

Did Yeshua Break the Sabbath?

An Inquiry
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The issue of the Sabbath was not an early one. Nowhere in the Apostolic Writings (the New Testament) do we find any indication that anyone questioned the validity of the Sabbath. There is not one argument between Yeshua and His antagonists over the issue of whether or not the Sabbath is a day that G-d commanded to be set apart. If there were controversies over the Sabbath, they related to the man-made laws which had been added to the Torah commandment.

The Sabbath precedes Sinai. It is given in Genesis 2 as the day that God Himself set apart and blessed over all the other days. In fact, the issue of the manna and when it was to be gathered (Exodus 16) shows that the Sabbath was well in place before the giving of the Torah on Sinai. That it became the sign of the Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 31:14ff) is something subsequent to its place in Creation. This is why Yeshua Himself states “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27). Note carefully that He did not say that the Sabbath was made for the Jews, but for “man” or “mankind.” Thus Yeshua teaches us that the Sabbath is a matter of the Creative order that governs all of mankind, not just Israel.

Yeshua never broke the Sabbath, though He was accused of breaking it. But Yeshua did take exception with the many man-made laws that had caused the Sabbath to be a burden even in His time. Yeshua wanted to restore the true Torah teaching about Shabbat, that it was a day of joy and blessing, not one that only multiplied the expanding list of what one could not do.

So Yeshua’s custom was to be in the synagogue on Sabbath (Luke 4:16). It is common in our modern times to hear the question, What Would Jesus Do? Here, then, is an obvious answer. If it were the custom of Yeshua to be with the gathered people of God on the Sabbath, would it not make perfect sense to do what He did? And if we are His disciples, before we stop doing what He did, should we not expect a clear statement in Scripture to that effect? On what basis should we disregard the direct commandments of God and the clear example of His Son, Yeshua?

But where is there any statement in Scripture telling us that G-d no longer wants us to keep the Sabbath day? Where has He withdrawn the wonderful gift of Sabbath which He gave to His children? Where is the teaching of Yeshua for us, His disciples, saying that the Sabbath has been changed? There is none. Should we follow the 3rd and 4th Century Church leaders who said that the command of God, one that carried the death penalty for its neglect (Exodus 31:14f; Numbers 15:32f) is no longer important? Would we say the same thing about any of the other commandments? Why are we so willing to dismiss the fourth commandment without any direct statement of Scripture to do so?

Moreover, why would Yeshua , in speaking of the last days, tell us “pray that your flight not be . . . on the Sabbath” (Matthew 24:20)? Would not He have known that the Sabbath would be done away with for the last-days Church? Why should the Sabbath be a concern for anyone in the last days? Obviously Yeshua never envisioned a time when the Sabbath would be suspended.

Not only do the Scriptures never hint at the Sabbath being abolished or changed, but on the contrary we have the clear and direct statement of Yeshua Himself that until heaven and earth pass away, nothing in the Torah will be done away with. Matthew 5:17-21 states clearly that Yeshua did not come to abolish the Torah and Prophets, but to fulfill them (make them viable, alive, real). The text goes on to admonish the disciples of Yeshua both to do the commandments and teach others to do them if we want to be great in the kingdom of God.

Paul concurs. He is not concerned whether a person is a Jew or Gentile (circumcised or not circumcised). What he is concerned about is that everyone keeps the commandments (1 Corinthians 7:19). Does anyone really believe that Paul did not include the 4th commandment in what he calls “the commandments”?

Moreover, on what basis would someone argue that the Sabbath has been change to Sunday? Usually the answer to this question is that by the death and resurrection of Yeshua the Sabbath has been done away with. But if the eternal sacrifice of Yeshua is the instrument by which the Sabbath is abolished, how is it that in the Millennium it is reinstated?

In Isaiah 56:3ff and 58:13ff, both of which are surely millennial passages, the Sabbath is clearly in force, not only for Israel, but for all the foreigners who attach themselves to Israel. How could Yeshua abolish the Sabbath with His eternal sacrifice, yet have it reinstated in His millennial reign? If He abolished it, there must have been something wrong with it. Why then would it be reinstated in the Millennium? Reason this way: if it were clearly in place in the time of Yeshua, and it will clearly be in place in the millennium, on what basis has it been suspended in the interim? If God had intended that His straight forward commandment should, in a given era, be disregarded, then surely He would have made this clear. And once again, no such statement can be found in all of Scripture.

Paul also kept the Sabbath (Acts 17:2) and walked strictly according to the Torah (Acts 21:24). But some will say that in Romans 14 Paul speaks of the Sabbath as something that is none essential and even irrelevant.

But Romans 14 is not dealing with the Sabbath (the word Sabbath is not found in that context). It is most likely addressing the controversy over which day to celebrate the Festival of Weeks (an argument which was well established between the Pharisees and Sadducees of His day) or even perhaps over which days to set aside for fasting. The fact that Paul labels the whole debate as a matter of “opinion” (Romans 14:1) should alert us to the fact that he could not be talking about something clearly stated in the Scriptures, like the Sabbath command.

Furthermore, it is unthinkable that with such a passing statement Paul could

abolish a Torah commandment that was one of the central issues of his day. And all without even the slightest hint of debate or backlash! If Paul had taught that the Sabbath was no longer viable, this would have been added to the offenses his opponents listed against him. Yet never is Paul accused of such a teaching. The simple fact is that to read Romans 14 as abolishing the Sabbath is to read it entirely out of its historical, grammatical context.

Some might suggest that in the Apostolic Scriptures the first day of the week is mentioned as the meeting day for the followers of Yeshua. But an investigation shows that there are only two times in the whole of the Apostolic Scriptures where the followers of Yeshua meet on the First Day of the week: Acts 20:7-12 and 1 Corinthians 16:1-3. In the first reference, the meeting is obviously after the end of the Sabbath (when the first day of the week begins from a Hebrew standpoint), going late into the night. It was the custom of the early followers of Yeshua to gather together with the Gentiles after the Sabbath (when the Gentiles would be finished with work: remember, their masters were not worshipers of G-d and thus would not have honored the Sabbath by giving their slaves the day off) to celebrate their life in Yeshua. It was at this kind of a meeting that Eutychus, sitting in the window, fell to his death. The only other mention of a meeting on the 1st day of the week was Paul's admonition to the congregations to gather money for the relief of the believers in Jerusalem. Gathering money would not have been appropriate on the Sabbath, so a different day was chosen. But this never negated the obvious fact that they continued to meet on the Shabbat and to set it apart as unto the Lord. What is more, the Apostolic Scriptures with a unified voice show that the Sabbath, not the first day of the week, was the day upon which the followers of Yeshua gathered together in synagogues.

In the final analysis, then, the Scriptures are replete with clear indications (through numerous examples) and direct commands regarding the keeping of the Sabbath. What Scripture lacks is any clear statement to the effect that the Sabbath has been abolished. But why would G-d want to abolish something that He gave to His children for joy and gladness?!

Only What is Found in the New Testament Applies to Believers Today

The inevitable shift away from the synagogue which occurred in the 2nd and 3rd Century Church unwittingly created a subtle yet real break with the Tanakh. Since the Torah, Prophets, and Writings were the Scriptures of the synagogue, and since the emerging Christian Church wanted to define herself as a different than the synagogue and as new entity, it was only natural that an emphasis would be placed upon the Apostolic Scriptures to the detriment of the Tanakh. Being placed in an inferior position, the established Scriptures of the so-called "Old Testament" remained valuable for the Christian community only in so far as they reinforced the teachings of Yeshua and the Apostles. Still, the emerging Christian Church considered the Hebrew Scriptures to be the word of God, and they were therefore retained in the "Christian Bible."

The modern Christian Church, however, has moved well beyond even the 3rd and 4th Century Church, and adopted a practical hermeneutic which accepts only the “New Testament” as authoritative in the believer’s life. Something specifically taught in the Tanakh but not clearly repeated in the Apostolic Scriptures is considered applicable for Israel but not for the Church. So some within the Christian community might admit that the Sabbath remains for Jews, but that it does so only because there exists an eternal covenant with them of which the Sabbath is a sign.

Yet it is clear that the Sabbath commandment took in all who were within the community of Israel, not just the native born Jew or the proselyte This is clearly taught in the Torah: “but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements.” In this regard also note Exodus 23:12; Deuteronomy 5:14; 31:12.

What is more, those who stood at Mt. Sinai and ratified the covenant included far more than Jews, for the text clearly states that a “mixed multitude” left Egypt: “ And a mixed multitude also went up with them, along with flocks and herds, a very large number of livestock” Exodus 12:38. No doubt some Egyptians and even others of foreign nationality had come to believe in the God of Israel and had left with Israel in the great deliverance and redemption. As they stood at Mt. Sinai, they entered into the covenant. It would seem likely that the verses found in the Torah declaring one and the same law for the “native born and for the foreigner (stranger)” has this mixed multitude in mind (Exodus 12:49; Leviticus 24:22; Numbers 9:14; 15:29).

It is true that the Sinai covenant was made with the nation of Israel, and that it has national ramifications as well as individual. This is apparent from the fact that land is allocated to Israel (as a fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant), and nationalistic items such as army, kings, and a census are spoken of and laws given pertaining to each. But that this nationalistic character of the covenant also includes non-Israelites is clear, and extends to all who attach themselves to Israel through faith in her God. This is apparently Paul’s emphasis when he describes Gentile believers as becoming part of the “commonwealth” of Israel (Ephesians 2:12-13), having been distant before but now having been brought near. Moreover, Paul’s ingrafting picture of Romans 11, and the clear emphasis upon Abraham as the father of all who believe (Romans 4:16) moves toward the idea that the Gentile believer in Yeshua, like the God-fearer, has taken up “residence” within Israel (grafted into the same root) and therefore has the privilege of living within the divine precepts of the Torah just as the Jewish believer.

Some might argue that the lists of sins attributed to the Gentiles by someone like Paul (in Romans 1, for instance) does not include the breaking of Sabbath. To this several responses may be given. First, that the nations should abide by the Torah is the vision of the prophets for the last days. The full spread of the gospel did not occur until the coming of the Messiah and the sending of the Spirit, so the knowledge of the Torah was not widespread. Secondly, none of the lists confess to being exhaustive. Thirdly, the fact that the Torah condemns the sinner

(whether Jew or Gentile, cf. Galatians 3:10, 13) means that the sinner is judged as a law-breaker. Being condemned by one's works (cf. Revelation 20:12, 13) would require a standard for what would be accepted and what would not—this standard is God's Torah, a Torah which condemns all who are not in Yeshua. That the unbeliever is condemned by the Torah would indicate that he or she is condemned for breaking all of it, not just part of it (note James 2:10).

Such a perspective is in concert with the punishment put upon the nations for failure to keep Sukkot, a Sabbath to the Lord (Zechariah 14:17-19). These nations did not stand at Sinai, nor did they enter into the two-sided covenant between Israel and God. Yet they are held to the standard of the Torah. This being the case, one cannot argue that present day Gentiles are exempt from the Torah on the basis of covenant ratification, for if such were the case, the same would apply to Gentiles in any era. That it clearly does not is evident from the prophetic texts, which consistently portray righteous Gentiles as observing the Sabbaths given to Israel (Isaiah 56:1ff; 58:13, 14; 66:23).

Some might further argue that when believers are called to obey the commandments of God, the most important question to ask is "which commandments apply to me?" And some would answer that certain commandments, like the Sabbath, are not applicable for the present day Church. That there are specific laws given for specific groups is obvious (male/female, king/servant, married/single) but to single the Sabbath out as given only to the Jews needs further substantiation. The other nine Words (Commandments) are clearly universal in scope—an argument from silence (that Sabbath is not mentioned by the Apostles as a direct commandment) is insufficient to consider it entirely sectarian in its application. For why would God include one sectarian commandment together with nine universal commandments?

Actually, this kind of hermeneutic is flawed. To say that only the Apostolic Scriptures are directly applicable to the believer presents a number of problems. The first and most obvious is that the Apostles seem to go out of their way to show that the Scriptures or the word of God forms the standard for the disciple of Yeshua, yet in the time of the Apostles the "New Testament" as we have come to know it did not exist as Scripture. Evangelical scholars agree that the Apostolic Scriptures did not circulate as canonical texts until late in the 1st century CE at the earliest, and most likely until the 2nd Century. Though some of the Apostolic writings may have been received as divine halakah for the early Messianic congregations, most often when the Scriptures are referred to, it is the Tanakh ("Old Testament") and nothing more. To say, then, that the Christian Church receives as Divine direction only what the Apostles wrote is essentially to write off the 1st Century Messianic congregations as having little relevance for us in matters pertaining to our life of faith.

Secondly, the hermeneutic which receives only what is stated or restated in the Apostolic Scriptures as Divine direction cannot be sustained by the Apostolic Scriptures themselves. In Romans 1:32, for example, Paul presumes that everyone agrees that the death penalty is prescribed for homosexuality—he presumes this because it is "the ordinance of God", that is, because it is so stated

in the Torah . For Paul, since it is so stated in the Torah, it is received as Divine direction for the believing community to which he writes.

Thirdly, a great many ethical and moral values which we consider foundational have their basis in the Tanakh, not in the Apostolic Scriptures. Where in the writings of the Apostles do we find laws regarding abortion, pedophilia, cruelty to animals, bearing false witness in a court of law, bestiality, cross-dressing, to name of few?

Fourthly, if all that is necessary to live a fully sanctified life before the Lord is what is found from Matthew to Revelation (setting aside those portions of the Gospels which are directly spoken to a Jewish audience), is there really any essential need for the Tanakh? One hardly thinks so, and one might go so far as to say that Marcion (whose “canon” essentially consisted of only Paul’s writings) was right to unburden us from the first two-thirds of the Bible. Would not our spiritual energies be best spent upon the “essentials” rather than upon that which, in the final analysis, is no longer needed? Of course, the modern Christian Church is not suggesting that we abandon the “Old Testament,” but it seems that in a practical way such a hermeneutic moves that direction.

If the Tanakh is only a relic of the past, an antique which adorns one’s shelf but has no practical use in one’s life, is it really being received as the Word of God which lives and abides forever? And if it is only being used as a magnifying glass to investigate more closely the really important words of God (the “New Testament”) is it functioning as the two-edged sword the Apostles claim it to be?

The truth of the matter is clear: the Torah is a brilliant light illuminating our souls with God’s truth and pointing us time and time again to Yeshua. It is the foundation, the HaYesod of all of Scripture. And only as we know it, and live it, are the Scriptures as a whole understood as they should be.