

## ***Sabbath* in the Hebrew Bible**

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The word *Sabbath* comes from a Hebrew word *šabbat* meaning *rest*. The observation and remembrance of Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:8 “remember the *Sabbath* day, to keep it holy”: the fourth in the original Jewish the Eastern Orthodox, and most Protestant traditions, the third in Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions). It is believed that the *Sabbath* day is commemorated as God’s day of rest after he finished the Creation (Gen 2:2-3). However, its emphasis is on the covenant between God and His people and the consequent relationship exists between them (cf. Exod 31:12-13,16; Isa 56:1-8; Jer 17:19-27). The following is an attempt to trace the various aspects of *Sabbath* in the Hebrew Bible.

Exod 16:21-30 records for the first time the occurrence of the term the “*Sabbath*” in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, even though the *Sabbath* theme is essentially present in the creation framework of Gen 2:1-3, only the term “the seventh day” (3x) is attested there.<sup>2</sup> Exod 16:21-30 mentions three important features of the *Sabbath* day: 1. *Sabbath* is a “resting day” for the Israelites (v23,30); 2. *Sabbath* is “holy to the Lord” (v23); 3. *Sabbath* is a “divine gift” to the people (v29). While the first element is the most emphasized one in Exod 16, the second and the third aspects bring out the divine nature of the term.

Besides 16:21-30 the book of Exodus deals five more times with the *Sabbath* theme (cf. 20:8-11; 23:12; 31:12-17; 34:21; 35:1-3). The *Sabbath* observance forms the third of the Decalogue (cf. Exod 20:8-11). In comparison with Exod 16:21-30, the element of “the *Sabbath* is holy to the Lord” (cf. 16:23) is found emphasized and extended in 20:10-11, where holiness of the *Sabbath* is understood as the Lord blessed it and made it holy (cf. 20:11). Similarly the element of “resting” (cf. 16:23.25.29.30) is realized and even made stricter by the command that no work may be done by any human and animal on that day (cf. 20:10).<sup>3</sup> The Israelites have the duty to keep holy the *Sabbath* day (cf. 20:8). The reason for the demand of “resting/no working” is further substantiated by the fact that the Lord himself rested when he finished the Creation (cf. 20:11; Gen 2:2-3).<sup>4</sup> Thus, Exod 20:8-11 also places the *Sabbath* day in the framework of creation, an element which brings Exod 16 close to Gen 2:1-3.<sup>5</sup> However, the third commandment found in Deut 5:12-15, besides the elements similar to those in Exod 20: 8-11, sets the reason for the *Sabbath* observance in the context of the Lord’s liberation of the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt (cf. v15). In this perspective, the aspect of “resting/no working” of the *Sabbath* brings to light God’s direct liberative intervention for his people, and highlights the dignity of “freedom”/ “liberation” among those who keep the Sabbath.<sup>6</sup>

Exod 23:12 strengthens the two elements already found in Exod 20:8-11: the six-day and seventh - day context (cf. Exod 20:9-10), and the command to rest for the benefits of human being and animals (cf Exod 20:10). In Exod 23:12 the animals are specified as “your ox and your ass” and the servants as “son(s) of your maidservant(s)”. Therefore, according to the divine command, the well-being of the beasts

of burden, servants and aliens must also be taken consideration of on the *Sabbath* day.<sup>7</sup>

Exod 31:12-17 attests the *Sabbath* theme in the context of the Lord's command to set up the "Tent of Meeting" for his dwelling among the people (cf. Exod 24:12-31:18). The elements like "cessation of creation", "holiness to the Lord" "resting/no working" are repeated in this text. However, the Israelites are further commanded to keep the *Sabbath* cautiously since it is considered as the eternal sign and eternal covenant between the Lord and the Israelites (cf. v13,16-17).<sup>8</sup> *Sabbath* observance is an eternal institution among the Israelites one of the factors that assures the Lord's presence among them and his sanctification of them (v12.16).<sup>9</sup> Those who desecrate the *Sabbath* day by working on it will be put to death (cf. v14-15).<sup>10</sup>

The death penalty inflicted on those who work on the *Sabbath* (Exod 31:14-15) is further stressed and concretized in Exod 35:1-3 in addition to the elements already known so far such as the holiness of the *Sabbath*, and the framework of "working on six days and resting on the seventh day" (cf. v1-2). In Exod 34:21, the Israelites have already been commanded to rest on the seventh day even during the seasons of plowing and harvesting. A strict prohibition against working is further stressed in Exod 35:3 by the fact that the Israelites are not allowed even to light a fire in any of their dwellings on this holy day. Num 15:32-36 later records a case of the death penalty being applied to a man gathering sticks, a concrete illustration of the heavy punishment inflicted for the violation of the *Sabbath* commandment.

In short, Exod 31:12-17 brings out the fullest theological treatment of the *Sabbath*. Six points are consecutively found in this text: a) *Sabbath* is holy to the people (v14);

b) breaking the *Sabbath* is a serious crime: death (v14-15); c) *Sabbath*, a day of total rest is holy to the Lord (v15); d) resting is obligatory on this day (v16); e) *Sabbath* is the perpetual covenant between the Lord and his people (v16-17). f) on the seventh day, the Lord rested from work and was refreshed (v17).

In addition to the above-mentioned cases, the theme of the *Sabbath* is also treated considerably in Lev 23:1-3; Num 28:9-10; Amos 8:4-6; Jer 17:19-27; Ezek 46:1-5; Isa 56:1-7; 58:13-14; 66:23; Neh 13:15-22. In general, these texts deal mainly with two main aspects of the Sabbath: the “worship” and the “resting”. In the liturgical year of the Israelites *Sabbath* is considered one of the feast days of the Lord,<sup>11</sup> on which Israelites are to gather as a sacred assembly to worship God wherever they live (Lev 23:3). Num 28:9-10 mentions the sacrifices for the Sabbath day, which are double the amount of the daily offering.<sup>12</sup> Later, in the context of the new temple and the new cult (Ezek 40:1-48:35),<sup>13</sup> Ezek 46:1-5 also deals with the matter of the sacrifices on this holy day as offered by the prince, which requires a different quantity: six unblemished lambs, and an unblemished ram, together with a cereal offering of an ephah for the ram, and a cereal offering of as much as he is able to give for the lambs, and a hint of oil for each ephah. The worship dimension of the *Sabbath* is also discussed in Isa 66:23, which in turn does not deal with the sacrifices as in Lev 23:3; Num 28:9-10; Ezek 46:1-5, but with the universal perspective of the worshippers. Isaiah announces the perspective of the New Zion, in which all humankind shall come to worship before the Lord from one new moon to another and from one Sabbath to another.

The “resting” aspect of the *Sabbath* day is re-emphasized in Amos 8:4-6; Jer 17:19-27. The prophet Amos strongly

accuses the greedy people of their hypocrisy in keeping the new moon and the *Sabbath* day. They keep the *Sabbath* for form's sake, considering it as a burden for them. They wish the *Sabbath* to be gone quickly so that they can continue their unjust business. In his turn, the prophet Jeremiah strongly urges the Israelites (kings and the inhabitants of Jerusalem) to observe the sanctity of the *Sabbath*. The Israelites are ordered by the Lord not to carry forth a burden out of their houses and bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem on this holy day, nor to do any work, but to keep the *Sabbath* holy (Jer 17:21-22.25.27). What is new in Jeremiah's treatment of the *Sabbath* theme is his announcement about the correlation between the destiny of Israel and the observance of the *Sabbath*. If the Israelites obey the Lord's command, the leaders and the people will live in peace (Jer 17:24-26). If they do not listen to him, Jerusalem will be totally devoured by fire (Jer 17:27).

The positive results which spring from the faithful observance of the *Sabbath* also echo in the Book of Isaiah. In his message about the new temple and the new leadership (Isa 56:1-66:24),<sup>14</sup> Isaiah announces that those who keep the *Sabbath* free from profanation and themselves from evildoings shall be blessed (cf. Isa 56:2). Even the eunuchs shall be given an everlasting imperishable name better than sons and daughters if they observe the *Sabbath*, do what pleases the Lord and hold fast to his covenant (cf. Isa 56:4-5). In general, Isaiah announces that all who keep the *Sabbath* free from profanation and hold fast to his covenant shall be brought to the holy mountain; they shall be joyful and their sacrifices shall be accepted by the Lord (cf. Isa 56:6-7).<sup>15</sup> Those who refrain from breaking the *Sabbath* observing it with delight, honoring it by not following their own ways and interests shall have delight in the Lord, who in turn shall nourish them (cf. Isa 58:13-14).

A similar message of keeping the *Sabbath* free from profanation is also found in Neh 13:15-22. Nehemiah realizes that the *Sabbath* rule is not observed among his people or among the aliens in Jerusalem. Treading winepresses, bringing in sacks of grain, loading donkeys of all kinds of burdens (grain, wine, grapes, figs. etc.), business activities all take place on the *Sabbath* day (cf. v15-16) certainly violate the third commandment which forbids the Israelites, their servants, their beasts of burden, and the aliens among them from doing any work on this holy day (cf. Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14). These activities profane the Sabbath (Neh 13:17-18). Nehemiah sternly warns the people and takes necessary steps to make sure that calamity will not occur to Jerusalem once again (Neh 13:17-22). In this sense, Nehemiah shares a similar view with Jeremiah and Isaiah about the bond between the *Sabbath* observance and the destiny of Israel. Nehemiah stresses, however, more the negative consequences resulting from Israel's failure of observing the *Sabbath* observance in the past as a serious warning for his contemporaries (Neh 13:17-18).

In short, in the Hebrew Bible the concept of the *Sabbath* is multifaceted, and it covers the following aspects:

1. The *Sabbath* belongs to the Lord (cf. Exod 16:23.26; 20:10; 31:15; Lev 23:3; Deut 5:13);
2. It is holy to the Lord (cf. Gen 2:3; Exod 16:23; 20:11; 31:15; 35:2; Isa 58:13) as well as to the Israelites (Exod 31:14; Lev 23:3);
3. The Israelites must keep it holy (cf. Exod 20:8; 31:14; Deut 5:12; Jer 17.22.24.27; Isa 56:2.6; 58:13; Neh 13:22) mainly by "resting/no working" on this day (cf. Exod 16:23.25.29.30; 20:10; 31:15; 35:2; Deut 5:14; Lev 23:3; Amos 8:5; Jer 17:21-22.25.27; Neh 13:15-16)<sup>16</sup>;

4. They are to follow the temporal framework of working six days and resting on the seventh day (cf. Exod 16:26; 20:9-10; 31:15; 35:2; Lev 23:3; Deut 5:13-14) following the Lord's example as manifested in his creation framework (cf. Gen 2:1-3; Exod 20:11; 31:17);
5. The Israelites are also to keep *Sabbath* holy with their worshipping activities (cf. Lev 23:3; Num 28:9-10; Ezek 46:2-5; Isa 66:23);
6. Those who break the *Sabbath* day will be put to death (cf. Exod 31:14.15; 35:2; Num 15:35.36);
7. When the Israelites keep it faithfully, honoring it as the divine gift for them (cf. Exod 16:29), treasuring it as the sign of the Lord's liberation of them from Egypt (cf. Deut 5:15) and as the eternal sign/covenant between the Lord and them (cf. Exod 31:13.16.17), they will live in peace and happiness (cf. Jer 17:25-26; Isa 56:2.5.7; 58:14); otherwise they will fall into destruction as they did previously (cf. Neh 13:17-17).

## Reference

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## Notes

- 1 According to SARNA, *Exploring*, 147, “the biblical Sabbath has no known analogy in the ancient world. In fact, the very concept of a seven-day week is unique to Israel”.
- 2 SARNA, *Exploring*, 145-146, makes the following observation on Gen 2:1-3: “This passage contains no mention of the Sabbath as a fixed, weekly institution. It refers only to the seventh day of the Creation, to the divine cessation from creativity, and to the blessing and sanctification of that day. But the term “Sabbath” is not to be found, cognate verbal form”.
- 3 According to TIMMER, *Creation* 46, “Exodus 20: 10: the prohibition of any Work by anyone on that day shows a development over the command’s nascent formulation in Exodus 16, where only the gathering of food was prohibited”.
- 4 ALBCK, “Commandments”, 271, notes: “since man is taught to follow in God’s ways to cleave to him by imitating him, so man too should work for six days and rest on the seventh day”.
- 5 Cf. KROCHMALNIK, *Schriftauslegung*, 132; SARNA, *Exploring*, 146; TIMMER, *Creation*, 46
- 6 SARNA, *Exploring*, 148, notes: By proscribing work and human creativity on that day and by enjoining the inviolability of nature one day a week, the Torah delimits human autonomy while it restores to nature its pristine freedom, At the same time, human freedom is immeasurably enhanced, human equality is strengthened and the cause of social justice is promoted by legislating, with divine sanction, the inalienable right of every human being, irrespective of social class, to a day of complete rest every seven days”. ALBCK *Commandments*, 271, also comments on the aspect of resting: “In that way he can imitate the sovereignty and freedom of God who also “rested” from his work on the seventh day,



and there is no power which can force him to work". MARKL, Dekalog, 216, sees this as a case of *imitatio dei*.

- 7 MARSHALL, Israel, 159, holds that this regulation may "demonstrate a humanitarian purpose" and may "reflect efforts to preserve the longevity of valuable labour resources: livestock, slaves, and resident aliens". The humanitarian concern is also stressed by TIMMER, Creation. 46.
- 8 Cf. MARKL, Exodus, 316-319. According to LAFFEY, Pentateuch, 149, "Sabbath observance was to continue perpetually from one generation to another, just as God's covenant would last through the generations".
- 9 LAFFEY, Pentateuch, 148, notes on Exod 31:12-13: "The Sabbath is identified as a sign of God's covenant relationship; the people are to keep the Sabbath to recognize God as the one who makes them holy".
- 10 LAFFEY, Pentateuch, 148, notes on Exod 31:14-15: "Such severe punishments express the gravity of the offense, which is rejection of the covenant relationship with God. [...] There is no greater punishment, illustrating that this violation is of the greatest magnitude".
- 11 Lev 23:1-44 lists the feast days of the Lord: the *Sabbath* (v3); the Passover and Unleavened Bread (v4-14); the Pentecost (v15-21); the New Year' Day (v23-25); the Day of Atonement (v26-32); the Feast of Booths (v33-36.39-43).
- 12 The daily offerings: two unblemished yearling lambs as the established holocausts, offering one lamb in the morning and the other during the evening twilight, each with a cereal offering of one tenth of an ephah of fine flour Mixed with a fourth of a hint of oil of crushed olives. The accompanying drink offering will be a fourth of a hint for each lamb (cf. Num 28:4-5.7).
- 13 Cf. BOADT, Ezekiel, 309.
- 14 Cf. STUHLMUELLER, Isaiah, 332.
- 15 Although the prophet does not clearly specify the significance of "keeping the *Sabbath* free from profanation", the analysis of the texts up to this point suggests that he is speaking of the "resting/no working" dimension (cf. also Neh 13:15-22). The worship dimension of the *Sabbath* observance may also be intended in the prophet's announcement.
- 16 The spirit of "resting/no working" is further applied to the sabbatical year (cf. Exod 23:10- 11; Lev 25:1-7; Deut 15:1-11). Even the ground must be allowed to rest every seventh year (cf. Lev 25:1-7, esp. v2.4.5), that is, as. WENHAM, Leviticus, 317, remarks, "to be left untilled and thus to return at least partially to its state prior to human cultivation".