

1. CONSIDERATIONS ON THE SHABBAT BEFORE THE LAW. AN ATTEMPT TO RECONCILE THE OPPOSITES

Abstract

The religious life during the pre-Mosaic period is rather little known, especially because of the synthetic character of the first chapters of the book of *Genesis*. Implicitly, the problem of the Shabbat remains, with respect to this period, in an area of understanding which is somewhat unclear, without being able to issue definite statements regarding the practice or not of the Shabbat, as a historical-archaeological reality. This lack of effective information generated, in time, the appearance of a series of opinions concerning this

matter, opinions which are not only divergent but even opposite most of the time. But these divergences can be reconciled from a theological point of view if we distinguish between the historical and eschatological dimension of the Shabbat.



PAULA BUD

Faculty of Orthodox Theology
"Babeş-Bolyai"
University in Cluj-Napoca

Keywords

Shabbat, Law, rest, history, eschatology

The dynamics of the text of the Scripture as a revealed text is, besides a quality that confirms for the Scripture its unique status as letter of the divine love for the human being – as Saint John Chrysostom wonderfully defined it –, also a source that generates multiple and various interpretations, without them being opposite and thus inconsistent. On the contrary, they find themselves in a relationship of complementarity, each of them contributing to the completion of a text's meaning and understanding. Thus, even though the exegetes' opinions on a certain text often differ (sometimes in a radical manner) and are even opposed to each other, the simple acceptance of this contradiction is not the only possible perspective. One may also choose to look for an area of understanding

that could enhance a *reconciliation of the opposites*: a level of interpretation in which the meaning, arguments and logic of each exegetical position is valued in the extended context of the theological understanding of the Old Testament and of the Scripture as a whole. This paradigm also includes the issue of understanding and respecting the Shabbat during the period prior to receiving the Law on the Mount Sinai (Ex 20). But the exegetes' divergences regarding the knowledge and practice of the Shabbat before the Law can be harmonized, we think, within the frame of a theological interpretation which can distinguish between the historical and eschatological dimension of the Shabbat. In the center of this problem we find the episode of the manna (Ex 16), a text from which some elements are valued by the exegetes with the purpose of determining the moment in which the Shabbat was established.

The episode of the manna (Ex 16) has been subject to several ample historical-critical analyses, generated by its somewhat unexpected content: the situation involves respecting a commandment that was not formulated and addressed to the people of Israel yet. The climax of the book of Exodus, the Decalogue in chapter 20, will offer this commandment a legal status and will thus reserve, for a day of cult, an impressive gravity: a tenth of the Decalogue. Through this integration of the commandment of the Shabbat into the Decalogue, respecting the Shabbat as a historical-archaeological reality, a weekly day of cult, becomes, simultaneously, responsibility/ obligation and an identity mark of Israel. The seemingly chronological inconsistency between the texts from *Exodus* 16 and *Exodus* 20 constitutes the basis of the multiplication, diversification of the exegetical opinions, but it may also be regarded in a positive light: it determines the profound analysis of this text in order to understand its inner logic and the correlations with the whole text of the Old Testament. Moreover, when the problem of identifying the sources of chapter 16 occurs, the difficulty of diversity of opinions between the specialists also occurs, who ascribe most of the chapter to source P (the majority of the critics) and source J (Durham 2002, 223). But this episode is a particular case, whose importance is given not by the sources that constituted the basis of its writing nor by the manner in which these sources were combined, but by the central theological theme of solicitude as a proof of the divine Presence (Durham 2002, 224). Accepting to gather food only for the current day is an expression of the faith in fact that God gives people continuously what is necessary for them to survive. And the adjustment of the manna to the liturgical rhythm given by the alternation *six working days – a rest day* is the sign and the confirmation of the wonderful character of this bread from heaven. Thus,

the theological importance of the episode sets aside any preoccupation for style and structure, an aspect which generated even within the text some repetitions, of priority being the fact that providing the food as a mark of the Presence is combined thrice with the idea of respecting/ sanctifying/ guarding the rest day as a symbol and celebration of the Presence (Sherman 2006, 61). The episode allows, through its content, developing different perspectives of understanding, each of them valuing other elements and leading to distinct theological ideas/ statements.

The cutumiary perspective: bringing up-to-date the Shabbatic tradition

From the perspective of the Mosaic authority of the Pentateuch, one may suppose that some of the elements, including the episode of the manna, are the mark of Moses' thinking and "strategy" to prepare the people to accept and respect the Law. But in the case of a synchronic reading, focused on identifying the intention of the biblical text (*intentio operis*) (Oancea 2007: 187-202), chapter 16 may be regarded simply as a phase prior to the legislation of the day of rest within the Decalogue, and this is what gives the celebration of the Shabbat in this context a cutumiary character. The custom is a law norm sanctioned through a long practice, it requires an accumulation of traditions, of similar acts, which have no legal provisions. Keeping the seventh day through rest in the episode of the manna fits this pattern, by being, according to the biblical chronology, a moment prior to any legal statements regarding the compulsoriness of respecting the day of rest in Israel, an expression which will only occur in the context of receiving the Law on Mount Sinai (Ex 20:8-11).

The supporters of the idea that the Jews knew this day before receiving the Law (Osborn and Hatton 1999, 398) appeal to different arguments and explanations to support this position. A recurring idea is that although the Shabbat was an institution known by the Jews even in the pre-Mosaic period, the keeping of this day suffered a profound degradation during the Egyptian slavery because of the difficulties that were imposed by this special situation (Nichol 1978, 581). It is highly improbable that the Jews were let to rest during this period, even for a religious purpose. This is why one may consider that the institution of Shabbat could no longer function during their stay in Egypt. Even though the idea that the patriarchs as well respected this day is accepted, the Shabbat could certainly not be respected in Egypt (Spence-Jones 2004, 53). This will eventually lead to the necessity of a legislative expression for the observance of the Shabbat, following an extended period of Egyptian slavery in which the people of Israel

had gotten far away from their parents' faith and customs, and had passed through a period of radical change of status. If we remember the moment of Jacob's removal to Egypt, we see that it was determined by a call-invitation from Pharaoh: "and bring your father and your families back to me. I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you can enjoy the fat of the land" (Gn 45:18). But the situation changed in time, "then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt" (Ex 1:8), and from that moment on, the Jews have become from guests, slaves of the Egyptian people, unwillingly taking upon themselves the entire burden which came with this social status. It meant giving up their own faith and religious customs and, implicitly, accepting, more or less freely their masters' faith (Krauss 2001, 24-40). During the entire period of slavery, forced to respect the Egyptian laws (Freedman 1996, 813), which were not familiar with the rest on the seventh day, the Jews could not observe the Shabbat. Consequently, even though Israel kept the memory of a certain sabbatical practice, which Moses brings back to the Jews' attention, their inconstancy in respecting it is obvious (Ex 16:25-30). Naturally, the Israelites were not used to observing the seventh day, which they trespassed almost in a defiant manner (Nichol 1978, 581). That is why Moses, in order to introduce the Shabbat, was forced to punish by death the ones who did not respect it (Ex 31:14) (Nichol 1978, 580).

In the history of the chosen people, the slavery period represented a phase of spiritual degradation, visible even in the way the Israelites related to the day of rest, which generated, first of all, the necessity to bring up-to-date the content and importance of this day in Israel's religious experience. The exegetes speak about this bringing up-to-date in terms of *re-learning*, of *renewal* (Clarke 1999, 57), of *re-establishment* (Spence-Jones 2004, 53), of *clarifying* (Elwell 1996, 23), of *reiterating* (Courson 2005, 281) a pattern which was already known to the Israelites, of a *completion* (Nichol 1978, 581) of the instructions regarding the Shabbat, all these terms involving the knowledge about the weekly Shabbat before Sinai as well as passing through a phase of decline in understanding and respecting it. Despite of this process of bringing up-to-date, it is possible that the generation brought up in slavery could not fully accept this rest day, the Shabbat being characteristic and naturally assumed only by the new generation, brought up in the desert (Spence-Jones 2004, 57) in God's law.

The commandment of the rest in the seventh day is not regarded as something new neither by Moses nor by the people within this episode, the theme of the Shabbat being something generally known (Clarke 1999, 57). The Israelites are not explained

here what is the day of rest or why should they gather twice as much manna in the sixth day. It is interesting to observe the fact that the Israelites ask themselves twice with respect to the consistency of the manna, but never ask what is the Shabbat, which proves the fact that although the Shabbat was known, it was not respected in a particular way until that time (Pfeiffer 1962, 23). Through this food given miraculously, depending on a cultic law (Radmacher, Allen and House 1997, 22), God sanctifies the day of Shabbat and offers a time of physical rest and of re-orientation towards the spiritual things. Thus, what begins as a divine intervention in a critical moment, intervention through which the food for the hungry people is provided, becomes an important lesson about the special nature of Shabbat (Shapiro 2004:169). The rule of gathering the manna allows a double correlation: in the past, with the creating work, at the end of which God rested, and in the future, with the discovery of the fourth commandment which will make Shabbat an integral part of the Covenant (Stuart 2007, 372).

The historical perspective: inaugurating the Shabbat in Exodus 16 as an anticipation of the Law

Regarding the inauguration of the Shabbat in the episode of the manna (Ex 16), many exegetes express in a favorable manner (Keil and Delitzsch 2002, 364). Even if the existence of the principle which stands at the basis of observing this day even from the moment of creation, as a day of rest and holiness, is accepted, here the term of Shabbat as a weekly day of cult, as a cultic expression of the initial principle occurs for the first time (Nichol 1978, 582). Thus, even if God rested on the seventh day of the creation, He did not command man to do the same thing at that time. But now He gives the law of Shabbat to the people of Israel, a law that would become one of the Ten Commandments as a sign of His covenant with Israel on Sinai (Ex 31:13) and as a sign of weekly recalling the miracle of their liberation from Egypt (Dt 5:15). God established the observance of the Shabbat as a religious foundation before giving the Law and as anticipation of the Law (Stuart 2007, 381). The fact that some came out to look for manna even on the day of Shabbat, shows that this becomes an institution for Israel only after the giving of the Law. If God sanctified the Shabbat here through the gift of manna, He did this as a preparation for its consecration through the Law (Spence-Jones 2004, 37).

The episode of the manna as a whole represents a partial anticipation of the revelation from Sinai, because in chapters 15, 25, 26 the commandments and laws are mentioned, and in chapter 18,16 the civil code is formed (Stuart 2007, 381). Thus, even

if the meaning of the Shabbat and its place within the Law will be fully revealed in Exodus 20:8-11, for now the Israelites are reinforced, in this way, in the faith of God's care which provides them with food even if they stop working for one day and dedicate their time to the spiritual preoccupations. What the fourth commandment brings new is a moment of legislating the Shabbat and not its foundation (Colbu 2012: 33-5). Another perspective upon this episode is the diachronic reading: the possibility is explored that this chapter 16 of Exodus presents an event subsequent to the Decalogue, taking into account the references to the tabernacle and the ark, two elements which occurred, according to the biblical text, after this stage of revelation (Osborn and Hatton 1999, 389).

The creation perspective: Shabbat – part of the world's structures as a whole

To accept the fact that the Shabbat was known to the Jews prior to the offering of the Law leads the exegetes to suppose as well the probability that this day was respected by the patriarchs too, including Noah, thus meaning from the beginning of humankind. The practice is based on separating one day out of seven for the divine rest (Gn 2:2-3) which is considered to be a divine settlement and the first of all commandments addressed to the human being. Shabbat is, from this perspective, more than an institution, it is an element of the order of creation (Gn 2:2-3) (Fretheim 1991, 183), its very holiness deriving from the divine blessing and sanctification from the beginning of the world. Because it is an integrating part of the cosmic order, its sacred character is entirely independent from all human act or being (Sarna 1991, 90).

The affiliation of the Shabbat to the constitution of creation, to the reality of the world might mean that keeping the day of rest was an aspect that depended on the human being's nature, and to this respect, the expression of the fourth commandment: "For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth" (Ex 20:11) speaks about an *ontological argument* (Novak 2007, 77). We see how the human being, without receiving any law to this respect, fulfills the celebration of rest, and this can be easily connected to other liturgical manifestations mentioned by the biblical text, fulfilled also through the nature of the service characteristic for the human being, by virtue of an inner law inherent to man (Kim 1998: 10), for the human being is in the natural state of its creation only when it praises the Lord (Isaac the Syrian, 2003, 111): Cain and Abel's offering (Gn 4:3-4), Noah's offering (Gn 8:20), Abraham's offering (Gn 12:7) and the examples could go on. From all of this one may understand that the legislation of the liturgical practices, their foundation was

only done when the human being's too many mistakes made him forget his Creator and Master, the laws being in this case a support to help him remember and seek the communion with God.

In this context, a problem occurs, that of knowing and respecting the Law before Moses, especially by the patriarchs whose virtue is recognized and accepted both by the Judaic and Christian environment. But the two aspects are not inseparably linked, and we see that Saint Justin Martyr, although he recognizes the virtue of several pre-Mosaic characters such as Adam, Abel, Enoch, Lot, Noah or Melchizedek, he states explicitly the fact that they did not observe the Shabbat (Johnston 1974: 94-5). Within Judaism, the idea that most of the laws given on Sinai, and especially the Shabbat, existed prior to the moment in which they were actually received, is a reason usually associated to the apocalyptic direction of the Judaism (*Jubilee* 3:30-31), which left a print on the rabbinic literature (Johnston 1974: 97). Thus, some rabbis, starting from the text from *Genesis* 26:5: "Abraham obeyed me and did everything I required of him, keeping my commands, my decrees and my instructions" and influenced by the idea of the transcendence of the Law, came to state that Abraham respected the Law entirely (*Yoma* 28b; Johnston 1974: 99). It is hard to exclude firmly the possibility that some elements of the Law had indeed proceedings in the pre-mosaic period in the sense of W. Kaiser's view: "Despite its concision, economy of vocabulary and broad view, one must not think that the Decalogue was founded and promulgated on Sinai for the first time. All ten commandments were part of the God's Law written into the hearts before the stone tables, for all ten appear, in one way or the other, in the *Book of Genesis*" (Kaiser, 1983, 81-2).

On the other side, there is the exclusive assuming of the Shabbat as a gift from God to Israel, but by virtue of which not only the observing of Shabbat wasn't required to the Jews but it was forbidden (*Sanhedrin* 58b; Johnston 1974: 96). A text which supports this idea occurs in *Exodus* 31:12-17, where the Shabbat is presented as an eternal sign between God and Israel (Cohen 1965: 9). We only wish to underline here the fact that on the answer to this problem depends the universal compulsoriness to respect the Shabbat (Johnston 1974: 100). If we accept the idea that this is indeed part of the world's structures and that it was observed from the beginning of the history, it means that it goes beyond the strict frame of a people – Israel (Fretheim 1991, 183) and that it is part of everyone's responsibility.

The Christological perspective

In a key of Christian reading, linking the gift of manna with the compulsoriness of observing the day of rest is not accidental, the Holy Fathers interpreting the two seemingly distinctive elements in a unity of meaning. Following immediately a new moment of dissatisfaction of the people regarding the frugal food (Ex 16:1-3), the gift of manna is not destined to satisfy the greed of those overwhelmed by earthly thoughts, for these receive meat (*quail*, v. 12-13a). In return, the manna is the heavenly food because it is “shadow and image” of the teachings and gifts given through Christ, teachings which nourish both humans and angels. Moreover, this food for the body which God gives Israel from heaven is understood as a prefiguration of the Body which the Incorporeal gives to the hungry for communion (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1982, 47) (Jh 6:32-33). In the day of the Shabbat, this food does not depreciate in order to make a connection to the One Who, while resting in the tomb on Saturday, did not become subject to corruption.

The commandment to gather only the quantity of manna necessary for one day and the simultaneous interdiction to keep from it for the next day are interpreted by Saint Gregory of Nyssa as the expression of the fact that we are not allowed to use images after their fulfillment, and it is not useful for us to gather in this earthly life, out of greed, more than we need (Ashby, 1997, 73), because all of these will transform into maggots (Ex 16:20). But the Jews are allowed to keep the manna from the previous day for the day of holy rest in God’s honor (Ex 16:23) (Semen 1993, 200) because the surplus is allowed when it turns towards something that is not subjected to corruption (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1982, 49), towards the spiritual goods.

Attempt to harmonize the opposites

The perspectives of understanding the manna episode and the way in which this generates divergent opinions regarding the moment of the instituting of Shabbat, presented here briefly, are an eloquent example of the diversity in interpretation which is made possible by the text of the Holy Scripture. Each of these perspectives is supported by convincing textual, logical and theological arguments regarding Shabbat and the moment of its institution, with a direct reference to *Exodus* 16.

The *cutumiary perspective* accepts a tradition of observing a weekly day of cult. The moment of the setting up of this day cannot be determined, and neither if there were any provisions formulated with respect to the manner of celebrating it. What is important here is the simple possibility that the Shabbat day was an institution known

from the pre-Mosaic period which, in the time of Moses, reached a phase of decline and required a process of re-learning, renewal, clarification. The act of offering the manna, in this context, appears as a form of marking this day which is a sign of the divine Providence and a time of returning to God.

On the same level of understanding the Shabbat as the seventh day dedicated to rest there is the *historical perspective*, generated by a reading close to the letter of the text, according to which the episode of the manna occurs as a moment of setting up the day of rest, with a double function: of anticipation/preparation of the Law (Ex 20), of defining the Shabbat as a historical reality given to the chosen people. Here there is a clear distinction between the principle of the rest day known from the creation (Gn 2:2-3) and its cultic expression (Ex 16), stating that the Shabbat inaugurated now will become a law through its integration within the Decalogue.

However, with the *creation perspective*, we move to another level of understanding, in which the border between the weekly day of rest, which is supposedly respected from the beginning of the world, and the Shabbat, as a part of the world's structures, vanishes, a day becoming the expression of a reality which has its origins in God's rest at the end of the creation. From this perspective, the Shabbat as an ontological reality is independent from all legislation and even from all observance from the human being and, thus, it is not impossible that it received a natural cultic expression even from the beginning of the humankind, without being able to say which this expression was. Thus, the meaning changes: the man is the one who, without obeying a law or commandment, tries to become a part of this reality of divine sanctification and blessing which is God's Shabbat (Gn 2:2-3).

In a key of Christian reading, the Christological perspective upon the episode gives the manna a prefigurative value for Christ Himself, the real bread from heaven Who spent a day of Shabbat in the tomb, and His body did not become corrupted.

These perspectives converge in an area of understanding which perceives the Shabbat in essence as a *rest in God*. To this respect, Shabbat was both respected and disrespected, to an individual level, before the offering of the Law on Mount Sinai, because it depended, above all, not on a belonging to a set of legal-cultic rules or on the ethnic affiliation, but on the degree of man's closeness to God. This is why one may accept the fact that the Shabbat was known and lived from the beginning of the humankind, and the patriarchs and their predecessors (Enoch, Noah) were persons whose virtue is confirmed by the biblical text and recognized unanimously by the

Jews and Christians. Together with the institutionalized form of the Shabbat (with the anticipating stage in *Exodus* 16 and with the legislation in *Exodus* 20) it becomes a communitary responsibility and an identity mark which indeed belongs exclusively to the people of Israel. The institutionalized form materialized in a weekly day of cult with its own liturgical rules, never constituted the object of a commandment addressed to the other nations: this Shabbat is God's gift to Israel and it belongs only to Israel. But the Shabbat of the chosen people, as a weekly day of cult is, in fact, a time of ceasing work in order to dedicate exclusively to the spiritual exercise, oriented towards reaching the spiritual rest in God. Thus, besides the perspective of understanding, the Shabbat is constantly associated to the idea of the rest in God, which determines us to believe that, apart from its historical, archaeological, ethnical, martyrical aspect, the Shabbat, in its essence, is the expression of the humankind's *telos* to live eternally in the communion of the eternal happiness with the One who is.

* This study was published in
*Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai –
Theologia Orthodoxa* 2 (2013): 39-50.

References

- Ashby, G.W. *Go out and meet God: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*. In *International Theological Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.
- Clarke, Adam. *Clarke's Commentary: Exodus*. Albany, Ages Software, 1999.
- Cohen, Gary. "The Doctrine of the Sabbath in the Old and New Testaments." *Grace Journal* 2 (1965).
- Colbu, Ştefan. "The Decalogue. A New Institutional Approach." *European Journal of Science and Theology* 1 (2012): 33-5.
- Courson, Jon. *Jon Courson's Application Commentary: Genesis-Job*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005.
- Durham, John. *Exodus*. In *Word Biblical Commentary* 3. Dallas: Word Incorporated, 2002.
- Elwell, Walter A. *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996.
- Freedman, David Noel (coord.). *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol. 1. Doubleday, 1996.
- Fretheim, Terence. *Exodus*. In *Interpretation: a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991.

Isaac the Syrian. *Words to the Lonely about the Life of the Spirit, Divine Mysteries, Providence and Judgement*. In *Words to the Lonely, Part II recently discovered*. Translated by Ioan I. Ică Jr. Sibiu: Deisis, 2003.

Johnston, Robert M. "Patriarchs, Rabbis and Sabbath." *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 12 (1974): 94-5.

Kaiser, Walter. *Toward Old Testament Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983.

Keil, Carl Friedrich și Delitzsch, Franz. *Commentary on the Old Testament*. Vol. 1. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002.

Kim, Sang-Bok David. "The Pre-Mosaic Concept of Ethics." *Torch Trinity Journal* 1 (1998).

Krauss, Walter. *Civilizația asiro-babiloniană*. Translated by C. Ionescu Boeru (Bucharest: Prietenii Cărții, 2001).

Nichol, Francis D. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary: The Holy Bible with Exegetical and Expository Comment*. Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978.

Novak, David. "The Sabbath Day." In *The Ten Commandments for Jews, Christians, and Others*. Michigan: Grand Rapids, 2007.

Oancea, Constantin. "Exegeza istorico-critică și teologia biblică ortodoxă: o re-evaluare." *Revista teologică* 3 (2007): 187-202.

Osborn, Noel D. and Howard Hatton. *A Handbook on Exodus*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1999.

Pfeiffer, Charles. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1962.

Radmacher, Earl D., Ronald Barclay Allen and Wayne H. House. *The Nelson Study Bible: New King James Version*. Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1997.

Sarna, Nahum M. *Exodus*. In *The JPS Torah Commentary*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991.

Semen, Petre. *Învățătura despre sfânt și sfințenie în cărțile Vechiului Testament*. Iași: Trinitas, 1993.

Sf. Gregory of Nyssa. *Despre viața lui Moise*. In *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* 29. Translated by Dumitru Stăniloae and Ioan Buga. Bucharest: IBMO, 1982.

Shapiro, Shubert. "Shabbat: Three stages in Israel's Experience." *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 3 (2004).

Sherman, Cecil. *Genesis – Job*. In *Cecil Sherman Formations Commentary* 1. Macon: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2006.

Spence-Jones, H.D.M. *The Pulpit Commentary: Exodus*. Vol. 2. Bellingham: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004.

Stuart, Douglas K. *Exodus*. In *The New American Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2007.