

WHEN DOES THE SABBATH BEGIN?

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When the Sabbath begins is of great importance because God commands us to keep holy the Sabbath day, as well as the seven annual Sabbath days (found within the seven Feasts of Israel; Lev. 23:1-44). At the very least this means that we must not be working, nor buying or selling when the Sabbath begins, and of course, we cannot be doing those things until the Sabbath ends. When we know when the biblical Sabbath begins we'll also know the time when it ends because the beginning of one day obviously also marks the end of the previous day.

The two most common positions for when the biblical day begins are sunset and darkness. Traditional Judaism teaches that the Sabbath begins at sunset,¹ but that the Sabbath ends at darkness, when one can see at least two or three major stars in the sky on Saturday *night*.² If the Sabbath ends at darkness, the other days should end at darkness as well. The biblical day ends at darkness and the next day obviously begins at that time. This understanding is not based only on rabbinic thought for when the biblical day ends, but Scripture as well.

Biblically, Creation Week sets the standard or pattern for when a day begins and ends. Before the light of the first day there was only darkness. This is seen in Genesis 1:2, 4-5:

²“The Earth was without form and void,³ and *darkness* was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over *the face of the waters*.³ Then God said, ‘Let there be light!’, and there was light,⁴ and God saw the light, that it was good, and God divided the light from the *darkness*.⁵ God called the light day, and the *darkness* He called *night*. So, the *evening* (i.e. darkness) and the morning were the first day.” (Genesis 1:2-5)

Verse two speaks of darkness being upon the deep and the Spirit of God hovering over the waters. In Hebraic thought or parallelism *the waters* are equated with, of just another way of saying ‘*the deep*.’⁴ This means that the waters were dark or black. In other words, there was no light at that time.

God spoke and light came (v. 3). God divided the light from the darkness (v. 4). Obviously, there was no twilight period or sunset that *preceded* the darkness.

¹ Jewish tradition says to light the Sabbath lights 18 minutes before *sundown*, but that's their tradition of making a *fence* around the commandment so that one doesn't inadvertently sin by lighting a fire on the Sabbath (Ex. 35:1-3). The Rabbis chose to light the Sabbath candles 18 minutes *before sunset* because the number 18 is symbolic. The two Hebrew letters, which make up '18,' are יח (pronounced *hie*), and spell *life*.

² This applies for the annual holy days as well (see Leviticus 23:54).

³ In stating that the Earth was without form and void, Scripture is saying that nothing had been created yet. An Earth that is ‘without *form* and *void*’ is something that obviously doesn't exist. Try to imagine an Earth (or anything physical) without form—it's not there; it doesn't exist. Verse one (‘In the Beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth’) is the chapter heading for what follows. It's not that there was a world that existed before the creation of this Heaven and this Earth. Some think there were other worlds or universes before this one, or that the Earth had people on it that God destroyed, and then He created Adam, but they project their imagination into verses one and two, not understanding what God is saying.

⁴ These *waters* are not created waters, for nothing of Creation has been created yet. These waters (and the deep) represent the dwelling place of God the Father. This is seen from the account of Day Two, where God separates the upper *waters* (where He dwells), from the lower waters (of Creation), with the *firmament* separating the two (Gen. 1:6-8f.). For more on *waters* picturing the Father ask for the PDF *Yahveh and the Waters of Creation*.

In verse five God calls the light day and the darkness night, and says that the *evening* and the morning were the first day. The term *evening* here, obviously means darkness, not twilight. The word *darkness* is equated with *night* ('God divided the light from the darkness'), and being in the same passage as *evening* and the first day means that *darkness*, not sunset or twilight, begins the biblical day.

Even though the sun wasn't created until Day Four, this pattern of '*evening* (darkness) and day (light)' continues for the first six days of Creation (Gen. 1:8, 13-14, 16, 18-19, 23, 31; the pattern isn't mentioned for the seventh day; Gen. 1:31–2:1-3). If *evening* in Genesis speaks of twilight (the time between sunset and darkness, as those who think sunset marks the end of a day), then there is no *night* time or darkness in the Creation account. Evening in Creation speaks of darkness.

This pattern of first darkness and then light also reveals a theological reality. First there is darkness (sin) and then light (redemption). Man is born into the darkness of sin, but redeemed by the Light of holiness when he is Born Again.⁵

The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* specifically speaks of *erev* (evening) in the Genesis account equaling darkness.⁶ In Genesis there is no sunset or twilight mentioned that acts as the end of a day, only *evening*, which in these cases equate with darkness. The Hebrew term for *evening* is עֶרֶב *erev*, which has various meanings in Scripture, depending on the context, with darkness and twilight being two of them.

Each day of Creation began in darkness because before there was light on the first day of Creation; there was only darkness at first, and all the days of Creation follow this pattern. One day ends at darkness and the next day begins at darkness. Alfred Edersheim, the distinguished 19th century Jewish-Christian authority on Messiah Yeshua, the Temple in Jerusalem, Jewish culture, Talmud and Pharisaic teachings in relation to the teaching of Yeshua, said it's,

“noteworthy that in Gen. 1 we always read, ‘And the evening and the morning were the first day,’ or the second, or third day, etc. Hence, the Jews calculate the day *from evening to evening*, that is, from the first appearance of the stars in the evening’ (i.e. darkness; no sunlight) ‘to the first appearance of stars (the) next evening’ (i.e. darkness; no sunlight), ‘and not, as we do, from midnight to midnight.’”⁷

The Creation account offers the pattern for when the biblical day begins. It reveals that the line of demarcation between a day occurs at darkness, not sunset. This understanding is supported by when the sacrifice of the Passover lamb took place.

Passover — When was the Lamb Sacrificed?

Another biblical perspective that supports the day ending at darkness and the next day beginning at the same time is the ancient commandment of when the Passover lamb was to be sacrificed (Dt. 16:2, 4). Scripture states that it was to be sacrificed ‘between the (two) evenings’ on 14 Aviv.⁸

⁵ The Light of the First Day is that of Messiah Yeshua, *coming forth* from the midst of the Godhead as the uniquely *begotten* Son of God. Yeshua is at one and the same time both the Light and Word of Day One (i.e. the Light of God and the Word of God; John 1:1-9; 8:12, 42; 16:27-28, 30; 17:8; Rev. 19:13, etc.). For an article on Yeshua being this Light and Word from eternity past, see *Yeshua—God the Son* at <http://seedofabraham.net/Yeshua-God-the-Son.pdf>.

⁶ R. L. Harris, editor; Gleason Archer, Jr. and Bruce Waltke, associate editors, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Accordance Bible Software), n.p. “עֶרֶב (*erev*) evening, night. This supports *erev* in Genesis One as being *darkness*.”

⁷ Alfred Edersheim, *Bible History: Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), p. 12, note 2.

¹“Now Yahveh spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, ²“This month shall be your beginning of months.⁹ It shall be the first month of the year to you. ³Speak to all the Congregation of Israel, saying: ‘On the tenth (day) of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb, according to the house of his father, a lamb for a household. ⁶Now you shall keep it until the 14th day of the same month (i.e. 14 *Aviv*). Then the whole assembly of the Congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at *twilight* (literally, ‘between the evenings’). ⁸Then they shall eat the flesh *on that night* (15 *Aviv*), roasted in fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs they shall eat it.’” (Exodus 12:1-3, 6, 8)

Verse six (‘you shall keep it until the 14th day...and slaughter it at twilight’) speaks of twilight on 14 *Aviv* (*Abib* in English Bibles) as being the time of the lamb sacrifice. In Hebrew *twilight* is בֵּין הָעֶרְבַּיִם *bain ha’ar’byim* (literally, ‘between the evenings’ or *between* the two evenings), the time between sunset and darkness. Sunset is seen as one evening and darkness is seen as the other evening. This understanding of twilight being between the two evenings is brought out in a number of Hebrew lexicons:

1. *The Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* states that *between the evenings* is “the time between sunset and nightfall; the evening twilight.”¹⁰
2. Harris, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, writes that, “‘Evenings were quite important for sacrificial acts and ceremonial meals in ancient Israel. The Passover (sacrifice) began on the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month (see Ex. 12:6, 18). Sometimes, as in Ex. 12:6, the Hebrew reads, ‘between the two evenings,’ likely ‘twilight,’ the time interval between sunset and darkness in which there is a state of illumination.”¹¹
3. *The Hebrew and English Lexicon* states of the “phrase בֵּין הָעֶרְבַּיִם *between the two evenings*, i.e. prob. between sunset and dark.”¹²

With *between the evenings* being twilight, and the lamb commanded to be sacrificed at that time, if the biblical day ends at sunset, ‘between the evening’ (twilight) for day 14 would be at the **beginning** of day 14 (immediately after *sunset* of day 13). This would mean that the sacrifice of the Passover lamb would take place *more than a day before the lamb was to be eaten* (on the night of day 15). Exodus 12:10 and Deuteronomy 16:4, though, state that none of the lamb was to be eaten or *remain to the next day* (morning), so twilight must belong at the *end* of each day; the lamb being sacrificed at the *end* of day 14 in the twilight, not at the beginning of day 14:

“You must let none of it (i.e. the lamb) remain until morning, and what remains of it until morning you must burn with fire.” (Exodus 12:10)

“...nor shall any of the meat which you sacrifice the first day at twilight remain overnight until morning.” (Deuteronomy 16:4)

If the biblical day ends at darkness, the sacrifice of the lamb between the (two) evenings on day 14 means

⁸ 14 *Aviv* is day 14 of the first biblical month, which today in Judaism is known as *Nisan*. The name change to *Nisan* came about during the Babylonian captivity. *Nisan* is the English way of saying the first Babylonian month. For an article on the four ancient Hebrew names for the biblical months, and the current names of the Jewish months and their Babylonian counterparts, ask for *Hebrew Months*.

⁹ That name of the first month is *Aviv* (Ex. 13:4; 23:15; 34:18; Dt. 16:1).

¹⁰ Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, authors; M. Richardson, translator, *The Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Boston, MA USA: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), p. 878.

¹¹ R. L. Harris, editor; Gleason Archer, Jr. and Bruce Waltke, associate editors, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. II (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 694.

¹² Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, based on the lexicon of Wilhelm Gesenius; Edward Robinson, translator and E. Rodiger, editor, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Abridged; Accordance Bible Software), n.p.

that it would be slaughtered at the *end* of day 14 because that would be the only time when day 14 has twilight. A few hours later, after it has been skinned and roasted over the fire, it's eaten as one of the three main foods for the Passover meal (Ex. 12:8). Any of the lamb that is left at morning (still 15 *Aviv*) would be burned in the fire.

The Passover meal is eaten on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, day 15 (15 *Aviv*), in the darkness of night (about 8-9 PM). This is seen from God telling Israel to be prepared to leave Egypt the *night* they ate the first Passover, which is 15 *Aviv*, because He was going to go through Egypt on that night, slay Egypt's first born sons, and Israel would leave about dawn on 15 *Aviv*. These next passages of Scripture also confirm that the Passover meal was not eaten at any time on 14 *Aviv*, twilight at the beginning of 14 *Aviv* cannot be biblical, which means that sunset cannot be the line of demarcation between one day and the next:

“And thus you must eat it; with a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. *You must eat it in haste. It is Yahveh's Passover.* ‘For I will *pass over* the land of Egypt on that *night* (when the Passover meal is eaten) and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast, and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment! I am Yahveh!’...So you must observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, *for on this same day* I will have brought your armies out of the land of Egypt. Therefore, you must observe this day throughout your generations as an everlasting ordinance.” (Ex. 12:10-12, 17; see also Ex. 12:37-38; Lev. 23:4-6)

“They (the Sons of Israel) departed from Rameses in the first month, on the **15th** day of the first month—on the day after (the night of) the Passover¹³ (meal), the Sons of Israel went out with boldness in the sight of all the Egyptians.” (Numbers 33:3; cf. Dt. 16:1)

If sunset were the time when a biblical day ended, and twilight began the next day, they would have slain the lamb on day 14, put the blood on the doorposts on day 14, and would have had to have eaten it that night, on day 14, with Yahveh going through the land of Egypt at midnight on day 14. Day 14, though, was not when Yahveh went through the land. It was day 15:

“Then Moses called for all the Elders of Israel and said to them, ‘Pick out and take lambs for yourselves according to your families, and kill the Passover (lamb). And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin. None of you shall go out of the door of his house *until morning*. For Yahveh will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, Yahveh will pass over the door and not allow the destroyer to come into your houses to strike you.’” (Exodus 12:21-23)

“And it came to pass at *midnight* that Yahveh struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of livestock. So Pharaoh rose in the *night*, he, all his servants, and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where there was not one dead. Then he called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said, ‘Rise! Go out from among my people, both you and the Sons of Israel! Go! Serve Yahveh as you have said. Take your flocks and your herds and be gone! And bless me also!’ And the Egyptians urged the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste. For they said, ‘We shall all be dead!’” (Exodus 12:29-33)

Israel left Egypt on 15 *Aviv*, having sacrificed the Passover lamb on 14 *Aviv*, at the end of the day, at twilight. They ate the Passover lamb that night, on 15 *Aviv*; Yahveh killed all the firstborn of Egypt at midnight; Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron while it was still dark (perhaps 4 AM?) and Israel began

¹³ Or it could be interpreted, ‘on the day after the Passover (sacrifice of the lamb).’

leaving Egypt about dawn, as the sun was coming up, on 15 *Aviv*. Israel walked out, was redeemed from Egypt, in the Light.

Between the (two) evenings is the time between sunset and darkness (i.e. twilight). The sacrifice of the Passover lamb must be at the *end* of 14 *Aviv*, not at the beginning of it because if it's at the beginning than the Sons of Israel couldn't have eaten it immediately after it was roasted, but instead would have had to have waited more than a day to eat the lamb on 15 *Aviv*. With God stating that none of the lamb was to remain overnight, sunset, as a marker for when the day ends and another day begins, is not biblical. This means that the period of twilight is the last part of a biblical day, ending at dark, with the next new day beginning at darkness.¹⁴

The Day of Atonement Begins in Darkness

Another biblical perspective that reveals when the biblical day begins is the Day of Atonement. It's observed on the 10th day of the seventh biblical month. God speaks of it beginning in the evening of the 9th, which has to mean the end of the 9th day, when the 9th day gives way to the 10th day, because the Day is only observed on day 10, not day 9, and it continues for a full day until the end of the 10th, at evening (darkness), which begins the 11th day:

“...the 10th day of this seventh month shall be the Day of Atonement. It shall be a holy convocation for you—you must afflict your souls and offer a sacrifice made by fire to Yahveh. You must do no work on this day for it is the Day of Atonement—to make atonement for you before Yahveh your God. Any person who is not afflicted in soul on this day shall be cut off from his people. Any person who does any work on this day I will destroy from among his people. You must do no manner of work. This shall be a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. It shall be to you a Sabbath of solemn rest and you shall afflict your souls—on the 9th day of the month at *evening*, from *evening to evening*, you must celebrate your Sabbath. (Leviticus 23:27-32)

From *evening to evening* speaks of darkness to darkness, as the Day of Atonement is all of the 10th day, but not part of the 9th day, but begins at the darkness at the end of the 9th day.

Josephus and the Sabbath

Josephus (37-100 AD) was a Jewish scholar and historian who was born in Jerusalem seven years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Messiah Yeshua. Josephus was also one of the descendants of Aaron (i.e. he was a priest) and he lived during the time when the Temple in Jerusalem still stood. He would write of Jewish ways and Temple practices. He spoke of the Sabbath day beginning at darkness, with a priest blowing a silver trumpet (Num. 10:1-10) during the twilight of Friday to announce the approaching Sabbath:

“one of the priests...gave a signal *beforehand*, with a trumpet, at the beginning of every seventh day, *in the evening twilight*, as also at the evening (darkness) when the day was *finished*, as giving notice to the people when they were to leave off work, and when they were to go to work again.”¹⁵

¹⁴ As important as the sacrifice of the Passover lamb is, the day it's sacrificed on, 14 *Aviv*, is not a yearly Sabbath. The next day, 15 *Aviv*, when the Passover meal is eaten *and* when the Sons of Israel left the darkness of Egypt, is the first annual Sabbath of the year (i.e. the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread). This explains why day 15 is also the day when Yeshua was crucified, for in His crucifixion all His followers left the Kingdom of Satan.

How to Determine Darkness

If we lived in the days of Fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob we would be able to clearly see when twilight gives way to darkness. For those living in or near a city it's much harder because of all the electric lights that come on during twilight, but we can be fairly sure of when the Sabbath begins and ends, from either of these two points:

1. Look to the west (where the sun sets) to determine when twilight gives way to darkness. You might want to practice going outside towards the end of twilight and staying there until you realize that it's dark on the western horizon (no rays or light of the sun on the horizon). This way you'll be able to determine how long from sunset to darkness it would be for Shabat on Friday and Saturday nights. From sunset to darkness it can be anywhere from 40 to 100 minutes, depending on the season and how close one is to the equator. If you'll click on this, <https://www.timeanddate.com/astronomy/usa/tulsa> and place your country and city in it (substituting your country and city for where it has "usa/tulsa" you'll see "Night, Twilight, and Daylight Times in" your city "Today" and to its right a listing from 'Night' onward for that day. As you move your cursor over the 'Night' and other listing you'll see how it marks out the bar on the left. At the bottom of the listing is 'Astro. Twilight' for the evening; when it begins and ends. At the beginning of Astro. Twilight is when it should be completely dark in your area.
2. Every Jewish calendar notes when each Shabat officially ends, according to the Rabbis. This information can be found on the Internet. The time is nowhere near when their Sabbath candle lighting time is listed the day before, on Friday night, but the Saturday night time tells us when they believe a day actually ends (at dark). Their time every Saturday night is a fairly good gauge to go by for when the Sabbath on Friday night (the night before), actually begins because from one night to another it's a little less than a minute difference for the sun to set. For example, if the Jewish calendar for your area says that the Sabbath ends on Saturday night at 7:01 PM, you can be certain that the Sabbath began no earlier than 7:00 PM on Friday night. With this rabbinic time for ending Shabat it's good to add 10 minutes to it because even with seeing two or three major stars in the sky there still may be some light on the horizon.

The weekly Sabbath begins on Friday night when the rays of the sun cannot be seen on the western horizon and ends the same way the following night. If you light Sabbath lights for Friday night you'll want to light them before dark. A good rule of thumb is to light them 15 minutes after sunset. You don't want to light them after darkness because it's a sin to kindle a fire on God's 7th day Sabbath day (Ex. 35:1-3),¹⁶ for He is holy Fire (Exodus 19:16f.; Lev. 9:23–10:6; Deuteronomy 4:24; Hebrews 12:29).

¹⁵ Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, book 4, chapter 9, p. 583.

¹⁶ In the blessing for lighting the lights we don't go by what the Rabbis say, that God *commands* us to light the *Sabbath* lights, because God doesn't command us to do that. We can use the format of the traditional blessing, but change it to this: 'Blessed are You, Yahveh our God, eternal King, who has given us the commandments and who has commanded us *to keep the Sabbath day holy*.' Then pray and thank the Lord for the Sabbath day, and as people come to mind, ask him to bless them. Then go out and blow the shofar as loud as you can to let the neighbors know that it's the Sabbath, and shout, 'Shabat Shalom!' Some may eventually respond back with 'Shabat Shalom!' Then sing and praise the Lord Yeshua, and thank Him for Creation and Redemption, the very themes of the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11; Dt. 5:12-15).

Blessed are You, Yahveh our God, King of the Universe, who has made us holy by His commandments and commanded us to keep the Sabbath... Yeshua, we love You.

Baruch Atah Yahveh, Elohaynu Melech HaOlam, Asher Kid'dashanu B'Mitz'votav, Vitzi'vanu Lishmor, Et HaShabat... Yeshua, Anachnu O'havim O'ti'cha.

ברוך אתה יהוה אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו לשמור את השבת... ישוע אנחנו אוהבים אותך

Conclusion

Even though traditional Judaism says that sunset is the time when the Sabbath begins (and so they light their candles 18 minutes before that), Judaism teaches that the Sabbath isn't over until one can see two or three major stars in the sky, which means the Sabbath ends at darkness, not at sunset, with the next day (the first day of the week; i.e. 'Sunday') beginning at darkness on Saturday night.

Creation Week scripturally sets the pattern for the day beginning in darkness, and therefore, ending at darkness. This was confirmed with the Passover lamb being sacrificed *between the evenings* of 14 Aviv, and being eaten a few hours later on the next day (15 Aviv) in the night time. If sunset ended a day, twilight (between the evenings) would be at the beginning of each day, and consequently, the lamb would have been slain more than 24 hours before it was to be eaten. With God saying that nothing of the lamb was to remain over into the next morning, the idea that sunset ends a day proves unbiblical. Alfred Ederseim confirmed that the days begins and ends at darkness when he wrote,

“the Jews calculate the day from evening to evening, that is, from the first appearance of the stars in the evening to the first appearance of stars (the) next evening.”

The Day of Atonement further supported that darkness begins and ends a biblical day. God spoke of beginning the Day of Atonement at the end of the ninth, *in the evening of the 9th* (i.e. when the 9th ended at darkness), for the keeping of the Day is the 10th, not any part of the 9th (although one certainly prepares to enter into the Day at that time). If sunset ended the day then the evening of the 9th would be at the beginning of the 9th, and one would have to wait 24 hours to observe the Day of Atonement.

Josephus adds to this understanding, writing of a priest at the Temple, blasting the silver trumpet,

“at the beginning of every seventh day, *in the evening twilight*, as also at the evening when the day was finished.”

Obviously, it was past sunset when the priest blew the trumpet to announce the approaching Sabbath.

Creation; the sacrifice and the eating of the Passover lamb; the Day of Atonement, Alfred Edersheim and Josephus all speak of the biblical day beginning at darkness, not sunset.¹⁷

¹⁷ This article was created on 26 February 2016 and last revised on 19 November 2016.