

## **Sabbath and Creation: A Literary-Theological Analysis**

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This essay has two aims.<sup>1</sup> One is to discuss the key passages in Genesis and Exodus dealing with the institution of the Sabbath that reflect specifically priestly religious viewpoints. The second is to use that discussion as an illustration of what a truly literary theology of the Hebrew Bible entails. In my own mind and work the two aims are intertwined because it was in writing a sketch of the literary approach to the comparative method in studying the Hebrew Bible that I first used the passage on the Sabbath in Gen 2:1-4 as an example of how the Bible makes religious meaning through literary rather than ideological and theoretical means.<sup>2</sup> Religious ideas find expression in loose, mutually reinforcing networks of language and imagery, not in chains of abstract reasoning and philosophic discussion, both of which were unavailable to ancient Israel. The language aspect involves the use of such linguistic features as leading words, verbal allusions, word plays, significant verbal juxtapositions, and other such devices. Imagery involves metaphors and similes, intertextual allusions, and nuances of association.

Here I propose to discuss six passages dealing with the Sabbath, some very briefly, others in more detail: Gen 2:1-4a; Exodus 16; Exod 20:8-11; Exod 31:12-17; Exod 35:1-3; and Num 15:32-36. In addition, some later passages dealing with institutions related to the Sabbath, the Sabbatical year, and the Jubilee will be briefly considered, as well as, very briefly, the historical context.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is part two of a study of the major Pentateuchal passages dealing with the Sabbath. The first part was published as "Manna and Sabbath: A Literary-Theological Reading of Exodus 16," *Interpretation* 59 (January, 2005): 5-16.

<sup>2</sup> "New Approaches to the Comparative Study of Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Literatures," in *Approaches to Teaching the Hebrew Bible*, ed. B. Olshen and Y. Feldman (New York: Modern Language Association, 1989), 72-77.

The general thrust of the argument is that the passages in Exodus are grounded in creation typology as established in Gen 1:1-2:4 in a manner crucial to the theological stance of the priestly redactors of the Pentateuch, P, here used loosely of the “schools” of P and H, as well as all the sub-groups isolated by some scholars.<sup>3</sup> That the Sabbath is a “sign” of creation is, of course, openly stated in Exodus 31; but I shall try to show that the relationship between the Sabbath and Creation occurs in all the passages in question, which in various ways develop this relationship, through their manipulation of language and imagery in a manner that intimates a whole underlying priestly theology. Moreover, this theology progresses in the passages, so that the institution of the Sabbath is unfolded and developed before our eyes, as it were, in a literary strategy which has to be viewed as intentional. Although most of the discussion will involve the Exodus passages, we shall see that they constantly relate back to Genesis, not only to Gen 2:1-4a but also to other passages reflecting key stages in priestly religious thinking.

The six passages to be considered will be given headings that reflect the stage they represent in the unfolding of the theological argument: Prefiguration, Preparation, Revelation, Re-creation, Restoration, and Execution.

### *1. Prefiguration*

The first passage, Gen 2:1-4a, is the end of P’s creation account, and represents a prefiguration of the Sabbath, which is foreshadowed only verbally by the root שבת, “to stop.” But the institution itself, though unnamed, is already sanctified and blessed, and declared to represent a cessation of divine creative “labor,” or “commission,” מלאכה. The latter term links the passage with the

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<sup>3</sup> The Pre-P history of the Sabbath, which is very obscure, will not be discussed in this essay. Outside of the Pentateuch, the Sabbath seems to be associated with the New Moon and may have referred to the fifteenth day of the lunar month, like the Babylonian *šab/pattu*. The Pentateuchal Sabbath, if not P’s creation, is central to P’s theology in a way the Sabbath clearly was not in the Pre-Exilic period, at least up to the time of Jeremiah in the late sixth century. On the history of the earlier Sabbath, see the literature cited in the article mentioned in n. 2 above.

third, fourth, and fifth passages to be discussed, namely, Exod 20:8-11; 31:12-17; and 35:1-3. The latter passages form a frame around the account of the apostasy with the Golden Calf and its aftermath, in Exod 32-34; and they are linked verbally to the long sections that precede and follow them, Exod 25-31 and 35-40, in which the term מלאכה is prominently used to describe the work of building the tabernacle shrine. The link between shrine and Sabbath is also achieved through other important verbal links, especially in Exod 40, where the reference to Gen 2:1-4 becomes explicit. “Moses completed the work” (Exod 40:34) clearly echoes Gen 2:1, “God completed His work.”<sup>4</sup> In my earlier article mentioned above,<sup>5</sup> I suggested that the foreshadowing or prefiguration of the Sabbath in Gen 2:1-4 is part of P’s theological strategy. It is well known that the creation account in Gen 1 polemicizes against the older Israelite myth of combat between Yahweh and the Sea monster, to which the reference in Gen 1:21 to God’s creation (ויברא) of the “sea dragons” (תנינים) is a coy allusion. P has demythologized the old myth and the mythical world view it represents.

But P has a contradictory agenda as well. Ancient creation myths frequently end with the establishment of shrine and cult, a grounding in eternity at creation that the ancient mind felt was indispensable, and that P also wants. P views the cult as ברית עולם, an “eternal covenant,” which means not just eternal in the future, but also rooted in the primeval past, at creation. But the biblical covenantal and historical pattern demanded that the cult and shrine be established first at the Sinai revelation. P’s answer was Gen 2:1-4, in which the prefiguration of the Sabbath points forward to Sinai, and specifically to Exodus 24-40, where the use of the key terms will reinforce the connection of creation and temple cult, with the Sabbath as a linking device. This is stage

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<sup>4</sup> On the homologies and parallels between the establishments of the Sabbath and the Tabernacle, see further Moshe Weinfeld, “Sabbath, Temple, and the Enthronement of the Lord,” in *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l’honneur de M. Henri Cazelles*, ed. Mathias Delcor et André Cacquot (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981), 501-12.

<sup>5</sup> See n. 2 above.

one, the prefigured Sabbath as indicator of creation and as pointer to the shrine and its cult.

## *2. Preparation*

The second stage, preparation, is in Exodus 16, which lays the groundwork, even before Sinaitic revelation, of the actual institution of the weekly Sabbath. A detailed analysis of this passage appeared in my earlier study of 2005,<sup>6</sup> so here I will only briefly summarize those aspects of that discussion that are relevant to the present one. In the historical context of the manna story, the priestly strand of composition in Exodus 16 introduced the Sabbath as a day on which the manna may not be collected. Israel will “cease” (שבת) to gather it, because the manna itself will cease—not fall—on the seventh day. The manna is a link to creation, a new work of creation as it were, a miraculous substance which the Israelites name “what is it?” The very naming marks the account as a creation story of sorts. But the manna is also linked to the later cult, because it is to be “set before Yahweh,” which I suggest indicates that manna is also to be understood as the prototype of the לחם הפנים, “the bread of the (divine) Presence”—though there is as yet no cult!

The narrative centers on a set of word plays on terms with the letters *shin* and *bet*: שבת, “stop, cease,” שביעי, “seven,” ישב, sit, be inactive,” and even, with a *sin*, שבע, “be sated.” The general thrust is to present the Sabbath as a test of loyalty and obedience, in preparation for the general account of revelation in Exodus 19-24, but also, more specifically, for the revelation of the cult. I suggested in the aforementioned article that the priestly theologian is really using the strange substance of the manna, linked to the seventh day, the Sabbath, as a device to present a new concept of time that combines mythical and cyclical thinking with historical and linear thinking; for that is what the Sabbath represents, in ancient terms. The seven-day week delineated by the

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<sup>6</sup> See n. 2 above.

Sabbath is not connected directly to the lunar calendar of months or to the solar year. It marches linearly through time. But the Sabbath week is also a cycle in itself, eternally recurring, and reliving the original seven-day creation. The latter point becomes central to the rationale for the Sabbath given in the third passage, Exodus 20, the stage of revelation.

### *3. Revelation*

The actual institution of the Sabbath, prefigured in creation and prepared for in the manna story, is made explicit in the revelation of the Ten Words in Exodus 20. Vv. 8-10 point to the kind of humanitarian rationale for the Sabbath one finds in Exod 23:12 and in the Deuteronomic rationale of the commandment in Deuteronomy 5. Neither of these passages reflect P; but v. 11 does reflect the priestly orientation. The Sabbath was set aside, blessed and sanctified, terms that take up Gen 2:3, because God “rested” on it after His labors. Now the term וינח, “he rested,” looks at first as if it is reflecting the non-priestly humanitarian rationale implied by vv. 8-10. God was tired, so He rested. But, in fact, P is being disingenuous: the root נח has a strong cultic resonance, especially in reference to the ark, the throne of the deity, which “rests” in the Holy of Holies of the shrine; cf. Num 10:36; Ps 132:8; et al. So P is intimating by use of the word “rest” something much more profound than mere refreshment.

“Rest” on creation looks back to Gen 2:1-4, where the establishment of the divine resting place in the temple is pointedly not mentioned, in favor of the neutral term שבת, “cease.” But to the priestly theologians, as to the mythically rooted religions of the ancient world in general, creation should end with cult. By postponing mention of God’s “rest” to the Sinaitic revelation, P is intimating that the establishment of cult by Moses is the completion of creation, a theological point reinforced by other verbal and thematic links to Genesis 1 and 2, as noted above. But the reference to “rest” points not only

backward, but also forward to Exodus 31 and the next, and most explicit, stage of theological development of the Sabbath idea.

#### *4. Re-creation*

The first of the two Sabbath passages juxtaposed to the tabernacle account, Exod 31:12-17, represents the fullest and most direct expression of the priestly view of the Sabbath. Sabbaths are declared to be an eternal “sign” (אֵימָנוּת) between God and Israel of the fact that it is God alone who sanctifies them. This is the first time that the term “sign” has been used for the Sabbath. Now calling the Sabbath a “sign” is perplexing. The other “signs” in P are visible, physical things: the rainbow as a sign of the covenant with Noah never to bring another flood (Genesis 9) and the “sign” in the flesh of circumcision in the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17). But how is the Sabbath visible and physical? It looks like any other day, and, like them, it is determined by the cycle of the sun. It would have made sense to refer to the Sabbath as a sign in Exodus 16, where the seventh day was marked by something tangible, the cessation of manna. Manna itself is miraculous, and so it could have been termed a sign or wonder.

The answer seems to lie in the literary juxtaposition presented above, of Sabbath and tabernacle. It is the shrine that is the visible aspect of the sign of the Sabbath because both of them represent a divine “commission” (מִלְאָכָה), a positive, something to be accomplished, as in the case of the shrine, and a negative, in the case of the Sabbath, which involves refraining from labor.

The unity of shrine and Sabbath is P’s theological point. Both are God’s “resting places,” the former in space and the latter in time, what Abraham Joshua Heschel called “a palace in time.” The sacred place represents the positive, the sabbath the negative; together they make a complete religious idea. P’s way of putting this is that together, shrine and Sabbath form a “sign” of an “eternal covenant,” an expression also used for the cult. It is in this sense that the underlying idea in Exod 31 can be term “re-creation”: the Sabbath

relives the original process of creation by repeating the seven day temporal pattern of Genesis 1. The “sign” is, in effect, a kind of blueprint or model, a תבנית, of the temporal aspect of creation just as the physical תבנית, the model of the tabernacle given by God to Moses, is of the spatial aspect of creation.

The other new point in Exodus 31 is the most extremely negative aspect of the Sabbath. “Whoever performs ‘work’ (מלאכה) on [the Sabbath] shall be put to death, and that life (נפש) shall be cut off from the midst of its people”— a double penalty. This surely expresses yet another superlative, marking the Sabbath as a doubly serious institution, the penalties for its violation doubly severe. It is an equivalent in time not only of the shrine as a whole, but of the Holiest Place in the shrine. It is significant that Exod 31:15 uses a similar superlative compound for the Sabbath as it does for the Holiest Place. The term for the latter is קדש הקדשים, literally “holy of holies.” Exod 31:15 says: “Six days only shall you do your work, but the seventh day (שביעי) is Yahweh’s holiest Sabbath (שבת שבתון קדש)—these very words occur also in Exod 16:23); whoever does work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death.” The Sabbath is the temporal equivalent not only of the shrine, as stated above, but specifically of the Holiest Place of the shrine. Both aspects of holiness, temporal and spatial, were imprinted at creation.

The last word of this most significant passage is curious. Exod 31:17 states: “Between me and the Israelites it is a sign forever, that in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth, but on the ‘seventh day’ (שביעי) he ‘stopped’ (שבת) and ‘caught his breath’ (וינפש).” Here one finds the juxtaposition of the important leading words used in relation to the Sabbath in Genesis 2 and Exodus 16 and 20: שבת, “stop, cease,” and שביעי, “seven.” But the last expression, “he caught his breath,” is used earlier only in a passage that is not connected to the priestly theology, namely, Exod 23:12, which reflects the non-priestly humanitarian, recreational, view of the Sabbath in the covenant

tradition. Why does P, in such an important passage as Exodus 31, so central to its religious interpretation of the Sabbath, and so sophisticated in its use of literary devices and allusions, presenting a quite revolutionary view of sacred time in relation to sacred space, suddenly, at the very end, use such a gross anthropomorphism as “he caught his breath?”

To be sure, stating that God “rested” (וינוח) on the seventh day is also anthropomorphic, but “rest” has, as we have seen, old cultic associations with the shrine, and is part of P’s tactics in (re)interpreting the Sabbath. But “catch one’s breath” can be nothing but human, all too human. The third biblical use of the verb הנפש occurs in 2 Sam 16:14, where it makes this human aspect of the term clear: the elderly David, exhausted by his flight from Absalom, “catches his breath” when he finds a place to rest for a bit. P, it seems, is suddenly using a term that clearly belongs to the humanitarian tradition of the Sabbath. But in Exodus 23 the term is used not of God but of slaves and resident aliens! Why, then, is it used of God in Exodus 31?

Now P is by no means averse to anthropomorphisms; but most of them were inherited from old cultic terminology and given a new meaning. For example, the “bread of the Presence” was so reinterpreted in Exodus 16 as bread given by the Presence, namely, God, the provider of manna, and not, as in other ancient cults, as bread provided to be eaten by the gods. Similarly, the smoke of sacrifices is said to have a “propitiating odor” (ריח נחוח). But “catch one’s breath” is not such an old, established cultic term and is hardly liable to reinterpretation as something other than physical. Why is this disturbing expression used by P?

It seems to me that the aim of the word וינפש, “he caught his breath,” is to intimate a relationship between the act of creation and the emphatic, doubly-stated death penalty enjoined for Sabbath breakers. P elsewhere is extremely sensitive to violence as a breach of the created order. After the flood, God declares that murderers should henceforth be punished by humans rather

than directly by God, as in the flood: “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed” (Gen 9:6). We have seen that precisely because the Sabbath is so holy, a superlative day, it requires a superlative penalty for violation, marked by the double penalty. But P is still disturbed by death, a so utterly negative aspect of the Sabbath.

I suggest that the final word in the Sabbath passage in Exodus 31, **וַיִּנְפֹּשׂ**, is intended to refer back to the statement in the same passage that not only shall the Sabbath violator be put to death, but that that his “life (**נַפְשׁ**) shall be cut off from his people.” The implied connection in thought follows the pattern of positive-negative that is often an aspect of P’s strategy in dealing with the Sabbath: God “caught his breath,” literally “took life-breath” (**נַפְשׁ**), on the seventh day and therefore decreed that whoever breaks the Sabbath should be deprived of “life-breath” (**נַפְשׁ**). The penalty fits the crime.

Expressing a theological idea through a primarily verbal literary link rather than through a logical theological theorem may seem strange to moderns unfamiliar with how ideas are expressed in ancient literature before the Greeks (though parts of Deuteronomy and the theological sermons of Ezekiel, both late pre-exilic or exilic, show glimmerings of verbal theologizing). The statement in Genesis 9 mentioned above, which is also part of the priestly work, has just such a verbal connection, as a significant pun, because “blood” (**דָּם**) and “man” (**אָדָם**) by their very sounds reveal their inner relationship.

A further, strengthening consideration for viewing the references to “life, life-breath” as part of a literary-theological endeavor by P, is the fact that the term **נַפְשׁ** is one of the central concepts in the priestly theology as a whole, not only in Genesis 9 but also in Leviticus 17, where the seat of **נַפְשׁ**, is declared to lie in blood, with its atoning power. One must also consider the regular priestly use of **נַפְשׁ**, in the sense of “individual,” to refer to the members of the cultic community (cf. Lev 2:1; 4:2; etc.). There is therefore a *prima facie* reason

to assume, or at least suspect, that the use of such a troublesome term as *וינפש* in reference to God must have some meaning connected to P's theological stance. The overall sense of the play on *נפש* and *וינפש* in Exodus 31 would be something like an underlying idea that the observance of the Sabbath adds *נפש* to Israelites, for which God was the model, in the usual priestly theology of *imitatio dei* ("You shall be holy as I am holy" [Lev 19:2]); but violation of the Sabbath removes *נפש*.

### 5. *Restoration*

The other passage that forms part of the meaningful juxtaposition of shrine and Sabbath, Exod 35:1-3, is brief, but it is even more negative than Exodus 31. It repeats the statement of Exod 31:15 about the Sabbath's being a superlatively holy day, along with the prescription of the death penalty for violators, but then adds a new point—a further, new restriction: "You may not light fires in any dwelling on the Sabbath day." Apparently, Israel is to remain in chilly gloom on the Sabbath. Now, fire is important to the cult because it symbolizes the divine presence, in the fire on the altar, which is never allowed to go out, and within the shrine, in the "eternal light" of the menorah. So prohibition of fire outside the shrine on the Sabbath may be simply an extension of the positive-negative principle I posited in reference to the term *נפש* above. What is necessary and holy in the shrine on the holiest day is forbidden on that day outside of the shrine. The prohibition would then be theologically understandable; but it is still a rather abstract, and, I think, too superficial explanation of the prohibition. In fact, the law is so negative and marks so drastic a lessening of the positive aspect of the Sabbath that it must have some explanation rooted in the immediate circumstances of the text.

That circumstance is surely the preceding narrative in Exod 32-34, the account of the great apostasy of the making and worshipping of the Golden Calf. Aaron lamely justifies his actions in helping to manufacture the image by

stating, disingenuously, that the molten calf just “came out of the fire” (Exod 32:24). Moses had already burned the image up in fire. It is possible that fire itself is viewed by P, just in this specific context, as a sign or symbol of Israel’s crime. Such an act of extreme disloyalty diminishes the sanctity of the blessing the Sabbath was intended to represent. The utility and comfort that come from the use of fire will be prohibited on the Sabbath, as a memorial of the crime and a warning. Since fire is one of the stock symbols of the divine presence, its absence on the Sabbath must be viewed negatively, as symbolic of a reduced presence of God.

This interpretation conforms to elements of the aftermath of the apostasy with the Golden Calf. Moses mollifies God a bit and averts immediate divine abandonment of sinful Israel. He pitches a tent outside the camp to woo God’s presence back at least to the periphery of the community. God consents to lead the people again and states he will rewrite the tablets smashed by Moses. But in fact, Exod 34:2 speaks only of Moses’s being commanded to write down the text of the covenant. The new copy will not be written, as the first was, by the very “finger of God.” And there is no further revelation of the Glory to the people as a whole, as at Sinai. They do not see the very fire of God. Instead the aspect of divine light is transmitted to Moses alone, symbolic of his status as official mediator. God is soothed but still rankled by the apostasy. Moses is the moon to God’s sun, as it were, reflecting light. This diminished radiance is taken up by the prohibition of fire on the Sabbath, a day diminished by Israel’s crime. But even so, the renewal of the Sabbath command shows that the relationship to God has been restored by the intercessions of Moses.

This three-fold pattern of (1) creation of an original, perfect model, (2) its disruption by sin, and (3) restoration on a diminished level, is in fact central to priestly theology in the Pentateuch. The priestly editors edited older traditions of creation to establish just such a pattern in Genesis 1-9, which the account of revelation in Exodus is reliving typologically. God’s original creation, capped by the prefigured Sabbath, was “very good.” But the sins of humanity brought a return to watery chaos. God is mollified by the flood, but

the post-diluvian dispensation is at a lower level than the original creation. It is not “very good” but contains provision for inherent human wickedness expressed in the punishment for homicide, and the provision for animal slaughter. This three-fold pattern, or typology, is repeated at Sinai in the priestly editors’ structuring of revelation. The first stage, corresponding to creation, is Exod 19-31, composed of passages from earlier traditions and P’s own revelation of the structure of the tabernacle. It ends with the full Sabbath law and the statement that the first tablets were written with the “finger of God.”

The second stage, corresponding to the degeneration of humanity from Cain to the generation of the Flood, is represented by Israel’s apostasy involving the Golden Calf. The third stage is partial restoration. It contains such elements as Moses’s prayers of intercession, his setting up a peripheral tent of meeting (not the one commanded in Exodus 24-31), and his stepping in as semi-divine, luminescent mediator. But the restoration, like that after the flood, is at a diminished level of divine contact. The new text of the covenant is written by Moses. And the prohibition on the Sabbath day, the very symbol of holiness, of fire—itsself symbolic of divine closeness—is a further expression of lowered, though partially restored, relationship to God.

Revelation thus reenacts the pattern of creation, with the device of the Sabbath again serving as a link between them, this time, as so often, expressing a meaning that is both negative and positive. There is still a Sabbath, but a darker one, literally and figuratively. The Sabbath, unenlightened by fire, is dimmed from what it might have been if Israel had not sinned. Yet the fire of God’s wrath, so common a theme in the Bible, will not burn against Israel to consume them utterly. It is not surprising that, no sooner is the tabernacle built than the Book of Leviticus begins with the required blood sacrifices necessary to atone for such a sinful people.

### *6. Execution*

The last Sabbath passage is Num 15:32-36. A man is found gathering straw on the Sabbath. He is imprisoned briefly while the matter is brought to Moses. “Stone him!” is the stern command. This is the first and only account of the performance of the new institution of the Sabbath after the Sinai revelation. One might have expected some grand ceremony of installation, as of the sacrificial cult in Leviticus 9. Instead, the curt judicial proceeding marks the execution of the practice of the Sabbath, an execution in both meanings of that term. To be sure, the Sabbath is still observed by refraining from collecting manna on that day; but the fate of the straw-gatherer shows that God means business in regard to the death penalty stated in Exodus 31, and that the penalty will be stoning. There may also be a link to the prohibition of lighting fires on the Sabbath, since that is perhaps why the miscreant was gathering straw.

### *Later Sabbath Passages in the Pentateuch*

The Sabbath seems to play a somewhat different, expanded role in passages reflecting the Holiness tradition. In Lev 25:4 the term Sabbath is extended to the year of release. It is a “Sabbath for the land” itself (v. 6). The Sabbath day may be an occasion of some hardship, in that one’s rest will lack the comfort afforded by fire; but refraining from agriculture for a year is inconvenience on a larger scale. So reassurance is needed: “If you say, what shall we eat during the seventh year when we don’t sow or reap, I shall command increased blessing in the sixth year, so that you have enough for three years, the sixth, seventh, and eighth, when you are sowing the new crops” (Lev 25:20-22). The pattern of provision regarding the manna, with its double supply on the sixth day, is repeated.

But the Sabbath is expanded even further: after seven sets of seven years, in the fiftieth year, Israel is to hold a Jubilee, when no agriculture is allowed, and, in addition, land must return to its original family owners, thereby wiping out fifty years of capitalist progress. Presumably, in the forty-

eight year God will have to provide four years of sustenance in advance, no doubt necessitating massive storage facilities. Even the mind of the later Rabbis boggled at such a draconian injunction: the Jubilee, they said, was an institution that ended with the destruction of the First Temple (see, e.g., Maimonides, *Code, Laws of Shemitah* 10:8). Fortunately, the kindling of fires was not also enjoined for the Sabbatical and Jubilee years; nor was the staying at home. Instead, the new key word with *shin-beth* is *shub*, “return,” the returning of each man to the holdings of his clan (Lev 25:10, 13). The “returning” of the land to its original status and its resting during fallow years are extensions of the priestly link between creation and Sabbath; they are, in fact, a re-creation of the original social organization of Israel every fifty years. The Sabbatical year may be difficult, and the Jubilee impossible, but both are significant theological expressions of priestly creation theology combined with prophetic concern for social inequity.

Finally, Leviticus 26 extends the Sabbath image to the fallowness of the land during the period of its depopulation during the exile. It is “paying off” the Sabbaths and Sabbatical years Israel failed to observe while it was in its land (vv. 34-35, 43—note the heaping up of *shin-beth* terms, though the absence of the new term *shub*, “return,” in this context is striking).

### *Historical Context*

Although this discussion has taken a dominantly literary approach, it must be noted that the threefold pattern just outlined of original, perfect dispensation, human sin, and restoration on a diminished level, corresponds not only to the priestly view of creation and history in general, but specifically to the mood of the restoration under Ezra, the period from which the final form of the Pentateuch, with its dominant priestly orientation, stems. The Second Temple and its cult was just such a diminished dispensation as the one P represents in the Pentateuch on the most important topics. The speeches of Ezra in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 display a deep sense of the tenuousness of the religious order. The subjugation to the Persian kings is a sign of the shrunken, only partially

restored, bond to God represented by the reaffirmation/imposition of the Law, the “peg” (יתד) that ties Israel to the land, the “little chance for life” (מחיה מעט). It is surely not coincidental that the two major signs of strict adherence to the precarious new order were both institutions P terms “signs” in the Pentateuch: circumcision and strict observance of the Sabbath. The pattern of the unfolding theological presentation of the Sabbath in the Pentateuch that I have attempted to outline above was therefore deeply representative of the age, and consequently, also deeply meaningful to it theologically.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The later Rabbis did not understand the dynamic interplay of positive and negative in the priestly understanding of the Sabbath, and so attempted to remove the most negative element through such laws as allowing fire to be kept burning of the Sabbath, so long as they were kindled before, etc. The Samaritans and, later, the Karaites understood the negative original intent much better, though they did not associate the restriction with sinfulness.