

# SHOULD WE KEEP THE SABBATH? (Pt 9)

## The Better **Sabbatismos**

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In our previous article we came to a confronting conclusion: Whether one is a Jewish Christian tempted to revert to the Law by keeping dietary and calendar ritual, or a Gentile Christian being pulled back into following one's past heathen traditions, the apostle Paul warns that is a return to **the elementary principles of the world!**

*Both* systems --- Judaism under the old Law and Paganism under various philosophies --- are enslaving forces arising from the mediation of angelic and of demonic powers respectively! Thus, to relapse from the Christian Gospel into either the Jewish Law or a pagan worldview, is to forget that **in Christ all the fulness of the Deity dwells bodily** and that the Christian **is complete in him who is the head over all rule and authority (Col. 2: 8-10).**

To revert to the Law or to Gentile ways is to forget that we have been united to Christ and made alive in him by the mighty liberating power of God who raised him from the dead **(Col. 2: 12)**. Everything else besides Messiah himself is **a mere shadow**. To seek to please God by keeping the Law's decrees and commandments --- including Sabbath --- is to abandon Christ himself who is the substance. **(Col. 2:16-17)**.

Now, someone may ask whether this teaching is found in any other corroborating Scripture? Is it only Paul who draws these astonishing implications from the Gospel of Christ? Paul is often cast in poor light by those who don't want to accept what he clearly teaches. <sup>1</sup>

So, one would expect that such a revolutionary truth rising from the new covenant in Messiah would be repeated and emphasised in other Scriptures. After all, the Law itself says a matter shall be established by 2 or 3 witnesses.

### **HEBREWS ... THE BOOK ABOUT BETTER AND GREATER THINGS** <sup>2</sup>

The book of Hebrews was specifically written to Hebrew Christians who were being hounded to return to their previous Jewish ways. In essence, the source of this persecution arose from both political and religious sources, though in practice it was hard to separate what was overt and what was covert. <sup>3</sup>

The whole purpose of **Hebrews** is to demonstrate the superiority of Christ and **the new covenant** over the **old covenant** given to Israel through the agency of Moses. With the coming of the new Messianic covenant God **has made the first obsolete**. The period of transition from the old to the new was already happening when **Hebrews** was written, for the author went on to say, **But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear (Heb. 8:13)**. (Remember our ship in the process of doing it's U-turn?)

But what exactly does **Hebrews** include in the old or first covenant?

Let's recall that both the Old and the New Testaments define the old covenant as consisting of **both** the Ten Commandments and the Deuteronomic laws in the Torah of Moses. Our writer knows this for he states, **Now even the first covenant had regulations of divine worship [latreias literally means service] (Heb. 9:1)**.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul was in fact, endorsed by the other apostles of Christ at the Council of Jerusalem, and henceforth carried *bone fide* apostolic credentials (e.g. **Acts 15** and **Gal. 2: 1-9**).

<sup>2</sup> This is not the place to argue over who wrote the book. Various suggestions have been offered ... Paul himself, Apollos, Barnabas, Luke, Sylvanus, Priscilla and Aquila, etc. All suggestions are problematical.

<sup>3</sup> In the 3 decades before Jerusalem was ransacked by Titus, the Land of Israel was increasingly coming under the control of the Zealots and Rome was finding it increasingly difficult to control these revolutionary stirrings. Thus, Messianic Jews came under fire from both the political Zealots who saw them as traitors to their people and from Judaizers within the Church who also saw them as having abandoned their fathers' faith.

It is unquestionably clear that the Sabbath was one of those regulations of divine worship or service (Lev. 23). Following this reference the author of Hebrews lists other aspects of the “first covenant”, then in verse 4 he lists “the tables of the covenant” ... a clear reference to the Ten Commandments. These are facts of Scripture in their contextual setting. Thus the “tables of the covenant,” which include the Sabbath commandment, and the “laws for divine worship”, which include the Sabbath, are old and ready to disappear. <sup>4</sup>

Old covenant directives for worship were imposed until a time of reformation [*diorthoseos* means *a new order*] (Heb. 9:10). <sup>5</sup> And we are left in no doubt as to when this time of reformation --- or the new order --- is, for the next verse tells us it came when Christ appeared (Heb. 9:11). The inevitable conclusion is that the new covenant is not like the one God made with Israel when they left Egypt; In other words, the new covenant is not like the Ten Commandments. <sup>6</sup>

We thus see again and again that, the Mosaic Law was a system of type and symbol foreshadowing the perfect fellowship with God secured and supremely revealed by Messiah; in a nutshell, the Book of Hebrews teaches that although Judaism and Christianity are essentially connected, nevertheless, without Christianity Judaism remains imperfect and incomplete.

Indeed, the introduction to the book says that God spoke in the prophets in times past to the [Jewish] fathers by various portions and by various methods, but now in these last days He has spoken unto us in a Son (1: 1-2). The whole prophetic ministry was fragmentary and preparatory for the coming of Israel’s (and the world’s) Messianic King. His coming would signal the beginning of these last days to end this present evil Age. In Christ the Son, the final and full revelation has arrived.

Furthermore, this Son whom God Himself has appointed heir of all things because He prepared the eons with him and his Kingdom in mind, is therefore greater than the mighty angels of God, for to which of the angels did He ever say, “You are My Son, today I have begotten you” (v. 5)? <sup>7</sup> God has not granted the future Kingdom world to angels, but to the human Lord Messiah, who now sits as God’s right-hand Man in fulfilment of the prophetic oracle (Ps. 89: 3-4; Ps. 110:1; Heb. 2:5).

#### MESSIAH HAS STRIPPED BOTH ANGELIC AND DEMONIC MEDIATORS OF THEIR POWERS

Incidentally, we can now understand how it is that the old Mosaic Law could be said to be under the control of the elementary principles of the world. We have no difficulty in seeing that the Gentile philosophies and gods are under the control of demonic spirits, but by what stretch of the imagination can we say God’s Law mediated to Israel was also under the control of supernatural powers now likened to elementary principles of the world?

The answer is that the Law was given through the mediatorship of angels. <sup>8</sup> Good angels, yes. But failure to listen to the word of God mediated through these angelic powers brought certain judgment (2: 2). Also, Despite the spiritual ideal of the Mosaic law as an instrument of faith in the Abrahamic promise, the Israelite use of the law as an instrument of self-justification (illustrated by the NT Gospels’ portrayal of the Pharisees) was the religious reality. <sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Christ*, Life Assurance Ministries, Az., 2003, p 238-239

<sup>5</sup> Strictly speaking, *diorthosis* is a making right or straight. It is used of reducing a bone fracture, for instance. The author means the new covenant brings things to a satisfactory state being properly re-aligned..

<sup>6</sup> *Op Cit.* p 239 (Emphasis original).

<sup>7</sup> The unfortunate translations that read **by whom also he made the worlds** --- some go so far as to say the Son created the universe --- muddy the waters big time, because the meaning of the original Greek is that God **designed the eons with His Son, Jesus Christ** --- and by implication all the saints through him --- **in mind**. Thus, the Genesis creation of the heavens and earth is not referred to by our author, but rather the creation of the New Kingdom Age. For confirmation read **Heb. 2: 5!**

<sup>8</sup> The rabbis knew this from such verses as **Deuteronomy 33: 2**. The NT writers knew this as indicated in such verses as **Acts 7: 53 and Galatians 3: 19**. Josephus also believed this as a good Jew in *Antiquities* 15:53!

<sup>9</sup> Robert Hach, *The Passion and Persuasion: A Biblical Deconstruction of the Evangelical Rhetoric of the Cross*, Xlibris Corp., USA, 2011, p 75

Thus, the effect of the Mosaic law on God's people was not the righteousness of faith, but rather condemnation through self-righteousness. This effectively placed the people under a curse of enslavement.

However, the good news is that when Jesus Christ died upon the cross he **cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and he has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.** By his death Christ **spoiled** (an old KJV English word meaning **disarmed**) **the rulers and authorities ... and triumphed over them in it (Col. 2: 14-15).**

This means that by the death of Christ on the cross, those previous angelic ministers of the Law were divested of their mediatorial dignity. They have been "disarmed", "stripped" and "divested" of their status and previous rank as mediators of the Law. Their decrees and judgments are completely innocuous now, and this is precisely why the New Testament likens their old mediatorial ministry through the Law as also being a part of the **elementary principles of the world** --- in effect being no different to the Gentile world system! The evil spirits of the world and the angels who mediated the Law are both eliminated as dominating powers over God's people. We fear their threatened judgments and vengeance no more.

The problem was that the Mosaic law, through its condemnation of transgressor, compelled them --- as slaves are compelled --- to seek to justify themselves by their "works of the law". This was, then, the effect of the evil angelic administration of the Mosaic law: the subversion of the Mosaic law *from* being an instrument for the expression of faith in the Abrahamic promise *into* a system of self-justification, placing Israel "under a curse." <sup>10</sup>.

#### BACK TO THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

Favourite words found in the book to convey this massive Christological shift of the ages are **better** and **greater**. To summarise the "betterness" and the greater glory of the new covenant in Messiah, here is a little list:-

Jesus is a **better** revelation of truth (Heb. 1:1-3).

Jesus is **better** than angels (Heb. 1: 13-14).

Jesus is **better** than Moses (Heb. 3: 1-6)

Jesus is **better** than Aaron the Levitical priest (Heb. 5).

Jesus is a **better** high priest (Heb. 6-7).

The new covenant has a **better** law (Heb. 7:12).

The new covenant is a **better** covenant for it has better promises (Heb. 8:6).

The new covenant has a **greater** temple (Heb. 9:11).

The new covenant has **better** sacrifices (Heb. 9:23).

The new covenant has a **better** possession (Heb. 10:34).

The new covenant has a **better** country (Heb. 11:16).

The new covenant has a **better** resurrection (Heb. 11:35).

The new covenant has something **better** (Heb. 11: 40).

The new covenant has **better** blood (Heb. 12:24).

The new covenant has **better** atonement (Heb. 10:1-5).

We have deliberately left out of this list what's relevant to our topic, namely the new covenant also has a **better** Sabbath. This subject is covered in one paragraph from **chapter 3:1 to 4:13** --- there being no chapter breaks in the original text. And as we would expect, the argumentation is classically couched in Jewish rhetoric, being heavily based on his Hebrew readers' knowledge of Israel's history and Scriptures. This makes this section

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Hach, *Op. Cit.*, p 75

quite a challenge for those of us with no such background or thought-patterns. But I think we can negotiate it by distilling it down into digestible mouthfuls!

The big picture is that Jesus, as the final mediator of God's purposes in Israel and the world, is **counted worthy of more glory than Moses**. This is no slur upon Moses, who was **faithful** to all God called him to do. The difference is that Moses was a **servant** in God's **household**, whereas Jesus as God's Son is the heir of the entire estate (**Heb. 3: 1-6**).<sup>11</sup>

By virtue of his resurrection and exaltation to God's right hand in heaven, Jesus' superiority --- even over the great Moses himself is evident: *Moses was buried by God in the desert* and was forbidden to bring the people into their promised rest in the Land. Jesus was raised by the Father and is God's ever-living and ever-reigning Son and therefore, is the heir of the entire household. He now is the King in waiting and will return **a second time for salvation (9: 28)**.

This is why the writer exhorts his readers that, being persecuted as they are in the meantime, they must **hold fast [their] confidence and the boast of [their] hope firm unto the end (3:6)**. Not to hear God's invitation to steadfast faithfulness **today** is to repeat the sad history of Israel at Meribah and Massah when they put the LORD God to the test in the wilderness.

God commanded Israel to go forth and enter the Land. They disbelieved, were hardened by the deceitfulness of their sin, so forfeited God's promised rest. **And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief (3: 19)**. Because of their unbelief God swore in His wrath, **they shall not enter My rest (Heb. 3:11; Ex. 17: 7)**. Thus Israel, liberated from Pharaoh by mighty miracles, and now standing on the very borders of the Promised Land under Moses, forfeited God's rest. Their carcasses fell and their bones bleached in the desert in unmarked and forgotten graves.

Applying this warning to his readers, the writer fears that God's open invitation to enter the promised rest "today" in Messiah, may be disregarded by them too. **Therefore, we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard (concerning Messiah's Gospel) lest at any time we should drift away (2:1)**.

Confidence begun in Christ is not enough. Failure to continue to obey the Gospel-promise God is making through His Son Jesus will lead to equally disastrous consequences as befell Israel in the wilderness. The promised salvation-rest in Christ depends on their continuance in the confident expectation that God's promise is eschatologically certain. This rally to faith was very relevant to that generation of Hebrew Christians, because the soon-anticipated return of their Messiah was delayed it seemed, and their hearts drooped under hope unrealised. Where was Messiah's promised Kingdom glory?

Therefore, **Today, if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts as when they provoked Me in the day of trial in the wilderness ... where your fathers tried Me by testing Me (vs. 8-11)**.

**Hebrews** goes on to say that not only did Moses fail to bring the children of Israel into God's promised rest, but his successor Joshua also failed even though he actually led them across the Jordan. The writer argues this quite ingeniously by quoting from **Psalm 95: 7f**,

**He again fixes a certain day, 'Today,' saying in David after so long a time just as has been said before, 'Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts'. For if Joshua had given them rest, He (i.e. God) would not have spoken of another day after that (4: 7-8)**.

Follow the argument. When king David wrote **Psalm 95** the Israelites had been long living in the Promised Land, yet they still had not entered into God's rest. Thus, Joshua like Moses, did not give Israel God's promised rest. Otherwise God **would not have spoken in David of another day (of rest) after that!**

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<sup>11</sup> Recall the parable Jesus told about the workers in the vineyard who ill-treated the emissaries of the Owner? In a final act for those workers to see reason, the Owner then sent his own son and heir saying, **"They will respect my son" (Matt. 21: 33)**. But those evil workers said, **"This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and seize his inheritance."**

## BIG PROBLEM!

Here were Sabbath-keepers living in the Promised Land under King David to whom God had promised the throne to his dynasty forever still waiting for God's promised rest! *BIG PROBLEM!*

The problem is that [Joshua 21: 43-45](#) seems to say the exact opposite --- [The LORD gave them rest on every side, according to all He had sworn to their fathers, and no one of all their enemies stood before them; for the LORD gave all their enemies into their hand. Not one of the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass \(!\)](#)

[Hebrews 4: 7](#) says Joshua did not give them rest, but [Joshua 21: 43-45](#) clearly says God did give Israel rest as He promised. Is this a contradiction? By no means! Just read the next two verses; [There remains therefore a Sabbatism for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His \(4: 9-10\).](#)

There is no contradiction because they are speaking of *two different types of rest*. The very people who had been given the Ten Commandments and the Law and the Temple had been keeping the seventh-day Sabbath-rest of the old Sinaitic covenant for generations. But they knew nothing of God's [Sabbatism](#) which yet remains to be enjoyed.

This word [Sabbatism](#) is unique, never used anywhere else in all of the Bible. Up till now, the writer has used a regular word for "rest" (*katapausis*). He now replaces that usual word by coining a brand new word not found anywhere else ... [Sabbatismos](#).

Remember how we said in the very first article in this series that, no sooner had Adam rebelled and the perfect peace and harmony of God's world had been shattered, than God Himself set about to restore mankind to His state of perfect rest? This goal our writer to the Hebrews now identifies as the [Sabbatism](#) that is promised and still remains for Christian believers.

This is because the writer identifies the rest promised to believers in Messiah Jesus as being the very rest God Himself enjoyed on the Seventh Day after His creating works had ended. Remember, there was no evening on *that* day of God's rest --- it was never meant to end. Likewise, there remains a [Sabbatismos](#)-rest that will be fully realised in the eternal ages to come.

God has been tirelessly working towards His great plan for mankind --- full restoration to His rest. The promised [Sabbatism](#) we are invited to enter in by faith in Christ is that new order God has promised in the future Kingdom when all of His heavenly blessings become realised. God gives this salvation-rest, the [Sabbatism](#) through the mediatorial ministry of His Son..

The highly acclaimed *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* agrees, saying that [Sabbatismos](#) expresses [the repose typified by the Sabbath is seen as the spiritual rest to be realized fully in the life to come, "for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his"](#) <sup>12</sup>

## THE TENSION IN THE OVERLAP OF THE TWO AGES

Now here is the interesting thing. Although God's promise of the future [Sabbatism](#) will be fully realised when Messiah returns, He also says that, [the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His](#). In the Greek the aorist verb [has rested/ceased](#) indicates an action already completed at some point in the past.

In other words, there is a tension between the indicative (we have entered the rest) and the imperative (we are to strive to enter the rest) in the passage. This is but a reflection of the whole of the NT teaching that we are

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<sup>12</sup> Revision Ed. Moises Silva, Zondervan, Second Edition, Vol. 4, 2014 , p223

currently in the overlap of two ages. We currently have, but do not yet have! To use the theologians' words, there is a tension between realized and future eschatology.

Yet it remains to ask. In what sense can the believer in Messiah be said to have already ceased from his own works as God did from His on that first Seventh day? In particular, in what sense can the Hebrew Christians who are being persecuted and pressured to return to their Judaism be said to have ceased from their works?

Some say it is the rest of grace. Having been justified by faith apart from the works of the law, the Christian has now entered into a new and restful relationship with God. In other words, it's suggested, this is a rest from works-righteousness. But the difficulty with this is that nowhere in the whole book of Hebrews is the subject of justification by faith mentioned. It is out of context.

I think it fits the contextual setting far more nicely if we take the "works" the readers have already ceased from, to refer to the ceremonial and sacrificial minutiae so prominent in the Judaism the readers had left upon their conversion to Christ. This means the Messianic believers, when they turned to Christ and entered by faith into the new covenant, had abandoned their previous dietary and calendar rituals of living under the old covenant;

**For we have become partakers of Messiah, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm unto the end. Today is you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts ... Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it (3:12-15; 4: 1).**

#### TO RETURN TO JUDAISM IS APOSTASY!

Thus, to go back to those previous "works" of the old law is to fail to enter God's rest in Christ. We can prove this is the correct interpretation by considering the writer's following warning against apostasy. The specific warning given to these tested Hebrew Christians is, **Take care brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God (Heb. 3:12).** The Greek is quite telling here. An evil heart of **unbelieving** (*apistias*) will lead these Jewish believers in Christ into **apostasy** (*aposteenai*) away from the living God Himself!

Whoa! This is a powerful statement designed to **shock**: ***To go back into Judaism is to evidence an evil heart that takes one away from the Living God of Israel Himself!***

The question being directly addressed then, is "Can Jewish Christians who revert to Judaism still remain faithful to the living God of Israel?" The answer? Such recanting is evil unbelief and rebellion (*apostasia* is often translated as "rebellion"!). This unbelief will forfeit God's rest;

**Our author, who sees Christianity as the fulfillment of the promises, and therefore as true Judaism and not as another religion, to apostatize from Christianity is to turn away from the living God. No room is given to the modern idea of the presence of God in, and therefore the legitimacy of, Judaism as a religion paralleling Christianity. The author regards a relapse to Judaism on the part of his readers as most grievous and dangerous indeed. <sup>13 14</sup>**

In these last days, legion are the numbers who have abandoned their hope in Christ. May we not be in that number but hear God's voice while it is still called 'Today'. May there never be found in any of us an evil heart of unbelief taking us away from the living God of Israel! He has set His Son as the Lord Messiah at His own right hand of authority. The Gospel God announces through His risen Son guarantees the **Sabbatismos** is surely coming.

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<sup>13</sup> *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series: Hebrews*, Donald A. Hagner, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1983, p 67

<sup>14</sup> This is not to be taken as Anti-Semitic in any way, shape nor form. God has not abandoned Israel according to the flesh. Jews are still beloved for the "fathers' sake" and God is still working His eternal purposes for Israel, according to the Abrahamic covenant which has not be cancelled. But today, any Jew outside of God's Messiah Yeshua stands in unbelief according to the NT teaching, and is in the same perilous condition as unbelieving Gentiles. Indeed, the apostle Paul says that Jews who oppose the Gospel of Christ are **enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers (Rom. 11:28).**