

Chapter 1

SABBATH AND THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

INTERPRETATION SERIES EDITOR PATRICK MILLER HAS shrewdly observed that the fourth commandment on Sabbath is the “crucial bridge” that connects the Ten Commandments together.¹ The fourth commandment looks back to the first three commandments and the God who rests (Exod. 20:3–7). At the same time, the Sabbath commandment looks forward to the last six commandments that concern the neighbor (vv. 12–17); they provide for rest alongside the neighbor. God, self, and all members of the household share in common rest on the seventh day; that social reality provides a commonality and a coherence not only to the community of covenant but to the commandments of Sinai as well. For that reason, it is appropriate in our study of the Sabbath commandment to begin with a reflection

on the first commandment and, subsequently, to finish our work with a consideration of the tenth commandment that concludes the Decalogue.

The first commandments concern God, God's aniconic character, and God's name (Exod. 20:3-7). But when we consider the identity of this God, we are made immediately aware that the God who will brook no rival and who eventually will rest is a God who is embedded in a narrative; this God is not known or available apart from that narrative. The narrative matrix of YHWH, the God of Israel, is the exodus narrative. This is the God "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (v. 2). Thus the Sabbath commandment is drawn into the exodus narrative, for the God who rests is the God who emancipates *from slavery* and consequently *from the work system of Egypt* and *from the gods of Egypt* who require and legitimate that work system. It is, for that reason, fair to judge that the prohibition against "the other gods" in the first commandment pertains directly to the gods of Egypt (see Exod. 12:12) and other gods of the same ilk in Canaan, or subsequently the gods of the great empires of Assyria, Babylon, or Persia. In the narrative imagination of Israel, the gods of Egypt are stand-ins for all the gods of the several empires. What they all have in common is that they are confiscatory gods who demand endless produce and who authorize endless systems of production that are, in principle, insatiable. Thus, the mention of "Egypt" brings the God of Israel into the orbit of socioeconomic systems and practices, and inevitably sets this God on a collision course with the gods of insatiable productivity.

The reference to "Egypt" indicates that the God of Sinai who gives the Ten Commandments is never simply a "religious figure" but is always preoccupied with and attentive to socioeconomic practice and policy. If we want, then, to understand this God (or any god), we must look to the socioeconomic system that god legitimates and authorizes. In the case of the Egyptian gods (who are in contrast to and in competition with the God of the exodus), we look to Pharaoh's system of production that is legitimated by the gods worshiped by Pharaoh. In Exodus 5, we are given a passionate narrative account of that labor system in which Pharaoh endlessly demands more production. What the slaves are to produce is more bricks that are to be used for the building of more "supply cities" in which Pharaoh can store his endless supply of material wealth in the form of grain (see Exod. 1:11). Because the system was designed to produce more and more surplus (see Gen. 47:13-26), there is always more need for storage units that in turn generated more need for bricks with which to construct them. Thus, if we follow the required bricks from the slave camps, we end with surplus wealth, taken as a gift of the gods of Pharaoh.

In this narrative report, Pharaoh is a hard-nosed production manager for whom production schedules are inexhaustible:

- "[W]hy are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors!" (Exod. 5:4)
- "... yet you want them to stop working!" (v. 5)
- "You shall no longer give the people straw to

make bricks as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy.” (vv. 7–8)

– “Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words.” (v. 9)

– “I will not give you straw. Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it; but your work will not be lessened in the least.” (vv. 10–11)

– “Complete your work the same daily assignment as when you were given straw.” (v. 13)

– “Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?” (v. 14)

– “No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, ‘Make bricks.’” (v. 16)

– “You are lazy, lazy; that is why you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.’ Go now, and work; for no straw will be given you but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks.” (vv. 17–19)

– “You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks.” (v. 19)

The rhetoric is relentless, all to the single point, as relentless as is the production schedule.

It is clear that in this system there can be no Sabbath rest. There is no rest for Pharaoh in his supervisory capacity, and he undoubtedly monitors daily production schedules. Consequently, there can be no

rest for Pharaoh’s supervisors or taskmasters; and of course there can be no rest for the slaves who must satisfy the taskmasters in order to meet Pharaoh’s demanding quotas. We may imagine, moreover, that the “Egyptian gods” also never rested, because of their commitment to the aggrandizement of Pharaoh’s system, for the glory of Pharaoh surely redounded to the glory of the Egyptian gods. The economy reflects the splendor of the gods who legitimate the entire system, for which cheap labor is an indispensable footnote! It requires no imagination to see that the exodus memory and consequently the Sinai commandments are performed in a “no Sabbath” environment. In that context, all levels of social power—gods, Pharaoh, supervisors, taskmasters, slaves—are uniformly caught up in and committed to the grind of endless production.

Into this system of hopeless weariness erupts the God of the burning bush (Exod. 3:1–6). That God heard the despairing fatigue of the slaves (2:23–25), resolved to liberate the slave company of Israel from that exploitative system (3:7–9), and recruited Moses for the human task of emancipation (3:10). The reason Miriam and the other women can sing and dance at the end of the exodus narrative is the emergence of a new social reality in which the life of the Israelite economy is no longer determined and compelled by the insatiable production quotas of Egypt and its gods (15:20–21).

The first commandment is a declaration that the God of the exodus is unlike all the gods the slaves have known heretofore. This God is not to be confused with

or thought parallel to the insatiable gods of imperial productivity. This God is subsequently revealed as a God of mercy, steadfast love, and faithfulness who is committed to covenantal relationships of fidelity (see Exod. 34:6–7). At the taproot of this divine commitment to relationship (covenant) rather than commodity (bricks) is the capacity and willingness of this God to rest. The Sabbath rest of God is the acknowledgment that God and God's people in the world are not commodities to be dispatched for endless production and so dispatched, as we used to say, as "hands" in the service of a command economy. Rather they are subjects situated in an economy of neighborliness. All of that is implicit in the reality and exhibit of divine rest.

Thus the Sabbath command of Exodus 20:11 recalls that God rested on the seventh day of creation, an allusion to Genesis 2:1–4. That divine rest on the seventh day of creation has made clear (a) that YHWH is not a workaholic, (b) that YHWH is not anxious about the full functioning of creation, and (c) that the well-being of creation does not depend on endless work. This performance and exhibit of divine rest thus characterize the God of creation, creation itself, and the creatures made in the image of the resting God. Creation is to be enacted and embraced without defining anxiety. Indeed, such divine rest serves to delegitimize and dismantle the endless restlessness sanctioned by the other gods and enacted by their adherents. That divine rest on the seventh day, moreover, is recalled in the commandment of Exodus 31:12–17, wherein God is "refreshed" on the seventh day. The God of Israel (and of creation) is no immovable, fixed object, but here is said to be

depleted and by rest may recover a full sense of "self" (*nephesh*).

The second commandment is closely related to the first. The commandment against "graven images" (idols) is a prohibition against any artistic representation of YHWH, for such representation would serve to "locate" YHWH, to domesticate God and so to curb the freedom that belongs to this erupting God (Exod. 20:4–6; see 2 Sam. 7:6–7). Such images have the effect of drawing God, in imagination and in practice, away from covenantal, relational fidelity and back into a world of objects and commodities. The temptation to produce an "image" of God in artistic form is always, everywhere a chance to produce a commodity out of valuable material, at best gold if it is available, or lesser valuable material if there is no gold. When a god is fashioned into a golden commodity (or even lesser material), divine subject becomes divine object, and agent becomes commodity. We may cite two obvious examples of this temptation in the Old Testament. First, in the narrative of the "Golden Calf" in Exodus 32, it was gold that was fashioned into the image that readily became an alternative god who jeopardized the covenant. The ensuing narrative of Exodus 33–34 tells of the hard and tricky negotiations whereby covenantal possibility is restored to Israel after its foray into distorting images (Exod. 34:9–10). Less dramatically, it is evident that Solomon's temple, designed to "house" YHWH, became a commodity enterprise preoccupied with gold (emphasis added):

The interior of the inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high; he overlaid it with pure *gold*. He also overlaid the altar

with cedar. Solomon overlaid the inside of the house with pure *gold*, then he drew chains of *gold* across in front of the inner sanctuary, and overlaid it with *gold*. Next he overlaid the whole house with *gold*, in order that the whole house might be perfect; even the whole altar that belonged to the inner sanctuary he overlaid with *gold*. (1 Kgs. 6:20–22)

So Solomon made all the vessels that were in the house of the LORD: the *golden* altar, the *golden* table for the bread of the Presence, the lampstands of pure *gold*, five on the south side and five on the north, in front of the inner sanctuary; the flowers, the lamps, and the tongs of *gold*, the cups, snuffers, basins, dishes for incense, and fire pans of pure *gold*; the sockets for the doors of the innermost part of the house, the most holy place, and for the doors of the nave of the temple of *gold*. (7:48–50)

Even as YHWH was honored by such extravagance, the temple was clearly intended to reflect honor on Solomon and on his regime. The attention to gold objects clearly skewed the simple and direct matter of covenantal possibility. Commodity desire has, for the most part, crowded out the covenantal tradition.

In the modern world, Karl Marx reflected most deeply on the compelling power of commodity. He took his famous phrase “commodity fetishism” from current study of the history of religions in which it was judged that “primitives” had such fetishes that occupied their desire and their devotion. Marx transferred that idea from “primitive” practice to modern market fascination and came to see that possessing commodities of social value generated a desire for more such value so that commodity took on a power of its own

that consisted of desire for more and more. It is easy enough to see Pharaoh's compulsion for more grain (a measure of wealth) beyond anything he could have needed, simply so that he could exhibit his great wealth and power. His desire for more created a restlessness that could permit no Sabbath rest for himself or any in his domain. And clearly Solomon is sketched out as the one who would possess all of his available world in his insatiable need for more (see 1 Kgs. 10:14–25).

For good reason the book of Deuteronomy ponders the force and danger of “images of God.” In what is likely a late exposition of the first two commandments, this sermonical chapter looks back to the danger done by “commodity religion”:

Since you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure—the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven. (Deut. 4:15–19)

The danger is to compromise the peculiarity of YHWH and of Israel.

After this inventory of possible images, the rhetoric of verse 20 voices the alternative:

But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron-smelter, out of Egypt, to become a people of his very own possession, as you are now.

The emancipatory gift of YHWH to Israel is contrasted with all the seductions of images. The memory of the exodus concerns the God of freedom who frees. The clear implication is that fixed images preclude freedom and become icons of stable equilibrium. Such image-religion becomes a way of sustaining status quo socioeconomic power that negates the emancipatory impulse of Israel's God and Israel's defining narrative. Thus it is credible to see that the culmination of *creation* in Sabbath and the culmination of *exodus* in Sabbath together refuse Pharaoh's pursuit of commodity. This refusal is decisive for Israel's faith and Israel's management of the economy: Do not worship such objects or make them your defining desire! That radical either/or is precisely the issue of the first commandment. It concerns the two temptations Israel faced, a temptation toward idols and an economic temptation of Israel to commodity.

YHWH is a Sabbath-keeping God, which fact ensures that restfulness and not restlessness is at the center of life. YHWH is a Sabbath-giving God and a Sabbath-commanding God. Israel, for that reason, is always again to re-choose between "life and death" (Deut. 30:15–20), between YHWH and "the gods of your ancestors" (Josh. 24:14–15), between YHWH and Baal (1 Kgs. 18:21), between the way of Torah and the way of sinners (Ps. 1). Sabbath becomes a decisive, concrete, visible way of opting for and aligning with the God of rest.

That same either/or is evident, of course, in the teaching of Jesus. In his Sermon on the Mount, he declares to his disciples:

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matt. 6:24)

The way of *mammon* (capital, wealth) is the way of commodity, which is the way of endless desire, endless productivity, and endless restlessness without any Sabbath. Jesus taught his disciples that they could not have it both ways.

In the tradition of Matthew, the next verses (vv. 25–33) exposit the power of anxiety as the alternative to trust. It is, of course, in the same gospel tradition that Jesus comes to these familiar words:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (11:28–30)

"Weariness, being heavy-laden, yoke" are all ways of speaking of the commodity society of endless productivity. In context, this might have referred to the strenuous taxation system of the Roman Empire, for "yoke" often refers to imperial imposition. Alternatively, this may have referred to the endless requirements of an over-coded religious system that required endless attentiveness. With reference to imperial imposition or over-coded religion, Jesus offers an alternative:

come to me and rest! He becomes the embodiment of Sabbath rest for those who are no longer defined by and committed to the system of productiveness. In this role he is, as he is characteristically, fully in sync with the tradition of Israel and with the Sabbath God who occupies that tradition.

Because Jews and Christians continue to attend to these commandments as contemporary mandates, we may consider the ways in which the first commandment (concerning the emancipatory God and no other) and the second commandment (concerning images as commodities) pertain to our common life. It is, of course, the case that the commandments always pertain to the constancy of the human condition and to gospel possibility. But we may more particularly consider the peculiar and immediate way in which the first two commandments pertain to our present circumstance. The "choice of gods" is, in context, a choice of restlessness or restfulness.

The reality of restlessness in our contemporary society is obvious and epidemic. The identification of that restlessness perhaps goes back to the categories of Martin Luther concerning "faith and works," with the accent on "works" indicating a need to produce, perform, and qualify for the goodness of God. It is an easy move to take that Reformation accent on "works" and see in our current social restlessness evidence of not yet being good enough or having done enough. Or perhaps such restlessness is rooted in the Enlightenment discovery of the individual and the emergent ideology of individualism that cuts us off from the buoyant sustenance of community and tradi-

tion. In that ideology, one is not only free to secure one's own future without answering to any other; one is also required to secure one's own future, because a laissez-faire economics mandates that one must sink or swim by one's own effort, and it is never enough simply to tread water.

These rootages in Reformation and Enlightenment categories have created a contemporary circumstance in our society that generates an endless pursuit of greater security and greater happiness, a pursuit that is always unsatisfied, because we have never gotten or done enough . . . yet. The gods ("other gods") of this system are the gods of market ideology that summon to endless desires and needs that are never met but that always require yet greater effort.

The various elements of that restlessness of "not enough yet" and "greater effort required" are evident everywhere. But they are grounded in a theological desire for an ultimate reality of total satiation that is no reality at all. That theological "mis-commitment" is apparent in economic performance that can never fully satisfy. Such an intrinsic and systemic inadequacy is a recognizable echo of the ancient Hebrew slaves, harassed by many supervisors and taskmasters who kept reminding them of the inadequacy of their production.

— *The advertising game*, the liturgy of consumerism in the service of market theology, always offers one more product for purchase, one more car, one more deodorant, one more prescription drug, one more cell phone, one more beer. The message is that the "product" will make one safe or simply acceptable. But the

preliminary message is that one is not yet safe or not yet acceptable because one does not yet have the product. The production of "new and improved," the endless advance of style, and the always-new technology make old possessions inadequate and incomplete so that there is and must be an open-ended effort to satisfy the gods of commodity.

– In order to have economic leverage to pursue such commodity, *an educational advantage* is all but indispensable. As a result, there is a striving for improvement reflected in "teaching to the test" so that we may demonstrate not only competence but also superiority. Such a commoditization of education means that the study of tradition in artful, critical fashion is lost in the urge of test scores. In order that one may test well, moreover, there is an incessant pressure for admission to the right school and thus tutorial pressure to enhance performance.

– But because test scores are not sufficient for admission to the "best" educational programs, there must be *supplementary extracurricular activity*. This in turn requires constantly attentive parents who perform as chauffeurs to get to the next tennis or soccer or piano lesson so that a prospect for fun or nurture disappears into restlessness that becomes a process of accumulation of qualifying marks.

– And if young persons are cast as performers of social restlessness, the economy is a process of getting ahead or of staying even by the same route of accumulation. As a result, the restlessness becomes *a political effort* to own and control congress and court appointments in order that laws may be enacted concerning credit and tax arrangements and regulatory agencies to make way for predation

by the strong and well-connected in their desire for more. That restlessness inevitably has resulted in many "left behind" who cannot compete due to poor circumstance or opportunity or a defeatism that properly assesses one's hopeless chances in a rapacious system. The outcome of such endless striving for more is a social arrangement of the safety and happiness of the few at the expense of the many, a replica of the "pyramid" of ancient Pharaoh.

– Such economic advantage and the unsustainable standard of living that it permits require *an expansive and aggressive military* in order to control resources and markets so that the world economy, reflected in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, is designed to keep the gains flowing to the top of the pyramid of power and success. It is not accidental that the best graphic portrayal of this arrangement is a pyramid, the supreme construction of Pharaoh's system. Those at the top of the pyramid require huge amounts of cheap labor at a parsimonious "minimum wage" to make such a life possible.

– This limitless pursuit of consumer goods (and the political, cultural, and military requirements that go with it) in the interest of satiation necessitates over-production and *abuse of the land*, and the squandering of limited supplies of oil and water. Thus, the environment is savaged by such restlessness; the ordering creation is skewed, perhaps beyond viability. It is long since forgotten that rest is the final marking of creator and creation.

– The totem for such restlessness is perhaps *professional sports* (with major college sports only a subset of professional sports). The endless carnival of those sports constitutes a dramatic affirmation of power, wealth,

and virility in which "victory" is accomplished by many abusive exploitations, all in pursuit of winning and being on top of the heap of the money game.

– And of course, every facet of this restlessness is grounded in and produces anxiety that variously issues in aggression and finally manifests in *violence*:

- violence expressed in military adventurism that enjoys huge "patriotic" support;
- violence against the earth that is signaled by overuse;
- violence in sports, now with evidence of "paid injuries";
- violence in the neighborhood, with guns now the icon of "violent security";
- violence against every vulnerable population, sexual aggression against the young and the "war on the poor," which is accomplished by law and by banking procedures.

It is impossible, is it not, to overestimate the level of anxiety that now characterizes social relationships in our society of acute restlessness? That violent restlessness makes neighborliness nearly impossible.

None of this is new; all of it is much chronicled among us. All of it is as old as Pharaoh's Egypt. The narrative of the exodus is not a "one off" miracle. The portrayal of the slave camps of Egypt and the deliverance of the exodus do not constitute an isolated miracle. The narrative is a rendering of recurring social relationships legitimated by anti-neighborly gods who give warrant, in the interest of commodity, to redefine neighbors as slaves, threats, rivals, and competitors.

Only when we ponder the "other gods" and the systems they authorize can we appreciate the radical nature of these first two commandments. Into this arena of restlessness comes the God of rest who offers relief from that anxiety-producing system. This God has no hunger for commodities and does not legitimate commodity systems. This God is attentive rather to the cries of those "left behind" and comes to open futures by exit (exodus) from systems of restlessness into the restfulness of neighborliness.

The two commandments go beneath social performance and social appearance to the deep, elemental, defining issue of "God versus the gods." These gods of commoditization for the most part go unchallenged in our world. As a result, their exploitative systems go unchallenged and unnoticed. The abuse becomes normal. Restlessness is unexceptional. Anxiety is a given, and violence is unexamined as "the cost of doing business." It is all a virtual reality in which we become narcotized into a system that seems to be a given rather than a construction.

In that context, we have the exodus narrative that shows those gods of commodity to be powerless and without authority. They are phonies that we should neither fear nor serve nor trust:

They have mouths, but do not speak;
eyes, but do not see.

They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell.

They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;

they make no sound in their throat. (Ps. 115:5–7)

More than that:

Those who make them are like them;
so are all who trust in them. (v. 8)

They are the ones who champion anxiety and affirm restlessness. The adherents to the gods of restlessness find such a predatory society normal.

And then into our midst comes this other unexpected voice from outside the Pharonic system: “Let my people go!” (Exod. 5:1). It is not surprising that Pharaoh does not recognize the commanding voice of YHWH. Pharaoh’s system precludes and denies any such commanding voice that emancipates (v. 2). But YHWH persists: Let them go outside the system of restlessness that ends in violence. Let them depart the system of endless production, in order to enter a world of covenantal fidelity. In ancient context, they must depart from the Egyptian system in order to dance and sing freedom.

The departure from that same system in our time is not geographical. It is rather emotional, liturgical, and economic. It is not an idea but a practical act. Thus the Sabbath of the fourth commandment is an act of trust in the subversive, exodus-causing God of the first commandment, an act of submission to the restful God of commandments one, two, and three. Sabbath is a practical divestment so that neighborly engagement, rather than production and consumption, defines our lives. It is for good reason that Sabbath has long been, for theologically serious Jews, the defining discipline. It is also for good rea-

son that Enlightenment-based autonomous Christians may find the Sabbath commandment the most urgent and the most difficult of all the commandments of Sinai. We are, liberals and conservatives, much inured to Pharaoh’s system. For that reason, the departure into restfulness is both urgent and difficult, for our motors are set to run at brick-making speed. To cease, even for a time, the anxious striving for more bricks is to find ourselves with a “light burden” and an “easy yoke.” It is now, as then, enough to permit dancing and singing into an alternative life.

NOTES

1. Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 117.