

Ezekiel 20:12-26

“Did God Actually Create Bad Laws for Israel?”

“Also I gave them My sabbaths to be a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them. But the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness. They did not walk in My statutes and they rejected My ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live; and My sabbaths they greatly profaned. Then I resolved to pour out My wrath on them in the wilderness, to annihilate them. But I acted for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, before whose sight I had brought them out. Also I swore to them in the wilderness that I would not bring them into the land which I had given them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands, because they rejected My ordinances, and as for My statutes, they did not walk in them; they even profaned My sabbaths, for their heart continually went after their idols. Yet My eye spared them rather than destroying them, and I did not cause their annihilation in the wilderness. I said to their children in the wilderness, ‘Do not walk in the statutes of your fathers or keep their ordinances or defile yourselves with their idols. I am the LORD your God; walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and observe them. Sanctify My sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between Me and you, that you may know that I am the LORD your God.’ But the children rebelled against Me; they did not walk in My statutes, nor were they careful to observe My ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live; they profaned My sabbaths. So I resolved to pour out My wrath on them, to accomplish My anger against them in the wilderness. But I withdrew My hand and acted for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out. Also I swore to them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them among the lands, because they had not observed My ordinances, but had rejected My statutes and had profaned My sabbaths, and their eyes were on the idols of their fathers. I also gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live; and I pronounced them unclean because of their gifts, in that they caused all their firstborn to pass through *the fire* so that I might make them desolate, in order that they might know that I am the LORD.”

The Book of Ezekiel informs Bible readers a great deal about various aspects of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, ancient issues faced in the Sixth Century B.C.E. by the exiles in Babylon, as well as futuristic issues pertaining to the Messianic Age. The Prophet Ezekiel was a priest (1:3), who had been taken into Babylonian captivity, and while in Babylon was directed by the Lord to do some rather out-of-the-ordinary actions, and/or say things many would consider “over the top,” often to depict the shame of the exile and sin of the people.¹ In the oracle of Ezekiel 20:12-26, one sees an emphasis on an historical pattern of God’s deliverance, rebellion against Him by Ancient Israel, and judgment widely being withheld from God. Ezekiel 20:5-9 prefaces,

“[S]ay to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘On the day when I chose Israel and swore to the descendants of the house of Jacob and made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt, when I swore to them, saying, I am the LORD your God, on that day I swore to them, to bring them out from the land of Egypt into a land that I had selected for them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands. I said to them, ‘Cast away, each of you, the detestable things of his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.’ But they rebelled against Me and were not willing to listen to Me; they did not cast away the detestable things of their eyes, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I resolved to pour out My wrath on them, to accomplish My anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt. But I acted for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they *lived*, in whose sight I made Myself known to them by bringing them out of the land of Egypt.’”

What can really catch Bible readers off guard, is not necessarily how Ancient Israel is chastised for engaging in idolatrous rebellion against the Lord. That violation of the institution of the seventh-day Sabbath, and what it represents for God’s people—can be mentioned right alongside of other crimes against the Lord, particularly that of child sacrifice (20:26)—**only serves to highlight the importance of *Shabbat***. As it is stated, “I gave them My statutes and informed them of My ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live” (20:11), with God’s Torah to be a means of great blessing and a high quality of life (Deuteronomy 4:40; Joshua 1:7-8). Unfortunately, this is not what is witnessed in Ezekiel 20:12-26. And, while Sabbath violation and dismissal is not isolated

¹ Consult the entry for the Book of Ezekiel in the workbook *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

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from other significant sins committed against the Lord, this oracle is not the only place in Ezekiel where the Sabbath is highlighted (22:8, 26; 23:38; 44:24; 45:17; 46:3). The Prophet Ezekiel's admonitions are quantitatively similar as to those witnessed by Jeremiah previously (cf. Jeremiah 17:19-27). God's forbearance, and the patience He demonstrates so that His people might repent and turn to Him, is witnessed in how He does not immediately judge them for rejecting His provision and good intentions embodied in an institution such as *Shabbat*.

20:12 That the institution of the Sabbath is serious to the God of Israel, is easily seen in the word, "I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between Me and them, to know that I am HASHEM Who sanctifies them" (ATS). *Shabbat* is an important sign or *ot* (אוֹת) between God and Israel (Exodus 20:8-11; 31:16-17). Noting how v. 12 does state *v'gam et-Shabbetotai nattati l'hem* (וְגַם אֶת־שַׁבְּתוֹתַי נָתַתִּי לָהֶם), "{and} I also gave them My *Shabbatot*" (TLV) or "*shabbats*" (CJB), S. Fisch notes the view, "The plural includes festivals which are given in the Pentateuch the designation of *Sabbath*; cf. Lev. xxiii.24, 29 (Kimchi)."² Disregard for the Sabbath, as an institution given by God—which here can involve components beyond the weekly, seventh-day Sabbath—is something that is going to merit some serious punishment by Him. This is why in later generations, following the Babylonian exile, the Jewish community took the Sabbath so seriously. Sabbath violation was a major cause of the exile, and so (rigid) Sabbath observance would seemingly prevent such a disaster from ever occurring again. Even with a few critical presuppositions seen in his commentary, Steven Tuell is broadly accurate in his observations,

"Sabbath observance became increasingly important in the years of the exile and afterwards (see, e.g., Isa. 56:1-8) as the distinguishing mark of the people Israel. It was likely for this reason that Jesus' apparent disregard for the Sabbath law (see., e.g., Matt. 12:1-14// Mark 2:23-3:6//Luke 6:1-11) was so deeply troubling to the religious leadership of his day. The link between Sabbath observance and holiness is evident in the Holiness Code (Lev. 19:3, 20; 23:3; 26:2), as is the link between Sabbath violation and exile (Lev. 26:34; see also 2 Chr. 36:21; Jer. 17:19-27)."³

Because of the severity of prophetic words such as Ezekiel 20:12-26, any perceived Sabbath violation by figures like Yeshua of Nazareth, would have merited Him significant criticism. Customarily, many Christian readers of the Gospels have thought that the Messiah was indeed violating the Sabbath, when actually Yeshua's own Sabbath observance, *halachah*, or orthopraxy tended to sit well within the variance of applications accessible to First Century Jews (discussed further).

20:13a An historical perspective is presented regarding past activity between God and Israel: "But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They did not walk in my statutes but rejected my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live; and my Sabbaths they greatly profaned" (ESV). One can detect an association with Leviticus 18:5 here: "So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD."⁴ As Leslie C. Allen directs, "Compliance with God's moral and religious terms meant 'life and good fortune,' while contravention spelled 'death and disaster' (Deut 30:15). A blessed life flowed from 'loving Yahweh your God, obeying him and cleaving to him' (Deut 30:20)—so far from legalism was the connotation of the laws of Sinai."⁵ Institutions such as the Sabbath were intended to bring blessing, rest, refreshment, and a sense of wholeness to those who were faithful to keep it. **The Sabbath was hardy intended to bring bondage, legalism, and impairment.**

It is described how "My sabbaths they greatly profaned" or "they grossly desecrated My sabbaths" (NJPS). In the Piel stem (intensive action, active voice), the verb *chalal* (חָלַל) can mean

² S. Fisch, *Soncino Books of the Bible: Ezekiel* (London: Soncino, 1950, 1994), 123.

³ Steven Tuell, *New International Biblical Commentary: Ezekiel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 129.

⁴ Consult the FAQ, "Leviticus 18:5."

⁵ Leslie C. Allen, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ezekiel 20-48*, Vol 29 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), pp 10-11.

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“make (profane) use of” (*CHALOT*).⁶ A variety of past incidents in the wilderness sojourn can be considered for Israel’s general rebellion against the Lord (cf. Numbers 10:11-14:35). But, that the Sabbath was violated during Israel’s trek, such as seen in the incident with the man gathering sticks (Numbers 15:32-36) or going out to collect manna on the Sabbath when there would be none (Exodus 16:22-30),⁷ needs to also be factored in. At the same time, Israel’s habit of disobeying something given to them by God *which was for its benefit*, continued well beyond the period of the Exodus and wilderness sojourn. Desecration, violation, or profanation of the Sabbath, is something which would hit hard at not just Israel’s relationship with God, but also with much of Israel’s intended purpose as being holy and distinct unto Him. As Christopher J.H. Wright astutely describes,

“The Sabbath was indeed a sign of the covenant, a memorial of both creation [Exod. 20:8-11] and redemption [Deut. 5:12-15]. The term included not only the weekly seventh day, but also the sabbatical and jubilee years [Exod. 23:10-11; Deut. 15; Lev. 25], and related economic institutions concerned with the relief of debt and slaves. It therefore had a vital role in the whole ethos of Israel’s social life. Deuteronomy 15 illustrates the central place that sabbatical institutions had in preserving the covenantal sense of justice and compassion in Israel’s economic structure...It reflected the total loss of Israel’s distinctive socio-economic system in the waves of oppression and exploitation that swamped the nation during the monarchy...Ezekiel telescopes history and traces Israel’s rejection of Yahweh’s laws and their desecration of the Sabbaths right back to the generation to whom they were first given.”⁸

Iain M. Duguid offers some further, critical thoughts, on the ancient importance of the Sabbath, and what abandonment of it would mean:

“With its one day in seven observance, the Sabbath cut across the nature-based calendars of the pagans, which revolved solely around phases of the moon and agricultural seasons. Indeed, it called God’s people to march to the beat of a different drum, as a mark of submission to their covenant overlord. It was a sign of their liberation from bondage (for slaves are not in control of their schedule) but also a sign of their distinctiveness from other nations who had not been similarly redeemed. To profane the Sabbath was to thus abandon an essential element of their distinctiveness as the people of the Lord and to attempt, in effect, to ‘become like the nations around us.’ It is to refuse to follow the example that God himself set in Genesis 2:1-4.”⁹

20:13b-14 Continuing in the historical overview, it is stated by God, “So I had thought to pour out My wrath upon them in the Wilderness, to make an end of them. But I acted for the sake of My Name, that it should not be desecrated in the eyes of the nations before whose eyes I had taken them out” (ATS). Profanation of the Sabbath is now mentioned right alongside of how severe the wilderness rebellion against the Lord was. Upon hearing the bad word of the ten spies, God actually did prepare to eliminate His people, and then start over again with the descendants of Moses:

“The LORD said to Moses, ‘How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst? I will smite them with pestilence and dispossess them, and I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they” (Numbers 14:11-12).

Moses is witnessed to have intervened on behalf of the Israelites, pleading with God about His own reputation, and what it would signal for Him to have delivered the people from the bondage of Egypt, to only annihilate them in the desert:

“But Moses said to the LORD, “Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for by Your strength You brought up this people from their midst, and they will tell *it* to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that You, O LORD, are in the midst of this people, for You, O LORD, are seen eye to eye,

⁶ *CHALOT*, 105.

⁷ Cf. Sarna, *Exodus*, pp 90-91.

⁸ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), pp 158-159.

⁹ Iain M. Duguid, *NIV Application Commentary: Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 261.

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while Your cloud stands over them; and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. Now if You slay this people as one man, then the nations who have heard of Your fame will say, "Because the LORD could not bring this people into the land which He promised them by oath, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness." But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, "The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth *generations*." Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now'" (Numbers 14:13-19; cf. Psalm 106:23-25).

20:15-17 The Lord did not annihilate Ancient Israel in the wilderness, but it is witnessed, "However, I swore to them in the wilderness that I would not bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, the fairest of all lands, which I had assigned to *them*" (v. 15, NJPS). The Exodus generation would die out and not enter into the Promised Land. Only Joshua and Caleb and the small children—who it was believed, albeit falsely, would be slaughtered upon entering into the Promised Land—will be those permitted by the Lord to finally enter it (Numbers 14:25-35). Deuteronomy 1:26-40 fully records,

"Yet you were not willing to go up, but rebelled against the command of the LORD your God; and you grumbled in your tents and said, 'Because the LORD hates us, He has brought us out of the land of Egypt to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites to destroy us. Where can we go up? Our brethren have made our hearts melt, saying, "The people are bigger and taller than we; the cities are large and fortified to heaven. And besides, we saw the sons of the Anakim there."' Then I said to you, "Do not be shocked, nor fear them. The LORD your God who goes before you will Himself fight on your behalf, just as He did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in the wilderness where you saw how the LORD your God carried you, just as a man carries his son, in all the way which you have walked until you came to this place." But for all this, you did not trust the LORD your God, who goes before you on *your* way, to seek out a place for you to encamp, in fire by night and cloud by day, to show you the way in which you should go. Then the LORD heard the sound of your words, and He was angry and took an oath, saying, "Not one of these men, this evil generation, shall see the good land which I swore to give your fathers, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh; he shall see it, and to him and to his sons I will give the land on which he has set foot, because he has followed the LORD fully." The LORD was angry with me also on your account, saying, "Not even you shall enter there. Joshua the son of Nun, who stands before you, he shall enter there; encourage him, for he will cause Israel to inherit it. Moreover, your little ones who you said would become a prey, and your sons, who this day have no knowledge of good or evil, shall enter there, and I will give it to them and they shall possess it. But as for you, turn around and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.'"

While a lack of faith in God's deliverance and protection was indeed a major part in why the Exodus generation was unable to enter into the Promised Land, another underlying cause is detailed by the Prophet Ezekiel. As the Lord states, "[All this] because they spurned My laws and did not follow My decrees and they desecrated My Sabbaths, because their heart kept going after their idols" (v. 16, ATS). Too many of the ways of Egypt dominated their thinking and conduct, causing them to reject the instruction and direction of the One God. Even with such rebellion and obstinance present in the hearts of the Exodus generation, God's mercy and grace prevailed: "Nevertheless my eye spared them, and I did not destroy them or make a full end of them in the wilderness" (v. 17, RSV).

20:18 An intriguing word appears in v. 18: "I said to their children in the wilderness, 'Do not follow the statutes of your parents or keep their laws or defile yourselves with their idols'" (TNIV). Here, the Hebrew *b'chuqei avoteikhem al-teileiku v'et-mishpetei'hem* (אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם אֶל־תֵּלְכוּ וְאֶת־מִשְׁפֵּטֵיהֶם) (בְּחֻקֵי) is indeed, "to-statutes-of fathers-of-you not you-follow or laws-of-them" (Kohlenberger).¹⁰ This presumably represents some kind of religious laws and statutes—notably **not** stated by God to be "My statutes" or "My ordinances"—which constituted either pagan practices the Exodus generation retained from Egypt, or alternatively an incorrect orientation toward God's practices so

¹⁰ Kohlenberger, 4:349.

that they would be perverted. The latter option would be epitomized by how it was said of the golden calf, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (Exodus 32:4).

20:19-20 The children of the Exodus generation were given an opportunity to not fall into the same mistake as their parents, as it is detailed, "I am *ADONAI* your God. Walk in My statutes, keep My ordinances and do them" (v. 19, TLV). There is a contrast with the first person possessive appearing in the terminology *b'chuqotai leiku v'et-mishpotai shimru* (בְּחֻקוֹתַי לִכְוּ וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי שִׁמְרוּ). Yet, the required obedience of the children of the Exodus generation, does not just involve God's instructions generally, as it specifically concerns, "Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God" (v. 20, NIV).

20:21-22 The children of the Exodus generation are described as not being that much better than their parents: "But the children rebelled against Me: they did not follow My laws and did not faithfully observe My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live; they profaned My sabbaths. Then I resolved to pour out My fury upon them, to vent all My anger upon them, in the wilderness" (v. 21, NJPS). This is commonly thought by Jewish commentators¹¹ to be the sin of Baal Peor:

"While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the LORD was angry against Israel. The LORD said to Moses, 'Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel.' So Moses said to the judges of Israel, 'Each of you slay his men who have joined themselves to Baal of Peor.' Then behold, one of the sons of Israel came and brought to his relatives a Midianite woman, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, while they were weeping at the doorway of the tent of meeting. When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he arose from the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand, and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and pierced both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman, through the body. So the plague on the sons of Israel was checked. Those who died by the plague were 24,000" (Numbers 25:1-9).

God's forbearance and mercy, in spite of further rebellion against Him, is noted: "I restrained My hand and acted for the sake of My Name, that it not be desecrated in the eyes of the nations before whose eyes I had taken them out" (v. 22, ATS). By this point in the wilderness sojourn, the Lord's actions with Israel are becoming known to many, so to terminate the population would give a totally wrong impression to the world at large of the character of this One God.

20:23-24 Because of the review of Israel's history here in the Exodus and wilderness sojourn, readers might need to remember that we are actually encountering a prophetic declaration from Ezekiel in Babylonian exile! Lamentably, Ezekiel has to state for the Lord, "I swore to them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them through the lands" (v. 23, NJPS). The promise of exile was indeed given to Ancient Israel *b'midbar* (בְּמִדְבָּר) or *before* the people ever entered into the Promised Land:

"The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD drives you" (Deuteronomy 4:27).

"Moreover, the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth; and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone, which you or your fathers have not known" (Deuteronomy 28:64).

"Therefore He swore to them that He would cast them down in the wilderness, and that He would cast their seed among the nations and scatter them in the lands (Psalm 106:26-27).

¹¹ Fisch, 125.

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The reason for this sure promise of future exile from the Promised Land of Israel, is “because they had not obeyed my laws but had rejected my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths, and their eyes lusted after their parents’ idols” (v. 24, TNIV). Rejection of God’s Instruction generally is not all that is seen; desecration of the Sabbath and acceptance of idolatry go together as a significant cause of sure calamity.

20:25-26 A huge amount of controversy surrounds Ezekiel’s claim in v. 25: “Therefore I also gave them statutes that were not good, and judgments by which they could not live” (LITV). This is specified to involve, as v. 26 appears in ATS, “I profaned them because of their gifts—of passing every firstborn [before Molech]—so that I might destroy them, so that they should know that I am HASHEM.”

It is indeed stated *v’gam-ani nattati l’hem chuqim lo tovim u’mishpatim lo yih’yu b’hem* (יהיו בהם לא ונגם-אני נתתי להם חקים לא טובים ומשפטים לא), “and-also I I-gave-over to-them statutes not good-ones and-laws not they-could-live by-them” (Kohlenberger).¹² Is what is stated here intended to actually be God’s Torah, or is some kind of other principle in view? Could this be God’s Torah as He originally intended it to be kept, but something that cannot be observed when sin enters in? Or, are these some kind of Biblical instructions misinterpreted and perverted, with the result being child sacrifice?

A widely liberal perspective on what is seen here is offered by Marvin A. Sweeney in *The Jewish Study Bible*:

“Since the people disobeyed God’s good laws, He gave them bad laws instead, exemplified by child sacrifice. Whether this is the way some Israelites interpreted Exod. 22.28; 34.19, and whether at an early point in Israelite religion sacrifice of the first-born was regularly practiced, is unclear. It seems, however, that some believed that God approved of child sacrifice (Deut. 12.29; Jer. 7.31; 19.5; 32.25). The notion that God misled the people so that He could then condemn them for it is found also in 14.9).”¹³

A lesser perspective is seen in the comments of Tuell:

“There is no ambiguity here. The plain meaning of the text is this: since the Israelites have repeatedly spurned God’s life-giving laws and statutes, the Lord has given them statutes that cannot lead them to life—that will, indeed, defile them, immerse them deeper in sin and guilt, and so lead them to death. Faithlessness and disobedience had brought Israel to this pass.”¹⁴

Child sacrifice—be it to Molech or to some other Canaanite or Ancient Near Eastern deity—is **nowhere approved by God, and certainly it is nowhere commanded by God**. Deuteronomy 18:10 declares, “There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer.” More interpreters than not have taken vs. 25-26 to represent a sinful and rebellious Ancient Israel being turned over to laws and statutes, which would deliberately condemn them. The 1984 NIV rendering is reflective of this: “I also gave them over to statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by.” Child sacrifice could have been a perverted and twisted interpretation—via the influence of Israel’s pagan neighbors—of Torah instructions being thought to actually require one’s firstborn human child being killed (cf. Exodus 22:29¹⁵; Numbers 18:15¹⁶).

¹² Kohlenberger, 4:349.

¹³ Marvin A. Sweeney, “Ezekiel,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 1078.

¹⁴ Tuell, 130.

¹⁵ “You shall not delay *the offering from* your harvest and your vintage. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to Me” (Exodus 22:29).

¹⁶ “Every first issue of the womb of all flesh, whether man or animal, which they offer to the LORD, shall be yours; nevertheless the firstborn of man you shall surely redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem” (Numbers 18:15).

That child sacrifice was witnessed during the history of the Southern Kingdom, is a difficult fact to avoid (2 Kings 16:3¹⁷; 21:6¹⁸; 23:10¹⁹).

It is hardly a surprise, that among all of the out-of-the-ordinary things the Prophet Ezekiel was directed to do by God, that “Moreover, I gave them laws that were not good and rules by which they could not live” (v. 25, NJPS), should be properly recognized as shock language. God’s commandments were actually intended to bring a blessed, high quality of life for those who observed them (vs. 11, 13, 21). But, when people have reached an unbelievably high quotient of sin, such instructions can be hopelessly perverted and God will turn people over to what they crave. V. 25 notably does not label anything as “My statutes” or “My ordinances,” per what has just been witnessed in v. 18.

As is compiled in the quotations below, Ezekiel commentators will frequently agree that vs. 25-26 does not depict God’s good commandments as causing death to enter in, but rather that God has allowed His rebellious people to be turned over to their perversion of His Instruction and/or the introduction of pagan laws and statutes:

- Charles H. Dyer: “It is better to see the ‘statutes’ and ‘laws’ (Ezek. 20:25) as commandments of the pagan religions to which Israel had turned.”²⁰
- John B. Taylor: “[T]he law of redemption [allows for] a substitute or ransom-price [to] be provided for first-born children (Ex 22:29; Nu. 18:15ff.). But the occasional continuance of child-sacrifice was probably due to a misinterpretation of this law, and so Ezekiel could imply that God has ultimately made it so.”²¹
- John Goldingay: “While it might have seemed perverse of the people to understand such a command to require literal fulfillment, other peoples’ practice of child sacrifice might make this seem quite a plausible understanding. Yahweh’s command thus brought death, not life. Paul will in due course reckon this to be true of all God’s commandments.”²²
- Peter C. Craigie: “In part, Ezekiel’s perspective on this commandment is to be interpreted within the context of divine providence; there is nothing that is done that does not somehow, albeit mysteriously, come under the divine providence. But there is more than the mystery of providence in this passage. Ezekiel implies that one of the commandments of God was interpreted by Israel to establish the practice of child sacrifice...{quoting Exodus 22:29}...Taken in context, of course, the verse does not command child sacrifice; animals were sacrificed in place of children. But to twisted minds, already warped by the powerful influences of the pagan religion which they so frequently espoused, the command could take on a completely different light. And so the horrifying picture emerges of worshippers devoutly sacrificing children, deceiving themselves in the belief that they were fulfilling the intent of the divine law.”²³
- Daniel I. Block: “Interpreted at face value, these verses create horrifying and intolerable theological problems. How could Yahweh, the gracious covenant God, be portrayed as granting his people ‘bad’ laws that would not result in life? Even more unconscionable, how could he defile the nation by demanding of them their

¹⁷ “But [Ahaz] walked in the way of the kings of Israel, and even made his son pass through the fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had driven out from before the sons of Israel” (2 Kings 16:3).

¹⁸ “[Manasseh] made his son pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and used divination, and dealt with mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD provoking Him to anger” (2 Kings 21:6).

¹⁹ “[Josiah] also defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter pass through the fire for Molech” (2 Kings 23:10).

²⁰ Charles H. Dyer, “Ezekiel,” in *BKCOT*, 1265.

²¹ John B. Taylor, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Ezekiel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1969), 159.

²² John Goldingay, “Ezekiel,” in *ECB*, pp 640-641.

²³ Peter C. Craigie. *Daily Study Bible Series: Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 149.

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firstborn, offered up as child sacrifices, so he could destroy them? Students of Scripture have struggled with these problems through the centuries....[T]he prophet leaves several clues that these 'bad laws' are not to be identified with either the laws of the firstborn given in Egypt or the Sinai revelation. First, they are given to the second generation of freed Israelites. Second, within this panel they are separated from references to laws that could be construed as Sinaitic and designed to produce life (vv. 19-21a) by the threat and retraction of divine wrath (vv. 21-22). Third, they present a contradiction to those laws so fundamental that any member in his audience would probably have dismissed these utterances as another sign of the prophet's irrationality. Fourth, as many have noted, Ezekiel betrays his rhetorical intent by altering the form of his term for decrees. Whereas elsewhere he always refers to Yahweh's normative decrees with the normal feminine plural *huqqôt*, here he employs the masculine form (*huqqîm*, signaling to hearer and reader a special nuance."²⁴

- Leslie C. Allen: "Elsewhere in the Old Testament הַקִּיָּה and הַקִּיָּם 'rulings' are used interchangeably, and הַקִּיָּם is used of divine rulings in Ezek 11:12; 36:27. However, a careful reading of the present oracle discloses that while elsewhere in it הַקִּיָּה is used alongside מִשְׁפָּטִים 'standards' with the first singular suffixes relating to Yahweh, here not only is הַקִּיָּם used but both terms lack such a suffix. It seems to be significant too that הַקִּיָּה has been used in v 18 concerning self-made rulings that Israel had substituted for Yahweh's and persisted in observing...Here was a comparable set of rulings independent of Yahweh's positive will and yet enclosed within the purview of his punitive will. Not of God, they were given by God! Theologically the divine policy is akin to the role of prophecy in Isa 6:9-10, where the prophetic word is given to seal the people's fate by giving them an opportunity to add to their sin by rejecting that word...[Ezekiel] regarded pagan rites introduced into Israelite religion as a destructive course into which the people had locked themselves—and even been locked by God in the playing out of his negative role (vv 25, 26)."²⁵

The Targum of this verse actually interpreted Ezekiel's word as regarding those who were turned over to various Rabbinical rules of little or no value:

"Since they had rebelled against My Memra, and did not wish to listen to My prophets, I removed them and delivered them into the hand of their enemies; they followed their stupid inclination and they obeyed religious decrees which were not proper and laws by which they could not survive."²⁶

More consistent with the actual tenor of "I also gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live" (v. 25), is how this statement of the Prophet Ezekiel should be read in concert with the further words of the Apostle Paul, and how God will turn fallen humanity over to its base sins and lusts:

"Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them...For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural...And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper" (Romans 1:25, 26, 28).²⁷

²⁴ Daniel I. Block, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp 637, 640.

²⁵ Allen, pp 12, 16.

²⁶ Cited in Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 638.

²⁷ Consult the FAQ, "Romans 1:26-27."

Ezekiel 20:12-26 Sabbath and Rest in the Tanach

It should be rightfully concluded that a **perversion of the dedication of the firstborn seen in the Torah** (Exodus 22:9), which called for an actual sacrifice of a firstborn human child—via the influence of Israel’s pagan neighbors—is **what is intended by vs. 25-26**. This is something which can be viewed as “statutes” and “ordinances” which the Ancient Israelites encountered very early on, as the people entered into the Promised Land, and child sacrifice was witnessed as being practiced by the Canaanites. The history of the Tanach does bear out how various Israelites, even if in isolated incidents at first (i.e. Judges 11), did sacrifice their firstborn. *The Prophet Ezekiel now recalls how this became something to which much of the population would be given over.*

It cannot be overlooked how in later centuries, vs. 25-26 would be misinterpreted and misapplied by various ancient Christians, not just as a means to dismiss God’s Torah as somehow being bad, but also to promote anti-Semitism. Wright correctly concludes that a misinterpretation of God’s Instruction is what Ezekiel was speaking against:

“Early Christian interpretation seized on these verses as polemic against the Jews, claiming that they showed that the law itself was not good and not life-giving. Modern critics have seized on them as evidence that child sacrifice was once an officially accepted rite within Yahwism. Both misinterpretations ignore the fact that Ezekiel is being horrendously controversial in this whole chapter, creating a rhetorical parody of Israel’s history in order to highlight its worst side. In a context of such sustained sarcasm and irony, we cannot suddenly take a verse like this as a face-value doctrinal or historical affirmation.

“It is impossible to imagine, in the light of his overwhelming emphasis on the goodness and importance of God’s law and on the horrific evil of child sacrifice, that Ezekiel could have seriously meant that Yahweh himself gave bad laws and commanded human sacrifice...Israel had turned God’s law upside down and rejected it, so that it *became for them* ‘not-good’ and a source of death, not life. They had gone in for child sacrifice *as if* God had required it, perhaps even portraying it as part of the law of Yahweh. So Ezekiel portrays Yahweh as letting them do so—ending up in their own defilement and destruction.”²⁸

Ezekiel 20:12-26 application The prophetic word delivered by Ezekiel in 20:12-26 depicts some very significant sins and offenses committed by Ancient Israel against God. Whether it be the rebellion in the wilderness, or the child sacrifice practiced in the Promised Land—the fact that it would not be until the Babylonian exile that the full brunt of God’s indicated punishment would be realized, serves as proof of how longsuffering and merciful He is. Peter C. Craigie addresses how scenes like this from past history have much to tell people about a possible future onto which they could embark:

“The Israelites deserved to remain in Egypt, but God delivered them in any case for the sake of his own name and reputation. He gave them laws by which to live and a sabbath on which to rest, but they rejected the laws and profaned the sabbath. Again, God contemplated leaving this group of thankless refugees in the wilderness, but again he relented. He warned a new generation of the failure of their fathers and made crystal clear the condition for the future of the covenant. But the new generation was no better than the last, rejecting the commandments and profaning the sabbath; indeed, they were worse than their predecessors, for they compounded their evil in failing to have learned from history....History is often less valuable in explaining the past than it is in indicating a direction for the future. It is one thing to know why we are where we are; it is another thing to know what we must do to move in a new direction, to create a new kind of history.”²⁹

Many evangelical Christian readers of Ezekiel 20:12-26 will see and probably make some connections between the abomination of child sacrifice and the modern genocide of abortion. They might make associations between how the laws of countries like the United States, while originally intending to provide freedom, liberty, and protection to its citizens—can be turned against them and perverted, permitting the slaughter of the unborn. *Certainly, God has been unbelievably patient with America for sins such as abortion.* The prevention of God’s judgment on a country like the United States, and its legalization of abortion, requires not just the fervent prayers and

²⁸ Wright, *Ezekiel*, 160.

²⁹ Craigie, *Ezekiel*, pp 146, 147.

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intercession of righteous men and women—but also the proper education of God’s own, as it pertains to a respect for the life of the unborn, respect for the human body, and a proper handle on human sexuality.

It is sad, though, that while many evangelical Believers will rightly plead for the cause of the unborn, that many will not plead for any cause so that God’s people might have a higher view of His Torah or Law, and institutions such as the Sabbath—which was given by Him so that His own might experience a high quality of life on Earth!³⁰ *A world where the Sabbath is observed by God’s people, is a better world.* This is a world where God’s own dedicate a complete day to Him, focusing on Him, His Word, and what He has done for them. Thankfully, via the emergence of the Messianic movement in our day, we are beginning to see some traces of that world manifest in our congregations and fellowships—with the full ramifications of Ezekiel 20:12-26, where God’s Instruction *and* Sabbath are honored, taking shape.

³⁰ Cf. Charles L. Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel: The Glory of The Lord* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 110 demonstrates some of the dispensational roots of early Messianic Judaism, even issuing some negative conclusions about the Sabbath not actually being rooted in the Genesis narrative of Creation.