

Sabbath, a “Little Jubilee”

BY RICHARD H. LOWERY

Sabbath may be the key to our survival, prosperity, and sanity. By celebrating a hoped-for world of abundance, self-restraint, and mutual care, the Bible’s sabbath and jubilee traditions critique the economic systems that create scarcity, overwork, and gross economic inequality.

We face a spiritual crisis. We are overworked, stressed out, and chronically neglecting basic disciplines of spiritual growth and family nurture. The problem is personal, but its causes and effects are social and economic. On average, more family members (parents and children) are working outside the home than 20 years ago. Their absence, exhaustion, and anxiety about money for lifestyles take a toll on the family. The logic of consumption drives young and old to perpetual dissatisfaction. Our spirits hunger for wholeness.

Biblical sabbath offers a way to think and act theologically as we confront the spiritual, ecological, and economic challenges before us. By celebrating a hoped-for world of abundance, self-restraint, and mutual care, sabbath traditions critiqued ancient royal-imperial systems that created scarcity, overwork, and gross economic inequality. These traditions can serve a similar critical function today, offering words of proportion, limits, social solidarity, and the need for rest, quiet reflection, and recreation in the face of never-ending work and consumption. In our world, sabbath consciousness may be the key to human survival, prosperity, and sanity.¹

MURKY ORIGINS, CLEAR CONNECTIONS

Though its historical origins are unclear, biblical sabbath is linked conceptually to norms of household justice, community solidarity, and support for the poor that also find expression in the Bible’s sabbath year and jubilee traditions of debt forgiveness and slave liberation (Deuteronomy 15; Leviticus 25). Christian Sunday often is described as a “little Easter.” It is

appropriate as well to think of biblical sabbath as a "little jubilee," a weekly celebration of hoped-for release, where debts are forgiven, slaves are freed, families are reunited, and household property lost through natural or human-made disaster is returned to the family. Sabbath is an enduring sign of hope that the poor will see justice and the distraught find peace.

JUBILEE

The Bible's jubilee traditions are found in Leviticus 25, a chapter connected by theme and rhetoric to the Priestly creation story in Genesis 1. Jubilee laws govern debt release, manumission of debt slaves, and return of household property lost through economic hardship. They are closely related to debt forgiveness and slave release laws in Deuteronomy 15 and to royal decrees of release or "liberty" common in the ancient world (*durarû* in the Assyrian and Babylonian language, *derôr* in Hebrew, which is translated "liberty" in Leviticus 25:10 and Isaiah 61:1). In these royal decrees of liberty, kings released citizens from taxes, military draft, and state labor obligations. They also cancelled debt and released debt slaves. These royal decrees were common throughout the ancient Near East, but they depended on the whim (which is to say, the pressing political needs) of the king. Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 offer a unique twist on this common practice by setting it to a regular cycle. Deuteronomy establishes a seven-year cycle of debt forgiveness and limits debt slavery to six years. In the seventh year, slaves go free. Leviticus releases debt and restores household property every fiftieth year, after seven "sabbath years" have passed. Both sets of laws establish a seven-year cycle, which Leviticus 25 explicitly ties to sabbath. In a variety of ways, the ethical concerns of sabbath year and jubilee parallel the moral vision at the heart of the Bible's sabbath traditions.

SEVENTH YEAR AND SEVENTH DAY

Exodus 23:9-12 explicitly links sabbath observance with a seventh year release of agricultural produce for the economic support of the poor, who are epitomized by the resident alien.

The repeated reference to resident aliens in the passage ties together seventh year and seventh day by a technique scholars call "inclusion," repeating key words at the beginning and end to create literary bookends for the material in between. The inclusion in this case consists of two key words, "resident alien" (*ger*) and "life" (*nefesh*). Verse 9 begins in Hebrew, "and a resident alien." Verse 12 ends with "and the resident alien." Verse 9 warns against oppression, because "you know the life (*nefesh*; literally, "breath") of the resident alien." Verse 12 says you should rest on the seventh day so workers in your household will be "revitalized" (*weyinnafesh*, a verbal form of *nefesh* that literally means "to breathe life into"). The "life" of the "resident alien" is the glue that binds seventh year to sabbath in Exodus 23:9-12.

Reading these laws through the life of the resident alien sets them among the norms of social solidarity that held ancient agrarian communities together. Farm life was precarious in the highlands of Palestine. Taxes, war, crop failure, and death frequently undermined the ability of families to produce enough to survive. In such cases, economically secure households gave support to struggling families, because it was dangerous for households to collapse, leaving rootless, alienated, and desperate individuals to fend for themselves. Resident aliens were especially vulnerable, since they were living away from their own kin who normally would provide emergency help. Exodus 23, like many of the laws of economic relief in the Bible, uses "resident alien" as shorthand for households at extreme risk.

Reading these laws through the experience of the resident alien also sets them specifically within Israel's sacred narrative. By reminding Israel that they were "resident aliens" in Egypt, the passage explicitly connects sabbath rest and seventh year release to Israel's liberation and covenant with God, the same rationales that govern the jubilee laws of debt and debt release (Leviticus 25:38, 42, 55; cf. Deuteronomy 15:15).

The seventh year law in this passage requires a regular release of agricultural produce for the economic support of the poor:² "you must release it and leave it alone, so the needy of your people may eat" (23:11).³ Like gleaning (Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-21; cf. Ruth 2), the triennial tithe (Deuteronomy 14:28-29), and the laws governing debt and slave release (Deuteronomy 15:1-18; Leviticus 25:8-55), the seventh year law in Exodus 23 provides a mechanism of support for the poor. Perhaps it was a rotating "set-aside" program, where farmers designated one-seventh of the fields and vineyards each year for use by poor households.

Seventh year release is bound in this passage to seventh day rest "so your ox and donkey may rest, and your homeborn slave may be revitalized" (23:12). Like seventh year release, sabbath has a humanitarian purpose; it is literally to

breathe new life (*weyinnafesh*) into the household's most vulnerable workers—the slave, the resident alien, and the farm animals. Rest for beasts of burden refreshed the animals but also served a human purpose by effectively stopping agricultural work. The ancient equivalent of turning off the machines and hanging a "closed" sign on the factory door, rest for ox and donkey meant a day off for human laborers.

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Seventh year and seventh day are joined in this passage by a passion for social justice, rooted in the identity of Israel as a nation of liberated slaves and the character of Israel's God as champion of the oppressed.

REST FOR WORKERS AND SYMBOL OF COVENANT

Short versions of the sabbath law such as Exodus 34:21 address individual Israelites, without regard to economic status: "six days you must toil, but on the seventh day you must rest." But other passages, including

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both versions of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 5:14), focus the sabbath law on justice for workers in wealthy households. "You must not do any work—neither you nor your son nor your daughter nor your male or

female slave, nor your cattle nor your donkey nor any of your animals, nor your resident alien who is in your gates—so that your male and female slave will rest just like you do" (Deuteronomy 5:14). Few households were wealthy enough to make the kind of loans that would bring them debt slaves. These sabbath laws specifically address those wealthy few. The purpose of sabbath rest for "you" (the householder) is that subordinate members of the household, especially "male and female slaves," may enjoy rest. The boss must rest so the workers can have a day off.

This concern for vulnerable members of the household may also underlie the curious ban on lighting fires in some versions of sabbath law (cf. Exodus 35:2-3). Home fires most often were for cooking, a job that typically fell to women and children. The ban on lighting fires ensures that householders will not expect women to cook, while men enjoy sabbath rest. Sabbath knows no distinction of gender. Male or female, slave or free, everyone gets to rest on sabbath.

Sabbath is a unique holiday for a distinctive deity, who defines the divine-human relationship by rest, not by work. Israel's neighbors were not so lucky. In the Babylonian creation myth, for example, the gods Marduk and Ea create human beings to do the gods' grunt work. In Israel's sacred story, by contrast, humans are created to rule the earth, not as slaves to do the gods' tedious labor, but as kings and queens stamped with the image of God. Later, God "creates" Israel by liberating them from forced labor, canceling their debt, buying their freedom from slavery, and restoring their household property.

Sabbath celebrates this jubilee relationship with God. Sabbath rest is God's distinctive mark, a deep symbol of Israel's intimate relationship with

the one who frees rather than enslaves, who offers lavish blessing rather than endless toil.

DELIGHT IN CREATION

Genesis 1:1-2:4a, the Bible's first sabbath story, portrays a created world fundamentally benevolent and able to produce enough to sustain prosperous human life. This theme of natural abundance is coupled, however, with a principle of self-restraint. Creation climaxes and finally coheres in sabbath rest. Sabbath is woven into the very fabric of the universe, the thread that holds the world together.

This story portrays creation as a progressive movement from watery chaos to order. "When God began to create the sky and the earth, the world was shapeless chaos (*tohû wabohû*)." *Tohû wabohû* describes something empty and wild, without shape or coherence. It typically signifies uncultivated, dangerous wilderness, a sharp contrast to the ecological and social order of land successfully farmed. This story, like other ancient creation stories, portrays this primordial chaos as a raging sea. In the ancient world, as in our own, water management was a perpetual and pressing concern. Uncontrolled rainwater can destroy crops and building. Catching rainwater, directing and slowing the course of its runoff by channels and terraces limits its destructive power and maximizes its benefit to agriculture. The Genesis story reflects this ancient agrarian reality. At the dawn of creation, the world was shapeless chaos—deep, dark, windy water, a wild and violent "cosmic soup." God creates a livable world by taming and channeling the raging primordial flood.

The writers choose the Hebrew word *bara'* ("create") to describe God's work, and use it interchangeably with *ʿasah* ("make"). Elsewhere, humans are also said to "make" (*ʿasah*) things. But in the Bible, God alone "creates".

In a slightly different form in 1 Samuel 2:29, *bara'* means "to fatten oneself." As an adjective, it means "fat."⁴ In one form, *bara'* refers to separating fats from a liquid, skimming cream from milk. *Bara'* is an appropriate choice for Genesis 1, which portrays creation as the separating and collecting of primordial waters to allow solids to appear—sky, earth, heavenly bodies, vegetation, and living creatures. In this story, creating is like churning butter, and creation is the cream that rises to the top of watery chaos, worked and shaped by God.

In the Bible, fatness connotes wealth and health (cf. Genesis 27:28). *Bara'* describes the seven "fat" cows in Pharaoh's famous dream that symbolize seven years of prosperity (Genesis 41:2-20). It describes the rich and lavish food of Israel's enemy in Habakkuk (1:16) and the miraculous physical health of Daniel's kosher vegetarians (Daniel 1:15). *Bara'* serves as a double entendre in Genesis 1. God "creates" a "fat" world, a rich and lavish overflow of goodness that is abundant and life-giving at its very core.

The double meaning of *bara'*, "to create" and "to be fat," is reinforced

in the narrative by God's appraisal of the creative work in progress. The declaration, "God saw that it was good (*tôv*)," runs like a litany through the story. But the full meaning of *tôv* is not captured by the English word "good." *Tôv* implies joy and delight. The *tôv* refrain expresses God's intense pleasure at creation's every detail. It is God's cosmic "wow!" as creation unfolds: "God saw this as delightful!"

SABBATH REST, THE CROWN OF DELIGHTFUL CREATION

On day one, when God began creating, the universe was wild and watery chaos (Genesis 1:1-2). On day seven, the world is restful and whole (2:1-4a). The opening verses of chapter 2 drive home the point by repeating in different forms a word that means "finished, complete, total, whole": "And they were finished (*calah*), sky and earth and all (*cal*) their host, and he finished (*calah*) the work he did." The theme of completion continues in 2:2b with the word *shabat*, "to rest, cease, stop," the verbal form of the noun *shabbat* (sabbath): "and God stopped/rested on the seventh day from all the work he did."

God's ability to rest is a sign of God's sovereign rule in creation. Elsewhere in the Bible, "rest" describes political stability, which is the ability of a people or king to secure order and successfully govern.⁵ Rest signifies the successful establishment of justice and peace. It is a witness to *shalom*. God rests at the end of creation because God is able to rest. God's benevolent rule in the universe is unchallenged. Sabbath celebrates God's complete, just, and compassionate rule in the world.

The blessing of the seventh day in verse 3 brings the creation drama full circle. On the first day, God established time by creating light and starting the cycle of day and night that regulates the biological, agricultural, and social rhythms of earth. On the seventh day, God creates sacred time and signals the completion of a living, life-giving world.

Elsewhere in the story, only sea creatures, birds (1:22), and human beings created in the image of God (1:28) are "blessed." In these cases, God's blessing is coupled with the admonition to "be fruitful and multiply" (cf. the covenant blessing in Genesis 12:2; 17:20; 22:17; 26:3-4, 24). God's promise calls for the world's response. God's blessing is also God's command. To be blessed is to flourish, and to flourish is to respond appropriately to God. Blessing carries the responsibility to live a blessed life.

Sabbath, as blessed time, multiplies itself. It becomes the focal point around which all other time coheres. It shapes all the days of our life as celebrations of God and God's delightful world. It is an enduring sign of God's benevolent desire for the world's flourishing.

Sabbath rest is active, not passive. Here is the delightful twist: "rest" is a verb and "work" is a noun. You've got to work at sabbath keeping.

Sabbath is a challenge. It requires a leap of faith, humble confidence that the world will continue to operate benevolently for a day without our

labor, that God is willing and able to provide enough for good life. Too many of us try to cram eight days of work into a seven-day week. Sabbath promises seven days of prosperity for six days of work. We get more out of life than we put into it. And in the surplus is the gracious mercy of God.

SABBATH MANNA AND THE COMMONWEALTH OF GOD

Exodus 16 tells the Bible's second story about the origin of sabbath. God provides manna in the wilderness to teach Israel to keep sabbath (16:5, 22-30). The story shows that God's providential care extends even to zones of chaos outside the secure, ordered world of farms and villages.

One peculiar characteristic of manna is important to note: the bread from heaven cannot be hoarded. God commands that each Israelite gather "as much of it as each needs to eat." Need is defined individually, not collectively. God's providential care is measured person by person. No one falls through the cracks. Different people collect different quantities: "some gathered more, and some gathered less." But miraculously, "when they measured with an omer, the ones with more had no surplus and the ones with less had no shortage. They all gathered exactly what they needed to eat" (16:18). God fills the basket of every single person, regardless of strength and ability. God's reliable, providential care is limited only by the actual needs of each individual.

In the sabbath-manna story, hoarding is more than a simple case of rule-breaking. It is a rejection of God's commonwealth where everyone gets enough for abundant life. It is an act of disbelief. Greedy consumption is unfaith, rooted in the blasphemous fear that God is not the liberator of slaves, the loving creator who desires abundant life for all.

CONCLUSIONS

The Bible's sabbath laws and stories envision a world where the "natural laws" of scarcity, poverty, and excessive toil no longer apply. These texts anticipate and celebrate a redeemed world, where those who struggle now on the margins of survival find comfort and release. They envision a better world, the commonwealth of God's desire, a world of jubilee justice, where all people live and work with dignity and freedom, caring for one another, enjoying life together, and delighting in contented rest.

This vision of wealth and well-being universally shared stands in sharp contrast to the harsh economic realities actually experienced by ancient families, and it is unlike the world most people know today. But this sab-

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bath-grounded dream of God's redeeming, sustaining commonwealth has enduring power to transform the world.

According to the creation-sabbath story, women and men bear the image of God and therefore share the power to govern (Genesis 1:26-28). If "every man is a king," as the Louisiana populist Huey Long used to say, and "every woman is a queen," as Genesis 1 would add, then no one should live like a slave, submitting "graciously" or otherwise to the dominating power of another.

Like manna, power when it is hoarded, founs and evaporates. Power claimed and shared grows and blesses the world.

With power comes responsibility. Sabbath, a foretaste of the world as it should be, calls us to claim the power and accept the responsibility to make the world better. It calls us to examine the way we live, to make decisions that promote dignity, freedom, well-being, and life-giving power for all God's people.

Renewing the world begins in families and communities, with sabbath disciplines of delight. Having fun with friends and family honors God. Gratefully enjoying the gifts of life is proper worship. Sabbath calls us to establish boundaries, to set appropriate limits to work, to spend time in rest, reflection, recreation, and prayer. Sabbath rest affirms our dependence on God and each other. Sabbath joy helps us delight in creation and thus reflect God.

Most importantly, sabbath reminds us that we are the blessed gifts of God. Gifts communicate the giver. We are cherished signs, the very image of God who wills abundant life for all. Sabbath calls us to live that way.

NOTES

1 This article is adapted from my book, *Sabbath and Jubilee* (Chalice Press, 2000). I thank Chalice Press for permission to use this material.

2 This passage does not refer to letting land lie fallow, as many English translations suggest. See the discussion in *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 51-55.

3 All translations are my own.

4 See, for instance, Genesis 41:2, 4, 5, 7, 18, 20; Judges 3:17; 1 Kings 4:23; Psalm 73:4; Ezekiel 34:3, 20; Habakkuk 1:16; Zechariah 11:6; and Daniel 1:15.

5 Deuteronomy 3:20; Joshua 1:13-15; 23:1; 2 Samuel 7:1, 11; 1 Kings 5:3-4; 8:56; 1 Chronicles 22:9. These references have a different verbal root, *nwh*, but the idea is the same. The verb *shabat* is used in Genesis 2:2-3 for obvious reasons.



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