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# The Day of Rest in the Old Testament

HANS WALTER WOLFF

[On the basis of source analysis of the Sabbath accounts, the author identifies several theological and psychological functions that Yahweh intended the day of rest to serve. He relates his investigations to the New Testament and to life today. Dr. Wolff delivered this essay to members of the Theological Consortium in St. Louis. He is professor of Old Testament at Heidelberg University and the author of several books and numerous articles dealing with the interpretation of the Old Testament.]

**I**n this lecture we shall be concerned with essentially one question: What does the Commandment to observe the sabbath have to say to modern theological thought and to practice in the church of today? In my opinion, the question is important for three reasons:

1. In modern society the problem of how we use our leisure time remains largely unsolved. Although we officially spend less time working, a universal day of rest no longer exists among us. Executives, politicians, scientists, professors, and students and many others need Sundays and holidays to complete work which would otherwise remain unfinished. And to fill their extra leisure, the general public either seeks part-time jobs or has travel bureaus and recreation centers plan their time for them. Who is really able to recuperate and relax on the "day of rest"? This problem could endanger our lives.

2. The common day of worship poses a constant, fundamental problem for the

theory and practice of Christian congregations. The problem does not take a central position of importance in the New Testament. At first primitive Christianity adopted the synagogue's sabbath practices albeit with some discrimination. But soon the day of Jesus' resurrection (Matt. 28:1) prevailed as "the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10). In the centuries following questions continued to grow. Nor did they by any means cease after the emperor Constantine in 321 established Sunday as the legal day of rest. Today the commandment enjoining a day of rest can be seen to be an archetypal model for our theology. For at this point it becomes evident that faith and life, worship and ethos, tradition and practice cannot be separated from each other.

3. It is undoubtedly for this very reason that the commandment of the day of rest played a relatively large role already in the Old Testament. It takes up more space in the Decalogue than any other commandment. It is found, each time in a different form, in Ex. 34 and 24, in the Book of the Covenant, in Deuteronomy, in the Holiness Code, and in P. Prophets as different from each other as Amos, Hosea, and Ezekiel take up the subject of the sabbath. Finally, the day of rest appears in the most widely varying contexts in the historical writings, from the first creation account to Nehemiah's memoirs. Word statistics underline the fact of such widely scattered occurrences: the "seventh day" is by far the most frequent of those days designated



by number in the Old Testament (it occurs about 50 times according to E. Jenni, *Theol. Handwörterbuch zum AT I*, 1971, p. 710).

Before we inquire about the significance of the sabbath, we should first note how, according to the Old Testament, the sabbath was to be observed. How was the seventh day supposed to be celebrated? Perhaps the oldest form of the commandment occurs in Ex. 34:21a; it reads: "Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall cease to work!" The Hebrew text consists of two rhymed triplets: *shesbet yamim taabod ubayyom hashshetii tishbot*. Here we find the key word that names the day of rest in the Old Testament: *shbt*, meaning "to desist from work" (cf. Gen. 8:22). The seventh day is to be observed by rest from one's work.

But isn't the sabbath commandment given a positive formulation in the Decalogue? Ex. 20:8 reads: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy!" In Deut. 5:12 we find only a slight variation and an expansion: "Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as Yahweh, your God, has commanded you" (*lekaddesho* could be a secondary insertion taken from Ex. 20:8, as A. R. Hulst supposes: *Bemerkungen zum Sabbatgebot: Studia Biblica et Semitica Theodoro Christiano Vriezen*, 1966, 152—164). In both texts the seventh day is expressly called "sabbath for Yahweh, your God" (Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14). But how is the "sabbath for Yahweh" to be "remembered," "observed," "sanctified"? The unambiguous, sole answer is: "You shall not do any work." Thus, it is not only possible, but quite probable, that the positive formulation of the commandment in the Decalogue goes back to an original

categorical prohibition such as we find, in addition to Ex. 34:21, also in the Book of the Covenant at Ex. 23:12 and in the Holiness Code at Lev. 19:3. The sabbath is to be sanctified by demonstratively laying all work aside.

Only those regulations for the daily morning and evening sacrifices, which are very late and poorly attested, give the sabbath a cultic character by requiring that instead of one lamb, two (Num. 28:9 f.), or even three (Ezek. 46:4 f.) be offered on the sabbath, together with meal and drink offerings. By being attached to the sacrificial requirements for the other days of the week, these requirements of sacrifices on the sabbath practically confirm the fact that the sabbath day was not given a special cultic distinction, as if it were qualitatively different. Albrecht Alt (*KS 1*, 131, n. 1) is correct in stating that "Originally the sabbath was characterized merely by the prohibition of all work, and in Israel's early history had nothing to do with the specific cultic worship of Yahweh as such." After every 6 days, all busyness must cease for a full day.

Was the sabbath perhaps for this reason so characteristic for belief in Yahweh? Was not this regular weekly "strike" against all compulsion to work in principle a demonstration for Yahweh, the God of Israel?

To clarify what has been suggested let us now turn to the different formulations of the commandment of the day of rest.

1. We shall begin with the formulation in the book of Deuteronomy. Deut. 5:15 attaches the sabbath commandment to the ancient Israelite Exodus tradition, thus: "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Yahweh your



God brought you out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore Yahweh your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day." Here the reason for observing the day of rest is that affirmation which was absolutely fundamental for Israel, namely, that Yahweh had liberated Israel from Egypt. On every sabbath Israel is to remember that her God is a liberator who had put an end to all slaveholding and who is the equal of all who wield power within and without Israel, who might still seek to afflict His people. Did not early Christianity act accordingly when it connected the day of rest with the remembrance of Jesus Christ's resurrection? On every seventh day man is to recall that He who set us free can no longer be conquered by any power, not even by death. Through Him God accepts us completely, as we are, apart from all our achievements, and in spite of our transgressions. We need no longer be distressed by the pressure to achieve and produce. Nothing can accuse us: neither our failures nor our feeble undertakings, not even our unfinished work from the past week.

The fundamental significance of the seventh day is therefore this: rest from our work is to *remind us of the freedom we have already been given*. It is apparent that we need to be regularly reminded of the magnificent freedom which has been provided for us. This was obviously the purpose for which the primitive Christian church assembled itself on the first day of the week, as the Book of Acts reports about the Christians in Troas (Acts 20:7-12). The first day of the week, therefore, is not for the performance of certain cultic rituals, but to remind us of God's acts of salvation. In ancient Israel it was the re-

sponsibility of the parents, above all, to recall God's mighty acts for their children. It is perhaps for this reason that in the Holiness Code at Lev. 19:3, the commandment to honor parents is perceptibly connected with the sabbath commandment; similarly, these two commandments occur together in the Decalogue, but there the sequence is reversed. Mother and father ("mother" occurs before "father" in Lev. 19:3!) were the first to pass on the history of salvation. As such they deserve the respect of their children. The writers of Deuteronomy were not the first to have drawn attention to this; cf. Deut. 6:20 f.

The sabbath commandment shows in an especially instructive way that the basic commandments are a great gift given to Israel to help and benefit her. Far from being demands, the commandments are exactly the opposite: they free Israel from demands. Thus it is also significant that in the so-called "Ritual Decalogue," the central section of Ex. 34, the sabbath commandment immediately follows those commandments forbidding the worship of other gods and the making of images (vv. 14-21; cf. M. Noth, *ATD* 5). The God who gave Himself to Israel also gave her the gift of time. The institution of the sabbatical year for the cultivated land found in Lev. 25:1-7 makes this clear. The regulation requiring that the fields be left fallow every seventh year expresses the fact that the land is a gift from Yahweh. Accordingly, the injunction that the seventh day must "lie fallow" rejects all greedy use of time and shows that all time is a gift (thus W. Zimmerli, *Die Weltlichkeit des AT* [1971], p. 80). Thus a person's demonstrative laying down of his work on the so-called "sabbath for Yahweh" can



attest also to the remaining days of the week that every period of time is a gift. Does not the reference to the gift of freedom aim at bearing witness to the fundamental liberation from all compulsory labor? To this question we shall later turn our attention.

2. But first let us note a second basic motivation for observing the sabbath, which is connected with the thought of P. In Ex. 20:11 the command to rest from work is bolstered thus: "In six days Yahweh made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; *therefore* the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it."

According to this, the day of rest is to remind man forcefully, at least every 7 days, that he has been put into a world provided with all that he needs, and what is more, a world richly endowed with many, many beautiful things. The sabbath is thus an invitation to rejoice in God's creation. The words that give the motivation for the commandment remind us of the first creation account. In its own archaic fashion it grandly portrays the first full day of man's life as a great day of rest. God had just completed 6 days of work. But man on the first day of his life could rest with God and look back upon the great work God had done. Only after this does man turn to his work. Hence the early Christians were right in making the first day of the week, rather than the seventh, their day of rest. Moreover, in so doing they also demonstrated theological wisdom. After all, for the person whom God has liberated and richly blessed, the day of rest marks, not the end, but the *beginning* of the week. For him the week is not an uphill climb toward his weekend rest; in-

stead, he coasts downhill, fresh from his rest and relaxation. Therefore our work ought to acquire somewhat more of a recreational character; indeed, it should be a kind of protest against the pressure to produce and achieve. We have only to make sure that we care for everything the Creator has placed at our disposal, lest we destroy it. (The pollution of our environment has greatly endangered us and our world.) Man is totally unable to understand himself apart from what God has made. Whenever man is unable to see God's creation, his existence inevitably becomes devoid of meaning. Apart from it, man does not find the right relation to his work or to his leisure. Sunday can revive our joy in God's creation, in the varieties of life and creatures, of colors and sounds, as exhibited, for example, by "the birds that sing much more than Darwin would allow," as a modern biologist puts it. Do we not need to learn how to celebrate our day of rest anew, with sheer delight in heaven and earth?

Ex. 20:11 expressly reminds us that "God rested on the seventh day." In Ex. 31:17 there is added to the word *shabat* the word *wayyinnapesb*: "he took a deep breath." Here God's rest has a double significance: (1) Now He is *able* to rest, for his entire work, all that man needs, is completed. (2) Besides this, the additional word "he took a deep breath," or "he refreshed himself," subtly suggests that He *must* rest; He had become exhausted from His work of creation. We are able to comprehend this fully only in the light of Jesus Christ's exhaustion in His work of redemption, as it is expressed in His cry: "It is finished." In offering up Himself, God gave us everything.



"Therefore Yahweh *blessed* the sabbath day." In Gen. 1:22, 28 God had previously blessed the fish of the sea and man. This blessing provided them with the power to be fruitful and to multiply. Now the day of rest is blessed. It, too, is provided with life-restoring powers, so that from it man's time might be made new and fruitful. In addition God also "*hallowed*" the sabbath. That is, He separated it from the workdays. Like God's separation of light from darkness, His separating of rest days from workdays is also an act of divine goodness. Is not a unique joy in God's creation something we can acquire anew?

3. In the Book of the Covenant we find one of the oldest formulations of the sabbath commandment in Ex. 23:12. There the commandment is given a third motivation, which we must now consider: "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh you shall rest; that your ox and your ass may have rest and the son of your bondmaid, and the alien, may be refreshed." (The word "refreshed," *wayyin-napesh*, now applied to the exhausted son of a day laborer or to a foreign sojourner, is the very same word which Ex. 31:17 applied to the Creator!) It is highly significant that here the only purpose of the day of rest is that the dependent laborers may find rest and recuperation. It is indeed moving that the cattle too are cared for. But it is even more touching that, of the dependent laborers, the son of the female slave and the alien are especially singled out. For when such persons are ordered to work, they have no recourse or protection. When a master does not deem it wise to give his adult, female slave or his Israelite male slave a certain task to perform, he will more likely expect her son or a foreign

laborer to perform it. It is precisely to such borderline cases that this commandment speaks. According to Ex. 23:12, then, the sabbath was instituted *for those who are particularly burdened with work and are subject to the command of others.*

In view of this it is understandable that the dependent laborers are specifically mentioned in those longer formulations of the sabbath commandment which are found within the series of ten commandments. In Ex. 20:10 we hear: "On the sabbath you shall not do any work, you or your son, or your daughter, your manservant or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates." To these words the parallel version in Deut. 5:14 significantly adds: "so that your male and female slave may rest *as well as you!*" (*kamoka*). Here the commandment of a day of rest takes a step in the direction of making all men equal before God. At least on Sunday, parents should cease making demands on their sons and daughters, to say nothing of their servants.

This thought, namely, that the day of rest should be of benefit especially for the weaker members of society, is taken up by the New Testament. At the end of 1 Corinthians (16:2), in one of the few New Testament passages which mention the first day of the week, we hear that this day is to serve for the collecting and saving of money for the poor in Jerusalem.

In our egotistical concern with our own work, we all too easily push aside those who suffer from the drudgery they are forced to perform, both far and near. But at least in the quiet Sunday hours in God's presence, there should be a closing of this gap that separates us. Doesn't our leisure time also give us the opportunity to make



our homes and backyards a relaxing place where strangers can refresh themselves? It should provide us with time to send more than a hastily scribbled postcard to those who have long awaited a word from us; it should give us time to have more than a superficial conversation with a person who is ill. The commandment to rest on the sabbath gives us time for the modern slave, who lives on the periphery of our society, no matter in what form he may stand before us. Ludwig Koehler once wrote, "Before God's throne there will hardly ever be a greater testimony given on your behalf than the statement, 'He had time for me.'" Jesus Himself impresses upon us that "the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Above all, our Sundays should not degenerate into a hypocritical kind of pious busyness. Moreover, all attention we might give to those in need of help is genuine only when it is born of a living joy in God's gift of freedom, and from the certainty that nothing can separate us from His love.

4. *Voices from the prophets* speak out against *business on the sabbath*. Amos preached judgment upon the dealers in grain who could not wait until the sabbath was past in order to sell their wheat and deceive the people with poor quality, false scales, and inflated prices (8:5). We should note that this same prophet, who polemicized so passionately against the pilgrimages to the sanctuaries and against the various religious activities in the sacrificial cult (4:4 f.; 5:21 ff.), demands that the sabbath be observed, apparently because it is a powerful witness to the fact that man lives from *God's* mighty acts, not from his *own* works. A saying of Jere-

miah's which has been revised by the Deuteronomistic redactor warns: "If your life is dear to you, do not bear a burden on the sabbath . . ." (Jer. 17:21 ff.). Although this saying may already show evidence of a later casuistry, it nevertheless is undergirded above all by joy in a life of freedom. In this sort of life, Yahweh granted Israel a future, but she was to lose her life because of her introverted concern for herself. This is expressed most beautifully by these words from Trito-Isaiah (Is. 58:13-14): "If you turn back your foot from the sabbath, from doing your business on my holy day, if you call the sabbath a delight [*oneg* = enjoyment, pleasure!] and the holy day of Yahweh honorable, if you honor it, not going your own ways or doing your own business or talking idly, then you will have delight in Yahweh; I will make you ride on the heights of the land and enjoy the heritage of Jacob your father. For the mouth of Yahweh has spoken." These concrete admonitions are underlined not by a fear of punishment, but rather by joy and delight.

The prophets' words contradict man's natural inclination to make his life secure or to add to life's abundance by nonstop uninterrupted work. This error is addressed by a phrase which has been added to the brief, ancient version of the commandment in Ex. 34:21b. The commandment's oldest formulation reads: "Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from working." To this the following phrase has been added: "also in the time of plowing and harvest." Perhaps the ancient, brief formulation reaches back to nomadic times; its expansion, however, interprets it for the situation in Canaan, after the people had settled and cultivated



the land. These additional words of interpretation refer to the seasons of the year when work in the fields was especially pressing. Particularly in such times man needs a day of rest. (This also applies to students as they write papers and prepare for exams, and to professors when deadlines for meetings and lectures press upon them!)

The story in Ex. 16 about manna in the wilderness is an almost humorous criticism of our restless overzealousness for work. Each day God sent fresh bread to the Israelites; each day in the week it had to be gathered anew, for the bread from the previous day would stink. But on the sixth day God sent a double portion of manna. What was provided for the seventh day "did not stink, and there were no worms in it" according to vv. 22-24. Now, of course, some of the people had to go out on the seventh day—exactly like modern man—to gather their bread, but "they found nothing," the narrator tells us in v. 27, not without a bit of derision. Busyness on the seventh day is simply mocked as senseless for its results are zero; it fails to recognize the care that God provides. Man does not live from his own untiring efforts but from God's activity.

Nehemiah wanted to proclaim this good news in a unique fashion. On the sabbath day he saw people treading wine presses, loading grain, selling wine, figs, and other foodstuffs; men of Tyre bringing fish to the market. Then he reproached those responsible, asking: "What is this evil thing which you are doing? Thus your fathers increased God's wrath on us . . ." (13: 17 f.). Thereafter Nehemiah had the gates of Jerusalem shut on each sabbath. Many people, it would seem, considered the sab-

bath rest detrimental to their economic success. Those who keep the sabbath have been accused of laziness, a reproach which Tacitus leveled against the Jews (*Hist.* V, 4). Yet "human life has a higher significance than being merely a struggle for existence. Every sabbath grants anew to those who stand under [God's] royal dominion the freedom that belongs to God's children. Although at first that freedom is given in a limited measure, it is given with the renewed promise of complete fulfillment in the future." (W. Vischer, "Nehemiah," *Festschrift von Rad*, 1971, 609)

5. The New Testament presupposes that the day of rest is *an introduction to ultimate and complete freedom*. In the letter to the Colossians (2:17 f.) we read that sabbath days were to be understood as shadows of what was to come, when the future would become incarnate in Christ. Within the Old Testament we find that at the time of the Exile, the sabbath was understood as that which pointed toward Israel's future. During the Babylonian captivity the sabbath became the sign both of the covenant and of one's faith in Yahweh. In the name of his God, Ezekiel said: "You shall hallow my sabbaths, that they may be a sign between me and you, that you may know that I am Yahweh, your God" (Ezek. 20:20). P takes up this meaning of the sabbath even more emphatically (Ex. 31: 12-17). In this passage (v. 14) it is first of all remarkable that anyone who profanes the sabbath is threatened with the punishment of death; cf. 35:2! Num. 15: 32-36 tells of the execution of a man who failed to observe the sabbath. Here let us especially note the fact that not even the slightest cultic activity is required to sanctify the sabbath. It is hallowed by doing



exactly nothing, by resting. For precisely in this way the Israelite shows that Yahweh is his helper. The sabbath is considered the "sign" of a "covenant" "forever" (vv. 13, 16 f.). For Noah the sign of the covenant was the rainbow; for Abraham it was circumcision. Similarly for Israel the sabbath was a sign of a *berit*, that is, Yahweh's "binding himself" to Israel (cf. E. Kutsch, "Sehen und Bestimmen," *Festschrift K. Gallig*, 1970, p. 170). Indeed, this covenant is an emphatic promise "for ever" (*berit olam*), for all future generations (vv. 13, 16). This promise gives Israel hope for a freedom which has already begun in Yahweh's gift of His rules for living. Whoever does not accept His offer and cannot rest at least on the seventh day prepares his own death. (Perhaps P thought of the seventh day as the great day when Yahweh revealed Himself. For in its description of the Sinai event in Ex. 24:15-18, Yahweh's glory remains concealed by a cloud for 6 days. On the seventh day, however, Yahweh calls to Moses from out of the cloud and appears before the Israelites in the form of a consuming fire on the top of the mountain. Thus in P the seventh day is not only the day signifying that creation is completed, but is the day on which Yahweh's revelation is completed as well.)

Already in the Old Testament, therefore, the sabbath becomes an eschatological event in the midst of man's provisional existence. Today we are able to understand the sabbath as a decisive sign of the ultimate future, in two respects. First, it should constantly serve as a model which is to spur us on to shape the entire week in freedom — something which the sabbath has in fact already been doing di-

rectly or indirectly for mankind over the centuries. Second, the day of rest should provide the norm and pattern for man's basic posture in the presence of God; it should be a day on which people really begin to come alive. The leisure provided by this day can give us the creativity to schedule our own work and the work of others so that during the week we live with much greater freedom.

Above all, the day of rest is the sign of a hope which looks toward the complete freedom God's children will have in the future, a freedom awaited by the entire anxiety-ridden creation. We have seen how in the Book of Deuteronomy the sabbath makes each slave the equal to each free man; how in P the sabbath points to Yahweh, who himself sanctifies man by placing him into an everlasting covenant with himself. The decisive step was made by the early Christians when they observed the day of rest on the first day of the week. Ever since, week after week, this has reminded mankind of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and thus has given mankind the basis for the hope in the future resurrection of all men, hope for the new world which God has promised us; a world in which all tears will be wiped away and death and suffering, weeping and pain, will be no more (Rev. 21:4). The first day of the week should be a pointer to the last, final day for every person. We most surely make too little of Sunday when we are not at least minimally reminded of the day in the future when there will be full, complete freedom.

A new generation may well be able to take great delight once again in celebrating the seventh day in a more conscious manner. It will perhaps be able to clearly dis-



tinguish the sabbath from all workdays, as well as from all other leisure time devoted to hobbies, by intentionally ceasing from all meaningless activity and busyness, and by investing it generously with joy. Shouldn't our congregations explore new ways of observing the day of rest for individuals, families, and groups? In this way the world around us could again share in the freedom which has already been given to us; it could share in our joy in creation, and those heavily burdened with

the pressure of work would find genuine relief. A new understanding of the sabbath could reveal the senselessness of never interrupting our work, and thus the day of rest would become a prelude to that final, ultimate freedom we await. Doesn't the Old Testament, with its various formulations of the sabbath commandment, raise the question of what we are able to change in ourselves and in our world?

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