

SABBATH

Hebrew -- *shabbath*, Greek -- *sabbaton*,

By Mark Moore

I. Biblical Data:

Genesis 2:3--This institution began at the time of creation as God's own commemoration of His rest after the six days of creation (Gen. 1:1-2:3). We read, "And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, for on it He rested from all his work of creating." Exodus 20:8--The major institution of the Sabbath came in the 4th of the ten commandments which stated that the Sabbath (or the 7th day; i.e. our Saturday) was a holy day on which no work should be performed. It was to be a day of rest and worship. It was serious enough that a violator could be killed for performing work on that day (Num. 15:32-36). Israelites were not even to light a fire in their home on the Sabbath. Major O.T. text on the Sabbath--Ex. 20:8-11; 23:12; 31:12-17; 34:21; 35:1-3; Deut. 5:12--15.

N.T.--Aside from the controversies between Christ and the Pharisees in the gospels, and the mention of its practice by the Jews in the book of Acts, there are only two N.T. texts that mention the Sabbath, Col. 2:16 and Hebrews 4:4. Both of these speak of it as a symbolic picture of the Christian's perfect rest in heaven.

II. Jewish Sabbath Traditions:

"During the period between Ezra and the Christian era the scribes formulated innumerable legal restrictions for the conduct of life under the law." Zondervan p. 736a. There were 39 sections of prohibition; they are as follows: sowing, plowing, reaping, gathering into sheaves, threshing, winnowing, cleansing, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wood, washing it, beating it, dying it, spinning it, making a warp of it, making two cords, weaving two threads, two stitches, tearing to sew two stitches, catching a deer, killing, skinning, salting it, preparing its hide, scraping off its hair, cutting it up, writing two letters, building, blotting out for the purpose of writing two letters, pulling down,

extinguishing, lighting a fire, beating with a hammer, and carrying from one property to another.

These 39 rules can be placed into 4 categories: (1-11) the preparation of bread; (12-24) manners of dress; (25-33) writing; and (34-39) work necessary for a private house.

There were 5 types of interdictions laid down by the Jews: 1) those specifically forbidden in the scriptures, 2) those supposedly forbidden in the scriptures, 3) things forbidden because they might lead to a transgression of the Biblical command, 4) actions that are similar to the kinds of labor supposed to be forbidden in the Bible, and 5) actions that are regarded as incompatible with the honor due to the Sabbath.

The length of these Sabbath commands is appropriately described by Edersheim, p. 778 vol. 2: "In not less than twenty-four chapters, matters are seriously discussed as a vital religious importance, which one would scarcely imagine a sane intellect would seriously entertain. Through 64 1/2 folio columns in the Jerusalem, and 156 double pages of folio in the Babylon Talmud does the enumeration and discussion of possible cases, drag on, almost unrelieved even by Haggadan. The Talmud itself bears witness to this, when it speaks (no doubt exaggeratedly) of a certain Rabbi who had spent no less than two and a half years in the study of only one of those twenty-four chapters!"

In regards to healing on the Sabbath, a person could be medically tended to if there were danger to that person's life, otherwise it would have to wait. Now, certain external bodily ailments were not considered dangerous, however many internal ones were. Another interesting twist is that a person using such external remedies such as cotton in the ear, may place it there and leave it before the Sabbath begins, but once the Sabbath has started, one cannot put it in. And if it falls out on the Sabbath, it would

not be allowable to put another in. Thus when Jesus healed on the Sabbath, their laws were not silent. Unless it was a life threatening situation it should wait. Even in modern synagogue services one will hear the liturgical pronouncement after reading a list of those who died in that year and those who are presently ill: "Because this is the Sabbath we will make no supplication, but pray God's speedy healing and comfort to return." The modern Jew will not even ask God to heal on the Sabbath. In regards to the "sheep fallen in the pit," which Jesus mentions, they had laws for that also. If an animal could be sustained in the present predicament, it should stay there until after the Sabbath was over. If sure death would occur, they could then profane the Sabbath by taking positive action. The canon was that on the Sabbath no healing was to be done except to prevent death. A person could also apply such medical attention so as to keep a wound from getting worse, but not so much as to help it get better. Thus a plaster might be worn, provided its object was to prevent the wound from getting worse, not to heal it, for that would have been work. Here is an extreme example. If a wall fell on a man on the Sabbath, and it was doubtful whether he was still alive. You could clear away the rubble in order to find the body. If the man was still alive he could be pulled out from the rubble. But if he were dead, they would have to leave him there until after the Sabbath. This principle of life superceding the Sabbath most probably came from Lev. 18:5. Rabbi Simeon ben Menasya (c. A.D. 180) said, "The Sabbath has been committed to you and not you to the Sabbath." How strikingly similar this is to Jesus' earlier pronouncement that the "Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

This concludes the more important discussion of the Sabbath. This following section is as much for entertainment as for historical background. It is simply a series of excerpts from the two tractates of the Talmud dealing with Sabbath regulations.

III. Meticulous Sabbath Regulations:

" . . . the prohibition about tying a knot was much too general and so it became necessary to state what kinds of knots were prohibited and what kind were not. It was accordingly laid down that allowable knots were those that could be untied with one hand. A woman could tie up her undergarment, and the strings of her cap, those of her girdle, the straps of her shoes and sandals, of skins of wine and oil of a pot with meat. She could tie a pail over the well with a girdle, but not with a rope" (Zondervan, 736).

A Sabbath's journey could be no longer than 2,000 cubits (3,000 feet) from one's house. However, if you were to set up a temporary dwelling (by pitching a tent, leaving a meal, etc.) you could travel another Sabbath's journey from there.

A Sabbath's "burden" was the weight of "a dried fig." If a person were to twice lift the weight of half a dried fig so as to transport it from one place to another and thus combining the action into one, that would also constitute a sin and a Sabbath desecration.

If an article of clothing or apparel were intended to be worn in front, it could be slipped behind without constituting a breach of Sabbath law, but not the other way around; that would constitute a sin.

A person could not throw up an object and catch it for that would be work, involving that hand in such labor. But a big question arose as to whether a person could throw up the weight with one hand and catch it with the other. Similarly, a person could carry rain water caught from the sky, but not drained off the roof.

If a person were in one place, and his hand filled with fruit stretched into another, and the Sabbath overtook him in this attitude, he would have to drop the fruit, since if he withdrew his full hand from one locality into another, he would be carrying a burden on the Sabbath.

It was not lawful to sell anything to a heathen unless the object would reach its destination before the Sabbath, nor to give to a heathen workman anything to do which might involve him in the Sabbath work.

Thus, Rabbi Gamaliel was careful to send his linen to be washed three days before the Sabbath.

You could not increase heat on the Sabbath, thus nothing could be cooked. An egg could not be boiled by putting it near a hot kettle, nor in a cloth, nor in sand heated by the sun. Cold water could be poured on warm, but not the reverse. One rabbi went so far as to forbid throwing warm water on your body lest you either spread a vapor or clean the floor thereby.

Not only were men to rest but also animals. Thus arose many elaborate rules about packs and labors. "Next, certain regulations are laid down to guide the Jew when dressing on the Sabbath morning, so as to prevent his breaking its rest. Hence he must be careful not to put on any dress which might become burdensome, nor to wear any ornament which he might put off and carry in his hand, for this would be a 'burden.' A woman must not wear such headgear as would require unloosing before taking a bath, nor go out with such ornaments as could be taken off in the street, such as a frontlet, unless it is attached to the cap, nor with a gold crown, nor with a necklace or nose-ring, nor with rings, nor have a pin in her dress. The reason for this prohibition of ornaments was, that in their vanity women might take them off to show them to their companions, and then, forgetful of the day, carry them, which would be a 'burden.' Women are also forbidden to look in the glass on the Sabbath, because they might discover a white hair and attempt to pull it out, which would be a grievous sin; but men ought not to use looking-glasses even on weekdays, because this was undignified. A woman may walk about her own court, but not in the street, with false hair. Similarly, a man was forbidden to wear wooden shoes studded with nails, or only one shoe, on the Sabbath as this would involve labor; nor was he to wear phylacteries or amulets, unless, indeed, they had been made by competent persons (since they might lift them off in order to show the novelty). Similarly, it was forbidden to scrape shoes, except perhaps

with the back of a knife, but they might be touched with oil or water. Nor should any sandals be softened with oil, because that would improve them" (Edersheim, vol 2, 781).

Even to pluck grass was a sin. Likewise, it was sinful to do anything that would promote the ripening of fruits, such as watering, or even to remove a withered leaf. Thus if a person cut a mushroom, they had sinned twice: once in the cutting and again in producing a mushroom in place of the old.

A radish may be dipped in salt, but not left in it too long, for that might pickle it.

A person could not wear false teeth on the Sabbath lest they fall out and that person be tempted to pick them up and carry them, which would be a burden.

Mud on a person's clothing could be crushed by a person's hand and then shaken off, but it could not be rubbed out of the garment.

If a person took a bath, opinions were divided whether that person should dry all at once or dry limb by limb.

"If water had fallen on the dress, some allowed the dress to be shaken but not wrung; others, to be wrung but not shaken. One Rabbi allowed to spit into the handkerchief, and that although it may necessitate the compressing of what had been wetted; but there is a grave discussion whether it was lawful to spit on the ground, and then to rub it with the foot, because thereby the earth may be scratched. It may, however, be done on stones" (Edersheim, p. 783). A person was not allowed to cut their hair and fingernails on the Sabbath. If done in the ordinary way, that would be a mortal sin. If done in an unordinary way, that would be a lesser sin.

An animal might be assisted in birthing on the Sabbath, but not to the extent that a woman could be helped. For her sake the Sabbath could be desecrated. Also for circumcision the Sabbath could be desecrated.

"For example, a person might bathe in mineral waters, but not carry home the linen with which he had dried himself. He might anoint and rub the body, but not to the

degree of making himself tired; but he might not use any artificial remedial measures, such as taking a show-bath. Bones might not be set nor emetics given, nor any medical or surgical operation performed” (Edersheim, vol. 2, p. 786).

You could not eat an egg which was laid on the Sabbath for that was not

specifically prepared for eating on the Sabbath. But if the chicken were set aside as Sabbath food, and it laid an egg you could then eat the egg because it was simply part of the chicken that had fallen off.

On the Sabbath, you could not climb a tree, ride, swim, clap your hands, strike your side, or dance.

RESOURCES:

Alfred Edersheim, *Life and Time of Jesus the Messiah*, MacDonald Pub., Co: MCLean, VA, N.D., Vol. 2, pp. 51-62, Appendix #17, pp. 777-787.

Steven Barabas, "Sabbath," *Zondervan Pict. Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Merrill C. Tenny, Grand Rapid, MI: Zondervan, p. 735-736.

Merril F. Unger, "Sabbath," *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1957, pp. 939-941.