

Lesson 2 – Sabbath (שַׁבָּת *Shabbat*)

Leviticus 23:3 (ESV)

³ “Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work. It is a Sabbath to the LORD in all your dwelling places.

שַׁבָּת *Shabbat* – “cease,” “rest,” “complete rest,” or “desist”

In the Beginning...

Genesis 2:2–3 (ESV)

² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

God’s creation was “finished” by the seventh day. He was NOT going to continue creating on the next day. His rest was to be from that point onward. This was a time when God would dwell with His creation (Gen 3:8-9). However, through disobedience, man lost their true rest in God.

A Sign of Creation and Redemption

Exodus 20:8–11 (ESV) – The Ten Commandments

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy ... ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath **to the LORD your God** ... ¹¹ For **in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them,** and rested on the seventh day...

Deuteronomy 5:12–15 (ESV) – Repeating of the Ten Commandments

¹² “ ‘Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy ... ¹⁴ but the seventh day is a Sabbath **to the LORD your God** ... ¹⁵ You shall remember that you were a **slave in the land of Egypt,** and **the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.** Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Shabbat was not just a day off from work, but also a day “to the Lord,” a time to relate to God. How were the children of Israel to relate to him through the Shabbat?

As His Creation: Exodus 20:11 ties Sabbath to God’s creation, which was **“finished”** by the seventh day. Of all His creation, only man was created in God’s image (**Genesis 1:26-28**). He did this so we could both relate to Him and represent Him in the world. He created us to think and feel, so we could choose to have faith in Him and follow Him.

As His Redeemed: Deuteronomy 5:15 ties Shabbat to God’s redemption in Egypt. He delivered His people from bondage and judgment not merely to escape punishment, but that they might be His people and have a relationship with Him. This work of redemption was ultimately accomplished through the death of the Messiah where He declared, **“It is finished”** (**John 19:30**). When we find rest in Messiah, then we can relate to God and enjoy His peace and harmony.

A Sign of Sanctification

Exodus 31:13 (ESV)

“You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, **sanctify you...**”

Shabbat is a reminder of the sanctifying relationship between God and Israel. A relationship that sanctifies, sets us apart unto God for His purpose and glory.

A Sign of Eternity

Shabbat is not only a reminder of peace we have by faith in the Messiah right now, but a sign of future and perfect rest yet to come:

Exodus 31:17 (ESV)

It is a **sign forever** between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.’

“a sign forever” - Literally means “it is a sign to eternity,” or a “sign for eternity.” Sabbath was a picture of a day where God’s rest will be truly experienced forever by His redeemed creation.

Shabbat is Realized in the Messiah

- Jesus said, “**Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest ... learn from me ... you will find rest for your souls.**” (Matthew 11:28-29). The Messiah is the reality that Shabbat promises.
- “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, **we have peace with God** through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1). This fulfillment has come in the Messiah. He is the fulfillment of all that Shabbat pictures.
- Of the Ten Commandments, the Shabbat is the only one not reiterated in the New Covenant. This is because the **Shabbat is a type of the Messiah**; a foreshadowing of the true rest that comes only in Him (Colossians 2:16-17):

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

- God’s rest has been prepared from the end of creation, and is available to us now through the sacrifice of Jesus (Hebrews 4:1-13):

*⁹ So then, **there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,** ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.*

Old Testament

Exodus 16 - Moses instructs the people to collect two day's worth of manna on the sixth day, reserving half for the seventh day, which is a day of rest and a holy day to the Lord. When some of the people do not listen and attempt to collect manna on the seventh day, God asks Moses: "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My instructions?" This passage demonstrates that the Sabbath day is a commandment of the Lord (Exodus 20).

Exodus 31:14-15; 35:2 - The penalty for working on the Sabbath is death.

Exodus 34:21 - The Sabbath should continue even during the harvest and planting seasons.

Lev 16:31; 19:3; 23:2; 24:8 - The permanence of the Sabbath, which endures upon everyone for all generations.

Lev 23:32 - The Sabbath must be kept from evening to evening

2 Kings 4:23 - Specifies that travel to visit a "man of God" was not restricted on the new moon or the Sabbath.

2 Kings 11:4-12 (2 Chr 23:4-11) - Demonstrates that national defense and the defense of the king are allowable on the Sabbath.

1 Chr 23:31; 2 Chr 2:4; 8:13; 31:3 - Indicates that the celebration of the Sabbath day includes a burnt offering, a portion of which is contributed by the king. These passages also associate the celebration of the Sabbath with the tent of meeting, temple of the Lord, a meal with bread, the burning of incense, covenant, redemption, and the land. Specifies that the burnt offerings are given both morning and evening and are a lasting obligation upon Israel.

Nehemiah 10:31; 13:15-22 - Specifies the prohibition against commerce includes treading wine, loading, transporting, selling grain, grapes, or figs, and buying goods from foreigners. These acts are said to "profane the Sabbath" and were part of the reason for God's prior judgment upon Judah.

Isa 1:13; Ezek 22:8, 26, 23:38 - God expresses that observing the Sabbath (among other festivals, rituals, and offerings) is detestable when conducted for the wrong reasons.

Isaiah 58:13; 66:23 - Emphasize that Sabbath observance includes a voluntary abstinence from personal pleasures in order to follow God's will.

Ezekiel 45:17 - Indicates that the prince is responsible for providing the burnt offerings, drink offerings, and grain offerings associated with the Sabbath.

Ezekiel 46:1-12 - Clarifies that the gate to the temple will remain open on the Sabbath and closed the other days. The prince will bring the burnt offering (comprised of six unblemished lambs and one unblemished ram) to the threshold of the gate, giving his burnt offering and peace offering to the priests.

Intertestamental Period

The Damascus Document (first century BC) - Prohibits walking more than 1000 cubits, drinking outside the camp, drawing water into any vessel, wearing perfume, opening a sealed vessel, assisting an animal to give birth or helping an animal out of a pit, and having sexual relations.

The Book of Jubilees (second century BC) - Prohibits plowing a field, starting a fire, riding an animal, riding in a boat, killing anything, making war. It also limits its observance to just the Israelites instead of all people in the promised land. The prohibition against making war on the Sabbath led to several military losses:

- **Josephus** records that Ptolemy I Soter (323–283/2 BC) captured Jerusalem when the Israelites refused to fight on the Sabbath (*Antiquities* 12.1.1).
- **2 Maccabees 5:25–6** - States that Apollonius waited until the Sabbath day to assault the city of Jerusalem because the people would not fight on the Sabbath (168 BC).

1 Maccabees 2:38 - Reverses this practice, as Mattathias declares that the Israelites need to defend themselves on the Sabbath.

New Testament

Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:16, 31; 13:10 - Jesus enters the synagogue on the Sabbath and begins to teach with authority. Luke adds that it was Jesus' normal custom to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath (compare Mark 3:1; Luke 4:44; 13:10).

Matthew 12:1–12; Mark 2:23–3:6; Luke 6:1–9 - Records Jesus and His disciples traveling, eating, and Jesus performing healing miracles on the Sabbath. In addition, **Luke 13:14; 14:1–6; John 5:1–18; 7:22–23; 9:1–41** record healings conducted on the Sabbath day. The Pharisees confront Jesus about breaking Sabbath law. Jesus responds that David was allowed to break the Sabbath when he ate bread in the House of God (**1 Sam 21:1–6**), and that the priests break the Sabbath rules every Sabbath by conducting the burnt and peace offerings. He also argues that anyone would save their animal if the animal was in danger. Jesus responds that because a person is of much greater value than an animal it is acceptable to do good deeds.

Mark 2:27 - Jesus utters the phrase "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath." **This brings into focus that the Sabbath regulations, as interpreted by the Pharisees, had lost the intent of the Sabbath prescribed in the Old Testament.** Therefore, the rules they observed were human made, not God made, and able to be broken.

Matt 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 23:56 - Mary Magdalene and Mary (Jesus' mother) discover the risen Jesus at sunrise just as the Sabbath is ending. In addition, **John 19:31** describes the need to remove Jesus' body from the cross before the beginning of the Sabbath observance, which also impacted the preparation of spices and perfumes for the body.

Background Passages

Genesis 2:2–3 (ESV)

² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

Exodus 20:8–11 (ESV)

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Exodus 31:13–17 (ESV)

¹³ “You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. ¹⁴ You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. ¹⁵ Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. ¹⁶ Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. ¹⁷ It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.’ ”

Deuteronomy 5:12–15 (ESV)

¹² “ ‘Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. ¹⁵ You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Matthew 11:28–30 (ESV)

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

John 19:30 (ESV)

³⁰ When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Romans 5:1 (ESV)

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Colossians 2:16–17 (ESV)

¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Hebrews 4:1–13 (ESV)

¹ Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ² For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. ³ For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said,

“As I swore in my wrath,

‘They shall not enter my rest,’ ”

although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. ⁴ For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.”

⁵ And again in this passage he said,

“They shall not enter my rest.”

⁶ Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,

“Today, if you hear his voice,

do not harden your hearts.”

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. ¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Other References

Old Testament

Exodus 16:4–8 (ESV)

⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.” ⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, “At evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷ and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against the LORD. For what are we, that you grumble against us?” ⁸ And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because the LORD has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him—what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD.”

Exodus 16:22–30 (ESV)

²² On the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers each. And when all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, ²³ he said to them, “This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD; bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil, and all that is left over lay aside to be kept till the morning.’ ” ²⁴ So they laid it aside till the morning, as Moses commanded them, and it did not stink, and there were no worms in it. ²⁵ Moses said, “Eat it today, for today is a Sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. ²⁶ Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, there will be none.”

²⁷ On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, but they found none. ²⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws? ²⁹ See! The LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Remain each of you in his place; let no one go out of his place on the seventh day.” ³⁰ So the people rested on the seventh day. **Exodus 31:14-15; 35:2** - The penalty for working on the Sabbath is death.

Exodus 34:21 (ESV)

²¹ “Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest. In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest.

Leviticus 16:31 (ESV)

³¹ It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a statute forever.

Leviticus 19:3 (ESV)

³ Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the LORD your God.

Leviticus 23:2 (ESV)

² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, These are the appointed feasts of the LORD that you shall proclaim as holy convocations; they are my appointed feasts.

Leviticus 24:8 (ESV)

⁸ Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the LORD regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever.

Leviticus 23:32 (ESV)

³² It shall be to you a Sabbath of solemn rest, and you shall afflict yourselves. On the ninth day of the month beginning at evening, from evening to evening shall you keep your Sabbath.”

2 Kings 4:23 (ESV)

²³ And he said, “Why will you go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She said, “All is well.”

2 Kings 11:4–12 (ESV)

⁴ But in the seventh year Jehoiada sent and brought the captains of the Carites and of the guards, and had them come to him in the house of the LORD. And he made a covenant with them and put them under oath in the house of the LORD, and he showed them the king’s son. ⁵ And he commanded them, “This is the thing that you shall do: one third of you, those who come off duty on the Sabbath and guard the king’s house ⁶ (another third being at the gate Sur and a third at the gate behind the guards) shall guard the palace. ⁷ And the two divisions of you, which come on duty in force on the Sabbath and guard the house of the LORD on behalf of the king, ⁸ shall surround the king, each with his weapons in his hand. And whoever approaches the ranks is to be put to death. Be with the king when he goes out and when he comes in.”

⁹ The captains did according to all that Jehoiada the priest commanded, and they each brought his men who were to go off duty on the Sabbath, with those who were to come on duty on the Sabbath, and came to Jehoiada the priest. ¹⁰ And the priest gave to the captains the spears and shields that had been King David’s, which were in the house of the LORD. ¹¹ And the guards stood, every man with his weapons in his hand, from the south side of the house to the north side of the house, around the altar and the house on behalf of the king. ¹² Then he brought out the king’s son and put the crown on him and gave him the testimony. And they proclaimed him king and anointed him, and they clapped their hands and said, “Long live the king!”

2 Chronicles 23:4–11 (ESV)

⁴ This is the thing that you shall do: of you priests and Levites who come off duty on the Sabbath, one third shall be gatekeepers, ⁵ and one third shall be at the king’s house and one third at the Gate of the Foundation. And all the people shall be in the courts of the house of the LORD. ⁶ Let no one enter the house of the LORD except the priests and ministering Levites. They may enter, for they are holy, but all the people shall keep the charge of the LORD. ⁷ The Levites shall surround the king, each with his weapons in his hand. And whoever enters the house shall be put to death. Be with the king when he comes in and when he goes out.”

⁸ The Levites and all Judah did according to all that Jehoiada the priest commanded, and they each brought his men, who were to go off duty on the Sabbath, with those who were to come on duty on the Sabbath, for Jehoiada the priest did not dismiss the divisions. ⁹ And Jehoiada the priest gave to the captains the spears and the large and small shields that had been King David's, which were in the house of God. ¹⁰ And he set all the people as a guard for the king, every man with his weapon in his hand, from the south side of the house to the north side of the house, around the altar and the house. ¹¹ Then they brought out the king's son and put the crown on him and gave him the testimony. And they proclaimed him king, and Jehoiada and his sons anointed him, and they said, "Long live the king."

1 Chronicles 23:31 (ESV)

³¹ and whenever burnt offerings were offered to the LORD on Sabbaths, new moons, and feast days, according to the number required of them, regularly before the LORD.

2 Chronicles 2:4 (ESV)

⁴ Behold, I am about to build a house for the name of the LORD my God and dedicate it to him for the burning of incense of sweet spices before him, and for the regular arrangement of the showbread, and for burnt offerings morning and evening, on the Sabbaths and the new moons and the appointed feasts of the LORD our God, as ordained forever for Israel.

2 Chronicles 8:13 (ESV)

¹³ as the duty of each day required, offering according to the commandment of Moses for the Sabbaths, the new moons, and the three annual feasts—the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths.

2 Chronicles 31:3 (ESV)

³ The contribution of the king from his own possessions was for the burnt offerings: the burnt offerings of morning and evening, and the burnt offerings for the Sabbaths, the new moons, and the appointed feasts, as it is written in the Law of the LORD.

Nehemiah 10:31 (ESV)

³¹ And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day. And we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.

Nehemiah 13:15–22 (ESV)

¹⁵ In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them on the day when they sold food. ¹⁶ Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself! ¹⁷ Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? ¹⁸ Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."

¹⁹ As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath. And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day. ²⁰ Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. ²¹ But I warned them and said to them, “Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you.” From that time on they did not come on the Sabbath. ²² Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.

Isaiah 1:13 (ESV)

¹³ Bring no more vain offerings;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.

Ezekiel 22:8 (ESV)

⁸ You have despised my holy things and profaned my Sabbaths.

Ezekiel 22:26 (ESV)

²⁶ Her priests have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things. They have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.

Ezekiel 23:38 (ESV)

³⁸ Moreover, this they have done to me: they have defiled my sanctuary on the same day and profaned my Sabbaths.

Isaiah 58:13 (ESV)

¹³ “If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath,
from doing your pleasure on my holy day,
and call the Sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;

Isaiah 66:23 (ESV)

²³ From new moon to new moon,
and from Sabbath to Sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me,
declares the LORD.

Ezekiel 45:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ It shall be the prince's duty to furnish the burnt offerings, grain offerings, and drink offerings, at the feasts, the new moons, and the Sabbaths, all the appointed feasts of the house of Israel: he shall provide the sin offerings, grain offerings, burnt offerings, and peace offerings, to make atonement on behalf of the house of Israel.

Ezekiel 46:1–12 (ESV)

¹ "Thus says the Lord GOD: The gate of the inner court that faces east shall be shut on the six working days, but on the Sabbath day it shall be opened, and on the day of the new moon it shall be opened. ² The prince shall enter by the vestibule of the gate from outside, and shall take his stand by the post of the gate. The priests shall offer his burnt offering and his peace offerings, and he shall worship at the threshold of the gate. Then he shall go out, but the gate shall not be shut until evening. ³ The people of the land shall bow down at the entrance of that gate before the LORD on the Sabbaths and on the new moons. ⁴ The burnt offering that the prince offers to the LORD on the Sabbath day shall be six lambs without blemish and a ram without blemish. ⁵ And the grain offering with the ram shall be an ephah, and the grain offering with the lambs shall be as much as he is able, together with a hin of oil to each ephah. ⁶ On the day of the new moon he shall offer a bull from the herd without blemish, and six lambs and a ram, which shall be without blemish. ⁷ As a grain offering he shall provide an ephah with the bull and an ephah with the ram, and with the lambs as much as he is able, together with a hin of oil to each ephah. ⁸ When the prince enters, he shall enter by the vestibule of the gate, and he shall go out by the same way.

⁹ "When the people of the land come before the LORD at the appointed feasts, he who enters by the north gate to worship shall go out by the south gate, and he who enters by the south gate shall go out by the north gate: no one shall return by way of the gate by which he entered, but each shall go out straight ahead. ¹⁰ When they enter, the prince shall enter with them, and when they go out, he shall go out.

¹¹ "At the feasts and the appointed festivals, the grain offering with a young bull shall be an ephah, and with a ram an ephah, and with the lambs as much as one is able to give, together with a hin of oil to an ephah. ¹² When the prince provides a freewill offering, either a burnt offering or peace offerings as a freewill offering to the LORD, the gate facing east shall be opened for him. And he shall offer his burnt offering or his peace offerings as he does on the Sabbath day. Then he shall go out, and after he has gone out the gate shall be shut.

New Testament

Jesus Going to the Synagogue

Mark 1:21 (ESV)

²¹ And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching.

Mark 6:2 (ESV)

² And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?"

Luke 4:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.

Luke 4:31 (ESV)

³¹ And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath,

Luke 13:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.

Jesus Healing and Eating on the Sabbath

Matthew 12:1–12 (ESV)

¹ At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ² But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." ³ He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? ⁵ Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? ⁶ I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷ And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸ For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

⁹ He went on from there and entered their synagogue. ¹⁰ And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—so that they might accuse him. ¹¹ He said to them, "Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? ¹² Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

Mark 2:23–3:6 (ESV)

²³ One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” ²⁵ And he said to them, “**Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: ²⁶ how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?**” ²⁷ And he said to them, “**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.**”

¹ Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. ² And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man with the withered hand, “**Come here.**” ⁴ And he said to them, “**Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?**” But they were silent. ⁵ And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, “**Stretch out your hand.**” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Luke 6:1–9 (ESV)

¹ On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. ² But some of the Pharisees said, “Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?” ³ And Jesus answered them, “**Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those with him?**” ⁵ And he said to them, “**The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.**”

⁶ On another Sabbath, he entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered. ⁷ And the scribes and the Pharisees watched him, to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might find a reason to accuse him. ⁸ But he knew their thoughts, and he said to the man with the withered hand, “**Come and stand here.**” And he rose and stood there. ⁹ And Jesus said to them, “**I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?**”

Luke 13:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, “There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.”

Luke 14:1–6 (ESV)

¹ One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. ² And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. ³ And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, “**Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?**” ⁴ But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. ⁵ And he said to them, “**Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?**” ⁶ And they could not reply to these things.

John 5:1–18 (ESV)

¹ After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

² Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. ³ In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵ One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, **“Do you want to be healed?”** ⁷ The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.” ⁸ Jesus said to him, **“Get up, take up your bed, and walk.”** ⁹ And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.

Now that day was the Sabbath. ¹⁰ So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.” ¹¹ But he answered them, “The man who healed me, that man said to me, **‘Take up your bed, and walk.’**” ¹² They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and walk’?” ¹³ Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. ¹⁴ Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, **“See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.”** ¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. ¹⁶ And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. ¹⁷ But Jesus answered them, **“My Father is working until now, and I am working.”**

¹⁸ This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

John 7:22–23 (ESV)

²² **Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. ²³ If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man’s whole body well?**

John 9:1–41 (ESV)

¹ As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. ² And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³ Jesus answered, **“It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”** ⁶ Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud ⁷ and said to him, **“Go, wash in the pool of Siloam”** (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹ Some said, “It is he.” Others said, “No, but he is like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.” ¹⁰ So they said to him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹ He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, **‘Go to**

Siloam and wash. So I went and washed and received my sight.”¹² They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, “He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.” ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” And there was a division among them. ¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?” He said, “He is a prophet.”

¹⁸ The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹ and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” ²⁰ His parents answered, “We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. ²¹ But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” ²² (His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.) ²³ Therefore his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

²⁴ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner.” ²⁵ He answered, “Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” ²⁶ They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” ²⁷ He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?” ²⁸ And they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” ³⁰ The man answered, “Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. ³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” ³⁴ They answered him, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” And they cast him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, “**Do you believe in the Son of Man?**” ³⁶ He answered, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” ³⁷ Jesus said to him, “**You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.**” ³⁸ He said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. ³⁹ Jesus said, “**For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.**” ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, “Are we also blind?” ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, “**If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.**”

1 Samuel 21:1–6 (ESV)

¹ Then David came to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest. And Ahimelech came to meet David, trembling, and said to him, “Why are you alone, and no one with you?” ² And David said to Ahimelech the priest, “The king has charged me with a matter and said to me, ‘Let no one know anything of the matter about which I send you, and with which I have charged you.’ I have made an appointment with the young men for such and such a place. ³ Now then, what do you

have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here.”⁴ And the priest answered David, “I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread—if the young men have kept themselves from women.”⁵ And David answered the priest, “Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition. The vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today will their vessels be holy?”⁶ So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the LORD, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away.

Jesus Rises just as the Sabbath has Ended

Matthew 28:1 (ESV)

¹ Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

Mark 16:1 (ESV)

¹ When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

Luke 23:56 (ESV)

⁵⁶ Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments.
On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

John 19:31 (ESV)

³¹ Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away.

Sabbath

(תַּבְּרַת, *shabbath*). A day of complete rest from secular work following six days of labor. Established and modeled by God.

Introduction

The concept of the Sabbath was modified over time. In the Old Testament, Sabbath began as a holy day for God, which included cessation from secular work. During the Intertestamental period, the Sabbath gained a legalistic tone, and came to include detailed aspects of observance. During the New Testament era, Jesus addressed and clarified the meaning of the Sabbath.

Old Testament

The word “Sabbath” (תַּבְּרַת, *shabbath*), which means “cease,” “rest,” “complete rest,” or “desist,” is found in every section of the biblical texts. Forms of the word תַּבְּרַת (*shabbath*) occur 104 times in the Old Testament. Roughly 40 percent of the occurrences are in the Pentateuch, another 40 percent occur in the Prophetic Books, and the remaining 20 percent occur in the Wisdom literature and historical books. Wisdom literature contains only two references to Sabbath (Psa 92:1; Lam 2:6). The texts associated with the priesthood contain the most references to the Sabbath. The noun תַּבְּרַת (*shabbath*) is thought to be derived from the verb תַּבְּרַת (*shavath*), meaning “to rest.”

References in the Pentateuch

While the word Sabbath does not occur in Genesis, the concept is shown in the creation account of Gen 1:1–2:4a, where God creates the world and all living things in six days and rests (תַּבְּרַת, *shavath*) on the seventh. Exodus 20:11 clarifies that the seventh day is meant to be the Sabbath day. The Decalogue characterizes the Sabbath as a day that:

- is holy and blessed
- should be remembered and kept holy
- belongs to the Lord
- requires abstinence from work for all people (Jews and Gentiles alike) and animals

The text implies that God rested on the seventh day of creation, and therefore humankind should follow His example (*imitatio Dei*) and rest on the seventh day (see also Deut 5:12–15).

Exodus 16 includes a discussion of the Sabbath day in the narrative of the Israelites wandering in the Sinai desert. Moses instructs the people to collect two days worth of manna on the sixth day, reserving half for the seventh day, which is a day of rest and a holy day to the Lord. When some of the people do not listen and attempt to collect manna on the seventh day,

God asks Moses (regarding the people): “How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My instructions?” This passage demonstrates that:

- the Sabbath day is a commandment of the Lord (Exod 20)
- the people need to rely upon the word of God, not their own understanding

Although this passage is the first in the biblical text to mention the Sabbath, Childs and Buber note that the text assumes the audience knew the concept, and the lesson concerns something that was already in existence.

Other references in Exodus clarify that:

- The Sabbath should continue even during the harvest and planting seasons (Exod 34:21).
- The Sabbath is a sign between the Lord and humankind that God is the source of sanctification (Exod 31:13).
- The penalty for working on the Sabbath is death (Exod 31:14–15; 35:2).
- The Sabbath is a perpetual covenant (Exod 31:13, 16).

Leviticus mentions the Sabbath 24 times (the most frequent of any biblical book). These references stress:

- rest on the Sabbath day (Lev 16:31; 23:2, 32)
- humility toward God (Lev 16:31, 32)
- the permanence of the Sabbath, which endures upon everyone for all generations (Lev 16:31; 19:3; 23:2; 24:8)
- that Sabbath is a holy convocation (Lev 23:2)
- the Sabbath must be kept from evening to evening (Lev 23:32)
- the Sabbath endures upon land as well as people (Lev 25:2–6; 26:34)

The references to the Sabbath day in the Pentateuch emphasize similar features, including the importance of rest, humility towards God, the holiness of the day, care for the needy, permanence of the statute, and consequences for disobedience. Further references in the Pentateuch tie the observance of the Sabbath to creation (the day God rested) and the exodus (the redemption of Israel from slavery in Egypt). In addition, the Sabbath is a sign of the everlasting covenant between God and Israel.

References in the Historical Books

The historical books of Kings, Chronicles, and Nehemiah mention the Sabbath. References to the Sabbath in the historical books assume knowledge of the Pentateuch and emphasize the prohibition against working or performing commerce on the Sabbath. The priest and the king now play a role in the Sabbath observance, with the king providing sacrifices for the burnt

offering, the priest performing sacrifices in the temple including a meal, and the duration of the observance is clarified from evening to evening.

- Second Kings 4:23 specifies that travel to visit a “man of God” was not restricted on the new moon or the Sabbath.
- Second Kings 11:4–12 (2 Chr 23:4–11) demonstrates that national defense and the defense of the king are allowable on the Sabbath.
- Second Kings 16:17–18 associates the Sabbath with a “covered way” or “canopy.” In this passage, the canopy which was built for the Sabbath is removed during the reign of Ahaz (circa 735–715 BC).

First and Second Chronicles provide details on the practices involved in the Sabbath observations. Passages such as 1 Chr 23:31; 2 Chr 2:4; 8:13; 31:3 indicate that the celebration of the Sabbath day includes a burnt offering, a portion of which is contributed by the king (2 Chr 31:3). These passages also associate the celebration of the Sabbath with the tent of meeting, temple of the Lord, a meal with bread, the burning of incense, covenant, redemption, and the land.

- First Chronicles 9:32 identifies rows of bread as part of a Sabbath meal.
- Second Chronicles 2:4 and 31:3 specify that the burnt offerings are given both morning and evening and are a lasting obligation upon Israel.
- Second Chronicles 36:21 describes the abandonment of the land of Judah during the Babylonian exile as a Sabbath rest for the land.

The events described in Nehemiah likely occur in the fifth century BC after some Israelites have returned to Judah from exile in Babylon. Apparently, many people had abandoned the celebration of the Sabbath and many of God’s ordinances. The passages in Nehemiah stress the importance of the Sabbath celebration (9:14). Nehemiah 10:31 reiterates a prohibition against commerce on the Sabbath as well as the sabbatical rest for the land and the remission of debts every seven years. Nehemiah 13:15–22 specifies the prohibition against commerce includes:

- treading wine
- loading
- transporting
- selling grain, grapes, or figs
- buying goods from foreigners.

These acts are said to “profane the Sabbath” and were part of the reason for God’s prior judgment upon Judah.

References in the Wisdom Literature

The Sabbath is mentioned twice in Wisdom texts. Psalm 92:1 identifies itself as “a song for the Sabbath.” The song is joyous, giving thanks to the Lord and declaring His lovingkindness in the morning and His faithfulness in the afternoon. The association of the song with the Sabbath highlights the intent of the day is much more than a legalistic restriction of activity; it is a joyous occasion reflecting on the many blessings the Lord has given. In contrast, Lam 2:6 highlights the judgment of the Lord that separated the people of Judah and Israel from celebrating the Sabbath. The passage shows that the inability to celebrate the Sabbath, and its restrictions, is painful for the people.

References in the Prophets

The prophetic texts provide a primarily negative view of the Sabbath observance in the later years of the divided monarchy. They utilize the Sabbath as an example for how the Israelites “ritualized” the ceremonies God commanded, losing the inner meaning of the event. God expresses that observing the Sabbath (among other festivals, rituals, and offerings) is detestable when conducted for the wrong reasons (Isa 1:13; Ezek 22:8, 26, 23:38).

- Ezekiel 20:12–24 details that profaning (perhaps meaning secularizing) the Sabbath occurred as early as the period of the exodus, and is not unique to the time of the prophets. Profaning the Sabbath brings about God’s wrath.
- Jeremiah 17:21 echoes this negative tone, warning that ignoring the Sabbath will lead to the destruction of Jerusalem.
- Hosea 2:11 specifies that one consequence of Israel’s disobedience will be the discontinuation of Israel’s celebrations.
- Amos 8:5 details that the Israelites were eager for the Sabbath to end so they might engage in commerce.

The prophetic texts also contain positive references to the Sabbath.

- Isaiah 56:1–4 illustrates that a person (applying to Israelites and non-Israelites) who preserves justice and does righteousness is blessed and will not profane the Sabbath.
- Isaiah 58:13 and 66:23 emphasize that Sabbath observance includes a voluntary abstinence from personal pleasures in order to follow God’s will.
- Ezekiel 20:12, 20 stresses that the Sabbath is a sign of the covenant between God and Israel.

As with the historical books, the prophetic texts highlight abstinence from work on the Sabbath and a call to keep the day holy (Jer 17:21–27). They also provide additional details on Sabbath observance during this period:

- Ezekiel 44:24 assigns the priests as responsible for keeping the Sabbath holy.
- Ezekiel 45:17 indicates that the prince is responsible for providing the burnt offerings, drink offerings, and grain offerings associated with the Sabbath.

- Ezekiel 46:1–12 clarifies that the gate to the temple will remain open on the Sabbath and closed the other days. The prince will bring the burnt offering (comprised of six unblemished lambs and one unblemished ram) to the threshold of the gate, giving his burnt offering and peace offering to the priests. The prince and the people will then worship at the opening of the gate.

Intertestamental Period

Intertestamental writings detailed Sabbath restrictions and recorded military losses resulting from Sabbath observance. The Damascus Document, dating to the first century BC, outlines several limits to activity on the Sabbath including:

- walking farther than 1000 cubits
- drinking outside the camp
- drawing water into any vessel
- wearing perfume
- opening a sealed vessel
- assisting an animal to give birth or helping an animal out of a pit
- having sexual relations

The book of Jubilees (second century BC) adds further prohibitions:

- plowing a field
- starting a fire
- riding an animal
- riding in a boat
- killing anything
- making war

Jubilees 2:30 alters the extent of Sabbath requirement, limiting its observance to just the Israelites instead of all people in the promised land. Fragment 5 of the work of Aristobulus associates the Sabbath with a sevenfold structure in the cosmos and to wisdom.

The prohibition against making war on the Sabbath led to several military losses:

- Josephus records that Ptolemy I Soter (323–283/2 BC) captured Jerusalem when the Israelites refused to fight on the Sabbath (*Antiquities* 12.1.1).
- Second Maccabees 5:25–6 states that Apollonius waited until the Sabbath day to assault the city of Jerusalem because the people would not fight on the Sabbath (168 BC).

However, 1 Macc 2:38 reverses this practice, as Mattathias declares that the Israelites need to defend themselves on the Sabbath. By the end of the Roman period, the Jews not only defended themselves on the Sabbath but engaged in offensive attacks.

New Testament

Each section of the New Testament text mentions the Sabbath. In the Gospels, Jesus teaches regarding Sabbath observance. The authors of Acts and the letters further clarify the meaning behind Sabbath observance.

Gospels

As Jesus begins His ministry, He enters the synagogue on the Sabbath and begins to teach with authority (Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:16, 31; 13:10). Luke 4:16 adds that it was Jesus' normal custom to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath, showing that Jesus followed the customs outlined in the historical books and the prophets (compare Mark 3:1; Luke 4:44; 13:10). John 7:22–23 records that circumcisions were performed on the Sabbath day.

Matthew 12:1–12; Mark 2:23–3:6; Luke 6:1–9 record Jesus and His disciples traveling, eating, and Jesus performing healing miracles on the Sabbath. In addition, Luke 13:14; 14:1–6; John 5:1–18; 7:22–23; 9:1–41 record healings conducted on the Sabbath day. The Pharisees observe the acts and confront Jesus about breaking Sabbath law (*halakhah*). Jesus responds that David was allowed to break the Sabbath when he ate bread in the House of God, and that the priests break the Sabbath rules every Sabbath by conducting the burnt and peace offerings. He also argues that anyone would save their animal if the animal was in danger. Jesus responds that because a person is of much greater value than an animal it is acceptable to do good deeds (i.e. healing) on the Sabbath.

In Mark 2:27, Jesus utters the phrase “The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.” The phrase brings two primary points into focus:

1. The Sabbath regulations, as interpreted by the Pharisees, had lost the intent of the Sabbath prescribed in the Old Testament. Therefore, the rules they observed were human made, not God made, and able to be broken.
2. The Sabbath proclaimed at creation was intended to serve mankind as a holy day, giving blessing, and observing God's rest/restoration.

Nothing of Jesus' or His disciples' actions were contrary to the purpose and intent of the Sabbath observance. As such, Jesus was not rewriting the law, but fulfilling and clarifying the original law as described in the Pentateuch, Historical Books, and the Prophets.

In Matt 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 23:56, Mary Magdalene and Mary (Jesus' mother) discover the risen Jesus at sunrise just as the Sabbath is ending. In addition, John 19:31 describes the need to remove Jesus' body from the cross before the beginning of the Sabbath observance, which also impacted the preparation of spices and perfumes for the body.

Acts and Epistles

The book of Acts preserves nine occurrences of the word Sabbath. The text mentions the Sabbath as a day for religious gathering/teaching and associates it with the formation of churches in Antioch (Acts 13:13–52); Philippi (Acts 16:11–15); Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9); and Corinth (Acts 18:1–4).

The Letters contain two occurrences of the term “Sabbath.” In Col 2:16, Paul argues that people should not be judged based upon their observance of various ritual acts, including eating and observance of festivals and the Sabbath. He labels these as “shadows” which were fulfilled by Christ. The meaning of the passage is debated; however, the text discusses misperception that performance of ritual was a pathway to salvation (Judaizing) and asceticism. This context demonstrates that Paul is not abolishing the Sabbath concept, but instating a lack of condemnation for failing to observe an ascetical form of self-denial. He is also arguing against the idea that Sabbath observance plays a role in salvation (through works).

Hebrews 4:9 refers to a Sabbath-rest that remains in effect. The author of Hebrews anticipates an eschatological fulfillment for the people of God in the period inaugurated with the appearance of Jesus (Heb 4:3–13). The eschatological context points to a present and future reality. Hebrews 4:3 indicates that presently, people who believe are able to enter into Sabbath rest. Additionally, Heb 4:11 points to a future rest for those who are obedient. The passage emphasizes the Old Testament principles that God’s Sabbath is based on abstinence from work (Heb 4:10), rest (Heb 4:3), tied to creations (Heb 4:4), and a call for obedience (Heb 4:6).

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Sabbath, Critical Issues

Survey of interpretive issues related to the biblical presentation of the Sabbath including its origin, rationale, practices, and the penalties for non-observance.

Origins of the Sabbath

While the first command to Sabbath observance appears in Exod 20:8 at Sinai, the earlier instructions God gives Moses regarding bread from heaven seem to announce a day of rest every seventh day (Exod 16:4–5). The origins of the Israelite Sabbath are difficult to determine from the biblical texts. There is uncertainty over the relative dating of texts regarding the Sabbath, and its biblical presentations vary with regard to:

- rationale for the practice
- enforcement of the practice (no penalty, Exod 16; civil penalty, Neh 13:15–22; death penalty, Exod 35:2; Num 15:32–36)
- the date at which the practice was implemented

Dating Sources

The exact dates of the biblical texts concerning Sabbath origins are unclear. Many scholars seek to assign the texts of the Pentateuch to different sources, including:

- The Yahwistic source (ninth century BC, “J”)
- The Elohist source (eighth century BC, “E”)
- The Deuteronomic source (late seventh century BC, “D”)
- The Priestly source (postexilic, “P”)

Scholars argue these sources reflect different settings, outlooks, and goals, and so articulate noticeably different theologies of the Sabbath. The presentation of the Sabbath in the earliest texts seems to focus on the provision of food and is not integrated in any legal code (e.g., Exodus 16, J supplemented by P). Humanitarian concerns such as rest for servants and animals (Exod 23:12, probably from the E source) and for oneself (Deut 5:12–15, from the D source) predominate in the later E and D sources. While these texts require the Israelites to abstain from work, they present a humanitarian orientation of the Sabbath. The later P sources present the Sabbath as primarily a theological concept tied to Israel’s covenant relationship to Yahweh (Exod 31:12–17). These texts fortify the Sabbath’s legal standing by calling for the death penalty for violators (Exod 35:1–3). In Wellhausen’s classical reconstruction of the sources, this latest form of the Sabbath appeared more ascetic than restful and restorative (Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 114–15; a more recent reconstruction appears in Grund, *Entstehung*).

Views regarding these sources vary widely. It is unclear whether the P source was reworked (see the varying views of Knohl, “Priestly Torah;” Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*; and Olyan, “Exodus

31:12–17”), and it is becoming common to blur the boundaries between some of the sources (see Dozeman, *Exodus*, who simply distinguishes between P and non-P material).

Sabbath Origins in the Biblical Texts

God’s consecration of the seventh day in Genesis 2:1–3 is often cited as the origin for the human observance of Sabbath. In this account, the seventh day is blessed and sanctified, and set apart as the final item in a seven-item series (Matthews, *Genesis 1:1–11:26*, 176). Exodus 20:11 takes this account as the foundation for the Israelites’ Sabbath observance. However, Genesis 2:1–3 is probably better seen as referring to divine rest than to a human Sabbath (VanGemeren, *Progress of Redemption*, 46, 48; Timmer, *Creation, Tabernacle, and Sabbath*, 70–71).

Exodus 16 seems to institute a regular seventh-day Sabbath that promotes trust that God will provide for His people. While this account only explicitly prohibits the gathering of manna on the Sabbath, it is likely the precedent on which Exodus 20 is based, with its prohibition of any kind of work (Exod 20:10; Fabry, Milgrom, and Wright, “מלאכה, *ml'kh*,”). Exod 35:2 makes Sabbath violation a capital offense.

Possible Sabbath Origins Outside Israel

Some scholars have looked outside of Israel for the origin of the Sabbath, suggesting that, over time, the Israelites adapted a regular (although not necessarily weekly) day of rest from one of the surrounding cultures:

- Batto suggests that Israel took the motif of divine rest after combat that was widespread in the ancient Near East and applied it first to Yahweh, then to Israel’s religious calendar (Batto, *Slaying the Dragon*, 78–81).
- Jenni suggested that what was originally a market day became a weekly day of rest (Jenni, *Sabbatgebotes*).
- Robinson, in light of the significant contact between Israel and Babylonian culture, argues that the Sabbath was first tied to the full moon (Robinson, *Origin*, 73) and later became weekly (*Origin*, 270, 313).

None of these options has gained widespread support, either because they lack evidence, or are contradictory. For example, Babylonian and other Mesopotamian cultures organized their days of work and rest by the lunar month, not the seven-day week (Hallo, “New Moons and Sabbaths,” 12).

Terms for “Sabbath”

The Bible uses a variety of terms to refer to the Sabbath itself, sometimes within the same passage. Exodus 16 uses “Sabbath,” “Sabbath observance,” and “holy (Sabbath)” (see also Exod 31:12–17). Other texts—particularly those closely associated with P and similar sources—consistently pair the terms “Sabbath” and “Sabbath observance” to designate either a seventh-day Sabbath or some other celebration (for the former, see Exod 35:2; Lev 16:29–31; 23:3, 32;

for the Sabbath of the land, see Lev 25:4). The New Testament consistently uses the term *σάββατον* (*sabbaton*).

Other Theological Connections

The Sabbath is closely connected to several other religious and theological concepts in the Bible.

Creation

While the first creation narrative (Gen 1:1–2:3) is probably better seen as referring to divine rest than to a human Sabbath, divine rest is the pattern for the human Sabbath in Exodus 20. Moreover, creation often appears in contexts where the Sabbath is present, as in the motive clause that concludes the command for Israel to keep Sabbath (Exod 31:12–17). The New Testament occasionally makes a similar connection, as when Mark 2:27 proposes a link between the origins of the Sabbath and the creation of humanity (C. S. Mann, *Mark*; W. Stott, “Sabbath”).

Sacred Time

The Old Testament uses Sabbath language for observances other than the weekly Sabbath, including:

- The Day of Atonement (Lev 16:31; 23:32)
- The Festival of Trumpets (Lev 23:24)
- The Festival of Booths (Lev 23:39)
- The sabbatical year (Lev 25:4, 5)

Each of these involve a “Sabbath observance” that invites people to reflect on the concept’s adaptation to other settings (Timmer, *Creation, Tabernacle, and Sabbath*, 35). A. Heschel presents the Sabbath as a point where the human spirit has communion with the divine (Heschel, *The Sabbath*).

Divine Presence

Both the Old and New Testaments connect the weekly Sabbath or rest with God’s presence. For example:

- The literary context of the references to the Sabbath in Exod 31:12–17; 35:1–3 is the tabernacle itself
- In Isaiah 65–66, God’s ultimate resting place overlaps with the site of Israel’s renewed worship
- Hebrews 3–4 connects the enjoyment of Sabbath rest by the faithful with God’s own rest (Bakon, “Creation, Tabernacle, and Sabbath;” Laansma, “*I Will Give You Rest*”; Naudé, “*קדש, tsdq*”).

The Book of *Jubilees* similarly expresses the belief that the proper celebration of the Sabbath brings people into God's very presence. Rabbinic conceptions of the Sabbath combine sacred space (in the Israelite household) and the sacred time of the Sabbath that was first seen in the sanctification of creation at the conclusion of the first creation narrative (Neusner, *Rabbinic Theology*, 345–56).

Covenant Sign

Due to assertions that the Sabbath in the context of the Sinai covenant is a “sign” (Exod 31:13) and a “covenant” (Exod 31:16) for Israel, Sabbath can be compared to other covenant signs in the Bible—especially circumcision in the covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:9–14) and the rainbow (in the covenant with Noah and all creation, Gen 9). The context of Exod 31:12–17 stresses Yahweh's identity and role as the one who sanctifies Israel (Exod 31:13). The weekly celebration of the Sabbath was a constant reminder of Israel's status and of the call for the Israelites to pursue obedience to the Sinai covenant signified by the Sabbath (Fox, “Sign of the Covenant;” Timmer, *Creation, Tabernacle, and Sabbath*).

Continuity and Discontinuity

The proper observance of the Sabbath has been disputed throughout history, as attested by the Sabbath debates throughout the Gospels (Chilton and Neusner, *Judaism in the New Testament*, 135–44). Today, a variety of views regarding Sabbath can be found in both Judaism and Christianity.

Jewish Practices

All forms of Judaism celebrate the Sabbath in recognition of God's transcendence and of the call for Israel to imitate their God (De Lange, *Introduction*, 96; Novak, “Sabbath Day,” 76). Jewish practice often includes viewing the Sabbath as a metaphorical bride or queen whose arrival and departure are observed in various ways.

Early Rabbinic literature developed 39 forms of prohibited work, but its main poles are home and synagogue, and it is animated by an ethos of blessing (Pearl, “Sabbath,” 595). In kabbalistic thought (a form of Jewish mystic spirituality that appeared around the twelfth century), the Sabbath was associated with God's *shekhinah*, the point of contact between the divine and earthly spheres (Werblowsky and Wigoder, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 629).

Christian Practices

Christian understandings of the Sabbath range widely. Many Protestant denominations celebrate the Lord's Day on Sunday as distinct from the Sabbath in most ways (see Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*). Other Protestant denominations—particularly those influenced by early British and Scottish theology—celebrate the Lord's Day on Sunday on the basis of the Decalogue (see Pipa, *Lord's Day*). Seventh Day Adventists practice seventh-day observance of the Lord's Day as the Christian Sabbath (du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath*).

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Sabbath

(Heb. verb shabbath, meaning “to rest from labour”), the day of rest. It is first mentioned as having been instituted in Paradise, when man was in innocence (Gen. 2:2). “The sabbath was made for man,” as a day of rest and refreshment for the body and of blessing to the soul.

It is next referred to in connection with the gift of manna to the children of Israel in the wilderness (Ex. 16:23); and afterwards, when the law was given from Sinai (20:11), the people were solemnly charged to “remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.” Thus it is spoken of as an institution already existing.

In the Mosaic law strict regulations were laid down regarding its observance (Ex. 35:2, 3; Lev. 23:3; 26:34). These were peculiar to that dispensation.

In the subsequent history of the Jews frequent references are made to the sanctity of the Sabbath (Isa. 56:2, 4, 6, 7; 58:13, 14; Jer. 17:20–22; Neh. 13:19). In later times they perverted the Sabbath by their traditions. Our Lord rescued it from their perversions, and recalled to them its true nature and intent (Matt. 12:10–13; Mark 2:27; Luke 13:10–17).

The Sabbath, originally instituted for man at his creation, is of permanent and universal obligation. The physical necessities of man require a Sabbath of rest. He is so constituted that his bodily welfare needs at least one day in seven for rest from ordinary labour. Experience also proves that the moral and spiritual necessities of men also demand a Sabbath of rest. “I am more and more sure by experience that the reason for the observance of the Sabbath lies deep in the everlasting necessities of human nature, and that as long as man is man the blessedness of keeping it, not as a day of rest only, but as a day of spiritual rest, will never be annulled. I certainly do feel by experience the eternal obligation, because of the eternal necessity, of the Sabbath. The soul withers without it. It thrives in proportion to its observance. The Sabbath was made for man. God made it for men in a certain spiritual state because they needed it. The need, therefore, is deeply hidden in human nature. He who can dispense with it must be holy and spiritual indeed. And he who, still unholy and unspiritual, would yet dispense with it is a man that would fain be wiser than his Maker” (F. W. Robertson).

The ancient Babylonian calendar, as seen from recently recovered inscriptions on the bricks among the ruins of the royal palace, was based on the division of time into weeks of seven days. The Sabbath is in these inscriptions designated Sabattu, and defined as “a day of rest for the heart” and “a day of completion of labour.”

The change of the day. Originally at creation the seventh day of the week was set apart and consecrated as the Sabbath. The first day of the week is now observed as the Sabbath. Has God authorized this change? There is an obvious distinction between the Sabbath as an institution and the particular day set apart for its observance. The question, therefore, as to the change of the day in no way affects the perpetual obligation of the Sabbath as an institution. Change of the day or no change, the Sabbath remains as a sacred institution the same. It cannot be abrogated.

If any change of the day has been made, it must have been by Christ or by his authority. Christ has a right to make such a change (Mark 2:23–28). As Creator, Christ was the original Lord of the

Sabbath (John 1:3; Heb. 1:10). It was originally a memorial of creation. A work vastly greater than that of creation has now been accomplished by him, the work of redemption. We would naturally expect just such a change as would make the Sabbath a memorial of that greater work.

True, we can give no text authorizing the change in so many words. We have no express law declaring the change. But there are evidences of another kind. We know for a fact that the first day of the week has been observed from apostolic times, and the necessary conclusion is, that it was observed by the apostles and their immediate disciples. This, we may be sure, they never would have done without the permission or the authority of their Lord.

After his resurrection, which took place on the first day of the week (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1), we never find Christ meeting with his disciples on the seventh day. But he specially honoured the first day by manifesting himself to them on four separate occasions (Matt. 28:9; Luke 24:34, 18–33; John 20:19–23). Again, on the next first day of the week, Jesus appeared to his disciples (John 20:26).

Some have calculated that Christ's ascension took place on the first day of the week. And there can be no doubt that the descent of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost was on that day (Acts 2:1). Thus Christ appears as instituting a new day to be observed by his people as the Sabbath, a day to be henceforth known amongst them as the "Lord's day." The observance of this "Lord's day" as the Sabbath was the general custom of the primitive churches, and must have had apostolic sanction (comp. Acts 20:3–7; 1 Cor. 16:1, 2) and authority, and so the sanction and authority of Jesus Christ.

The words "at her sabbaths" (Lam. 1:7, A.V.) ought probably to be, as in the Revised Version, "at her desolations."³

³ Easton, M. G. (1893). In [Easton's Bible dictionary](#). New York: Harper & Brothers.

SABBATH

(Heb. *šabbāt*, from the root *šābat*, 'to cease', 'to desist'). In the Bible the principle is laid down that one day in 7 is to be observed as a day holy to God. From the reason given for keeping the sabbath day in the Ten Commandments we learn that the example for the sabbath rest had been set by God himself in the creation. The sabbath therefore is a creation ordinance (Ex. 20:8–11).

In the account of creation the actual word 'sabbath' is not found, but the root from which the word is derived does occur (Gn. 2:2). The work of creation had occupied 6 days; on the 7th God rested (lit. 'ceased') from his labour. Thus there appears the distinction between the 6 days of labour and the one day of rest. This is true, even if the 6 days of labour be construed as periods of time longer than 24 hours. The language is anthropomorphic, for God is not a weary workman in need of rest. Nevertheless, the pattern is here set for man to follow. Ex. 20:11 states that God 'rested' (Heb. *wayyānaḥ*) on the 7th day, and Ex. 31:17 says that he ceased from his work and 'was refreshed' (*wayyinnāpaš*). The language is purposely strong so that man may learn the necessity of regarding the sabbath as a day on which he himself is to rest from his daily labours.

It has been held in contradistinction to what has been stated above that the institution of the sabbath derived from Babylonia. It is true that the Babylonian word *šabbatum* is related to the corresponding Hebrew word, but the force of the words is quite different. For one thing the Babylonians had a 5-day week. Examination of contract tablets reveals that the days designated *šabbatum* were not days of cessation from labour. Contracts from Mari (Tel el-Harîrî) show that work was performed, sometimes over a period of several days, without any interruption every 7th day. The Bible clearly attributes the origin of the sabbath to the divine example.

The fourth commandment enjoins observance of the sabbath. In Genesis there is no mention of the sabbath apart from the creation account. There is, however, mention of periods of 7 days (cf. Gn. 7:4, 10; 8:10, 12; 29:27ff.). We may also note in the narrative in Job that the seven sons celebrated a feast each on his day, and this was followed by the prayers and sacrifices of Job for the benefit of his children (Jb. 1:4–5). This was not a single round, but was regularly practised. It may be that here is an intimation of worship on the 1st day of the cycle. At least the principle that one day in 7 is holy to the Lord appears to be recognized here.

In Ex. 16:21–30 explicit mention is made of the sabbath in connection with the giving of manna. The sabbath is here represented as a gift of God (v. 29), to be for the rest and benefit of the people (v. 30). It was not necessary to work on the sabbath (*i.e.* to gather manna), for a double portion had been provided on the 6th day.

The sabbath was therefore known to Israel, and the injunction to remember it was one that would be understood. In the Decalogue it is made clear that the sabbath belongs to the Lord. It is therefore primarily his day, and the basic reason for observing it is that it is a day which belongs to him. It is a day that he has blessed and that he has set apart for observance. This is not contradicted by the Decalogue given in Dt. 5:12ff. In this latter passage the people are commanded to keep the sabbath in the manner in which the Lord has already commanded them (the reference is to Ex. 20:8–11), and the fact that the sabbath belongs to the Lord is again stated

(v. 14). An additional reason, however, is given for the observance of the command. This reason is merely additional; it does not conflict with those already given. Israel is commanded to observe the sabbath day, in order 'that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you'. Here is a humanitarian emphasis; but here also is emphasis upon the fact that the sabbath was made for man. Israel had been a slave in Egypt and had been delivered; so Israel must show the mercy of the sabbath towards those in her own midst who were slaves.

Throughout the remainder of the Pentateuch the sabbath legislation is found. It is interesting to note that there is a reference to the sabbath in each of the four last books of the Pentateuch. Genesis presents the divine rest; the remaining books emphasize the sabbatical legislation. This shows the importance of the institution. Sabbath legislation, it may be said, is integral and essential to the basic law of the OT and the Pentateuch (*cf.* Ex. 31:13–16; 34:21; 35:2ff.; Lv. 19:3, 30; 23:3, 38).

In this connection the significance of the sabbatical legislation appears in the severe punishment that is meted out upon a sabbath-breaker. A man had been gathering sticks upon the sabbath day. For this act a special revelation from God decreed that he should be put to death (*cf. J. Weingreen, From Bible to Mishna, 1976, pp. 83ff.*) This man had denied the basic principle of the sabbath, namely, that the day belonged to the Lord, and therefore was to be observed only as the Lord had commanded (*cf.* Nu. 15:32–36).

Upon the Pentateuchal legislation the prophets build; their utterances are in accordance with what had been revealed in the Pentateuch. The 'sabbaths' are often linked together with the 'new moons' (2 Ki. 4:23; Am. 8:5; Ho. 2:11; Is. 1:13; Ezk. 46:3). When prophets like Hosea (2:11) pronounced divine judgment on new moons, sabbaths and other appointed feasts, they were not condemning the sabbath as such; they were condemning a misuse of the sabbath and of the other Mosaic institutions.

On the other hand, the prophets do point out the blessings that will follow from a proper observance of the sabbath. There were those who polluted the sabbath and did evil on that day (Is. 56:2–4), and it was necessary to turn from such things. In a classic passage (Is. 58:13) Isaiah sets forth the blessings that will come from a true observance of the day. It is not a day in which man is to do what pleases him, but rather one on which he is to do the will of God. God, not man, must determine how the sabbath is to be observed. Recognizing that the day is holy to the Lord will bring the true enjoyment of the promises.

During the Persian period emphasis was again laid upon observance of the sabbath day. The pre-exilic ban on engaging in commercial transactions on the sabbath (Am. 8:5) or carrying burdens on that day (Je. 17:21f.) was reinforced by Nehemiah (Ne. 10:31; 13:15–22). During the period between the Testaments, however, a change gradually crept in with respect to the understanding of the purpose of the sabbath. In the synagogues the law was studied on the sabbath. Gradually oral tradition made its growth among the Jews, and attention was paid to the minutiae of observance. Two tractates of the Mishnah, *Shabbath* and *'Erubin*, are devoted to a consideration of how the sabbath was to be observed in detail. It was against this burdening of the commands of God with human tradition that our Lord inveighed. His remarks were not directed against the institution of the sabbath as such and not against the OT teaching. But he

did oppose the Pharisees who had made the Word of God of none effect with their tradition. Christ identified himself as the Lord of the sabbath (Mk. 2:28). In so speaking, he was not depreciating the importance and significance of the sabbath nor in any way contravening the OT legislation. He was simply pointing out the true significance of the sabbath with respect to man and indicating his right to speak, inasmuch as he himself was the Lord of the sabbath.

As Lord of the sabbath, Jesus went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom (Lk. 4:16). His observance of the sabbath was in accord with the OT prescription to regard the day as holy to the Lord.

In his disagreement with the Pharisees (Mt. 12:1–14; Mk. 2:23–28; Lk. 6:1–11) our Lord pointed out to the Jews their complete misunderstanding of the OT commands. They had sought to make the observance of the sabbath more rigorous than God had commanded. It was not wrong to eat on the sabbath, even if the food must be obtained by plucking corn from the ears. Nor was it wrong to do good on the sabbath day. To heal was a work of mercy, and the Lord of the sabbath is merciful (*cf.* also Jn. 5:1–18; Lk. 13:10–17; 14:1–6).

On the first day of the week the Lord rose from the dead, and therefore it early and increasingly became the day above all others—‘the *LORD’S DAY’ (Rev. 1:10)—on which Christians met for worship (*cf.* Acts 20:7; also *Didache* 14. 1; Justin, *First Apology* 67. 3).

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⁴ Young, E. J., & Bruce, F. F. (1996). [Sabbath](#). In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed., p. 1032). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Sabbath

Sabbath (from Heb. *shabbat*, ‘to cease, desist’), the weekly day of rest and abstention from work enjoined upon the Israelites.

Origin: An etiological origin for the Sabbath is supplied in Gen. 2:1–3, which speaks of God ceasing from the work of creation on the seventh day, blessing the day, and declaring it holy. Scholarly explanations of the Sabbath’s origins have focused on certain days in the Babylonian monthly calendar on which normal activities of the king and certain professions were restricted. These days, known as ‘evil days,’ were determined by the lunar cycle, corresponding with the quarters of the moon. While the postulating of a dependence on the Babylonian calendar is tempting, it cannot be objectively sustained. The biblical Sabbath was ordained as a weekly institution with no relation whatsoever to the lunar cycle. Moreover, the somber nature of the Babylonian ‘evil days’ stands in stark contrast to the joyous nature of the Sabbath.

Of uncertain relation to the lunar ‘evil days’ was the day of the full moon on the fifteenth of the month, known as *shapattu*, a term possibly related to *sabbath*. This day was described as a ‘day of pacifying the heart [of the god]’ by certain ceremonies. No significant similarities between this day and the Sabbath are known, however. The closest analogy between the biblical Sabbath and Babylonian culture is the shared literary motif of the god(s) resting after having created humans (see *Enuma elish* 7.8, 34). Even here, the parallel is distant: the biblical God rests at the conclusion of his creative efforts, while the Babylonian gods are freed from the labors required to feed themselves since humans were created to relieve them of that task.

Observance: The Sabbath was a cornerstone of Israelite religious practice from earliest times. This can be seen from the consistent mention of the Sabbath throughout all the strata of Pentateuchal and extra-Pentateuchal sources, with the exception of wisdom literature. In the Pentateuch, Sabbath observance is legislated repeatedly in general terms (Exod. 20:8–11; 23:12; 31:12–17; Lev. 23:3; Deut. 5:12–15), though the types of work prohibited are relatively limited; those mentioned include gathering food, plowing and reaping, kindling a fire, and chopping wood (Exod. 16:29–30; 34:21; 35:3; Num. 15:32–36). The positive specifications of Sabbath observance include giving rest to one’s servants and animals (Exod. 20:10; 23:12; Deut. 5:14).

Outside the Pentateuch, evidence relating to the practical observance of the Sabbath is not overabundant, but it is more extensive than that found for most laws. During the monarchial period (ca. 1050–586 B.C.), the Sabbath (as well as the New Moon) was marked by visits to prophet and Temple (2 Kings 4:23; Isa. 1:13). Business activity came to a halt (Amos 8:5). The Sabbath was a joyous day, much like the festivals (Hos. 2:13; Lam. 2:6). Its desecration was severely attacked by Jeremiah, who lashed out against those who carried burdens from their houses or through the gates of Jerusalem (Jer. 17:19–27). During the period of the restoration, Nehemiah enforced observance of the Sabbath by locking the city gates of Jerusalem in order to prevent traders from selling their wares (Neh. 13:15–22). Contemporary documents from a Jewish colony in Elephantine, Egypt, likewise mention the Sabbath, attesting to its recognition by Diaspora (i.e., non-Palestinian) Jews in the fifth century B.C.

In addition to these features of popular observance of the Sabbath, one can also piece together a picture of Sabbath observance in the Temple. The Pentateuchal prescriptions of additional sacrifices and changing of the showbread on the Sabbath (Lev. 24:8; Num. 28:9–10) apparently reflect accepted practice (cf. Ezek. 45:17; 46:4–5; 1 Chron. 9:32; 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:3; 8:13; 31:3). The sacrificial service may have been accompanied by a special psalm (Ps. 92:1). There is also a somewhat cryptic reference to the changing of the royal guards at the Temple on the Sabbath (2 Kings 11:4–12).

Purpose: Two major rationales for Sabbath observance are presented in the Pentateuch. The concept of the Sabbath as a memorial of God’s resting from the work of creation is expressed in Gen. 2:1–3 and repeated in Exod. 20:11 and 31:17. The latter passage broadens the concept in defining the Sabbath as ‘a sign forever between me and the people of Israel.’ Although God had already sanctified the seventh day at the time of creation, he did not reveal its special status to humankind at large, but only to his people Israel. Thus, Israel’s observance of the Sabbath underscored its special relationship with God. This rationale was emphasized by Priestly writers.

Along with the theological rationale, a distinctly humanistic approach is to be found in Exod. 23:12 and Deut. 5:14–15, both of which ground the observance of the Sabbath on the need to give servants, strangers, and work animals an opportunity to rest. The added reminder in Deut. 5:15 of Israel’s experience in Egypt most likely intends to bolster the owner’s feeling of compassion for the weak and destitute (cf. Deut. 15:15; 16:12).

Sabbath observance took on an added significance with the prophets active shortly before and during the exilic period. Jeremiah attaches the very fate of Jerusalem to the observance of the Sabbath, thereby expressing a radical new conception (Jer. 17:19–27; cf. Neh. 13:17–18). Ezekiel subscribes to the same line of thought in equating the Sabbath with all the other commandments (Ezek. 20:11–24). The prophecies in Isaiah 56:2–7 and 58:13–14 likewise single out the Sabbath as the primary commandment, observance of which will bring personal as well as national salvation. The mention of the Sabbath in the Elephantine papyri and the appearance of the personal name Shabbetai, meaning ‘born on the Sabbath’ (Ezra 10:15) likewise attest to its importance in this period.

This unique prophetic idea may stem from the ever-growing need for Israel to preserve its own identity in the face of a hostile pagan world. To this end, Ezekiel significantly draws from the Priestly formulation in describing the Sabbath as a ‘sign’ between God and Israel (Ezek. 20:12), though his stress on the national consequences of Sabbath desecration represents a new application of the Priestly concept. Another explanation for the prominence of the Sabbath in the exilic literature is the fact that observance of the Sabbath was not dependent on the Temple cult. Although some of the old Sabbath practices, such as the additional sacrifices, became impossible with the destruction of the Temple, the continued observance of the Sabbath on the lay level would ensure Israel steadfastness to its faith.

In addition to the weekly seventh day of rest, the term ‘Sabbath’ and its related form *Shabbaton* occur elsewhere in the Pentateuch referring to some of the festival days and to the seventh ‘Sabbatical’ Year, on which the land was to lie fallow (Lev. 16:31; 23:24, 32, 39; 25:2–6;

26:34, 35, 43). Each of these occasions shares the chief characteristic of the weekly Sabbath, namely, the restricting of work. It has been suggested that the Sabbath day and the Sabbatical Year express the belief that Israel's time and land belong ultimately to God.

In the earliest Christian community, observance of Sabbath regulations fell into disuse among Christians of Jewish descent, principally because Jesus himself had been lax in his obedience to them (e.g., Matt. 12:1–8; Mark 3:1–5; Luke 13:10–17; John 5:1–10) even though he continued to take part in synagogue services held on the Sabbath (e.g., Luke 4:16). Jesus' claim to lordship over the Sabbath (Mark 2:28) was an important element in the hostility he aroused in those who felt that Sabbath traditions were incumbent on all Jews (e.g., Mark 3:6; John 5:18). Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath, coupled with the tradition that his resurrection occurred on the first day of the week (Sunday; cf. Matt. 28:1), meant that Sunday rather than the Sabbath (Saturday) became the chief liturgical day for Christians.

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⁵ Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row and Society of Biblical Literature. (1985). In [Harper's Bible dictionary](#) (1st ed., pp. 888–889). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Did Jesus “break” the Sabbath?

Jesus and the religious authorities of his day were not always on the same page when it came to Sabbath observance. In order to understand their disconnect, we need to take a look at how the Pharisees arrived at their religious practices. The Pharisees were respected teachers of the Law of Moses and knew that disobedience to the Law of Moses had a weighty price tag. The Jewish nation was disciplined by the Lord through the Babylonian exile for 70 years. Therefore, the scribes and teachers of Israel tried to prevent such judgment from happening again by developing additional regulations that would serve as a type of “fence” around the Law of Moses. But with this seemingly good idea came the danger of focusing on the “fence” and losing sight of the primary meaning of God’s commands, including the meaning of the Sabbath. In Jesus’ day, observing all the Sabbath regulations was elevated above other commands such as kindness and charity.

The way Jesus acted on the Sabbath became a point of persecution and even rejection of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. In Matthew 12, Jesus allows his disciples to pluck the heads of grain to eat on the Sabbath, and he also heals a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath. The Pharisees challenged Jesus as to why he allowed his disciples to do what was contrary to the traditions of keeping the Sabbath. (Note that they were not accused of stealing the grain from someone else’s field, but of plucking the grain on the Sabbath.) We learn about this provision for the hungry in the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy 23:25. However, Jewish traditions equated plucking ears with reaping grain, which was forbidden on the Sabbath.

Jesus responded to his accusers with another passage in Scripture, 1 Samuel 21:1–6, where David broke the Law when he was hungry and took the bread from the house of God that was set apart for priests only, but he was not condemned. Just as David who was hungry was given bread from the holy place to eat, also, Jesus said that priests break the Sabbath by working in the temple, yet remain innocent. Messiah Jesus was teaching them that something greater than the temple was here indicating that his own disciples in serving him were as priests serving in the temple. Jesus declares that he is “Lord of the Sabbath.” This claim is implicitly messianic, going beyond the mere right to tamper with tradition. It places Jesus in a position to handle the Sabbath law any way that he wills. Jesus is greater than the Law and is therefore qualified to give meaning and definition to Sabbath observance. The authority of the temple laws (like offering the doubled burnt offering on the Sabbath according to Numbers 28:9–10) shielded the priests from being guilty of breaking the Sabbath. Likewise, the authority of Jesus shielded his disciples from guilt. Jesus said that he is greater than the temple. The temple only had merit because of the Lord whom it served. All who serve him are free from restrictions in that service. The law points to Jesus and finds its fulfillment in him (see Matt. 5:17–48).

God is not looking for worshipers who simply follow traditions, but who are motivated by love. Why does God declare that he is indifferent about ceremonies, when he strictly enjoined in his Law that they should be observed? The answer is easy. External rites are of no value in themselves. God desires “compassion and not sacrifice” (Hos. 6:6). Our understanding of the

Scriptures should bring us not to judge people, but rather to have compassion and love which are truly at the heart of the Law. ⁶

⁶ Nadler, Sam, PhD, "Feasts of the Bible Leader Guide," Rose Publishing, Torrance, California, 2011