

The Sabbath and God's People

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I first became aware of the particular biblical relationship between Sabbath and peoplehood that I want to discuss here through an interest in the concept of people and nation presented in Scripture. Many would assume that Jews were by definition descendants of Abraham. But that is not how the Bible depicts God's people. Consistently Scripture reveals how a group of what are non-Israelites at one point in time are later regarded as Israelites. The Gibeonites, for example, return after the exile as fully "Jews" (Neh. 3:7, 8). Others, while not specifically relabeled as Jews in Scripture, would still have become so. The elites of the conquered city of Jerusalem, for example, would have become the elites of the Davidic monarchy. David's bands of Philistine and other mercenaries would have become assimilated into Israelite society. In time they and their descendants would have regarded themselves as fully Israelites. It was a trend that goes all the way back to the time of Abraham. Abraham was a tribal chieftain who could command an army of retainers comparable to that of many of the kings and rulers of his time (Gen. 14:14).¹ All of his servants and retainers would have considered themselves members of his family even if they were not blood-related to the patriarch.² They all belonged to the household of Abraham.

As I followed this pattern of the growth of God's people through absorbing non-Israelites,³ I noticed another motif that frequently accompanied the theme of peoplehood, particularly during times when that identity faced threats: the Sabbath. Scripture constantly connects the concept of peoplehood with Sabbath.

God created the first human beings and then rested on the Sabbath, establishing a thematic pattern tying peoplehood with Sabbath that I believe continues throughout the rest of the Bible. Not only did the Lord create people in the first place, but the Sabbath also symbolizes, in addition to the original creation, His power to preserve or restore

them. People and Sabbath thus become as it were the two sides of a single conceptual coin.

When human beings rebelled, God did not abandon them. He still sought a people for Himself. After the Flood He called Abram to begin that people anew. Eventually His people went into Egypt, where slavery almost destroyed them. They forgot who they were. The Lord had to instill in them a sense of identity as His people. As He led them through the wilderness He assured them that He would care for them through the regular gift of manna (Ex 16:13-36). Their obedience to the manna cycle and their rest on the Sabbath became a test of their acceptance of God as their Lord and they themselves as His people.

At Sinai God declared them “a holy nation” (Ex 19:6). They now existed only because He had delivered them from the bondage and the chaos of slavery (Ex 20:2; Deut. 5:15)—He had created them as a people anew. There He proclaimed the Ten Commandments, including the Sabbath one. Once again observance of the Sabbath symbolized their acknowledgment of their peoplehood.

Not only was the Sabbath prominent in the formation of God’s people, it also surfaces in Scripture when they face the threat of destruction, assimilation, or dispersion. For example, 2 Kings 11 tells how Athaliah, the queen mother of Judah’s King Ahaziah and daughter of Ahab and Jezebel of Israel, seized control of Judah after her son’s death. She tried to destroy all members of the royal family. But Ahaziah’s sister, Jehosheba, managed to save Ahaziah’s son, Joash, and hid him in the Temple precincts for six years. In the seventh year (an interesting echo of Creation week) Jehoiada, the high priest, staged a coup to remove the queen from power and place Joash on the throne. The coup took place on the Sabbath (2 Kings 11:5-9). One could dismiss the reference to Sabbath as just an explanation for how Jehoiada could move larger numbers of soldiers around without attracting suspicion, but one must keep in mind biblical literary style. It is very terse and every word counts.⁴ The biblical author would not have mentioned something unless he had a point to make with it. The Bible is literature, and literature encodes much of its messages in allusions as well as imagery.

Furthermore, Scripture rarely mentions on what day something happens. The reference to Sabbath is especially significant when we take into consideration that after

the execution of Athaliah, Jehoiada made “a covenant, between the Lord, the king, and people, that they should be the Lord’s people” (verse 17). By mentioning the Sabbath along with the establishment of a covenant, the biblical author directs our attention back to the Sinai experience.⁵ The people whom Athaliah had almost destroyed through her pagan activities God now reconstitutes and brings back into renewed relationship with Him.

Amos 8 reports that materialism and economic abuse had become rampant in the northern kingdom. In their desire for gain they could not wait until the Sabbath had ended to resume their business activities. Scripture contrasts Israel’s covenant with God and with each other symbolized by the Sabbath with the self-destructive practices that were now tearing God’s people apart and bringing them to an end (Amos 8:2)..

The book of Isaiah shows how resident aliens and eunuchs, both regarded as outsiders or at least second-class citizens, can through Sabbath observance become part of God’s people (Isa. 56). Sabbath observance also forms part of the prophet’s discussion of true worship (Isa. 58), and true worship consists of a proper relationship with God and with fellow humanity—a sense of identity as His people. Isaiah also declares that God’s people will go into exile because of their national rebellion, but when He restores them with the rest of humanity in a new earth, they will from Sabbath to Sabbath worship the Lord (Isa. 66:23). Then, just before the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah also emphasizes the Sabbath (Jer. 17:19-27). Judah faced extinction as a nation and even as a people. If they would honor the Sabbath, however, Jerusalem would be inhabited forever (verses 24-26). But they refused to listen to the prophet and went into captivity.

In Ezekiel God sketches the history of His people before announcing that He will restore Israel, bringing them back from exile (Eze. 20). Twice He mentions that the Sabbath was a sign or symbol of His relationship to them as a people (verses 12, 20). Because they profaned the Sabbath and rejected the covenant He had made with them, God had to shatter their national identity by dispersing them among the nations (verses 23, 24). When some did return from Babylonian captivity, the Sabbath again made its appearance in Scripture. As Nehemiah worked to rebuild the identity of religious life in Jerusalem (religion was one of the most important aspects of all ancient self-identity) he

found that its inhabitants, in league with the pagan people around them, had turned the Sabbath into just another market day (Neh. 13:15-22). Furthermore, traders from Tyre had apparently, as was their widespread practice, established a mercantile colony in Jerusalem (verse 15).⁶ All this would have drawn the people, especially the elites, into the socioeconomic fabric of the Phoenician world.

The context of the incident is the danger of assimilation that threatens the people of Jerusalem. Non-Israelites were moving into the city and even the sacred Temple precincts themselves (verses 1-9). Many of God's people, including one of the sons of the high priest, had non-Israelite wives (verses 23-30). The children could not even speak their fathers' language (language is also a vital part of any group's self-awareness). In ancient Mediterranean culture children during their first few years were raised within the sphere of women,⁷ especially among elites as society became less egalitarian with the rise of urban environments. While boys would be dramatically (and painfully) torn from this comfortable existence at about age 8 so as to bring them into the world of men, they would have still been powerfully and permanently shaped by their woman-dominated early years. The children of Yahud's leaders were being culturally and religiously shaped by their non-Yahwistic mothers. As a result, God's people faced the very real danger of vanishing as an identifiable body. To stop the destructive process Nehemiah stressed the Sabbath as a symbol of their identity as God's people and of their allegiance to Him.

By New Testament times God's people had learned the importance of Sabbath to their identity. But whereas they had once ignored it, they now swung to the other extreme. Instead of it being a protection, they had transformed it into a potential danger. The rules and practices that had developed surrounding the Sabbath had become in many ways barriers to the continuing growth of God's people. It is interesting that Jesus repeatedly confronted two aspects of the Judaism of His time that had by then made it more difficult for Jews to interact with Gentiles and thus lead them to become part of God's people: Sabbath practices and food regulations.⁸

The close connection in Scripture between the themes of peoplehood and Sabbath makes one wonder if, for example, in the repeated calls by God in the book of Revelation for His people to come out of Babylon, we should hear echoes of the other side of the

coin: the power of the Sabbath to restore and preserve His people. It is, I believe, a topic to consider exploring.

¹ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 46.

² This not universalism. God's plan was for voluntary response to the divine grace revealed through the lives of His human representatives. Individuals and whole peoples could and did reject the offer. Unfortunately, ancient Israel did not fulfill their intended role, and the church inherited it. But God's Old Testament people did numerically expand much more than we have traditionally thought. For a number of years I worked on a long article tracing the theme of peoplehood through Scripture and how Israel incorporated others. It has now vanished into that abyss of forgotten projects.

³ God called His chosen people to represent Him and bring all nations to Him, a theme dominant in Isaiah and the other prophetic books. The nations would become one in their worship of the true God. We see a similar parallel in the book of Revelation.

⁴ See, for example, the classic study by Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

⁵ Verse 19 of the parallel account in 2 Chron. 23 mentions the gatekeepers that the high priest stationed to prevent anyone unclean entering the Temple precincts, an echo of the setting of bounds around Mount Sinai (Ex. 19).

⁶ *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 482.

⁷ Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), pp. 27-29; Daniel I. Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," in Ken. M. Campbell, ed., *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 76, 77.

⁸ Paul would deal with the social problems created by food and meal issues.

