

Exodus 23:12; 34:21

“Rest for the Sabbath Day”

“Six days you are to do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease *from labor* so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female slave, as well as your stranger, may refresh themselves” (Exodus 23:12).

“You shall work six days, but on the seventh day you shall rest; *even* during plowing time and harvest you shall rest” (Exodus 34:21).

Two, seemingly miscellaneous instructions about the weekly Sabbath, appear in Exodus 23:12 and Exodus 34:21, within the Torah portions *Mishpatim* (Exodus 21:21-24:18) and *Ki Tisa* (Exodus 30:11-34:35), respectively. Both occur as the Israelites are issued important features regarding their developing society, as in due time they will enter into the Promised Land. While there is a repetition of some details witnessed in more lengthy Sabbath passages in the Book of Exodus, readers should recognize how critical Sabbath observance will be for the community life of Ancient Israel.

23:12 The Sabbath statement of Exodus 23:12 is actually preceded by instructions regarding the Sabbatical year, as the land was not to be farmed in one of every seven years, and it was to be left alone growing without cultivation, allowing for the poor and animals to eat freely from whatever would grow (23:10-11). Observance of such a Sabbatical year, as is seen, would not at all mean a suspension of the weekly Sabbath. As it is rendered by Alter, “Six days shall you do your deeds and on the seventh you shall cease, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and your bondman and your sojourner catch their breath.” The verb *nafash* (נָפַשׁ), commonly rendered as “refreshed,” appearing in the Nifil stem (simple action, passive voice), more fully means “*take breath, refresh oneself*” (*BDB*).¹ There is a repetition of what has been previously witnessed (20:8-11), and this Sabbath instruction does notably appear before the listing of the three annual pilgrimage festivals (23:14-19).

There are some varied opinions to be witnessed regarding Exodus 23:12. R. Alan Cole, for example, thinks that the Sabbath “is to be a cessation of labour for Israel, physical rest for the animals, and refreshment for the workers in slave or semi-slave status, for whom there was presumably no religious obligation.”² The weekly Sabbath as an inclusive institution for all in the community is asserted by Walter Brueggemann, who states, “The rhythm of agrarian life requires such a day of rest. The rest is clearly egalitarian, applying to animals and resident aliens.”³ Interestingly enough, the *Soncino Chumash* records the view of how for those who keep the Sabbath, “The force of *that is*, the non-Israelites concerned may also testify to God’s creation of the universe.”⁴

Frequently, Exodus 23:12 has been approached from the perspective of it emphasizing the humanitarian dynamic of all needing a Sabbath rest, something which should not be thought to the detriment of the Sabbath as a Creation institution. Peter

¹ *BDB*, 661.

² Cole, *Exodus*, 179.

³ Brueggemann, in *NIB*, 1:874.

⁴ Cohen, *Chumash*, 489.

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Enns indicates, "We should be careful not to pit the humanitarian concerns of 23:12 against the more 'theological' motive of 20:11. They most certainly compliment each other."⁵ Terence E. Fretheim takes the presence of Exodus 23:12 to involve how "observance of the sabbath, [is] where rest for those who work is the prominent interest...Ritual here has not become ritual for its own sake but in the service of wider human concerns....Once again this humanitarian concern is coupled with Israel's loyalty to Yahweh (23:14; cf. 22:20, 28). Faithfulness to God cannot be separated from the practice of justice in everyday life."⁶

34:21 The statement of Exodus 34:21, "Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing season and harvest you must rest" (NIV), does repeat what is stated previously in Exodus 20:9, with some further specificity. Some might think that Exodus 34:21 is a bit disjointed, but in the view of Nahum M. Sarna, "The inclusion of the Sabbath law here, after the passover and the first-born [34:18-20], presupposes that the institution of the Sabbath is based on the Exodus, as in Deuteronomy 5:15, and not on Creation, as in Exodus 20:9."⁷ For sure, all can be agreed how once again the institution of the Sabbath is to be woven into the society of Ancient Israel.

More to what is stated in Exodus 34:21, the weekly Sabbath or *Shabbat* is to be observed, even during times of plowing and harvest. This is no different than how weekly rest was to take place during the construction of the Tabernacle (31:12-17; 35:2-3). There would have been huge temptations, during times of plowing and harvest, to attempt to get some extra work completed. Or, there might have just been an outright urge to suspend the Sabbath entirely, so that the population could be fed. As J.H. Hertz points out, "Even during periods of the year when there is urgent pressure in the field, and the Israelite feels that his livelihood demands continuous work, without a break on the Sabbath, he must nevertheless not desecrate the holy day."⁸ As previously witnessed, an observance of God's Sabbath, requires that God's people have sufficient faith for them to recognize that He will provide them with their required food (16:29). Brueggemann astutely concludes,

"The practice of work stoppage on the sabbath is a sacramental assertion that human beings exist neither from nor for productivity, but for well-being in the land."⁹

Those of us today who strive to make the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* a holy time, often find ourselves in a modern society where we are in no danger of hunger. Instead, we might find ourselves on Saturday afternoon tempted by a piece of work or two that we did not complete during the previously week. Yes, there might be unavoidable deadlines at the office which have to be met—but we can also ask for God's grace and mercy to be present, so that we can be more efficient workers on the six days before *Shabbat*. At the same time, much of the work or tasks that we find ourselves

⁵ Enns, *Exodus*, 456.

⁶ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 251.

⁷ Sarna, *Exodus*, 219.

⁸ Hertz, 367.

⁹ Brueggemann, in *NIB*, 1:950.

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doing, *we do not need to do*. We can have a degree of confidence that some things can at least wait until sundown, when *Shabbat* is over.