

What About a Lunar Sabbath?

Ángel Manuel Rodríguez

Question: I've been told that the biblical Sabbath was a lunar Sabbath fixed by the moon, rather than a specific day of the week independent of the moon or the sun. What do you think?

Any biblical evidence to support this proposal is lacking. Therefore, I feel uncomfortable honoring the issue by addressing it here. But apparently I should say something about it. If the time for the Sabbath was determined by the moon, then the Sabbath will have to be observed at different days during the month and not on the seventh day of the week. The Sabbath could be any day of the week, based on the time of the new moon. Let me say a few things about this matter.

1. The Israelite Calendar: The Israelite calendar was lunisolar, that is to say time was measured on the basis of the new moon (the rotation of the moon around the earth) and also the sun (the rotation of the earth around the sun). A lunar calendar of 12 months is about 11 days shorter than the solar calendar, which is approximately 365 days. In the ancient world this was solved by adding an extra month seven times in 19 years. In the Bible the moon calendar was used to fix the time for the festivals—for instance, 14 days after the new moon came Passover (Num. 28:16). Apparently some people are arguing that the Sabbath itself was to be observed seven days after the first day of the month.

2. The Sabbath and the Moon: At the beginning of the twentieth century the connection between the Sabbath and the moon was proposed and defended by a number of critical scholars. They rejected the biblical origin of the Sabbath and suggested that its origin was related to several “evil days” in the Babylonian calendar, including the day of the full moon, during which people rested. Those days occurred in a sequence of about seven days. Further study indicated that the so-called “evil days” were not a sequence of seven days; they were the first, seventh, fourteenth, nineteenth, twenty-first, and twenty-eighth days of the month. That theory has since been abandoned.

3. Genesis 1 and the Sabbath: The origin of the biblical Sabbath is definitely connected with the creation week. It was instituted by God three days after the creation of the moon (Gen. 1:14; 2:2), not the seventh day after the first day of the month. It was to function independent of the month on a specific sequence of days unconnected from the moon and the sun, but uniquely grounded in God’s power to rule over time. The seventhness of the Sabbath is related to the passing of time, from the beginning of God’s creating activity on Planet Earth to its close. This is indeed a unique divine act, a fragmentation of time in a sequence of seven days exclusively fixed and governed by God Himself.

4. Sabbath and Festivals: A lunar Sabbath would imply that the Sabbath is part of the Israelite festivals, but that is not the case. The seventh-day Sabbath was instituted long before the festivals were given to the Israelites. The Hebrew term translated “feasts, festivals,” is *mô^{co}dîm*, and it means “fixed/appointed time, meetings.” It refers to different activities that were not necessarily dated by the lunar calendar (e.g., Jer. 8:17; Hosea 2:9). Even if one were to argue that the term applies to the Sabbath, it does not follow that the time for the Sabbath was fixed by the moon (cf. Lev. 23:2). Besides, the Bible makes clear that the Sabbath is to be differentiated from the festivals (Lev. 23:37, 38).

Finally, the Sabbath rest was different from the rest required during the ceremonial Sabbaths. Leviticus 23:3 states that during the Sabbath the Israelites were “not to do any work.” But during the time of the sacred assembly the people were commanded to “do no regular work” (23:8, 21, 25, 35, 36, NIV). This indicates that there was a type of work they were allowed to do during the festivals that was forbidden during the Sabbath.

Although the intentions of those promoting the lunar Sabbath may be good, they have to be aware of the fact that they are unintentionally introducing and promoting a sabbath rest that is different from the biblical seventh-day Sabbath rest.

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