

Tribal Sabbaths: Rest Days in the Bible and in African Traditional Religions

Carl B. Bridges

Professor of New Testament
Johnson University
cbridges@johnsonu.edu

L. Stephen Cook, Jr.

Professor of Old Testament
Johnson University
scook@johnsonu.edu

A comparison and contrast between the Israelite tradition of Sabbath-keeping and known traditional African rest days observed among various groups today reveals that the biblical Sabbath differs from modern tribal sabbaths in its broader scope and humanitarian motives.

The people of Israel took a weekly day of rest in honor of their God, and some people in traditional societies in Africa do the same today. This paper explores the motives for Sabbath-keeping reflected in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocrypha, and the New Testament alongside the motives of traditional African people today for keeping their tribal sabbaths.

We argue that motives for Sabbath-keeping in the Israelite tradition included ritual, national, and humanitarian concerns, that both Jesus and Paul relativized the practice and minimized ritual motives, and that the known traditional African rest days emphasize ritual requirements at the expense of humanitarian concerns.

This study falls into five unequal parts: 1) a survey of the Sabbath in the Hebrew Scriptures, 2) a reference to some relevant passages in the Apocrypha, 3) a discussion of the Sabbath in the New Testament, 4) ethnographic information on Sabbathlike days in tribal Africa, and 5) a comparison and contrast of the biblical Sabbath and the tribal sabbaths.

THEOLOGY AND PURPOSES OF THE SABBATH¹

The Sabbath is presented in the OT first and foremost as a day of abstention from labor. In the OT, work is not usually mentioned in a particularly enthusiastic

¹ The material in this section is adapted from a previously unpublished paper by Steve Cook, "The Sabbath: Judah's National Security Policy" (Catholic University of America, 2001).

way; rather, it is a requirement for obtaining life's necessities (Gen 1:29; 2:15; 3:17-19; Prov 14:23; Qoh 3:13). However, the Sabbath commandment enjoins its addressees to set aside every seventh day as a day of rest (Exod 20:8-11; Deut 5:12-15).

This command encompasses all classes of humans as well as beasts of burden.² It also re-appears in numerous contexts in the OT (Exod 31:14; 35:2; Lev 23:3; Jer 17:22; Neh 13:15-22). Though its observation is mandated, the Sabbath serves as a gift to Israel, counterbalancing the usually mundane OT conception of labor.³

The prohibition against working on the Sabbath is abundantly clear; what is not clear is exactly what counted as work.⁴ Though originally the people were commanded not to go out on the Sabbath (Exod 16:29), it appears they did allow themselves short journeys (2 Kgs 4:22-23).

For certain classes of workers, the Sabbath was a day among normal days. Priests continued to offer sacrifices and even increased the amount on the Sabbath (Num 28:9-10; Ezek 46:4). The Bread of the Presence was replaced every Sabbath (Lev 24:5-9). The royal sentries and the priestly courses at the temple rotated duties (2 Kgs 11:5-8; 2 Chr 23:4-5).

Nonetheless, the OT discussions are undeterred by these apparent exceptions. Weekly rest is commanded without qualification and is firmly rooted both in theological and historical grounds. The Exodus version of the Sabbath commandment is rooted theologically in God's resting on the seventh day after completing creation (Exod 20:8-11; Gen 2:1-3).

Israel's subsequent Sabbath rest thus imitates the divine pattern. Preuss adds, "God brings to completion through 'rest,' and his final work of creation is the rest transmitted through Israel's Sabbath as his gift to his world."⁵ The revelation of the seventh day's sanctity exclusively to Israel is thus a sign of Israel's unique consecration to Yahweh.⁶

² The broad range of the commandment's targets leads Milgrom to describe it as "egalitarian" in character. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27* (AB 3B; New York: Doubleday) 1961-1962. However, McKay notes wives are not mentioned among those told to rest on the Sabbath. Heather A. McKay, *Sabbath & Synagogue: The Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 13, n. 8.

³ H. D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 2:105.

⁴ The struggle to define "work" eventually transformed what was originally a day of blessing and joy (Isa 58:13) into a burdensome duty in later Judaism. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (ed. Fred Skolnik; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) 1:133.

⁵ Preuss, *OT Theology*, 2:237.

⁶ Moshe Greenberg, "Sabbath: In the Bible," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (ed. Fred Skolnik; Detroit: Macmillan, 2007) 14:560.

The Deuteronomic Sabbath commandment, by contrast, is grounded historically in the Exodus.⁷ By resting on the seventh day, Israel is reminded that Yahweh is the exemplary Liberator, providing relief from Pharaoh's crushing slavery (Exod 5:2-9).

As a result, Yahweh's people must in turn allow their own slaves to rest (Deut 5:14-15). The humanitarian concern exhibited in both versions of the commandment is expanded in Deuteronomy to provide the whole motivation for observing the Sabbath.⁸

Rather than seeing contradictory motive clauses in the two versions of the Sabbath commandment, scholars tend to see the two as complementary. So Preuss, who observes:

Thus the rest of God as gift and the social responsibility of Israel as duty stand beside each other and comprise the different rationales for the commandment of the Sabbath. . . . Since YHWH himself is righteous, and that means he behaves faithfully toward his community . . . he desires to see such righteousness actualized among those who are his own.⁹

In any case, neither of the rationales reflected in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 is reflected in extra-pentateuchal passages.¹⁰

Attempts at establishing priority of either version of the commandment and/or speculation on their age are thus made difficult. As Greenberg warns: "Even if conceptual or literary development can be shown, absolute dating is impossible—all the more so when it is borne in mind that presently interrelated ideas may have arisen independently and contemporaneously, and in either case, before their literary embodiment."¹¹

⁷ The two versions of the commandment also differ in that the Exodus version begins with "remember" (זָכַר, *zācar*), while the Deuteronomy version begins with "observe" (שָׁמַר, *shāmar*). Merrill contends the verb שָׁמַר was employed in Deuteronomy instead of זָכַר in order to emphasize that Sabbath participation is more active than merely intellectual. Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy* (NAC 4; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 150. However, we contend the concept of remembrance in the OT often encompasses the activity that results from recollection (see Gen 8:1; 40:14; Num 15:40; Ps 103:18), and therefore the two verbs in the respective versions of the Sabbath commandment are virtually synonymous.

⁸ *Contra* Yong-Eui Yang, *Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew's Gospel* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 299-300, who sees less of a humanitarian role for the Sabbath than does this essay.

⁹ Preuss, *OT Theology*, 2:187. See also: J. C. McCann Jr., "Sabbath," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (ed. Geoffrey Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 4:250: "The different expansions of the fourth commandment in Ex. 20 and Dt. 5 are complementary rather than contradictory. The Sabbath is to be positively observed, remembered, hallowed as a witness to God's saving activity both in creation and in deliverance from captivity."

¹⁰ Greenberg, "Sabbath," 560.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 560.

A somewhat different (and less exalted) motivation for Sabbath-keeping begins to arise in texts near the end of the monarchy: Judah's very future depends on it. An increased regard for the Sabbath as crucial to national survival is most apparent in texts from the time of Jeremiah and later.

Whereas pentateuchal and deuteronomistic passages tend to single out idolatry as the fatal national sin (Exod 23:32-33; Deut 4:25-27; Judg 2:11-14; 2 Kgs 17:7-23), prophetic and postexilic texts spread a wider net, also naming deficiency in Sabbath-keeping (Jer 17:24-27; Ezek 20:10-20; 22:9-16; 23:38; Isa 58:13-14; Neh 13:15-22; 2 Chr 36:21; compare Lev 36:24-25).

The shift in focus toward Sabbath-keeping came about as a result of the destruction of the temple and consequent collapse of the sacrificial system. Like circumcision, the Sabbath acquired importance during the exile as a sign by which the Jew was known in a pagan environment.¹²

Preuss also adds the possibility that the Sabbath provided a conscious contrast to the Babylonian full-moon day, a type of "taboo" day on which one avoided work for fear of failure and bad luck.¹³ In any case, participation in the uniquely Yahwistic Sabbath institution could be seen as an act of obedience to the Mosaic law, in which Sabbath observance is a "sign between me and you" (Exod 31:14) and a "perpetual covenant" (31:16). Accordingly, nonparticipation while living in a pagan environment might be seen as an offense equally grievous as that of worshipping foreign gods.

Fundamental in all Sabbath connections is that the day is said to be "a Sabbath belonging to Yahweh your God" (יְהוָה לַיְהוָה, *layhwhb*; Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14), a phrase central to the meaning of the Sabbath, yet it almost escapes the reader's notice.¹⁴ Israel's resting is not only a gift from Yahweh to his people, but a weekly reminder to them that Yahweh is the Lord of Time.

The fallowness of the land in the sabbatical year signified Yahweh's ownership of the soil. Analogously, the Sabbath was a day to be given back to him, in order to acknowledge that no human work or business, however pressing, can take precedence over the recognition that all time belongs to Yahweh.¹⁵ For six days, the Israelite could dispose of time as deemed beneficial or necessary; on the seventh day, however, Yahweh's people were duty-bound to renounce autonomy and affirm his dominion over them.

¹² Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962) 1:79; Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1:133 n. 3.

¹³ Preuss, *OT Theology*, 2:236. For a more thorough discussion of the differences between Israelite Sabbath and Babylonian *sabbattu*, see Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:131-132 n. 4.

¹⁴ I (Steve Cook) am indebted for much of the insight on this aspect to the article by M. Tsevat, "The Basic Meaning of the Biblical Sabbath," *ZAW* 84 (1972) 447-459. The *lamed* could also be rendered "unto" Yahweh, but the possessive understanding is better here (Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1962).

¹⁵ Von Rad, *OT Theology*, 1:16 n. 3; Eichrodt, *Theology* 1:133.

The notion that the Sabbath was a day of *worship* in OT times is a common misconception.¹⁶ McKay argues that in the Hebrew Bible, the Sabbath was only a day of rest, and not of worship, for the average Israelite.

The two texts that point incontrovertibly to worship on the Sabbath, Ezek 46:3 and Isa 66:23, envision it as taking place in a future, glorious age. Specific activities decreed for the Sabbath are directed toward cultic officials, not for the common worshiper.¹⁷

Noteworthy in this connection is the command in Exod 16:29 that the people were not to go out on the seventh day. Bosman concludes,

It would seem as if the ordinary Israelites knew of no specific religious practices peculiar to the Sabbath and that rest was the only, or [at] least the predominant, Sabbath prescription they adhered to It is therefore important to appreciate the theological significance of ordinary Israelites abstaining from work without resorting to any cultic festivity reserved for the Sabbath.¹⁸

The attestation of Sabbath observance in every period of Israel's history is a testimony to its vitality as a national institution. Regardless of how the pentateuchal sources are to be dated, it is difficult to deny the practice of a weekly rest day extends back to very early times in Israel's history.

References to the Sabbath from Israel's earliest prophets (for example, Amos 8:5, Hos 2:11) assume the practice was already a well-established aspect of religious and economic life. Thus it seems likely that pentateuchal law material concerning the Sabbath contains prescriptions that date from at least the pre-exilic period, if not earlier. The regular insistence on Sabbath observance throughout Israel's history points to it as one of the primary stipulations of the Mosaic covenant.

SABBATH IN THE APOCRYPHA

Barring a few incidental references to the Sabbath (for example, 1 Esd 1:8, 5:52; Jdt 8:6, 10:2), the most interesting apocryphal references appear in the books of the Maccabees. In the early days of the Maccabean revolt, some Jews refuse to defend themselves on the Sabbath and so die (1 Macc 2:29-38).

When the priest Mattathias, father of the Maccabean brothers, hears of this, he urges a different policy: "Let us fight against anyone who comes to attack us on the sabbath day; let us not all die as our kindred died in their hiding places" (1 Macc 2:41 NRSV). Sherman Johnson and Mary Callaway call this "the earliest

¹⁶ See McKay, *Sabbath & Synagogue*, 11-12) for a representative sample of authors who make this assertion. Her discussion of whether worship took place on the Sabbath is found on pp. 11-42.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁸ H. L. Bosman, "Sabbath," *NIDOTTE*, 4:1160. Of course by Jesus' time, the Sabbath had become a day of instruction and prayer in the synagogue.

statement of the principle that one may profane one Sabbath in order to keep all the others.”¹⁹

In another case, the Sabbath cuts short the pursuit of defeated enemies. In 2 Maccabees 8, Judas Maccabeus defeats the enemy general Nicanor on a Friday. Then, “after pursuing them for some distance, they were obliged to return because the hour was late. It was the day before the sabbath, and for that reason they did not continue their pursuit” (2 Macc 8:25b-26 NRSV). And later, some of Nicanor’s Jewish troops beg him not to attack Judas on the Sabbath, a plea he ignores (2 Macc 15:1-5).

These three incidents show the Jews’ ambivalence toward fighting on the Sabbath. According to the Maccabean authors, the rebels would defend themselves, but apparently they would not attack on the holy day.

SABBATH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the Christian Scriptures, the Sabbath is discussed, practiced, and sometimes “broken.” Both Jesus and Paul treated the Sabbath in a flexible way compared to many Jews of their time.

*Jesus and the Sabbath*²⁰

All four Gospels portray Jesus as a Sabbath-breaker according to his opponents. In the Triple Tradition, he argues with some Pharisees when his disciples pick grain on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28; par. Matt 12:1-8, Luke 6:1-5).

Then he heals a man’s paralyzed arm in synagogue and faces criticism again (Mark 3:1-6; par. Matt 12:9-14, Luke 6:6-11). Although Luke places the second incident on a “different” (ἑτέρω, *heterō*) Sabbath (Luke 6:6), the Synoptic tradition puts the two incidents together as examples of Jesus’ attitude toward the holy day.

The material unique to Luke’s Gospel demonstrates the same attitude toward the Sabbath. Jesus heals a woman with a “spirit of weakness” (πνεῦμα ἀσθενείας; *pneuma asthenias*) who cannot stand upright and earns criticism from the synagogue leader (Luke 13:10-17).

On another Sabbath, he heals a man “suffering from dropsy” (ὕδροπικός, *hudropikos*)²¹ and again is criticized (Luke 14:1-6). And in John’s Gospel, Jesus

¹⁹ Sherman Johnson and Mary Callaway, comments on 1 and 2 Maccabees, in B. M. Metzger and R. E. Murphy, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 191, referring to 1 Macc 2:41.

²⁰ For detailed treatments, see Yang, *Jesus and the Sabbath*, and Phillip Sigal, *The Halakhah of Jesus of Nazareth according to the Gospel of Matthew* (SBL 18; Atlanta: SBL 2007) 145-186.

²¹ J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988) at the location discussed above.

heals a paralyzed man by a pool and must debate with his opponents because the miracle takes place on the Sabbath (John 5:1-18).²²

From these incidents, several of Jesus' statements can be gathered showing his flexibility in observing the Sabbath law:

- In the grain fields incident (Mark 2:23-28; par. Matt 12:1-8, Luke 6:1-5) Jesus argues from King David's ritual offense of using the holy bread from the house of God (1 Sam 21:1-6), suggesting human need trumps religious rules. He concludes, "The Sabbath came into being (ἐγένετο, *egeneto*) for man, and not man for the Sabbath, so the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."
- While healing the man with the paralyzed hand (Mark 3:1-6; par. Matt 12:9-14, Luke 6:6-11), Jesus angrily asks the crowd, "Is it right to do good or do evil on the Sabbath, to save life or kill?"—thus allowing good work on the holy day.
- When Jesus is criticized for healing the disabled woman (Luke 13:10-17), he compares her release from Satan's bonds to the everyday practice of untying livestock to water them, even on the Sabbath. Here again, he argues human need trumps religious observance.
- After healing the man with dropsy (Luke 14:1-6), Jesus compares the healing to an emergency situation in which a child or an ox falls into a well. Just as anyone would rescue the child or the animal on the Sabbath, so Jesus feels free to rescue people from their disabilities.
- After healing the man at the pool (John 5:1-18), Jesus compares his "work" to his Father's work. If the Father works on the Sabbath, so may he.
- An additional saying appears in Luke 6:5 D (Codex Bezae). Jesus finds a man working on the Sabbath and remarks, "Man, if you know what you are doing, you are blessed. If not, you are cursed and a lawbreaker" (author's translation). If authentic, this saying shows Jesus approving Sabbath work as long as the worker understands the relative nature of the Sabbath command, incidentally affirming Paul's discussion of the Christian conscience in Romans 14–15.

To summarize: Jesus clearly does not value Sabbath observance in any legalistic sense. He approves ignoring ritual in order to do good work. As the Deuteronomy version of the Ten Commandments affirms Sabbath-keeping for humanitarian reasons (Deut 5:12-15), Jesus affirms Sabbath-breaking—in the technical sense—for those same reasons.

²² We do not know of any prohibition of healing as work outside the Gospels. The thirty-nine kinds of work mentioned in m. ṭabb. 7:2 do not include healing in any form. Thus, the objections of Jesus' opponents seem *ad hoc*.

Paul and the Sabbath

If Jesus taught his followers a humane and flexible approach to Sabbath-keeping, the Apostle Paul took the next step by connecting the observance to the individual conscience. In his discussion of meat-eating versus vegetarianism (Romans 14–15a), he also mentions the keeping of special days, which no doubt included Sabbaths:

One person distinguishes day from day, while another honors every day. Each person should be fully convinced in their own mind. The person who honors the day does so to the Lord [and the person who does not honor the day does so to the Lord] (Rom 14.5-6a, author's translation).²³

In the letter to the Colossians, the new life in Christ eliminates a believer's bondage to the "elements" (στοιχεῖα, *stoicheia*) of the cosmos, including rules about special days. Here the Sabbath appears explicitly as one of those special days:

Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or observing festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (Col 2:16-17 NRSV).

As Jesus relativized the importance of the Sabbath within the Jewish environment, so the Pauline perspective applies the same truth to environments in which Jewish and Gentile believers mingle. The need for ritual observance has disappeared, except when it lingers in the conscience and practice of an individual; whatever Sabbath-keeping practices remain will not bind the believer.

SABBATHS IN TRIBAL AFRICA

For the purpose of comparison, this paper deals only with weekly work restrictions, excluding annual holidays such as harvest festivals, monthly holidays, and the like.

Weekly Work Restrictions

The Akan people of West Africa, especially the Ashanti (Asante), remain one of the most studied tribal groups in all of Africa. Living mostly in Ghana but also in Cote d'Ivoire, the Akan include subgroups such as the Ashanti, Fante, Akyem, Brong, and others. Traditionally, the Akan take a weekly day off from certain kinds of work based on the birthdays of certain deities.

Like some other tribes in West Africa, the Akan have a system of personal names based on the day of a child's birth:

²³ The expanded version appears in the Majority Text, two uncials, and a few other witnesses.

Birth day	Male name	Female name
Sunday	Kwasi	Akosua
Monday	Kwadwo	Adwoa
Tuesday	Kwabena	Abenaa
Wednesday	Kwaku	Akua
Thursday	Yaw	Yaa
Friday	Kofi	Afua
Saturday	Kwame	Amma

The names vary in pronunciation and spelling from group to group but remain otherwise consistent. Only the Baoule of Cote d'Ivoire shift the names back by one day; a child born on Sunday will bear the name other Akan groups give a Saturday-born child, and so on throughout the week.²⁴ In addition, the Akan consider all white people Sunday-born, so that they commonly refer to a white man as Kwasi and a white woman as Akosua.

Even the gods can have birthdays. Specifically, the earth (*asase* in the Twi language) appears as a female deity born on Thursday, hence her name: Asase Yaa. Here we use the terms “god” and “deity” in a broad sense. Kofi A. Busia, the last Prime Minister of Ghana before the nation abolished that position, argued that the Akan do not consider Asase Yaa a goddess as such but more as a personified power behind the physical earth.²⁵

In any case, Asase Yaa has a birthday, and the Ashantis do not farm on Thursdays in her honor.²⁶ The neighboring Fante, also an Akan tribe, call the earth Asase Efua—earth as a Friday-born female—and thus do not farm on Fridays.²⁷

Note that the Akan do not avoid all work on the earth's birthday, only farming. The traditional Akan do not practice a complete weekly Sabbath as in the Israelite tradition.

Other Fante people, those who live on the coast and make their living by fishing, honor the sea (Bosompo) by not fishing on Tuesdays.²⁸ No evidence has been

²⁴ “Akan Day Names,” *Online Dictionary for the Twi Language of the Akan People of Ghana in West Africa* [Last accessed May 9, 2016]. Online at: <http://www.twi.bb/akan-names.php>. Most Twi language translations in this paper come from the same web site.

²⁵ Busia, Kofi A. *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti* (London: Oxford, 1954). Cited from John Pobee, “Aspects of African Traditional Religion,” *Sociological Analysis* 37 (1976) 7. Online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3710065>.

²⁶ Kwame Arhin, “The Economic Implications of Transformations in Akan Funeral Rites” *Africa* 64 (1994) 309. Online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1160783>.

²⁷ Pobee, “Aspects,” 9.

²⁸ Allison W. Gray, “Canoe Decoration and Meaning among the Fante of Cape Coast,” *African Diaspora ISP*, Paper 25 (1996) 9. Online: http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=african_diaspora_isp.

found to indicate the Fante call the sea by its day-name (Kwabena if male, Abenaa if female), which leaves open the question of whether the sea and the earth receive analogous honors.

Moreover, anecdotal evidence shows the Ga and the Adangbe (Dangme), non-Akan tribes living farther east along the coast, also do not fish on Tuesdays. As with the Thursday-farming prohibition among the Ashanti, the fishing prohibition allows for other work, such as mending nets, but prohibits only harvesting from the sea.²⁹

Farther afield, the Shona people of Zimbabwe observe a no-farming day as well. According to M. Gelfand, writing in the 1960s:

There are five main categories of spirits in whom the Shona believe. . . . The *mhondoro* is the tutelary spirit of the whole clan or tribe whose concern is the good of the people as a whole. The Shona believe that they bring rain, are responsible for the production of good and bountiful crops, and in many areas, with the decision as to who shall succeed to the chieftainship. In every area under the protection of a *mhondoro* a special day called *chisi* is set aside by the spirit when no work may be done in the fields or gardens. It is a ritual day of rest and was formerly determined by the phase of the moon, but of recent years a certain day of each week, frequently Friday or Thursday is fixed as *chisi*.³⁰

Note that again “no work may be done *in the fields or gardens*” [emphasis added]. The Shona Sabbath does not require people to stop working altogether, only to stop farming.

In a similar way, the complex web of taboo days honored by the Malagasy people living in Alaotra, Madagascar, includes all kinds of “prohibitions affecting work, behavior, and eating habits” on certain days with variations that extend down to the level of villages, families, and individuals. The most common taboo day falls on Thursday and the most common taboo prohibits working in wet rice fields.

Significantly, farmers may still engage in “dryland agriculture” on prohibited days. When anyone breaks these work taboos, either the ancestral gods or offended neighbors may punish the infraction: the gods by drought or flood and the neighbors by destroying the fields.³¹

Africa has a thousand tribes, and these samples do not indicate how many have Sabbathlike practices. Not all do. For example, an American woman who lived for years among the Turkana of Kenya and wrote a thesis about them reports that they have no Sabbath-type practices at all.³² Note also that tribal Sabbaths appear to

²⁹ Carl Bridges observed the Ga and Adangbe fishing customs when he lived in Ghana between 1976 and 1983.

³⁰ M. Gelfand, “The Shona Religion,” *Zambezia* 1 (1969) 38. Online: <http://tinyurl.com/ovq6n4o>.

³¹ L. A. Jarosz, “Taboo and Time-Work Experience in Madagascar,” *Geographical Review* 84 (October 1994) 439. Online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/215758>.

³² Kara Harris, personal communication. See her “Syncretism in Turkana: Regarding the Issue of Ancestors” (M.A. thesis, Johnson University, 2013).

spring from purely ritual motives. No humanitarian motive for the rest days has yet been uncovered.

“Bad Days” among the Akan

So far only rest days based on the seven-day week in a few African tribes have been considered. In addition to those days, the Akan of West Africa also use a complicated forty-two-day calendar cycle that includes four “bad days” (*dabone*). The cycle probably reflects the fusion of a six-day week and a seven-day week inherited from different cultural precursors of the present-day Akans.³³

When the first day of the six-day week (Fo) coincides with the first day of the seven-day week (Dwo), that day becomes a “bad day,”—a holiday. Similarly, the coincidence of Kuru (fourth day of the six-day week) and Wukuo (third day of the seven-day week) results in another bad day. The two other bad days include Fo-Fi (first day of the six-day week, fifth of the seven-day week) and Kuru-Kwasi (fourth day of the six-day week, seventh of the seven-day week).

The *dabone* serve largely as ritual days, each with its appropriate set of ceremonies, but they also require abstention from some kinds of work:

These four ‘holidays’ are not complete vacations from all labour. No farming may be carried out on any *dabone* but work per se is not banned. Hunting and gathering are usually permitted and the people may go to their farms to carry home firewood or food reaped the previous day, so long as no weeding of farms is done. Often communal labour is performed on those *dabone* which are not filled with ritual and ceremonial activities.³⁴

Because they believe it dangerous to violate them, the Akan call these “bad days,” much like the term “holy day” might be used, taking “holy” to mean something like “taboo.” A motto sometimes seen painted on transport vehicles in Ghana refers to these bad days: “All days are not equal.” And as noted earlier, the Akans’ forty-two-day cycle does not appear to include any humanitarian motive. The days do not give rest to workers so much as they give honor to the gods.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Sabbath-keeping in the Israelite tradition was motivated by ritual, national and humanitarian concerns. Ritual motives are seen in Sabbath-keeping as a way to honor the God who created the world and rescued Israel from slavery.

³³ Philip F.W. Bartle, “Forty Days: The Akan Calendar,” *Africa* 48 (1978) 80-84. Online: <http://cec.vcn.bc.ca/rdi/kw-40.htm>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

National motives are evidenced in that Sabbath-keeping or lack of it helped determine the fate of the nation. Humanitarian motives are seen in the people of Israel providing of a day of rest for slaves and livestock as they remembered their own slavery in Egypt.

Evidence from the Apocrypha seems to indicate some change in Sabbath-keeping occurred during the intertestamental period. The people of Israel still believed they owed God ritual obedience but would not die to avoid the “work” of self-defense.

In the NT period, the Sabbath obligation became flexible and humane. Jesus, declaring himself “Lord of the Sabbath,” freed his followers from a rigid Sabbath-keeping that would ignore human need.

Paul taught his followers to accommodate one another’s practices. He showed Sabbath-keepers and non-Sabbath-keepers how to live in peace, based on individual conscience.

The ethnographic data from certain African tribes show points of agreement with the Israelite Sabbath tradition: a weekly day of abstaining from labor based on a prohibition by a god and enforced by social or supernatural sanctions. The data also show significant differences: only certain kinds of labor are forbidden and no humanitarian motive is articulated.

Thus the OT Sabbath differs from modern-day tribal sabbaths in its scope—a blanket prohibition of work versus narrowly tailored prohibitions. And both Testaments testify to a biblical Sabbath that differs from the tribal sabbaths in its humanitarian motives. **Scj**