

The Biblical Sabbatical Year and Its Implications for Ecology: An Exegesis of Exodus 23:10-11

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Abstract: Exod 23:10-12 enjoins Israel to keep both a seventh-year Sabbath and a seventh-day Sabbath. The juxtaposition of these two Sabbaths in the text suggests a connection between the Sabbath and ecology, since rest and nourishment are required both the land and its inhabitants (i.e., humans and beasts). This article exegetically analyzes Exod 23:10-12 and suggests some possible ecological implications. Accordingly, it is argued that while the biblical sabbatical year seems to have required a rest for the whole land—a practice which may seem impossible today—in modern times heavily cultivated portions of land could be allowed to lie fallow. Instead of overusing particular portions of land with the aid of agro-chemicals, farming systems such as land rotation could fruitfully be practiced. Such a practice may not only allow cultivable lands regain fertility, it may also contribute towards the sustenance of the wild including endangered species. This study may be particularly useful in the African context.

Key words: Sabbatical, ecology, land, cultivation, trees.

1. Introduction

In the Old Testament, the Sabbath has interesting links with ecology. God crowns his creation with the Sabbath (Gen 2:1-3) and subsequently instructs Israel to keep the weekly Sabbath as a reminder both of creation and a day of rest for creation (Exod 20:8-11). This connection between the Sabbath and ecology is highlighted in the injunctions relating to the sabbatical and jubilee years (Exod 23:10-11; Lev 25:1-12; Deut 15:1-18). Besides its instructive social dimensions, the sabbatical/jubilee year was a period when the cultivable land could lie fallow and the beasts of the field feed from the aftergrowth of the field. This article focuses on the sabbatical year, particularly as found in Exod 23:10-11. After a brief overview of the concept of the sabbatical year, the paper analyzes Exod 23:10-11 exegetically and then draws pertinent ecological implications from the text.

2. Materials

Apart from Exod 23, the concept of the sabbatical year occurs twice in the Pentateuch (Lev 25:1-12; Deut 15:1-18). In Lev 25, the elements of the sabbatical year include the following: (1) “the land itself must observe a Sabbath” (v. 2); (2) there was to be no regular harvest-gathering activity during the year (vv. 4-5,11); (3) the produce of the land that year was for all: the owner, the poor, and the animals (vv. 6-7); (4) the jubilee year injunction included all the elements of sabbatical year as well as release of property and slaves (vv. 8-55; cf. Exod 21:2-6). In Deuteronomy, the sabbatical year involved (1) the cancellation of debts (or release of loan pledges?) as a means of poverty alleviation (15:1-11); (2) release of Hebrew slaves (15:12-18; cf. Exod 21:2-6; Jer 34:8-11) and (3) the reading of the Law (Deut 31:1-13). These regulations are based on the premise that “the land is mine and you are aliens and sojourners with me” (Lev 25:23). Taken together, the sabbatical laws constituted a viable approach to socio-economic well-being as well as environmental sustainability.

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Scholars have speculated the origin of the sabbatical year, with some pointing to the seven-year cycle of fallow land for agricultural productivity found at Ugarit (i.e., the triumph of Baal) [1]. Occasions of slave release and remission of debts are also found in Mesopotamia, during which the king declared liberty often in second year after his accession [2]. While broad parallels may obtain in the ANE (Ancient Near East), the unique characteristics of the Israelite practice disallow direct connection with the wider ANE practice. As the text suggests, the sabbatical-year law was given to the Israelites in the Wilderness [3, 4]. Like others, this regulation was intended to be observed after the settlement of Israel in Canaan.

Exod 23 is basically a legal material that can further be divided into four units: laws bordering on justice and integrity (vv. 1-9), sabbatical regulation (vv. 10-12), annual feasts (vv. 14-17), and injunctions to obey and follow Yahweh (vv. 13,18-33). The sabbatical regulation (vv. 10-12), the focus of this study, begins by enjoining the people of Israel to cultivate the land and gather its produce for six years (v. 10). The land, however, is to lie fallow in the seventh year, and during this fallow period the poor people and the beasts of the field may eat from the aftergrowth (v. 11; cf. Lev 25:6). While vv. 10-11 deal with a seventh-year Sabbath for the land, v. 12 relates to a seventh-day Sabbath for the people, a Sabbath day during which man and beast alike should *nuakh* “rest” and *naphash* “be refreshed”. The juxtaposition of these two kinds of Sabbath further brings to the fore the idea that the Sabbath has ecological undertones [5].

Exod 23:10-11 reads, “You shall sow your land for six years and gather in its yield, but on the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the needy of your people may eat; and whatever they leave the beast of the field may eat. You are to do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove” (New America Standard Version). In the MT (Masoretic Text), the text is devoid of syntactical difficulties.

Semantically, *tizra* “you shall sow” and *saphta* “you shall gather” are unambiguous, referring to the normal agricultural cycle of planting and reaping respectively. A few words, however, deserve attention. The referent of *artseka* “your land” has been debated: Is it the individual’s field or the land of Canaan as a whole? Wright [3] has suggested that in Exod 23 there seems to be a suggestion of a rotation system (cf. “your land”) but that in Lev 25 it becomes a single fallow year for the whole land [6] (cf. “the land”). On the contrary, Chirichigino [7] argues that the text suggests a universal fallow, not a rotation, so that “the thrust of the sabbatical year seems to have been the universal observance of the same year, rather than a rotation system” [1]. It is to be noted further that “your land” is usually corporate in the Pentateuch (Exod 34:24; Deut 19:2, 10; 28:12,24,52). More important, however, is the fact that Exod 23 addresses Israel as a whole and throughout the passage only the second person singular pronominal suffix is used. Consequently, there is no grammatical support for the argument that “your land” refers to the individual’s crop field. Like *artseka* “your land,” *karmeka* “your vineyard” and *zeteka* “you olive grove” should also be understood corporately, namely all fields and gardens throughout the land of Israel (cf. Lev 25:20-22). The word *ebyon* “poor” has been understood to mean “the landless” (cf. Lev 25:6) [1, 5]. While the parallel text of Lev 25:6 has “servants”, “hired”, “foreigners”, and “aliens” instead of “poor”, *ebyon* in Exod 23:11 does not need to be equated with “the landless” (cf. v. 6).

Two key verbs are used in Exod 23:11: *shamat* and *natash*. The verb *shamat* and its cognates may mean “release, remit” (Deut 15:2; 31:10-11), “loosen” (2 Sam 6:6; Jer 17:4), “throw down, let drop” (2 Kgs 9:3). It occurs in Deut 15:1-3 and 31:10-11 in reference to the “remission” of pledges for debt (cf. Exod 21:7). In Exod 23:11, *shamat* seems to connote a twofold “remission”: (1) refraining from cultivation so as to let the land enjoy its Sabbath and (2) refraining from gathering/reaping the aftergrowth, thereby

“letting it drop” for the poor as well as beasts of the field. On the whole, it appears that the “remission” conveyed by *shamat* takes more of a temporary character, the implication being that the “remission” of the land with its produce in Exod 23 was only temporary. The other verb, *natash*, may mean “forsake, abandon, or leave unattended” [8]. In certain passages, *natash* parallels *azab* “abandon” (1 Kgs 8:57; Ps 27:9; 94:14; Isa 32:14; Jer 12:7). In Gen 31:8, *natash* means “allow”. It is used in Num 11:31 in the sense of “let fall” and in Isa 33:23 in the sense of “loosen”. Thus, *shamat/natash* share a semantic proximity, and its use in Neh 10:31 to specifically refer to the sabbatical practice of “leaving fields fallow and debts unclaimed” further bridges this semantic proximity (cf. Jer 17:14). Based both on the literary context and its usage elsewhere, *natash* in Exod 23 seems best rendered “let lie (unplowed)”. Moreover, it appears that *shamat/natash* in Exod 23:11 antithetically parallel *asaph/zara* in v. 10, so that the meaning of the former pair need not be construed further than the negation of the latter pair.

3. Results and Discussion

Contrary to scholars like Kraus [9], Barker [1] states that “nothing is mentioned about increasing the fertility of the land as a purpose for this law despite a number of scholars arguing that fertility must have been part of the law’s intention, a carryover from Canaan. Thus, the force of this law is primarily humanitarian, though there were religious and cultic associations as well” [1]. In other words, “the sabbatical year law is just one of a number of laws that protect the landless Israelites (e.g., gleaning laws in Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:19-21)” [1]. While this assertion is questionable because a mere gleaning opportunity for the poor does not require the rich refraining totally from cultivation, the text helps the reader appreciate the importance of the land being a gift from God and the obligation to share its bounty equitably, trusting that God will provide abundantly for all.

Although the sabbatical law had social, economic, and religious/stewardship concerns (cf. Lev 18:28; 25:23; 2 Chron 36:17-21; Jer 25:8-14) [10], these concerns are not exclusive of an ecological perspective. The ecological dimension of the law can be seen in several respects. Although the poor and the beasts are the named beneficiaries of the fallow aftergrowth, the land itself is said to be “released” (*shamat*). This “releasing” of the land is particularly important as indicated in later references to the sabbatical regulation (e.g., Jer 25:8-14; 2 Chron 36:21). For sure, a one-year gleaning opportunity was not enough to sustain the poor for a period of seven years, so that God asked Israel to always leave some crops every harvest time for the poor and the socially disadvantaged (cf. Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut 24:19-22; cf. 14:28-29). The implication is that there was more to the sabbatical regulation: “The land was entitled to a rest because it needed it; it must be released for a time in order to gain fresh strength and insure its future fertility” [11]. Similarly, the idea of the land being allowed to “lie fallow” (*natash*) indicates that apart from the generous provisions for the less advantaged the land itself needed some nourishment. The law’s concern for the beasts of the field further highlights the ecological perspective. Just as God would not want the beasts of the field overpower the land of Israel (Exod 23:29), so would God not allow the people’s means of sustenance or farming activities lead to the extinction of the animal species, who are a concern also to God (Deut 22:6-7; Ps 104:11-30; Jonah 4:11).

4. Conclusions

It has been argued in this study that the sabbatical-year law probably required a rest for the whole land of Israel and not just a rotation of cultivable portions of land, even though the Israelite society was basically agrarian. In practice, a worldwide/continent wide observation of a sabbatical rest of arable lands today may not be possible, so that one has to make applications that do not require a

direct imposition of the biblical text to societies which may even not uphold the authority of the Bible. Nonetheless, secondary applications could be made of Exod 23 that may contribute to the discussion on ecology. First, heavily cultivated portions of land could be allowed to lie fallow after a few years of continuous cultivation. Because farmers do not allow their lands to enjoy “sabbaticals”, they resort to agro-chemicals as a means of boosting the fertility of the soil. These chemicals are in themselves harmful to health. Second, in some communities in Africa where farming requires the destruction of vegetation to allow for sunlight, the aftermath of farming activities is deforestation which in turn is leading to desertification. If these farmers would allow for fallow periods, new trees could be planted in the year before the fallow year(s), so that these trees would grow during the fallow. Finally, if widespread fallows may not be the option for farmers today, it is suggested that land rotation could be considered a viable option, instead of them overusing particular portions of land with the aid of agro-chemicals. While such a practice does not follow directly from Exod 23, as a practical alternative in Africa it may allow cultivable lands regain fertility, enable farmers to grow new trees in the fallow portions, and responsibly contribute towards the sustenance and repopulation of the wild including endangered species.

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