

Is Shabbat Part of Nature? Greeks, Romans and Jews on the Day of Rest

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Genesis 2:1-3

The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array.

On the seventh day God finished the work that had been undertaken: [God] ceased on the seventh day from doing any of the work.

And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy—having ceased on it from all the work of creation that God had done.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, From the Sacks Haggadah

The most compelling impact of Egypt was the enactment of freedom in time: the threefold sabbatical structure of the seventh day, the seventh year, and the Jubilee, the year that marked the completion of seven septennial cycles. Despite attempts of historians to trace a connection to the Babylonian calendar, the Sabbath was an unprecedented innovation. It meant that one day in seven all hierarchies of wealth and power were suspended. No one could be forced to work: not employees, or slaves, or even domestic animals. In the seventh year, debts were remitted and slaves sent free. In the Jubilee – when the shofar was sounded, proclaiming “liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants” (Lev. 25:10) – all ancestral land was returned to its original owners. The logic of these laws is simple: “For the Israelites belong to Me as servants; they are My servants whom I brought out of Egypt” (ibid. 25:25). Those who are servants to God may not be slaves to man

Agatharchades (2nd century B.C.E., he is the first Greek writer to mention the Sabbath)

The people known as Jews ... have a custom of abstaining from work every seventh day; on those occasions they neither bear arms nor take any agricultural operations in hand, nor engage in any other form of public service, but pray with outstretched hands in the temples until the evening. Consequently, because the inhabitants, instead of protecting their city, persevered in their folly (*anoian*), Ptolemy, son of Lagus, was allowed to enter with his army; the country was thus given over to a cruel master, **and the defect of a practice enjoined by law was exposed**. That experience has taught the whole world, except that nation, the lesson not to resort to dreams and traditional fancies about the law, until the difficulties are such as to baffle human reason.

Tacitus, Histories 5:4:3

11 They say that they first chose to rest on the seventh day because that day ended their toils; but after a time they were led by the charms of indolence to give over the seventh year as well to inactivity.

Josephus, Wars of the Jews, 7:43

[In reference to Antiochus, a governor from the time of the Great Revolt] having next procured the aid of troops from the Roman general, domineered with severity over his Jewish fellow-citizens, **not permitting them to rest on the seventh day, but compelling them to do everything exactly as on the other days**; and so



strictly did he enforce obedience that not only at Antioch was the weekly day of rest abolished, but the example having been started there spread for a time to the other cities as well.

Pliny the Elder, Natural History 31:18 (Rome, 77 C.E dedicated to Vespasian's son, Titus)

In Judæa there is a river that is dry every Sabbath day.

Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Book 7, Chapter 5 (published sometime between 79-81, Rome)

In the course of his march he saw a river, the nature of which deserves to be recorded in history. It runs between Arcea, located in Agrippa's kingdom and Raphanea, and has an astonishing peculiarity. For, when it flows, it is a copious stream with a current far from sluggish; then all at once its sources fail and for the space of six days it presents the spectacle of a dry bed; again, as though no change had occurred, it pours forth on the seventh day just as before. And it has always been observed to keep strictly to this order; whence they have called it the Sabbatical river, so naming it after the sacred seventh day of the Jews.

Sefer Ha'agadah 492:66

The Turnus Rufus (the red tyrant) asked R. Akiva: How does the Sabbath day differ from other days?

The latter replied: How does one man differ from other men?

Rufus: In that the emperor chooses to honor me [and not other men].

R. Akiva: So, too, the King of kings chooses to honor it.

Rufus: What I meant was: Who decides that this day is the Sabbath?

R. Akiva: It is proved by the fact that the river Sambatyon, which flows so swiftly on weekdays that it pulls up stones from its bed does not pull them up on the Sabbath, when it rests.

Rufus: For your proof, you go as far afield as the wind?

R. Akiva: A necromancer will be my proof, for he can raise a ghost on any weekday, but not on the Sabbath. Or your father's grave will be my proof, for it emits no smoke on the Sabbath.

Rufus: [By speaking of such proof], you shame, disgrace and revile my father!

At that, Rufus went off and made the test with his own father. Every day he raised him, but on the Sabbath he could not raise him. After the Sabbath he again raised him and asked him, "Have you become a Jew since you died?" The father replied, "He who does not observe the Sabbath when he is in your world can do so by his own choice, but here he is compelled to observe it."

Rufus: And what labor do you perform on weekdays?

The father: On weekdays we are punished, but on the Sabbath we are allowed to rest.

Rufus came back to R. Akiva and asked him: If God wishes to honor the Sabbath, as you say, let Him not cause winds to blow on that day, let Him not cause rain to come down on that day, let Him not cause grass to grow on that day.

R. Akiva: May the breath of such a man be blasted out! I will tell you a parable to explain the matter: When only one man lives in a courtyard, he is allowed to carry things anywhere in the courtyard. So too, since the entire world, all of it, belongs to him, and no one else shares this domain with him, He is free to carry things on the Sabbath throughout the world, through every part of it.

Sifre Devarim 42 (on Deuteronomy 11:14, וְנָתַתִּי מִטְר־אֶרְצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ) I will grant the rain for your land in season:

R. Natan says: "in its season:--each and every Friday night, as it rained in the days of Queen Helena.

רבי נתן אומר: "בעתו" - מלילי שבת ללילי שבת, כדרך שירדו בימי הילני המלכה

