

Sabbath, Originated in Ancient Near Eastern Paganism

I have encountered statements to the effect that the Sabbath was not actually something prescribed by God for Ancient Israel, but instead something that Ancient Israel adapted from Ancient Near Eastern paganism. Can you help with this?!

It can definitely come as a shock when today's Messianic people hear the thought that the seventh-day Sabbath is believed by some to be a Mesopotamian or Canaanite import to the religious and spiritual practices of the Torah. It was very common among older liberal scholars to see the view expressed that the Hebrew Sabbath or *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת) was not something rooted within the Biblical traditions of Creation, but instead something adapted by the Ancient Israelites or Jews in association with Ancient Near Eastern paganism (necessarily in some association with the JEDP documentary hypothesis, with the Torah being composed after the Babylonian exile).¹ This proposition has had significant support among past liberal scholars, although with diversity of opinion regarding how the Ancient Israelites and Jews began keeping the Sabbath. Conservative scholars have firmly opposed the idea that the seventh-day Sabbath originated in Ancient Near Eastern paganism, including those Christians who think that *Shabbat* has been abolished for the post-resurrection era.

The standard liberal Bible encyclopedia of the past century, the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, had this to say about the origins of the Sabbath:

"In ancient Babylonia a particular day of distinctive character was known as *šabbattū* (*šapattū*), a name plainly identical with the Hebrew שַׁבָּת. It was designated specifically as the 'day of quieting of the heart.' The precise meaning of this expression is uncertain, but at least the concept of relaxation is implicit therein.....Actually the sabbath had its origin in a unique and rather primitive calendar, distinctly agricultural in character, which was current among the various West Semitic peoples until approximately 1000 B.C.—i.e., until some three centuries, more or less, after the settlement of the Hebrews in Palestine and the adjustment of the majority of their tribes, particularly those dwelling in the more fertile central and N sections of the country, where farming was naturally the dominant occupation, to Canaanite agricultural civilization. This calendar was based upon and recorded the successive stages in the planting, ripening, harvesting, and use of the annual crop. It was one of the institutions of Canaanite culture which these Hebrew newcomers borrowed. It had been current likewise among the Eastern Semites in earlier times, and it was undoubtedly from this calendar that the Babylonian *šabbattū* was derived. Accordingly, instead of the Hebrew sabbath's being the outgrowth of the Babylonian *šabbattū*, both institutions, the Babylonian *šabbattū* and the Hebrew sabbath, sprang from a common source."²

Later, the entry for "Sabbath" in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, has to lessen the claims of the *IDB* before it:

"[A major] hypothesis focuses on the power of the symbol 'seven days' in Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Hebrew...Just as seven-day feasts were celebrated in Mesopotamia, so they were in Israel (the Feasts of Unleavened Bread and Booths and wedding festivals—Exod. 23:15; Deut. 16:13-15; Judg. 14:10-18). 'Seven days' was a powerful

¹ Consult the relevant sections of the workbook *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

² J. Morgenstern, "Sabbath," in *IDB*, 4:135-136.

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symbol of significantly complete time. It is possible that the symbol somehow conditioned Israel's choice of an intermediate day as climactic and holy....Yet this hypothesis...must share the weakness of conjecture."³

It can come as a shock, but there are Jewish theological resources which have agreed, in various ways, with the idea that the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* finds some origin in Ancient Near Eastern paganism. According to the JEDP documentary hypothesis, many theological constructs did originate during the Exile to Babylon, although Mesopotamian religious ideas may have already been familiar to the Israelites. The entry for "Sabbath" in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* does assert,

"Speculation on the origin of the Sabbath has centered on the apparent Babylonian cognate *šappattu*, the mid-month day of the full moon, called 'the day of calming [the god's] heart'—apparently an auspicious day. The biblical combination of 'New Moon and Sabbath' has been thought, accordingly, to reflect what were originally two holy days, one at the start, the other in the middle of the month. Another partial analogy to the Sabbath has been found in the 'evil days' of the Babylonian month (mostly at seven-day intervals) on which the king's activity was severely restricted. How the *šappattu* might have been combined with the entirely distinct 'evil days,' become dissociated from the lunar cycle, and finally emerge as the joyous, weekly 'Sabbath of the Lord' has not been persuasively explained. Nonetheless an ultimate connection between the biblical and the Babylonian phenomena seems likely. If so, the history of the Sabbath began with a radical severance from the past. The particularity of the biblical day was its positive sanctity—so that abstention from work on it expressed piety, and that sanctity was a divine ordinance—not a matter of lucky and unlucky times. It was perhaps first grounded on God's compassion toward workers, later brought into relation with the Creation, and later still with the Exodus."⁴

More accessible to the Reform Jewish layperson, are the opening statements of the essay "The Roots of Shabbat," by Bernard M. Zlotowitz, appearing in the resource *An Invitation to Shabbat: A Beginner's Guide to Weekly Celebration*:

"According to traditional Jewish belief, the Sabbath has its origin in God's divine command to observe the seventh day as a day of rest and sanctification. Scholars, on the other hand, are divided in their opinion concerning the origin of the Sabbath, although they all agree that it was borrowed from another culture. Some scholars contend that its origin is Babylonian. The Babylonians believed that the seventh, fourteenth, twenty-first, and twenty-eighth days of the month (following the phases of the moon) were evil days and, therefore, the physician, the oracular priest, and the king ceased all labor on those days. The cessation of work on the day they called *Sabbatu* was based upon fear and had no relation to the biblical concept of the Sabbath as a day of rest, joy, and refreshment of the soul.

"Other scholars contend that the Hebrews borrowed the concept from the Canaanites, whose primitive agricultural calendar was based on a seven-day week. The Canaanites regarded the number seven to be evil and unlucky, a potential source of ill fortune to be avoided at all costs. They viewed this final day of the week as one on which evil spirits abounded and, therefore, as a day on which human labor would not prosper.

"The ancient Hebrews, however, transformed this negative character of the seventh day into one of joy, refraining from labor because it was a day of gladness of the spirit. None of the scholarly theories explain how and why the Jews, who were supposed to have borrowed the Sabbath from the Canaanites or Babylonians, accomplished this transformation."⁵

Zlotowitz, while mentioning this view of older Bible scholars, does not seem to hold it himself. He instead asserts,

"Traditionally, Judaism teaches that the Sabbath was unique to ancient Hebrew culture and was not influenced by others. It contends that the Sabbath as a day of rest and joy is our special contribution to the world, a gift from the Jewish people to all humankind."⁶

³ B.E. Shafer, "Sabbath," in *IDBSup*, 761.

Similar conclusions are drawn by J.C. McCann, Jr., "Sabbath," in *ISBE*, 4:248-249.

⁴ Moshe Greenberg, "Sabbath," in *EJ*.

Some similar, although non-committal thoughts, are present in Judith Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time* (New York: Random House, 2010), pp 35-36.

⁵ Bernard M. Zlotowitz, "The Roots of Shabbat," in Ruth Perelson, *An Invitation to Shabbat: A Beginner's Guide to Weekly Celebration* (New York: UAHC Press, 1997), 5.

⁶ *Ibid*.

The thought that the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* originated in Ancient Near Eastern paganism, either in Mesopotamia or Canaan, and was adopted by the Israelites, has not gone without some response by conservatives, particularly evangelical Christians, who while often thinking that the Sabbath is abolished for the post-resurrection era,⁷ still want a Bible that is reliable and trustworthy, and did not just repackage and retool mythology contemporary to Ancient Israel. The entry for “Sabbath” in *NIDB* is widely dismissive of any sort of Babylonian origin for *Shabbat*:

“Various attempts have been made by OT critics to find a Babylonian origin for the Jewish Sabbath. There is evidence that among the Babylonians certain things were to be avoided on the seventh, fourteenth, nineteenth, twenty-first, and twenty-eighth days of the month; but the nineteenth day breaks the sequence of sevens, and there is no question that the Hebrew Sabbath is much older than this Babylonian observance. Among the Hebrews, moreover, the Sabbath was associated with the idea of rest, worship, and divine favor, not certain taboos.”⁸

The *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* is also highly pessimistic toward the seventh-day Sabbath originating from outside of the Biblical narrative and materials:

“Over the course of the twentieth century, scholars have made proposals regarding extrabiblical origins for the Israelite sabbath. For example, a number of scholars proposed an origin of the sabbath day in Mesopotamia. Such a theory often argues that the etymology of the Hebrew word *šabbāt* is found in the Akkadian word *šapātu* (or *šabātu*), which probably means ‘full moon’ or ‘the day of celebrating the full moon.’ In more recent years, G. Robinson has revived the theory that the Israelite sabbath was a relic of the Babylonian moon cult. He argues that only after the exile did the monthly festival become a weekly observance. But this is extremely unlikely. Hosea 2:11, a preexilic text, implies that sabbaths were weekly and sets them apart from the new moon festival. The Babylonian moon festival had set days in the month, a pattern that is not found in the OT or in weekly sabbath observance. Weekly sabbaths do not coincide regularly with a lunar cycle of twenty-nine days...Similar theories have also purported to find the sabbath origin in Assyrian calendars or in Arabian moon festivals. In the end, however, such theories remain speculative. There is no evidence that clearly connects these with the Israelite sabbath...”

“Finally, the number seven, it is argued, was significant in some ancient Near Eastern cultures, in particular, in Ugaritic texts and calendars...The original Canaanite seventh day was a taboo day, an evil day, and was associated with the pentacontad calendar in which the numbers seven and fifty were significant. However, despite [this] claim...[such a] thesis lacks supporting evidence for such an origin of the sabbath or for its alleged transformation from an evil or taboo day into a time of gladness.

“The quest for an extrabiblical origin of the Israelite sabbath has failed thus far at least. All of these theories remain speculative; none is convincing. The origin of the Israelite sabbath must be found within the biblical record...”⁹

The standard liberal Bible encyclopedia of the 1990s and into the 2000s, the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, while being astute to summarize the different theories of Sabbath origin for its entry, draws the conclusion of how little sustained support exists for an extra-Biblical and pagan Near Eastern origin, for *Shabbat*:

“In spite of the extensive efforts of more than a century of study into extra-Israelite sabbath origins, it is still shrouded in mystery. No hypothesis whether astrological, meological, sociological, etymological, or cultic commands the respect of a scholarly consensus. Each hypothesis or combination of hypotheses has insurmountable problems. The quest for the origin of the sabbath outside of the OT cannot be pronounced to have been successful. It is, therefore, not surprising that this quest has been pushed into the background of studies on the sabbath in recent years.”¹⁰

⁷ Cf. Harold H.P. Dressler, “The Sabbath in the Old Testament,” in D.A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), pp 22-24.

⁸ Steven Barabas, “Sabbath,” in *NIDB*, 876.

⁹ P.A. Barker, “Sabbath, Sabbatical Year, Jubilee,” in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), pp 698-699.

¹⁰ Gerhard F. Hasel, “Sabbath,” in *ABD*, 5:851.

While debated as to whether or not the seventh-day Sabbath is a memorial of Creation, or was a Creation ordinance instituted in association with the arrival of humankind, Genesis 2:2-3 is where the attention of Bible readers is necessarily placed:

“By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made” (NASU).

In the estimation of *ABD*, “Man’ (*ādām*), made in the *imago Dei*, ‘image of God,’ (Gen 1:26-28) is invited to follow the Exemplar in an *imitatio Dei*, participating in God’s rest by enjoying the divine gift of freedom from the labors of human existence and thus acknowledging God’s as his creator.”¹¹

¹¹ *Ibid.*