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The Sabbath in the Old Testament (Its Origin and Development)

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THE question of the Hebrew Sabbath is still one of the vexing problems of Old Testament study, despite Langdon's declaration that "the origin and meaning of the Hebrew Sabbath are philologically and historically clear" (*Sumerian and Babylonian Psalms*, p. XXIII). The conclusions presented in this paper may not be without their difficulties, but to the writer, at least, they seem best to represent the evidence as at present known. It may be of interest to note that they were arrived at quite independently of Zimmern, Meinhold and others, with whose conclusions it was afterwards found they are in general agreement.

It was Zimmern in 1904, in the "Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft", who first suggested in print that the Sabbath was originally the day of the full moon. Meinhold followed him in 1905 with a more elaborate treatment of the thesis, *Sabbat und Woche im A. T.*, and again in 1909 in the "Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft". The hypothesis has been accepted by Beer (*Sabbath: Der Mishna-tractat Sabbat*) and by Marti (*Geschichte der Israelitischen Religion*, etc.), but has not received the consideration from English-speaking scholars, I believe, that is its due.

Sabbath in Babylonia

The origin of the Sabbath is certainly not to be found with the Hebrews themselves. Ultimately it is "to be traced back

XVIII 23 it is called *ûm nuh libbi* i. e. a day for the pacification of the anger of the deity, an appropriate day for penance.

The Sabbath used to be, and by many scholars still is, identified with the Babylonian "favorable, unfavorable days", which for the intercalary month of Elul fell on the 7th, 14th, 19th, 21th, and 28th days, (IV R. 32 f.), but there is absolutely no evidence that these have any connection whatsoever with *šabattu*. Indeed, as we have noted, there is as yet no evidence anywhere that *šabattu* was applied to any day other than the 15th, and to assign this term to other days, as Jastrow¹ and many scholars do, is the purest assumption and is based upon a preconceived idea as to what the Sabbath was. Neither is there any evidence that the terms *šabattu* and *nubattu* have any connection with each other.

With the Babylonians the Sabbath was manifestly a full moon festival and the etymology of the word would seem to confirm this. The root *šabātu* in V R. 28 e. f. is equated with *gamāru*, "to complete, fulfill, bring to an end", or intransitively, "to be complete". *Šabattu*, then, could mean the day on which the moon was complete or full.

Sabbath in Early Israel

If the Sabbath was the day of the full moon with the Babylonians, we would expect it to be the same with the early Hebrews, to whom it was more or less indirectly communicated. Here again the evidence would seem to confirm our expectations. The word שֶׁבֶת is probably contracted from שֶׁבֶתֶת (so Ols-hausen, König, Driver, W. R. Smith, Cook, ecl.). The root שֶׁבֶת (cf. Isa. 14 4, 24 8) in its transitive form means "to sever, put an end to"; in its intransitive form "to desist, come to an end, be at an end, be complete" (Arabic, سَبَّتَ, "to cut off, intercept"). The grammatical form of שֶׁבֶת, according to some, suggests a transitive sense, "the divider", i. e. apparently the day that divides the month, the 15th or the day of the full moon. Meinhold (*ZATW*, XXIX, 101) takes it in the intransitive sense and argues for שֶׁבֶת the meaning "the complete,

¹ E. g. in *A. J. Th.*, II, pp. 312 ff.

the full" moon. So many derivations of the word, however, have been given (for a summary see Beer, *Sabbath*, p. 13, note 3), that little help can be expected from the word itself, until more positive evidence is forthcoming. It is, at any rate, not to be identified with נָחַת, "to rest, repose". The idea of rest is a later meaning that was read into the word.

All our evidence would seem to indicate that the Sabbath in early Israel had nothing whatever to do with the seventh day of the week. The observance of the seventh day was probably early, for it is prescribed in both J (Ex. 34 21) and E (Ex. 23 12), but it could not possibly have been earlier than the settlement of the Hebrews in Canaan, when they began first to engage in agriculture. A periodic rest for a nomadic people is an impossibility, but an economic necessity for a people engaged in agriculture and the like. It probably had no relation to the moon and with the Hebrews came to be arbitrarily designated as every seventh day because of the sacredness attached to the number seven and the sense of completeness which it expressed (see further Meinhold, *Sabbat*, pp. 13-14; Hehn, *Siebenzahl und Sabbat bei den Babyloniern und im A. T.*). In Ex. 20 8 ff. and Dt. 5 12 ff., where the Sabbath is identified with the seventh day, all modern scholars are agreed that the law stood originally, "observe (variant 'remember') the Sabbath to sanctify it". Ex. 20 9-11 is the addition of a late P redactor and Dt. 5 by the large majority of scholars is placed in or near the Exile. In any case it is a late amplification of the earlier, more simply expressed law. In no other passage in the pre-exilic literature of the Old Testament is it even suggested that the Sabbath is to be identified with the seventh day. Jer. 17 19-27, since the time of Kuenen, has been universally regarded as a scribal gloss from a period as late as the days of Nehemiah. The only other references to the Sabbath in pre-exilic literature (with the exception of those mentioned in the following paragraph), II Kings 11 16, 18, throw no light upon its origin.

On the other hand the Sabbath in early Israel is very intimately connected with the new moon and is uniformly coupled with it, e. g. Am. 8 4 ff., Hos. 2 13, Isa. 1 13 ff., II Kings 4 23 (cf. also the reminiscences of this association in the later literature,

Ez. 45 17, 46 3, Ps. 81 3, Neh. 10 34, Isa. 66 23, I Chron. 23 31, II Chron. 2 3 8 13 31 3). Just so in Babylonian literature the first and the fifteenth days are grouped together (Radau, *Early Babyl. History*, p. 315; Pinches, *PSBA*, XXVI, 59). The Harranians had four sacrificial days in each month, at least two of which were determined by the conjunction and opposition of the moon (*Encycl. Brit.*, 11th edition, XXIII, 961). The ancient Hindus observed the new moon and the full moon as days of sacrifice. The full moon as well as the new moon had evidently a religious significance among the ancient Hebrews (cf. Ps. 81 3), for, when the great agricultural feasts were fixed to set dates, the days selected were the full moons.

“Wenn nun in alter Zeit in Israel Neumond und Sabbat neben einander genannt werden, so kann der Sabbat damals nicht der Tag der 4 Mondphasen gewesen sein. Denn dann wäre ja auch der Neumond ein Sabbat! Auch konnte der Sabbat nicht schon der vom Mondwechsel getrennte letzte Tag der siebentägigen Woche sein. Denn dann fielen ja Neumond und Sabbat gelegentlich zusammen: es sind aber verschiedene Feste! Dann bleibt also für den Sabbat nichts anderes übrig, als im Unterschied zum Neumond an den Vollmondstag zu denken” (Beer, *Sabbath*, p. 12; cf. further Meinhold, *Sabbat und Woche*, pp. 3 ff.). Eerdmans’ objection, that the Sabbath is not expressly called the full moon, is of little moment, for שבת is as explicitly full moon as חדש is new moon.

To give further credence to this hypothesis, there is evidently in Lev. 23 11 (P) a trace of the fact that the 15th or the day of the full moon was at one time known as the Sabbath. “Denn der ‘nach dem Sabbat’ (מחרת השבת) kommende Tag, an dem der Priester beim Mazzenfest die Erstlingsgarbe für Jahwe weiht, kann nur innerhalb der 7 tägigen Festwoche vom 15.-21. des 1. Monats fallen. Wäre der Sabbat hier der letzte Tag der 7tägigen Woche, und fiel ein Sabbat auf den 14., der aber noch nicht zu der Festwoche zählt, so würde der erste Sabbat der Festwoche selbst erst auf den 21., also den letzten Tag der Festwoche fallen, so dass der ‘Tag nach dem Sabbat’ gar nicht mehr zu der Festwoche gehören würde! Ganz anders, wenn eben der 15. als der Vollmondstag der Sabbat ist. Dann ist

der 16., als 'Tag nach dem Sabbat', am besten geeignet für die das Fest einleitende Weihe der Erstlingsgarbe" (Beer, *Sabbat*, p. 13).

The fact that Ezekiel so roundly rebuked the previous generations for desecrating the weekly Sabbath (Ez. 20 13, 16 21 24 22 8, 26 23 38) indicates very clearly that it was not observed in the earlier period, probably because it was unknown. Just so Deuteronomy condemned the Hebrews of his day for worshipping at high places, regardless of the fact that he was the first to prohibit such worship.

The full moon would constitute a most appropriate occasion for a sacrificial feast, for the moon has always had a large place in Hebrew thought, indeed in Semitic thought generally (cf. Baudissin, *Mond bei den Hebräern*). It was supposed to exert both a good and a bad influence on plants, animals and men (cf. Ps. 121 6). As nomads and shepherds, the Hebrews regarded the night as benevolent, the day with its withering heat as malevolent. Most of their journeyings, as with the Arabs today, were made at night, and it was natural, then, that they should pay homage to the moon that lighted their way. In Jer. 7 18 8 2 44 17 ff. we have references to the worship of the moon (cf. also Judges 8 21, 26, Isa. 3 18, II Kings 23 5, Dt. 4 19 17 3, etc.). The ancient Semites universally worshipped the moon and the stars, (cf. Hommel, *Der Gestirndienst der alten Araber*; B. D., III, 434, etc.). The old non-agricultural Germans observed the new moon and the full moon as religious festivals (Tacitus *Germania* II). The Passover was set to the full moon in the spring (Ex. 12 22) and probably had some connection with the moon originally (see Meinhold, *Sabbat und Woche*, p. 30). The Hebrew traditions connect the early movements of the race with a number of places intimately connected with moon worship, e. g. Ur and Haran (where the moon-god, Sin, was worshipped); the wilderness of Sin, which the Hebrews are said to have entered on the 15th (the full moon) day of the month (Ex. 16 1)! The new moon was always observed as a religious festival (I Sam. 20, II Kings 4 23, Am. 8 4 f., Hos. 2 13, Isa. 1 13 ff., etc.). It is not at all unlikely, therefore, that the full moon was similarly observed (cf. Ps. 81 3), and that this full moon festival was known as the Sabbath.

Gressmann (*Mose und seine Zeit*, pp. 461 ff.) believes that the origin of the Sabbath is to be found in Ex. 16²³ ff., which he regards as an ancient saga of the Hebrews. But this passage is universally regarded as part of the late priestly writings. Its account is so completely out of harmony with all the ancient sources which we have noted, that it can scarcely be believed that we have an old tradition preserved here. It is P's interpretation of an incident in Israel's history and is quite in line with his views elsewhere.

The manner in which the Sabbath was observed lends further support to the belief that it was originally a full moon festival and differentiates it very sharply from the Sabbath as we know it in post-exilic times. The older laws only demand such cessation from daily toil as among all ancient peoples naturally accompanied a day set apart as a religious festival. "The Greeks and the barbarians have this in common that they accompany their sacred rites by a festal remission of labor" (Strabo X 39). On both the new moon and the Sabbath there was a remission of general business (Am. 8 5). The animals and servants were not needed for ordinary toil and could be used for other purposes (II Kings 4 22 f.). But the Sabbath was not a day of absolute rest, for it was on this day that the guard in the Palace and Temple were regularly changed (II Kings 11) and Jehoiada carried through a revolution against Athaliah on the Sabbath and considered it no desecration of the day (II Kings 11). Like the new moon it was one of the stated religious feasts of the Hebrews and was a day of joy and festivity (Hos. 2 11, cf. I Sam. 20 4 ff.); it called men to the sanctuary to make sacrifice (Isa. 1 13); it was a good day to visit a prophet (II Kings 4 22 f.). So many people were accustomed to visit the Temple on that day that soldiers were required to police the crowds (II Kings 11, cf. Isa. 1 11 ff.). It was in a much later period that the idea of rest and complete cessation from all labor was attached to the Sabbath. Like so many of the other religious institutions, which the Hebrews held in common with their Semitic kinsmen (e. g. circumcision, sacrifice, new moon, etc.), it came in time to acquire with them distinguishing features of a marked kind and to assume a new character.

Sabbath in the Pre-Exilic Prophetic Period

The Sabbath continued essentially the same through the pre-exilic prophetic period, except in one particular. Both it and the new moon seem to have fallen into disrepute with the prophets, evidently because of their association with the moon. The prophets were the mighty mouth-pieces of the Yahweh religion and looked askance upon any institution that savored of heathen association. Hence all forms of astral religion were denounced by them (Am. 5 21, Hos. 2 13, Isa. 1 13, Jer. 8 2 19 13, Zeph. 1 5, cf. also Isa. 47 13); were absolutely prohibited by Deuteronomy (Dt. 4 19 17 3); and Josiah, stimulated thereto by Deuteronomy, attempted to stamp it completely out of the land (II Kings 23 5). This antipathy of the prophets to astral religion even went to the extent of causing them to give historical explanations for the feasts, e. g. in the case of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover (Ex. 23 15 34 18 12 1 ff., Dt. 16 1 ff.). The New Moon festival is completely ignored by Deuteronomy or struck out altogether and yet up to that time it was considered a most important feast (cf. I Sam. 20 4 ff., II Kings 4 23, Am. 8 5, Hos. 2 13, Isa. 1 13). Deuteronomy proper (i. e. Ch. 12-26), nowhere mentions the Sabbath and this is particularly striking in view of the fact that he gives a very complete calendar of feasts in Ch. 16. "Es wäre ja geradezu unerhört, dass eine schon auf Mose zurückgehende, das ganze Volksleben durchziehende Einrichtung, nämlich die siebentägige Woche mit einem Sabbat genannten Ruhetag am Schluss, die in nichts mehr den Zusammenhang mit dem Mond verriet, so gänzlich von den deuteronomischen Gesetzgebern ignoriert wäre" (Meinhold, *Sabbat und Woche*, p. 8).

The prophets were great social reformers and little interested in the ritual. With them the element of rest, that was attached to the Sabbath, was given first place, that of worship was made secondary, evidently because of its heathen association. In this probably is to be found the beginning of a movement whereby the Sabbath was separated altogether from the moon and identified with the seventh day and complete rest prescribed for its observance (cf. Dt. 5 13 ff.).

Sabbath in the Exilic Period

From what has been said about the attitude of the prophets to the Sabbath, it might be expected that the institution would have disappeared altogether in the period of the Exile. But the very reverse is the case. It was emphasized as it never was before. And this is a fact not hard to explain. The exilic period was in many respects a reaction against that immediately preceding it. Under the influence of the priest-prophet Ezekiel and his school the ritualistic feature of the Yahweh religion was tremendously emphasized. The Yahweh religion stood in such dire peril that it seemed necessary to accentuate its peculiar forms and institutions in order to perpetuate its existence. Hence we have in this period the production of such legalistic writings as the Holiness Code (Lev. 17-26 in large part) and the Book of Ezekiel (particularly Ch. 40-48)—the forerunners of the elaborate Priestly Code of later years. These legalistic writers, in contradistinction from the prophets, were careful to preserve all the institutions of ancient Israel and in their old ritualistic form.

Another reason for the important place given to the Sabbath during the Exile grew out of the Deuteronomic reform. That had closely bound all the religious feasts to the now-destroyed temple and sacred city. Hence they necessarily, for a time at least, fell into abeyance in so far as their observance was concerned. The Sabbath Deuteronomy had not mentioned and it alone could be observed by all the exiles wherever they were. It met a deep need and kept alive their faith in the Yahweh religion. Indeed for many it became the symbol of the ritual as a whole. Its observance became the distinctive mark of a loyal member of the race and was one of the few things that remained to differentiate them from their heathen neighbors. No wonder, then, that it bulked so largely in their thought and literature.

It was in the Exile or in the years immediately preceding it that the Sabbath became dissociated from the moon and came at length to be identified with the seventh day (Ez. 46 1, cf. Ex. 31 15 H^P). We have already noted what was probably the

beginning of a movement in that direction. The prophets had vigorously denounced all astral religion. Hence such feasts as the New Moon and Sabbath became odious to them. On the other hand an observance like the seventh day as a period of rest and worship was quite acceptable. The exilic leaders were as much concerned as the prophets to differentiate Israel's religion from all others but they chose to do it in a different way, viz. by a revival of the earlier ritualistic conceptions. Accordingly they were careful to preserve all of the old but dissociated from anything that savored of heathen practice. Hence it was that the Sabbath was revived but now in a new association. It became identified with the seventh day and in course of time grew to be one of the most ritualistic of Jewish institutions.

It is not difficult to conceive how this change came about. It was exactly in line with the general tendencies of the times. The similarity of the words Sabbath (שבת) and seven (שבע) might have had something to do with it, and likewise the meaning of the word Sabbath. In any case it is no more difficult to understand how the term could have been taken over from the full moon festival and applied to the seventh day than it is to understand why it should have been taken over from the seventh day in Christian times and applied to the first day. With the Christians it received a significance radically different from what it previously had and its earlier connection was soon completely lost and forgotten.

The observance of the Sabbath in the Exilic period was altogether in harmony with what we have already said about the period. The primitive ritualistic conception was revived and enlarged, and the necessity of abstaining from labor emphasized, not for man's sake, as the prophets would have put it, but as an element of worship—an end in itself. It was regarded as a sign between Yahweh and his people (Ez. 20¹², 20, Ex. 31¹³ H^P); it was to be observed as a holy day (Ez. 44²⁴, Ex. 31¹⁴ H^P) and was not to be desecrated as it had been by former generations (Ez. 20¹³⁻²⁴ 22⁸, 26 23³⁸); it was to be strictly observed (Lev. 19^{3b}, 30 26²) and to that end sacrifices were prescribed for it (Ez. 44²⁴ 45¹⁷ 46¹⁻⁵, 12). It was altogether a day of abstinence and no longer one of joy and festivity.

Sabbath in the Post-Exilic Period

In the post-exilic period the ritualistic character of the Sabbath was accentuated to a greater degree than ever and it was very definitely connected with the seventh day (Ex. 35 1-2 31 15-17, Lev. 23 3, Ex. 16 22-26, all from the P document). The tendency was to make the Sabbath a central and saving institution, until in the Mishnah it was given first place among the feasts. The restrictions with regard to its observance became ever more and more detailed and casuistical, e. g. it was unlawful for one to leave his house on the Sabbath (Ex. 16 29) or to carry burdens (Jer. 17 19-27); one could not make a fire on the Sabbath (Ex. 35 3); what food was needed for the Sabbath must be prepared on the day previous (Ex. 16 23); in fact all manner of work was prohibited (Ex. 20 10, Lev. 23 3). It was to be a day of complete rest and cessation from all toil and business of every kind (Neh. 10 32 3 15 ff.). Indeed the priestly law-givers did not cease until they had made labor on that day a capital offence (Ex. 35 2, Num. 15 32-36). Not only was it a day holy to Yahweh (Ex. 16 23 31 15 35 2), but its consecration was a law which Yahweh had promulgated at creation (Gen. 2 2f., Ex. 20 11). In this connection, however, it is of interest to note that P never represents the patriarchs as observing it or being at all cognizant of its existence. He probably believed that it was not communicated to the Hebrews until it was delivered by Yahweh to Moses at Sinai (cf. Neh. 9 14). As a holy day the Sabbath was to be kept holy by the people and free from all profanation (Ex. 20 10-11, Lev. 23 3, Isa. 56 2, 4, 6 58 13), and special offerings were prescribed for its observance (Num. 28 9f., I Chron. 23 3f., II Chron. 2 4 8 13 31 3, Neh. 10 33).

It is just a little surprising that the Sabbath is nowhere mentioned in the Psalms or in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. It may be that these writers followed more nearly in the footsteps of the earlier prophets and to them, as to the prophets, the priestly emphasis upon the ritual was more or less repugnant and they would have none of it. Their sympathies, at least, were decidedly not with the movement whereby the Sabbath lost completely its early joyousness and festivity

and came finally to be the severest kind of burden, fettered by every manner of restriction and loaded down with ritual. Little wonder that Jesus found the Sabbath of his day unbearable and continually rode rough-shod over its absurd restrictions and by one stroke swept them aside: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath", (Mk. 2 27).