

The Sabbath the Old-Covenant Sign for Israel

God gave the sabbath to Israel as a special distinguishing marker, separating them from all other nations. This principle encapsulates most if not all of the scriptural teaching which shows us that the sabbath stood or fell with Israel's role in the old covenant, which covenant was rendered obsolete in and through the finished work of Christ.

Let me prove it.

We know that Israel, and Israel alone, out of all the nations, was privileged to be given God's law through Moses on Sinai. We have an abundance of scriptures which put it beyond doubt (Deut. 4:1 – 6:25; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5, and so on). In this, Israel was unique among the nations.

[God] has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws (Ps. 147:19-20).

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God (Rom. 3:1-2).

[Consider] the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen (Rom. 9:4-5).

Comment is surely superfluous. Israel was given the law; Israel alone, of all the nations, was given the law; the law was given to Israel for Israel and for no others.¹ And the sabbath was at the heart of that law. This, at a stroke, destroys universal sabbatarianism. Indeed, it should put an end to all attempts to bring believers (most of whom are Gentiles), in these days of

¹ See my *Christ* pp27-37,337-341.

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the new covenant, under a law which God designed to be exclusively for Israel in the days of the old covenant, and which was fulfilled and rendered obsolete by Christ.

Now let me come to the particular: the sabbath was God's special sign for Israel and only Israel.

Although God could say: 'All the earth is mine', he chose to declare to the Israelites: 'You shall be a special treasure to me above all people'. But there was a condition: 'Now therefore, *if* you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, *then* you shall be a special treasure to me above all people' (Ex. 19:5). 'Keep my covenant'. In other words: 'Keep my law'. In giving this new nation – this nation of Israel, his nation – his law in order to mark them out as his people, in particular God gave them a special – unique – sign that they were his people. This sign belonged to no other people, since only Israel was his nation. And this sign was his sabbaths: 'Moreover I also gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between them and me, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them' (Ezek. 20:12); that is, separates them from all other peoples.² God commanded the Jews: 'Hallow my sabbaths, and they will be a sign between me and you, that you may know that I am the LORD your God' (Ezek. 20:20). And the same applied to their following generations (Ex. 31:13). By 'sabbaths', of course, God meant the weekly sabbaths in particular. In short, God commanded the Hebrew people from that time on to keep his law – including the sabbath – especially the sabbath – *and especially the sabbath as a sign that they were God's nation, distinct from all others:*

Surely my sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that it is the LORD who sanctifies you. You shall keep the sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death... Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath,

² The root meaning of 'sanctify' is 'separate'. See my *Fivefold*.

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to observe the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed (Ex. 31:13-17).

Incidentally, the time when Israel became a nation (Ex. 6:7)³ is vitally connected with this giving of the law, and the sabbath in particular. It confirms that the law was given only to the nation of Israel, not to Adam, not to the Gentiles. As we have seen the sabbath was introduced to the new nation in the wilderness at the giving of the manna (Ex. 16), and within a few short weeks it was heavily reinforced and set in stone at Sinai (Ex. 20). The sabbath was given to Israel, and only Israel, as the special marker that they were God's people. The people, receiving this sign of the sabbath, in conjunction with the rest of the law, promised their obedience as God's holy nation, and did so both before and after Sinai: 'Then all the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do"' (Ex. 19:8) – before Sinai – and after: 'Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the judgements. And all the people answered with one voice and said: "All the words which the LORD has said we will do"' (Ex. 24:3).

The tables of the law were housed in the special box constructed for the purpose – the ark of the covenant for Israel (Ex. 25:10,15-16; 40:19-20; Deut. 10:1-5; 1 Kings 8:9; Heb. 9:4), its name – 'the ark of the *covenant*' – pregnant with meaning. The commandments and the covenant were one (Ex. 34:28; Lev. 26:15; Deut. 4:13), this being symbolised by their union in the ark of the covenant. This holy box was placed at the very centre of the Jewish religion and nation. No hand was allowed to touch it – death fell upon the transgressor (2 Sam. 6:6-7). In this way, God was once again underlining the connection between the law and death for disobedience (Rom. 7:9-10; 2 Cor. 3:6-7,9; Heb. 12:18-24). Moreover, he was signalling the status of the law as the separating marker for Israel.

³ See my *Christ* p27.

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Nor did the giving of the law stop in Exodus 20. The biblical record makes it very plain that God went on to unfold a complete life-system for the Jews involving worship, the family and society, to enable the fledgeling nation to run its affairs in a way which would please God, and keep them distinct from all other peoples. So much so, how to deal with false worship and idolatrous altars (Ex. 20:22-26), how to manage servants (Ex. 21:2-11), recompense and retribution for personal injuries (Ex. 21:12-36), property laws (Ex. 22:1-31), the judicial system (Ex. 23:1-9), and the three annual feasts (Ex. 23:14-19) – all new revelation – were all made clear to Israel at this time of the formation of the nation.

Did you spot it? Did you spot the gap in the previous paragraph? I deliberately missed out one integral passage of Scripture in the list of new things the LORD made known to his people at that time. Indeed, I missed out the principal distinguishing mark of the old covenant. Which was? When someone fills in an application form for a job, the prospective employer looks to see if there are any unexplained gaps. If there are, he attaches huge significance to them. What deliberate gap did I leave? Exodus 23:12. To what does this gap-passage refer? Sabbath laws! By omitting this, I tried to highlight the significance of the sabbath to the Jews at this time – it was part and parcel of the entire Jewish system of worship and daily life which was made known to them at the start of their existence as a nation. And it was the main marker to separate Israel from all other nations on earth.

After promising guidance and blessing for the nation, and commanding their obedience (Ex. 23:20-33), God then confirmed the covenant with Israel (Ex. 24). He went on to unfold other matters which had significance for the Jews and only them; namely, the tabernacle and all its concomitants, including the offerings and the priesthood (Ex. 25). As God drew his revelation to a close, he told the people through Moses that he had chosen and named two men to carry out the work (Ex. 31:1-11).

But there was one last piece of revelation needed to confirm the covenant in all its unique fullness for Israel. And what was

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that? It was the sabbath! ‘Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying’:

Speak also to the Israelites saying: ‘Surely my sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that it is the LORD who sanctifies you. You shall keep the sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death... Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever’ (Ex. 31:13-17).

Note the connection between the distinctive nature (in that sense, the holiness) of the sabbath and the distinctive nature (in that sense, the holiness) of the Israelites;⁴ they stood or fell together in the covenant God made with the Hebrews at that time.

And after Israel’s rebellion with the golden calf – after which God mercifully re-issued the covenant on Sinai – he repeated the process, giving Moses two new tablets of stone. In so doing, he restated his instructions pertaining to the covenant he was making with Israel, including warnings against idol worship, instructions concerning the keeping of the feasts, the redemption of the first-born, the sabbath and so on (Ex. 34). As God said: ‘Write these words, for according to the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel’ (Ex. 34:27). As Moses was addressing God just prior to this second visit to Sinai, he could rightly say of Israel: ‘This nation is your people’ (Ex. 33:13).

And upon Moses’ return to the people, he went over the same ground as before: ‘Then Moses gathered all the congregation of the children of Israel together, and said to them: “These are the words which the LORD has commanded you to

⁴ The Israelites, it goes without saying, as a nation, were not regenerate; see my *Fivefold*.

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do”’. Where did Moses begin? What was the *first* thing he put before the people? This:

Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh day shall be a holy day for you, a sabbath of rest to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations on the sabbath day (Ex. 35:1-3).

In other words, he began with the sabbath. Then followed instructions, as before, concerning the tabernacle, the men who would oversee the work, the priesthood and all the rest of it – all of which the Israelites carried out (Ex. 35:1 – 40:38). But I ask the question again: Where did God and Moses begin when restating God’s covenant with Israel? With the sabbath!

All this would seem to be clarity itself; it would appear to settle the issue once and for all. The sabbath was given to the Jews. It was a Jewish day. The distinction (in that sense, the holiness, the separation) of the day and the people stood or fell together. The sabbath was a mark – a unique sign – of God’s covenant with them, and only with them. God did not give the sabbath to Adam. He did not give it to the Egyptians. He did not give it to the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites... he gave it to the Hebrews. Indeed, as the Bible makes as clear as noonday, it is even more far-reaching than this. The Gentiles did not have the law. And therefore the Gentiles could not have had the sabbath. God has never said: ‘I give my sabbath to the nations. I give my sabbath to the UK, America, Australia...’ Any such suggestion utterly ruins the revealed concept of the sabbath as the special distinguishing marker for Israel, and for Israel only.

There is no room for doubt that the law in general was given to the Jews, and, in particular, the sabbath was the special sign God gave to the Jews to signify they were his people (Ex. 31:12-17; Ezek. 20:10-12,20). This is confirmed by the very terms of the fourth commandment: God pointed out to the Jews that it applied to ‘your stranger who is within your gates’ (Ex. 20:10). The fact that this needed to be stated proves that the commandment was not of universal application – it did not,

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after all, apply to the stranger who was *not* living among the Jews.⁵

Now the very essence of a sign is this: it is special. The sabbath must have been special to the nation of the Jews – it *must* have been – otherwise the whole point of the sabbath as a sign would have been lost.⁶ If everybody had the day, if it was a creation ordinance applying to all men as men,⁷ inevitably it could not have been distinctive to the Jews, and consequently no sign at all. At a stroke, those passages which speak of the day as a unique sign for the Jews as a nation would thus be rendered void of meaning. And worse. What appalling construction might be placed on calling a day special to Israel – when it was nothing of the sort? The very suggestion is blasphemous.

What is more, as I have explained, the sabbath lasted as long as the old covenant, and no longer; that is, as long as the sacrifices, the priesthood and all the rest. All are fulfilled and abolished in Christ, rendered obsolete by him (Rom. 10:4; 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Gal. 3:19,23-25; Eph. 2:14-15; Heb. 7:12,18-19,22; 8:6-13; 9:10; 10:15-18). To sacrifice now is to insult the blood of Christ; to keep the sabbath is to insult the rest he brought. In both cases, it would be clinging to shadows when the reality is at hand.⁸

By applying the sabbath to non-Jews, sabbatarians drive a coach and horses through this vital biblical principle; namely, that the sabbath was a sign for the Jews, as long as the old covenant was in force, and this necessarily means that it was uniquely a day for the Jews. By taking the sabbatarian line, sabbatarians effectively empty the day of its important biblical significance for the nation of Israel. Will they do the same for other signs? I refer to Genesis 17:11 with Romans 4:11, and Exodus 13:8-16.

⁵ See below for my remarks on Ex. 12:43-49.

⁶ Compare Rev. 2:17.

⁷ See the chapter: 'The Sabbath Binding on All Men?'

⁸ See the chapter: 'Colossians 2:16-17'.

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Let me explain: Abraham ‘received the sign of circumcision’ (Gen. 17:11; Rom. 4:11) as the sign of God’s covenant with him; that is, he was given a special indicator, a special marker, unique to him and his descendants; it was a sign for them and for them alone. If circumcision had been given to the entire human race, its uniqueness would, obviously, have been lost; its value as a sign would have been destroyed. The idea that circumcision could be a sign for Abraham and his descendants, and yet be given to all mankind, is simply ludicrous.⁹

Then again, at the very time of leaving Egypt, the Jews were given the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which they had to observe when they were settled in their land. This served as a sign:

And you shall tell your son in that day, saying: ‘This is done because of what the LORD did for me when I came up out of Egypt’. It shall be as a sign and as a memorial between your eyes, that the LORD’s law may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt (Ex. 13:8-9).

The Feast of Unleavened Bread was for the Jews, and only for the Jews. More, it was *a sign* for them, and for them alone. If all nations had been required to keep the feast, its very essence as a sign would have vanished. When God gave the Jews the Passover, he expressly forbade any foreigner to eat it (Ex. 12:43-49).

Then again, upon reaching Canaan the Jews had to redeem their first-born. By way of explanation, the father had to tell his son:

By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And it came to pass, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the LORD killed all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both the first-born of man and animal. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all males that open the womb, but all the first-born of my sons I redeem.

⁹ Of course, the spiritual equivalent (which is regeneration – *not* baby sprinkling!) applies to all members of the new covenant; that is, believers. As does the sabbath – in its spiritual reality.

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As God said: 'It shall be as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes, for by strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt' (Ex. 13:11-16). Once again, only the Jews were required to keep this service of redemption; it was a sign for them and them alone.

The same goes for the sabbath; it was a sign for the Jews, and it was therefore given specially and only to them. It has never belonged, as a day of observance, to any others.

All these old-covenant signs were given to the Israelites within three months of their leaving Egypt (Ex. 19:1). God instituted many new things for them at that time – all strange and unfamiliar to them; so much so they needed repeated instruction as to how they should behave; they simply did not know – it was all so new. God gave them a new calendar (Ex. 12:2); he gave them feasts which they had never known before (Ex. 12:1-28); he gave them a method of redemption – something not known before (Ex. 13); he gave them manna – something completely unknown on earth before (Ex. 16); he gave them a new judicial system (Ex. 18); he gave them his law, which involved a vast array of new things – a stated place to sacrifice, a stated, organised way of sacrifice, a stated priesthood, the tabernacle, the levitical system and so on (Ex. 19) – all utterly unknown before. God gave these things to the Jews as special signs and markers, laws, commands, statutes, regulations, ordinances, judgements and practices – practices which until that time in the wilderness, following Israel's exodus from Egypt, had never been known among men. Are we really to believe that one, and only one, of these special markers – the sabbath – the one great special sign for Israel, the one commandment specially picked out by God as a sign for them – *had* been known to all men for centuries? Are we really asked to believe that the sabbath, the revelation of which comes slap-bang in the middle of all the other new things revealed to the Jews, was not new? that it had been given to Adam (and thus to all men), thousands of years before? that it was a day for all men and not special to the Jews? I repeat my question: Did all these signs apply only to the Jews? Or do they all apply to all the human race for all time?

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Of course they did not, and do not! They never did apply to all men. They were given to the Jews for the Jews, in the old covenant. And they were all fulfilled, and therefore abolished, in Christ.

That the sabbath – along with the other signs – was for the Jews only is confirmed by the treatment of the sabbath in Nehemiah 9:13-15. On returning from exile, the Levites led the Jews in praise of God, confession of their sin, and a renewal of the covenant (Neh. 9:5-38). And the fact that God, centuries before at Sinai, had made known his holy sabbath to them – the Jews – was an integral part of all this:

You came down also on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments. You made known to them your holy sabbath, and commanded them precepts, statutes and law, by the hand of Moses your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger, and brought them water out of the rock for their thirst, and told them to go in to possess the land which you had sworn to give them.

There are several points. God made his sabbath known to the Jews, not to Adam: ‘You made known to *them* your holy sabbath’. The Jews became Jews long after Adam’s time. There were no Jews in Genesis 2. Again, it is expressly stated that God made his sabbath known in the wilderness (with the manna and then at Sinai) by Moses (Neh. 9:14); not in Eden, to Adam. Note also the way Nehemiah reversed the historical record – manna, sabbath, law – and made it law, sabbath, manna. Above all, notice how Nehemiah sandwiched the ‘making known of the sabbath’ between the revelation of the law on Sinai (Neh. 9:13), and the giving of the manna (Neh. 9:15). In short: God made known his holy sabbath to the Jews when he commanded them through Moses in the wilderness (Neh. 9:14), not when he himself rested at creation. Above all, God *made known* his sabbath at that time; he did not *remind* the Jews of a day which they had forgotten. This passage is utterly invincible!

It stands out a mile; Nehemiah 9:14 is conclusive: Israel did not have the sabbath or the law until God gave both law and sabbath to them in the Wilderness of Sin on their leaving Egypt.

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And he gave both to Israel, and to Israel alone. And when he gave the law (at Sinai), so soon after giving them the sabbath (in the desert), no wonder he told them to ‘remember’ it; that is, to keep it, to observe it. It was the special marker, the special distinguishing sign for Israel in the old covenant, separating her from all other nations, and marking her as no other nation was ever to be marked. And it all fell, all was set aside, all was rendered obsolete, all became defunct (Rom. 10:4; 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Eph. 2:14-15; Heb. 7:18-19; 8:13), with the finished work of Christ (John 19:30; Gal. 3:19).¹⁰ On all these counts, therefore, any call for national observance of the sabbath, today, and by all nations, is quite wrong.

One last time: the sabbath was the special marker, the distinguishing sign of the old covenant, and it applied to Israel, and to Israel only.

¹⁰ Of course, the old covenant is still valuable in the new covenant, serving as a paradigm for believers. See my ‘The Law the Believer’s Rule’.