

On the Name of the Weekly Day of Rest

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Abstract

In antiquity, Jews developed the concept of a seven-day week with the seventh day, named '*Shabbat*', devoted to rest and worship. This concept was later borrowed by other religions and cultures but the day of rest was shifted to other days of the week. When the name '*Shabbat*' was transmitted through Islam, it continued to denote the name of the seventh day of the week, but no longer the day of rest. When the name was transmitted through Christianity, however, a more complicated situation developed. Some day names derived from '*Shabbat*' now denote the seventh day of the week, but no longer the day of rest and worship, while other names derived from '*Shabbat*' denote the day of rest, but no longer the seventh day of the week. Many terms derived from '*Shabbat*' denote new and unrelated concepts. This paper discusses the etymology and the range of meanings of the root '*sh-b-t*' in biblical and modern Hebrew. It then traces the semantic changes that the day name '*Shabbat*' has undergone upon being borrowed into other languages and cultures. In addition, it examines the names of Saturday obtained from sources other than *Shabbat*.

Introduction

In Hebrew, both biblical and modern, the first six days of the week have no names, only numbers. Saturday, the seventh day and the Jewish day of rest and worship, is the only day of the week that has a name, *Shabbat*. This paper is about that name, *Shabbat*, and what happened to it as the use of the seven-day week spread out about the world.

The name *Shabbat* in Hebrew

The origin of the Biblical word *Shabbat* is uncertain. Many linguists bring up the likely connection with the Babylonian *sapattu* 'feast of the full moon' (Wilson 1937: 242; O'Neil 1978: 35). A possible evidence of an ancient connection of *Shabbat* with the phases of the moon is the command to observe "Sabbaths and new moons", recurring thirteen times in the Hebrew Bible.

The root שבת *sh-b-t* occurs in the Bible as a verb and as a noun. In the English translation the noun is rendered as 'Sabbath' while the verb is usually translated as 'rest', but its basic sense is not simple rest but deliberate desisting from work. In Modern Hebrew one of the meanings of this verb is 'to be on strike'.

Spread of the use of the seven-day week

The use of the seven-day week started with the Jews, probably before 10th century B.C.E. However, its spread over the world was not due to Jews. The modern week was picked up by the Romans in Egypt in the first century B.C.E. in somewhat uncertain circumstances and brought to Rome from where it proliferated throughout the Roman Empire one step ahead of the spread of Christianity (Zerubavel 1989:14).

Later, it was spread farther by the Christians, and later still by the Moslems. Therefore, historically most of the names of the seven days of the week in modern languages fall into three categories:

1. Names of pre-Christian origin.
2. Names of Christian origin.
3. Names of Moslem origin.

We shall examine the present-day names for Saturday that belong to these three categories.

Pre-Christian Names for Saturday

The Roman Empire adopted the seven-day week before the spread of Christianity, using names of the days of the week based on seven Roman deities. The Roman week had no day of rest but *Dies Saturni*, which happened to coincide with the Jewish Shabbat, survives today as the name of Saturday in many European languages, including English (Table 1).

Table 1.
Names for Saturday derived directly from Latin *Dies Saturni*

English	<i>Saturday</i>
Frisian	<i>Saterdei</i>
Dutch	<i>Zaterdag</i>
Afrikaans	<i>Saterdag</i>
Scots Gaelic	<i>Di-Sathairne</i>
Irish Gaelic	<i>De-Sathairn</i>
Manx Gaelic	<i>Jesarn</i>
Breton	<i>De Sadorn</i>
Welsh	<i>Dydd Sadwrn</i>
Cornish	<i>Dy Sadorn</i>
Albanian	<i>Shtunë</i>

From the Roman Empire the names of the seven days of the week made their way eastward. In many of today's languages of South and South-East Asia, the name for Saturday is derived from the Sanskrit *Shani*, Hindu deity corresponding to Roman Saturn (Table 2).

Table 2.
Names for Saturday derived from the Sanskrit *Shani*

Hindi, Marathi	<i>Shanivaar</i>
Bengali	<i>Shonibaar</i>
Punjabi	<i>Shanicharvaar</i>
Nepali	<i>Sansarbaar</i>
Dhivehi	<i>Honihirudivas</i>
Gujarati	<i>Shanivaar</i>
Assamese	<i>Honibaar</i>
Sinhalese	<i>Sinasurada</i>
Oriya	<i>Shonibaar</i>
Tamil	<i>Chani</i>
Telugu	<i>Shanivaaram</i>
Kannada, Konkani	<i>Shanivaar</i>
Malayalam	<i>Shani</i>
Myanmar	<i>Sáne</i>
Thai	<i>Wun-sao</i>
Lao	<i>Wan sao</i>
Cambodian	<i>Tngay-saow</i>

In Central Asia and Eastern Asia we find names for Saturday derived from *Dies Saturni* via the medieval Chinese term ‘earth day’, earth being the element associated with the planet Saturn (Table 3). These names are not used in modern Chinese, but Japanese retains the Chinese characters 土曜日 for ‘earth day’.

Table 3.
Names for Saturday meaning ‘earth day’, the medieval Chinese element associated with the planet Saturn

Japanese	<i>Do-yoobi</i>
Korean	<i>To-yo-il</i>
Tibetan	<i>Spem-pa</i>
Mongolian	<i>Byamba</i>
Kalmyk	<i>Bembä</i>

In Scandinavian languages, the names for Saturday are derived from Old Norse *laugardagr* ‘bathing day’ (Table 4).

Table 4.
Names for Saturday derived from the pagan ‘bathing day’ (Old Norse ‘*laugardagr*’)

Icelandic	<i>Laugardagur</i>
Faroese	<i>Leygardagur</i>
Norwegian, Swedish	<i>Lördag</i>
Norwegian (Nynorsk)	<i>Laurdag</i>
Danish	<i>Lørdag</i>
Finnish	<i>Lauantai</i>
Estonian	<i>Laupäev</i>
Saami	<i>Lavvardat</i>

Bathing day was a pagan concept, designating the day preceding major pagan festivals, on which ritual bathing was common. However, the designation of Saturday as ‘bathing day’ has Christian undertones, because Saturday was the day before the Christian weekly day of worship. It is interesting that the Maori name for Saturday is *Rahoroi*, with *ra* = ‘clean’, *horoi* = ‘day’. While this name, clearly signifying ‘bathing day’, was introduced by 18th century Christian missionaries, their choice of name confirms that the custom of bathing before a holy day was common to many pagan societies.

Some of the pre-Christian names for Saturday are of considerable antiquity. However, none of them have any connection with *Shabbat* and convey no connotation of rest.

Christian Names for Saturday

The earliest Christians celebrated the Jewish Sabbath on the seventh day of the week but soon they began to celebrate the first day of the week, Sunday, as Lord’s Day. A short-lived intermediate stage, when both days were celebrated, is preserved in the naming of Saturday and Sunday in languages of Ethiopia. Ethiopian Christians were isolated early in their history from major centers of Christianity in Constantinople and Rome and traditionally use the same name, *Senbet* ‘Sabbath’, for both Saturday and Sunday (Table 5). In several languages of the region these two days of the week are now distinguished by the use of qualifiers such as ‘first’/ ‘second’, ‘Jewish’/ ‘Christian’ or ‘small’/ ‘great’. When used without a qualifier, *Senbet* means ‘Sunday’.

Table 5.
The use of the name *Senbet* for Saturday and Sunday in Ethiopian languages

<u>Language</u>	<u>Saturday</u>	<u>Sunday</u>
Amharic (Ethiopia)	<i>Senbete Ayhud</i> ‘Jewish Sabbath’ <i>Kedam</i> ‘earlier’	<i>Senbete Krestyan</i> ‘Christian Sabbath’ <i>Senbet</i> ‘Sabbath’
Gurage (Ethiopia)	<i>Kedam Senbet</i> ‘earlier Sabbath’	<i>Wir Senbet</i> ‘major Sabbath’
Tigre (Ethiopia)	<i>Senbet N’ish</i> ‘small Sabbath’	<i>Senbet Abay</i> ‘big Sabbath’
Oromo (Ethiopia, Kenya)	<i>Sanbata Tinno</i> ‘small Sabbath’	<i>Sanbata Guddaa</i> ‘full-size Sabbath’
Tigrinya (Eritrea)	<i>Kedam</i> ‘earlier’	<i>Senbet</i> ‘Sabbath’

When the day of worship and rest was shifted to Sunday, the majority of Christian churches chose a new name for that day: Greek *Kyriake*, Latin *Dominicus* (both meaning ‘Lord’s Day’), Old Bulgarian *Nedelja* (meaning ‘no work’ or ‘no activity’). However, they kept the Hebrew name *Shabbat* (Greek *Sabbaton*, Latin *Sabbatum*, Syriac *Shabta*) for Saturday. Many of the names of Saturday in European languages today are therefore derived indirectly from the Hebrew *Shabbat* (Table 6).

Table 6.
Names for Saturday derived from Hebrew *Shabbat* via Greek, Latin or Syriac

Derived via Latin *Sabbatum*, *Sabbata* and *Dies Sabbati* or Greek *Sabbaton*:

Spanish, Portuguese	<i>Sábado</i>
Italian	<i>Sabato</i>
Sardo	<i>Sappadu</i>
Catalan, Occitan	<i>Dissabte</i>
Provençal	<i>Disapte</i>
Tagalog	<i>Sabado</i>
Russian/Ukrainian/Belarus	<i>Subbota</i>
Polish, Czech, Slovak, Slovene	<i>Sobota</i>
Serb, Croatian, Macedonian	<i>Subota</i>
Bulgarian	<i>Sybotá</i>
Modern Greek	<i>Sávvatón</i>

Derived via Greek *Sambaton* or possibly via Latin *Sambatum* (note the epenthetic ‘m’):

Southern German	<i>Samstag</i>
Swabian	<i>Samschdich</i>
Romanian	<i>Sîmbătă</i>
Hungarian	<i>Szombat</i>
French	<i>Samedi</i>
Amharic	<i>Senbet</i> (Saturday or Sunday)

Derived via Syriac *Shabta* (note the preservation of the original ‘sh’ of *Shabbat*):

Georgian	<i>Shabati</i>
Armenian	<i>Shabat</i>
Chechen	<i>Shot</i>
Ingush	<i>Shoatta</i>

A few names for Saturday were derived from other sources than Hebrew *Shabbat* (Table 7).

Table 7.
Names for Saturday derived from sources other than *Shabbat*

‘Day before Sunday’ (early medieval coinage)		
German		<i>Sonnabend</i>
Frisian		<i>Sneon</i>
Romany		<i>Dives- maṅkā- kūrke</i>
‘Sixth day’ (13 th to 18 th century coinages)		
European Languages		
Lithuanian		<i>Seštadienis</i>
Latvian		<i>Sestdiena</i>
Languages of Asia and the Pacific		
Mandarin		<i>Xīngqīliú</i>
Taiwanese		<i>Pài-gō</i>
Hmong (Laos)		<i>Hnub rau</i>
Hawaiian		<i>Pō’aono</i>
‘Day that completes the week’ (18 th century coinage)		
Bantu Languages (Southern Africa)		
Shona (Zimbabwe)		<i>Mugovera</i>
Zulu (Southern Africa)		<i>iMiqibelo</i>
Xhosa (Southern Africa)		<i>uMgqibelo</i>
Tonga (Zimbabwe)		<i>Mujibelo</i>
Sesotho (Lesotho)		<i>Moqebelo</i>

We may note that in early Christian coinages Saturday is denoted as day seven, following the Bible. In later coinages, however, it is denoted as day six. This change appears to have been brought about by a natural tendency to consider the celebrated special day of the weekly cycle as ending the cycle rather than beginning it. So, after about the tenth century for most Christians Sunday replaced Saturday as day seven. An analogous change occurred in the Islamic world where Friday began as day six but later became counted as day seven.

Islamic names for Saturday

Moslems took over the seven-day week from the Jews but shifted the day of weekly worship to the sixth day of the week, our Friday. The choice of Friday was said to be because God created man on the sixth day, but it must have been strongly motivated by the desire to distance the followers of Islam from both Jews and Christians.

Like Jews, Moslems gave the first five days of the week numerical names (in Arabic or in Persian), but chose a special Arabic name for the sixth day, *Youm al-Joum'a* 'day of assembly'. For the seventh day, they kept the Hebrew designation, *Shabbat* (*Youm as-Sabt* in Arabic, *Shambe* in Persian) but without retaining the underlying notion of rest. In fact, early Moslems had no day of rest. The Koran specifies Friday only as a day of public assembly and worship, leading to a tradition of work stopping only during the time of communal prayer, not for the entire day. However, in modern times Friday in many Moslem societies also began to function as a day of rest. Moreover, a Thursday-Friday "weekend" has emerged in countries such as Iran and Kuwait, the equivalent of the Saturday-Sunday weekend celebrated in the West (Bloom and Blair, 2000:109).

Thus, for most Moslem communities around the world Saturday is denoted by a name derived from the Hebrew name *Shabbat*, although that day does not represent to them a day of rest (Table 8).

Table 8.
Names for Saturday derived from Hebrew *Shabbat* via Arabic or Persian

A. Via the Arabic *As-sabt*

Syrian	<i>Issabt</i>
Egyptian	<i>Essabt</i>
Maltese	<i>Issibt</i>
Hausa	<i>Subdu, Assabit</i>
Fula	<i>Aset</i>
Tuareg	<i>Essebtin</i>
Tamasheq	<i>Essebbet</i>
Kabyle	<i>Sebt</i>
Malagasy	<i>Asabotsy</i>
Malay, Indonesian	<i>Sabtu</i>
Javanese	<i>Setu</i>
Maranao	<i>Sabtoo</i>
Fulfulde	<i>Assebdu</i>
Teda	<i>Essebdu</i>
Harari, Somali	<i>Sabti</i>

B. Via the Persian *Shambe*

Farsi, Pashto	<i>Shambe</i>
Kirghiz	<i>Ishembi</i>
Azeri, Turkmen	<i>Shenbe</i>
Uzbek	<i>Shanba</i>
Kurdish	<i>Shemme</i>
Kazakh	<i>Senbi</i>
Baluchi	<i>Shembe</i>
Tajik	<i>Shambe</i>
Uyghur	<i>Shānbä</i>
Kazakh	<i>Senbi</i>
Bashkir	<i>Shämbe</i>

In some of the languages which use the name for Saturday derived through the Persian *Shambe*, that same word also functions to denote ‘week’. Not all of the Islamic names for Saturday are derived from Hebrew *Shabbat*. In Turkish, Azeri, and Crimean Tatar, the name for Saturday is *Cumartesi*, Turkish for ‘day after Friday’. In Punjabi, Pashto, Dari, and Urdu the name is *Hafta*, Persian for ‘seventh’, while the more recently coined Swahili name is *Jumamosi*, ‘first of the week’.

Lexical developments of the name *Shabbat*

In most European languages we find words derived from the Hebrew *Shabbat*, with a wide variety of meanings. These words fall into two categories: those that preserve the notion of rest and those that do not. In the first category we find words like English *Sabbatarian* (one who keeps the Sabbath) and *Sabbatical* (Research leave given to University professors). In the second category we find words like Yiddish *shabbes-shtekh* (hasty stitches sown in a hurry as on the eve of Sabbath), Polish *sobótka* (bonfire, such as were laid on the eve of Pagan holidays), or Ukrainian *subitka* (whipping of schoolchildren carried out on Saturdays). An extreme example of this category is *witches’ sabbath*, a term used in all European languages, e.g., German and Dutch *Hexensabbat*, Russian *shabash vyed’m*, Slovene *satat čarovnic*, French *sabbat de sorcières*, or Italian *sabba di streghe*. *Witches’ sabbath* denotes a midnight orgy, the very opposite of a day of rest.

The expression *witches’ sabbath* has its roots in the European Middle Ages, which were permeated by the general belief in the evil power of witches and in the malevolence of Jews and heretics. *Witches’ sabbath* is based on the supposed nocturnal gatherings of witches and their consorting with the devil. Referring to such imagined gatherings as ‘Sabbaths’ stems from the intermingling of witches and Jews in the popular mind.

Summary

The concept of the weekly day of rest has become entrenched in the modern world. The original Hebrew name for this concept, *Shabbat*, found its way into most modern languages, but in many cases it no longer denotes rest or the day of rest.

Note

The names of Saturday and Sunday in modern languages were gleaned from dictionaries available in print or from on-line dictionaries on the Internet. Linguists specializing in many of the languages were also consulted, and some of their names are listed in two previous publications in *Onomastica Canadiana* (Falk 2003, 2004). In addition, the author wishes to acknowledge the help from Dr. Adrian Koopman (Zulu day names), Dr. Philip W. Matthews (Maori day names), and his wife, Dr. Lilian Falk (Modern Hebrew usage).

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