

## The Sabbath

**Erich Fromm  
(1927a)**

Translation from the German by Susan Kassouf



*Unlike his other pieces written in German, Erich Fromm never attempted later to make this first psychoanalytic publication from 1927 also available in English. There appear to be primarily two reasons for this:*

*Fromm wrote the essay »The Sabbath« out of an outright enthusiasm for Freud's drive theory. Fromm applied Freud's theories of the incestuous Oedipal struggle within the individual and, by projection, in the history of humankind to the religious and cultural phenomenon of the Sabbath rest. Just three years later in the essay The Dogma of Christ, Fromm was himself sharply critical of such an application of psychoanalysis to religious phenomena, because it did not take the actual historical practice of life as its starting point for a psychoanalytic interpretation of religious phenomena. We can therefore assume that Fromm's own psychoanalytic method and theory deterred him from translating this 1927 interpretation of the Sabbath rest into English.*

*This did not prevent Fromm, however, from grappling anew with the Jewish commandment of the Sabbath rest. In his 1951 book The Forgotten Language (1951a, pp. 241–249), Fromm interprets the symbolic language of rituals in the section »The Sabbath Ritual,« without referring to the earlier essay from 1927.*

*The idea that the Sabbath ritual symbolizes the union between man and nature is crucial here, too, yet the rituals are not linked with sacrificial parricide and sin offering, but rather with man's existential situation: »The Sabbath symbolizes a state of union between man and nature and between man and man. By not working – that is to say, by not participating in the process of natural and social change – man is free from the chains of time, although only for one day a week.« (Ibid., p. 245.) Fromm returns to this idea in his 1966 book You Shall Be as Gods (1966a, pp. 193–201).*

*It is thus primarily for reasons of biography and scholarly history that the 1927 essay, translated by Susan Kassouf, is being published now in English. The*

essay shows a young Erich Fromm, inspired by Freud's psychoanalysis, who shortly before (1926) had turned away from his father's religion and broken with the practice of Jewish ritual. Fromm's questioning of Freud's drive theory soon after the publication of »The Sabbath« and the development of his own social-psychoanalytic understanding of psychoanalysis qualifies the assertions in this essay. »The Sabbath« nevertheless represents an important document for Fromm research as it shows how knowledgeable Fromm was of Freudian psychoanalysis at the time.

(Rainer Funk)

The institution of a weekly day of rest seems for social and hygienic reasons such a self-evident recommendation that it might not appear to require further clarification through depth psychology. But, if we turn to the institution of the Sabbath as it developed by the Israelite prophets, in the Bible and in later Jewish tradition, a series of very urgent and as yet unresolved questions immediately arise.

If the Sabbath should be a day of rest and relaxation for man, if the prohibition on work is to be seen as a benefit and not a deprivation, then how can some of the prohibitions that hold for this day, which visibly tend in the opposite direction, be explained? Thus, the effect of the biblical prohibitions against cooking and baking on the Sabbath (Ex 16:23), leaving the house (Ex 16:29), or lighting a fire (Ex 35:3), is certainly *not one of relief but rather of hardship*, which we would sooner expect on a day of mourning or atonement (see J. Hehn, 1907; M. Jastrow, 1898; G. Beer, 1908); *these are after all typical rites of mourning and penance* which we are used to finding otherwise in the Jewish religion as well as in other religious traditions (see for example the Jewish instructions for mourning the death of close relatives below).

This somber, anxious, ascetic tone of the Sabbath laws does not disappear in the later rabbinical development of Judaism. Although on the one hand, the Sabbath in growing measure comes to serve relaxation, becoming a »day of pleasure« on which the body, too, should receive its due with ample food and sleep; yet, on the other hand, the opposite tendency remains apparent, indeed to some extent it continues to intensify.

This is how in the time of the Maccabees one came to the – admittedly, neither practicable nor durable – conclusion that on the Sabbath one may not defend oneself against military attacks, even if they should cost one's life (1 Macc 2:34 ff.; 2 Macc 5:25 ff; 6:11). The prohibition on work was extended so far for example that it appeared punishable to even pick an ear of grain or carry even the lightest object across the street. In the Book of Jubilees 50:8 (from the last decades of the second century BC) marital relations between husband and wife on the Sabbath are prohibited. Moreover, healing the mildly

sick was forbidden as was originally probably any healing at all. A clear parallel to the ancient Arabic mourning customs (see also Deut 21:12) is offered by the following »work« prohibition in the Mishnah: »He who cuts his nails (...) and likewise his hair and likewise his mustache and likewise his beard and likewise she who braids (her hair) and likewise paints (her eyelids) and likewise puts rouge on (her cheeks), Rabbi Eliezer declares them (all) guilty of sin offerings« (Mishnah, *Sabbath* X, 6).

Our surprise at the peculiar character of these work prohibitions on the Sabbath only grows when we see that violating these prohibitions, which are supposed to promote rest and well-being, are punishable as the highest of crimes by death (on the order of adultery) (Ex 35:2). This severity, which so little befits a humane institution like the day of rest, is further illustrated by the fact that it is prohibited to even touch objects with which forbidden work could happen.

Let us add further that next to circumcision, the Sabbath counted as the fundamental norm, really the criterion for Jewish nationality. Its *ethnic* significance only increases our difficulties in explaining the universal human significance of a day of rest prescribed for social reasons.

The reasons given in the Bible for the Sabbath also offer no clarification. While the reference to bondage in Egypt in the Fifth Book of Moses (Deut 5:15) appears to apply to the modern day of rest, the explanation of the Sabbath given in the Second Book of Moses (Ex 20:11), which connects it with God resting on the seventh day after creation complicates the problem more. If the day of rest was implemented for the benefit and relaxation of man who labored throughout the week, then (from the theological perspective) what sort of almost blasphemous image represents God as the first in need of rest after six days of hard work?

In addition to these questions arising from the peculiar nature of the Sabbath Law itself, other historical questions concerning the development of the Sabbath are no less complicated. Above all is the problem of the link between the Babylonian seventh days, which were days of unhappiness as well as atonement, and the Hebrew Sabbath, which was supposed to be a day of joy; in addition, the link between the Sabbath and the Biblical Day of Atonement, called the Sabbath of Sabbaths; and later images of the Messianic Age, named a »time of total Sabbath«; and finally, its relation to the Christian Sunday, the content of which is no longer a prohibition on work but rather a celebration of Christ's resurrection.

We begin our examination of these questions by establishing what the Biblical-Talmudic literature means by »work.« In contrast to the concept of work today (see for example B. Harms, 1923), which contains a psychological

moment (fatigue, aversion) and an economic moment (a commercial purpose), the Jewish concept of work indicates something specific about the relation between man and nature. The person who performs »work« is not someone who toils or creates economic value, but rather is someone who has an effect on nature in a constructive or destructive sense, that is, someone who changes nature in its substance. In other words: nature is declared taboo, and any change, even simply spatial, made by things and people is »work« that is frowned upon. [Note: The prohibition on work for animals should also be understood from this perspective. As part of nature, they, too, become taboo on the Sabbath.] Changing nature in this way – in the case of agrarian peoples, this primarily means the cultivation of the land – is what the ban on work on the Sabbath attempts to prevent; and the most severe punishment backs this ban.

All work is a subjugation of matter, of maternal substance, by man, and the cultivation of the land in particular is well known to us from some analogies as a symbol of incest. *Therefore, what was originally supposed to be prevented on the Sabbath above all was – dynamically speaking – man’s incestuous subjugation of Mother Earth as well as of Nature in general.* The original character of the Sabbath was thus obviously not a positive one that served rest and relaxation, but rather a negative one marked by renouncing the subjugation of nature. This character of renunciation becomes even clearer if we consider that, given the poor productivity of work in Biblical times, foregoing a day of work also meant renouncing essential goods. Thus, in economic terms, a day of rest necessarily had the character of renunciation.

If the Sabbath originally served as a defense against incestuous tendencies, and if we still glimpse in it elements of atonement, such as the prohibition on fire and cooking, or on coitus, it is not so farfetched to think that the Sabbath also commemorates the primal crime, the incestuously determined parricide. Perhaps God’s rest as the foundation for the Sabbath leads us a step further. Hebrew mythology largely eradicated the memory of the original struggle of the horde with the father and his murder. If vestiges, such as eating the forbidden fruit that could allow Adam to become like God, and building the Tower of Babel, which follows the same idea, recall an original struggle between a Father-God and his sons, then from the start this God appears as the powerful, invincible father who creates the world, that is, who is wed to Mother Earth.

While the Babylonian creation myth (in the fragment by Berossus) still contains the memory of the original parricide, in which Bel ordered one of the gods to cut off his head and mix the flowing blood with the soil to make people and animals (E. Schrader, 1903), the biblical account appears completely silent on the matter. Yet, shouldn’t we see in the story of God resting after his work

of creation a final remembrance of the killing of the father? In the language of dreams and children we are of course familiar with the symbolic equation that rest = death. Thus, we would not be surprised to find a *final echo of a memory of the killing of the father, an otherwise already repressed myth in the Bible*, in the story of God's rest after the last act of creation in which he gives woman to man, which likely conceals how the son wins the mother.<sup>1</sup>

With this answer we would have clarified several difficulties. We would have understood the preventive character of the Sabbath law, the rigor of punishment, the ethnic meaning of the institution, the penitential nature of certain provisions, and »blasphemy« in relation to God's rest. But, much as all of these traits may align with each other and with the explanation given here, they do not align with the following fact. As we saw above, on the one hand the Sabbath has simply remained a dark day of penance and atonement, but – even if this feature continues to shine through – in the course of development it has simultaneously become a day of joyful rest, the basis of one of the most life-affirming achievements of humanity.

Even the prophet Isaiah demanded that the Sabbath be a delight (Is 58:13), and the later development of Judaism gives diverse legal expression to the pleasurable nature of the day. Before the Sabbath begins, it is compulsory to wash one's face, hands and feet with warm water (*Shulchan Aruch*, Orach Chayim, 260); in honor of the Sabbath, one should light candles, dress in good clothes and joyfully greet the Sabbath as one would a king or a bride and groom (*Shulchan Aruch* 262). When visiting the sick, one should speak to them differently than on a work day and emphasize God's great love (*Shulchan Aruch*, 287). On the Sabbath it is forbidden, even if because of study and prayer, to fast longer than six hours (*Shulchan Aruch*, 288); one should enjoy at least three festive meals, eat many and delicious fruits, and not give up the afternoon nap, if it is a habit (*Shulchan Aruch*, 290) In apparent opposition to older tendencies, treating a dangerously ill person (*Shulchan Aruch*, 328), as well violating Sabbath law in cases of mortal danger (*Shulchan Aruch*, 329), is explicitly made a special duty. The clearest transformation of the Sabbath from a day of atonement to one of joy can be seen in the special recommendation for marital relations on this day as belonging to the enjoyments of the Sabbath

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1 The connection between the institution of the Sabbath with the phases of the moon and the moon cult will not be explored here further. Recall the fact, however, that in Babylonia and South Arabia the bull, the ancient Semitic totem animal, was identified with the moon god and the horns represented a prominent feature of the moon god. A day determined by the phases of the moon could therefore very likely commemorate the killing of the father (= totem animal). (Disappearance and return of the moon crescent!) See E. Schrader, 1903, pp. 362 ff.; D. Nielsen, 1904, pp. 110 ff.

(*Shulchan Aruch*, 280). In all of these laws, a vital, positive attitude toward life prevails. The prohibition on work becomes a blessing and the Sabbath becomes the joyful highlight of the week.

How are these opposing tendencies in the institution of the Sabbath to be understood? For historians, they are an unsolvable puzzle that has misled many to either note only one side of the Sabbath or the other. Let us see if the psychoanalytic method can solve this puzzle better! Let us assume that the character of renunciation and deprivation represents only *one* side of the commandment to rest. After all, work is the expression of human need, the struggle with nature and the environment imposed upon man by Mother Earth's deprivations. This character of work is clearly reflected in the myth of man's fall from grace in which he is driven from the Garden of Eden, the garden of pleasure (the womb), auguring the struggle between man and animal, man and soil, and between man and nature in general, and expressing the struggle as work, pain and drives.

Accordingly, the prohibition on work not only has a negative meaning in the sense of preventing incest, but rather conversely it can also serve to restore the paradisiacal state of no work, the harmony of man with nature, the return to the womb. Thus, we could establish the ambivalent, polar character of the prohibition on work, which in addition to the prevention and punishment of incest, simultaneously represents the *restoration of the harmony of the womb* and the lifting of punishment; and ascertaining this contradiction would have brought us to a standstill, had not Freud shown us the way with his dynamic explanation. He writes in: *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (S. Freud, 1926d, p. 113 f.) about obsessional symptoms (and the prohibition on work is undeniably of obsessive nature):

»Two impressions at once emerge from this brief survey of obsessional symptoms. The first is that a ceaseless struggle is being waged against the repressed, in which the repressing forces steadily lose ground. (...) Obsessional neurosis originates, no doubt, in the same situation as hysteria, namely, the necessity of fending off the libidinal demands of the Oedipus complex. (...) But it is subsequently shaped along quite different lines owing to a constitutional factor. The genital organization of the libido turns out to be feeble and insufficiently resistant, so that when the ego begins its defensive efforts the first thing it succeeds in doing is to throw back the genital organization (of the phallic phase), in whole or in part, to the earlier sadistic-anal level. This fact of regression is decisive for all that follows.«

And further (S. Freud, 1926d, p. 118):

»I have already described the general tendency of symptom-formation in obsessional neurosis. It is to give ever greater room to substitutive satisfaction at the expense of frustration. Symptoms which once stood for a restriction of the ego come later on to represent satisfactions as well, thanks to the ego's inclination to synthesis, and it is quite clear that this second meaning gradually becomes the more important of the two.«

These comments by Freud also shed a critical light on our problem. If the Sabbath was originally penance for the primal crime, commemorating the killing of the father and incestuous desire, and if the prohibition on work served on the one hand as punishment for the misdeed, on the other hand as a defense against new incestuous impulses, then measures of protection and prevention gradually take on a character of fulfillment. Through regression to the pregenital level, incest – here, a return to the womb – is nevertheless realized; a day of atonement on which man must forego work becomes a day of pleasure, a day of harmony between man and nature, which brings to fruition exactly that which originally was to have been prevented.

It should not be overlooked that this psychological change in the function of the work prohibition only became possible with certain economic changes. Labor productivity had to have increased so much that one day of rest no longer represented a substantial reduction in the possibility of satisfying needs, and that work was already so intensive and organized that a day without it meant real rest. This sociological factor may have played a role in the fact that historically the fulfillment character of the Sabbath developed later than its preventive character.

Up until this point we have tried to illustrate the fundamental and universal aspects of the institution of the Sabbath, and we have tried to explain psychologically the ambiguity and change in function of the prohibition on work. It will be up to the following to show how this explanation of the historical development of the Sabbath institution fares and in turn is more brightly illuminated by this development.

Among the most important assertions that Friedrich Delitzsch makes in his lecture *Babel und Bibel* (F. Delitzsch 1905, p. 31 ff.) is that about the dependence of the biblical Sabbath on a Babylonian day of rest (*Sabbatu*). In addition to this *Sabbatu*-Day, which likely was celebrated on the fifteenth of every month, the seventh, fourteenth, nineteenth (seven times the seventh day of the previous month), the twenty-first and twenty-eighth day of Elul II (perhaps of

other months, too) play a special role in the Babylonian holiday calendar. The prohibitions common to these days are (according to J. Hehn, 1907, p. 106):

»The shepherd of many peoples may not eat meat that is roasted on coals, bread of ashes, he may not change his robes, he may not wear light-colored clothes, he may not offer any sacrifice. The king should not mount his chariot or speak as a ruler. At sacred sites, the magus may not say any incantations, the doctor should not lay hands on the sick. Issuing an anathema is not possible.«

Instead of »issuing an anathema«, Delitzsch and others translate this as »the day is not suited for any matters at all« (see F. Delitzsch, 1905, p. 62 fn. 18), and Hehn also concedes a possible translation to be »not suited for accomplishing anything at all.«

Even if the name »Sabattu« is not verified as the Babylonian seventh day, in light of the otherwise close relationship between Babylonian and biblical culture, respected authors see a probable connection between these evil days with the Jewish Sabbath. The main objection raised against assuming this connection is the thoroughly different character of both days. On the Babylonian seventh day it is clear enough that the point is not rest as a way to recover from work, but on the contrary these are somber days dedicated to atonement and prayer, to »reconciling the hearts of the gods.« Man should refrain from all of life's comforts,

»from everything which puts him into a happy harmony with the deity, as the renunciation of making sacrifices, which expresses the gods' participation in the meals of man, makes especially clear. All of the rules result in man abasing himself before the deity and acknowledging his powerlessness toward it.« (See J. Hehn, 1907, p. 106.)

For many religious scholars, these days' somber mood of fear informed a critical objection to the connection between the Babylonian days of atonement and the biblical Sabbath; this objection, however, is only possible for those who overlook the ambiguity of the character of the Sabbath itself. Conversely, the assumption of this connection between *Babel und Bibel* only makes the Sabbath's character of atonement and reconciliation clearer. As we could show above, the main feature of the seventh day in Babylon became a still clearly discernible undercurrent even after its later transformation in Israel, which among other things also invigorated the renewed rigor of the Pharisees' Sabbath laws.

In this context, we need not decide if the Sabbath was borrowed from



Babylon or if it is a result of independent development on common soil. It also does not matter if the Hebrew Sabbath, as Jastrow thinks, was in ancient times very similar to the Babylonian day. For us what is important is only the fact that we can accept as the unquestionable conclusion of current research that the development from a Babylonian day of atonement, on which fear of the gods' wrath prohibited doing diverse sorts of work, to the Hebrew Sabbath, which was to later be appreciated as a joyful day of rest for people, left clear traces in the ambiguity of the Sabbath itself, as we indicated above.

This apparent discrepancy between the Babylonian seventh day on the one hand and the Hebrew seventh day on the other, as well as the apparent ambiguity of the character of the Hebrew Sabbath itself, which despite all rational attempts at interpretation has remained as yet inexplicable, may now become less cryptic in light of the psychoanalytic approach illustrated here.

We can draw on yet another religious institution in order to better understand the role atonement plays in the Sabbath laws, namely the Jewish *Day of Atonement*. The character of penance, which completely permeates the essence of the Babylonian days of »rest,« and in part still determines the Jewish institution of the Sabbath, is expressed with total clarity. The Bible (Lev 16:31) says of the day: »It shall be unto you a Sabbath of Sabbaths (a superlative expression of the Sabbath rest), and you shall castigate yourselves.« In later development, the command of castigation is expressed five times as follows (Mishna, *Yoma* VIII, 1): »On the Day of Atonement it is forbidden to eat, to drink, to wash, to put on sandals, or to have intercourse.« It is considered the day of reconciliation with God, the father whom one wishes dead.

On this »Sabbath of Sabbaths« any sort of work is forbidden; and here the prohibition against work very clearly bears an ascetic, prohibitive character in the sense of preventing incest, as shown above. The five castigating prohibitions also point to this: eating and drinking as symbols of the oral incorporation of the father, sexual intercourse as a repetition of incest, are forbidden. Especially telling is the prohibition on putting on sandals, that is, shoes made of leather. Any clothing with leather, in other words, with the skin of the totem animal, is an attempt to identify with the father, and as such forbidden on the Day of Atonement, just like sexual intercourse and work.

The primal crime of killing the father, which apparently should not only be atoned for on this day but should also be repeated symbolically, is also recalled as the center of the sacrificial ritual for the Day of Atonement in the rule (Lev 16:8) that one should cast lots on a goat to kill »for Yahweh«. The killing of God (= the father) is symbolically repeated in the sacrifice of this goat, the totem animal of the Hebrews – and simultaneously also atoned for again in the prohibitions of the day. (See Th. Reik, 1919.)

But the Day of Atonement, like the Sabbath, also exhibits the tendency to transform defensive measures into fulfilling ones. A clear expression of this is that, in addition to the ritual of castigation, the concept of penance increasingly becomes the focus of the institution over the course of development. This penance is called *teshuva*, that is, *return*; analytically speaking: a return to the womb, the repetition of the crime at a pregenital level substitutes for the castigation of the primal crime of incest. While the Day of Atonement may begin with fear and dread, it ends in an atmosphere of cheer, often with singing and dancing; the centuries-long transformation from the Babylonian to the Jewish Sabbath takes place here *in nuce* over the course of one day. (See K. Abraham, 1979, pp. 137–147.)

While at first we found in the rules around the Day of Atonement an expression of the preventive tendencies of the Sabbath laws, characteristic evidence of the Sabbath institution's tendencies toward fulfillment can also be found in the Jewish conceptual world. Thus, it is promised in the Talmud that the Messiah will come only if Israel would for once fully protect the Sabbath. The Talmud simply gives fitting expression here to its conceptions of the Sabbath's special character of fulfillment: the prophets see in the Messianic Age a state in which the struggle between man and nature has found an end. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, a boy shall lead the lion (Is 11:6), the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun (Is 30:26). The paradisiacal state will be restored. If humans had been banished from paradise because he wanted to become like God = the Father, that is, win the mother, and if work was a punishment for this primal crime, then according to the ideas of the prophets, in the Messianic Age man will again live in complete harmony with nature, that is, without the need for work in paradise = womb. Thus, we can see in the rabbinical link between concepts of Messianic and Sabbath time how the drive-satisfying tendency of the work prohibition predominates.

*The institution of the Sabbath takes on a completely new external form in Christianity.* Although the New Testament did not originally lift the ban on work during the Sabbath directly, but rather only censured its hostile severity (Mark 2:23 ff.), it will soon be eliminated as a constitutive moment of the Sabbath and the day of rest will be given new meaning as a day »to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord.« But yet only seemingly a new meaning! If the old Sabbath was meant to commemorate the killing of the father, and if the ban on work was meant to atone for this killing and defend against any similar new impulses, then here the killing of the father is symbolically undone by the memory of the resurrection of the son. Despite all of these changes in the external form of the Sabbath, from a dynamic perspective the Christian day of rest still preserves its old psychic function. (See Th. Reik, 1923.)

If we follow the history of the Jewish Sabbath as well as that of the Christian Sunday further, then we notice that for each specific form of the day of rest it is critical whether the quality of drive satisfaction or drive deprivation prevails. The puritanical Sunday, for example, bore a thoroughly somber, ascetic character which we encountered most clearly in the Babylonian days of rest, while conversely the Jewish Sabbath, as shaped by Hasidism for example, expresses a joyful, drive-affirming state.

At this point, we want to content ourselves with these speculations and not explore further the individual fates of the day of rest in the development of different religions.

Let us summarize in brief the results of this investigation: *The Sabbath was originally intended to commemorate the killing of the father and the conquest of the mother; the prohibition on work represents repentance for the primal crime and its repetition through regression to a pregenital level.* This psychoanalytic interpretation not only let us understand the meaning of the day of rest in psychic-economic terms. It also gave us a dynamic explanation for the inner connection between such conflicting elements in the Jewish institution of the Sabbath and for the historical continuity between the Babylonian, Jewish and Christian days of rest in their, descriptively speaking, so thoroughly divergent forms.

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