

KEEP HOLY THE SABBATH DAY:
Exodus (20: 8-11) versus Deuteronomy (5: 12-15)

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This paper is an exercise in the intertextual study of two parallel pericopes in the Old Testament – the covenant directives concerning the Sabbath as found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. For the convenience of the reader, the selected passages are depicted in parallel form at Annex A.

In examining the two pericopes, there are, as is to be expected, a number of similarities, and instances of the text being exactly repeated. However, there are also a number of differences, and it is these that will be the focus of this paper. An examination of the additions to and deletions from the Exodus text by the writer(s) of Deuteronomy and

Exodus reads “Remember to keep holy the sabbath day” (Ex 20:8); whereas the Deuteronomy account says “Take care to keep holy the sabbath day, and adds the emphasis, “ as the Lord, your God commanded you” (Deut 5:12). The phrase “take care’ is likely a stylistic difference, but the added phrase begs explanation.

The text at Exodus (20:9) and Deuteronomy (5:13) is identical, and requires no explanation. However, there are substantive differences in the balance of the text of the two pericopes.

In discussing the prohibition against work on the Sabbath, the account in Deuteronomy (5:14) adds a number of items to that found in Exodus (20:10); apparently for clarity, and emphasis. It is not only forbidden for you

and your son to work, but your daughter, and your slaves whether male or female. Moreover, it is not just your beast who may not work, but beasts (plural); and specifically, not your ox or your ass. A further addition is that your male and female slave should rest as you do.

The remaining text illustrates substantive differences. Deuteronomy (5:15) begins with the admonition, 'For remember that you too were once slaves in Egypt, and the Lord, your God, brought you from there with his strong hand and outstretched arm.' There is no parallel for this whatsoever in the passage from Exodus. The sentence, 'In six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them; but on the seventh day he rested.' (Ex 20:11), has been redacted completely from the account in Deuteronomy. Finally, the last sentence of the Exodus pericope, 'That is why the Lord has blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.' (20:11), has been strengthened into an injunction in Deuteronomy, '...the Lord, your God, has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day'. (Deut 5:15) Moreover, it acquired added emphasis through the addition of the phrase "your God".

Nearly 600 years separate the events in Exodus from the time of Deuteronomy.¹ During that time Israel reached its zenith under the kingship of Solomon. It began to collapse following his death. The ten northern tribes broke away, and formed their own kingdom; which later fell to the Assyrians.²

¹ Lawrence Boadt, "Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction", (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 176

² Boadt, 294

During the intervening years, the kings and the people broke their covenant with their God, and disobeyed his laws.

The book of Deuteronomy was written, after the fall of the Northern Kingdom, by a group of priests, Levites and prophets whose intention was to reform the many bad practices of the faith in Judah.³ Their purpose was to offer hope to a discouraged seventh century Israel, and a new chance to obey the covenant.⁴ The Deuteronomy pericope reflects the purpose for which the book was written. The passage is more directive and explicit. The “wriggle room” was removed by the inclusion of daughters and slaves to the list of people who were not to work on the Sabbath. Similarly, the ox and ass were added to the list of beasts which were not to work. The seriousness which the writers attached to this observance is underscored by the fact it is twice stated that the Lord ‘commanded’ the observance of the Sabbath day (Deut 5: 12, 15). Moreover, the Israelites are reminded that it was through God’s grace that they were delivered from the Egyptians.

The changes in the text from Exodus to Deuteronomy shifts the earlier record of the covenant from a position of absolutely controlling and dominating authority, while not denying it. Thereby, it permits the restatement of the covenant to one more clearly defining the obligations of the people under the law. The statement of the covenant was strengthened by this process to meet the needs of a different time, and a new generation.

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³ Boadt, 95

⁴ *ibid*, 193

Annex A

EXODUS 20 8-11

Remember to keep holy the sabbath day.
(20:8}

Six days you may labour and do all your work, (20;9)
but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord, your God. No work may be done either by you, or your son, or your male or female slave, or your beast, or by the alien who lives with you. (20:10)

In six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord has blessed the sabbath day and made it holy. (20:11)

DEUTERONOMY 5: 12-15

Take care to keep holy the sabbath day as the Lord, your God, commanded you. (5: 12)

Six days you may labour; and do all your work; (5:13)
but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord, your God. No work may be done then, whether by you, or your son or daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your ass, or any of your beasts, or the alien who lives with you. Your male and female slave should rest as you do. (5;14)

For remember that you too were once slaves in Egypt, and the Lord, your God, brought you from there with his strong hand and outstretched arm.

That is why the Lord, your God, has commanded you to observe the sabbath day. (5:15}

Source: The New American Bible