CHAPTER TWO

SABBATH AS HOLY DAY OF THE JEWS:
EARLY JEWISH LITERATURE

Introduction

The texts of the Hebrew Bible show that the sabbath did not have a fixed, unchanging importance in the understanding of Jewish communities before the turn of the era. Some texts show a higher reverence for sabbath than others; some require sacrifices on the sabbath and others do not. The one feature common to all the texts about the sabbath is that they do not provide clear instructions for sabbath rituals for non-priestly Jews.

The gradual development of the importance of sabbath that was adumbrated in the biblical texts can be more fully identified in extra-biblical Jewish texts. There the various writers present their views of the sabbath as a religious entity with greater power to exact particular human behaviours than was evident in the Hebrew Bible. So, while some extra-biblical texts describe a sabbath with more stringent rules governing behaviour and thoughts, others demand from their followers further religious observances, and yet others require from their community a deeper attitude of reverence for the day itself. In each of the texts studied here the sabbath has been aggrandised in one or more of these aspects, but only the second type of response produces extra behaviour on the sabbath that might be evaluated as worship.

Not surprisingly, any such developments were not uniform throughout the writings of the period, so the different, although similar, trends can be seen more clearly if data from the Apocryphal and Deutero-Canonical works are presented together followed by data from the Dead Sea Scrolls and Jubilees. Then, from the different images of sabbath in the lives and thoughts of the different groups of Jews, conclusions can be drawn about sabbath praxis.
The Sabbath in the Apocryphal Literature

In some apocryphal texts the sabbath day has acquired a new character: it is no longer merely a day set aside for rest, once a week, but is a special time with some quality of holiness that it possesses intrinsically. This quality causes the sabbath both to affect life on other days as well and to have the power to exact more attention than was demanded from the believing community in the Hebrew Bible narratives. However, even though the sabbath might achieve a greater level of influence in Jewish community life, that would not entail the development of a set of religious practices.

In certain other apocryphal works, the sabbath is not mentioned at all, even where one might expect it to appear, as in the description of the piety of the young man, Tobit.\(^1\) Also, although Ben Sira records the names of some holy days, and refers to the exalting and hallowing of certain (unspecified) days,\(^2\) he does not mention the sabbath at all. Even Ben Sira’s lengthy descriptions, in chs. 34–35, of the Temple cult and its sacrifices, and of the proper behaviour of one who keeps the law, make no mention of the sabbath by name.\(^3\) The sabbath does not play an obvious part in what goes on in the Temple cult as he describes it. Ben Sira speaks of sacrifices, offerings of first fruits, of tithes and of prayer, but there is no reference to the sabbath.

The range of ways of regarding or ignoring the sabbath visible in the early Jewish texts, reinforces our earlier conclusion that different groups within Jewish society had different views of the value and role of the sabbath in Jewish life. The lack of interest in the sabbath displayed in texts such as Tobit and Ben Sira contributes little to our study, but a more detailed analysis of the texts that promote or honour the sabbath can show how the sabbath was regarded by the communities who preserved such texts.

\(^1\) Tob. 1.3-9.
\(^2\) Sir. 33.7-13; see also in Chapter 3 a discussion on the lack of references to 'synagogue' in Ben Sira.