritan liturgy and the phrase ἐν σαββάτῳ δευτεροπρώτῳ from Luke 6:1.¹³ According to Baumgarten, Horace knew that the Jews numbered their Sabbaths, and so he decided to assign a number to the Sabbath cited by Aristius, choosing *tricesima* because it scanned well.¹⁴ This practice, however, is so scarcely attested (even at Qumran, certainly outside of the sectarian community) that even if it were true that some Jewish group was numbering its Sabbaths as part of a liturgical cycle, it would hardly have made so great an impact on Horace to have warranted inclusion in a satire where it is used in such an off-hand way. The fact that the numbering of Sabbaths among Jews is not known from any other source leads one to think that no solution to the problem of *tricesima sabbata* is to be found therein. If the fault of the ancient solution was that *tricesima sabbata* cannot mean what it seems like it must (i.e., a New Moon which is also a Sabbath), then the flaw of the more recent approach is that there is no evidence that *tricesima sabbata*, as the "thirtieth Sabbath" (of the year), would have meant anything broadly in Judaism at Horace's time. The quandary derives from the fact that no answer can be made to fit both sides of the question.

¹² Joseph Baumgarten, "The Counting of the Sabbath in Ancient Sources," *Vetus Testamentum* 16 (1966): 277-78. The Angelic liturgy mentions a "seventh Sabbath," while the Masada text makes reference to a "sixth Sabbath."

¹³ *Ibid.*, 280-86.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 286. This same kind of argumentation was suggested by Lambinus: *quamvis enim Iudaeorum menses cum lunae cursu congruentes vicisimo nono quoque circiter die compleantur, tricenarius tamen numerus rotundior et aptior erat versui, quam vicenarius novenarius* (Lambinus, 133).

In view of the role of the New Moon and the lunar calendar in the Jewish festival year, it is difficult to ascribe the number “thirty” merely to metrical convenience. This leads us in the direction of recognizing something of the New Moon in the phrase *tricesima sabbata*. In addressing the specifics of the phrase (i.e. that it says “thirtieth Sabbath,” and not “thirtieth day,” or the like), one must keep in mind the context in which the phrase appears. Fuscus Aristius is having fun with Horace; his reference to the Jews and their festival serves as an intentionally poor excuse not to provide Horace with an escape from the boorish fellow. Although some familiarity with Jewish customs might be expected for the average Roman, too much information, or information which is too detailed, might be thought of as strange and out of place in the mouth of Aristius. It must be allowed, therefore, that what Aristius says may be less than technically accurate. Indeed, it is much more likely that it would be inaccurate in some way, than that it would presuppose a technical level of knowledge of Jewish customs. Aristius’ comment is an off-hand excuse, and as such, it is probably a reference to the thirtieth day of the month, the New Moon. Only this assumption accounts realistically for the number “thirty.” The fact that Aristius calls this day a “Sabbath” is due simply to misstatement on his part, seeing that it would be very plausible for a non-Jew to call every Jewish holiday “Sabbath,” especially since the command not to engage in labor was not restricted only to weekly Sabbaths. Aristius, therefore, is portrayed as having come up with the first excuse which came to his mind on the spot for not helping Horace, blurting out his bit about the Jewish holiday where work is forbidden, trying to be funny rather than technically accurate. It would not have suited Horace’s purpose to have had Aristius play his joke with a highly detailed or precise reference to Jewish customs.

It would seem, therefore, that the problem of *tricesima sabbata* is best solved by referring it to an obvious Jewish festival (the New Moon), taking the phrase grammatically as one unit (not as a New Moon which is also a Sabbath), and by allowing for some license on Horace's part in constructing the dialogue for his friend Aristius (who uses his knowledge of the Jews for the sake of the joke, but who does not know *too much* about Jews). If this is correct, *tricesima sabbata* means "the festival of the thirtieth day," a festival erroneously referred to as "Sabbath."