

WHEN DOES THE DAY BEGIN?

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Ancient, medieval, and modern commentators on the Bible disagree over the meaning of Genesis 1:5: . . . *there was evening and there was morning, one day.*

It is beyond doubt that mainstream Judaism understood "day" to commence at sundown and to end at the ensuing nightfall. Accordingly, the Sabbath is taken to extend from Friday evening [*erev Shabbat*] to Saturday evening [*b'motza'ei Shabbat*].

This issue is touched upon in early rabbinic writings.¹ In the Middle Ages, the talmudic commentator and biblical exegete Samuel Ben Meir, known as the Rashbam, (ca. 1080-ca. 1160) and Abraham Ibn Ezra (ca. 1089-ca. 1167) differed as to the exact meaning of the phrase in question. In his commentary on Genesis 1:5, the Rashbam wrote that "light always comes first and darkness afterwards," a statement which may, but need not necessarily, be read as postulating that the day precedes the night. Ibn Ezra, in his commentary on Genesis 1:5 and expanded upon in his Epistle on the Sabbath [*Iggeret ha-Shabbat*], takes issue with the Rashbam. He avers that while the first part of the verse *And God called the light day, and the darkness He called night*, puts the light before the darkness and thus might be construed as supporting the Christian version,² the second part of the verse *and there was evening and there was morning, one day*, places the evening before the morning and so might be read as confirming the traditional Jewish position.³

Pro and contra arguments did not produce unequivocal evidence one way or the other. To this day, the question remains undecided.⁴ Cassuto⁵ is of the opinion that the Rashbam and not Ibn Ezra gave the correct explanation of the verse. However, in the end he too tried to have it both ways, and so he writes:

the method of counting the day from the evening which is customary among nomads, was the older usage, but when in civil life a new system came into force, which regarded sunrise as the commencement of the day according to the conditions prevailing in the Land of Canaan, the change did not affect the religious tradition, which is

by nature conservative, and just as of old the holy days began at evening, so the custom remained and was embodied in the laws of the Bible.⁶

The question as to when the day begins and ends is connected to the more encompassing question whether in ancient Israel the seasons and festivals followed the solar or the lunar calendar. According to the solar cycle, the day would commence at sunrise, whereas according to the lunar reckoning day begins at moonrise. During the latter half of the Second Temple period the solar/lunar controversy had divided Jewry both in Eretz Israel and in the Diaspora. The absence of an explicit statement that the Sabbath is to be hallowed from Friday night to Saturday night was one focus of the debate.

The solar advocates argued that neither the diverse legal corpus nor the narrative portions of the Bible contains an ordinance to the effect that the day should be counted from nightfall to the following nightfall. In support of their position they point to the Sabbath commandment in the Books of Exodus 20:10-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-14 as well as the Creation chapters (Gen. 2; Ex. 31 and 35 and Lev. 23) where we find no mention of the preceding evening. These texts speak of *yom ha'shabbat* or *yom hashvi'i* or *b'etzem hayom ha'zeh*. The episode of the man who gathered wood *b'yom ha'shabbat* and was punished is a poor example since the man was engaged in an act that is generally performed by day and not by night.

Ibn Ezra also noted the absence of any injunction hallowing the evening preceding the Sabbath day, but dismissed it as inconsequential. Unable to produce biblical support for the then-established custom and tradition that had for more than a millennium become mainstream Judaism, he resorted to arguments from logic, as we see in his commentary on Exodus 16:25:

Many non-believers misinterpreted this verse and said that one must observe the Sabbath (day) and the night which follows it, because Moses said: 'today is Sabbath unto God and not the previous night . . . They also arbitrarily interpreted (the formula) 'there was evening and there was morning' (Gen. 1:5-31, to mean) that the first day was completed only in the morning of the next. But they were wrong, Moses only spoke to Israel according to the custom of others Because the customs of the uncircumcised are unlike those practiced in Eretz Israel in respect to food, apparel, and other matters. Their

custom is to cook and bake and work only in daylight, in summer and in winter. Therefore Moses said *tomorrow*. Now, pay attention to the stupidity of those who interpret the words 'there was evening and there was morning' in the way which I mentioned. The text reads *God called the light day*, which is the time span from sunrise to sunset; *and darkness he called night*, which is the time span from sunset to sunrise. But, in the unbelievers' interpretation, night turned into day, and darkness into light. How can it be that He called the time span from *erev*, which means sunset, until *boker*, the morning, 'day'; whereas in fact it is night? To these (commentators) refers the verse *they turn night into day* (Job 17:12).

According to Talmon, the fragments of calendrical documents discovered at Qumran prove that members of the Community of the Renewed Covenant abided by a solar calendar of 364 days per annum, shorter by 30 hours than the Roman solar calendar (also known as the Julian Calendar) established by Julius Caesar in the year 46 BCE. The Qumran reckoning, in all likelihood, was known to the Judean Covenanters from the books of Jubilees and Enoch and was not their own innovation. On the contrary, as dissenters they claimed to preserve an ancient Israelite practice going back to the time of Creation.

Moreover, they did not hesitate to accuse the established mainstream Jewish community and its leaders of having abandoned the exclusively legitimate solar calendar in favor of the heathen's lunar calendar and with it the counting of the day, including the Sabbath, from evening to evening, as one would expect from keepers of the lunar calendar.⁷

The Covenanters' contention against the calendar calculation based on the lunar period that was customary in mainstream Judaism, did not go unanswered by the sages. Traces of the dispute are discernable in rabbinic literature.⁸ The sages could not ignore or conceal the fact that these dissenters, like the Samaritans, kept "every commandment which they kept . . . more strictly than Israel."⁹ It was necessary therefore to bring charges against them, such as could justify their conviction and excommunication. The saying transmitted in the name of Eleazar of Modi'in is in all likelihood directed against the dissenters rather than the Christians:¹⁰

He who profanes Sabbaths and despises festivals and desecrates the Covenant in the flesh and reads into the Torah what is not there,

notwithstanding that he has [observance of] Torah and good works to his credit, has no portion in the world to come.¹¹

This saying, in all probability, is attacking Jewish dissenters who excelled in their devotion to the commandments, who had "observance and good works" to their credit, but were at odds with the sages on issues of circumcision, the interpretation of the Torah, and the observance of the Sabbath and festivals. These were none other than the Qumran community of Covenanters, who rejected the dates of the Jewish festivals and fixed them according to their own calendar. What is more, they desecrated the eve of the Sabbath, which was not considered holy according to their system of reckoning the day from sunrise.

Observe/ remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy (Ex. 20:8 and Deut. 5:12) served the rabbis as an authoritative base for the inclusion of the Sabbath eve in the Sabbath law. Thus R. Juda ben Bathyra taught:

From the wording of the commandment, "observe" the Sabbath "day" it follows that it applies to the day only. Whence therefore do we include the night? This is taught by the additional phrase "to keep it holy." If so, why does it say "the day"? because the day commands more respect than the night.¹²

Talmon comments:

This extension of the Sabbath law so as to include in it the night preceding the Sabbath is conspicuously out of place in a legal framework associated with the solar calendar and is unsuited for a community whose members derived from that calendar the honorific title "Sons of Light". . . . For this reason the extension was accepted by mainstream Jewry in the Second Temple Period and later by both the Rabbinites and the majority of Karaites in the Middle Ages.¹³

In view of the lack of any explicit statement which prescribes the observance of the Sabbath beginning from Friday evening, the sanctification of the preceding evening was deduced from texts which pertain to the observance of the Day of Atonement and the (first) Day of the Matzot Festival. The verses in Leviticus contain an explicit ordinance to observe the Day of Atonement from the evening of the ninth until the evening of the tenth day in the seventh month: *And you shall mortify yourselves from the ninth of the month in the*

evening ba'erev; *from evening to the evening of the tenth* m'erev ad erev *you shall keep your Sabbath rest* (Lev. 23:26-32).

The law of the Matzot Festival (Ex. 12:15, 19, Deut. 16:3-4) prescribes the eating of unleavened bread for seven days without specifying any dates. However, from the context it is clear that the observance is to begin in the morning of the day following the ritual of the paschal lamb, which was sacrificed in the afternoon *bein ha'arba'im* of the fourteenth day of the first month (Ex. 12:2, Deut. 16:7-8). It follows that the ensuing seven-day Matzot Festival was meant to extend from the fourteenth to the twenty-first of the month, with the first and the seventh day observed as a Sacred Convocation. But the prescription that the paschal lamb should be eaten together with matzot and bitter herbs *u'matzot al marrorim yochluhu* would imply that the period of seven days of eating the matzot was to begin on the fourteenth.

Nehemiah 13:19 employs the terms *lifne hashabbat* [before the Sabbath] and *ahar hashabbat* [after the Sabbath] to report the governor's order to close the gates of Jerusalem in order to prevent the desecration of the Sabbath. In all likelihood, Nehemiah issued the order sometime on Friday afternoon. What is not clear is whether *lifne hashabbat* also indicates the time of the day before the Sabbath. One may ask the same question regarding the phrase *ahar hashabbat*. Does it refer to Saturday night or to any time in the 24-hour period following the Sabbath?

From Nehemiah 7:3 we learn that for reasons of security, Nehemiah ordered that the gates of the city not be reopened until the sun was hot, which would clearly indicate that verse 19 is referring to the following day and not to the night following the Sabbath.

Use of the term *ahar hashabbat* connoting the following day is likewise employed in rabbinic literature (see: Mishna, Shabbat 19:4) where in the case of the "two infants one to be circumcised after the Sabbath and one to be circumcised on the Sabbath" the phrase "*ahar hashabbat*" must refer to the following day (viz. Sunday) and not to the night after the Sabbath (viz. *motzae Shabbat*) since *brit milah*, was generally done by day.¹⁴

Scripture does not relate explicitly to the calendar change from the solar to the lunar. We may assume, however, that such a change deeply affected the life of the community and of the individual. There may well be a hint of the transition in Daniel's vision of the Four Beasts (Dan. 7:15-28), representing

kingdoms in which the fourth kingdom is said to differ radically from the preceding three. In the fourth realm there will arise one who *will utter words against the Most High* and plan to alter times and laws, usurping for himself an attribute of God to whom alone the power is given to challenge times and seasons.

Saadia Gaon understood this accusation as an allusion to the Roman emperor Titus "who set out to change times, abolish the Sabbath, the holy seasons, and the Torah."¹⁵ Those who rejected dating the calendar change as late as the reign of Titus (79-81 CE), point out that Jewish leaders and above all the priesthood would not have accepted without protest such radical changes imposed by a hostile foreign ruler. More plausible, in their view, is dating the change to the lunar reckoning by mainstream Judaism, alluded to in Daniel's vision, to the first quarter of the second century BCE, when Antiochus IV Epiphanes introduced the lunar calendar in his empire.¹⁶

Solomon Zeitlin dates the introduction of counting the day at sunset based on a lunar calendar to the early part of the Second Commonwealth,¹⁷ and according to Julian Morgenstern the change was introduced in Israel a century or a century-and-a-half after Nehemiah.¹⁸ It was left to Talmon to summon extra-biblical sources to buttress the postulate that the observance of the Sabbath from Friday evening to Saturday evening was indeed in force or was innovated in ancient Israel after the time of Nehemiah. The change from one reckoning to the other was brought about by the substitution of the lunar calendar for the ancient solar calendar. This change was carried out by a house of priests that achieved supremacy in the Temple of Jerusalem some time in the middle of the Second Temple period.¹⁹

NOTES

1. See e.g., B. Ber. 8a; B. Yoma 81b and Mechilta R. Shimon bar Yohai, P. Ki Tissa, chapter 31:14, p.160, ed. D. Hoffmann (Frankfurt: 1906).
2. In all likelihood, Ibn Ezra was referring to some unspecified patristic biblical commentaries on Genesis.
3. Shlomo Sela, *Abraham Ibn Ezra and the Rise of Medieval Science* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) pp. 54-57. Jacob Z. Lauterbach in his *Rabbinic Essays* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1951) p.450, n. 60, writes that "Ibn Ezra's attack in his *Iggeret HaShabbat* (Kerem Hemed V [Prague 1830], p. 115 ff. was directed not against R. Samuel b. Meir's interpretation of Genesis 1:5, but against those heretical sects who drew practical conclusions from this interpretation and observed the Sabbath from morning to morning."

4. For a concise survey of the dispute, see M. M. Kasher, "A Peculiar Explanation of the Rashbam on the verse 'it was evening and it was morning'" in the Shulsinger edition of *Miqraoth Gedoloth* (New York: Shulsinger, 1950) pp. 16-20.
5. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1966) pp. 28-30.
6. Cassuto, pp. 29-30.
7. Shemaryahu Talmon, "Reckoning the Sabbath in the First and Early Second Temple Period - From the Evening or the Morning?" in *Sabbath: Idea, History, Reality*, ed. G. Blidstein, (Beer-sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2004) pp. 11-17.
8. cf. note 1
9. B. Hullin 4a
10. See L. Finkelstein, *Introduction to Abot d'Rabbi Natan* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950) p. 74-79.
11. *Abot d'Rabbi Natan*, ed. S. Schechter; (New York: Feldheim, 1945) text A, Ch. 26, p. 82.
12. Mechilta d'R. Shimon bar Yohai, P. Ki Tissa, chap. 31, v. 14; Mechilta d'R. Yishmael, P. Ki Tissa, P. Aleph.
13. S. Talmon, *The World of Qumran From Within* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1989) p. 180.
14. J. Tigay, "Lifne Ha Shabbat and Ahar Ha Shabbat," *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1978) pp. 362-65.
15. Henry Malter, *Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1942) pp. 325-6.
16. J.C.Vander Kam, "Calendrical Change in Jerusalem," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 12 (1982) pp. 52-74.
17. S. Zeitlin, *Some Stages in the Jewish Calendar, Studies in the Early History of Judaism*, Vol. 1, (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1973) pp. 183-93.
18. J. Morgenstern, "The Calendars of Ancient Israel," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 19 (1934) pp. 183- 193.
19. S. Talmon, "The Reckoning of the Day in the Biblical and Early Post-Biblical Periods: From Morning or From Evening?" (Hebrew) pp.109-129, in *Sarah Kamin Memorial Volume* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994).