

THE DOCTRINE OF THE SABBATH IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

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"Come, O Sabbath Day and bring, peace and healing on thy wing," are the words from a Hebrew song which greets the sabbath.¹ These words mirror the fact that the sabbath was given by God to be a blessing to mankind. The purpose of this study is to examine this blessed institution. From the original sanctification of the seventh day at creation, to the Fourth Commandment of Sinai, to the disputations concerning this day in the four Gospels, and finally to the eternal sabbath when the redeemed of the ages devote every day to God, this subject winds its way through Scripture. May the Lord bless and guide the reader as he follows the sabbath from creation to eternity and sees the wisdom, holiness, and goodness of God in all of His dealings concerning this institution.

From Creation to Sinai

From Creation to the Patriarchs

After creating the heavens and the earth in six days, God "rested" on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2). Therefore He blessed and hallowed the seventh day (Gen. 2:3). The Hebrew word used in Gen. 2:2 for "rested" is the verb shavath, "to rest." Hence the name Sabbath means "rest," and points to the rest day which commemorates Jehovah's original rest from His activity of creation.²

There is no reason to suppose that this blessing of the seventh day did not occur at the chronological point at which it is located in the narrative. The supposition that Gen. 2:3, "And God blessed the seventh day, . . .," is a proleptical remark pointing solely to a later Sinaitic blessing is totally destitute of evidence or warrant! The vast majority of readers and commentators have seen the blessing of Gen. 2:3 to be a part of the creation account chronological narrative. He created, He rested, and He blessed--that is the Biblical order. Thus the sabbath day was hallowed at creation, although Israel was not commanded to rest on this day until 1447 B.C.³

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Noah's sending forth the dove at seven day intervals suggests that antediluvian time was reckoned by seven day weeks. However, there is no record of Noah being commanded to keep the sabbath day holy either before or after the flood (Gen. 6-9).

The week fulfilled by Jacob in Genesis 29 also points to a primitive seven day weekly time division. The "week" spoken of in verses 27 and 28, upon study, does not seem to be a week of years as many have thought, but a week of days. This is true because Jacob is seen as having already fulfilled the week and married Rachel as his second wife before he even begins to work off the additionally required seven years (Gen. 29:27, 28, 30).^{4, 5}

Thus, although Scripture does not explicitly tell us that God revealed His seven day week to the antediluvians or patriarchs, it is certain that this scheme could not be seen in nature without the aid of divine revelation.

Supposed Babylonian Origins

There is no warrant for ascribing the Biblical sabbath to a Babylonian source. The opposite, however, may be true. Although there are traces of a sabbath of a sort and of sevens in Babylonian history, it has not been shown that these antedate the Hebrew sabbath. Among those items treated on this topic are the following:

1. The Enuma Elis, the Babylonian creation saga, was written on seven tablets. Tablet V mentions the number seven only incidentally in connection with the half moon.⁶
2. Babylonian restrictions on the 7th, 14th, 21st, and 28th of the month did not recess business. It applied only to certain people, and also applied to the 19th day of the month.⁷
3. George Smith in 1881 claimed that the sabbath was an Accadian institution associated with the seven planets. He also noted the Assyrian word Sabattu, "a day of rest for the heart."⁸

Sampey has well said, "The wealth of learning and ingenuity expended in the search for the origin of the Sabbath has up to the present yielded small returns"[i.e., to the critical theories].⁹

At the Giving of the Manna

Exodus 16:4-5, 14-30 tells that during Israel's journey at the giving of the manna the seventh day was announced as "the rest of the holy sabbath unto the Lord" (v. 28). Weekly God brought forth the manna only on the first six days. Weekly He performed the miracle of causing the manna which fell in a double portion on the sixth day to signally last through the seventh day while on all previous days it putrefied overnight. Thus for forty years in the wilderness God taught the lesson of His sabbath in a visual and physical way. And so Israel rested on the seventh day (Ex. 16:30).

The Fourth Commandment Given at Sinai

The official institution of the sabbath came a short time after the manna in the Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue (Ex. 20:9-11). Israel was (1) to keep the seventh day holy, and (2) to rest on it, following the example of Jehovah's creation rest. On this law Edersheim relates,

In its spiritual and eternal element, the Sabbath Law embodied the two thoughts of rest for worship, and worship which pointed to rest. The keeping of the seventh day, and the Jewish mode of its observance, were the temporal and outward form in which these eternal principles were presented.¹⁰

The purposes of the sabbath law were: (1) to remind man of his eternal obligation to worship his creator; (2) to provide a time for worship and meditation by instituting a mandatory rest day; (3) to give a needed periodic rest to man from his daily toil; (4) to typify the final salvation rest, Heb. 3:7-4:11; (5) to be a sign to Israel that Jehovah is the one who sanctifies her, Ex. 31:13, Ezek. 20:12, 16; (6) to commemorate the completed creation, Ex. 20:11; (7) to commemorate redemption and the consequent rest that follows it, Deut. 5:15; and (8) to provide a witness of the true God to the nations.

Keeping the sabbath was a part, as Keil says, "of the obligation into which the people had entered in their covenant with the Lord, to keep His commandments (Ex. 19:8; 24:7)."¹¹ Isaiah 56:4, 6 associates this day with the "taking hold of the covenant," and Ex. 31:13 and Ezek. 20:12, 16 point it out as a "sign" between Jehovah and Israel.

The sabbath and the covenant go together. Continued violation of the fourth commandment stood for years as a spiritual thermometer revealing Israel's plight of having polluted the covenant. As a consequence, God has likewise forsaken her for a time (Deut. 28:1-14; Rom. 11:26-29).

From Sinai to Moses' Farewell Deuteronomic Address

Exodus 31:12-17

Here the sabbath is pointed out as the "sign" to Israel that Jehovah is her sanctifier. One who rejects this sign by violating the sabbath has rejected God and is to be put to death (vss. 14-15). This sabbath sign is further noted as a perpetual sign between Jehovah and Israel forever (vss. 16-17). Isaiah 66:23 and Ezek. 44:24 indicate the yet future keeping of this sabbath-sign by Israel in the Kingdom.

Leviticus 23:2-4

Leviticus 23:2-4 shows that the sabbath was a feast and holy convocation to the Lord as were Israel's other feasts. While no work at all was to be done on the sabbath (including the Day of Atonement which was declared a sabbath on which absolutely no work was to be done),

on the other feast days only "servile work," literally "work of service," was prohibited. This prohibition of "servile work" says O. T. Allis, "apparently prohibits only the carrying on of one's ordinary business or the performance of manual labour, but not the preparation of food."¹² From the more stringent regulations on the weekly sabbath as compared to the other feasts, with the exception of the Day of Atonement, it can be seen that the regular weekly sabbath was a day of great importance in the mind of God (Lev. 23:1-44).

Numbers 15:32-36

This passage tells of the man stoned to death for gathering sticks on the sabbath. The context of this event is a discussion of sins of ignorance, Num. 15:22-29, and sins of presumption, literally "with a high hand," i.e., open rebellion, Num. 15:30-31.¹³ The former was remedied by a sacrifice, but the latter called for the death of the rebel against Jehovah. The sabbath breaker here, vs. 32-36, was clearly defiant of God, and God Himself ordered the man to suffer capital punishment for his wickedness against God's covenant. The seventh day was a serious matter!

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Verse 15 says that because Jehovah had redeemed Israel from Egypt, "therefore" ('al-kēn) He has commanded Israel to keep the sabbath day. Thus the association of the sabbath day and redemption is made. Was creation not right and reason enough? Redemption is here added as further reason for Jehovah's being able to command Israel to keep the sabbath. Since redemption is in a real sense a re-creation, this is not the addition by Moses of a foreign element to the memorial of the original creation rest. The original creation brought man forth unto God out of that which was nonexistent; redemption brought man forth unto God out of that which was lost! The day was coming when an even greater redemption than that of Egypt was to be celebrated. Then, even the sabbath day itself would be insufficient to mark the occasion!

In the Time of the Prophets

Right Sabbath Observance

One of the topics which the Latter Prophets dealt with was the correct observance of the rest day. From their own words and the words of other Scriptures the proper way of keeping the sabbath can be clearly seen. Exodus 20:8-11 showed that the day was to be observed weekly by its being kept holy and by all, including sojourners and animals, ceasing from their labour. Leviticus 23:2-3 shows it to be a day of holy convocation. Psalm 92 is shown to commemorate the sabbath by its title. Thanksgiving, praise, sacred songs and music, and contemplation of God's holiness, His goodness, His mercy, and His works--all had their place on the sabbath according to this psalm. Isaiah declares that it was a day of refraining from one's own pleasure in order to "delight" in the Lord (Isa. 58:13-14). Finally, Nehemiah gives the example showing that authorities should, when necessary on the sabbath, insure that others hallow the day (Neh. 13:15-21).

Rewards for Keeping the Sabbath

Isaiah 56:2-7 promises the greatest of blessings to those individuals who keep the day. Even aliens who keep the sabbath are pledged "an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off" and "a name better than sons or daughters." Jeremiah 17:24-26 declares that if the nation observes the sabbath Jerusalem "shall remain forever." Thus great national blessing is connected with the fulfilling of the Fourth Commandment just as it is with the fulfilling of the entire covenant (Isa. 58:13-14; Deut. 28:1-14).

Israel Polluted God's Sabbath and Brought on Judgment

By Isaiah's time, c. 700 B.C., the day was so defiled that the Lord declared, ". . . the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting" (Isa. 1:13). Even the priests had become sabbath breakers (Ezek. 22:26). Amos declared that the sabbath became a day when Israelites planned dishonest acts for the morrow (Amos 8:5). Jeremiah 17:19-22; Ezekiel 22:8; 23:38; and Nehemiah 13:15-21 also tell of the widespread and general pollution of the holy day from c. 765 B.C. when Amos entered the scene to c. 417 B.C. when Nehemiah left.¹⁴

As a result of this, God brought on judgment as He had promised (Jer. 17:27; 2 Kg. 17:1-18; Hos. 2:1-13, especially v. 11; and Deut. 28:15-68). Bothersome adversities and finally conquest, deportation, and captivity came to both kingdoms because Israel and Judah continually broke the covenant of the merciful and longsuffering God by their wholesale violation of the Decalogue of which the Fourth Commandment was a part.

The Sabbatical Year

Leviticus 25:1-7 instituted the sabbatical year, and Leviticus 26:34, 35 remarkably predicts that if the nation should disregard this law, then the Lord would cause the land to lie fallow the years due it by dispersing the nation from off the land. II Chronicles 36:21 shows that the law was in fact ignored during the Monarchy and records the fulfillment of God's promised judgment in the seventy year Babylonian Captivity.

The Period of the Second Temple, 515 B.C. --70 A.D.

By and large this period was the anteroom for the New Testament period per se. During these years both the synagogue and rabbinic law grew up side by side. Legalism and casuistry gained the upper hand among the leaders and Israel in seeking to establish her own righteousness through the law rejected the righteousness of God (Rom. 10:3). Rabbinic law did not make the sabbath a delight (Isa. 58:13), but a burden upon the people (Matt. 23:4).

The regulations prescribed every conceivable movement on the sabbath. A tailor could not go out with his needle nor a scribe with his pen. Clothes could not be examined by lamp light lest an insect be killed in the process -- and this would be unlawful labor on the sabbath.¹⁵

One could not sell anything to a gentile unless he was sure that the object would reach its destination before the onset of the holy day.¹⁶ Seats could be lifted, but not dragged. The latter might cut a rut into the ground and this would be "work." Women were not to wear ornaments lest in their vanity they remove them to show someone. Then by holding the ornament they would be bearing a burden on the sabbath.¹⁷ Neither could women look into a glass lest they see a white hair and be tempted to remove it--which would be work!¹⁸ 2000 cubits was the maximum sabbath journey for this was the distance between the people and the ark (Josh. 3:4)! However, a wise and pious sabbatarian could walk 2000 cubits, take up his new sabbath residence under a tree by depositing food for two meals there, and then be free to journey another 2000 cubits!¹⁹ And so it went. The spirit had fled!

I Maccabees 2:31-38, however, showed that in the second century B.C. there were those who would rather die than defile the sabbath. Verses 39-42 showed also that upright men believed that fighting for Lord and life could be done on the seventh day against ungodly Antiochus Epiphanes.

Christ and the Sabbath

Christ, who came not to destroy the law but to fulfil it (Matt. 5:17), gave the lie to the burdensome spiritless additions of the elders which made man a slave to the day. He declared, "The sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath" (Mk. 2:27).

The quarrel between Christ and the Pharisees over healing also pivoted, to the legalists, on a point of casuistry. They too acknowledged that healings and medications necessary to save life were permissible, but Christ's healings were of limbs often, and this was strictly illegal (Mk. 3:1-6).²⁰

He defended his disciples for picking and eating grain on the sabbath (which involved the dual sins of reaping and milling) on the grounds that He Himself was "one greater than the Temple"--the very "Lord of the sabbath" (Matt. 12:1-8). If the Pharisees had accepted Him they would have accepted this argument, for they too believed that one could work on the sabbath when engaged in the service of the Temple.²¹

The Lord Himself habitually attended the synagogue on the rest day (Lk. 4:16; Mk. 1:21; 3:2; etc.). He taught God's word (Lk. 4:16-28); performed good works of necessity and righteousness (Mk. 3:4-5); and healed the afflicted (Mk. 3:4-5; Lk. 13:10-17; etc.). Truly His was the true and divinely intended way of observing the sabbath.

The Apostolic Church and the Sabbath in This Dispensation

The Apostolic Church Met on the First Day

Acts 20:7 and I Cor. 16:2 show that the Apostolic Church, which started our present dispensation, met for the breaking of the bread, preaching and teaching of the Word, and for collections on the first day of the week rather than on the seventh. Thus they commemorated the anniversary of the Lord's resurrection which occurred on the first day of the week (Jn. 20:1, 19, 26).

The Jerusalem Council

The Jerusalem Council did not place the gentile Christians under obligation to keep the sabbath; in fact, it freed them from it (Acts 15).

Paul in Colossians 2:14-17

The Apostle Paul in Col. 2:14-17 said, "Let no man therefore judge you . . . of sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ."

Paul in Romans 6:14

Paul declared that the believer is "not under the law, but under grace" (Emphasis mine).

Seventh Day Adventists and others, who claim that this means that the believer is not under the ceremonial law but still under the moral law (i. e., the Decalogue including the Fourth Commandment -- according to the Adventists), cannot substantiate this claim with Scripture.²² The New Testament frees the believer from "the law" without qualification (Rom. 6:14; 7:1-6; Gal. 2:19; 3:13; etc.).

They err in their reasoning that not being under the moral law would mean that the believer would absurdly be free to break the Ten Commandments, and therefore to sin at will.

Rightly understood, not being under the law (or being "dead" to it, Rom. 7:4) means that the believer is not under the law for his: (1) Justification, Rom. 10:4; (2) Condemnation, Rom. 7:1-6; 8:1-4; Gal. 3:13; or for his (3) Guiding Life-Principle, i. e., the standard by which everything is measured, Rom. 7:1-6; Gal. 2:19-20; Col. 3:17-23.

The believer's justification is in Christ by grace; there is no condemnation in Christ; and the guiding life-principle of the believer is to "please Christ" (cf. Jn. 8:29).

Not being under the law does NOT mean that the believer is free to sin (Rom. 6:15); free from all duties and obligations (Rom. 6:16-18); free to commit those acts forbidden in the nine non-sabbatical commandments of the Decalogue (for these still represent violations of Christ's will, and the New Testament specifically prohibits their commission, e. g., Eph. 6:1-3; 4:28; 5:3-6; Rev. 22:15); nor are Christians free to forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Heb. 10:25). Such "freedom" is antinomianism.

To illustrate: My two-year-old daughter is under the meal time law which forbids food being dropped purposely on the floor. My wife has never been placed under this meal time law. Yet, not surprisingly, it is the one under the law who from time to time drops food on the floor. The one not under the law never does it!

Thus, not being "under the law," and being "dead" to it (Rom. 6:14; 7:4) takes the Christian out from under the Sabbath Commandment which was given to the nation Israel.

The Sabbath in This Dispensation

Thus, for this dispensation the day of convocation has been changed from the Old Testament sabbath to the New Testament Lord's Day. This change was made by the competent authority of the infallible apostolic teaching and example (Matt. 18:18).

Since redemption is not foreign to creation, but is actually a re-creation out of that which had been previously lost (Mk. 10:45) rather than out of that which had been nonexistent, it is seen that the Lord's Day which commemorates Christ's resurrection, and consequently our redemption, is an apt replacement for the Old Testament sabbath-creation rest convocation day (Deut. 5:15). The Old Testament sabbath has not so much been done away with by Christ as it has been fulfilled by Him (Matt. 5:17; Col. 2:17). As the sabbath commemorated the creation rest, so the Lord's Day remembers the redemption rest!

The Sabbath, the Millennium, and Eternity

The sabbath is a perpetual sign between Jehovah and Israel forever (Ex. 31:16-17). Isaiah 66:23 and Ezek. 44:24 indicate a yet future keeping of the day by Israel in the Kingdom. The Book of Revelation never once mentions the sabbath day, for in eternity every day will be a sabbath devoted to Jehovah (Heb. 3:7-4:11).

CONCLUSION

This paper may well be concluded with J. Barton Payne's words,

For those who would seek to trust in it as intrinsically efficacious after once having looked into the face of Jesus Christ, its practice must be forbidden. The Jewish ceremonies are "weak and beggarly" anticipations (Gal. 4:9). At the same time, however, the principles (e.g., atonement) that the ceremonies symbolized are timeless; and the ceremonies, accordingly, where relevant, continue to be matters of obligatory observance in the Church, though in a necessarily transmuted form. . . . Some ceremonies, therefore, such as the Sabbath (though again with a shift in details of performance, namely, of the particular day of the week that is set apart) continue to possess binding significance; for they still anticipate that heavenly rest, when the believer's actual state will correspond to his present holy standing in Christ (Heb. 4:9).²³

DOCUMENTATION

1. The writer recalls this song from his boyhood. The source is unknown.
2. "Jehovah" or "Yahweh."
3. John C. Whitcomb, Jr., "Chart of Old Testament Patriarchs and Judges" (Winona Lake: Grace Theological Seminary, 1961).
4. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. I: The Pentateuch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951), p. 286.
5. This week being taken as a "week of days," rather than as a "week of years" as some hold it to be, does not in any way alter the established fact that Daniel's prophecy of the Seventy Weeks deals with weeks of years (Dan. 9:20-27).
6. James B. Pritchard (ed.) The Ancient Near East (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), pp. 31, 36.
7. Joseph P. Free, Archaeology and Bible History, 5th ed. (Wheaton: Scripture Press, 1956), pp. 26-27.
8. Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, Vol. I: Apostolic Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), p. 477, footnote 1. Schaff or Smith, whom Schaff quotes, do not indicate here the crucial information concerning the time of the appearance of these items in Accadian and Assyrian history, nor the evidence for such.
9. John R. Sampey, "Sabbath," ISBE (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), IV, p. 2631.
10. Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 2 Vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), Vol. II, pp. 56-57.
11. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. IV: Joshua, Judges, Ruth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), p. 79. These words have been adapted from another context because of their aptness.
12. O. T. Allis, "Leviticus," New Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), In loc., Lev. 23:3.
13. Allan A. MacRae, "Numbers," New Bible Commentary, In loc., Num. 15:22-31.
14. John C. Whitcomb, Jr., "Chart of Old Testament Kings and Prophets," 3d ed., Rev. (Winona Lake: Grace Theological Seminary, 1960).
15. Edersheim, II, p. 779.
16. Ibid., p. 780.
17. Ibid., p. 781.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., p. 777.
20. Ibid., pp. 59-61.
21. Ibid., pp. 56-58.
22. W. C. Irvine, Heresies Exposed (New York: Loizeaux Bros., Inc., 1921), pp. 164-65.
23. J. Barton Payne, The Theology of the Older Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), p. 355.