



## *Texts in Context*

# The Sabbath: Holy Time

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A year or so before Abraham Joshua Heschel died in 1972, I was invited to our local synagogue to hear him speak about *shabbat*, the Sabbath. His book *The Sabbath* had been published twenty years before, in 1951, and had soon become a bestseller, not only with Jewish readers but also with Christians.

Forty-some years later, I still remember how he began. Paraphrasing his comments from my memory, he said:

The Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, have been translated from Hebrew into hundreds of languages. But one word in the Hebrew Decalogue could not be translated—not in any one of those hundreds of languages. None of those languages had an equivalent word for שבת, *shabbat*. All of them used the original Hebrew word. Thus in English we have “sabbath,” in German “*sabbat*,” in French “*sabbat*,” in Hungarian “*szabad*,” and we could go on and on.

No translation of the Bible that I know of “translates” the Hebrew word שבת. They simply put שבת into their own alphabet, as we do in English—Sabbath.

Rabbi Heschel went on to describe what various religions through the ages have considered “holy.” Some religions view certain persons as holy; others have holy places; some have a holy book; some have holy articles; some have holy songs, or holy liturgy. But only the Jews have a specific time, once a week, every week, which has been “hallowed” or which is “holy.”

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## OBSERVING THE SABBATH

The observance of the Sabbath dates back to the very first week of creation, when the seventh day was designated as a day different from the first six days. It was not only a day of rest; it was שַׁבָּת, a “holy” day. “So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation” (Gen 2:3). That sacred time was codified when Moses received the two tablets of the law, with “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy” inscribed on the stone. The fullest explanation of the commandment is given in Deut 5:12–15 with its sweeping injunctions:

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Centuries later, the Qur’an designated Ramadan, the ninth month in the Islamic calendar, as a special time of fasting and observance in order to commemorate the first revelation of the Qur’an to Muhammad, according to Islamic belief. Other religions also view ceremonies on certain days as sacred in their ways. But no other religion labels one day a week, every week in every year, as the “sabbath.”

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“Some religions build Cathedrals or temples, but Judaism constructs the Sabbath as an architecture of time,” wrote Rabbi Heschel. Furthermore, he asserted that because God “hallowed” the Sabbath, time itself is hallowed.<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Heschel summarized, “The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time.”<sup>2</sup>

Another unique aspect of Sabbath observance—and no doubt a reason for the enduring strength of the much-persecuted Jewish people—is the fact that this important religious observance is not done only with people assembled in a church, or mosque, or temple, being led by a pastor, priest, bishop, imam, shaman,

<sup>1</sup>Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (1951; repr. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005) xiii.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

or some similar kind of leader. Sabbath observance doesn't require a particular building, a prescribed leader, or organizational structure. Sabbath observance is done in Jewish homes, around the dinner table, with the parents or elders of the family presiding. It can be done anyplace where people sit together around a table and connect themselves to the enduring history of God's creating, rescuing, and maintaining God's people through the ages.

For three years our family lived in Strasbourg, France. Our apartment building was not very solidly built, so every Friday evening we heard the Jewish family in the apartment below us observe their Sabbath meal with singing and prayers. In our family we regularly said our table prayers before each meal, but those Sabbath prayers resounding up through our floorboards in those ancient chants, melodies, and prayers seemed so much more impressive.

Christian churches did not adopt the rituals, ceremonies, and laws of the Old Testament, with the single exception of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, which includes the Sabbath: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exod 20:8). This is the third commandment for Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Anglicans, and the fourth commandment for the Jews, the Eastern Orthodox, and most Protestant traditions. (Furthermore, this commandment, along with the following commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," are the only two stated positively, without a "no" or "not" in them.)

## JESUS AND THE SABBATH

The Sabbath played a key role in Jesus' life as well. The passages for this article deal with controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees over Sabbath observance. The Pharisees, literally the "ones who are separated," were very strict about their separation from Gentiles. The center of their faith and life did not center on the priestly rituals at the temple in Jerusalem (as was the case with their oft-time rivals, the Sadducees), but stressed the strict observance of Torah throughout the whole land by everyone. Once the Second Temple was destroyed in AD 70, the focus of Jewish life moved from Jerusalem to observance of rituals and law wherever the Jews lived, led no longer by the priest in Jerusalem but by scholars and rabbis wherever they were dispersed around the world.

For a strict Jew, following Deut 5, it is unlawful to expend effort or work to obtain or prepare food on the Sabbath. An observant household would prepare food the day before and lay it on the table to be eaten with no further effort. In Mark 2:23, the spark of controversy with Jesus over the Sabbath set off when the Pharisees saw Jesus' disciples picking and eating heads of grain while walking through the fields on the Sabbath. The Pharisees criticized Jesus, who responded by reminding them that David himself did something far more radical when he entered the temple on the Sabbath and ate bread consecrated for use only by the priests, and gave some to his disciples as well (1 Sam 21:1–6). He did this, Jesus said, "when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food" (Mark 2:25).

Then Jesus added, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

The principle is simple: *What is good for human beings takes precedence over the strict laws of the Torah*, or as Jesus put it, “The sabbath was made for humankind.” In the next chapter Jesus came into the synagogue again on the Sabbath, perhaps the same day. There he meets a man “with a withered hand.” He asked the man to come forward, then challenged the Pharisees, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save a life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4). With that question Jesus exposed the Pharisees’ inflexible views of the law as an obstacle to helping the man who needed healing. The Pharisees could not even venture an answer, and Jesus healed the man’s hand. The infuriated Pharisees “immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him” (Mark 3:6). Thus early in his ministry, the battle lines were drawn between Jesus and the Pharisees. The conflict would continue to worsen over time, ending with the cross on Golgotha.

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Matthew’s Gospel tells the same story. Jesus referred to David, but then added even more emphasis: “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here” (Matt 12:6). Is he referring to himself, or is he speaking about the compassion and healing he brings because of his love for people? In either case the principle is the same: The good of people takes precedence over the law, even on the Sabbath. To make his point clear, he quoted Hos 6:6, “For I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” He ended the episode by stating, “For the Son of Man is Lord of the sabbath” (Matt 12:8). In Matthew’s Gospel, as with Mark, the healing of the man with the withered hand follows, with an even more specific challenge to the Pharisees:

Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath. (Matt 12:11–12)

Here again, as in Mark, they had no answer, but “went out and conspired against him, how to kill him” (Matt 12:14).

Luke’s Gospel duplicates the Sabbath accounts in Matthew. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus does a great deal of healing on the Sabbath. He heals the woman who had been bent over double for eighteen years (Luke 13:10–17). He heals a man with dropsy (Luke 14:1–6), in both cases arguing that such acts of mercy were equivalent to watering animals or rescuing them from a well.

In John’s Gospel Jesus heals the paralytic at the Bethesda Pool and then tells

him to carry his mat, being accused for both actions of breaking the Sabbath (John 5:9–18). He restores sight to the man born blind on the Sabbath (John 9:1–14). Jesus was not disputing the need to observe the Sabbath, nor was he abrogating the law. His rebuttal to the Pharisees concerning the Sabbath was consistent with the clear direction of the Old Testament prophets to view compassion and love—the good of people—as the first and foremost purpose of the law. In addition to the prophet Hosea, he could have quoted the prophet Amos:

Seek good and not evil,  
that you may live,  
and so the LORD, the God of hosts will be with you,  
just as you have said.  
Hate evil and love good,  
and establish justice in the gate. . . .  
I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . .  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:14–15, 21, 23–24)

Or he could have quoted Micah:

“With what shall I come before the LORD,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgressions,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”  
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:6–8)

However, far from disregarding the law, whether on the Sabbath or any other day of the week, Jesus actually broadened the law beyond its literal sense. No doubt some of the Pharisees had listened to his “Sermon on the Mount,” and heard him say, “I have come not to abolish [the law or the prophets] but to fulfill it.” They would have heard his repeated refrain, “You have heard it said. . . but I say unto you. . .” One by one he cited an Old Testament law, then broadened it to treat people with understanding and compassion (Matt 5:17–48). Indeed, the good and welfare of people always take preference over the law and Sabbath regulations.

Still, in spite of the narrowness of the Pharisees’ criticisms of Jesus, the meaning and observance of the Sabbath is an indispensable and crucial part of Jewish faith and life, and one of the items of the Jewish tradition that we Christians have assumed as well.

## CHRISTIANS AND THE SABBATH

So how do we Christians “remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”? How do we preach about the Sabbath? The way *not* to preach the Sabbath is to impose a modern list of dos and don’ts—exactly what Jesus was arguing against. This commandment, after all, is not one of the seven “do not” commandments. Rather consider the Sabbath in the positive manner it is stated: remember.

One obvious answer is to dedicate time to God—specifically for worship, but also for study, for Bible study, for prayer, or for service to people—anything we do in service to God. An obvious place is Sunday worship. As important as that is, it’s just one of many, many ways we can use time to serve God, just as Jesus healed people on the Sabbath. This is not a dreary obligation—“do we *have* to go to church, daddy?”—but a time to be lifted up out of daily routines, to thank God for this special time, to connect ourselves not only to God but to those in the pews around us. Finally, this circle broadens out to unite us with all those worshipping around the world.

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A second answer to observing the Sabbath is the very obvious truth that human beings need a break in the routines of everyday life. God made this day different, a day of rest after six days of labor creating the world. How can we make this day different in our own individual and family lives? How can we use this time to rejuvenate and refresh ourselves for the week to come? “Rest” is not only one of the purposes of Sabbath, but a fundamental human need regardless of any religious implication. We have been given this gift of time. How wonderful! What can we do to make it special?

A third answer is that a sense of “sacred time” connects us to other times. When we observe the Sabbath we are reunited with fellow believers throughout time—with our families, with Christians throughout history, with Jesus and his disciples, and with the Hebrews of the Old Testament, all the way back to creation, when God “hallowed” the seventh day as a day of rest.

There is still another answer, a fourth answer. God established the Sabbath as “holy time,” so time itself is God’s time, and time is for us a precious gift of God. We live every day, every hour, every minute in God’s time!

This view is the polar opposite of the secularism we live in the midst of today. Millions of people live today with no sense that there is anything to this world than what we can see and touch. There is “nothing more out there.” We human beings aren’t connected to anything greater than ourselves. Time and space are totally

neutral; they just *are*, with no special meaning. A human being is a physical being like the animals, only quite a bit smarter.

This secularism is a bleak worldview, barren of any meaning except what we might conjure up for ourselves. Contrast that to a world which God created, where each person is created to live with God, where God created not only all that surrounds us, but gave us the gift of time to live fully with God and the world around us. This is ultimately the precious gift of Sabbath—God’s world, God’s people, in God’s time! ⊕

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