**BOOK OF JUBILEES AND SABBATH**

**BY DR. ELIYAHU LIZORKIN-EYZENBERG**

**As we read about the Sabbath in our time, when the Christian Sabbath-keeping practice has been virtually abrogated, it is easy for us to dismiss the passionate desire to obey the Sabbath in full measure as resulting from legalistic Jewish tendencies. However, it is important to see that our author saw breaking of the Sabbath as only a surface issue revealing the real problem, which hid in the unbelieving heart of the covenant-breaker. Sabbath-keeping was to be performed not in dry legalistic obedience but as the holy duty of the redeemed heart: “They should keep Sabbath thereon, and that they should not forsake it in the error of their hearts.”**

**The book of *Jubilees*** is a pseudepigraphon[[1]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn1) known prior to Qumran from a complete Ethiopic and partial Greek, Latin and Syriac/Aramaic translations. *Jubilees* was composed entirely in Hebrew, then translated into Greek and from Greek into Ethiopic, in which language alone it is extant in its entirety.[[2]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn2) It has for the first time surfaced in a large number of mostly small fragments in its Hebrew original in five Qumran caves. According to Lane, the work is **a midrashic retelling of the story of Genesis** (and the beginning of Exodus) in the form of a revelation conveyed by angels to Moses.[[3]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn3) Nickelsburg points out that the Book of *Jubilees* is an **extensive elaboration of Genesis 1 – Exodus 12.**[[4]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn4) VanderKam succinctly summarizes the general content of the book:

*The revelation proves to be a heavily edited rehearsal of the material from Genesis 1 to Exodus 20, all of which is incased in chronology which divides time into units of 49 years (Jubilees), each of which consist of ‘seven weeks of years.’**[[5]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn5)*

The object of the author was to **defend Judaism against the disintegrating effects of Hellenism**, and the various means by which he did this will be discussed below. According to Ferguson, the sins[[6]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn6) most frequently and strongly opposed in the book of *Jubilees* are idolatry, fornication, and eating blood.[[7]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn7)

**THE SUMMARY POINTS**

* First, the Sabbath’s heavenly origin is affirmed not only in the sense that God issued the command, but also because **Sabbath-keeping is at the heart of heavenly life itself** (2:17-19; 6:30b-31).
* Second, the Sabbath comes as a covenant sign. God chose Israel out of all the nations and commanded her to keep the Sabbath. **Israel and the Sabbath are forever bound up together** for YHWH has sanctified them both (2:19-22).
* Third, capital punishment was to be administered to anyone who has violated the Sabbath or in any way profaned it (2:26; 50:13b).
* Fourth, Sabbath-keeping was not primarily outward and superficial in character, but an **inner duty of the heart** (2:28-29).
* Fifth, the Sabbath was to be obeyed without any inventions of man, fully and without any compromise or avoidance (2:29-30).
* Sixth, the weekly **Sabbath was greater** than any of the feasts of Israel. No Sabbath, as the greatest of all feasts of Israel, ought to be overshadowed by other holiday activities that Israel’s god also decreed. The feasts could not supersede the Sabbath. The only means to accomplish this is to order life according to the heavenly 364-day calendar (6:32-33).
* Seventh, sexual relationship, contemplating/talking about any business activity or even drawing water was forbidden on the Sabbath (50:8-10). The prohibition list also includes taking a journey, farming, creating fire, riding on any kind of animal, striking or killing anything, catching a living thing, fasting or making war (50:12b-13a).
* Eighth, Sabbath-keeping was to be characterized by **joy and satisfaction** (50:10a).
* Ninth, only Temple worship takes precedent over observance of the Sabbath commandment (50:10b-12a).

Here are some textual unites to consider:

***JUB.* 2:17-36**

This passage can be divided into several sections for the purpose of study. First, the heavenly origins of Sabbath-keeping are affirmed in 2:17-19a, where heaven’s Sabbath-keeping is discussed. YHWH and the angels of his presence are engaged in the on-going practice of Sabbath observance. The angels affirm to Israel,

*He hath bidden us to keep the Sabbath with Him in heaven and on earth.*

The doctrine of the Supremacy of the Law, as manifest in the heavenly keeping of the Sabbath finds its application in this passage as in many others.

Second, Israel is established as **elect among the nations** in 2:19b-21a. The election and separateness of Israel from all other nations of the Earth seems to be a recurring theme in the Late Second Temple literature and especially here in the **Book of *Jubilees***. The Creator is quoted here:

*Behold, I will separate unto Myself a people from among all the peoples, and these shall keep the Sabbath day.*

Covenant election is the very basis of anything that is written or inferred in any way in this book. Our author was purposely drawing parallels between Israel and the Sabbath. YHWH has blessed and sanctified both Israel and the Sabbath; therefore, keeping the Sabbath is a means by which Israel’s holiness is marked.

Third, in 2:21b-22a the **Sabbath is presented as a covenant sign**, harkening back to 2:17. It is in the context of this covenant election that we realize that the Sabbath is a very special commandment. It is both a commandment and a sign of the special, covenantal relationship between Israel and her god:

*Thus He created therein a sign in accordance with which they should keep the Sabbath.*

Strict adherence to this commandment equals passionate commitment to the god who issued it. This we will see later in more detail.  The authors spare no effort in establishing the covenant relationship of Israel with their god as the emphasis in this work. In other Jewish writings, the idea that the Sabbath was something “personal” only between YHWH and Israel is even clearer. Perhaps the most radical idea that exemplifies this type of exclusivism is the idea that Gentiles who would keep the Sabbath would actually be committing adultery by doing so, because **Israel alone is the bride of YHWH**.[[8]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn8) According to Doering, *in this exclusivisim the book of Jubilees differs greatly with the writings of the Greek-speaking Jewish Diaspora where inclusivism and commonality is often emphasized as argued by Aristobulus (Fragment 5), Philo (Opif. 89-128; Mos. 2:21) and Josephus (Ag. Ap. 2:282)*.[[9]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn9)

Fourth, a hint for the future doctrine of the heavenly origin of the Hebrew language is given in 2:22b-23. This comes up in other portions of the book of *Jubilees*, establishing Israel’s connection with the divine origins (creation and covenant) connecting generations of the faithful as well as the types of creation made by YHWH with the 22 letters of the Hebrew language:

*There (were) two and twenty heads of mankind from Adam to Jacob, and two and twenty kinds of work were made until the seventh day.*

Fifth, **severe punishment** is emphasized for breaking the Sabbath. From the standpoint of our author, nothing short of full subscription to the Torah standards of Israel’s god would insure YHWH’s allegiance to Israel. This strictness, of course, needs to be seen in the context of the great privilege, great election and great sign given to Israel. So, the disregard of such great things should receive an appropriate disciplinary action:

*Whoever does any work thereon shall die, and that he who defiles it shall surely die.*

Sixth, in 2:28-29a it is clear that breaking this commandment is a heart related problem. As we read about the Sabbath in our time, when the Christian Sabbath-keeping practice has been virtually abrogated, it is easy for us to dismiss the passionate desire to obey the Sabbath in full measure as resulting from legalistic Jewish tendencies. However, it is important to see that our author saw breaking of the Sabbath as only a surface issue revealing the real problem, which hid in the unbelieving heart of the covenant-breaker. Sabbath-keeping was to be performed not in dry legalistic obedience but as **the holy duty of the redeemed heart**:

*They should keep Sabbath thereon, and that they should not forsake it in the error of their hearts.*

Seventh, uncompromising fulfillment of the commandment is demanded in 2:29b-30a. **The book of *Jubilees*** knows nothing about constructing Erub for the more convenient keeping of the Sabbath, a practice that had developed by the time of the composition of the Targums.[[10]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn10) So it is that we see in this book an uncompromising call to full obedience to the ordinances of Israel’s god, especially the ordinances of the Sabbath:

*Not to bring in or take out thereon through their gates any burden, which they had not prepared for themselves on the sixth day in their dwellings.*

Eighth, in 2:30-36 we are given a succinct summary of the chapter, citing the ancient and heavenly origins of the commandment, and emphasizing Israel’s covenantal privilege that ought to be passed on to future generations of YHWH’s elect people:

*We kept Sabbath in the heavens before it was made known to any flesh to keep Sabbath thereon on the earth. And the Creator of all things blessed it, but he did not sanctify all peoples and nations to keep Sabbath thereon, but Israel alone … This law and testimony was given to the children of Israel as a law for ever unto their generations.*

What is the reason behind the call to strict obedience to the law of Israel’s god? It is because the heavenly community is committed to do the same and have done so long before Israel was commanded to join the company.

***JUB.* 6:30-38**

In this second pericope, once again I will divide the text according to the logical breaks for the purposes of organizing the material. First, heavenly origin is established in 6:30b-31:

*Thus it is engraven and ordained on the heavenly tablets. And there is no neglecting (this commandment) for a single year or from year to year.*

Just as the validity of Moses’ tabernacle is established by its original that is in heaven (Heb. 8:5), so this 364 day earthly calendar is to be observed because of its heavenly origins.  Once again the idea of the supremacy of the law is set forth and validated in this section.

Second, the number of days in the full year is set forth in 6:32-33a. Wintermute is once again helpful here: *The author believed that there was a theological value inherent in certain special times. Unlike modern man, he did not limit himself to the quantitative measuring or counting of days from an arbitrary starting point. For him, the days are also to be divided on a qualitative scale with respect to their sanctity. Some days were sacred and others profane.*[[11]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn11) None of the feasts ever fell on the Sabbaths:

*That they observe the years according to this reckoning – three hundred and sixty-four days, and (these) will constitute a complete year, and they will not disturb its time from its days and from its feasts.*

No Sabbath, as **the greatest of all feasts of Israel**, ought to be overshadowed by other holiday activities that Israel’s god decreed.  Strict obedience to the Law simply meant that all the commandments were to be obeyed. To celebrate Sabbath and the Feasts on the same day was to attempt “to kill two birds with one stone.” This was completely unacceptable in view of the nature of the Law and the history of the Covenant people.

Three, the costly consequences of following the wrong counting of days is set forth in 6:33-38:

*They will disturb all their seasons and the years will be dislodged from this (order) … all the children of Israel … will forget the new moons, and seasons, and Sabbaths.*

Forgetting the holy days of YHWH is equal to walking “according to the feasts of the Gentiles after their error and after their ignorance.”

***JUB.* 50:8-13**

The third and last major pericope reemphasizes Israel’s god’s covenant election. But it does not simply restate this fact but goes on to set forth **what exactly constitutes the breaking of the Sabbath**.

First, in this last pericope under consideration, in 50:8-10a our author describes some of the work that is forbidden on the Sabbath, including a prohibition of sexual relations on the Sabbath, speaking about business and drawing water.[[12]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn12)

*Whoever desecrates that day, whoever lies with (his) wife, or whoever says he will do something on it, that he will set out on a journey thereon in regard to any buying or selling: and whoever draws water thereon which he had not prepared for himself on the sixth day.*

The Law cannot be supreme in the life of a human being if on the Sabbath common things are done. All days are YHWH’s, but the **Sabbath has a special seal of approval**. This is the day for self-discipline, for developing trust in God’s provision, for once-a-week confession that Israel’s god is the Lord of this particular covenant-keeper.

Second, he states the reason for the immense importance assigned to keeping the Sabbath in 50:10a:

*For great is the honor which YHWH has given to Israel that they should eat and drink and be satisfied on this festival day.*

Once again the electoral privilege given to Israel by her God is evoked. It is an honor that was not offered to any other people on the face of the earth.  The Sabbath is so holy that **only heavenly work is allowed**. It cannot be contaminated with the good things of this world, but may only be filled with the good things of the world to come.

Third, **the heavenly work (worship)** which is allowed is briefly discussed in 50:10b-12a,

*Rest thereon from all labor which belongs to the labor of the children of men save burning frankincense and bringing oblations and sacrifices before YHWH … This work alone shall be done on the Sabbath-days in the sanctuary of YHWH your God.*

It is not work that is actually forbidden on the Sabbath, but labor. The word for “worship” can after all be translated as work. In this sense it is a work of another kind.

Fourth, more types of work that are forbidden are listed in 50:12b-13a. The author states that,

*… every man who does any work thereon, or goes on a journey, or tills (his) farm, whether in his house or any other place, and whoever lights a fire, or rides on any beast, or travels by ship on the sea, and whoever strikes or kills anything, or slaughters a beast or a bird, or whoever catches an animal or a bird or a fish, or whoever fasts or makes war on the Sabbaths …*

can not be a part of the covenant-keeping community that the author of Jubilees envisioned. As we will see later, the Maccabean wars will form a special challenge to the various Jewish communities of the time.  All of them would be coping with the issues in different ways.  Some would alter their Sabbath practice radically, some would do so moderately and some like this group would stay with the traditional interpretation and be a witness among the people in an age of compromise.

Fifth, the summary-conclusion follows in 50:13b with a stern reminder of the **penalty of Sabbath breaking**, the electoral responsibility of the children of Israel to the land of YHWH, a recollection of the Sabbath’s heavenly origin, and the correct numbering/division of time:

*The man who does any of these things on the Sabbath shall die, so that the children of Israel shall observe the Sabbaths according to the commandments regarding the Sabbaths of the land, as it is written in the tablets, which He gave into my hands that I should write out for thee the laws of the seasons, and the seasons according to the division of their days. Herewith is completed the account of the division of the days.*

Keeping the right festival on the right day was a core, rather than a peripheral issue in the minds of at least some representatives of the Jewish community of the Late Second Temple Period. The **penalty for Sabbath-breaking was death**, signifying once again the supremacy of the Law in general and the nature of the covenant sign belonging to it in particular. When “stealing” (Lev. 6:2-7) and even “rape/premarital sex” (Deut. 22:28-29) are punishable with correctional deeds, but Sabbath-breaking with the ultimate penalty (death), one is forced to acknowledge the disproportionate significance of this commandment compared to many others and hence to consider what it represents to the people of Israel.

[[1]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref1) There are several schools of thought with regards to what actually constitutes Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. Namely, Protestants and Catholics have defined those names differently. Apocrypha, the books of similar age to those in the Canon, are called deuterocanonical by Catholic theologians. Pseudepigrapha are the collections of books of the late second temple period that are usually attributed to Biblical figures. These terms in many ways have outlived themselves and at times are more confusing than helpful.

[[2]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref2) See Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 79.

[[3]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref3) See Allen Lane, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 507.

[[4]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref4) See Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 73.

[[5]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref5) James VanderKam, “Book of *Jubilees*,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* Vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday,1992), 1030.

[[6]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref6) Interestingly enough, these were the three sins that the Jewish Christians gathered in Jerusalem warned against when writing to the Gentile converts about what they may or may not do (Acts 15:20, 29).

[[7]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref7) See Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 451.

[[8]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref8) See Doering, “The Concept of the Sabbath,” 190.

[[9]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref9) Ibid.

[[10]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref10) *Erub* is a special structure that is jointly owned and is shared by several families that live near by, which allows for getting food in and out of the house in a way that does not technically break the letter of the Sabbath commandment.

[[11]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref11) Wintermute, “*Jubilees*,” 38.

[[12]](https://israelstudycenter.com/the-book-of-jubilees-and-the-sabbath/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref12) This is another link with the *Damascus* *Document*.