

Sabbath Dismissal, Mark of the Beast

Is not keeping the Sabbath the mark of the beast?

It is true that various Sabbatarian groups of the Twentieth Century, or at least people in such groups, have advocated that the mark of the beast of Revelation 13:16-17 is to be viewed in terms of not keeping the Sabbath and/or observing Sunday as a religious day.¹ Some of this has been associated with the theory that in the future, as the regime of the antimessiah/antichrist approaches, that Sunday will be enforced as a religious day, either in North America or in the world. As things stand, now in the second decade of the Twenty-First Century, discussions and debates over the continuance of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, particularly between evangelical Christians and Messianic Believers, have rightfully recognized that people attending Sunday church services hardly have “the mark of the beast.”

In 2000, J.K. McKee wrote an article entitled “**What is the Mark of the Beast?**” (updated 2006), in which he did discuss some of the connections various people had made between what is prophesied in Revelation, and a dismissal of the seventh-day Sabbath:

The Sabbath Factor

One issue that very few evangelicals have opened dialogue about is the Sabbath observance question that arises when dealing with the mark of the beast. This is in part because some groups—often from the fringe—advocate that non-observance of the seventh-day Sabbath is the mark of the beast. They usually have false beliefs associated with them about the Divinity of Yeshua, salvation, and the afterlife. Because of these factors, the view is often immediately dismissed. However, with the growth of the Messianic movement, some have begun to consider that one who does not keep *Shabbat* has the “mark of the beast.”

Historically, Protestant Christianity has considered itself “Sabbath honoring,” but it has viewed the Fourth Commandment (Exodus 20:8-11) as applying to Sunday and not to Saturday. For this reason, many in evangelical groups today totally dismiss the belief that the mark of the beast is non-Sabbath observance, because they may be forced to deal with this issue. Although it is not my intent to unfairly judge Christians, this is a subject that needs to be brought to the table. As Messianic Believers who desire to live the life of Messiah Yeshua, we firmly believe that the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* is to be honored and that we should obey the Torah.

In Acts 15:19-21, we are told the requirements that James the Just set forth for the non-Jews who were coming to faith in Messiah Yeshua:

“Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (Acts 15:19-21, NASU).

One of the deductions of Acts 15:21 is that non-Jews coming to faith would be anticipated to attend synagogue and learn the Law of Moses, per the fulfillment of Tanach prophecy (Acts 15:15; cf. Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-3). Paul writes in Ephesians 2:11-12 that non-Jewish Believers have become part of the Commonwealth of Israel via their faith in Yeshua, not a separate entity known as “the Church.”² Our Heavenly

¹ Cf. R.J. Bauckham, “Sabbath and Sunday in the Protestant Tradition,” in D.A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999 [1982 actual publication]), 334; Walter R. Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 472; Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Handbook of Today's Religions* (San Bernadino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1983), 119; F.R. Harm, “Sabbatarianism,” in Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 1045.

² Consult the article “When Did ‘the Church’ Begin?” by J.K. McKee, for more details (appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*).

Father tells us in Exodus 31:13, “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 the LORD who sanctifies you” (NASU). So, the question of whether or not we are to keep the seventh-day Sabbath is a question of whether Believers **are to be holy or set-apart unto God**. Interestingly enough, during the Tribulation period people will be given the choice of either choosing God or choosing Satan—*so the question of being consecrated or set-apart unto the Lord remains critical*.

However, what is the Sabbath’s relation to the mark of the beast, if any? Stereotypically, aberrant or unorthodox groups are the ones that have advocated that non-observance of the seventh-day Sabbath is the mark of the beast. Have we suddenly gone their way? Not at all, in fact, although we maintain a pro-Sabbath and pro-Torah position, as does most of the Messianic movement, **we do not believe that non-observance of the seventh-day Sabbath is the mark of the beast**.

Some have made the argument that the “sign” or “mark” of God is keeping His appointed times, on the basis of Scriptures such as Exodus 13:9: “And it shall serve as a sign to you on your hand, and as a reminder on your forehead, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth; for with a powerful hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt” (NASU). The Hebrew word for sign is *ot* (אוֹת), meaning “*sign, pledge, token*” (BDB).³ Some have said that those who have the “mark of the beast,” in contrast to this, are doing things contrary to what God has decreed. As the seventh-day Sabbath was given as a major sign to Israel, it is argued that the absence of Sabbath-keeping is the “mark of the beast.”

This view, however, has some serious exegetical flaws. While anyone who receives the mark of the beast in the Book of Revelation is certainly doing things contrary to the will of God, and is committing himself to Satan, the vocabulary used to describe the mark of the beast and keeping God’s appointed times is totally different. *Ot* is translated as *sēmeion* (σημείον) in the Septuagint, meaning “*a sign, a mark, token,*” or quite possibly also “*in reasoning, a sign or proof*” (LS).⁴ The Revelation account, describing the “mark of the beast,” employs the term *charagma* (χάραγμα), “**a mark that is engraved, etched, branded, cut, imprinted, mark, stamp**” (BDAG).⁵ The mark of the beast is clearly something that is physical, as opposed to something primarily ideological such as the Sabbath.

How are a physical mark and the Sabbath question possibly tied together?

Even if the mark of the beast is not failing to keep the Sabbath, this does not mean that it cannot in some way be related. The mark of the beast is a physical manifestation of a person’s rebellion toward God. In the final days before the Messiah’s return, human beings will be given the clear choice of either receiving the salvation available in Yeshua, or rejecting it. Those who reject the Lord will receive the mark of the beast—be it a microchip or biological implant. There will be a clear distinction during this time between the Forces of Light and the Forces of Darkness. Many people, sadly, will choose to follow after the beast and accept his rhetoric against the God of Creation. The Prophet Daniel describes how he will arise:

“Thus he said: ‘The fourth beast will be a fourth kingdom on the earth, which will be different from all the *other* kingdoms and will devour the whole earth and tread it down and crush it. As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom ten kings will arise; and another will arise after them, and he will be different from the previous ones and will subdue three kings. He will speak out against the Most High and wear down the saints of the Highest One, and he will intend to make alterations in times and in law; and they will be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time. But the court will sit *for judgment*, and his dominion will be taken away, annihilated and destroyed forever. Then the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of *all* the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; His kingdom *will be* an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him” (Daniel 7:23-27, NASU).

Specifically, we are told that the antimessiah/antichrist will have the power “to change the times and the law” (RSV). It is important to note that the Aramaic word *dat* (דַּת), appearing in Daniel 7:25, is to be differentiated from the Torah or Law of Moses (תּוֹרָה). It specifically relates to “**state legislation, public law**” or “**law as religion**” (HALOT).⁶ When Daniel prophesied that the beast would have the power to change the law, he was referring to the state laws that would be legislated that would prevent God’s people from keeping His Law. One of the principal laws that will be mandated in the Seventieth Week of Israel by the worldwide antichrist system will be the implantation of the mark of the beast:

³ BDB, 17.

⁴ LS, 727.

⁵ BDAG, 1077.

⁶ HALOT, 2:1856.

“He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name” (Revelation 13:16-17, NIV).

This human law that will be made requires a person to receive the mark of the beast in order to conduct in trade and commerce. Those who do not receive the mark of the beast are killed as traitors to the state (Revelation 13:15), or what we might call the antimessiah’s “New World Order.” Receiving the antimessiah’s “mark” will be considered a sign of loyalty, if not worship. The implementation of the mark of the beast is contrary to God’s Law, as the Torah prohibits a person from making a tattoo or any kind of idolatrous etching on his body:

“You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:18, NASU).

Traditional Jewish theology has always advocated, via the premise of *Pikku’ach Nefesh* or “regard for human life,” that any commandment of the Torah short of committing idolatry can be broken to save one’s life or fellow. However, one who receives the mark of the beast will be committing idolatry, embracing a physical symbol on the body that he or she is loyal not to God—but to *Satan*. But how is this related to “the Sabbath”? Consider the blasphemies that the antimessiah will declare against God, described by John in Revelation:

“There was given to him a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemies, and authority to act for forty-two months was given to him. And he opened his mouth in blasphemies against God, to blaspheme His name and His tabernacle, *that is*, those who dwell in heaven. It was also given to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them, and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him” (Revelation 13:5-7, NASU).

Both Daniel and Revelation speak of the antichrist who will speak out against God Almighty, and persecute the saints. The saints in Revelation are specifically described as those “who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Yeshua” (Revelation 12:17; 14:12, NASU). **This is a description of Messianic Believers.** Messianic Believers today should know Messiah Yeshua as their Personal Lord and Savior, and likewise be striving to obey God by following the Torah. A critical part of the Torah is keeping the weekly Sabbath or *Shabbat*.

We now arrive at an interesting impasse. Understanding that *Shabbat* is indeed a sign given by God to His people, what will happen during the Tribulation period? What kind of rhetoric or blasphemies will be issued by the antimessiah and his cohort against the God of Israel and the Torah? Are there not places on Earth today where it is difficult for many Jews to follow the Torah? In various European countries, laws have been passed that prohibit traditional kosher slaughter of animals,⁷ and impede the practice of infant circumcision.⁸ One day, the Scriptures tell us that people will be “marked” with some form of physical identification. Perhaps the answer of how the mark of the beast and *Shabbat* may be connected is more simple than we think.

One of the most critical parts of keeping the Sabbath is not buying or selling. Buying or selling on the Sabbath was definitively prohibited during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, when the exiles of the Southern Kingdom returned from Babylon and experienced some difficulties with their non-Israelite neighbors. We are told that, “As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the sabbath or a holy day; and we will forego *the crops* the seventh year and the exaction of every debt” (Nehemiah 10:31). The principal reason in Revelation that people receive the mark of the beast **is to buy and sell**. Receiving the mark of the beast goes against the principal requirements of keeping *Shabbat*: abstaining from work and engaging in commerce.

The connection between a physical mark of the beast and Sabbath observance may come as a result of the blasphemies that the antimessiah issues against God. It may be manifested as simply as a statement made by the antimessiah such as, “We’re going to use our marks to buy and sell on that ‘God’s Sabbath!’” coming as a result of seeing Israel being restored and the 144,000 on the scene. At the first bowl/vial of God’s wrath (Revelation 13:17), those who have the mark (*charagma*) will receive a grievous sore, and they will physically pay for their foolishness.

What is the connection between the physical mark of the beast and non-observance of the Sabbath? While I do not believe that not keeping the Sabbath is “the mark of the beast,” I do believe that the antimessiah can blaspheme God by proclaiming that those with the mark should buy and sell profusely on *Shabbat*, which is forbidden in Scripture. Why and how the Sabbath observance issue is brought to the world scene may also be an interesting phenomenon to follow. Could it come about because of Israel’s prophesied end-time ingathering and restoration taking place concurrent to this, the return of the Messiah steadily approaching?

⁷ In Switzerland, for example, traditional kosher slaughter of animals has been illegal for over a century. Additional countries that have made it illegal include Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands. For a further discussion, consult the article “Kosher Country: America’s Jewish Soul” by Rabbi Daniel Lapin, accessible at <<http://www.towardtradition.org>>.

⁸ Consult the article “Is Circumcision for Everyone?” by J.K. McKee (appearing in *Torah In the Balance, Volume II*).