

When Does the Sabbath Begin?

Introduction

The subject of whether the day, and therefore the Sabbath, begins in the evening or in the morning has been debated by scholars for a long time. The theories on this subject are in several different forms.

1. Sunset to sunset: J. P. Lange (*Commentary on Genesis*, Zondervan edition), B. Jakob (*Das Erste Buch in der Tora*, 1934), and H. R. Stroes (“Does the Day Begin in the Evening or Morning?” *VT* 16 [1966]: 460-475).

2. Sunrise to sunrise: P. J. Heawood (“The Beginning of the Jewish Day,” *JQR* 36 [1945]: 393-401), and U. Cassuto (*Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 1, English edition in 1981).

3. Sunrise to sunrise, pre-exilic, sunset to sunset post-exilic: S. Zeitlin (“The Beginning of the Jewish Day during the Second Commonwealth,” *JQR* 36 [1945]: 403-414), and R. DeVaux (*Ancient Israel*, vol. 1, 1961, P. 181).

4. Sunset to sunset contemporary with sunrise to sunrise: G. Barrois *Manuel d’Archéologie Biblique*, vol. 2, 1953, p. 183) and G. Von Rad (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. *hēmera*).

Since their earliest adoption of the Sabbath, post-Millerite Adventists have lined up with Group 1 above, initially from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., and finally from sunset to sunset. An examination of evidence from the Old and New Testaments and the first-century Jewish custom substantiates this position.

Genesis 1

Issue 1: Translation of *hayah*

To establish the clearest basis for this determination, the original languages of the biblical text should be consulted. For example, on the basis of German translations one could hold that in Gen 1:5 Heb *hayah* should have the meaning of “become” (*wurde* from

werden), rather than “was” (*war* from *sein*). Thus, it could be argued that the process of “becoming evening” closes the light part of the day and “becoming morning” closes the dark part of the day, making the 24-hour day begin with sunrise.

While this is certainly a possibility, it is not the only one. *Hayah* can simply refer to existence as in Gen 1:2, “The earth was [*hayah*] without form and void,” or in Gen 3:1 “The serpent was [*hayah*] more subtle than any beast of the field.” Thus “there was evening and there was morning, day one” can simply mean that the first 24-hour day consisted of a dark part (evening) and a light part (morning). In order to avoid confusion by using the word day (*yôm*) twice with two different meanings in the same sentence, e.g., “and there was night and day, day one,” Moses used “evening and morning” to describe the two halves of the 24-hour day. J. P. Lange (*Genesis*, Zondervan, n.d., pp. 166-167) says:

Evening and morning denote. . . the interval of a creative day, and this is evidently after the Hebrew mode of reckoning; the day is reckoned from sunset. The morning that follows stands for the second half of the day proper. In the same manner was the day reckoned by the Arabians, the Athenians (*nuchtēmeron*), the Germans, and the Gauls. It is against the text for Delitzsch to put as the ground here the Babylonish reckoning of the day, namely from the dawning of the morning.

To support the alternate view a number of fairly obscure or little used German translations must be used. Two of these use “was” (*war*) which might mean “become” (*werden*) in this context. All Luther Bibles use “was” (pl. *ward*, as do the Zürcher and Elberfelder (1962) Bibles.

While most English translations use the expression, “There was evening and there was morning: day one” NIV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, Douay version) or “the evening and the morn-

ing were the first day” (KJV, NKJV), several versions translate “evening came and morning came: the first day” (JB, NEB, Moffat and Knox), thereby possibly supporting the process concept with the day beginning at sunrise.

Issue 2: A Gap?

To support the idea of a sunrise beginning for the Sabbath, one must also assume that there is a gap between Gen 1:2 and 1:3, and that day one begins with verse three. The text, however, does not indicate there is a gap. As far as the Hebrew text is concerned, day one could very well commence with Gen 1:1, in which case the darkness of verse two would be the first half of the first 24-hour day. In Midrash *Tillin* we read: “What did God create the first day? Heaven and Earth. What the second? The firmament. . .” (John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*, vol. 2, p. 200). According to the author of Midrash *Tillin*, the first day began in Gen 1:1. This is also the opinion of H. C. Leupold (*Exposition of Genesis*, vol. 1, Baker, 1942, p. 57) who says: “On this [the first] day there had been the creation of heaven and earth in the rough, then the creation of light, the approval of light, the separation of day and night.”

Issue 3: Day and Night or Night and Day?

Another argument used to start the day at sunrise is the claim that a literal day is always designated as “day and night.” Not once, it is argued, is a 24-hour day described as “night and day.”

The biblical evidence, however, shows that there are a number of texts where the expression “night and day” refers to a 24-hour day. For example: 1 Sam 25:16; 1 Kings 8:29; Esther 4:16; Ps 55:17; Isa 27:3; 34:10; Jer 14:17. While some may argue that “night and

day” simply means “all the time,” the two terms nevertheless comprise the time period of a 24-hour day.

While the expression “day and night” appears in many texts (e.g., 1 Chr 9:33; 2 Chr 6:20; Neh 1:6; 4:9; Isa 60:11; 62:6; Eccl 8:16), this does not prove that this designation describes the sequence in a 24-hour day and, therefore, prove that the beginning of the day is at sunrise. In most of them, the emphasis is on the fact that these events happen not only by day (which one would expect), but also by night (which is not self-evident).

Zeitlin (p. 410) has correctly observed: “When they (the wise men from the Talmud) spoke of a day of importance as one for work, study, etc., they put the day first, since in actual life the day takes precedence over the night as regards activity.”

Nehemiah 13

Verse 19 of this chapter clearly indicates that the seventh-day Sabbath was kept from evening to evening.

The text literally reads: “And it was when the gates of Jerusalem began to be shaded [*sil* from *sel* shadow] before the Sabbath, I ordered that the gates should be shut, and I ordered that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath.”

If the Sabbath began with sunrise, there was no need for Nehemiah to make sure that they were shut on Friday evening, since they were always shut at night anyway.

The attempt has been made to support this argument with the translation “*Vorabend des Sabbats*” (evening prior to the Sabbath), used by Menge and *Die Gute Nachricht*. However, this is not what the Hebrew text says. The word evening (*Abend*) does not appear anywhere in the text. It simply says: “as it began to be dark before the Sabbath” (NKJV). This is also Luther’s translation: “*Da es dunkel ward vor dem Sabbat*” which is closer to the original text

than *Menge* and *Die Gute Nachricht*. If the Sabbath began at sunrise, “there is no explanation for the fact that such a routine matter as shutting the gate at nightfall should be mentioned so emphatically” (Stroes, p. 464).

Luke 4

Luke 4:31-44 is another NT passage in which the closing boundary of the Sabbath is clearly demarcated. Verses 31-36 tell about the healing of a demoniac in the synagogue where the people had gathered for the Sabbath service. After this Jesus left the synagogue and went to Simon Peter’s house. There Jesus and the disciples found his mother ill (v. 38) and healed her also (v. 39). Then in v. 40, when the sun was setting, at the end of the Sabbath, the people brought many more ill persons to him, also for healing. Thus the two initial healings on the Sabbath, the demoniac in the synagogue and Peter’s mother at his house, were divided from the period after Sabbath by sunset.

Mark 16

The first two verses of this chapter also indicate that the Sabbath was kept from evening to evening.

The Greek text says, “And when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. And very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb as the sun rose.”

The only reading of this text which makes sense is that as soon as the Sabbath hours were finished on Saturday evening, the women went and bought the spices, then they went to bed and early in the morning of the first day of the week (“when it was yet dark,” John 20:1) they came to the tomb.

If the Sabbath was not finished until sunrise on the first day of the week, how could the women buy the spices after the Sabbath?

Their behavior cannot be explained with the morning theory.

Matthew 28

These three previous texts, one in the OT and two in the NT, clearly show that the seventh-day Sabbath was kept from evening to evening. Other texts which may be open to more than one interpretation, e.g., Matt 28:1, must be interpreted in harmony with those texts which are clear. Yet even Matt 28:1 creates no problem if we accept the night as the self-evident complement of the day, which does not need to be specifically mentioned. Matt 28:1 reads, “After the Sabbath [which concluded with sunset on Saturday evening], as the first day of the week began to dawn. . . .” or “at sunrise” (Mark 14:1, NKJV). Two less common German Bibles translate Matt 28:1 with “on Sabbath evening” instead of “after the Sabbath.” The Greek word *opse*, which Matthew uses only here, is an adverb which can mean “after a long time, late, late in the day, at even,” or it can be used as a preposition with a genitive meaning “after” as in Matt 28:1 (Liddell and Scott, *Greek Lexicon*, s.v. *opse*). In such cases, where more than one translation is possible, other texts must determine which meaning should be adopted. In this case, Mark 16:1, 2 clearly state that the Sabbath was past when the women went to buy spices. Therefore, the meaning “after the Sabbath” should be adopted for Matt 28:1.

Heawood (p. 400-401) has argued that the word *epiphōskō* makes it clear that the day begins a dawn. However, the word *epiphōskō* from *phōs* “light” can refer to the light replacing the darkness (to shine forth as in Matt 28:1) or “to dawn” in the sense of beginning a new 24-hour day (Luke 23:54). even if that day begins at night.

On this expression John Lightfoot observes that, “However unsuitable therefore it might sound in the ears of Greeks or Latins, . . . yet with the Jews it was a way of expression very

usual.” They would readily understand the evangelist as speaking of the night of the Sabbath drawing on (*Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*, vol. 3, p. 217). The fact that Sabbath candles were lighted in honor of the Sabbath at its beginning, may be part of the explanation.

Jewish Practice

In the first century, the Sabbath, according to Jewish sources, was celebrated from evening to evening. Josephus, speaking of the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70), tells us that a priest blew the trumpet “at the beginning of every seventh day, in the evening twilight, as also at the evening when the day was finished, as giving notice to the people when they were to leave off work, and when they were to go to work again” (*Wars of the Jews*, 4.9.12).

Hayyim Schauss says that

In order to assure against profanation of the Sabbath the Jews added the late Friday afternoon hours to the Sabbath. In Jerusalem a priest, standing on the high tower of the temple blew a trumpet as a signal to put away all work and to begin the Sabbath rest. . . . At the first blow of the trumpet the Jews in the fields about the town put down their work: those who worked closer to town did not rush from the fields, but waited for those who worked further out, and all marched into town together. The shops, however, were still open; they closed at the second

trumpet call. The third blast was the signal at which the pots were taken from the stoves and wrapped in various materials to preserve their warmth. The third blast was also the signal for kindling the Sabbath lights. The devout who wore phylacteries all day long, removed them at this signal. Then came an intermission, followed by three successive blasts, thus heralding the sacred Sabbath rest (*Jewish Festivals*, 1938, pp. 13, 14).

This is also clearly supported by the Mishna

They may not go to await nightfall at the Sabbath limit [2000 cubits from the place where a man lives] to hire labourers or to bring in produce, but a man may do so in order to safeguard produce and [then after nightfall] he may bring back the produce in his hand (*Shabbath* 23:3).

Conclusion

There is strong evidence that the Sabbath in the Old and New Testaments was kept from evening to evening. The extra biblical evidence from the first century A.D. also indicates that the Jews, including Jesus, kept the Sabbath from evening to evening. The Seventh-day Adventist Church, therefore, is justified in continuing the observance of the Sabbath from evening to evening.

Biblical Research Institute Committee