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Sabbath-keeping in the Bible from the perspective of biblical spirituality

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This article responds to the renewed interest in the spiritual practice of Sabbath-keeping by investigating its nature and meaning in the Judeo-Christian traditions. After briefly analysing the reasons for the contemporary neglect of Sabbath-keeping and indications of its renaissance, this article will analyse biblical pronouncements about the Sabbath, mainly from Hebrew Scriptures, but with brief attention to Christian Scriptures that provide various insights of decisive importance to understand and explain its prominent place for faith communities, but that are vitally important for reinvigorating Sabbath-keeping in a contemporary context. It analyses pronouncements in the Bible in Genesis 2:1–3 that highlights the Sabbath as joyful resting; the need for Sabbath-keeping as commandment in Exodus 20:9–11 and in Deuteronomy 5:12–15, and, finally Sabbath-keeping as trust in God as the provider in Exodus 16:1–30. Various spiritual insights and implications of these passages will be discussed. The article assumes historical critical insights as developed in biblical studies but develops a theological analysis that explains the spiritual dynamics in these texts. These spiritual insights explain the prominence of Sabbath-keeping in the Bible and its practice in the Judeo-Christian religious discourse.

Contribution: This article contributes to scholarship on spiritual practices, by analysing the nature and meaning of Sabbath-keeping in Genesis 2:1–3, Exodus 20:9–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15 and Exodus 16:1–30, stressing their spiritual dynamics in terms of joyful resting, as commandment, as trust in divine provision and as a reflection of their covenantal nature.

Keywords: Sabbath-keeping; Sunday-observance; Sabbath; Genesis 2:1–3; Exodus 20:9–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15.

Introduction

In 1998, John Paul II noted in his papal letter, *Dies Domini*[1]*:*

> Until quite recently, it was easier in traditionally Christian countries to keep Sunday holy because it was an almost universal practice and because, even in the organisation of civil society, Sunday rest was considered a fixed part of the work schedule. Today, however, even in those countries which give legal sanction to the festive character of Sunday, changes in socio-economic conditions have often led to profound modifications of social behaviour and hence of the character of Sunday. The custom of the 'weekend' has become more widespread, a weekly period of respite, spent perhaps far from home and often involving participation in cultural, political or sporting activities which are usually held on free days.[2] (par. 4)

Later on, Walter Brueggemann (2014:ix) began his publication on the Sabbath with the remark, 'For the most part, contemporary Christians pay little attention to the Sabbath'.

This marks a shift from the important place of the Sabbath in the social and religious life of earlier times. Throughout the history of Christianity as an acknowledged form of religion, faith communities in general held Sabbath-keeping in high regard. They could count on the support of the State for legislation to uphold Sunday-observance as a general approach in society by requiring the cessation of commercial activities. Sometimes, faith communities identified themselves in terms of Sabbath-keeping, as is the case, for example, with Seventh Day Adventists. Some communities, like Puritans and Sabbatarians, observed stringent rules of Sabbath-keeping that shunned activities like swimming, doing needle work, not cooking meals, not viewing films and not participating in sport.

1.In this article, Sabbath-keeping as a spiritual practice is discussed to include and refer to Sunday-observance as well. Sunday-observance is a more focused term, characteristic of a Christian context. Although there are differences between the two, it is assumed here that Sunday-observance reflects a practice that has its roots in Hebrew Scriptures and that shares a common biblical tradition. For the history of Sabbath-keeping, see De Villiers and Marchinkowski (2020a, 2020b).

2.See the letter at http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_05071998_dies-domini.html. Consulted 03 February 2021.

Note: Special Collection: Scholarly Voices, sub-edited by Yolanda Dreyer (University of Pretoria).

This has been changing with the increasing secularisation of society. As a result of the growing religious pluralism in many countries, states are no longer guardians of religious customs, such as Sabbath-keeping, and had to take up a more neutral position. The power of churches to influence societal ethos has diminished. Sundays have become thoroughly secularised and have assumed the same form and nature of any other day of the week. In addition, Sunday-observance has been relegated to the private sphere or to the gatherings of faith communities.

The consumerist society also contributes to the neglect of Sabbath-keeping.[3] Weeks (1981) documented how secularisation took its toll on Sunday-observance already early in modern United States history, especially since the middle of the 19th century. With the rise of consumerism, commercial activities were allowed on Sundays and, as a consequence, workers were required to work on Sundays, whilst entertainment and outdoor activities in the areas of art, theatre, sport and movies also affected Sunday-observance. The need to perform in the workplace, in institutions of learning, in art circles and in sports activities competes for the waking hours of people's days. It has been challenging, for example, to appropriate Sabbath-keeping in contemporary societies because of their activity-driven mindset and their admiration for being busy. They often equate rest with laziness or sloth. Technological advances have created mechanisms that allow access to people and work at any place and at any hour of the day, further claiming the time and attention of the work force and requiring them to be always available and contactable (Bass 2000:28; Kessler 2012). As a spillover, the work week becomes longer, blurring the boundaries between home and work, between work and play. Traditional boundaries constructed by society (to keep itself healthy) in previous generations are no longer in force. This blurring of boundaries in contemporary contexts promotes burnout and fatigue.[4] As a result, the onus is on every person to regulate their own lives for the sake of their well-being.[5] All of these represent serious challenges that affect the way people reflect on work, resting and on their own well-being.

There has been, however, also a notable change in this situation, as is evident in the reappraisal of Sabbath-keeping as a spiritual practice. Some scholars have come to regard it as a way of countering the negative effects of consumerism (Brueggemann 2014). Others have noted the important role of the Sabbath in Scripture, influenced by the well-known and classic publication of Heschel (1951) and, more recently, that of Brueggemann (2014). This trend was supported by studies of Sabbath-keeping in Jewish and early Christian communities and its ongoing significance for some of these religious communities, as will become evident in the discussion of the literature below.

Also influential was the awareness of the destructive consequences of consumerism on the earth. There is a growing number of ecological publications and debates[6] in the theological discourse, which is also to be detected in biblical research that analyses the Bible in terms of its ecological implications. Amongst these were ecological reflections on the Sabbath, because of its seminal place and role in the narrative of creation (Gn 1–3), as will be discussed further below, but then specifically also on Sabbath-keeping as care for the world. Sabbath-keeping is then regarded as a restorative, healing practice that can promote care for creation.

This article responds to the renewed interest in spiritual practice of Sabbath-keeping by investigating its nature and meaning in the Judeo-Christian traditions. After analysing the reasons for the contemporary neglect of Sabbath-keeping and indications of its renaissance, this article will analyse biblical pronouncements about the Sabbath, mainly from Hebrew Scriptures, but with brief attention to Christian Scriptures that provide various insights of decisive importance to understand and explain its prominent place for faith communities, but that are vitally important for reinvigorating Sabbath-keeping in a contemporary context. It analyses pronouncements in the Bible in Genesis 2:1–3 that highlights the Sabbath as joyful resting; the need for Sabbath-keeping as commandment in Exodus 20:9–11 and in Deuteronomy 5:12–15; and, finally, Sabbath-keeping as trust in God as the provider in Exodus 16:1–30. Various spiritual insights and implications of these passages will be discussed. The article assumes historical critical insights as developed in biblical studies, but develops a theological analysis that explains the spiritual dynamics in these texts. These spiritual insights explain the prominence of Sabbath-keeping in the Bible and its practice in the Judeo-Christian religious discourse. For the purposes of this article, only the most prominent passages will be discussed.

Spiritual perspectives on the Sabbath in the Bible

Sabbath-keeping is one of the most ancient spiritual practices with roots in the foundational texts of Judaism and Christianity. These biblical pronouncements on Sabbath contain some key insights that could also enrich the practice of Sabbath-keeping when one seeks to keep it in contemporary settings, as will be discussed now.

Sabbath as joyful resting (Gn 2:1–3)

It remains striking that the Sabbath has such a prominent, even vital place in the creation account in Genesis where it is a motif that brings closure to the creation narrative. This link

3.See the remarks of Bass (2005:31) and Kessler (2012). Kessler investigates the experience of 'restlessness' in contemporary society because of the dissonance in modern work. Hays (2010) and Vorster (2011) are two examples of how scholars reflect on consumerist societies in the light of the biblical message.

4.See also Smith-Bagai and Ludwig (2011:351). They note how modern life with its work ethic has been associated 'with occupational imbalance, stress, workaholism, burnout, eating and sleeping disorders, and other negative health conditions'.

5.See the characterisation of work in contemporary settings by Bass (2005:31–35).

6.See already Moltmann (1993), and for an overview, the two essays of Buitendag (2019a, 2019b). On the environmental crisis and biblical material, see Bauckham (2010) and Mondelaers (2013). *Spiritus*, the journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, contains many examples of ecological spirituality.

of the Sabbath with creation is also repeated in the Decalogue as another key passage (Ex 20:9–11). Sabbath as a spiritual practice is to be understood within the framework of this account in which the Sabbath is God's day of rest after 6 days of creation. Genesis 2:1–3 is of special importance in this regard:

> [*T*]hus, the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. [2]And on the seventh day, God *finished the work* that he had done and he *rested* on the seventh day *from all the work* that he had done. [3]So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God *rested from all the work that he had done in* creation.[7]

These three verses are integrated in the creation narrative to indicate that God created the earth in an intentional and purposeful way. Genesis 2:3 does not contain an explicit command to keep the Sabbath, as is the case in Exodus 20:9–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15. The verse simply states that God blessed and sanctified the seventh day, thereby reflecting the divine joy in the works of creation.[8] This remark represents the turning point in the creation story and is an important interpretation of the creation event. The verse further notes that God regarded the events as good (Gn 1:31) and complete (Gn 2:1). The lead actor in this account is God who, when finished, stops the creative activity. At the end of six creative events that reflect a working week, the creation story finds closure only when a seventh event can be included. The seventh event is an intentional rest event of the Creator so that the Creator may reflect on the completed creation and enjoy it.[9]

The divine 'rest' is not about being tired, about relaxing or doing nothing. The rest has to do with what was discussed earlier: the unformed space that existed at the beginning has been ordered according to the divine intention. Once that ordering was accomplished, God was free to enjoy and oversee the workings of a properly functioning world and thus enter a state of rest (Haynes 2015:33–34).[10] Restfulness here represents the cessation of activity as part of Yahweh's rhythm of life.[11] The cessation is, though, qualified in a positive way because of the remark that God regarded the work of creation as good.

At the same time, the resting is linked with the actions of blessing and sanctifying. Several attempts have been made to describe the spiritual nature of this aspect. Rest indicates the positive attitude of the divine about the created order. In addition, creation and rest are a matter of joy.[12] Heschel (1951:22–23) notes that the word *Menuha*, translated as rest, 'means here much more than withdrawal from labor and exertion, more than freedom from toil, strain or activity of any kind' and adds, '[*t*]o the biblical mind *menuha* is the same as happiness and stillness, as peace and harmony'. The biblical story of creation is, therefore, not only about a pattern and rhythm of work and rest, but it also points to happiness, joy and fulfilment.

Commentators such as Assohoto and Ngewa (2006:13) also suggest that the Sabbath implies an element of enjoyment. The Creator is seen as 'using Sabbath time' to find joy in the creation that has been accomplished. God relishes the experience of life, of observing creation and paying attention to how things are. God is 'actively resting', thinking, dreaming and 'being' (Assohoto & Ngewa 2006:13). There is no longer an emphasis on 'doing'. 'Being' is now the primary activity. The Sabbath is, therefore, about a profoundly joyful time that is a response to and interpretation of the creative work of God.[13]

This joyful nature points to another spiritual dimension of the Sabbath by revealing its teleological character. That God stepped back in order to admire or enjoy the creation work (Gen. 2:2) by implication reveals the divine perspective on it. The Sabbath creates a space in which the value of work is recognised. The Sabbath is now seen as having intrinsic value and inherent beauty, but this is only revealed to those who approach it spiritually (Fleischacker 2017:217).[14] The reference to the divine joy prompts readers of the narrative to look at creation and Sabbath like God did and to appreciate work for its value, but also, at the same time, understanding its limitations.

In summary, then, Genesis 2 reveals the cosmic relevance of the Sabbath as the divine gift of creation. This day reminds

7.For a detailed exegesis of Genesis 2:1–3, see Haynes and Krüger (2017a). They interpret verse 1 as a summary of Genesis 1 as account of God's creative activity, and verses 2–3 as the rest that resulted from the completed activity. These two verses delineate the Sabbath as being marked by the absence of a divine act of creating.

8.Some scholars regard the cessation of activity by the Creator in Genesis 1–2 as requiring a similar discipline in humankind. Even translations try to promote this interpretation. The 1983 Afrikaans version over-translates Genesis 2:2 as '*Hy het die sewende dag as gereelde rusdag ingestel*' [he instituted the seventh day as regular day of rest]. See Cole (2003) who notes the role of this verse in the debate about the significance of the Sabbath: there are two options – one regards the reference to the Sabbath as a creation ordinance, valid for all times, whilst the other regards it as temporarily significant. Regarding the latter, see Costa (2016:123–147) for the argument that the Sabbath is not a creation ordinance, but a sign of the Mosaic covenant. He discusses various New Testament texts to argue that the Sabbath was a pointer to Christ and thus only temporarily valid. Christ is the one who gives eternal rest. Although the rest may not be an ordinance, it has been regarded in the reception history of this text as exemplary of how humanity should respond to the creative action of God – especially being created in the image of God.

9.Bass (2000:47) makes the point this way: '[*b*]y resting, God declares as fully as possible just how very good creation is. The work of creating is finished, and God has no regrets, no need to go on to design a still better world or creature more wonderful than man and woman'.

10.He adds, '[*t*]he implication is that there is no end-of-day refrain relating to the seventh day because, for God, *the seventh day never ended*. God did not begin a new work week at the beginning of the eighth day. He continued in his rest, overseeing a properly ordered cosmos that was now functioning around him'.

11.Several authors claim that restfulness is the *telos* of creation. Haynes and Krüger (2017b:676), for example, in an exegetical analysis of Genesis 2:1–3, noted that God's rest did not just happen once creation was completed. It was integral to God's purpose. Once the ordering of the first six days had been accomplished, God was free to enjoy and oversee a properly functioning world and enter a state of rest. They pointed out that unlike the first six days of creation, there is no end-of-day refrain on the seventh day. For YHWH, the seventh day never ended. He did not begin a new work week at the beginning of the eighth day. They add (Haynes & Krüger 2017b:682), '... The resultant picture is of a God who is resting from his creative activity because the created order fulfils his intentions. He is in a position to enjoy all that he has made, and specifically the image-bearer, who functions on his behalf in its midst'.

12.The theologian Karl Barth (quoted in Bass 1997:78) draws attention to this restfulness. 'Resting, God takes pleasure in what has been made ... In the day of rest, God's free love toward humanity takes form as time is shared with them'.

13.This aspect is of great importance for the practice of Sabbath-keeping, which can only be done if it has a positive, joyful character, devoid of legalism. See also Diddams, Surdyk and Daniels (2004).

14.He concludes, 'Inter alia, that means that the intrinsic value of our work, the creative activity we carry out during the six days of the workweek, depends on the Shabbat'. Resting is, therefore, not only about regaining strength for a new workweek. It is, in the words of Smith-Gabai and Ludwig (2011:352), 'about providing opportunities for both physical and spiritual renewal. It also provides a change in orientation by lessening the focus on doing, and allowing more time for being'.

one to reflect on the meaning and character of creation that brings one to find rest in its beauty. Sabbath has a universal meaning, highlighting its place within the creation events. It reflects the divine joy in creation and the divine gift of existence and life for all people and things.

Ultimately, then, Genesis's narrative on creation is not merely about chronological events, about taking one day in the week off for non-work activities or about the interruption of labour and toil. It also prompts its readers to see beyond those particularities and to reflect on a deeper level on what was worked in creation for and given to them and the spiritual attitude that it implies. It is a spiritual tale about God who gives time and space to humanity in which they experience the joy of the divine presence, providence and care as it is to be detected in the world.[15] It is also a reminder that work and toil, valuable as they may be, are not the beginning and end of all things. It speaks about a time in which work is suspended and rest is needed in order to be reminded of and to celebrate the aesthetic nature and significance of life and creation.

Sabbath-keeping as commandment (Ex 20:9–11)

Another equally fundamental aspect of Sabbath-keeping is developed in Exodus 20:9–11 where a commandment for Sabbath-keeping is explicitly given. The people of God are required to rest like God did after the creation events.

A key commandment

The special meaning of the Sabbath in Exodus 20:9–11 is illuminated by its place in the book as a whole. The book describes God's liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses – a key salvific event in Hebrew Scriptures. A significant event takes place during the exodus that shaped Israel's self-understanding permanently.[16] At Mount Sinai, Moses is summoned to a conversation with God about Israel's future. The encounter is about establishing a covenant, which culminates in the handing down of the 10 laws that are given for the people's well-being and as the foundation for the ethical framework and legal discourse of Israel. Although there are only 10 commandments, they have a summarising nature of what life according to the law looks like. They imply and generate many other laws that reflect and respond to the covenantal relationship of God with the people.[17] How this foundational commandment was understood and how it gave rise to other laws are illustrated by the remarks of Olson (2008:6) who traces the regulations from forbidding work, not making fires and carrying burdens, to the ceasing of commercial activity. He refers to Exodus 16:22–30; 20:8–11; 31:13–16 and 35:2–3 to Numbers 15:32–36; 28:9–10, Deuteronomy 5:12–15 to Nehemiah 9:14; 10:31; 33 and to 13:15–22. All these rules have their origin in the Sabbath command.

A close reading of the Decalogue reveals the key place of the Sabbath commandment in it. Thus, not only the historical context, but also the form of the Decalogue underlines the importance of the Sabbath commandment.[18] It is also the longest commandment (Olson 2008:5), being about one-third of the total length.[19] It stands in the centre of the Decalogue, preceded by three laws concerning God's person and followed by six laws concerning human relationships.[20] The fourth commandment looks back to the first three commandments and the God who rests (Ex 20:3–7; Brueggemann 2014:1) and forward to the people who must learn to rest. The Sabbath commandment thus marks a transition, indicating that Sabbath-keeping is central to the relationship with God (the first three commandments), but it is also significant in terms of the relationship with other people (the last six commandments).[21] Being with God is not only about the Sabbath encounter with the divine, but also about being with the neighbour and creation. Keeping the Sabbath is thus paired with the responsibility to be gracious to fellow human beings. The formal appearance of the Sabbath commandment underlines its special power in divine–human relationships.[22]

Its key place in the Decalogue underlines the importance of Sabbath-keeping as reflecting the will of God: Sabbath-keeping is ultimately a commandment that indicates what God desires for and requires from the people of God. Keeping the Sabbath is not an interesting historical piece of information, nor just another activity in the spiritual life, but is a commandment to be obeyed. It is also not merely a legalistic matter, simply another apodictic rule or law

15.Kaiser (2013:127) concludes his discussion of Luther's creation theology in Genesis 1:1–24 with this remark, 'Luther regarded the entire process of creation in the beginning of the world and the continual upholding of the universe and the earth as an amazing, attracting, benevolent, generous, and selfless act of God that testifies of his goodness and love towards humanity'.

16.For a discussion of the place of Exodus 20 within the larger unit of Exodus 19–24, see Klingbeil (2010:494–495). See also Haynes and Krüger (2017a:96) for a discussion of the Decalogue's foundational nature. On the Priestly writer as the author of this passage, see Westermann (1984:88–90). See Haynes and Kruger (2017a:90–113) for an exegetical analysis of Exodus 20:8–11, its relationship with Genesis 2:1–3 and the place of the Decalogue in its historical context.

17.The Jewish rabbinic tradition further expanded the Sabbath law in all kinds of ways, eager to maintain the integrity of the Sabbath in changing circumstances such as exile and occupation.

18.Like the reference to the Sabbath in Genesis 2, the reference in Exodus is also foregrounded by the way in which it is narrated.

19.Brueggemann (2014:27) illuminates this spiritual nature of Sabbath-keeping when he explains the reasons why the Sabbath command is the longest of the ten: '[*h*]ow strange to use the most airtime at the mountain on the Sabbath command. The divine utterance must have come as a shock to the listening Israelites. There had been no Sabbath in Egypt, no work stoppage … There had been no work stoppage for the slaves because they had to gather straw during their time off; no work stoppage of anybody in the Egyptian system, because frantic activity drove the entire system. And now YHWH nullifies that entire system of anxious production'.

20.Brueggemann (2014:2) noted that '[*a*]t the same time, the Sabbath commandment looks forward to the last six commandments that concern the neighbor (vv. 12–17); they provide for rest alongside the neighbor. God, self, and all members of the household share in common rest on the seventh day; that social reality provides a commonality and a coherence not only to the community of the covenant but to the commandments of Sinai as well'.

21.Haynes and Kruger (2017a:96) remark that 'Israel's redemption from Egypt not only forms the backdrop to the relationship between God and Israel found in the first four commandments, but it is also the basis of her responsibility to her neighbour. The two tables of the Decalogue are not so easily bifurcated; to keep covenant properly with God, Israel had to fulfil her relational obligations to her neighbour as well'. Vorster (2011:201) noted that 'God's people must always be a sharing community. Therefore, Christians should be protagonists of the praxis of sharing. Society at large should be taught to share God's gifts, to be compassionate and to create a sharing community'. For a more detailed analysis of the unique character of the Sabbath commandment in terms of other commandments, see Klingbeil (2010:500, but also 508).

22.Also illuminating is the observation of Klingbeil (2010:508) that the Sabbath commandment is the only one in the Decalogue that offers a motivation for its observance.

amongst many others. It is a commandment that is integrated in and that reflects the loving relationship of God with humanity. It indicates the way in which humanity can respond to the divine initiative and outreach. This is underlined by the motivation for Sabbath-keeping in Exodus 20:11 about God who rested on the seventh day. The commandment thus reflects an orientation towards God, and an awareness of the divine intention with the cosmos. In Sabbath-keeping, the people of God react to and lovingly remember what God did in creation.

The web of relationships in which the Sabbath commandment is integrated illuminates this further: Sabbath-keeping in its link with the first part of the Decalogue reminds one to remain aware of and seek to be present *coram Deo* as the God who creates *ex nihilo* and gives life *ex gratia* in order for humanity to flourish. Divine activities in creation determine the mindset with which humans order and sanctify their lives. Although the people are given this commandment in the desert as and whilst they are liberated from slavery, they are reminded that being with God ultimately rests on the firm foundation of the gift of life to all and everything – which includes rest, joy and being blessed. The Sabbath with its gifts of grace is for them, but also for the whole of creation. This is the most fundamental aspect of Sabbath-keeping: it is the necessary, but grateful response to the great deeds of God to the world. The motivation that refers to the first creation account extends the Sabbath commandment to humanity and the whole of creation. Sabbath rest is not only about individual piety, but especially also about community. More so, it is a Sabbath-keeping that reminds humanity that the divine grace extends beyond Israel to all of humanity and the whole of creation.

Finally, the motivation is illuminated in an indirect manner by Exodus 20:9–10 by the inclusion of children, servants, livestock and sojourners amongst those who observe the day.[23] This underscored the liberating nature of Sabbath-keeping. Its inclusive nature reflects a radical transformation of a society deformed by its strict boundaries between privileged and marginal groups.[24] There are no excluded groups, no slaves, no unwelcome people amongst those who celebrate the Sabbath: all need to participate. Keeping Sabbath is, therefore, on a deeper level also a celebration of freedom by meeting and sharing the day together with others, with all the spiritual, socio-economic consequences thereof. This illuminates the nature of God and suggests why one would want to practise Sabbath-keeping. Because people 'belong' to an emancipating God who is free to rest, they can, as human beings who have been set free, also rest – something they, as slaves, could never do (Olson 2008:7), setting themselves apart from the rigours of the work week.

Sabbath-keeping as remembering and sanctifying

The commandment to keep the Sabbath is explained in this passage in more detail in two remarks.[25] Firstly, there is an instruction to 'remember' the Sabbath day and secondly to 'keep it holy'.

Remembering is not merely a cognitive activity, but also a spiritual attitude of acknowledging and keeping in mind the work of God who gives rest on the Sabbath and to live in God's presence.[26] Keeping in mind is about a constant, ongoing activity. This is further explained by the request to keep the day holy. The infinitive construction that expresses the verb to keep holy also indicates the way in which the Sabbath is to be remembered. Sanctification means, as Brueggemann (2014:4–6) notes, that the Sabbath sets its practitioners visibly apart as a group that belong to God and that are aware of their common lot as people of God. The practice is linked concretely and visually in external behaviour and activities, such as cultic activities and worship. For Israel, the Sabbath was a day of sacred assembly, as noted in Leviticus 23:3, where the salvific acts of God are remembered and celebrated regularly. Psalm 92, described as a psalm for the Sabbath day, begins with the remark that it is good to praise the Lord and make music to his name (cf. also Kessler 2012:4). The Sabbath is saturated with tangible opportunities to encounter God. This is why the Sabbath is kept holy 'unto the Lord' (Ex 16:23; 20:10; 31:15; 35:2, Lv 19:3; 23:3; Olson 2002:6). The day is set aside to be with God in a special manner.

Honouring the ongoing covenant (Dt 5:12–15)

The discussion of Sabbath-keeping in Deuteronomy 5:12–15 supports what is said in other texts, but there are also differences with the version of the commandment in Exodus 20:8–11.[27] Together, they underline the ongoing nature of Sabbath-keeping, although with different nuances. These differences illustrate the dynamic and contextual nature of Sabbath-keeping and bring to the fore other dimensions of Sabbath-keeping. The version in Deuteronomy 5:12–15 reflects a later stage and context in the history of Israel.[28] The passage portrays the people as having observed the Sabbath practice for generations after their ancestors were given the

23.Brueggemann (2014:30) notes, '[r]est as did the creator God! And while you rest, be sure that your neighbors rest alongside you. Indeed sponsor a system of rest that contradicts the system of anxiety of Pharaoh, because you are no longer subject to Pharaoh's anxiety system'. Insightful is the comparison of Olson (2008:8), of Israel's first building project as a liberated people, the building of the tabernacle (Ex 25–31, 35–40), to the story of God's creative work in Genesis 1:1–31. There are six phases for the tabernacle's construction and six great days of creation. The Sabbath day comes at the end of each of these sequences. In the case of the construction of the tabernacle, the Sabbath commandment is reinforced in Exodus 31:12–17.

24.See Haynes (2015) who also highlights the revolutionary nature of the Sabbath commandment in its criticism of those who force labourers to work incessantly, whilst it honours the human status of marginal groups in society.

25.The Hebrew text, 8:זָכוֹר אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ, begins with an infinitive absolute instead of a simple imperative. It reflects strong emphasis.

26.Note that it is the divine acts that determine the holiness of the day. The focus is on what God is and does for human beings.

27.The Sabbath command is cast differently. Instead of an instruction to 'Remember' (Ex 20), the injunction is to 'observe' (Dt 5:12). The instruction to 'keep it holy' (Ex 20) becomes a qualification to 'observing' it. The last part of the verse refers the reader back to Exodus 20. It could be expressed as follows: decide to practise the discipline of Sabbath by keeping the day holy. The 'remember' of verse 15 substantiates this interpretation (Olson 2008:17). Sabbath-keeping is, therefore, to be practised as a habit.

28.For differences between the two passages, see Klingbeil (2010:498–499). He notes that the version in Deuteronomy 5 represents an event 40 years after the first proclamation.See Deuteronomy 5:3–5. 'Observe' (5:12), for example, implies that Sabbath has become a common practice (Olson 2008:17). The practice is well known and accepted in Israel by that time.

Decalogue at Horeb (Dt 5:2–5). The people are reminded of the Decalogue as they are about to enter and conquer the Promised Land. In a ceremony of covenant renewal, they are made aware that the Decalogue is the principle of covenant living (Dt 5:3; Klingbeil 2010:498). The Decalogue is further reinterpreted in the light of the Deuteronomistic history as part of the self-understanding of Israel. The passage reiterates that the 10 great laws are binding for Israel in its ongoing spiritual journey. It is a reminder of the importance of the Sabbath: what happened at creation is relevant for the people of God for the rest of their existence. They need to honour the covenant that remains binding on them.

The motivation for the Sabbath commandment varies: whilst Exodus 20:11 relates the commandment to creation and implicitly outlines Sabbath-keeping as a paradigm for all people,[29] Deuteronomy 5:15 relates it to the exodus of God's people, and thus to the salvific action of God for Israel. It illustrates how later generations developed new aspects of the Sabbath-keeping. These differences need not contradict each other: they differ because of the different contexts in which the Decalogue is remembered. In the case of Deuteronomy, the divine relationship with Israel as liberating the people of God is in focus. Observing the Sabbath means honouring the covenant of the divine with the people and their ancestors. It speaks about God's special care for the people as the One who saves and liberates, especially at a key moment of their existence. What happened at the beginning of the world is repeated at the beginning of their journey to the promised future. And, in a covenantal relationship, the people of God are expected to respond to the salvific actions with the appropriate devotion and love.

For the rest, both passages are similar in that they depict Sabbath-keeping as a response to God's transformative and liberating acts, the one in creation (involving all people) and the other in the exodus (Israel). Both versions require sanctification of the Sabbath.[30] Keeping the day holy is to keep it different. The activity attached to the working week must cease for the Sabbath.

There is, however, a seminal remark in both that illuminates the special nature of the day. Both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 contain the phrase, 'the seventh day is a Sabbath *to the Lord*'. It suggests that the Sabbath belongs to the Lord in a way in which the other days do not. This indicates that the purpose of Sabbath extends beyond the need for rest, the balance of work and enjoyment that makes for holy living. The day is about a God directedness. In the working week, people concentrate on labour (the work of hands and minds), but the challenge is to pay attention to God on the Sabbath in a more direct manner. Various practices, such as 'paying attention', or even 'discernment', are here linked with the God-awareness.[31] The Sabbath requires one to be attentive to the unseen God who created the world, who raises the sun each morning and calls it to set at night. The land yields crops in season, the rain falls upon the field and the harvest is as a result of the Lord's grace. Ceasing the work of cultivation of the land for the Sabbath allows the people to observe and experience God who honours their labour with growth of their crop.

Both motivations speak about divine doing in the acts of creating and liberating. This illuminates the very nature of God: 'divine action is the visible manifestation of divine being'. But these motivations also speak about human nature: humanity and God's people are part of a covenantal relationship. People are reminded that their very existence in creation and their recreation in the exodus require a loving response. Sabbath-keeping is a call to remembering one's status as created. It is about divine election that leads not to boasting, but to worship the One who transcends creation. This is further underlined by the fact that Sabbath-keeping is integrated in the history of Israel and creation: there is a link between people from all times and places. They find a common destiny in their status as beloved people of God who then respond to the divine generosity with gratitude and joy. What God did in creation for humanity is also evident in God's ongoing involvement in God's people in their stress and displacement.

Trusting God as the provider

A further aspect of the practice of Sabbath-keeping is illuminated in a special manner by Exodus 16:1–30.[32] The passage describes the divine gift of manna[33] to the people to still their hunger on their journey through the desert for 40 years. The passage is about the survival of the people in the dangerous time of the exodus, but it focuses primarily on the way in which Sabbath-keeping is understood and kept.[34]

29. Klingbeil (2010:500), '[*t*]he universal aspect of creation (as referred to in Ex 20:11), is now illustrated specifically in God's liberation of his covenant people from Egypt (Dt 5:15)'. See also his remarks on 503 about the universal nature of the Sabbath. But cf. Costa (2016:131), '[*t*]he Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic covenant. The Sabbath was a unique sign between God and Israel, and not between God and the nations. The Sabbath was a covenant sign to Israel alone'.

30. See also Klingbeil (2010) for further similarities between the two versions.

31. Compare this with other ancient practices such as prayer, study of scripture, solitude and fasting that are focussed on paying attention to God. It underlines a key element of the divine–human relationship that requires concentrated attention.

32. Exodus 16 is a contested passage in scholarly research. Vorster (2011) discussed the various approaches of literary and textual critics to its editorial techniques, historical context and theological relevance. See also Johnston (1996:253) and Vervenne (1996:21). The complex arguments cannot be discussed here.

33. Frankel (2015:208) noted that the narrative 'highlights the theme of God's grace as exemplified in his provision of the manna', but added, 'an inordinate amount of narrative weight nonetheless centers on another matter, the twofold supply of manna that was to be gathered on the sixth day in preparation for the seventh day, when no manna would be sent'. For him, the main issue is not the divine provision, but how the Sabbath was instituted. With an intricate literary analysis of the passage, he argues that the bulk of Exodus 16 reflects a unique, very early view of the Sabbath: it is here not linked with creation and the sanctification of Israel, it is not an eternal sign, did not have the status of an everlasting covenant and was a day in which only agricultural (and not all) work was forbidden. Israel is informed about the Sabbath through the gift of the manna in this passage (and not through direct divine revelation to the people at Mt. Sinai as in Dt 5). The Sabbath was seen as part of God's weekly cycle of activity and rest on behalf of Israel, and it was Israel's task to align her own activity in the field with this divine cycle. For the purposes of this article, the motif of the divine grace and the focus on the Sabbath as spiritual practice that had to be upheld with dedication are important. The passage also shows how the spiritual practice of Sabbath-keeping is managed in detail, but consistently in terms of the specific context – here the desert journey of God's people.

34. There is no reference to creation in this passage as in Exodus 20. Instead, it refers to the giving of the Law at Sinai, stressing the importance of obeying the Sabbath law as test of the people's commitment to the commandment.

On the deepest level, the passage is also about trust in the divine providence. God honours the law and is faithful as the Provider in times of need and scarcity by providing manna to the people during the long journey if only they keep the Sabbath (Ex 16:4). Sabbath-keeping is about trusting God to provide in line with God's covenantal relationship. God who created is the God who sustains and remains faithful to creation.

The passage speaks firstly about trusting God for physical needs. The people are so hungry that they romanticise their previous enslaved situation and its abundance (vv. 2–3), thereby compromising their covenantal relationship. And yet, despite their resistance against God, they are again given a promise that God will provide (v. 4). They will be given food, but will also be tested as to whether they will obey the divine commandment (not to forage for food on the Sabbath). The provision will be wholly a miraculous work of God, it will not be dependent on any action of the people. It will be regular and predictable. They are to gather only enough for the day, nothing more – lest the stored provision spoil. The spiritual meaning of this remark underlines how the divine–human relationship is consistently initiated and established by God.

Here too one notes how Sabbath-keeping is about growing spiritually. The intention stated is that the people will learn, by repeated observation, that God is willing and able to provide for the people's basic needs. Implicit is the divine intention that Israel will learn dependence on God in simple ways so that Israel will remain dependent on God when Israel enters the land and settles in it.

This instruction to remain committed to Sabbath-keeping is underlined by the need of the regular observance of the Sabbath that is interwoven into the story. 'On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they do on other days' (Ex 16:5). 'Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any' (v. 26). Even in unusual circumstances, such as a migration of the people, the Sabbath becomes part of God's training of them and a standard practice for living. They need to nurture this relationship of trust by habit. The section, therefore, ends with the words: 'So the people rested on the seventh day' as an indication of their commitment and active response (v. 30).

Sabbath-keeping is about seeking to be fully and exclusively committed to God as the Provider, which means also desiring to remain in the presence of God. Sabbath made the people aware of divine providence: they will recognise that God is Lord. They experience this when they see the glory of the Lord in the cloud (v. 10). To hold onto this is required, especially when one succumbs under the pressure of daily life and its challenges and, then, not to seek security in what cannot provide security.

The passage once again shows the importance of Sabbath-keeping for God. It is not suspended in difficult circumstances of transition and it is instituted with divine sanction should it be disobeyed (cf. esp. v. 28). It is, however, not so much Sabbath-keeping as law that is at stake, but rather complete dependence on God as the Provider and an ongoing awareness of how God powerfully provided their liberation from Egypt and will continue to foresee in their needs (vv. 6–7). Sabbath-keeping calls Israel to place its needs and survival in the hands of a god who can be counted on to provide. Relieved of the need to gather food (or work) on one day of the week, they are made free to rest and to appreciate God's provision. They find their eyes opened in a special manner to see the glory of God, the beauty that surrounds them and the evidence of the creator that is all around (Bass 2000:51).

Conclusion

The analysis of biblical texts on the Sabbath explains why later communities attached so much value to it. It played a key role in the spiritual life of faith communities because of their understanding of its role in biblical texts. The discussion also revealed various perspectives on the Sabbath, all of them determined by the times and contexts in which the texts were written. This dynamic nature of the biblical material shows how new forms of Sabbath-keeping kept on developing.[35] This indicates how faith communities did seek a practice in dialogue with their holy traditions and Scripture that resonated with their own history and traditions. This openness would help explain why the Sabbath has been appropriated so differently in Jewish and Christian traditions.

It should be noted however that a spiritual practice like Sabbath-keeping is clearly prone to neglect and distortion. The repeated calls to honour Sabbath-keeping in the Bible reveal this. As Bass (2005:27) noted, the dynamic nature explains how each practice 'is always lived imperfectly, and sometimes even in such a distorted manner that it becomes repressive and even harmful'. Hence, there is the need for faith communities to hold onto Sabbath-keeping and retain its spiritual nature in such a way that it remains relevant to their later contexts. At the same time, they can learn from biblical traditions about how this practice can be made relevant without repeating older traditions. They enjoy a freedom to celebrate the Sabbath in terms of their own situation in a dynamic dialogue with earlier faith communities.

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35.This is also true of the Sunday meetings of Christians. De Jonge (2016:577) notes, '[*w*]hat is clear is that eucharistic practices and ideas could widely differ from place to place and change with time. They developed at different places at a different pace'. See also the remarks in Bass (2005:27) who integrates Sabbath-keeping in time and space, with, as a consequence: '[*e*]ach practice arises from a "living tradition" that has taken shape over time as Christians in a wider range of contexts have argued, in words and actions, about the implications of Christian faith for Christian living'.

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