

SABBATH AS RESISTANCE

NEW EDITION
WITH STUDY GUIDE

Saying No to the Culture of Now

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PREFACE

FOR THE MOST PART, CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS PAY LITTLE attention to the Sabbath. We more or less know that the day came to reflect, in U.S. culture, the most stringent disciplinary faith of the Puritans which, in recent time, translated into a moralistic prescription for a day of quiet restraint and prohibition. In many, somewhat-pietistic homes that amounted to not playing cards or seeing films on Sunday, and certainly not shopping. I can remember each year debates in our rural community about farmers working on some few Sundays to harvest wheat in the face of devastating rains that were sure to come. I can remember from my earlier days, moreover, that because of “Blue Laws,” Sunday home baseball games for the Phillies and the Pirates in Pennsylvania could not begin a new inning after 6:00

p.m. The sum of all these memories of restraint was essentially negative, a series of “Thou Shalt Nots” that served to echo the more fundamental prohibitions of the Decalogue. This context did not offer much potential for seeing the Sabbath in a positive way as an affirmative declaration of faith or identity. And, of course, as church monopoly in our culture has in many places waned or disappeared, the commitment to Sabbath discipline has likewise receded.

As in so many things concerning Christian faith and practice, we have to be reeducated by Judaism that has been able to sustain its commitment to Sabbath as a positive practice of faith.¹ The magisterial book of Abraham Heschel continues to be a lead voice in a Jewish awareness of Sabbath.² In our present context, perhaps it is Michael Fishbane’s eloquent probe of Jewish practices that has the most to teach us about Jewish understandings of Sabbath.³ Fishbane’s discussion is in the larger context of his splendid book concerning the maintenance of Jewish “mindfulness” in a society that is increasingly “mindless.” The Sabbath, along with the other practices he exposit, concerns the maintenance of a distinct faith identity in the midst of a culture that is inhospitable to all distinct identities in its impatient reduction of all human life to the requirements of the market. In contrast (and contradiction) to cultural mindlessness (that can hardly be underestimated!):

The Sabbath and its observance may cultivate a theological mindfulness. . . .

How so?

The Sabbath sanctifies time through sanctioned forms of rest and inaction. On this day certain work-

aday activities and ordinary busyness are suspended and brought to a halt. In their stead, a whole host of ways of resting the body and mind are cultivated. These are of a special cultural type. For though we have a natural notion of work, and think of it in terms of physical exertion or compulsory performance done in order to sustain one's livelihood, these kinds of labor relate to our Adamic selves: the physical self that is sent forth into the world and must work the earth to provide sustenance, while losing body strength on one's life-course toward death. By contrast, our Mosaic selves are enhanced through the teachings of the Oral Torah, which bring other notions of work and categories of labor to bear.⁴

Fishbane contrasts the "Adamic self," the one of natural creatureliness, with the "Mosaic self" that comes under the sway of the Mosaic commands of Sinai. The Sabbath is a sphere of inaction.

One enters the sphere of inaction through divestment, and this release affects all the elements of the workaday sphere. Business activity and exchange of money are forbidden, and one is urged not just to desist from commerce but to develop more interior spheres of settling the mind from this type of agitation. . . . Slowly, under these multiple conditions, 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 humankind 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 attempt to bring the qualities of inaction and rest into the heart and mind. . . . The Sabbath is thus a period of sacred stasis, a

duration of sanctity through the cultivation of inaction in body and spirit. . . .

The heartbeat of repose may thus suffuse the mind and limbs of one's being, and generate an inner balance poised on quietude and a settled spirit.⁵

The choice of an economic image by Fishbane, "divestment," suggests that we may consider the sabbath as an alternative to the endless demands of economic reality, more specifically the demands of market ideology that depend, as Adam Smith had already seen, on the generation of needs and desires that will leave us endlessly "rest-less," inadequate, unfulfilled, and in pursuit of that which may satiate desire. Those requirements concern endless predation so that we are a society of 24/7 multitasking in order to achieve, accomplish, perform, and possess. But the demands of market ideology pertain as much to consumption as they do to production. Thus the system of commodity requires that we want more, have more, own more, use more, eat more, and drink more. The rat race of such predation and usurpation is a restlessness that issues inescapably in anxiety that is often at the edge of being unmanageable; when pursued vigorously enough, moreover, one is propelled to violence against the neighbor in eagerness for what properly belongs to the neighbor.

As acute as this is for us in our society, this is not an unprecedented or even new situation. It is, as Judaism remembers, as old as Pharaoh's insatiable script for production. It is impossible to imagine that in the system of Pharaoh there could ever be any restfulness for anyone (see Exod. 5:4–19). Most remarkably Israel, in the narrative, finally is delivered from Pharaoh's

anxiety system and comes to the wilderness; there Israel is given bread that it is not permitted to store up (Exod. 16:13–21). But even more remarkable, even in such a marginal context, with daily need for bread that is given for the day, provision is made for the Sabbath. Israel cannot store up bread for more than a day; except (big “except”!) on the sixth day Israel may store up enough for the seventh day so that it can rest on that day (vv. 22–24). This unexpected provision is surely a sign that this bread for life is not under the demanding governance of Pharaoh; it is under the sustaining rule of the creator God. Even in the wilderness with scarce resources, God mandates a pause for Sabbath for the community:

Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.

On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. The LORD said to Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? See! The LORD has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day.” So the people rested on the seventh day (vv. 25–30).

The conclusion affirmed by the narrative is that wherever YHWH governs as an alternative to Pharaoh, there the restfulness of YHWH effectively counters the restless anxiety of Pharaoh.

In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is

a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods. Such an act of resistance requires enormous intentionality and communal reinforcement amid the barrage of seductive pressures from the insatiable insistences of the market, with its intrusion into every part of our life from the family to the national budget. In our anxious society, to cite a case in point, one of the great “seductions of Pharaoh” is the fact that “soccer practice” invades the rest day. Families, largely contained in market ideology, think of themselves as helpless before the requirements of such commitment. In context it requires (or “would require,” subjunctive, contrary to fact) enormous, communal resolve to resist the demand.

But Sabbath is not only resistance. It is alternative. It is an alternative to the demanding, chattering, pervasive presence of advertising and its great liturgical claim of professional sports that devour all our “rest time.” The alternative on offer is the awareness and practice of the claim that we are situated on the receiving end of the gifts of God. To be so situated is a staggering option, because we are accustomed to being on the initiating end of all things. We neither expect nor even want a gift to be given, so inured are we to accomplishing and achieving and possessing. Thus I have come to think that the fourth commandment on sabbath is the most difficult and most urgent of the commandments in our society, because it summons us to intent and conduct that defies the most elemental requirements of a commodity-propelled society that specializes in control and entertainment, bread and circuses . . . along with anxiety and violence.

I have taken as a theme for this little book a familiar phrase from the teaching of Jesus in Mathew 11: There he contrasts the “heavy yoke” of his contemporary society with his “easy yoke” (vv. 29–30). That heavy yoke about which his listeners knew perhaps refers to the imposition of Rome and the demanding taxation of the empire, an endless tax to support military adventurism. It is equally possible that the yoke refers to the stringent requirements of establishment religion in which many could not qualify. Either way, empire or religion that colludes with empire, the requirements of acquiescent conduct were heavy. And Jesus, who resisted such a yoke, offered an alternative life of discipleship. Thus in our text, *discipleship* may concern the love of God and the love of neighbor, practices readily alternative to “making it” in the economic world of command performance.

And now, in the utterance of Jesus and in the practice of Jesus and his community, gifts are given! The gifts that are given lie outside the domain of empire and its colluding symbol systems. By appealing to Jesus, I do not suggest Christian preemption of this defining Jewish observance. Rather Jesus fully understood and commended the practice of his Jewish inheritance, which invites to restfulness.

This book is addressed exactly to those who are “weary and heavy laden,” made so by the insatiable requirements of our society—in its taxation for the sake of imperialism, in its social conformity that urges doing more and having more (now perniciously embodied in “teaching to test”), in its frightened intent that there should be no “free lunch” for anyone, in its assumption

that there is a technological resolution of every human problem, in its pathologies of greed and control.

I am glad to thank David Maxwell, who first invited me to write on Sabbath for his enterprise *The Thoughtful Christian*. I am equally grateful to Marianne Blickenstaff for her readiness to move from that initial publication with David to what is offered here. And I am pleased that the press has now added a study guide. I anticipate that such a study guide will give many readers better access to the issues to be faced concerning Sabbath. I am most grateful for the work of Martha Bettis Gee who has prepared the study guide. She has engaged the material in a most thoughtful way that will be of great benefit to readers of the study as they pursue these urgent issues.

I have found this study to be an important existential one for me. I know about the restless anxiety of not yet having done enough. I am glad to dedicate this book to the memory of my mother, Hilda, who knew more about work than about rest. Charles was her firstborn who died young, in his second year, before I was born. I learned more about a work ethic from my mother than I did about rest. But my growing up was plain and simple, close to the soil. There was in our home a natural restfulness imposed by the measures of rural life and my father's blessed garden. My mother would readily interrupt her Sabbath rest for the sake of any of her sons, most especially for Charles, whose precarious life required such attentiveness that she willingly gave.

I have come to think that the moment of giving the bread of Eucharist as gift is the quintessential center

of the notion of Sabbath rest in Christian tradition. It is gift! We receive in gratitude. Imagine having a sacrament named “thanks”! We are on the receiving end, without accomplishment, achievement, or qualification. It is a gift, and we are grateful! That moment of gift is a peaceable alternative that many who are “weary and heavy-laden, cumbered with a load of care” receive gladly. The offer of free gift, faithful to Judaism, might let us learn enough to halt the dramatic anti-neighborliness to which our society is madly and uncritically committed. Fishbane concludes concerning the “Lord of Peace”:

This is dying within life for love of God. It is a divestment of will for God’s sake—and the wonder of the world.⁶

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NOTES

1. There are, of course, many fine studies of the Sabbath by Christian interpreters. Among the best is Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Fasting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

2. Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1951).

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

4. *Ibid.*, 124–25.

5. *Ibid.*, 125–27.

6. *Ibid.*, 128.