



The Sabbath as a Sign: Like a Tree in the Wilderness

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“**T**he seventh day is a palace in time,”¹ Abraham Heschel once noted. In so doing, he dusted off the ancient definition of the Hebrew prophets, for whom the Sabbath was a “sign.” But instead of being a spatial sign, such as the monument that is eroded by time and becomes a sign of death, the Sabbath is a sign in time and stands out with its actuality and freshness—a palace erected in the midst of hovels, a place of sublime beauty which inspires our song and welcomes us. The Sabbath, then, is a sign of something beyond itself. It is like a tree in the desert wilderness. The presence of a tree in

the desert is a sign that water is close by. As the tree cannot survive without a source of water,



so humanity cannot survive without God. And just as the source of life for the desert tree is not always obvious, so it is with the presence of God. He moves, often unseen, through this world. Therefore, to remember the Sabbath is to demonstrate that humanity has not forgotten the source of its existence.

A Sign of Remembrance

The Sabbath, essentially linked with memory, is the most explicit command in the Decalogue.² It is the act of remembrance *par excellence*, for it recalls an absolute past: the origin of the universe and humanity, the past of all things and of all peoples. The association of the fourth commandment with the fifth also alludes to the importance of memory. Not only are the two commandments juxtaposed, they are also the only two of the ten to be formulated in a positive way: “Remember the Sabbath day. . . . Honor your father and your mother.” While the fourth commandment points to the creative act of God, the fifth recalls the procreative act of parents. Thus the correspondence between these

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two commandments calls upon humanity to remember its origin and roots.

The binding together of Sabbath and memory does not merely inspire philosophical flourishes or a beautiful truth to meditate upon. Rather, remembrance implies a concrete, historical fact that plunges the roots of the Sabbath into reality. Hence, the Sabbath reminds us that creation is not the result of an autonomous process, but of an intervention from above at a given moment in time. It implies an absolute beginning and end.

The Sabbath is not only a remembrance of creation, however. It is also a remembrance of the Sabbath itself.³ This remembrance goes beyond mere mental strain to involve the whole person in a concrete act. To remember the Sabbath is to reactualize it on a weekly basis. This involves a “setting apart” of the hours of the Sabbath, thereby distinguishing it from all other times. One implication of this setting apart is fidelity to the real time of the Sabbath. In a society in which not only the meaning but also the time of the Sabbath has been lost, the elements of time and content once again become entwined in the remembrance of this special day.

A Sign of Hope

In remembering the event of creation, the Sabbath becomes a sign of hope, in that it evokes the miracle by which light shone out of the shadow and plenitude was drawn from the void. Hence, the

Sabbath becomes a sign of liberation from the Egyptian yoke⁴ and the Babylonian exile.⁵ These two events involve the powerful act of re-creation, recalling the original act of creation.⁶ In the New Testament, Yeshua’s miracles often occurred on the Sabbath,⁷ precisely to underscore this gift of hope.⁸

The essence of the Sabbath is most fully expressed, however, in Gen 2. The Sabbath that took place at the end of creation week was the first full day in the lives

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of man and woman. The Sabbath reminds us, then, of humanity’s first communion with God. This dimension of the Sabbath is noted by the prophet Isaiah, who associates the delights of the Sabbath with the delights of God: “If you . . . call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord . . . , then you shall delight yourself in the Lord.”⁹ The Sabbath is thus described as that moment in time when one can delight in the experience of “God with us.” This notion is also implied in Isaiah’s association of the Sabbath to the *shekhinah*, the sign of God’s presence. The phrase “*wayyekal melakhah*” (“He completed the work”) is used in Gen 2:2 to introduce the Sabbath at the end of the creation week.¹⁰

Interestingly, this same phrase also introduces the presence of the *shekhinah* after the constructions of the sanctuary built by Moses¹¹ and the temple erected by Solomon.¹² These three passages seem to emphasize the link between the Sabbath and the *shekhinah* of God’s presence.

As a sign of God’s presence, the Sabbath nourishes humanity’s deep longing for the day when His presence shall be fully revealed. Significantly, the Sabbath is referred to as the “day of the Lord,”¹³ an expression which is also used in conjunction with the day of the coming of the Lord—an act that will put an end to all misery and inaugurate a new era. The Sabbath as the “day of the Lord” points toward the return of the Lord as a sign of hope.

A Sign of the Absolute

The Sabbath evokes the absolute, as it refers to a reality which transcends us and to a law which comes from beyond. The Sabbath is a sign of the absolute primarily because it is divine law. Significantly, the Sabbath is introduced in the Decalogue with the word “remember.” This word is not an ordinary imperative or command; it is an absolute infinitive, which denotes an imperative of emphasis. The Sabbath command is, therefore, perceived to be an imperious law that imposes itself absolutely and from above. Certain elements even suggest that the Sabbath is preponderant to other laws. For example, in the Levitical account,

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the Sabbath is distinguished from other festivals and days of rest.¹⁴ In the biblical tradition, the Sabbath has been preserved as the first commandment that men and women observed immediately after creation. The first couple inaugurated their existence and the beginning of human history by observing this commandment. The Sabbath was also the first command given to Israel immediately after their flight from Egypt.¹⁵

Further, among all the Levitical laws, the Sabbath is the only one that is not annual—the only day that is independent from the natural and astronomical cycles. The Sabbath has no moral or natural causes to justify its observance. The only *raison d'être* of the Sabbath is religious. It is, in fact, the only commandment that implies faith.

The Sabbath is also the sign of the absolute in that it embodies the gracious act of a God of love. It is what the psalmist celebrates as the *hesed* of God.¹⁶ The Sabbath reminds us that we are nothing but the outcome of divine generosity. The gift of the Sabbath was not given to humanity as a reward for human work. Rather, it reminds us that it was God who took the initiative to give men and women the rest which they did not deserve, enabling them to enjoy a communion they had not sought. In

practice, the Sabbath is a pedagogy of *hesed* (“love”) in that it teaches us the value of nonaction in relation to God. In abstaining from work on the Sabbath, we demonstrate our total dependence upon Him. What we have is not the result of our own work or effort, but is a gift from God. It is *hesed* that causes the psalmist to burst into song: “Let your face shine on your servant, save me in your unfailing love [*hesed*].”¹⁷ Thus it is at the heart of the Sabbath—God’s unfailing *hesed* for humanity—that the law and grace find reconciliation. In observing the fourth commandment, the believer does not exclude the grace of God. Rather, it is by observing the law of God that the believer expresses faith that salvation depends entirely on God’s grace.

Finally, the Sabbath is a sign of the absolute in that it testifies of God Himself, the One who is absolutely “Other.” Henceforth, the Sabbath is called the “day of the Lord.”¹⁸ It is the day the Lord has made,¹⁹ the sign of God.²⁰ This day is, therefore, a time intrinsically sacred; it is a time that moves us to the deepest respect. We feel the necessity of observing the day chosen by God rather than one decreed by human tradition. The Sabbath is, therefore, more than a day of rest and re-creation at the end of the week; it is the concrete expression

of our faith in God and the sign that our values depend on God.

A Sign of Love

The Sabbath finds no existence outside of humanity, for it is not only a deed granted by God to humans, but it is also a covenant given by humans to God.²¹ The Sabbath is sanctified inasmuch as two partners are involved.²² However, the human doing is but an answer to the divine doing. The Sabbath is, on the human level, an expression of our love for God. Further, the Sabbath exhorts us to abstain from doing our own will: “If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, . . . if you honor it by going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,”²³ then the Sabbath becomes an act which confronts the reality of life and not a disembodied spiritual truth. The believer who observes the Sabbath engages in an experience which obliges him or her to meet God where He is. In this encounter, the believer silhouettes himself or herself against an indifferent world.

Humanity’s encounter with God does not, however, exclude encounter with others. On the contrary, our communion with God is fulfilled only through our communion with others. This social dimension of the Sabbath is already implied in the story of creation, which relates man and woman to the first adoration. It is even more explicit in the Decalogue, where on the Sabbath all the family members, the slave, and the stranger are

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invited to enjoy the same privileges of liberty and rest. The Sabbath is for remembering that the other person is an equal and deserves our respect. It is also the day when, in the family gathering, the arts of listening and dialoguing can be cultivated.

The way the Sabbath is situated in the literary structure of the Decalogue confirms its pre-occupation with both God and humankind. The text of the Sabbath is located at the center of the Decalogue, both geometrically and thematically speaking (see chart).²⁴ As far as geometry is concerned, the fourth commandment is comprised of 55 words (in Hebrew) and is situated between 67 words (the first three commandments) and 41 words (the last six commandments). The Sabbath commandment comprises, then, approximately half the words of the whole Decalogue (55 words to 108 words), thereby occupying its center. Thematically, the first three commandments are concerned with the relation between God and humanity, whereas the last six commandments involve the relation between humans. The Sabbath functions, then, as a bridge between the two series of commandments and is concerned with relations. As a sign of God's love for us, as well as our love for Him, the Sabbath demonstrates that the vertical relation between God and us does not exclude the horizontal relation of one human being with another; rather, these two aspects of relationship are interdependent.

A Sign of Life

The Sabbath celebrates the creative process of God and thus

<i>The Decalogue (Exodus 20:1-17)</i>		
Prologue (vv. 1, 2) "I am the Lord . . ."		
67 Words	God	1 st Cdt (v. 3) no other God
		2 nd Cdt (vv. 4-6) no carved images
		3 rd Cdt (v. 7) no name of God taken in vain
55 Words	Humanity	A 4 th Cdt (vv. 8-11) "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy;
		B "six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God.
		C "In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates.
		B ₁ "For in six days the Lord made the heavens and earth, the sea, and all that is in them and rested the seventh day;
		A ₁ "therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it" (NJV).
41 Words	Humanity	5 th Cdt (v. 12) honor your father and mother
		6 th Cdt (v. 13) no murder
		7 th Cdt (v. 14) no adultery
		8 th Cdt (v. 15) no stealing
		9 th Cdt (v. 16) no false witness
		10 th Cdt (v. 17) no coveting

implies a positive appreciation of life. The senses, food, and beauty are well received and fully enjoyed. In the second century, the Gnostic heretic Marcion, who despised the human body and creation, rejected the Old Testament and its God, YHWH, who was the God of Creation. Marcion claimed that the Creator God of the Old Testament had been replaced by the God of Salvation in the New Testament. Thus he gave the spiritual domain priority over the physical one. According to Marcion, the soul, or spirit, is distinguished from the body. Following the philosophy of Plato, the origin of Marcion's understanding of the soul, salvation is understood to be a deliverance from the body. Thus the ideal existence becomes, essentially, a spiritual effort outside and sometimes against the body.

Due to Marcion's influence, this dualistic concept of the physical versus the spiritual has affected Christian anthropology, causing many Christian theologians to place salvation and creation in opposition to each other. One of

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the most interesting symptoms of this dualistic mentality may be detected in the Christian shift from the Sabbath memorial of creation to the Sunday memorial of salvation. Thus Sabbath-keeping expresses a religious philosophy that says yes to creation and the senses and involves the body in the spiritual process of salvation, thereby affirming that

same token the unity of the spiritual and physical in the human person.

Sign of the past and the future, the Sabbath tears us from the present to rekindle our memory and set our hope ablaze. Sign of the absolute and of love, the Sabbath teaches us to open ourselves to others—to humanity and God.

If humans have lost the meaning of the Sabbath, it is because they have lost their roots. Unfortunately, for many today, the Sabbath is no longer a sign of the glorious event of creation or of the extraordinary hope of recreation. Humanity has become comfortably settled here below, and thus the Sabbath has become a mere “weekend” or an obscure ritual.

If humans have lost the sense of the Sabbath, it is because they are unable to open up to others. It must be noticed that the three monotheisms that issued from the Bible—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all observe a different Sabbath, as though to avoid any possible encounter with the other,

maybe also to avoid stumbling upon God.

From the depths of the past to the present, the Sabbath has been a sign to the Jew, as well as to the Christian. Even more, the Sabbath is the sign that comes between Jews and Christians. The Sabbath is one of the first elements that determined and even maintained the open wound of their separa-

tion. Separated by time, Jews and Christians have lost sight of each other. What better way for them to meet again than to consent together to adore the Sabbath of the God of Abraham, Israel, and also of Paul. The Sabbath would then become the sign of a miracle; a sign that we remember; a sign that God is more than a dead tradition; a sign of life; a sign of hope—like a tree in the wilderness.

¹ Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Men* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 111.

² Exod 20:8.

³ Bible quotations are from the NKJV unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Deut 5:15.

⁵ 2 Chron 36:21.

⁶ Exod 15:8; Deut 4:32, 33; Isa 43:15-17; 44:24.

⁷ Matt 12:9-14; Luke 14:1-6; John 5:1-6; 9:1-38.

⁸ Luke 13:16.

⁹ Isa 58:13, 14.

¹⁰ Gen 2:2.

¹¹ Exod 40:33-38.

¹² 2 Chron 5:14; 7:12.

¹³ Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14.

¹⁴ Lev 23:2-4.

¹⁵ Exod 16.

¹⁶ For example, Pss 33:5, 22; 36:6; 57:11; 63:3; 108:5.

¹⁷ Ps 31:16, NIV.

¹⁸ Exod 20:10; Lev 23:3; Deut 5:14.

¹⁹ Gen 2:1-3.

²⁰ Exod 31:15.

²¹ Deut 5:15.

²² Exod 31:17; 20:20.

²³ Isa 58:13, 14, NIV.

²⁴ This median position of the Sabbath in the Decalogue takes on a particular meaning in the light of the ancient Middle Eastern documents. The seal, which engaged the partners of the alliance, was in fact apposed at the center of the tablet (see Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Studies and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 18, 19.