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# The Shabbat Covenant

*By Jim Myers*

This is the first in a series of articles about the Shabbat. We will examine the history of the holiday and see how our biblical texts describe it. There can be no doubt that Shabbat holds a central place in all of our biblical heritages.

Shabbat holds a central place in Rabbinic Judaism and has a history that can be traced from Genesis through the Prophets and even into the Book of Acts. As the Jesus Movement made its transition from a Jewish sect to a Gentile religion, Shabbat was also transformed from beginning on Friday sundown to Sunday.

Shabbat began as a universal rest period for Elohim in Genesis. During the Exodus it became a required obligation for the Israelites, which included the death penalty for anyone violating it. Isaiah the Prophet prophesied that foreigners as well as Israelites should keep Shabbat. Jacob (James), the brother of Jesus and head of the Jesus Movement in Acts, declares that the Movement's Gentile members should be in the synagogues listening to the words of the Torah being read every Shabbat.

Obviously, the vast majority of modern Jewish and Christian religious groups hold different positions from those of Isaiah and Jacob (James). I don't think you will find Gentile participation in Shabbat services a part of most synagogue services. You will also notice that the Sabbath for most church members doesn't begin at sundown on Friday. Torah readings are also not a regular feature of most church services either.

### The First Shabbat

Shabbat was the final creation of Elohim in the first creation account of Genesis. It took place on the day after the creation of man and woman and is described in Genesis 2:

1 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed and all their hosts. 2 And in the **seventh day** Elohim completed His work which He had done; and He **rested** (**SHABBAT**) on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. 3 Then Elohim **blessed** the seventh day and **sanctified** (**VAYeQADESh**) it, because in it He rested (**SHABBAT**) from all His work which Elohim had created and made.

The prior six days were marked by Elohim's creative actions. The Shabbat, on the other hand, was the product of Elohim's inaction -- resting. The name of the seventh day became "Shabbat" because the Hebrew word for "rest" is "SHABBAT." When the text was translated into Greek the word "SHABBAT" was translated as "SABBATH." Shabbat is just as much a part of creation as light, plants, trees, fish, birds, animals and mankind. What would our world be without any of them?

The special position that Shabbat holds in the creation account is seen by the fact that there are only three blessings given by Elohim in the story:

- (1) *Blessing of water creatures & birds.*
- (2) *Blessing of man & woman.*
- (3) *Blessing of the Shabbat.*

In addition to being blessed by Elohim, the Shabbat was also "sanctified," a better translation would be "set apart." In other words, **Shabbat was "set apart" from the other six days.** They would be days of work, while the Shabbat would be "set apart" from work days by the fact that it would be a time of "rest."

### Shabbat & Covenant in Exodus

The title of this article is "The Covenant of Shabbat." So far we have discussed Shabbat, but the next biblical account will connect the concept of "covenant" with it. Covenants are a central theme in the Hebrew Bible, so it is extremely important for us to accurately define this word. The Jewish Encyclopedia defines it as follows:

*An agreement between two contracting parties, originally sealed with blood; a bond, or a law; a permanent religious dispensation.*

The words "**Shabbat**" and "covenant" come together in Exodus 31:

12 And Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 13 "But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, '**You shall surely observe My sabbaths**; for *this* is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am Yahweh who sanctifies you. 14 'Therefore you are to observe the Shabbat, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. 15 'For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a shabbat of complete rest, holy to Yahweh; whoever does any work on the Shabbat day shall surely be put to death. 16 'So the sons of Israel shall observe the Shabbat, to celebrate the Shabbat throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant.' 17 "It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days **Yahweh made heaven and earth**, but on the seventh day He ceased, and was refreshed."

This section is loaded with words that echo throughout the Hebrew Bible. First, the Hebrew word translated as "**observe**" (**TISheMORU**) carries in its meaning the idea of "**to guard and protect**." Second, the importance of the word "sign" must not be overlooked. I bet you remember an earlier sign that Yahweh established for mankind – **the rainbow**.

Let's consider a couple of points about the sign of the rainbow. First, the purpose of the sign was so that people would "**remember**" Yahweh's promise. Second, I doubt that the rainbow was created during the time of Noah, **Yahweh took something that was already around and gave it a new meaning**.

Yahweh makes it very clear that the Shabbat is an extremely important day. It must be guarded and protected just like a valuable treasure. It is a sign for the people of Israel, just like the rainbow – *a sign designed to cause people to remember a very important promise of Yahweh.*

What was the promise? The answer is found at the end of verse 13 where the author uses the Hebrew word **MeQADISheKEM**, which has the root of **QDSH**. This is the same root word that was found in Genesis 2:3, which we translated as "set apart." *The promise is that "Yahweh will set apart the Israelite people through the Shabbat.*

Now I will retranslate Yahweh's words from Exodus 31:13 –

"But as for you (Moses), speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'You shall surely guard and protect My Shabbats; for this is a sign of remembrance between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am Yahweh who set you apart.'"

The fact that violation of the above commandment carried the death penalty also testifies to its importance. We will continue this discussion in the next article where we will see what Isaiah the Prophet tells us about Shabbat. ●

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