

Leviticus 19:3, 30; 26:2

“Revering the Sabbath”

“Every one of you shall reverence his mother and his father, and you shall keep My sabbaths; I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 19:3).

“You shall keep My sabbaths and revere My sanctuary; I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:30).

“You shall keep My sabbaths and reverence My sanctuary; I am the LORD” (Leviticus 26:2).

19:3 Leviticus 19 is mainly a chapter of widely miscellaneous instructions given to Ancient Israel, which has been prefaced with the imperative, “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (19:2). The first instruction which follows is the admonition, “Each one of you is to respect his mother and his father, and keep My *Shabbatot*. I am *ADONAI* your God” (TLV). One sees a reverse issuing of the Fifth (Exodus 20:12) and Fourth (Exodus 20:8-11) Commandments, followed by the Second Commandment (19:4; Exodus 20:4).

In Leviticus 19, Bible readers see an inward, ethical or moral imperative to respect one’s parents, sitting right alongside the need for God’s people to keep the Sabbath. Observance of both, and the important role that honoring father and mother and resting on the Sabbath day play, is critical for recognizing Israel’s God as the One who has the best interests of human beings in mind. In the estimation of Derek Tidball,

“The Sabbath provided freedom from the tyranny of work and space for people to cultivate their relationship with God. A society that is addicted to commercial activity and never ceases from the endless task of creating wealth is an unhealthy one. Its riches in material terms will only be matched by its poverty in spiritual terms. Its citizens will be cogs in the industrial machine or bytes in the information network, but they will not be people who are fully alive.”¹

Noting the verb *shamar* (שָׁמַר), “keep,” in Leviticus 19:3, John E. Hartley takes it as “meaning to observe the special customs and practices of that day. The Scriptures are amazingly silent on what those practices should include; this silence shows that God entrusts to human insight the specific ways to live up to his general instructions.”² Certainly, while the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* is to be a time of rest from labor, it is not to be a time of coerced or forced abstention from thought or interaction with God. On the contrary, the Sabbath is to be a time when people focus on their Creator, and Jewish history for certain reveals many edifying traditions and customs that have enhanced the sacredness of *Shabbat*.

In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Richard Elliot Friedman raises the question, noting some of his childhood experiences, “Why are parents and Sabbaths put together?...It reminds us of the enormous power of the Sabbath to bind a family together.”³ He then goes on to mention the Sabbath dinner table with *kiddush* and blessings upon the

¹ Derek Tidball, *The Message of Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 236.

² John E. Hartley, *Word Biblical Commentary: Leviticus*, Vol 4 (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 131.

³ Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 379.

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children. Even with an obvious limitation of the seventh-day Sabbath being replaced by Sunday activities, we can still broadly agree with R.K. Harrison's sentiment, "The honouring of the sabbath, which has been replaced by the first day of the week...in Christian teaching, furnishes a regular opportunity for the believer to worship God in the company of others, and to contemplate the extent to which his or her life accords with the demands of divine holiness."⁴

In evaluating why v. 19 associates the honor of father and mother with the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, J.H. Hertz makes the astute conclusion of how fear for God should exceed that of one's human parents:

"The connection of these two precepts is significant. Even as honouring of parents stands foremost among human duties, the sanctification of the Sabbath is the first step towards holiness in man's spiritual life. For the Sabbath is not only a day of cessation from work, but the weekly opportunity for communal worship and spiritual growth...These two commands are placed side by side in order to teach that the fear of parents must not exceed the fear of God. Should they demand anything that contravenes God's law, then the child must place his duty to God before that to his parents."⁵

19:30 Also repeated in Leviticus 26:2, is the word, "You shall keep My sabbaths and venerate My sanctuary: I am the LORD," with the institution of the Sabbath here associated with the *miqdash* (מִקְדָּשׁ). Is this statement only made because there were instructions to be observed on the Sabbath in association with the Tabernacle and Temple? Or, is the Sabbath being presented in terms of a sanctification of time? Hertz actually indicates, "The parenthetical insertion of this injunction may be intended to impress upon the Israelite that reverence for Sabbath and Sanctuary will keep him from the heathenish rites and immoralities mentioned in the preceding verses and that following"⁶ (Leviticus 19:26-29, 31).

Also employed in v. 30 is the plural *Shabb'totai* (שַׁבְּתוֹתַי), the plural "My Sabbaths." A fair deduction would be that this plural "Sabbaths" would signify both the weekly Sabbath and various High Sabbaths.⁷ More customarily, though, the mentioning of the Sabbath within various prohibitions against pagan practices, has led to an emphasis of how observance of *Shabbat* will be an important guard against adoption of paganism by Ancient Israel. The *ArtScroll Chumash* commentary asserts, "The Torah speaks very frequently about both the Sabbath and idolatry, because both are reckoned as equal to all the commandments of the commandments of the Torah. Idol worship is a clear denial of God. Sabbath desecration, too, is a denial that God created for six days and rested on the

⁴ R.K. Harrison, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 196.

He notes the passages Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1; John 20:1.

⁵ Hertz, 498; also Cohen, *Chumash*, 723.

R. Laird Harris, "Leviticus," in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed. et. al., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:602 rightly criticizes any attempt to connect the Torah institution of the seventh-day Sabbath with a Mesopotamian, pagan origin.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 504.

⁷ Cohen, *Chumash*, 728.

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seventh—the eternal reminder of God as the Creator (*Rambam*).⁸ Samuel E. Balentine similarly states,

“To keep the Sabbath means to abstain from all forms of idolatry, whether worshipping gods manufactured by hand (v. 4) or seeking revelation from gods associated with the spirits of the dead (v. 31). It also means to pay heed to the sacrificial regulations concerning the well-being offering (vv. 5-8).”⁹

Proper worship of the Lord is to most certainly involve honoring the Sabbath! Observance of the Sabbath, for Ancient Israel, was to be something that kept them away from paganism. Actually concluding that the Sabbath is a moral institution from God, Harrison describes, “Its sanctity will be preserved as the Israelites observe sabbath worship and reverence the Lord’s sanctuary. Because the Hebrews failed to observe this injunction consistently in their subsequent history, the land was filled with wickedness and they themselves were taken into exile (*cf.* Ezk. 23:37-42).”¹⁰

26:2 Leviticus 19:26 is identical to Leviticus 19:30, although it is notably preceded by the instruction, “You shall not make for yourselves idols, nor shall you set up for yourselves an image or a *sacred* pillar, nor shall you place a figured stone in your land to bow down to it; for I am the LORD your God” (26:1). The wider context witnesses an emphasis for obedience, and with it a Divine prospering in the Promised Land for Ancient Israel. Harrison properly notes, “Observance of the sabbath and punctilious attendance to worship at the sanctuary will be the best means of forestalling the corruptions of Canaanite worship.”¹¹ The plural *Shabb’otai* is intended to signify both weekly and High Sabbaths.¹²

Friedman takes Leviticus 26:2 to “bring together the sanctification of time and the sanctification of space. The Sabbath is the most sacred time. The sanctuary (meaning first the Tabernacle and later the Temple) is the most sacred space. This dual command thus embraces everything.”¹³ Balentine also states, “The elevation of the Sabbath to a position of such singular importance means that Leviticus places it at the center of God’s decisions concerning Israel’s future. The stakes are indeed high, as the following litany of blessings (vv. 3-13) and curses (vv. 14-39) makes clear.”¹⁴ To disregard or downplay the importance of the Sabbath, can very well mean to dismiss a very critical, key component of the holiness intended for God’s own.

⁸ Scherman, *Chumash*, 665.

⁹ Samuel E. Balentine, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Leviticus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2002), 163.

¹⁰ Harrison, *Leviticus*, 202.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹² Hertz, 538.

¹³ Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 407.

¹⁴ Balentine, 198.