

Leviticus 23:1-3

“The Sabbath as an Appointed Time”

“The LORD spoke again to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘The LORD’s appointed times which you shall proclaim as holy convocations—My appointed times are these: For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest, a holy convocation. You shall not do any work; it is a sabbath to the LORD in all your dwellings.’”

Leviticus 23 tends to be approached as the main body of Torah instruction detailing and codifying the appointed times or *moedim* (מוֹעֲדִים). Yet what is interesting about this passage, is that it does not start with describing the festivals of Passover or Unleavened Bread (23:3-8), but instead begins with an emphasis on the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת). Many Messianic people consider and reckon *Shabbat* among the *moedim* or appointed times, but various Jewish interpreters have not reckoned *Shabbat* to be among the appointed times.

Is the Sabbath actually one of the appointed times, or is the Sabbath to be regarded as something independent of them? Will weekly observance of the seventh-day Sabbath naturally lead one to keeping the annual appointed times? Or, is the Sabbath, while being related to the appointed times, its own institution—highlighting the seventh day as being slightly more important than annual holidays? The Sabbath is notably an institution based in Creation (Genesis 2:1-3), whereas the appointed times are based in God’s salvation historical activities for Israel.

23:1-2 Who are the appointed times to be observed by? It is stated, “Then ADONAI spoke to Moses saying: Speak to *Bnei-Yisrael*, and tell them” (vs. 1-2a, TLV). English versions variably render *bnei Yisrael* (בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) as “sons of Israel” (NASU), “people of Israel” (RSV/NRSV/ESV), “Children of Israel” (ATS), and “Israelites” (NIV). It is safe to say that the *bnei Yisrael* are not exclusively male Israelites, and that female Israelites are also intended. But what about the various non-Israelite sojourners, who recognized Israel’s God? Are they directed this instruction also, with *bnei Yisrael* serving to represent the broad, general community? Previous instruction has indeed prescribed that the sojourner in Ancient Israel was to have a Sabbath rest (Exodus 20:8-11), and it would be very hard to say that a sojourner in Ancient Israel would not be affected by the annual appointed times. Baruch A. Levine, interestingly enough, indicates that “The sacred occasions, the Sabbaths and festivals, are to be observed by all the people; they are not merely of concern to the priesthood nor relevant solely to the sacrificial cult of the sanctuary.”¹

Interestingly enough, another view of who the *bnei Yisrael* are, is detectable from liberal commentators committed to the JEDP documentary hypothesis, where the material seen in the Book of Leviticus is concluded to originate from P or the so-called Priestly writer. Jacob Milgrom is one who states, “These instructions are addressed to the **people of Israel**, i.e. the lay farmers, rather than to the priests.”² Samuel E. Balentine represents a slightly toned down approach, in his words, “The instructions concerning ‘holy convocations’ are addressed not to the priests, as in the previous pericope (21:1, 16: 22:2), but to the laity (v. 2)...Clearly the priests are also indispensable for this worship, but ultimately only the people can translate worship into faithful living.”³

Continuing in v. 2b, readers encounter the Divine word, “These are My fixed times, the fixed times of the LORD, which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions” (NJPS). It is true that while intended for those who compose the community of Israel, that the text labels them as *moa’dei ADONAI* (מוֹעֲדֵי יְהוָה), “HASHEM’s appointed festivals” (ATS), certainly an indicator that however one reckons these appointed times, **the attention is to be placed upon the God who established them and the veneration He is due**—and much less upon the people and the self-gratification they may have by their keeping them. While the Sabbath is listed in v. 3 following, Jewish

¹ Baruch A. Levine, *JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 154.

² Jacob Milgrom, “The Book of Leviticus,” in Charles M. Laymon, ed., *Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 81.

³ Balentine, 173.

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commentators have tended to conclude that the Sabbath is not, in fact, to be regarded as one of the appointed times, but is instead an institution independent of them. As is noted by the *Soncino Chumash*,

"The Sabbath is not included among *the appointed seasons of the LORD* and so verse 4 repeats the phrase. The reason is that the Sabbath is a day fixed by God, whereas the actual date for the observance of the festivals had to await the proclamation of the Sanhedrin."⁴

Mainly, because Leviticus 23:4 later states, "These are the appointed times of the LORD, holy convocations which you shall proclaim at the times appointed for them," with the Passover listed in Leviticus 23:5, it is concluded that the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* sits independent of the annual *moedim*. Levine also concludes that the Sabbath is not to be reckoned as a specific *moed* (מועד):

"There is...a problem in using the term *mo'ed* with reference to the Sabbath. Elsewhere in the ritual legislation it usually designates an annual occurrence. A *mo'ed* occurs at the same time each year; its annual date must be 'fixed.' There is, however, no need to 'fix' the time of the Sabbath, which is not, strictly speaking, a calendrical phenomenon."⁵

Today's Messianic people might not generally be inclined to *declassify* the seventh-day Sabbath from among the *moedim* or appointed times. Still, that Jewish interpreters do not often consider the Sabbath as an appointed time, **and instead as the Sabbath being a unique institution**, should be a point well taken.

23:3 The Sabbath, which all are agreed prefaces the annual appointed times, is a weekly occurrence: "Six days shall tasks be done, and on the seventh day, an absolute sabbath, a sacred convocation. No task you shall do. It is a sabbath for the LORD in all your dwelling places" (Alter). It is interesting that among Leviticus commentaries, both Jewish and Christian, that particular terms and clauses have generated some very compelling observations—to be surely considered by anyone wanting to appreciate (or reappraise) the seventh-day Sabbath.

The Sabbath is to be a time on which *melakhah* (מלאכה), "occupation, work" (BDB),⁶ is prohibited. Even though he is committed to the JEDP documentary hypothesis, attributing the material of Leviticus to a presumed Priestly source, John E. Hartley does still usefully summarize how the Bible itself is widely silent on what composes such "work." He concludes that this silence should be taken as God allowing His people to make the proper decisions and value judgments, per their varied contexts:

"It is amazing that nowhere does the priestly legislation have specific laws as to what kinds of work are forbidden or even any guidelines as to how much effort may be spent before it qualifies as work. This is more amazing in light of the numerous laws on the Sabbath in rabbinic writings. This fact teaches that God prefers to give his people principles to live by and let them fill in the details. This, of course, gives the law an enduring quality that allows it to be applicable to a variety of cultural contexts amidst the changing times. From the Pentateuch it is discovered that the kinds of work not permitted on the Sabbath included plowing and harvesting (Exod 34:21), preparing food by baking and boiling (Exod 16:23), making a fire (Exod 35:3), and gathering of wood (Num 15:32-36). In Jer 17:21 carrying loads was forbidden, and according to Amos 8:5 and Neh 13:15-21, buying and selling were outlawed."⁷

The seventh day is labeled to be a *Shabbat Shabbaton* (שַׁבְּתָה שְׁבֻחוֹת), "a sabbath of complete rest" (NJPS), "a *Shabbat* of solemn rest" (TLV), "a day of complete rest" (ATS). The *ArtScroll Chumash* commentary draws attention to how observance of the weekly Sabbath is interconnected with observance of the annual appointed times:

"The Sabbath is mentioned with the festivals to teach that anyone who desecrates the festivals is regarded as if he had desecrated the Sabbath, and anyone who observes the festivals is regarded

⁴ Cohen, *Chumash*, 749.

⁵ Levine, 154.

⁶ BDB, 521.

⁷ Hartley, *Leviticus*, pp 375-376.

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as if he had observed the Sabbath. The festivals, as days of rest, fall under the category of the Sabbath, because it is the holiest and primary day of rest (*Rashi*, as explained by *Gur Aryeh*).⁸

The Sabbath is intended to be a *migra-qodesh* (מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ), “a day of sacred assembly” (NIV). While people are to rest from their labors on the Sabbath for certain, the Sabbath being a holy convocation would certainly lend support for God’s people corporately gathering together for times of prayer, worship, and teaching. *IVPBBBC* concurs that some kind of corporate gathering times were present within the world of Ancient Israel:

“Sacred assemblies or proclamations were an important part of most religious practice in the ancient world. They refer to local or national gatherings for public, corporate worship. The people were summoned together away from their occupational work. Aside from performance of corporate *rituals, it is unclear what took place at these gatherings. In later times they were used for public readings, but evidence for this on all such occasions in the early periods is lacking (see Deut 31:10-13). This passage is the only reference to these gatherings in association with the sabbath.”⁹

R. Laird Harris similarly describes how the Sabbath for Ancient Israel was a time for worship and teaching:

“There is an emphasis here that the Israelite rested at home. There were special offerings given in the tabernacle (e.g., a double burnt offering), but the ordinary Israelite and his whole family rested. Presumably here was an opportunity for family worship and instruction in the law of God, but this is not specifically enjoined. What a boon a weekly rest must have been to the ancient laborer and farmer in his weary round of toil! The Sabbath was a great blessing.”¹⁰

That the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* was not to be something limited to any geographic location, is witnessed in how it was to be kept *b'kol moshvoteykhem* (בְּכֹל מוֹשְׁבוֹתֵיכֶם), “in all your dwelling places.” Levine indicates how “This stipulation occurs frequently in the ritual legislation. It emphasizes the fact that the Sabbath is to be observed by the community of Israelites in their houses and is not solely a celebration to take place in the sanctuary.”¹¹ The *Soncino Chumash* goes further, noting this to be “Both in the land of Israel and the diaspora, and whether at home or on a journey.”¹² The Sabbath is something to be observed wherever one may “dwell.”

Leviticus 23:1-3 application The weekly Sabbath, and the annual appointed times which follow, are to perform an important part of how those who observe them perceive God—God as Creator who wants His people to rest, and God as Deliverer who has provided salvation for His own. Gordon J. Wenham has concluded,

“Through this elaborate system of feasts and sabbatical years the importance of the sabbath was underlined. Through sheer familiarity the weekly sabbath could come to be taken for granted. But these festivals and sabbatical years constituted major interruptions to daily living and introduced an element of variety into the rhythm of life. In this way they constantly reminded the Israelite what God had done for him, and that in observing the sabbath he was imitating his Creator, who rested on the seventh day.”¹³

The seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* is a regular reminder for who God is every week, and so the intention of some to not associate the Sabbath as being among the *moedim*—but instead its own institution that functions in tandem with the annual appointments—can be appreciated with what it is intended to convey. As Oswald T. Allis has said, “while the sabbath is a holy convocation, it differs from the other set feasts...in the fact that it is observed weekly while they are annual. In

⁸ Scherman, *Chumash*, 683.

⁹ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 137.

¹⁰ Harris, in *EXP*, 2:623.

¹¹ Levine, 155.

¹² Cohen, *Chumash*, 750.

¹³ Gordon J. Wenham, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp 301-302.

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this we have also a definite indication that the regular, frequently occurring, weekly sabbath was intended to be a holier day than any of the set feasts.”¹⁴

All too frequently, the attention of God’s people tends to be on the holiness of various annual holidays, and not on the weekly Sabbath. In fact, attendance at congregational events held during holidays such as Passover, *Yom Teruah/Rosh HaShanah*, or *Yom Kippur* tends to be much higher in Jewish synagogues and in Messianic congregations, than on the weekly Sabbath! Yet, if the Sabbath is not reckoned among the annual appointed times, **its importance is only highlighted, not diminished.**

The institution of the Sabbath, and the intended rest from labor and refreshment it offers, is something which is a basic need of all human beings. R.K. Harrison properly directs, “A rest interval of one day in seven seems admirably suited to the needs of the human body. Intervals of greater or lesser extent have been tried from time to time, but they have not proved as successful as the biblical sabbath.”¹⁵ Many of us in our own lives may have tried to rest at multiple times during a week, once every five days, once every six days—or even something as ridiculous as working for seven days and then resting for three days—but the interval in one day in seven is what will actually provide the useful balance between accomplishing work and being physically and mentally rejuvenated. In the rightful estimation of Walter C. Kaiser, “The sabbath is ever to be valued as the grandest solemnity in the worship of God. Since it is not to be eclipsed or supplanted in the future, it is given pride of place in the list of sacred assemblies.”¹⁶

Many people in today’s Messianic community—even with a diversity of Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds—can all attest to the great blessing it is to keep the weekly Sabbath. While there are doubtlessly still lessons to be learned regarding appreciation of *Shabbat*—including having a reverence for activities on the weekly Sabbath that would be similar to the annual appointed times—*Shabbat* is something that each of us indeed tends to welcome, when Friday evening arrives!

¹⁴ Oswalt T. Allis, “Leviticus,” in *NBCR*, 161-162

Ibid., 162 where he goes on to reflect a fairly typical, evangelical Christian position on the status of the seventh-day Sabbath in the post-resurrection era:

“Yet in the history of the church there has been a strong tendency, as there is today, to stress the importance of special occasions and to minimize that of the Lord’s day, the first day of the week which is the only holy day expressly sanctioned in the NT.”

¹⁵ Harrison, *Leviticus*, 216.

Ibid., pp 215-216 speaks against any connection between the Hebrew *Shabbat* and Mesopotamian *Shabattu* (also Harris, in *EXP*, 2:622-623; Walter C. Kaiser, “The Book of Leviticus,” in *NIB*, 1:1157), summarizes the development of Sabbath observance in the post-exilic period, and then the Christian observance of Sunday activities.

Tidball, pp 272-273 goes further in summarizing the Christian observance of Sunday activities.

¹⁶ Kaiser, in *NIB*, 1:1157.