



Sabbath as Alternative

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

It is a great misfortune that in our United States Puritan legacy, the Sabbath is perceived as a restrictive, killjoy practice. In ancient Israel, however, the Sabbath is a mighty practice that sustains a peculiar faith identity. That peculiar faith identity, moreover, has immense significance for the healthy ordering of the political economy.

LOOKING BOTH WAYS

It is clear that the Sabbath commandment stands at the center of the Decalogue, the ultimate Torah that characterizes the covenant made at Sinai (Exod 20:11–17).¹ The Sabbath commandment occupies considerable textual space (vv. 8–11). I have learned from Patrick Miller that this critical position in the Ten Commandments means that this Sabbath commandment looks both ways.² It looks back to commandments one through three, which concern God. This backward look suggests that the God who gives the commandments practices Sabbath and is a God of rest, not a God of endless, anxious production. But the Sabbath commandment also looks forward to commandments five through ten, which concern neighborly relations. Thus, respectful neighborly relations, as detailed in

¹The themes of this paper are more fully explicated in my book *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the Culture of Now* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

²Patrick D. Miller, Jr., “The Human Sabbath: A Study in Deuteronomical Theology,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 6/2 (1985) 81–97. Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 117–166, has provided the finest critical exposition of the Sabbath that we have.

The covenant is an act of resistance to and an alternative to the Pharaonic social system. Sabbath is the visible expression of resistance and alternative.

commandments five through ten, are premised on restfulness so that such relations are not driven by anxious, aggressive, self-protective conduct and policy. The Sabbath commandment looks both ways and provides for a restfulness for both God and neighbor. It is possible to think that such a commandment eventuates in the two great commandments to “love God and neighbor” (Mark 12:28–34), to respect the restfulness of both parties: don’t crowd, don’t demand, don’t coerce.

THE GIFT OF BEING RE-NEPHESHED

The Sabbath commandment, like all of these commandments, sits in a thick interpretive tradition. Interpretation is required in order to probe what the commandment might mean in actual practice in particular circumstances. Indeed, we are given two quite different normative interpretations of the Sabbath commandment. The one that is most familiar to us is in the Sinai event of Exod 20. In that rendering, the ground for Sabbath rest is creation:

For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. (Exod 20:11)

This grounding of Sabbath appeals to the rhythm of creation in a seven-day routine that is performed and acknowledged in the creation narrative (Gen 1:1–2:4a). In that narrative, God rested on the Sabbath day after six days of work (Gen 2:3). God is portrayed as not endlessly at work, not endlessly anxious about the world as creation, not endlessly engaged in its generation or maintenance. God exhibits confidence that the world, infused with God’s blessing, has a sustaining capacity of its own.

Perhaps the most interesting and important biblical exposition of this claim is voiced in the more tedious and unfamiliar provision for the tabernacle in Exod 25–31. In that long, detailed instruction by God to Moses, provision is made for an apparatus for divine presence, culminating in the coming of God’s glory into the tabernacle (Exod 40:34–38). The instruction is given in seven divine speeches to Moses, each introduced with the recurring formula, “The LORD said to Moses” (Exod 25:1; 30:11, 17, 23, 34; 31:1, 12).³ It is observed by many interpreters that these seven speeches are designed as a match to the seven days of creation in Gen 1–2.⁴ Moses is instructed to make a liturgic world that articulates creation as it should be so that Israel, in its worship, may for a time move from the conflicted dangerous world of its circumstance to the rightly ordered world of creation as offered in liturgy. In that sequence of seven divine speeches, the first six concern liturgic furniture and equipment, and provision for proper priestly procedure and decor. It is something of a surprise that the seventh speech, not unlike the seventh

³See Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Structure of P,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (1976) 275–292, and P. J. Kearney, “Creation and Liturgy: The P Redaction of Ex 25–40,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89 (1977) 375–387.

⁴See Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: Winston, 1985) 111–137.

day of creation, is very different and concerns exactly the observance of Sabbath. The rightly ordered world of worship culminates in Sabbath observance (Exod 31:12–17).

In these verses the Sabbath is insisted upon with intense urgency, as a “sign forever” of a perpetual covenant between YHWH and Israel. None of the other provisions in these speeches has that claim attached to it. The rhetoric suggests a binding of the two partners not unlike the commandments in Exod 20 wherein commandments one through three concerning God and commandments five through ten concerning neighbor are bound together in the fourth commandment.

the Sabbath is insisted upon with intense urgency, as a “sign forever” of a perpetual covenant between YHWH and Israel

Notice should especially be taken of the final clause of Exod 31:17 that concludes the seven speeches of instruction to Moses. It is said that God rested on the seventh day. Our usual translation is that God “was refreshed.” Sabbath is for refreshment. Even God requires such refreshment! But the term rendered in this way is a verbal form of the noun *nephesh* that we usually render as “life, self, soul.” The nominal form occurs many times in the biblical text; but the verbal form, as here, occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible. In Exod 23:12, it is used in a way parallel to Exod 31:17 that concerns Sabbath rest: “You and your slave and your immigrant shall be refreshed.” The other use is in 2 Sam 16:14. David, fleeing for his life along with his faithful entourage, arrives at the Jordan River and “was refreshed.” Each of these uses concerns refreshment given in the form of rest or enlivening water—except that the verb (in the reflexive) translates the noun as “self, soul, life.” A stronger translation would be that God, in Exod 31:17, was re-*nepheshed*, that is, received back “self, life, soul” that had been depleted or diminished by the work of creation. Such a translation indicates the urgency of Sabbath, because the usage recognizes that one’s life (*nephesh*)—even God’s life (God’s *nephesh*)—can be depleted or diminished, and must be restored by proper Sabbath keeping.

Such a translation makes clear that in Exod 20:8–11, Gen 2:3, and Exod 31:17 Sabbath keeping is no mere incidental practice. It is rather an acknowledgement of the human condition and of God’s provision for human frailty and fragility, made clear in the affirmation that even God’s own life or self can be depleted and diminished. Thus, Sabbath is a mighty antidote to an economy of depletion and diminishment, because it entails participation in a community that does not believe that human well-being and worth are established by endless productivity. The commandment is thus an act of resistance against such an economy. It is also provision for an alternative way. That alternative in Gen 1–2 relies on the fruitful blessing of the earth. In Exod 31 it is reliance on the presence of God as life-giver, assured in the apparatus of the liturgy.

Sabbath then is not just a practice. It is a life choice to belong to a different humanity. Michael Fishbane sees that Sabbath is an act of divestment from the productivity of the world, a divestment that knows that life is a gift and not an accomplishment or a possession:

A sense of inaction takes over, and the day does not merely mark the stoppage of work or celebrate the completion of creation, but enforces the value that the earth is a gift of divine creativity, given to mankind in sacred trust. On the Sabbath, the practical benefits of technology are laid aside, and one tries to stand in the cycle of natural time, without manipulation or interference. To the degree possible, one must also attempt to bring the qualities of inaction and rest into the heart and mind.⁵

The matter of Sabbath keeping as life choice for an alternative existence is echoed in the poetry of Isa 56 concerning participation in the postexilic community of Judaism. The prophetic poem makes provision for the inclusion in the community of “foreigners and eunuchs,” two groups that some surely wanted to exclude. Most remarkably, their inclusion is premised, generally on keeping covenant, but specifically on keeping Sabbath:

To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
Who choose the things that please me
and hold fast to my covenant....
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain. (Isa 56:4, 6–7)

It is noteworthy that Sabbath keeping is the only specific requirement, suggesting that it is this disciplined act that most distinguishes the community of covenant from the dominant economy of that time. The culminating invitation of inclusiveness is in the wake of Sabbath keeping:

These [foreigners and eunuchs] I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer....
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples. (Isa 56:7)

One might judge that in a Sabbath-less society all would not be welcome at worship because in a production-propelled society, social rank, social power, and social access are sure to be hierarchal, based on worth established by endless productivity. Sabbath is a great equalizer: all are welcome because their worth is not based on such productivity, a criterion that foreigners and eunuchs perhaps could not meet.

SABBATH AS EMANCIPATION

The Sabbath commandment is decisively altered in Deuteronomy. This is the only substantive change in the Decalogue in these verses (Deut 5:12–15). In verse

⁵Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) 126.

15 the commandment on Sabbath is no longer grounded in God's rest at creation. Now the grounding is in the exodus event that was an emancipation from the exploitative labor practices of Pharaoh in Egypt (see Exod 5:4–19). The exodus was a decisive disruption of Pharaoh's production schedule that eased the coercive pressure on the bodies of bonded workers. The exodus is narrated as a onetime event, but the Sabbath is a way of assuring that the memory of the exodus has continuing emancipatory significance. According to Deut 5:14, on the Sabbath day, working animals, slaves, and immigrants (those without assured rights) are all "as you," that is, all entitled to rest. The Sabbath is a day of social equalization for those who on all other days are quite unequal.

in the tradition of Deuteronomy, the Sabbath commandment provides the basis for an extended series of economic provisions that are designed to protect the weak from predation

In the tradition of Deuteronomy, the Sabbath commandment provides the basis for an extended series of economic provisions that are designed to protect the weak from predation.⁶ The series includes:

- restrictions on charging interest on loans (23:19–20)
- limitation on loan collateral concerning the poor (24:10–13, 17–18)
- prohibition of "wage theft" by withholding payment to laborers (24:14–15)
- provision for the widow, orphan, and immigrant (the most economically vulnerable groups in that ancient economy) by leaving agricultural produce after harvest, thus anticipating the pernicious laws of "enclosure" enacted in modern times (24:19–22)
- limitation of physical punishment in order to maintain human dignity for the guilty (25:1–3)
- requirement of honest weights and measures in commerce (25:13–16)

All of these provisions are intended to prevent predatory practices against the vulnerable. Notice that, twice, the motivation for the commandment is remembrance of the exodus (24:18, 22).

It is clear that the tradition of Deuteronomy provides the basis for much of the prophetic critique of a predatory economy. Deuteronomy is the lead tradition that defines social relationships in terms of covenant that regards all the members of the community as neighbors. Thus the economy is to be a neighborly practice that curbs excessive greed and exploitation in the interest of sustaining social relationships of dignity, respect, and security.

One prophetic articulation concerning Sabbath that lives in the same world as Deuteronomy is the oracle of Amos 8:4–8. The prophet addresses those who

⁶See Frank Cruesemann, *The Torah: Theology and Social History of Old Testament Law* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 201–275.

exploit the poor by dishonest weights, who reduce the poor to tradable commodities. In the oracle, God vows disruptive action against the “pride of Jacob,” unspecified actions that will cause the land to tremble, that will bring mourning and chaos like an out-of-control Nile River. The image is of an exploitative economy that victimizes those without resources.

Sabbath, in the horizon of Deuteronomy, is not only provision for a day of rest. It is a taproot for a political economy that is imagined and practiced differently.

What interests us is that such merchants and traders resent Sabbath that inconveniently interrupts their sharp commercial dealings. They are eager that Sabbath should end in order to resume their predatory practices. They rightly recognize that the Sabbath is intended precisely to disrupt such practices, to give the vulnerable a respite from exploitation. Sabbath, in the horizon of Deuteronomy, is not only provision for a day of rest. It is a taproot for a political economy that is imagined and practiced differently. In that different economy, economic concerns are subordinated to and governed by neighborly relationships. The economy has no autonomous function, but is designed to serve the common good of the neighborhood.

A PARADIGMATIC SABBATH

The preamble to the Decalogue indicates that the Ten Commandments are designed as an alternative and counter to the regime of Pharaoh:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Exod 20:2)

It turns out that the narrative of exodus emancipation is not an isolated event of ancient memory. It is in fact programmatic and paradigmatic for all that follows in Israel. Thus we may make a case that the entire Decalogue is designed to fend off the pressures, dangers, and seductions of a Pharaonic economies.⁷ We must be acutely aware of the intensity of Pharaoh’s socioeconomic practices. The series of imperatives issued by Pharaoh to his supervisors and taskmasters require that the Hebrew slaves must be more and more productive of larger brick quotas, even in circumstances that hinder their productivity (Exod 5:4–19). Behind this inflammatory picture of exploitation there is the more sober narrative report of Gen 47:13–25, which probes how Pharaoh’s economic policies worked. It is clear that Pharaoh is an accumulator of land and food, apparently propelled by his double nightmare of scarcity (see Gen 41:1–7). His policy grew out of his fear! Joseph, an erstwhile Hebrew, is presented in the narrative as Pharaoh’s willing agent to work against his own Hebrew

⁷See Walter Brueggemann, “The Countercommands of Sinai,” *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture, and the Church*, ed. Carolyn J. Sharp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011) 75–92.

people. Pharaoh accumulates land and food that eventually amount to a monopoly. Amid the scarcity resulting from the famine, Joseph, on behalf of Pharaoh, systematically takes money from the hapless peasants; then he takes their cattle, their means of production.⁸ Finally Joseph takes their land and their bodies into slavery. The narrative reports in summary, “All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them. And the land became Pharaoh’s” (Gen 47:20).

Pharaoh’s land seizure is reported as a sustained strategy for reducing subsistence farmers to slavery, thus assuring that Pharaoh would have an endless reliable supply of cheap labor among those who had no economic leverage whereby to resist. Pharaoh’s strategy is to render people vulnerable to a kind of dependence that is sustained by impossible debt. In his world everything and everyone is reduced to a tradable commodity in which laborers are unable to assert any agency in their own history.

It follows, of course, that in Pharaoh’s regime there was no Sabbath rest for anyone. Certainly not for the slaves or for the work animals, and likely not for the taskmasters and supervisors, and surely not for Pharaoh himself. All social relationships in a society without Sabbath rest are reduced to commodity transactions, reinforced by fear, the threat of violence and, when necessary, real violence (see Exod 1:13–14).

In that world the exodus could be readily remembered through bodily suffering. The Sinai commands are an effort by YHWH, the God of liberation, to counter Pharaoh’s policies of coercive commoditization. By keeping Sabbath, Israel—practically and bodily—imagines a political economy that is not reduced to commodity transactions, one wherein even the vulnerable are respected and treated as neighbors who are entitled to security.

The Sabbath tradition in ancient Israel, along with the exodus narrative, was an articulation of reality that could be reenacted and re-performed in many new circumstances. Thus in usurpatious Jerusalem (and especially in the usurpatious reign of Solomon with his forced labor and tax-collecting prowess), Sabbath issues a mighty protest and alternative. Thus Sabbath practice is life beyond the reach of the predatory practice of Pharaoh, often belatedly re-performed by those who imitate Pharaoh. We cannot fully understand the Sabbath command, in ancient or contemporary setting, unless we are vigorously alert to the Pharaonic capacity that is endlessly re-performed in economies that are propelled by the logic of scarcity.

THE SABBATICAL PRINCIPLE

Patrick Miller has shrewdly seen that the Sabbath commandment issues in a “sabbatical principle” whereby the entire practice of political economy is redefined

⁸Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), has forcefully contended that famine does not indicate an absence of food, but only a scarcity that drives up the prices of food. The result is that the disadvantaged have no access to food that is indeed available for those with resources (see a case in point in 2 Kings 6:24–7:20).

by Sabbath claims.⁹ After “the seventh day,” the “sabbatical principle” shows up in two major Torah provisions. The provisions evidently derive from Sabbath as they also are according to a regime of “sevens.”

First, in Deut 15:1–18, a pivotal text for the tradition of Deuteronomy, the “year of release” provides that every seven years there is to be a remission of debts. This commandment clearly intends to subordinate the economy to the enhancement of neighborly social relations, so that neighbors count for more than either debts or wealth. Special attention is given to the needy (v. 7). It is evident that the commandment encountered stiff resistance (even as it does now whenever it is taught or advocated). Thus Moses warns against being “hard-hearted” or “tight-fisted” toward the needy. The urgency of the provision is indicated, moreover, by the repeated use of an absolute infinitive, a grammatical device in Hebrew whereby the verb is intensified by repetition that cannot be replicated in translation. This grammatical device is used to intensify no less than six verbs in this commandment (more than in any other text), making clear that Moses understood that this is the most urgent and most radical of all Torah provisions.

We may pay particular attention to an apparent contradiction if we juxtapose verses Deut 15:4 and 15:11. In verse 4, it is assured that if this commandment is performed faithfully, there will “be no one in need among you” (“the poor will cease in the land”). In verse 11, a more familiar statement asserts that “there will never cease to be some in need in the earth” (“The poor you will always have with you”—Mark 14:7 NIV). Thus verse 4 (“There will be no poor”) and verse 11 (“There will always be poor”). But in fact there is no contradiction between the verses. Verse 4 states the *effectiveness* of debt cancellation; verse 11 states the *urgency* of the same policy. The predatory economy of Pharaoh works to have continuing indebtedness in order to assure a supply cheap labor. Israel’s counter-imagination insists that Pharaoh’s debt-slave economy need not be practiced and is inimical to YHWH’s intent for Israel.

The second provision of the “sabbath principle” is the Year of Jubilee in Lev 25; it provides that every forty-nine years (seven times seven), property lost in the rough-and-tumble economy will be returned to rightful ownership, because such landed property is inalienable and is not finally a tradable commodity. Thus the autonomy of the market is severely limited in the interest of sustaining neighborly relationships.

While it is frequently contested that the proposal for a Jubilee Year has no realistic future, it is important that it is reiterated as the acceptable “year of the LORD’s favor” in Isa 61:2, a text cited by Jesus in his synagogue appearance, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).¹⁰

It becomes clear that the Sabbath provision in the Torah is not simply a re-

⁹Miller, “The Human Sabbath,” 93–97.

¹⁰It is possible to trace out the Jubilee performance of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, see Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

strictive or coercive requirement. It is rather an act of bodily testimony whereby the faithful insist that economic transactions, in and of themselves, are at best penultimate, and are situated in the more ultimate reality of neighborly social relationships. Seen in this way, Sabbath keeping is a subversive act that asserts that Pharaoh's claims of predatory monopoly are to be resisted and ultimately rejected. *Creation as the basis for Sabbath keeping* (Exod 20:11) insists that the God of covenant, and not Pharaoh, made the world and governs and sustains it. In his hubris Pharaoh can imagine that the world is his (see Ezek 29:3). But his claim is false. *Emancipation as the basis for Sabbath keeping* (Deut 5:15) is an insistence that the authority of Pharaoh is limited and that his claim to cheap bonded labor is to be rejected. Sabbath is the bodily declaration that persons in the image of YHWH do not belong to Pharaoh; he is not to be obeyed or trusted or feared.

SABBATH AS TESTIMONY

Rightly understood, Sabbath is a practice of immense urgency in our contemporary political economy. It is only necessary to recognize that "Pharaoh" in the narrative is a metaphor for all predatory, confiscatory economic practice grounded in and legitimated by idolatry. As a result we are able to see that the tenth commandment, "Thou shalt not be acquisitive" (Exod 20:17), is the climactic point of the Sinai covenant.¹¹ The covenant is an act of resistance to and an alternative to the Pharaonic social system. Sabbath is the visible expression of resistance and alternative.

This God has never intended that some should be reduced to slavery. This God has never intended that some should be reduced to commodity. This God has never intended that the earth should be plundered for the sake of limitless wealth.

It is evident that our national economy in the United States (writ large as "globalization"), is largely in the hands of Pharaonic interests.¹² The acquisitive oligarchy now largely manages the government and controls the media. It has, moreover, supported a sustained process of deregulation alongside rigged credit laws, inequitable tax arrangements, and low wages that has resulted in a growing gap between a small party of "haves" and a large company of "have nots" who are economically vulnerable and without leverage. As in ancient Egypt, such inequitable economics skews social relationships. "Pharaoh" is an icon for any political economy that reduces too many to low-wage jobs or no job at all, because there is no protection or safeguard against rapacious practices of the oligarchy for a work

¹¹See Marvin L. Chaney, "'Coveting Your Neighbor's House' in Social Context," *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 302–317.

¹²Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), has most clearly seen the perniciously negative dimensions of globalization.

force that is increasingly powerless. (The destruction of labor unions is an element in the strategy of accumulation.) The result is that only the “productive” are seen to have value. The “unproductive” are readily dispensable, most extremely by mass incarceration, but more broadly through an arrangement of inadequate housing, unfair schools, and inaccessible health care. The indices of social health all suffer in an economy of restless anxiety in which there is no “rest” for anyone, not among the “producers” who must endlessly produce more or among the “non-producers” who are characteristically kept at risk in a Pharaonic system.

The performance of Sabbath is an act of testimony, a powerful antidote to such a dehumanizing system of power. Practically, Sabbath is an insistence on rest for even the most vulnerable among us. Theologically, it is an insistence that the world does not belong to the predators. It belongs to the Creator of heaven and earth who intends that those in God’s image cannot be reduced to commodity. This God has never intended that some should be reduced to slavery. This God has never intended that some should be reduced to commodity. This God has never intended that the earth should be plundered for the sake of limitless wealth. Sabbath keeping is a deep affirmation that all of God’s creatures, human and nonhuman, should be honored in concrete and practical ways. When Jesus counsels his disciples, “Do not be anxious,” he surely intended that the man in the preceding parable with “bigger barns” should not be the order of the day, the restless man who never observed Sabbath and ended in death (Luke 12:1–31). Jesus surely refused endless accumulation as the purpose of life. He summoned his disciples to stand in solidarity with birds and flowers, trusting creation to know that there is enough for all. Indeed those trusting creatures are contrasted with Solomon, Pharaoh’s son-in-law, who continues within Israel Pharaoh’s restless accumulation. Sabbath is an embrace of the truth of the abundance of creation against the anxious scarcity that reduces neighbor to threat. Sabbath is a regular, visible enactment of that alternative. ⊕

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN is professor emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia.