

Question: How do we know that the day we call Sabbath is really the correct Sabbath? Maybe the days got mixed up through history, so the day we call the Sabbath is really just one of the six days of the week.

Answer:

I've heard this same argument before, but it really doesn't have any substance. Here's why:

1. The idea that there were no calendars in ancient times is totally false. Of course there were calendars, even though they may not have hung on the wall of every home. How do we know? Well, first of all, God commanded Israel to do things in a specific month, and on a specific day. For instance, the Israelites were to take a lamb on the 10th day of the 1st month, and they were to celebrate Passover beginning on the evening of the 14th day of the 1st month (Ex 12:1-6). So they kept track of months (by sighting the new moon), and they kept track of the days in the month. Archaeology of ancient civilizations, such as those undertaken in Egypt and the Near East, have shown conclusively that these nations were very aware of celestial movement of planets, the position of constellations in the sky, the sun and moon, etc., and were in some cases very keen on keeping track of time by astrological phenomenon.
2. Second, God gave a specific commandment to separate the seventh day from the other six days. They were to keep track of the days, so that the seventh day would be set apart. Moreover, the penalty for working on the seventh day was death (Ex 31:14). Now we might suppose that the Israelites were disobedient, and that they eventually failed to keep track of the days of the week. But this is also without substance. While Israel was in the wilderness, God told them to gather twice as much manna on the sixth day, and not to go out to gather it on the seventh day. It is clear in Ex 16 that some of the people disregarded God's commandment regarding the seventh day, and went out to gather manna, but there was none. The seventh day was clearly marked by God at this point, by the fact that He did not send manna on that day, just as He had said. Moreover, in the story of Num 15, the fellow who went out to gather sticks on the seventh day was sentenced to death by stoning. It would seem certain that, following this event, the Israelites made sure they numbered the days of each week, so as not to profane the Sabbath!
3. Third, those who think the Israelites may have "messed up," and not carefully kept track of the Sabbath for centuries, are really shooting themselves in the theological foot! If they cannot be trusted to have maintained the calendar so as to specify the Sabbath from one generation to the next, how can we trust that the ancient Israelites carefully maintained the Scriptures that were passed on from generation to generation? The reason that we trust the word of God in the Tanach (or Old Testament) to be the authentic Scriptures is because we trust that the Jewish scribes carefully preserved them, even down to the very letters. And we have good evidence that they did. For instance, the Dead Sea Scrolls are dated from the 2nd Century BCE up through the 1st Century BCE. The earliest codex of the Hebrew Scriptures that is extant today is the Aleppo Codex dated to 986 CE. That is over 1000 years later than the Dead Sea Scrolls. Yet when we compare the great Isaiah Scroll of the DSS with the Isaiah in the Aleppo Codex, we find remarkable accuracy. So if they could keep track of each letter of each book of the Bible so that we now possess it in all of its integrity, why would it have been impossible for them to keep track of the Sabbath?

4. Fourth, we know that Yeshua kept the Sabbath (Lk 4:16). That means He kept the proper Sabbath. And, He was keeping the same seventh day as was the entire community of the Jews at His time. He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath (as was His custom), and we find that they were carrying on typical Sabbath functions, like reading the Torah, and Haftarah, etc. So that means that the correct day of the Sabbath had been preserved up to Yeshua's time. For thousands of years, Israel had kept the weekly cycle intact, up to the time of Yeshua. If they did that for thousands of years before Yeshua's coming, why would we think the Jewish community failed to maintain the correct Sabbath for the next two millennia?

5. Fifth when we come to the early emerging Christian Church, as early as the late 2nd Century CE, we find Church leaders encouraging their followers to celebrate the first day of the week, and not to keep the Sabbath like the Jews do. So the early Church fathers knew when the Sabbath was, and when the first day of the week was. If one argues that the Jews forgot what day the Sabbath actually was, then one would also have to admit that the Church fathers also "messed up" and forgot to keep track of the first day of the week.

6. Finally, it is ludicrous to argue that a community would suddenly skip a day, or double a week day (like going from Monday to Wednesday, or having two Mondays in a row). I suppose one could imagine an individual losing track of what day it was, but not a whole community. Imagine the kid that had a birthday coming up, only to find out what everyone had skipped that day! At least he would raise a protest! The point is simply that such an argument is both unhistorical, and illogical. In the end, people who make this argument are just trying to find a way around the biblical commandment to honor God by honoring the Sabbath. When they stand before Him, and He asks them why they disregarded His set-apart day, if they give Him the excuse that they just didn't know for sure what day the true Sabbath was, I think they will be very embarrassed. They might hear something like: "Surely you can come up with a better excuse than that!"