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Oppression Interrupted: The Sabbath and Justice

ROLF A. JACOBSON

See, just as the LORD my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy.... And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? (Deut 4:5, 8)

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:8)

Both of the above passages, from Micah and Deuteronomy, respectively, assume that *justice* is embedded in God's law. In Deuteronomy, Moses asks, "What other great nation has statutes and ordinances as *just* (משפטים צדקים) as this entire law." The prophet Micah assumes that Israel already knows God's will—"He has told you, O mortal, what is good...to do justice (עשור משפט)." Note that Micah does not presume that the command to do justice is new, but that Israel already knows God's WILL for justice. How does Israel know this, or where is God's will for justice disclosed? The most plausible (perhaps even obvious) explanation is that God's will for justice had been disclosed in God's gift of the law.

The Sabbath commandment establishes the principle of God's regular, gracious intrusion into the economic bondage of life: one day in every seven, work is to stop. From this primary law, the principle of God's gracious intrusion radiates outward so that other aspects of oppressive work and economic bondage are also affected graciously.

But precisely where in the law is God's will for justice revealed? As many critics have pointed out, after all, the Ten Commandments (which are the heart of God's law) make no reference to seeking justice, doing injustice, or fighting injustice.

The thesis of this essay is that God's will for justice is embedded in the Sabbath commandment within the Decalogue and in what Patrick Miller has called the "sabbatical principle"¹ within the broader set of pentateuchal statutes and ordinances.

THE SABBATH: OPPRESSION INTERRUPTED

The Hebrew verb *shabat* (שָׁבַת), as is widely known, simply means "stop" or "cease." For example, see Gen 8:22: "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease (שָׁבַת)." The Sabbath command, then, in its most basic sense, is God's command to stop working one day in seven. Before the Sabbath was ever connected with worship, or prayer, or divine service, the Sabbath was a day to stop working.

Something is lost when the remainder of the commandment and the motive clause for why the commandment should be kept are left out. When the full commandment is not read, the justice element in the Sabbath commandment is missed.

Think of the Sabbath as the first labor law on the books.

For the sake of brevity, when the Ten Commandments are posted on statues, or commemorated in art, or printed in catechisms, the Sabbath commandment is usually curtailed to something like this: "Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy" or "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." Such a curtailment makes sense, especially for the purpose of helping the young or the newly catechized to memorize the commandments.

Yet, something is lost when the remainder of the commandment and the motive clause for why the commandment should be kept are left out. To be specific, when the full commandment is not read, the justice element in the Sabbath commandment is missed.

Consider the full commandment in the Deuteronomic version:

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty

¹Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 133. "The sabbatical principle is God's provision of freedom and rest as a continuing possibility for human existence." (Emphasis in original.)

hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Deut 5:12–15)

Notice that the commandment as a whole addresses the basic justice issue of the work week. Think of the Sabbath as the first labor law on the books.

Long before unions and labor representatives bargained for a just work week, God intruded graciously into the world and said, “Everybody gets one day off in seven. *Everybody*. Property owners. Sons. Daughters. Male slaves. Female slaves. Oxen. Donkeys. All animals. Resident aliens. And before you ask ‘why,’ I will tell you why,” says God. “Because you were slaves in Egypt and I brought you out. So everyone—including children, slaves, resident aliens, and even animals—gets a day off.”

I prefer to regard the Sabbath as *God’s gracious intrusion* into the labored oppression of life. Because of sin, the necessary work that we must do to survive as individuals and as a species is experienced as a burden. By the sweat of our brows, we work the ground, wrestling the means to sustain life from the earth. The biblical narrative suggests that while work itself was part of God’s original vision for the relationship between humanity and the earth—“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till and to keep it” (Gen 2:15)—the fact that we experience this work as so difficult and wearisome was not part of God’s original vision. The experience of work as oppressive is a result of sin. Genesis 3 uses the language of curse to describe this sad reality: “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread” (vv. 17b–18a).

But God is gracious and merciful. So God ordained that the oppressive reality of having to work “all the days of your life” would be graciously interrupted, one day in every seven. And that day would be called Sabbath. Oppression interrupted.

THE SABBATICAL PRINCIPLE: MERCY EXTENDED

Readers who are not deeply familiar with the case law of the Pentateuch may be surprised to learn that the concept of Sabbath is not just one limited to “The Sabbath,” but also applies to *an entire set of sabbatical laws*. The Sabbath commandment establishes the principle of God’s regular, gracious intrusion into the economic bondage of life: one day in every seven, work is to stop. From this primary law, the principle of God’s gracious intrusion radiates outward so that other aspects of oppressive work and economic bondage are also affected graciously. Miller uses the image of “trajectory” to describe this sabbatical principle. He writes that “the Sabbath as command and gift is *one of the most telling aspects of the divine activity*. The primary trajectory set loose in and by the Sabbath Commandment is the principle of regular release from the things that enslave, oppress, and bind human life.”²

²Ibid. (Emphasis added.)

In the following examples, it is clear that the Sabbath was not just a day, but also a principle regarding the regular intrusion of God to set free and show mercy.

The sabbatical principle and release from slavery

Consider Deut 15:12–18, which specifies that slaves were to be released in the seventh year of their service.

If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free. And when you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the LORD your God has blessed you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you.... Do not consider it a hardship when you send them out from you free persons, because for six years they have given you services worth the wages of hired laborers; and the LORD your God will bless you in all that you do.

Notice first, that in the ancient world, slavery was an economic condition: “If a member of your community...*is sold*...” If a person fell behind severely in their debts, they might have to sell themselves or their children to pay off those debts. See, for example, the plea that a certain widow addressed to the prophet Elisha: “Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared the Lord, but a creditor has come to take away my two children as slaves” (2 Kings 4:1). Slavery—a rather cruel oppression—was an economic condition.

Slavery—a rather cruel oppression—was an economic condition. It wasn't until the last five hundred years that the idea of a slave-free economy became imaginable.

In Israel, however, slavery was not to be permanent. Israel's gracious God mandated that in a slave's seventh year, they were to be set free.

But that is not all! In addition, the now-freed-slave's former master was “not to send him [or her] out empty-handed.” The master was to “provide liberally” for the freed slave out of the three basic domains of Israel's wealth: “your flock” (sheep and oxen), “your threshing floor” (grain), “and your wine press” (olives and grapes from the vineyard). The freed slave, in other words, was not just to be turned out into the cold, but was to be given enough “start-up capital” to become independent.

Why were Israelites expected to behave with such generosity and abundant care for the neighbor? Because they were to imitate God's redemption of them from Egypt: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you.” For that reason, Israel was not to consider it “a hardship” to be so generous toward their slaves.

In this way, the *gracious intrusion of Israel's God into the economic oppressions of life* was extended via the sabbatical principle in order to deal with the troubling institution of slavery.

Excursus 1—On Slavery

A brief excursus on slavery. Modern people of faith are often rightly scandalized by the Bible's acceptance of slavery. This is appropriate. But at least three things might be said to account for the Bible's view of slavery. First, Israel's slavery was different from the slavery that was known in North America, in that slaves went free after six years. Second, Israel's slavery was not the race-based, chattel slavery of American history (or for that matter the sexual-trade or religion-based slavery so prevalent throughout the globe still today). Third, it wasn't until the last five hundred years that the idea of a slave-free economy became imaginable. Throughout all of history until very recently, slavery was an assumed reality—the question was how to make it more just. Only in recent centuries has it been recognized that slavery is an irredeemable social evil and has it been conceivable that slavery itself could be eliminated. But note that our society still has its extremes of wealth and poverty—we have not fixed that social evil. This is not to defend the ancient institution of slavery, but merely to put it in context.

The sabbatical principle and rest for creation

God's sabbatical principle also extended to the idea of granting relief to the poor, to wild animals, and to creation itself. Consider Exod 23:10–12:

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed.

The last sentence in the above passage establishes the connection to the Sabbath commandment and again reminds that the purpose of the Sabbath is to grant a just work week to animals (“your ox and your donkey”) and to the poorest of the poor (“your homeborn slave and the resident alien”).

But the sabbatical principle also extends to the land. Every seventh year, the earth is to “rest and lie fallow.” And not just the fields that produced grain, but also “your vineyard and...your olive orchard” (which produced olives and grapes—Israel's cash, export crops). The purpose of this extension of God's gracious intrusions was threefold.

First, the land needs rest. We know this now from science—that farmland can be depleted of its nutrients; that rest, rotation of crops, or (in modern farming) amendment of the soil is necessary for the land. In ancient Israel, the rest of the land was understood as a divine command for the sake of the land itself.

Second, land was to be given rest “so that the poor of your people may eat.”

Notice again the justice element in the sabbatical principle. Ceasing to plant and harvest the fields and the orchards was for the purpose of justice—so that the poor might eat.

Third, land was given rest so that the “wild animals may eat.” Justice also extends to undomesticated animals. As Israel domesticated the lands for planting, pasture, and vineyards, the wild animals would be pushed out of their habitat. This was reality and a part of God’s will that human beings subdue the earth. But in the just, divine economy, God nevertheless still cares for the wild animals. Justice for such animals included the right for such animals to feed on the fruits of the fields and vineyards in the years when they were at rest.

The sabbatical principle and the forgiveness of debt

Here is a tip for you. Next time you are in an argument with someone who claims that the only way to interpret the Bible faithfully is to interpret it literally, read the following passage to them and then ask for a \$10,000 loan:

Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the LORD’s remission has been proclaimed. . . . If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, *do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor*. You should rather open your hand, *willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be*. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,” and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt. *Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so*, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.” (Deut 15:1–2, 7–11; emphasis added)

Here is the harsh reality regarding life in a broken world that lies in bondage to sin—some people are poor, some people live in poverty. The Bible acknowledges this tragic situation: “there will never cease to be some in need.” Or, as Jesus put it two days before his death, “You [shall] always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness [mercy] to them” (Mark 14:7). This does not mean that it is God’s will or God’s plan that there will always be some people who are poor. I believe this is not God’s will. Rather, as long as sin remains, some people will be reduced to poverty by the realities of sin.

Here is another harsh economic reality: sometimes—but not always—debt and poverty go together. Shakespeare’s Polonius may have advised his son Laertes “neither a borrower nor a lender be,”³ but life’s circumstances often force people to take on debt. And debt can be either a good thing or a bad thing.

³William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 3.

Debt can be a very good thing. Here is a scenario. You take out a loan at a reasonable interest rate. With the loan, you invest in a small business. You are good at running this business, you stay healthy, and you earn enough money to pay back the loan over time. Everyone wins. The lender wins. You win. Your customers win. Your employees win.

Debt can also be a bad thing. Here is a scenario. You take out a loan at a reasonable interest rate. With the loan, you invest in a small business. But maybe you are not good at running this business. Or maybe you don't stay healthy. Or maybe the economy tanks and nobody can afford your services or products. In most economies, not everyone loses. The rules are rigged so that the lenders never lose. You lose. Your employees lose. But the lender does not lose.

God extends the sabbatical principle to grant relief for those who fall behind in life and need to become borrowers

For those people for whom debt is a terrible thing, God extends the sabbatical principle so that debtors do not always lose. Every seventh year, all debts were to be forgiven. And just in case crafty lenders were tempted to be either hard-hearted and not lend, or quick-witted and only lend when the full six years of interest would be paid, God is rather specific:

- do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor
- willingly lend enough to meet the need, whatever it may be
- do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is near”
- give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so

In this way, God extends the sabbatical principle to grant relief for those who fall behind in life and need to become borrowers.

And if you think God is being a tad unreasonable, wait until you read Lev 25!

The Year of Jubilee—the sabbatical principle on steroids

There is not space here to take a full look at Lev 15 and the “Year of Jubilee”—the fiftieth year. Here, we will limit consideration to the law regarding the return of property. “In this year of Jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property” (25:13). That is, if a plot of land was sold, in the fiftieth “Year of Jubilee,” all land was returned to the family that originally owned it. God stipulated, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (25:23). Why should Israel obey? Again, because, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God” (25:38).

The law regarding the return of property extended the sabbatical principle to encompass the land itself. Recognizing that the primary means of production in an agrarian society was the land, the Year of Jubilee was the ultimate extension of the

sabbatical principle. This was so because it mandated that nobody could monopolize ownership of the land. In this way, God's grace was extended toward the ultimate justice issue—ownership of the means of production.

Excursus 2—Neither Socialism nor Crony Capitalism, but Their Opposites

Some people might be thinking, “That sounds a lot like socialism.” Some might like that thought. Some might hate it. So, for all who are thinking that this sounds like socialism, hear this word as from the Lord: “This is not socialism, this is the *opposite* of socialism! This is not crony capitalism, this is the *opposite* of crony capitalism!”

The “Year of Jubilee” was a set of laws that protected the property rights of families, or what we might call “small business owners.” These laws forbid the government and the wealthy from monopolizing ownership of the land—and note that throughout most of history the government (kings, dictators, dukes, counts, generals) and the wealthy have been one and the same. The prophet Isaiah famously condemned those “who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you” (Isa 5:8). The target of Isaiah’s denunciation was clearly the king and his cronies—people such as King Ahab and Queen Jezebel who in a previous generation had illicitly joined the vineyard of a private citizen named Naboth to their own royal properties.

In pure socialism, the government owns the means of production and private property is abolished. The Jubilee laws protect the property rights of local families against the threat of direct government ownership. But note then that this is also not crony capitalism. In crony capitalism, the government rigs the market so that crony friends of the governing elite are able to monopolize ownership of property and the mechanisms of the supposedly free market. The Jubilee laws also protect the property rights of local families against the threat of the cronies of the government.

Some people might be asking, “Did the ancient Israelites actually keep the sabbatical laws about freeing slaves, giving the land rest, forgiving debt, and returning land?” The answer is simple. Yes, many people did—mostly they did so when it was in their interest or not too painful to do so. No, many people did not—mostly they did not keep these laws when it was against their self-interest or too painful to do so.⁴

THE SABBATH THAT I CHOOSE—JUSTICE!

The prophet who is often called “Third Isaiah” had a complicated view regarding Sabbath observance.⁵

On the one hand, that prophet boldly called for the covenant inclusion of eu-

⁴For more, see Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

⁵See Frederick J. Gaiser’s essay, “The Delight of the Sabbath: An Exegetical/Homiletical Study of Isaiah 58,” in this volume of *Word & World*.

nuchs and foreigners “who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it” (Isa 56:6). That is, Third Isaiah taught that eunuchs and foreigners who kept the Sabbath should be formally welcomed into the chosen people Israel. This teaching was mostly likely in direct conflict with some of his contemporaries.

On the other hand, like the prophets Amos and First Isaiah (see Amos 5:18–24 and Isa 1:12–17), Third Isaiah condemned those who merely observed Sabbath and fast days, yet did not devote themselves to lives of justice and ethical integrity.

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday. (Isa 58:6–10)

Like his distant-future kinsman Jesus, who maintained that the Sabbath was made for the well-being of human beings and not the opposite, Third Isaiah looked to the Sabbath commandment and in it saw God’s will for justice. These ancient prophets, and the Savior, each heard in the Sabbath Commandment the certain call of the divine trumpet announcing the dawn of mercy and the sound of justice rolling down like water. ☩

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