

# The History of the Sabbath

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The word "sabbath" is derived from the Hebrew verb *shabat* which occurs first in Genesis 2:2: "And He rested (ceased, desisted) on the seventh day from all His work which He had done" (NASB). The technical term "sabbath" does not occur there, but the concept is found in this verse.

In Genesis God not only established the sabbath by personal example, but He blessed and hallowed that day. In other words, the observance of sabbath is understood to relate to the nature of God Himself, who rested from creation.

The Book of Exodus underscores the special status of the sabbath day and its holiness by relating the manna incident during the wilderness trek. There God supplied the manna miraculously throughout six days, but gave a double portion on the sixth day, two omers for each person. Thus it was unnecessary for the Israelites to set foot outside their tents to gather manna on the sabbath. Moses explained that the seventh day, after all, was "a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord" (Ex. 16:23, RSV).

The holiness of the sabbath emerges again as the fourth commandment in Exodus 20:10-11. In this text God gives a rationale that repeats some of the language of Genesis 2:1-2. Thus, God reminds Israel that the foundation of the sabbath day was laid in creation itself. It was not a recent formulation.

The understanding of the sabbath as blessed and holy for Israel expands to include draft animals and slaves in Exodus 23:12 and 34:21. Not only does God command that all work cease on these days during periods that are ordinarily demanding, but even during the days of unremitting labor such as harvest and plowing. Deuteronomy repeats this theme in 5:14-15 (a second version of the Ten Commandments) and adds that God commands no work for anyone at all on that day, including the "stranger that is within thy gates." The motive for keeping the sabbath was that God redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, so they should keep His day.

Enforcement of the command to keep the sabbath



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could be severe. In Numbers 15:32-36, the man who was caught collecting firewood on the sabbath was sentenced to death by stoning.

On the other hand reverence for this day was reinforced by the necessity of bringing to God a special sabbath offering. This offering was as large as that for the other days put together, which stressed the special sanctity of the day (Num. 28:9-10).

We must not think, however, that observance of the sabbath was regarded as a burdensome duty. It appears in Hosea 2:11 that sabbaths, feast days, the festivals of new moon, and "appointed feasts" were among the joys (or "mirths") of Israel. Isaiah 58:13 insists that the sabbath is to be a "delight." Observance of the sabbath was a way of practicing a distinctive identity as an Israelite before a pagan world.

The ancient Babylonians had a mildly similar custom in their observance of the *shapattu*, [shah-pah-TOO] or midmonth day of the full moon. This day was a day of good omen, called "the day of calming the heart." The heart in question belonged to one's special god or goddess. However, the Babylonians also observed "evil days" during the month, at seven day intervals, during which days the activities of the king were curtailed severely. If there is any relationship between these curious days and the Israelite sabbath, it must have been as ancient Israel radically reinterpreted the Babylonian custom.

During the intertestamental period the story is told of how Jews kept the sabbath so strictly that they allowed themselves to be attacked and killed by the Syrian army rather than fight and thus desecrate the sabbath (1 Maccabees 2:31-38). This gave rise to an important reinterpretation of the Law, first found in 1 Maccabees 2:41, that henceforth those who would attack Israel on the sabbath day would suffer a counterattack. That is, one may of necessity profane one sabbath in order to preserve life and observe subsequent sabbaths.

Lesson reference: L&W: Exodus 20:8-11

**Top:** The Pharisees condemned Jesus and His disciples for breaking the law by plucking grain on the sabbath. **Above:** Sepphoris was where the sabbath tractate of the Mishnah was completed. The town served as the capital of Galilee during Jesus' time. **Right:** The sabbath laws also included prohibitions for working draft animals on that day.



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The rabbis of the first and second centuries waxed eloquent on the virtues of sabbath observance: "If Israel keeps the Sabbath as it should be kept, the Messiah will come. The Sabbath is equal to all the other precepts of the Law" (Ex. Rabbah 25:12).

Furthermore, Israel was to regard the sabbath as a festival day. Everyone was to eat three meals, though they had to be cooked on sabbath eve (Shabbath 118a). Rabbi Hanina used to say on the sabbath eve, "Come, let us go out to meet the bride, the Queen," while Rabbi Jannai used to dress in his best and say, "Come O Bride, come O Bride" (Shabbath 119a).

So important was the sabbath in Israel that one entire "tractate" (book) of the Mishnah, the compilation of oral Jewish law completed at Sepphoris in Galilee about AD 200, was devoted to regulations about the sabbath. This tractate is called "Sabbath" and is the second largest in the Mishnah.

According to this tractate there are thirty-nine forbidden labors on the sabbath. These labors include sowing, weeding, plowing, lighting a fire, watering plants, handling tools, handling money, riding a horse, instructing a Gentile to do work, gathering wood, preparing food, or cooking.

On the other hand, according to the same tractate, one may move a large tool in order to feed a child, clear away straw to make room for guests, carry an animal its fodder, and so forth. The principle is that one may not cause suffering or death for the sake of the Law, since God says to do these laws "that ye may live" (Deut. 4:1).

In the light of these laws it is no surprise that Jewish followers of Jesus would observe the sabbath, as in Luke 23:56. It is also no surprise that the teaching of Jesus about the sabbath ("The Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath," Mark 2:28 and Luke 6:5), coupled with His stunning but predicted resurrection on the first day of the week, resulted in Christian observance of the first day rather than sabbath.

Furthermore, one of the most significant events in early Christian history, perhaps second only to the resurrection, came about on the first day of the week, or on a Sunday. According to the second chapter of Acts the disciples were gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost (*Shavuoth* in Hebrew, meaning "Weeks"). This festival took place fifty days (seven weeks) after the offering of the omer or first barley sheaf, which always came on a Sunday. The coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4) made an indelible mark on the early Christian movement and seemed to seal Sunday as the Christian sabbath. ○

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