

Septuagint Rendering of *Šabbat Šabbātôn*

Over the years some individuals have promoted the following argument in order to strengthen the theory that the *sabbata* of Colossians 2:16 cannot refer to ceremonial sabbaths. First, they note that both the seventh-day Sabbath and the Day of Atonement are sometimes designated by the compound Hebrew expression שַׁבָּת וְשַׁבְּתוֹן (*šabbat šabbātôn*), as in Exodus 31:15 and Leviticus 23:32. Then they allege that this two-pronged term is always rendered in the Septuagint by the compound Greek expression σάββατα σαββάτων [*sabbata sabbatōn*]. Finally, they claim that ceremonial sabbaths are never classified by the simple term “sabbaths,” as seen in Colossians 2.

For example, Robert Brinsmead noted: “When the Old Testament refers to the yearly Sabbaths, such as the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23), it calls them ‘a Sabbath of rest,’ which the Septuagint *consistently* translates with the compound Greek expression *Sabbata sabbaton*.”¹ Then he added: “Colossians 2:16 simply has *sabbaton*, the same word which Matthew 28:1 uses for the weekly Sabbath.”²

OUTLINING THE COMPOUND EXPRESSIONS

Table 3 outlines the seven compound expressions relating to the Hebrew term *šabbāt* and their translation into the Greek in the Septuagint, so as to assess the accuracy of the argument above.³

Table 3		Compound Expressions Relating to the Term Šabbāt
Ref.	Hebrew (MT)	Greek (LXX)
Exod. 16:23	שַׁבָּתוֹן שַׁבַּת sabbath of sabbatism ⁴ קָדַשׁ לַיהוָה for/to Yahweh holiness	σάββατα ἀνάπαυσις sabbath a rest ἅγια τῷ κυρίῳ holy to the Lord
Exod. 31:15	שַׁבָּתוֹן שַׁבַּת sabbatism sabbath of קָדַשׁ לַיהוָה for/to Yahweh holy	σάββατα ἀνάπαυσις sabbath a rest ἅγια τῷ κυρίῳ holy to the Lord
Exod. 35:2	קָדַשׁ שַׁבַּת sabbath of holy לַיהוָה שַׁבָּתוֹן for/to Yahweh sabbatism	ἅγιον σάββατα holy sabbath ἀνάπαυσις κυρίῳ a rest to [the] Lord
Lev. 16:31	שַׁבָּתוֹן שַׁבַּת sabbatism sabbath of הוּא לָכֶם for/to you it	σάββατα σαββάτων sabbath of sabbaths ἀνάπαυσις αὕτη ἔσται ὑμῖν a rest this shall be to you
Lev. 23:3	שַׁבָּתוֹן שַׁבַּת sabbatism sabbath of קָדַשׁ ... לַיהוָה מִקְרָא for/to Yahweh...holy convocation	σάββατα ἀνάπαυσις sabbath a rest κλήτη ἅγια τῷ κυρίῳ convocation holy to the Lord
Lev. 23:32	שַׁבָּתוֹן שַׁבַּת sabbatism sabbath of הוּא לָכֶם for/to you it	σάββατα σαββάτων sabbath of sabbaths ἔσται ὑμῖν it shall be to you
Lev. 25:4	שַׁבָּתוֹן שַׁבַּת sabbatism sabbath of לְאָרֶץ יְהוָה for/to the land it shall be	σάββατα ἀνάπαυσις sabbath a rest ἔσται τῆ γῆ it shall be to the land

John Wevers observed that in Leviticus 16:31, the “LXX begins with *σάββατα σαββάτων ἀνάπαυσις αὕτη ἔσται ὑμῖν* [*sabbata sabbatōn*

anapausis hautē estai humin], whereas MT has שבת שבתון היא לכם [*šbt šbtwn hy' lkm*]; in other words, שבתון [*šbtwn*] seems to have two equivalents. The phrase σάββατα σαββάτων [*sabbata sabbatōn*] occurs only twice in OT, here and at [Lev.] 23:32....Our verse with its double rendering of the word is unique.”⁶

As is evident from the above chart, Wevers’s observations are correct: *sabbata sabbatōn* occurs only twice in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and the Leviticus 16:31 rendering in the LXX is unique. Thus, it becomes clear that actually only once in the entire Bible (i.e., in Lev. 23:32) does the Septuagint specifically translate the Hebrew *šabbat šabbātôn*, i.e., “a sabbath of sabbaths,” or “a sabbath of rest” as *sabbata sabbatōn*—also a completely unique interpretation.

CONCLUSION REGARDING ŠABBAT ŠABBĀTŌN

As indicated in the previous chapter, “Šabbāt in the Old Testament,” the present investigation confirms that certain terms in the Hebrew Testament were used for both the seventh-day Sabbath and for ceremonial sabbaths. Of the seven occurrences of the two-pronged term *šabbat šabbātôn*, it is used four times in reference to the seventh-day Sabbath, twice to refer to the seventh-month Day of Atonement, and once for the seventh-year sabbath of the land. Since it is used in this common manner for these three “sabbaths,” it cannot function as one of the uniquely identifying linguistic indicators.

Furthermore, contrary to the view noted at the beginning of this chapter, the Septuagint does not consistently translate the Hebrew *šabbat šabbātôn* with the compound Greek expression *sabbata sabbatōn*. It actually does so only once out of the seven total occurrences in the Hebrew.

The question of whether the ceremonial sabbaths are never classified by the simple term “sabbaths,” which is the term seen in Colossians 2:16, will be addressed subsequently in chapter 5.

NOTES

1. Robert D. Brinsmead, “Sabbatarianism Re-Examined, Chapter 5: Colossians 2:16,” *Verdict* 4/4 (June 1981): 29. For basically the same arguments, see Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977), 359; Samuele Bacchiocchi, *The Sabbath under Crossfire: A Biblical Analysis of Recent Sabbath/Sunday Developments* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Biblical Perspectives, 1998), 248–249.

2. *Ibid.*

3. The original Hebrew and translated Greek text are reproduced here to provide the actual text. A literal translation of all of the words has been given so that the reader who may not understand these ancient biblical languages can observe the point being made regarding the manner in which the “sabbath of sabbaths” has been translated from the Hebrew into the Greek. Note that while the Greek reads from left to right as in English, the Hebrew reads from right to left, so the interlinear translations of each word will reflect this right-to-left order.

4. Milgrom pointed out that, though the word *šabbātôn* “stands in reverse order with *šabbāt* in Exod 16:23,...it has the same meaning as the normal construct chain” (Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible [New York: Doubleday, 2001], 2013).

5. William Gesenius noted that שַׁבָּתוֹן (*šabbātôn*) means “sabbath observance, sabbatism”; *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., Edward Robinson, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), 992.

6. John William Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Leviticus*, Society of Biblical Literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies Series, Number 44 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 257–258.