

## **Artistry and Architecture in the Fourth Commandment: New Proposals on the Context, Structure, and Beauty of Israel’s Sabbath Law**

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The fourth commandment (Exod. 20:8–11) occupies a unique and exalted place among the laws of the Decalogue. Rabbi Bahya ben Asher, a medieval scholar, called it “the primary commandment given to Israel,” and “the first principle of faith, as weighty as all the rest of the commandments combined.”<sup>1</sup> Other sages have described the Sabbath as the “bride” of Israel, elevating its status to the intimacy and mystique of marriage.<sup>2</sup> In his classic treatise on the significance of Sabbath, Heschel goes so far as to say, “The Sabbath is the presence of God in the world, open to the soul of man.”<sup>3</sup> So important is the Sabbath law to Judaism that some rabbis have placed it on par with the entire Torah. To keep it is to keep the whole law, and to break it is to break the whole law.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, the Sabbath was God’s gift to a weary people. For more than four-hundred years, the Israelites had lived and labored as slaves down in Egypt, a nation organized around a ten-day workweek with no regular day off.<sup>5</sup> Into such a world came the surprising text of the fourth commandment. The people who first heard it would have received it gladly. Their grueling and oppressive workweek had just been shortened from ten days to seven, with the seventh being a day of rest. In the text of this unique commandment, then, Yahweh reveals his compassion toward his people. His kindness and generosity are on display, as are his care and concern for all creation.

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<sup>1</sup>As cited in Alan Cooper and Bernard R. Goldstein, “The Development of the Priestly Calendars (I): The Daily Sacrifice and the Sabbath,” *HUCA* 74 (2003): 11. Early rabbis of the post-Temple period taught that if the Jewish people kept even one Sabbath properly, Messiah would come; see *Exodus Rabbah* 25.121.

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., *Genesis Rabbah* 11.80. Additional rabbinic citations can be found in Dovid Wax, ed., *The Ten Commandments: A Comprehensive, In-Depth Presentation of the Ten Commandments Featuring Essential Principles, Laws and Inspirational Insights*, Klein ed. (Lakewood, NJ: Taryag Legacy Foundation, 2005), 196.

<sup>3</sup>Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1951), 60.

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., *Exodus Rabbah* 25.12. Additional rabbinic citations can be found in Wax, *Ten Commandments*, 232.

<sup>5</sup>Anne-Sophie von Bomhard, *The Egyptian Calendar: A Work for Eternity* (London: Periplus, 1999), 51. Von Bomhard notes that Egypt’s calendar comprised 36 ten-day weeks called “decans” (36 weeks x 10 days per week = 360 days). Five days were added to the 360 days to coincide with a solar-based year.

Centuries of scholarship have aided our understanding of the Sabbath law. What is often missing, however, is a detailed look at its literary context and internal arrangement. Such an omission is due primarily to the claims of higher criticism that the law has been embellished over time; therefore, its present form must be unoriginal and therefore untrustworthy. This paper challenges that claim. It proposes, instead, a sharpened arrangement for the Decalogue, and a new literary structure for the Sabbath law, showing how its internal architecture reinforces its meaning. Our investigation will reveal that (1) the fourth commandment constitutes its own unit within the Decalogue, and (2) the commandment itself is chiasmically arranged. It is an exquisite text that defies any attempt to attribute its canonical form to scribal misadventure, editorial emendations, or other evolutionary developments. Indeed, the Decalogue is said to have been written “on tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God” (Exod. 31:18). As such, God’s artistry is on display in the Sabbath law. Not surprisingly, its literary presentation befits the beauty of its message, which we will also briefly consider.

### I. The Literary Context of the Fourth Commandment

The Sabbath law is the fourth of the Ten Commandments according to Philo, the Septuagint, the Talmud, and the Reformed and Eastern Orthodox Christian traditions.<sup>6</sup> Verbally, it is the longest commandment of the ten, and positionally, it is the pivot point of the collection, as we will seek to show.<sup>7</sup> This and the fifth commandment are the only two positively stated laws in the collection; the other eight are expressed negatively.<sup>8</sup>

How the commandments are arranged is a matter of some debate. Many divide the Decalogue in half, with commandments 1–5 forming the first table, and commandments 6–10 forming the second table.<sup>9</sup> They contend that the first table is primarily for Israel’s

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<sup>6</sup>The numbering of the Ten Commandments varies across religious traditions. Reformed and Eastern Orthodox churches separate “no other gods” and “no idols” into numbers 1 and 2, as do Philo (Philo, *Decalogue* 158–164) and the LXX. Lutheran, Anglican, and Roman Catholic traditions, however, combine them as number 1, while separating the various elements of “no coveting” into numbers 9 and 10. The Jewish tradition regards the opening statement (“I am the LORD your God”) as number 1, while combining “no other gods” and “no idols” into number 2. This study will initially follow the Reformed/Eastern Orthodox enumeration, viewing “I am the LORD your God” as a preamble to the collection, and all of “no coveting” as number 10. We will slightly modify this arrangement later in the paper. The expression *‘āšerēt hādēbārīm*, meaning “the ten words” (cf. Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4), fuels the quest to rightly divide the Decalogue into ten distinct laws.

<sup>7</sup>For a scholarly overview of the Decalogue’s critical issues and history of interpretation, see Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, trans. S. Woudstra, HCOT 3 (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2000), 1–17. Houtman’s exegetical exposition of the fourth commandment follows on pp. 38–50. For a less technical but broad and helpful treatment, see Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century*, NACSBT (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2010), 1–23. Rooker’s exposition of the fourth commandment follows on pp. 75–102.

<sup>8</sup>While the fourth commandment *begins* with a positively worded imperative (i.e., “Remember the Sabbath day,” v. 8a), it quickly shifts to negative language to convey the central prohibition (i.e., “on it you shall not do any work,” v. 10b). The fifth commandment, then, is the only completely positive law in the Decalogue (i.e., “Honor your father and your mother . . .,” v. 12).

<sup>9</sup>See, e.g., Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*,

application, and the second has a more universal applicability. They note that the phrase “the LORD your God” appears five times in the first half (Exod. 20:2, 5, 7, 10, 12) but not at all in the second half.<sup>10</sup>

Others divide the Decalogue *almost* in half, with commandments 1–4 outlining the individual’s responsibilities to God, and commandments 5–10 outlining the individual’s responsibilities to others in society.<sup>11</sup> They contend that the first four commandments have a decidedly vertical orientation, and the last six have a decidedly horizontal orientation.

Still others try to establish correspondences between “parallel laws” in the Decalogue (i.e., commandments 1 and 6; 2 and 7; 3 and 8; 4 and 9; and 5 and 10).<sup>12</sup> Rationales for these pairings, however, are largely unconvincing and lack broad support. Motyer views the commandments as unfolding “in no discernible order,”<sup>13</sup> and Sailhamer sees no way to resolve the competing proposals, claiming, “The text offers no clear hint of such a division.”<sup>14</sup>

Owens takes a different approach altogether. Analyzing the version in Deuteronomy 5, he notes that when the preamble (Deut. 5:6; cf. Exod. 20:2;) is included, the Decalogue contains a total of three positive statements, all of which lack a finite verb.<sup>15</sup> For both grammatical and theological reasons, he suggests that these statements divide the collection into three sections, with each statement governing the other seven laws.<sup>16</sup> Applying the same analysis to Exodus 20, Kaiser renders the flow of the collection as follows:

1. “I *being* the LORD your God . . .” [therefore observe commandments one to three],
2. “*Remembering* the Sabbath day . . .” [therefore do vv. 9–11], and
3. “*Honoring* your Father and mother . . .” [therefore observe commandments six to ten].<sup>17</sup>

In Moses’ restatement of the Decalogue just prior to Israel’s entrance into the Promised Land (Deut. 5:6–21), commandments 6–10 are connected by the conjunction “and” (ו, *vāv*),

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JPSTC (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 108; Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus*, trans. W. Jacob (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1992), 544–45; Carol Meyers, *Exodus*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 164; Wax, *Ten Commandments*, 25–26.

<sup>10</sup>It should be pointed out, however, that only in the traditional Jewish enumeration of the Decalogue does the phrase “the LORD your God” appear in each of the first five commandments (cf. Exod. 20:3).

<sup>11</sup>See, e.g., Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC 2 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 442; Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 321; Gordon J. Wenham, *A Guide to the Pentateuch*, EOT 1 (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 69.

<sup>12</sup>See, e.g., *Mekhilta*. Additional rabbinic citations can be found in Wax, *Ten Commandments*, 26. The pairing approach has been popularized in recent times by Rabbi Daniel Lapin, *The Ten Commandments: How Two Tablets Can Transform Your Life and Direct Our Nation*, American Alliance of Jews & Christians, Audio CD (Mercer Island, WA: Lifecodex, 2008).

<sup>13</sup>J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, BST (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 212.

<sup>14</sup>John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, LBI (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 283.

<sup>15</sup>A finite verb is a form of a verb that has a subject (expressed or implied) and can function as the foundation of an independent clause (i.e., a complete sentence). Finite verbs are distinguished from non-finite verbs, such as infinitives, participles, and gerunds.

<sup>16</sup>John J. Owens, “Law and Love in Deuteronomy,” *RevExp* 61 (1964): 274–83.

<sup>17</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 84.

indicating, perhaps, that he understood them to be governed by the fifth commandment as Owens suggests.

While it was not Owens' goal to do so, organizing the Ten Commandments in a tripartite arrangement has the effect of giving the collection a more balanced distribution by word count than any other proposal.<sup>18</sup> According to the *BHS* text, dividing the Decalogue exactly in half (i.e., commandments 1–5 and 6–10) yields a lopsided 88–12 percent distribution of Hebrew words. Dividing the Decalogue *almost* in half (i.e., commandments 1–4 and 5–10) yields a slightly improved 76–24 percent distribution of Hebrew words. Owens' proposal yields the greatest balance:

Commandments 1–3	76 Hebrew words <sup>19</sup>	44%
Commandment 4	55 Hebrew words <sup>20</sup>	32%
Commandments 5–10	41 Hebrew words	24%

This arrangement has the advantage of featuring the expression “the LORD your God” in all three sections of the Decalogue, thus making it impossible to separate a “secular” table from a “sacred” table. While the commandments clearly move from vertical/theocentric obligations to horizontal/societal obligations, Miller rightly insists that the Decalogue is “a whole” and that “one cannot claim authority for the second table without authority for the first.”<sup>21</sup> That said, it was certainly no mark of piety in Israel to practice the first table without practicing the second (e.g., Ps. 15:1–5; 51:4a; Isa. 1:12–17; 33:14–16; Micah 6:8; cf. 1 John 2:9–11; 4:7–8, 19–20). The Ten Commandments are inextricably linked (cf. James 2:8–11).

In all likelihood, the Decalogue unfolds in “a sequence giving priority to Yahweh before humankind,”<sup>22</sup> because theology is the ground of deontology. That is, objective moral values are anchored in the existence and essence of God. Therefore, to jettison the vertical laws is to undercut the authority of and motivation for the horizontal laws. Moreover, *all* the laws in the Hebrew Bible are first and foremost theocentric, as each one reflects the character, values, and ways of God. McConville writes, “The laws . . . enshrine principles that come from the nature of God.”<sup>23</sup> And Lalleman notes, “The covenant and the commands belonging

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<sup>18</sup>Despite the widespread portrayal of five commandments on each of the two stone tablets (cf. Deut. 10:1–5), such an arrangement would have resulted in a large disproportionality of text, as the first part of the Decalogue is considerably longer than the second. More likely was the inscribing of all ten laws onto two separate tablets, front and back (cf. Exod. 32:15), producing two complete copies of the Ten Commandments. In keeping with ancient treaty making customs, “duplicate copies of the covenant” may have been made, one for each party. See Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1989), 121; see also Sarna, *Exodus*, 108.

<sup>19</sup>This total includes the nine words of the preamble (Exod. 20:2) and is regarded here as part of the first commandment. When the preamble is included, there are a total of 172 Hebrews words in the Decalogue.

<sup>20</sup>Houtman, *Exodus*, 40 notes that the fourth commandment “occupies . . . due to its length, a central place in the Decalogue.”

<sup>21</sup>Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>22</sup>John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 282.

<sup>23</sup>J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, AOTC 5 (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 43.

to it are theocentric: God is the starting point and the orientation point for Israel and its laws.”<sup>24</sup>

Accordingly, it is the character of Israel’s God that establishes the character of Israel’s ethic. As Packer notes, “God’s law expresses his character. It reflects his own behavior; it alerts us to what he will love and hate to see *in us*. It is a recipe for holiness.”<sup>25</sup> Wright concurs, arguing that biblical ethics “are fundamentally *theological*. That is, they are at every point related to God—to his character, his will, his actions and his purpose.”<sup>26</sup> In a similar vein, Kaiser concludes, “What God is in his character, and what he wills in his revelation, defines what is right. . . . A course of action ought to be taken because it best reflects the character, nature, and will of God.”<sup>27</sup>

Following Owens’ grammatical insights, and the vertical-horizontal sequence of the commandments, Kaiser gives the Decalogue a tripartite division:

1. Commandments 1–3 describe right relations with God.
2. Commandment 4 describes right relations with work.
3. Commandments 5–10 describe right relations with society.<sup>28</sup>

This arrangement has interpretational validity, but I would propose a slight modification to sharpen it a bit. The fourth commandment is about much more than “right relations with work.” It is, in fact, a multi-dimensional law:

1. The fourth commandment is *vertical* in that “the seventh day is a Sabbath *to the LORD your God*” (Exod. 20:10a). It is also “blessed” and made “holy” *by God* (Exod. 20:11). This vertical dimension gives the fourth commandment a certain affinity with the first three commandments in the Decalogue.
2. The fourth commandment is *horizontal* in that the Sabbath is to be extended to “your *son*, or your *daughter*, your *male servant*, or your *female servant*, or your *livestock*, or the *sojourner* who is within your gates” (Exod. 20:10c). The Sabbath is God’s gift not only to his people, but to all who are part of their households. This horizontal dimension gives the fourth commandment a certain affinity with the last six commandments in the Decalogue.
3. The fourth commandment is also *personal* in that on the Sabbath, “*you shall not do any work*” (Exod. 20:10b). Keeping it would be a form of self-love (or “self-care”), which does not necessarily violate Scripture’s frequent warnings against pride (e.g.,

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<sup>24</sup>Hetty Lalleman, *Celebrating the Law? Rethinking Old Testament Ethics* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2004), 41.

<sup>25</sup>J. I. Packer, *Keeping the Ten Commandments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 37 (ital. mine).

<sup>26</sup>Christopher J. H. Wright, *An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1983), 21 (ital. his).

<sup>27</sup>Kaiser, Jr., *Old Testament Ethics*, 3.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.

Exod. 23:12; 2 Sam. 16:14; Eph. 5:28–29). This personal dimension gives the fourth commandment a certain uniqueness in the collection.

The fourth commandment, then, appears to be a turning point in the Decalogue. Wolf calls it “somewhat transitional.”<sup>29</sup> Miller views it as “a crucial bridge connecting to the commandments having to do with love of neighbor.”<sup>30</sup> The Masoretic scribes also regarded it as transitional, as indicated by their placement of a paragraph division marker (called a *parashah*, represented by the Hebrew letter פ, *pe*) right before the fourth commandment. This marker appears in Exodus 20 only here and after the tenth commandment (Exod. 20:17). As Rooker notes, “Based on the location of the . . . paragraph marker, it may be argued that its placement here marks a major division within the Ten Commandments.”<sup>31</sup>

More precisely, the fourth commandment can be viewed as a “Janus” text in the collection. It looks *backward* to the first three commandments in its vertical dimension. It looks *forward* to the final six commandments in its horizontal dimension. And it *stands on its own* in its personal dimension. It is the literary and theological hinge of the Ten Commandments. Therefore, the structure I have adopted for the Decalogue is as follows:

1. Commandments 1–3 (Exod. 20:2–7)

- The section begins with the first positive statement in the Decalogue.
- The section contains three laws (76 Hebrew words) comprising 44% of the Decalogue.
- The section highlights three key responsibilities to God.
- The section features the *vertical* laws of the Decalogue.
- The section includes four occurrences of the name “Yahweh.”
- The section ends with a paragraph division marker (פ) after verse 7 in the Masoretic text.

2. Commandment 4 (Exod. 20:8–11)

- The section begins with the second positive statement in the Decalogue.
- The section contains one law (55 Hebrew words) comprising 32% of the Decalogue.
- The section highlights one key responsibility to God, oneself, and others.
- The section features the *vertical-personal-horizontal* law of the Decalogue.
- The section includes three occurrences of the name “Yahweh.”
- The section ends with the completed chiasm of the fourth commandment.

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<sup>29</sup>Herbert M. Wolf, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 152.

<sup>30</sup>Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 117.

<sup>31</sup>Rooker, *Ten Commandments*, 76.

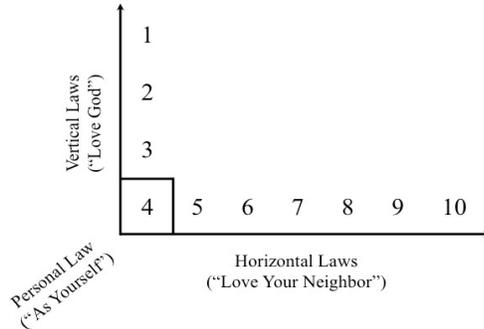
3. Commandments 5–10 (Exod. 20:12–17)

- The section begins with the third positive statement in the Decalogue.
- The section contains six laws (41 Hebrew words) comprising 24% of the Decalogue.
- The section features six key responsibilities to others.
- The section features the *horizontal* laws of the Decalogue.
- The section includes one occurrence of the name “Yahweh.”
- The section ends with a paragraph division marker (פ) after verse 17 in the Masoretic text.

Quite significantly, this structure corresponds to Jesus’ summary statement of the whole law: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind [vertical]. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor [horizontal] as yourself [personal].’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt. 22:37–40; cf. Luke 10:26–28).

Verbally, the Decalogue bears out these correspondences. The collection begins with a *vertical* orientation (“I am Yahweh your God” in Exod. 20:2a); it ends with a *horizontal* orientation (“your neighbor” in Exod. 20:17d); and it features a *tri-directional* orientation in the middle, including the personal dimension of the fourth commandment (“you shall not do any work” in Exod. 20:10b). Perhaps Jesus summarized the entire law the way he did precisely because the Decalogue is arranged in this fashion. My proposed structure for the Decalogue may be visualized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Arrangement of the Ten Commandments**



Under this arrangement, Exodus 20:2–3 constitutes the first commandment, and the rest of the laws follow the Reformed enumeration scheme. That commandments 5–10 comprise a distinct section of the Decalogue may be supported by the way they are cited by Jewish writers in the NT. Hamilton notes, “Anytime anybody in the New Testament quotes verbatim

or paraphrases one of the commandments, it is one of the last six, not the first four. That is true of Jesus (Matt. 5:21–48; 15:4; 19:18, in his answer to the rich young ruler’s question), of Paul (Rom. 7:7; 13:9; Eph. 6:2; Col. 3:5; 1 Tim. 1:9–10), of James (2:11).<sup>32</sup>

Such usage comports well with Jesus’ call for Israel to return to the lofty vision and deeper implications of the OT laws, from which he claimed his generation had strayed (cf. Matt. 5:17–48). Many first-century Jewish leaders, he said, had become sidetracked by focusing on the minutiae of their own traditions regarding the law, and some of those traditions missed the point of, or even nullified, the laws themselves—especially the neighborly concerns as reflected in the horizontal (i.e., final six) laws of the Decalogue (e.g., Mark 7:1–23). Perhaps it is significant that the structure proposed here for the Decalogue features *two* horizontal laws for every *one* vertical law, with the Sabbath law serving as the fulcrum.

Ultimately, the fourth commandment—which comprises a third of the Decalogue and functions as a bridge or hinge between the vertical and horizontal sections of the collection—constitutes its own distinct unit of the Ten Commandments. Within that unit is a legal text that features a well-crafted literary structure, to which we now turn.

## II. The Literary Structure of the Fourth Commandment

The text of the fourth commandment bears the marks of intentional symmetrical design by the author. Specifically, it is arranged in a five-part chiasm, as seen in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. The Chiasmic Arrangement of Exodus 20:8–11**

- A <sup>8</sup> Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
- B <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.
- C CENTER: On it you shall not do any work,  
 (1) you, or  
 (2) your son, or  
 (3) your daughter,  
 (4) your male servant, or  
 (5) your female servant, or  
 (6) your livestock, or  
 (7) the sojourner who is within your gates.
- B' <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day.
- A' Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

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<sup>32</sup>The brief reference in Heb. 4:4 to God’s resting on the seventh day likely refers back to Gen. 2:2–3, which serves as the basis for Exod. 20:11.

The first unit (A) introduces the subject of the Sabbath law, and the last unit (A') concludes the regulation with a declaration of divine blessing and holiness on the day. Together they form a virtual *inclusio*, with each unit using the expression “the Sabbath day” and the word “holy.” The literary structure conveys the divine emphasis that holiness “envelops” the seventh day. In the A' unit, God *made* the Sabbath holy, and in the A unit, the Israelites are to *keep* it holy.

The day is holy because it belongs to God, as indicated by his frequent use of the expression “*my* Sabbaths” (Exod. 31:13; Lev. 19:3, 30; 26:2; Isa. 56:4; Ezek. 20:12–13, 16, 20–21, 24; 22:8, 26; 23:38; 44:24). The seventh day also has the distinction of being the first item in the Bible to be called “holy” (Gen. 2:3). Heschel finds it noteworthy that a time period rather than an object is described by the first occurrence of *qādāš*, a word that “more than any other is representative of the mystery and majesty of the divine.”<sup>33</sup>

The second unit (B) specifies six days of work for the Israelites, followed by a Sabbath on the seventh day. The second-to-last unit (B') notes the rationale for the commandment—that in creation, God himself worked for six days, followed by a ceasing from his work on the seventh day. Both units employ the expressions “six days” and “the seventh day,” as well as the word “all” in reference to the work performed by God and his people. The B' unit presents God as the *pattern* for Sabbath; the B unit calls Israel to the *practice* of Sabbath. We will explore the law’s rationale in more detail in the next section.

The unmatched middle unit (C) highlights the fact that cessation of work is the heart of the commandment (“you shall not do any work”). Moreover, the cessation of work is extended to seven categories of recipients—including one’s children, one’s servants of either gender, any sojourners in town at the time, and even one’s animals—all of which emphasize the humanitarian nature of the fourth commandment. Seven, of course, is the most prominent symbolic number in Scripture, appearing in some fashion nearly six-hundred times. The book of Exodus features several passages containing lists or sequences of seven elements.<sup>34</sup>

The number seven often conveys a sense of totality, completion, or fullness. Both the form and content of the list, then, communicate that the Sabbath is to be granted to *all* creatures in the household. The list is meant to be paradigmatic, not exhaustive. For example, any grandmothers or grandfathers, aunts or uncles, nieces or nephews, or any other persons on site, though not specified in the law, are to receive and observe the Sabbath. The sevenfold list encompasses everyone, even as it underscores the importance of the *seventh* day itself.

Quite significantly, the chiasmic structure of the fourth commandment implies that the Sabbath law as it appears in the canon today represents a unified composition from the hand

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<sup>33</sup>Heschel, *Sabbath*, 9, who characterizes Judaism as a religion of “holiness in time.” It finds its meaning not in space and the material things that fill it, but in time and the eternity that infuses it. The true “architecture of holiness,” he argues, is not great temples or cathedrals, but the Sabbath itself. Humanity meets God not so much in geography as in time, which is a moment of eternity. For a challenge to Heschel’s view, see Ron H. Feldman, “The Sabbath Versus the Full Moon: A Critique of Heschel’s Valorization of the Sabbath,” *Judaism* 54 (2005): 27–33.

<sup>34</sup>See, e.g., the figures for “The Tabernacle Instructions” and “Tabernacle Built and Filled with God’s Glory” in David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 75, 77.

of a single author. As such, it need not be regarded as “showing many signs of growth and expansion,” *contra* Childs and a vast array of other source criticism scholars who regard it as a patchwork of traditions and redactions.<sup>35</sup> In his magisterial dissertation on Sabbath texts in the Hebrew Bible, Andreasen goes so far as to claim, “The fourth commandment in the present Decalogue is *unquestionably* a composite law consisting of early segments and later expansions.”<sup>36</sup> The assertion is both categorical and bold, but it is rooted in a tenuous and tendentious assumption. Andreasen presupposes that the original form of any given text “is frequently hidden far behind the present form of the tradition and cannot be laid bare, though in other instances the process whereby a tradition came into being can be detected, even if tentatively.”<sup>37</sup>

Whatever methodological value there might be in maintaining such a disposition toward a text under consideration, one place where an original form likely can be detected is where a tightly crafted literary structure common to ancient Semitic cultures can be discerned. The presence of an exquisite text reduces the ability of source criticism to account for it. Just as “too many cooks spoil the broth,” so too many authors spoil the structure. One would have to hypothesize a fair amount of editorial wizardry to synthesize successfully a cache of variant contributions from independent sources spanning multiple generations to produce the types of ornate concentricisms and other structures we now know permeate the Hebrew Bible. In other words, while a text that features an intentional literary pattern may have undergone a narrowly tailored editing process by a certain author to reach its final form, it is highly unlikely that that text’s prehistory could have involved multiple emendations from multiple hands over multiple centuries to produce anything resembling an exquisite text in the first place. In large measure, an exquisite text is irreducibly complex.

Perhaps my claim is as categorical and bold as Andreasen’s, but its support comes from analyzing *real* texts through literary criticism, not from introducing *conjectured* texts through source criticism. Indeed, to give source criticism priority over literary criticism is to miss quite often the exquisite arrangement of numerous biblical passages, not to mention elevating Western assumptions about ancient writing methods over Eastern assumptions. Decalogue studies are beset by a glut of Western scholarship that questions nearly every aspect of the formation, dating, and historicity of the Pentateuch. This phenomenon is fueled in large measure by the Graf-Wellhausen (JEPD) Hypothesis and its various descendants—views that claim the biblical text assumed its present shape not from the hand of Moses and his contemporary aids, but from multiple contradictory sources that were compiled and redacted over the centuries in a developmental (and therefore uninspired) fashion.

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<sup>35</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 413; see also, e.g., S. R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus in the Revised Version with Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911; reprint, 1953), 197; Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, trans. J. S. Bowden, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 164; Houtman, *Exodus*, 8, etc.

<sup>36</sup>Niels-Erik A. Andreasen, *The Old Testament Sabbath: A Tradition-Historical Investigation*, SBLDS 7 (Missoula, MT: SBL, 1972), 84 (ital. mine).

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

This paper holds all such theories of origin in suspicion, giving the benefit of the doubt to the canon as we now have it. While the claims of source criticism should be heard and evaluated on a case-by-case basis, the fact remains that the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, and the Dead Sea Scrolls all have been found largely intact, so the “fossil record” does not support a “divergent evolution” model of textual development. Indeed, applying the methods of source criticism to, say, *The Lord of the Rings* may well lead to the hypothesis that multiple authors from successive generations synthesized various traditions with conflicting storylines. After all, Aragorn, like Yahweh, goes by many names throughout the epic tale, including Strider (S), Estel (E), Thorongil (T), the Dúnadan (D), and several others. Moreover, the novel has been criticized for its plot holes, minutiae, violence, racism, lapses in logic, and other missteps, not unlike the charges often leveled against the Hebrew Bible. One can only imagine Tolkien’s response to such an analysis of his work. As Kaiser insists: “A good exegete will have nothing to do with hypothetical sources which have never materialized in any form. These sources are deductively ‘authenticated’ and then inductively ‘proven’ from the same document in what becomes a most vicious circle. What you put in, you get out.”<sup>38</sup>

The burden of proof is not on Kaiser to produce “the equally hypothetical autographs,” but on source critics who must reconcile the teleological nature of extant texts with an evolutionary model of their origin. The explanatory power of such models is often insufficient to account for the literary artistry found in biblical texts. In the end, literary criticism may not answer every question we have about a particular passage, but granting this tool priority over source criticism can help reduce the endless speculation and frustration inherent in the quest for textual origins, not to mention the unnecessary cynicism that evolutionary models often display toward the final form of the Pentateuch.<sup>39</sup>

Exodus 16 is a case in point. Using a source criticism approach to the pre-Sinai Sabbath/ manna story, Andreasen regards the passage as showing “unusual unevenness” and posing “extraordinary difficulties.”<sup>40</sup> He is puzzled by repetitions in the text, calling the material “disjointed,” “scattered,” and “frustrating.”<sup>41</sup> Dorsey has shown, however, that Exodus 16 is the literary center of the wilderness journey narrative (Exod. 13:17–19:2), a macro unit that is chiasmatically arranged.<sup>42</sup> While Dorsey did not analyze the structure of the center unit, one can see how a literary approach to Exodus 16 would resolve many of the issues raised by Andreasen. My own proposal for the literary structure of Exodus 16:1–36 shows that the passage is neither “disjointed” nor “scattered.” Rather, many of its repetitions are explicable because of the chiasmic arrangement of the unit, as illustrated in Figure 3.

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<sup>38</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 64.

<sup>39</sup>The work of Calum Carmichael, *The Spirit of Biblical Law* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996) in the field of biblical law is representative of the cynicism that permeates higher criticism’s view toward the Pentateuch. Referring to “the sophisticated artifice of the biblical writers,” he claims that while the OT legal texts are a “very effective device for making the reader think that the law is as real as the history and the history is as real as the law . . . this presentation is a façade” (2).

<sup>40</sup>Andreasen, *Old Testament Sabbath*, 67, n. 2.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>Dorsey, *Literary Structure*, 68.

**Figure 3. The Chiastic Arrangement of Exodus 16:1–36**

- A the Israelites demand food in the desert (16:1–3)
- B the people are commanded to gather enough bread for each day, and twice enough on the sixth day; a test of obedience (16:4–5)
- C God heard their grumbling; he will give them meat in the evening and bread in the morning; ‘What are we?’; ‘You will know it was the LORD’ (16:6–8)
- D CENTER: Yahweh’s glory appears in the cloud (16:9–10)
- C’ God heard their grumbling; he gave them meat in the evening and bread in the morning; ‘What is it?’; ‘You will know I am the LORD’ (16:11–20)
- B’ the people gather enough bread for each day, and twice enough on the sixth day; some fail the test of obedience (16:21–30)
- A’ the Israelites eat supernatural food in the desert (16:31–36)

Finally, in the case of the Decalogue, Exodus 31:18 states that the laws were written “on tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.” For the author of Exodus deliberately to misrepresent this aspect of the Sinai theophany would be to violate the moral norms of the very laws he extols. Specifically, such a deception would brazenly violate the third commandment against taking the Lord’s name in vain, and the ninth commandment against bearing false witness. Nor does arguing that the author of Exodus was crafting “religious myth” mitigate the charge of chicanery, as his fabrication has led to hundreds of millions of people down through history ordering their lives around a faux divine law. No, the Israelites kept the Sabbath law because they believed it had come directly from God, not from the imaginations or machinations of a religious mythmaker.

The fourth commandment is presented to Israel by way of a dramatic theophany (Exod. 19:16–25), and its content is artistically arranged—not by an evolutionary process of textual development, but by the finger of God himself. The beauty of its literary structure is surpassed only by the beauty of its message, to which we now turn.

### **III. The Beauty of the Fourth Commandment**

Myriad aspects of the fourth commandment are worthy of comment. For example, its divine origin is a revelation of God’s sovereignty over time. Its intended delight is a reminder of God’s goodness toward his people. Its humanitarian provision is a reflection of God’s care for all his creatures. Its penalty for desecration is an indication of God’s holiness. And its uniqueness in the ancient Near East is a display of God’s supremacy over the world. Each of these topics deserves in-depth consideration. In this final section, however, I will confine my remarks to one prominent aspect of the Sabbath law—its stated rationale.

Like the second, third, and fifth commandments of the Decalogue, the fourth commandment contains a motive clause. Israel is to keep the Sabbath “for [*ki* = because] in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day” (Exod. 20:11). Motive clauses are a hallmark of biblical law (e.g., Exod. 20:5, 7; 22:21, 26–27; 23:8; Lev. 19:2, etc.). Unlike the Laws of Hammurabi and other cuneiform law codes, Mosaic legislation often grounds its directives in Yahweh’s divine character or historical activity. In other words, God does not simply issue a raw command; he often explains the rationale behind it. His intent ostensibly is to provide for his people a window into his heart and mind.

The presence of motive clauses in the Sinai corpus is especially surprising because a suzerain is never obligated to explain his thinking and ways to his vassals. That God often takes the time to explain his rationale for any given law says something about his character, not to mention the value he places upon his people to hear and consider the wisdom of his ways (cf. “Come, let us reason together . . .,” Isa. 1:18). In the fourth commandment, the Israelites receive not only a motive but a model; they are called to *imitate* Yahweh, who acted in history in accordance with his own character. In doing so, he sets an observable pattern for them to follow (cf. Lev. 20:7; Mic. 6:8; Eph. 5:1, etc.). By contrast, other ancient Near Eastern laws are almost never motivated by historical events or the character of the lawgivers. As Sonsino notes, “Unlike biblical laws, no cuneiform law is ever motivated by reference to an historic event, a promise of well-being, or . . . a divine will.”<sup>43</sup> Significantly, God’s approach is not “Do as I say” but “Do as I do.” At Sinai God calls his people to follow not only his laws; he calls them to follow his lead.

According to Exodus 20:11, the rationale for the fourth commandment is God’s “rest” at the climax of the creation week. That rest is described in Genesis as follows: “Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested *šābāt* = “ceased”] from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested *šābāt* = “ceased”] from all the work of creating that he had done” (Gen 2:1–3).

The noun “Sabbath” (*šābbāt*) is related to the verb *šābāt*, which means “stop,” “cease,” “desist,” “come to an end,” “put to an end,” “be still,” “be quiet,” or “disappear.” The verb often conveys the idea of “rest” in the sense of ceasing from one’s labor.<sup>44</sup> Robinson analyzed all the occurrences of *šābāt* in non-Sabbath texts in the Hebrew Bible and concluded that the root means “cessation” from labor, not “rest.”<sup>45</sup> While the observation is valid as far as it goes, the weakness of such a methodology is to eliminate from the pool of evidence those samples that could affect the conclusion. Hamilton is closer to the mark when he writes, “The meaning of *šābat* is ‘to rest’ in the sense of repose only when the verb is used in a Sabbath

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<sup>43</sup>Rifat Sonsino, *Motive Clauses in Hebrew Law: Biblical Forms and Near Eastern Parallels* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1975), 173–74, who highlights the “relative scarcity of motive clauses in cuneiform laws” in contrast to the “greater frequency in biblical legislation.”

<sup>44</sup>While the precise etymological relationship between the noun *šābbāt* and the verb *šābāt* remains elusive to scholars, the two words appear to be used in the Hebrew Bible as if they derive from the same root.

<sup>45</sup>Gnana Robinson, “The Idea of Rest in the Old Testament and the Search for the Basic Character of Sabbath,” *ZAW* 92 (1980): 32–42.

context.”<sup>46</sup> Andreasen agrees: “Rest . . . must be the preferred translation in some instances.”<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, cessation of work is the *sine qua non* of rest, which is God’s intention in the fourth commandment according to Exodus 23:12. In that passage Yahweh calls for the cessation of work on the seventh day “so that your [animals, servants, and foreigners] may be refreshed [*nāphās*].” The word *nāphās* means to rest and rejuvenate oneself. It has the sense of ceasing from activity to be revitalized from a weary state: “The king and all the people with him arrived at their destination exhausted. And there he refreshed [*nāphās*] himself” (2 Sam. 16:14). To suggest that *šb̄t* cannot have a connotation of physical rest or relaxation in *any* context is to commit the root fallacy.<sup>48</sup> Sabbath, then, is intended to be a day of ceasing from one’s work in order to rest and be refreshed. Fishbane calls it “a period of sacred stasis.”<sup>49</sup>

Because Yahweh is an infinite being who never grows tired or weary in the sense of fatigue or exhaustion (cf. Ps. 121:3–4; Isa. 40:28), *šb̄t* in this context means a cessation of divine work, not a recovery period due to the previous six days of creative labor. That is, God ceased from his creation work, but he was not *tired* from that work. However, as the Israelites *are* finite creatures in need of rest, the Sabbath will be for them a respite from the previous six workdays. It will be a recovery period in which they can “recharge their batteries” on the day that God has blessed and made holy. Accordingly, all creatures on Sabbath are to experience not only rest but restoration.

Exodus 20:11 uses a different verb than *šb̄t* to describe God’s cessation of work: “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested [*nūah*] on the seventh day.” Depending on the context, the word *nūah* can mean: “settle down” (e.g., Gen. 8:4; Exod. 10:14; Num. 11:25–26); “rest” (e.g., Num. 10:36; Isa. 25:10) “repose” (e.g., Exod. 23:12; Lam. 5:5; Isa. 14:7; 28:12); or “await” (e.g., 1 Sam. 25:9; Hab. 3:16). Whether *nūah* is to be understood anthropomorphically here, or in some other way, Stuart rightly points out, “There could hardly be a stronger model for keeping the Sabbath than that of God himself. . . . God’s model in this matter obviates all objections from anyone that he or she ‘doesn’t need to take a day off’ since God could hardly wear himself out.”<sup>50</sup>

The central instruction of the fourth commandment, then, is to do nothing avoidable on God’s special day. The Israelites, along with all other creatures in their household (human or animal) are directed to follow God’s lead by resting on the seventh day. Humans in the household are to cease from their labors, and, in ceasing, they are to take the opportunity to remember their creator. Fretheim notes, “God’s resting is a divine act that builds into the very created order of things a working/resting rhythm. Only when that rhythm is honored by all

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<sup>46</sup>Victor P. Hamilton, “2323 *šb̄t*,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 902.

<sup>47</sup>Andreasen, *Old Testament Sabbath*, 106.

<sup>48</sup>For a description of the root fallacy, see D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 27–30.

<sup>49</sup>Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 126.

<sup>50</sup>Stuart, *Exodus*, 459–460.

is the creation what God intended it to be. The Sabbath is thus a divinely given means for all creatures to be in tune with the created order of things.”<sup>51</sup> Sarna concurs, observing that the seventh day was to be “an integral part of the divinely ordained cosmic order. It is infused with blessing and sanctity, not by any action on the part of man but by God himself. Its cosmic reality is entirely independent of human effort.”<sup>52</sup>

Additional insights from the creation account may further clarify the heart of the fourth commandment, as well as the heart of the one who gave it. Because the first humans were created *last* on the sixth day of creation, they were essentially born *into* the finished work of God—a work that included a vast array of “very good” gifts from the creator (Gen. 1:29–31). The story is not unlike expectant parents who joyfully labor to finish the nursery before their newborn baby arrives. Motivated by love, they create the best environment they possibly can for the coming child. On a cosmic scale, God has done something similar for the human race. Moreover, the creation account in Genesis 1 suggests that the first humans were essentially *born into rest*, as the original Sabbath day was fast approaching by the time they had been fully fashioned and brought to life.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the seventh day was their first full day on the planet. While the creation mandate included various obligations for the couple to fulfill (Gen. 1:26, 28; 2:15, 19–20), most, if not, *all* of those obligations are likely to be understood as having begun in the second week. One of their first “tasks,” then, would have been to “rest in God.” In that sense, all their subsequent work flowed *out* of the initial rest given to them by the creator. As such, their identity preceded their activity. They are rightly called “human beings,” not “human doings.” Sabbath days are a weekly reminder, then, that individuals are called to build their identity on God’s gracious activity for them, not on their fevered activity for him. Regardless of the intended chronology of Genesis 1–2, the original humans were image bearers of God (Gen. 1:27) before they were laborers before God.

Quite significantly, the Hebrew “day” (*yôm*)—which is the basic unit of God’s creative work in time—begins at dusk (Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). One could argue, then, that *the entire week* features an evening/morning rhythm in which the Israelites’ daily work flows out of their daily rest. That is, the day does not *end* with sleep; it *begins* with sleep. Therefore, rest is not only a response to work, it is a preparation for work. The Sabbath day serves to highlight and expand this preparatory rest.

Sailhamer notes another unique aspect of the original seventh day: “Unlike the other days of creation, the seventh day does not conclude with ‘and there was evening, and there was morning—the seventh day.’ In this respect the seventh day stands apart from the other six days in not having an account of its conclusion. It is this feature of the narrative that has suggested a picture of an eternal, divine ‘Sabbath.’”<sup>54</sup> The prospect of an eternal Sabbath

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<sup>51</sup>Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 230.

<sup>52</sup>Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1996), 146.

<sup>53</sup>Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 59 notes that the creation of Adam and Eve took place “apparently toward the end of the [sixth] day, after all the animals had been fashioned and placed on the earth—therefore not long before sundown at the end of the same day. . . . This can only mean that Eve was created in the closing hour of Day Six, along with Adam.

<sup>54</sup>John H. Sailhamer, rev. ed., *Genesis*, EBC 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 72; see also Ps.

speaks, perhaps, to a yearning within every conscientious worker—to have a day off that never ends! Such a desire reveals that, despite the cyclical nature of time—measured out in seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, seasons, years, decades, centuries, and millennia—human beings are teleological at the core. Occupation without consummation yields frustration. It may also yield existential despair. But the hope of an eternal Sabbath can be energizing, even to the point of transforming vagabonds into pilgrims. The earthly journey has meaning precisely because the eternal destination is real. Along the way—difficult though the journey may be—are points of Sabbath renewal from God himself. Heschel describes their weekly impact as a “resurrection of the soul.”<sup>55</sup>

God has so structured time that every seventh day the weekly grind gives way to weekly restoration. In the absence of the creation story’s numerical conclusion, one can view the seventh day as a moment in time that hints at eternity—a time when the restoration will be both permanent and complete. What better day, then, for Jesus to heal the sick, even though doing so repeatedly put him at odds with the religious leaders of his day (e.g., Luke 13:10–17; 14:1–4; John 5:1–18). “The Sabbath was made for man,” he said, “not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). God himself calls the Sabbath “a delight,” and he wants his people to do the same (cf. Isa. 58:13). At its most basic level, the fourth commandment calls the Israelites to imitate God (*imitatio Dei*) in this matter of taking a Sabbath rest. They are to follow in the footsteps of Yahweh, their suzerain king, who ceased from his labors on the seventh day. As Peterson notes, “The precedent to quit doing and simply *be* is divine.”<sup>56</sup>

In Moses’ restatement of the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy 5:12–15, the motivation for Sabbath observance is presented in terms of redemption rather than creation: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day” (Deut. 5:15). Jacob comments that God did not free the Israelites from Egyptian bondage for a life of drudgery; therefore, they were to “break the cycle of enslavement and stop on the seventh day before it became permanent and unalterable.”<sup>57</sup> Old habits die hard, and reminders are often needed to remain free.

While some readers are vexed by the variations between the first and second Decalogues, the explanation may be rather simple in the end. In Deuteronomy 5, Moses appears to be reciting the text from memory rather than reading it verbatim from one of the tablets. Furthermore, he is using the Ten Commandments homiletically, preparing the Israelites to enter the Promised Land. At that point he is speaking *prospectively* not *retrospectively*. As Childs points out, Israel’s memory of neither the creation week nor the exodus event serves as the motivation for keeping the Sabbath. Rather, keeping the Sabbath is Israel’s motivation for remembering the creation week and the exodus event.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, observing the weekly Sabbath keeps God’s larger story in view. A well-known Jewish aphorism declares, “More than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel.”

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95:7b–11; Heb. 3:7–4:11.

<sup>55</sup>Heschel, *Sabbath*, 83.

<sup>56</sup>Eugene H. Peterson, “The Good-for-Nothing Sabbath,” *CT* 38, no. 4 (1994), 36.

<sup>57</sup>Jacob, *Second Book of the Bible*, 564.

<sup>58</sup>Childs, *Exodus*, 417.

It is important to remember that God himself had already anchored the Ten Commandments in redemption by the time Moses restates them in Deuteronomy 5: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod. 20:2). This “preamble” indicates that grace was demonstrated before obedience was ever demanded.<sup>59</sup> Grammatically, the ten great imperatives are preceded by one great indicative. Block writes, “The giving of the Law was thus a climactic moment of divine grace.”<sup>60</sup> Observing the sequence of the Decalogue, Douma likewise concludes, “The commandments follow the gospel of undeserved deliverance.”<sup>61</sup>

In the end, it need not be feared that Moses takes undue license with the original text of the fourth commandment. The theme of redemption is not disconnected from the theme of creation, inasmuch as creation is now fallen and stands in *need* of redemption. If humanity’s lot is to work a cursed earth by the sweat of its brow (cf. Gen. 3:17–18), then God’s weekly Sabbath is a temporary *suspension* of that curse for his people’s benefit, hope, and encouragement. Every seventh day they are relieved of fighting the “thorns and thistles” that they brought on themselves.

Herein lies the beauty of the Sabbath law. It is God’s gracious gift in the face of human folly. Yahweh, the giver of the fourth commandment, reveals himself as the compassionate God who shows his people mercy even in the midst of the discipline they deserve. He liberates his people not only from their bondage to the oppressors of this world, but also from the world itself in all its brokenness, including their own. “The Sabbath comes like a caress,” writes Heschel, “wiping away fear, sorrow and somber memories.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, God’s Sabbath tells God’s story—the grand and glorious narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

### Conclusion

This investigation into the literary context of the fourth commandment has shown that the Sabbath law constitutes a separate and central unit within the Ten Commandments. It is the literary and theological hinge of the Decalogue, connecting the vertical laws to the horizontal laws by virtue of its own unique content and tri-directionality. Additionally, this analysis of the literary structure of the fourth commandment has shown that the Sabbath law is an exquisite text from the hand of a single author. That author is God himself (cf. Exod. 31:18), and his artistry is on display for all to see. It is an artistry that reflects the beauty of both the legal text itself and the one who gave it. In fact, the fourth commandment reveals a number of beautiful and important truths about God and his ways:

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<sup>59</sup>Under the Reformed enumeration scheme, Exod. 20:2 is regarded as the preamble of the Decalogue. The proposal in this paper regards it as part of the first commandment: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.”

<sup>60</sup>Daniel I. Block, “The Grace of Torah: The Mosaic Prescription for Life (Deut. 4:1–8; 6:20–25),” *BSac* 162 (2005): 13.

<sup>61</sup>Jochem Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. N. D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, NJ: R&R, 2006), 4.

<sup>62</sup>Heschel, *Sabbath*, 68.

1. *God is the creator of the universe.* As such, he is powerful, wise, imaginative, and good. He is sovereign over the creatures he has made, and Lord over the time in which those creatures live and move and have their being. He has authority to establish seasons and rhythms in life, and he desires that his people maintain those seasons and rhythms, finding satisfaction, significance, and delight in what he has ordained.
2. *God is kind and generous.* Yes, he requires time from his people—but how much? Formally, just one day in seven. And what does he require of them on the day that belongs to him? To build great pyramids or temples to his name? To perform elaborate rituals for him that consume the entire day? No, he asks them to do virtually nothing, except gather before him for a time and remember him (cf. Lev. 23:3). In large measure, he gives his special day back to them for their benefit. Sabbath, then, is a weekly reminder of the openhandedness and kindheartedness of God.
3. *God is not only kind and generous, he wants his people to be kind and generous as well.* He gives good gifts to his children, and he wants them to go and do likewise—especially to those over whom they may have some measure of authority. They have received freely; now freely they are to give. Loving God necessarily involves loving others. In fact, failure to love others indicates a deficiency in one's love for God.
4. *God is sensitive to the physical, psychological, and spiritual needs of his people,* including their need for rest, refreshment, and reflection. He delights in giving them opportunities to “re-charge their batteries” by relaxing and remembering his goodness to them. He cares about their well-being and wants them to be whole. He also wants his people to care for themselves even as they care for others.
5. *God treats his people with dignity, gentleness, and respect.* That the one who is almighty would offer a rationale for his law to those who are finite reveals his meekness. It also reveals the high esteem in which he holds them. He seeks to motivate his children with wise reasoning rather than with raw power. His desire is to have a relationship of love and unity with his people, not a relationship of coercion and apprehension. He wants them to understand and treasure his ways, not merely obey his laws mechanically or grudgingly.
6. *God is gracious and compassionate.* The Sabbath he gives is a temporary suspension of the curse, as every seventh day “thorns and thistles” need not be handled. He shows mercy to his children even in the midst of the discipline they deserve, giving them hope when they need it most. Presumably God would want his people to provide their own children with moments of hope and grace as well, even during those times of parental discipline.
7. *God values hard work.* The specified ratio of workdays to rest days is six to one. The Sabbath day, then, is not an invitation to sloth, but a provision for God's people to rest and get ready for a new cycle of labor that will occupy most of their week. Human beings are not beasts of burden, but neither are they designed to be unproductive. God's

desire is for his people to find meaning in a rhythm of honest work and periodic rest before him.

8. *God is worthy of emulation.* He acts in history in such a way as to establish patterns of behavior for his people that are admirable and achievable. He expects and enables them to follow his ways. Made in God's image, human beings are given the privilege and honor of walking in his footsteps. To do so is to fulfill their calling as image bearers of the one who made them.

The Sabbath was indeed God's good gift to a weary people. Moving from a system of no days off in ten to one day off in seven was "one of the most blessed and sublime sections of divine legislation . . . capable of providing incomparable benefits" to humanity.<sup>63</sup> That is why the people who first heard this law would have received it gladly. Their load had just been radically lightened by their suzerain king. Sabbath, then, was "good news" for God's people. They could breathe again. They could focus on God again. They could hope and heal again. They could rest. Ultimately, they could know that God was *for* them, not *against* them. The original recipients of this law could have stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and said, with thanksgiving in their hearts, "God's yoke is easy; his burden is light." And all who embraced God's Sabbath enjoyed its beauties, mysteries, and delights.

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<sup>63</sup>Jacob, *Second Book of the Bible*, 569.