

The 4-Step Approach to assessing the place of the Sabbath for Gentile followers of Yeshua:

The question of Sabbath observance remains a contentious one for many who profess to follow the Torah-observant Jew, Yeshua and believe he is the end-times Messiah.

Recently, I came across a very interesting approach, presented by Rabbi Yisroel Blumenthal, to critiquing Christian doctrines. I would like to therefore revisit this question and apply this very helpful and interesting approach.

In an article 'Contra-Brown'¹, Rabbi Blumenthal explains this 4-Step approach:

"Scripture is a lengthy and complex document. The message of scripture cannot be found in the reading of specific isolated passages. Rather, the true message of scripture emerges from an understanding of the totality of scripture. When any given doctrine is presented as a scriptural teaching, there are four basic criteria that should be applied to determine if the doctrine is truly scriptural.

- 1) *We must ask ourselves if the doctrine in question is **fully supported** by scripture. Does scripture support all of the main points of the doctrine? Or are there significant gaps which the proponents of the doctrine must fill in? Does scripture provide **comprehensive support** for the doctrine in question?*
- 2) *Another quality we must look for in our examination of the given doctrine is **clarity**. Is the scriptural support claimed for the doctrine **clear and unambiguous**? Or are there other possible interpretations of the passages marshaled on behalf of the doctrine in question.*
- 3) *A third criteria by which we should judge a specific doctrine is the **directness** of the scriptural support. Are the passages quoted to sustain the theory addressing the issue in a **direct and straightforward** manner? Or is the scripture discussing another issue altogether.*
- 4) *Finally we must ask if the scriptural support for the doctrine is **consistent**. After evaluating the doctrine for comprehensiveness, for clarity and for the direct nature of the support – we must then ask if scripture ever provides a conflicting teaching that is as comprehensive, clear and direct as are the passages cited in support of the doctrine in question.*

I would like to try to use this 4-Step approach to the question of the place of the Sabbath amongst those who profess Yeshua as their Messiah, and in particular, the gentiles amongst this group.

The doctrine that I wish to use Rabbi Blumenthal's 4-Step method on is the argument that 'the Sabbath is no longer relevant for Christians' (or that it is to be somehow observed on the first day of the week – Sunday – rather than on the 7th day, that is Saturday).

In my article on Judaism's perspective on Preterism², I have already detailed how this approach can be used to forcefully refute the doctrine of the Trinity.

It seems to me though, that even amongst those Christian groups (Unitarians) who have seen the light and rejected the Trinity, most of them still hold fast to the Hellenistic falsehood that Yeshua 'fulfilled' Torah and that this means it is no longer binding (and this includes of-course the 'keeping of the Sabbath').

There is of-course a great variety or nuances within this group as to what is meant by the understanding that the 'Law has been fulfilled or destroyed' and that the so-called 'Old Covenant' has been replaced. I have also addressed these arguments in other articles, but here I would like to focus just on the Sabbath issue.

Step 1:

So Step 1 is to ask, is the removal of the Sabbath 'Law' (the 4th Commandment) **fully supported** by Scripture?

There is no question that the Sabbath played a very significant life in the role of all Israel and the Jewish people, from the time of Mt. Sinai until, and including the times of Yeshua, as well as right up to the present day³.

¹ <http://jewsforjudaism.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Contra-Brown.pdf>

² <http://www.charismacomputers.com.au/Preterism%20-%20not%20even%20on%20the%20radar.pdf>

³ "More than Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews." - Ahad Ha'am - Asher Ginsberg, poet and Zionist ideologue: 1856-1927

There are a great many references to the observance of the weekly Sabbath throughout the Tanakh, as well as in the life of Yeshua.

But what about the times of the Apostles, the times from after the ascension of Yeshua up until the end of the writing of the books of the New Testament (most likely completed around 66-67 CE with the Book of Revelation)? Again, there are numerous references to the Apostles remaining Torah observant and therefore 'keeping the Sabbath'.

Furthermore there are NO, that is not one explicit statement throughout the entire New Testament where Yeshua or one of his appointed Apostles explicitly informed the followers of Yeshua that they were NOT to obey the 4th Commandment and 'keep the Sabbath'.

So, there is really no doubt whatsoever that the removal of the 4th Commandment is NOT fully supported by Scripture.

Step 2:

Rabbi Blumenthal's Step 2 is to look for clarity. Does the doctrine in question have clear and unambiguous support?

Typically Christian scholars who argue for the end of the Law (Torah) and Sabbath keeping will turn first to Colossians 2:16. As an example, this is the approach of Sir Anthony Buzzard in his debates on this issue, and in his book, *'The Law, the Sabbath and New Covenant Christianity'* (which contains a chapter written by the late Charles Hunting⁴).

In fact, I have spent considerable time in discussions and debate with Anthony Buzzard over this issue and also wrote a detailed paper on Colossians 2:16 – see 'Colossians 2 and the Sabbath'⁵.

This passage is understood in diametrically opposed ways by many scholars. That is, its message may have been abundantly clear to its original readers, but it is in serious debate today as to its meaning and import.

Therefore, regardless of whether you find my take on Col 2:16 the most convincing, or Sir Anthony Buzzard's take as more biblically sound, there can be no doubt that this, perhaps the single, most relied upon verse in the NT for those who argue for the abolition of the Sabbath is far from clear and unambiguous.

So in Step 2 our conclusion must be that there really is little clarity for this 'Christian' doctrine and no unambiguous support.

Step 3:

So having seen that the doctrine in question fails at Steps 1 and 2, how about Step 3? Is this doctrine presented in Scripture in a direct and straightforward manner? Can we find verses where this issue is clearly and explicitly addressed in context, and that the verses speak in a straightforward and clear-cut manner in presenting the truth of this doctrine?

Without doubt there is not a single passage in the NT that informs the readers and followers of Yeshua that they should discard the 4th Commandment. It may be argued though that some passages imply, at least in some implicit or indirect manner that the Sabbath is not to be honoured any more.

For example, we read in all three Synoptic Gospels that 'the son of man is Lord of the Sabbath'. Could this mean things have changed? Could this imply some reversal or removal of this commandment?

Firstly, whatever you may imagine that this means, it should be clear that no-one can be Master of something, if that something is no more.

The great Jewish scholar Prof. David Flusser also argued that Yeshua was not stating that 'he' was Lord of the Sabbath, but that man, or mankind, that is all of us, are Lord or Master of the Sabbath.

"On that occasion, Jesus said, among other things, "The Sabbath was created for man, not man for the Sabbath. So, man is lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28). Literally, "the son of man." Here it means simply "man." This was

⁴ It is interesting that in the last few years of his life Charles Hunting rejected this teaching on the Law and the Sabbath and instead came to strongly support, both in his words of encouragement, but also financially, the scholarship of the Biblical Hebrew and Greek scholar, Frank Selch, as well as my scholarship. I strongly recommend Frank Selch's book on the Sabbath . It is freely available as a pdf download from my website – see <http://www.charismacomputers.com.au/What%20about%20the%20Sabbath.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.charismacomputers.com.au/Col%202%20and%20the%20Sabbath.pdf>

already recognized in the seventeenth century by the famous Dutch scholar, Hugo Grotius in his commentary on Matt. 12:8.” – ‘Jesus’, by D. Flusser, 2001.

So Flusser is saying that all men (or in this context, at the very least, all who follow the teachings (Torah) of the God of Israel), not just the Messiah have dominion over the Sabbath – why then would they remove (or move it to Sunday)?

The Sabbath was made for man; the Almighty created a rest day and even observed it Himself, for our benefit, for our growth and joy⁶! To discard it is simply foolishness⁷!

Some try to argue that Yeshua somehow lessened or removed the requirement to observe the Sabbath because he ‘broke’ the Sabbath law himself. Even if this were true, it would not change the reality of the Almighty’s unchanging call to observe the Sabbath, as Yeshua was not/is not God and therefore has no authority to overturn the commandments of God.

The real problem here is that it is poor Greek translations that have introduced such mistaken ideas into the text.

It was accepted that on the Sabbath it was permissible to pick up fallen heads of grain and rub them between the fingers. According to Rabbi Yehuda, also a Galilean like Yeshua, it was even permissible to rub them in one's hand. Some of the Pharisees though, found fault with Yeshua’s disciples for most likely behaving in accordance with their Galilean tradition.

That is, it is most probable that these Galileans, picked the fallen heads of grain, rubbed them together and ate them. But what we read in Greek (see Matt 12:1-2⁸ in the footnote) is that they ‘plucked’ the heads of grain.

It seems fairly clear then, that when the original Hebrew account (written by someone who knew the customs and even the local differences in interpretation) was translated into Greek, the translator, not knowing these customs, and perhaps trying to make the scene more colourful, added the statement about plucking the wheat and thus introduced the one and only act of transgression of the Torah recorded in the synoptic Gospels⁹.

Another example, which perhaps leads to this confusion about Yeshua’s observance of the weekly Sabbath, is the story of his healing a man on the Sabbath.

John 7: 22-24 “Moses has given you circumcision (not that it is of Moses, but of the fathers), and on the Sabbath you circumcise a boy. If a boy receives circumcision on the Sabbath, that the Torah may not be broken, are you angry with me, because I made a man completely healthy on the Sabbath? ...”

The Torah commanded that baby boys were to be circumcised 8 days after being born (Gen 17:12, Luke 1:59). This Torah obedient practice could be problematic if the 8th day was the Sabbath when no work was to be permitted. Here the daily practice of Torah could bring about a conflict. To deal with this conflict, the arrangement had been accepted and practiced that if a boy’s 8th day from birth was the Sabbath, the person performing the circumcision (a ‘mohel’) was allowed to break the Sabbath by carrying the tools required through the village and performing the ritual.

It was accepted that when this conflict between the requirements of observing the Sabbath and of circumcising a male child on the 8th day occurred, the circumcision took precedence. If however the child was ill on his 8th day since birth (which say, was the Wednesday) and he was not well until the the Sabbath (the Saturday), the ruling was that now the Sabbath took precedence and so the circumcision would not be performed until a later day.

Yeshua by his comments appears to condone this approach to the potential conflict between these commandments.

⁶ The Weekly Sabbath teaches 3 very important, fundamental principles:

1. Belief in the Creation of the Universe by the Almighty who rested on the Seventh Day,
2. Belief in revelation, that is, in the Almighty revealing His ways and plans to those who seek Him – because the Torah is studied on the Sabbath,
3. Belief in the World to Come, in the coming Kingdom of God, the New Heavens and Earth, a time of true shalom (peace), a time when every day will be as joyous as the Sabbath. The Sabbath represents a small foretaste of this great new World. We read in Isaiah 66:22-23 “For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your offspring and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD.”

⁷ <http://luke443.blogspot.com.au/2012/07/the-sabbath-one-of-greatest-gifts-god.html>

⁸ Matthew 12:1-2 “At that time, Jesus went on the Sabbath day through the grain fields. His disciples were hungry and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But the Pharisees, when they saw it, said to him, “Behold, your disciples do what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.”

⁹ See M. Kister, "Plucking on the Sabbath and Christian-Jewish Polemic," Immanuel 24-25 (Jerusalem, 1990), pp. 35-51. For more on these textual issues see my book, 'The New Testament: The Hebrew Behind The Greek' - <http://www.amazon.com/The-New-Testament-Hebrew-ebook/dp/B009XO0NQU/>

However, what he then goes on to say is illuminating.

Firstly, he states, given this ruling, why should he be condemned for healing the whole man on the Sabbath. The clear understanding being that circumcision was a form of healing (not only a token or marker but a positive commandment of Torah), perhaps primarily because it was a mark of entry into the family/tribe of Israel.

If then circumcision was permitted to be performed on the Sabbath, because of its importance and impact in bringing some 'healing', Yeshua argues bringing full healing (healing the 'whole man') is surely just as permissible, if not even more so, and therefore not an infringement of Torah with respect to the Sabbath.

So in examining just these two Gospel narratives, it should be now apparent that any implicit re-assessment of the place of the Sabbath is much more likely a mistaken implication based on limited understanding or suspect translations.

Given that after some 2000 years and a significant degree of redaction and interpolation of the NT, along with a commonly Hellenistic perspective to trying to interpret it, it is informative to seek evidence of how the early Gentile followers of Yeshua understood the NT.

That is, did these gentile followers of Yeshua, for example amongst the groups that the Apostle Paul wrote and preached to, observe the weekly Sabbath?

It would appear that they most certainly did. Not only were they observing it in attending the synagogues on the Sabbath to hear the Apostle Paul and others preaching (as we read in the Book of Acts), the historical evidence also confirms this.

"The result of this was that to almost every one of the Jewish communities of the dispersion there was attached a following of "God-fearing" Gentiles who adopted the Jewish (i.e. the monotheistic and imageless) mode of worship, attended the Jewish synagogues, but who, in the observance of the ceremonial law, restricted themselves to certain leading points, and so were regarded as outside the fellowship of the Jewish communities. ...

*Now if we ask ourselves what those points of the ceremonial law were which these Gentiles observed, we will find them plainly enough indicated in the passages already quoted from **Josephus, Juvenal, and Tertullian. All three agree in this, that it was the Jewish observance of the Sabbath and the prescriptions with regard to meats that were in most general favour within the circles in question.**"* P314 Schurer "The Jewish People in the Times of Jesus". (Note that Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis, known in English as Juvenal, was a Roman poet active in the late 1st and early 2nd century CE.)

*In this respect, Juvenal is a good example, for his words display some of the derision felt by most 'elite Roman' pagans with respect to Jewish rituals: **"There were three things in particular which the educated world of the time made the butt of its jeers, viz. the abstinence from the use of swine's flesh, the strict observance of the Sabbath, and the worship without images.***

While in Plutarch it is seriously debated whether the abstinence from the use of swine's flesh may not be due to the fact of divine honours being paid to this animal, Juvenal again jokes about the land where "the clemency of the days of old has accorded to pigs the privilege of living to a good old age," and where "swine's flesh is as much valued as that of man."

Then as for the observance of the Sabbath, the satirist can see nothing in it but indolence and sloth, while he looks upon Jewish worship as being merely an adoring of the clouds and the skies". Schurer *ibid* p295.

This would certainly indicate that the Roman Gentile elite would not be impressed with any gentiles who became God-fearers and started observing these 'rituals'.

"Brown and Meier, 'Antioch and Rome', argue throughout that the dominant Christianity at Rome had been shaped by the Jerusalem Christianity associated with James and Peter, and hence was a Christianity appreciative of Judaism and loyal to its customs (p. 110) Cited by Wedderburn, Reasons, p. 51. Cf. Brown and Meier, Antioch and Rome, pp. 110-11. 'In fact, it is possible that the Christians in Rome continued to be part of the Jewish communities and synagogues for a long time as there are several references to synagogue meetings in "Shepherd of Hermas" (ca. 100-140 CE)"¹⁰

¹⁰ See 'The Mystery of Romans' by Mark Nanos

The Apostle Paul observed and/or supported many of the Feasts, New Moons (Yom Teruah) and the Sabbath, either by a direct reference to it, by attending the festival, or making a supportive reference to it:

- Shabbat(Sabbath): Acts 13:14-16; Acts 18:4; 4:16
- Pesach (Passover) – 1 Cor 5:7; Acts 27:9
- Festival of Unleavened Bread – Acts 20:6
- Shavuot – 1 Cor 16:8; Acts 20:16
- Yom Teruah – 1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:16 (New Moon Day, Rosh HaShannah)
- Yom Kippur – Acts 27:9 (the Fast Day)
- Sukkot – Acts 18:21

Thus it should be clear in assessing 'Step 3' that there is no direct and/or straightforward declaration in either the Tanakh or the New Testament that the Sabbath is somehow defunct. Thus, this Christian doctrine of denying the continuing relevance of the call to observe the Sabbath, seriously fails on Steps 1,2 and 3.

Step 4:

In 'Step 4' we are to investigate if there is any opposing doctrine that is at least as comprehensive, clear and direct as the doctrine being biblically evaluated. In this case the 'opposing doctrine' is the position espoused in the Tanakh that Sabbath keeping is foundational to holy living.

While no-one could seriously question the comprehensive support for the 4th Commandment throughout the Tanakh, we may ask if this support continues in the NT. On any superficial examination it may not be obvious, but when we dig a little deeper we instead see an implicit reference to and reliance on the place of the Sabbath throughout all the narratives of the NT.

There are many passages such as Luke 4:16; 4:31;6:6;13:10 that indicate the Yeshua attended the synagogue and /or temple on the Sabbath. There are also many passages that indicate the centrality of Sabbath observance in the lives of everyone associated with Yeshua, such as Mark 1:21; 6:2:16:1 and Luke 23:56.

Some have argued that the commandment to observe the Sabbath is restricted to the Jewish people and that the other nations, the Gentiles are not called to observe it. Part of this understanding may possibly have come from the fear that Gentiles, in not being fully conversant with Sabbath commandments and procedures would most likely fail to properly honour the Sabbath and in so doing actually profane or desecrate it.

Not all Jewish Rabbi's share this concern though. For example Rav Scharz writes:

"There are those who say that every Ger Toshav (a non-Jew living in Eretz Yisrael in the time of the Jewish Temple, who has formally accepted the obligation to observe the Noahide laws in front of a Jewish court) has to uphold and keep the Sabbath (Rashi, Kritot 9, Yevamot 40). There is room to suggest that the Noahides, even nowadays, by accepting to fulfill the seven commandments, are in the same category as a Ger Toshav and should, according to Rashi, be required or at least allowed to keep the Shabbat."

In conclusion then, the Christian doctrine of Sabbath denial does not meet the criteria established for any of the four 'steps' and in fact, should be seen to be a false doctrine which tries to denigrate, or change Torah, the eternal instructions of the Almighty.

At this point, if such an approach to the Sabbath is new to you, you may ask, why. Why is the Sabbath so important. Of what significant benefit to mankind is it?

These are worthwhile and important questions to ask. What follows is just a small attempt to offer some of the answers.

The Sabbath was and is one of the most significant indicators of freedom ever! In the ancient world no other people group had a day off each week; no other nation had such freedom.

The Sabbath is one of the greatest gifts God has ever given man - a day free from labour and a day to honour the King of the Universe, our Creator!

In the desert wanderings of the Exile from Egypt, a double portion of the manna was collected on the 6th day to last through the Sabbath. When this was tried on other days the manna rotted. God demonstrated in this miracle alone,

how important it was Him, that His people observed a day of ceasing or abstaining from their normal labours of providing for themselves and their families.

The Sabbath day, a day spent with community and family in study, prayer, discussion, and peace, reminds us how we should regulate and perfect our spiritual, intellectual, physical, domestic and social behaviours. Observing the Sabbath reminds and instructs us to sanctify our lives, the way God has sanctified the Sabbath day.

This commandment does not limit our freedom, it gives us distinct guidance toward holiness and therefore meaningfulness for our lives. The first six days God made good, the seventh He made holy. We may struggle to stop working on the Sabbath ('Shabbat' in Hebrew), but because it is commanded by God, there should be no guilt about having some downtime.

The Sabbath also reminds us of our potential for doing good. We, human beings, created on the 6th day are the bridge between the worldly and the divine – between the rest of creation (on the first 5 days) and the sanctified 7th day.

The appreciation of a non-productive day is predicated on a week of labour. "Six days you shall labor, and do all your work" Ex 20:9 (ESV) During the week we emulate the creative side of God.. The Sabbath is then the culmination of a productive week on which the non-productivity can be appreciated only when preceded by creativity.

Community prayers and fellowship are an important part of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was given to the Israelites as a reminder of God's freeing them from slavery – as a reminder then of both God and the sanctity of human freedom. It should serve the same purpose for Gentile followers of Yeshua who have also been freed from the slavery of sin.

On the Sabbath we search for the essence of God. Shabbat is the antidote to the tendency toward self-idolatry. Every time we live a day dedicated to holiness we have the opportunity to bring some residual effect into our daily lives. The Sabbath is not about time off, it is about sacred time.

I find it so sad, almost a form of self-flagellation and self-abuse, when people, especially those who think they follow the Messiah, Prophet and High Priest of Israel, reject the Sabbath! The Sabbath is a real day, NOT some theoretical, spiritual inner delusion of rest when the real man/woman continues to sweat blood and tears!

Augustine and many of the early Hellenistic/pagan church fathers have a lot to answer for in convincing the church that the Tanakh is all allegory and spiritual types and shadows! I pray that I have enlightened you a little to this serious error of mainstream Christianity.

"The Sabbath is spirit in the form of time." (Abraham Joshua Heschel - 'The Sabbath' 1951)

I repeat, for more on the Sabbath I recommend Frank Selch's great booklet '*What About The Sabbath*' and my article on '*Colossians 2 and the Sabbath*', which are both available and downloadable from www.circumcisedheart.info

Also I highly recommend: "*The Ten Commandments: The Significance of God's Laws in Everyday Life*" by Dr Laura Schlessinger and Rabbi Stewart Vogel, which includes a great portion on the Sabbath, some of which I have paraphrased above.

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