

The Sabbath as a Sign of Holiness

In the Context of Babylonian Days and Theology

In the ancient world of the Bible, the communication and reception of signs served as an important facet of life. In Mesopotamia, the signs typically came from the gods in divination. It took specialists to read and interpret them. In ancient Israel, however, God gave signs quite publicly, utilizing his specialists such as Moses and the prophets. These signs were for everyone who witnessed them or received them. As in Mesopotamia, signs in the Bible always involved the transmission of a divine message. One such sign is the Sabbath.

In this chapter we will explore the Sabbath as a sign in contrast to ancient Mesopotamia practices involving signs and sacred days, as well as this region's overall views of human creation human condition and requirements in the eyes of the gods. As we do this, we will highlight the features of the Sabbath as a sign that would otherwise pass our notice, or that we would fail to see in their fullness. We will conclude that the Sabbath-sign stands for an elevated human position in relationship with the God who reveals his holiness and who makes Sabbath-keepers holy. In the end, though, the Sabbath-sign points us to a revelation of God, not just what he has done, but also who he is. The Sabbath as a sign is a revelation of God's elevated character.

Only a few passages in the Hebrew Bible talk about the Sabbath as a sign. The first, canonically, is in Exodus 31:12-17. Ezekiel follows with two verses in chapter 20:12, 20. Unlike Ezekiel, Exodus 31:12-17 speaks of the Sabbath not only as a sign but also as a covenant. In

contrast to ancient Near Eastern contracts and treaties, a Hebrew covenant was originally a bond of trust that rested upon a divine promise.¹ But what is a sign?

Unlike today, when signs reflect information or advertising, a sign in the Hebrew Bible represented a revelation of God that He gave to His people.² With God as the “originator” or “subject” of the sign,³ the sign served to signify a revelation of his power or his character. The Sabbath clearly falls in both categories. By its commemoration of two great events—the Creation of the world and the Exodus from Egypt, the Sabbath as a sign, aims to reveal God as the creator and deliverer—in terms of the revelation of both his power and his character—to those who keep it. As a result, we find two different reasons for keeping Sabbath in the two presentations of the Decalogue in Exodus 20:11 and Deuteronomy 5:15: 1) because God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh; 2) because God brought Israel out of Egyptian slavery. The first depicts God as our Creator; the second tells us that God is one who delivers his people from slavery.⁴ By giving the weekly Sabbath as a sign of these two events, God ensures that those who keep the Sabbath intelligently cannot forget the events or the God who directed them. The Sabbath as a sign would help them remember these divine revelations.⁵

These revelations signified by the Sabbath as a sign can be more fully understood by contrasting them with Babylonian signs, sacred days, and theological views of human origins

¹ Compare the first covenant, given to Noah in Genesis 9:9-17 with Abraham’s initial covenant in Genesis 15:4-6.

² C. A. Keller, *Das Wort OTH als Offenbarungszeichen Gottes* (Basel: Buchdruckerei E. Haenen, 1946; cited in Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 115-116, 124, 532.

³ Keller, *Das Wort OTH*, 11; cited in Tonstad, 115.

⁴ See Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning*, 112-116.

⁵ See Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning*, 115-116; see Keller, *Das Wort OTH*, 64

and worship. By contrasting the biblical Sabbath with relevant Babylonian practices and concepts, we can more clearly articulate the significance and meaning of the Sabbath in its unique message against the backdrop of the ancient Near East. In so doing, we can highlight what the intent of the Sabbath as a sign really is—to reveal God as truly holy in some very specific ways. The fact that the Hebrew word for “sign” (*’oth*) parallels the Akkadian (Babylonian) *ittu* gives us a basis for contrasting the biblical view of Hebrew signs with the Babylonian treatment.⁶ In Babylonian texts, signs belong to the realm of divination in which gods send literal signs that depict divine messages in the heavens, in the entrails of sacrificial animals, and in other physical manifestations and events. Similarly, the Sabbath sign conveys a message from God. But to the diviner and those whose omens he “read,” the signs formed a judicial verdict from the gods either involving a positive message or a threatening one. In the case of the latter, one could only change the negative verdict by seeking to mollify the god’s anger and regain his favor.⁷ An unfavorable sign did not create the disaster it portended but

⁶ Hayim ben Yosef Tawil, *An Akkadian Lexical Companion For Biblical Hebrew: Etymological-Semantic and Idiomatic Equivalents with Supplement on Biblical Aramaic* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2009), 8. A number of scholars question whether we should associate the Hebrew word *’oth* with *ittu*. Helfmeyer, F. J. (1977). [נִיח](#). G. J. Botterweck & H. Ringgren (Eds.), J. T. Willis (Trans.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Revised Edition, Vol. 1, pp. 167–168). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans. But some of the reasons can be resolved. Just because the Hebrew word is not always feminine does not cancel its association with the Akkadian feminine *ittu*. For example, few scholars dispute the fact that the Ugaritic feminine noun *špš* is related to the masculine Akkadian *šamaš* or the predominately feminine Hebrew *šemeš*—all words for “sun.” These facts weaken the argument. See Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT)*, rev. Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm, trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson, 5 vols. (Leiden, New York, Köln: E. J. Brill, 1995), 1:26. Further, although the Hebrew word for “sign” only infrequently means an “omen” or its equivalent, while the Akkadian *ittu* very often does, a striking example occurs in Jeremiah 10:2, in which the prophet advises the people not to be afraid of the “signs of the heavens,” but to let the nations fear those signs. This and several other uses of the Hebrew *’ot* have fairly clear Akkadian parallels.

⁷ Amar Annus, “On the Beginnings and Continuities of Omen Sciences in the Ancient World,” in *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World*, ed. Amar Annus, OIS 6 (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010), 1-7.

“warned” of its appearance as the gods’ decision.⁸ The Sabbath-sign bears little likeness to this view of divinatory signs; indeed, the Sabbath-sign, with its ties to creation and freedom from slavery lies outside the judicial sphere. The Sabbath, therefore, is not about judging people but about giving them rest and re-creation. The only judiciary aspect is the installment in Exodus 31:12-17 of working on Sabbath as a capital crime. In terms of Babylonian ideology, it makes a strange contrast to the Babylonians who, as slaves of the gods (see below), could never cease work or rest. One would think that God’s people, recently freed from slavery, to whom God gave his Sabbath, would rejoice in a weekly day in which they did not have to labor but could rest with God. But some of them turned their back on the Sabbath early in their trek from Egypt through the desert toward the land of Canaan.⁹ Therefore the death penalty rest was needed to get the Israelites to accept God’s gracious gift of the Sabbath and all of its meaning. It was not inherent in the original giving of the Sabbath that lacked this judicial element. Indeed, the very framework of Exodus 31:12-17 depicted the relationship brought about by the revelatory sign: “the Sabbath is a sign between you and me;” “It is a sign forever between me and the Israelites.”¹⁰ Thus the Sabbath signifies a revelation of God that invokes a relationship between his Sabbath keepers and himself.

With this general backdrop in mind, we can compare and contrast several kinds of sacred Babylonian days with the Sabbath of the Bible. In Assyro-Babylonian astral divination, certain days could be either favorable or unfavorable, particularly for doing certain activities.

⁸ See Walter Farber, “Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 3:1899-1900.

⁹ Exodus 16:27-30.

¹⁰ Exodus 31:12, 17, CEB.

The Babylonians called the most striking days of this kind, “evil days.” The Assyrian “evil days” also contained a loose, lunar resemblance to the seventh-day Sabbath, since they occurred in some of the Assyro-Babylonian Menologies on the 7th, 14th, 19th, 21st, and 28th days of the lunar month.¹¹ In one of the menologies, each of these days bore the comment, “unsuitable for doing anything desirable.” Certain other actions were prohibited also.¹² It is interesting to speculate whether the inclusion of numerous prohibitions of activities on the Sabbath that emerged in the second temple period and later reflected Babylonian influence from these days due to the Exile. The Sabbath commandment primarily contained one prohibition: no work on Sabbath. This command is rightly considered a contrast with common practices in the ancient Near East that had no weekly day of rest from work.

In addition to these “evil” days, the 15th day of the lunar calendar makes its appearance in various Assyrian and Babylonian works.”¹³ Its name, *shapattu* reminds readers of *Shabbat* (in Akkadian, the same signs represent either b or p).¹⁴ This day refers to the 15th day of the lunar

¹¹ Benno Landsberger, *Der Kultische Kalender der Babylonier und Assyrer*, erste Hälfte (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1915), 99-100, 119-120.

¹² S. Langdon, *Babylonian Menologies and the Semitic Calendars*, The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy, 1933 (London: published for the British Academy, Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1935), 73-81. Because most Assyriologists recognize that before the 1950's, Assyriologists made a lot of mistakes in their determination of what texts actually read and even more, what they meant, caution should be exercised regarding the exact wording and the specific prohibitions of the evil days. But current scholars agree that for these days certain activities were prohibited. See, e.g., Cyrus H. Gordon, “The Biblical Sabbath: Its Origin and Observance in the Ancient Near East,” *Judaism* 31 (1982):12-16.

¹³ See John Brinkman, *et al.*, eds., *The Assyrian Dictionary*, 21 vols. (Chicago: The Oriental Institute; Glückstadt, Germany: J. J. Augustin, 1989), 17:449-450.

¹⁴ Similar to the Hebrew and Akkadian words for “sign,” scholars have debated whether the Akkadian 15th day of the month, *shapattu*, had any etymological connections to the Hebrew *shabbat*. Tawil, for instance, leaves it completely out of his *Lexical Companion*, 387. See note 7 above. Claims have been made that the two cannot be related because of the lack of doubling of the *b* and the doubling of the *t* in *shapattu*. Gerhard F. Hasel, “Sabbath,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:850. However, others are certain that the terms *shabbat* and *shapattu* are etymologically related. E.g., J. Morgenstern, “Sabbath” in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1962):4:135; W. G. Lambert, “A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis,” in *I Studied Inscriptions From Before the Flood*, ed. Richard S. Hess and David T. Tsumura (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 106, 107.

month, or the 15 days that make up half a month. It figures in two Babylonian creation myths (one of which, the Creation Epic, is dealt with in note 16 below). In *Atraḥasis*, Enki makes a cleansing bath on the first, seventh, and fifteenth (*shapattu*) day of the month. Following that third bath (likely on *shapattu*), the gods slaughtered Wê-ila, whose blood and flesh the birth-goddess Nintu mixed with clay to create human beings. Mami, the divine mid-wife took away the heavy toil of the gods who revolted and placed it on the human beings created from the clay and blood of the slain deity.¹⁵ This also stands in sharp contrast to the creation week that the Sabbath represents in which God slays no divine being for the purpose of creating humankind to be his slaves.

But what seems to be the significance of this 15th lunar day? From the above text it seems to involve cleansing in preparation for creation of humanity. It also involves removing the gods from slavery and creating human beings to take their place. In *Atraḥasis*, this enslavement of human beings appeased the gods who had revolted against the high god for having to overwork. In line with that, a phrase qualifying the lunar *shapattu* reads, “day of the resting of the heart,” a phrase that means “appeasement of (most likely) the gods, since the word “resting” is often used in a verbal form as appeasement, especially when used with “heart.”¹⁶ In contrast, the Bible offers Sabbath keepers a different kind of experience in which

¹⁵ W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-ḥasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 58-61.

¹⁶ See Langdon, *Babylonian Menologies*, 90; Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic based on the Lexicon of William Gesenius as translated by Edward Robinson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 992. Cf. Erica Reiner, ed., *The Assyrian Dictionary*, 21 vols. (Chicago: The Oriental Institute; Glückstadt, Germany: J. J. Augustin, 1980), 11:148-4b. One additional piece of information adds a further dimension to the concept of appeasement. In the Creation Epic, Marduk created the moon (Nannar) and designated him as “the jewel of the night to fix the days.” “On the fifteenth day [*shapattu*], half-way through each month, stand in opposition.”¹⁶ The term “in opposition” is an equivalent rendering as the current astronomical term for when the sun and the moon are seen at opposite ends of the horizon. We should bear in mind, though, that, for the Babylonians, these were the gods of judgment—the

God mandates rest, a rest that resembles his own at the end of creation week.¹⁷ Instead of a cleansing bath and slaying of a god, God's day is holy and He is the One who makes people holy. As Ezekiel puts it: "I even gave them my sabbaths to become a sign between me and them so that they would know that I, YHWH, make them holy."¹⁸ Once again, the Sabbath defines our relationship with God—not as his slaves, not as those who have to appease His wrath or experience violence, but as free people whom God offers the holy experience of *rest* with Him on Sabbath.

The work *Atrahasis* is not the only Babylonian work to feature violence. In the Creation Epic, Marduk, the patron god of Babylon, slays the chaos monster Tiamat, he sends her blood via the north wind to his father gods who rejoice and send him peace offerings. The next line says, "The lord rested; he inspected her corpse."¹⁹ This violence, followed by rest, may be paralleled toward the end of the Creation Epic. Marduk decides to slay the instigator of Tiamat's rebellion in order to create humankind. These human beings will serve as a substitute work/slave force so that the gods may rest. But instead of a time of rest, Marduk has them create a place of rest, Babylon. Marduk uses the violent slaughter of a god to create humanity to be his slaves.²⁰ Neither Genesis 1 nor 2 speaks of God creating humankind by means of a violent death. Indeed, violence is absent in all of creation. In its original setting, God is

sun over events of the day while the moon judged the earth during the night. Perhaps this is why *shapattu* became known as the day of appeasement.

¹⁷ Exodus 20:11 specifically mentions not only the fact that God created the heavens, earth, sea, and everything in them, but also that he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Sabbath reminds us of God's rest, not just his acts of creation.

¹⁸ Ezekiel 20:12, translation mine.

¹⁹ The Creation Epic (*Enuma Elish*) IV: 135, translation mine. For this text, see E. A. Speiser, "The Creation Epic" in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament (ANET)*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 67.

²⁰ The Creation Epic, VI:1-57, *ANET*, 68.

portrayed as a non-violent God. It would follow, then, that the Sabbath represents the same. This is God's preferred stance of holiness and the goal of making people holy.

How does God use the Sabbath to make people holy? First, when we observe the Sabbath to memorialize the creation, and thus the Creator, it reminds us that he who created us in his own image is holy and can make us holy if we lose our holiness. Additionally, we become holy, by no longer striving to God's favor or seeking to appease of God's anger. Rather God makes us holy as we rest and are revitalized in interaction with him.²¹ That rest can make us holy finds evidence within the texts, but this is not adequate of itself. We rest *with God*. In both Exodus 31:13, 17 and Ezekiel 20:12, 20, God says that "the Sabbath is a sign *between me and you*." Such wording occurs in contexts where God is making a covenant with someone or with his people (cf. Genesis 9:7-17) Here in Exodus 31:16, God says that the Israelite community was "to keep the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath an eternal covenant in every generation forever." In that context, he adds: "Between me and the Israelites it is a sign forever that in six days YHWH made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day YHWH rested and was revitalized."

The Sabbath as a sign between God and his people means a bond of relationship between them. They rest not only because God rested but rest *with God*. This powerful image only gets magnified an understanding of Babylonian concepts of rest. As we noted above, in the works *Atrahasis* and the Creation Epic, the gods decided to create human beings as their substitute workforce since they had revolted from their toil. This concept, going back to

²¹ Exodus 31:17.

Sumerian times, was a persistent view of ancient Mesopotamians.²² Human beings, including kings, viewed themselves as slaves of the gods for whom there was no rest. Just as their slaves worked every day of the month, except possibly for festivals, so they worked to satisfy the gods. Gods, therefore, could rest, but not their human slaves.²³

Ezekiel, living in Babylonia, may well have understood this fact. Perhaps this is what led him to deviate from Exodus 31, when he states in verse 12: I even *gave* them *my* Sabbaths to become a sign between me and them so they would know that I, YHWH, make them holy.²⁴ A Babylonian would find this concept difficult to understand: a god giving human beings *his* day of rest? And making it a sign between them so that human *slaves* would *rest with* their god? The concept brings powerful perceptions of the status of sabbath-keepers with God. It recalls the significance of human creation: God in Genesis makes human beings in his image sharing with them the status of governors, not over one another, but over the natural world.

Within a Babylonian context, the Sabbath as a sign would counter every day that they might consider favorable or unfavorable for certain activities. Standing apart from the lunar calendar every seven days, the weekly Sabbath reminded YHWH's people that he had given them this shared covenantal gift of resting with him and recalling their release from slavery, in

²² Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1963), 123; A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, rev. ed. completed by Erica Reiner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, 1977), 191. *Enuma Elish* VI:1-37.

²³ For examples of this ideology, see *Atrahasis* I 208-241 in W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 43-59; In the Creation Epic, Marduk invents human beings as the workforce, and creates them from the blood of the slain Qingu, Tiamat's consort who incited her to violence against the gods. In grateful response, the gods agree to build Babylon as a resting place for them and Marduk. *Enuma Elish* VI:47-58 in *ANET* 68-69.

²⁴ Ezekiel 20:12, my translation.

utter rejection of any status as his slaves. This non-violent rest, this freedom from slavery, this covenant of relationship is how God makes them holy.

Ezekiel adds in 20:20: “I gave them my Sabbaths that they might know that I am YHWH your God.” Ezekiel places the identity of God’s name with his gift of his Sabbath. Not only does God give his Sabbath to signify that he makes people holy but to signify that he is their God.

The sign of the Sabbath therefore bears a message not just *from* God but *about* God. Unlike the Babylonian gods who were selfish, prideful, power-hungry, violent, and who delighted in war and slavery, the God of the Sabbath reveals a character who creates the world and then gives his creation over to the two human beings made in his image to “take charge” of it (CEB) by serving it.²⁵ Once again, God elevates his people to an identity well above that of slaves, and gives them the freedom to act and think for themselves once again. This God reveals himself to us as one who neither demands unmitigated labor nor lords it over us, but who unselfishly wants more than anything else to enjoy fellowship with us so that we can know him more fully. As a God who never needs appeasement—only our change of heart, one that he creates—he offers us his gift up Sabbath rest with him as oneness of fellowship to make that possible and in that way to make us holy.

²⁵ I have combined the dominion in Genesis 1:28 with the service in Genesis 2:15; the word, sometimes translated, “to work it” also means “to serve it.” The reason for the strong terms in Genesis 1:28—“to subdue it” and “have dominion over” it (NRSV) is that Genesis 1 is a polemic against polytheism. Many, if not most of the gods were natural forces such as the sun and moon. This may be why, in Genesis, the sun is “the great light” and the moon is “the lesser light,” to diminish their divinity. And the main point was that the newly created humankind was to “take charge of” (CEB) the natural world, not to worship it, that is, become its slaves. In God’s creation, he demotes the ancient Near Eastern gods to their rightful place as nature and elevates humanity from slaves to caregivers who take charge of the natural world.