

Looney Tune of a “Sabbath” Moon

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A quick search using Accordance shows that the words (in the original Hebrew) “Shabbat” and “day” occur, within 10 words of each other, well over 100 times in the *Tanakh*. The same search, replacing “day” with “moon,” yields a big fat goose-egg (for the uninitiated that means *zero*). Yet there are those out there trying to defend something called “lunar sabbath,” as if these words were intrinsically linked and as if it was a plain teaching of the Bible. This doctrine subordinates the remembrance and celebration of two monumental, world-shaping events – namely, the Holy One’s blessed rest after the six days of creation and His mighty deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery – to the cycles of “the lesser light.”

Why would anyone think this way? The basic rationale for looking to the moon for determining the week runs along these lines: there is nothing in creation that marks the perpetual seven-day week as we have it today. Since all of creation testifies to the glory of the Creator, then the seven-day week *must* be found in the heavenly lights. The repeated cycles of seven are seen to be an invention of man, since they are not observable in nature. But... when we look at the moon, we see that the phases are roughly seven days! Therefore, this is how we are to mark the Sabbath!

What this argument fails to address is that the two events memorialized in the weekly Shabbat are also not found in the heavens: how, by looking at the creation, do we know He made it in six days and rested on the seventh? How, by looking at creation, do we know that He, according to His promise to Abraham and by His own might, delivered Israel from harsh slavery into freedom? These events are revealed to us in Scripture, and we accept them on faith (Hebrews 11:3). ***The Sabbath is about these key events.*** And the moon, an object of worship by many ancient peoples, has nothing to do with it.

But even a cursory survey will show that the evidence of Scripture and of history is completely contrary to this doctrine, which is not so new. The “lunar sabbath” suggestion first entered history in the 1800s, when unbelieving scholars of the ancient Near East were trying to reconcile Biblical “literature” with the ancient Mesopotamian religion (Babylon and Assyria) described in (then) newly-deciphered Akkadian documents. Turns out the Babylonians divided their months by the phases of the moon. Since this humanist agenda could not fathom that Scripture was indeed divinely-inspired revelation, it was proposed that Israel adopted seven-day phase units from the Babylonian moon-worship calendar and made a few modifications. They too did not see the biblical Sabbath as a memorial to the works of the One Who inhabits eternity: six-day creation and the election/redemption of a special people for Himself. Rather, they thought, the “seven” had to come from the “natural” calendar, just as the Babylonians had reasoned all on their own.

So this general idea has been around for over 100 years. But only since the late 1990s have I been aware that there were actually a few teachers pushing its observance, claiming that the whole Bible-believing world’s sense of time got bumped like a record with no one thinking the wiser of it. Why someone would want to believe this I cannot say. Needless to say, this doctrine is not based upon Scripture; though the “lunar sabbatarians” would like to convince us otherwise.

The Bible teaches from Genesis 1, Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5, and elsewhere that we are to reckon an every-seventh-day Shabbat. Six days of work, and a seventh day resting in His holiness and shalom. This is a wonderful approach to accounting time, a heavenly gift for

mankind (cf: Mark 2:27), and over the last 2,000 years it has permeated most of the world's calendars. Embedded within it is the remembrance that the Creator of heaven and earth is Sovereign over all His works, and that His people belong to Him and not to the superstitious rulers of the world. The sun worship, moon worship, etc... of the ancient world was (and is!) to be rejected outright. Therefore we can see how the observance of the every-seventh-day Shabbat is, at its core, a statement of allegiance to the God of Israel, Creator of all, to His economy, as well as a testimony against man's innate but idolatrous fear of natural forces and heavenly cycles.

Nowhere in Scripture is Shabbat reckoned, and nowhere are we commanded to reckon it, by looking at the moon. We're only taught to reckon time in continuing cycles of seven.

Some teach that a key verse proving the "lunar sabbath" calendar is to be found in Psalm 104. Now this is a most beautiful song, full of imagery and parallelism. But to take the verse "He made *yareach* for *mo'adim*, sun knows his setting" out of the larger poetic context, and then insist it means "He made the moon **for marking all of the Feasts, including Shabbat**" is abuse of Scripture, plain and simple. And it's not too different than hermeneutics I've encountered among the "Paleo-Hebrew word picture" people, the "Alef-Tav" advocates, or the "Peshitta Primacy" groups.

The consecutive cycles of seven is true for counting the *omer* and for counting the *shemithah* years ("sabbaths of years"). The recurring cycle of sevens is securely anchored in the text. Even the Gospel of Matthew would have us envision Yeshua's genealogy from Abraham through David as six complete, consecutive sevens, with the seventh of course marking Yeshua's birth.

Even Yeshua's brother was confident that all Israel, even in the Diaspora, were in sync when it came to the Sabbath, as they had been all along.

"For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath." (Acts 15:21)

All our historical sources from the Second Temple Era concur: everyone knew when Shabbat was; even Israel's enemies! (cf: 1 Maccabees 2:30-43) Disputes, even by groups that were to soon die out, are recorded for us in the ancient writings. A big debate at the time was *how* to properly observe the day, but never about "which day" to observe it. There was debate about when to start counting the *omer*, but even then, the various Jewish groups were in agreement of the perpetual seventh-day shabbat. Yeshua recognized the every-seventh-day Shabbat, completely independent of moon phases, as did the other Jews in His day. And then sometime after 70AD, we have Christians promoting Sunday as a day of worship, a tradition that has continued uninterrupted to our own day. Here too, even when there is a difference in day of worship, *there is no dispute about the perpetual seven-day week!*

Contrary to what the "lunar sabbath" teachers are proposing, there was no collective amnesia whereby all Israel simultaneously ceased observing the Babylonian "lunar" moon phases and started keeping the "perpetual seven" cycle. From the book of Exodus, we know that when the LORD taught Israel the Sabbath (through the giving of the manna), they had trouble trusting Him. Again, the lesson for Israel was (as it always is) to learn to walk by *faith*. God did not point them to the moon, but to His regular, miraculous provision. Five days, an *omer* a day. On the sixth day, a double portion. On the seventh day, a Sabbath rest! Quite simple. It drew the community together to march in step with the bread from heaven. No reference to what the sky looked like, no correlation with the calendars of idolators.

To wrap up we should highlight an important feature shared by the vast sea of ancient Jewish texts (books and collections as diverse as "the Apocrypha" to the Dead Sea Scrolls to the Apostolic Writings to the Mishnah and Talmud). They generally preserve, even if in exaggerated form, the voices of protesters or the opinions of opposing ideologies. This is because

Jewish groups thoughtfully defined and clarified their doctrines and practices through comparison and polemic with other Jewish groups. The “*We* say this, whereas *they* say that...” method of communication can be found in all manner of Jewish documents from the Second Temple period and beyond. This approach has proven to be both helpful and efficient, shaping the processes of debate and peer-reviewed research used in the world today. Looking back to when Israel first learned the Sabbath, the Scripture tells us there were dissenters! The voice of those who did not accept it was preserved for posterity.

But the “lunar sabbath” adherents want people to believe the outlandish: a radical, sweeping shift in time keeping method, uniformly affecting the entire Jewish world, was accomplished (by some unknown power) without a single protest. Israel went from marking “sabbaths” by reference to moon phases to a “perpetual seven” calendar unattested by creation. Not a complaint was recorded. Or, all dissenters were silenced forever... that is, until now.

Quite the conspiracy! Some potential for a good movie I suppose (or perhaps an animated “Looney Tune”), but that’s about it.