

The Tao of the Sabbath

Some Biblical Sabbath Texts Considered
in the Light of the *Tao-te-ching*

By P. Richard Choi

The philosophy of Lao-Tzu and Chuang-Tzu has been described as a poetry that “has a truth that goes straight to the heart of nature and of man.” In the past it has inspired excessive missionary enthusiasm, which tended to portray the *Tao-te-ching* as a Chinese prophecy of Christ. In this article rather than dabble in all manner of East Asian religious texts we will simply attempt a dialogue between some biblical Sabbath texts and the *Tao-te-ching* of Lao-tzu.¹

At this point, it should be remembered that the classical writings of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu are not to be confused with the religions of Taoism. Not only did the Taoist religions begin to form about four centuries after Lao-tzu, who lived in the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (sixth century B.C.E.), but they had rather separate and possibly animistic beginnings.²

Cessation of Work

To many Sabbath keepers, especially young ones, Sabbath observance is often problematic because they do not know what to do on the Sabbath. The question—What is lawful to do on the Sabbath?—itself is, in a way, an oxymoron because the Sabbath commandment clearly tells us that on this day we are to do nothing:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work. (Exod. 20:8-10)³

Few, however, are comfortable with the idea that *doing nothing*, referred to in these verses, really means *doing nothing*. Nearly all feel that, here,

doing nothing means *doing something that is right*. This view has some biblical basis because it is based on the way God himself kept the Sabbath. We are told in Genesis 2:2 that “on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done.” Apparently, even as God the Sustainer of the world rested (presumably without doing any work), the operation of the world did not come to a screeching halt, but went on as usual.

It is clear that God must have been doing *something* on the Sabbath. Jesus apparently thought so when he replied to those who challenged his Sabbath healings: “My Father is working still [on the Sabbath], and I am working [on the Sabbath]” (John 5:17). In the hope of bringing some light to the conundrum of how it is possible on the Sabbath to cease from all work, and yet still be working, I offer in this article a perspective from Lao-tzu’s *Tao-te-ching* and the writings of Chuang-tzu.

Many words, besides the “way,” have been used to translate the Chinese word *Tao* (道): “Reason, Providence, Truth, Virtue, or even God.”⁴ No single word has been deemed completely satisfactory. In fact, the *Tao-te-ching* itself does not make any direct statement about the Tao. The very opening words of the book deny that it is possible to pin down the Tao: “The *Tao* that is described as the *Tao* cannot always be the *Tao*. The name that is given as the name cannot always be the name.”⁵

The understanding of this mysterious word *Tao* is probably best gained directly from the mystical text of the *Tao-te-ching* itself. According to the *Tao-te-ching*, the Tao is like: food that has not been seasoned or prepared (無味; ch. 35); a piece of wood that has not been improved upon (無名之樸; ch. 37)⁶; a regular rock (路路之石) instead of a well polished gem (ch. 39); an empty room or an empty bowl (ch. 11)⁷; or muddy (that is, untreated) water (濁; ch. 15). The Tao is pristine, like a very deep canyon that cannot be accessed (谷; ch. 15), and pure like a yarn that has not been dyed (素; ch. 19).

The common thread that runs throughout these metaphors is the quality of being untouched by humans. In other words, Tao for Lao-tzu refers to that which is in perfect harmony with the pristine rhythm of nature. In the words of Y. C. Yang, to experience Tao is “(1) to know nature, (2) to be natural, and (3) to interfere not with nature.”⁸

Interestingly, in this context, Lao-tzu uses the well-known expression *wu-wei* (無為)—“non-activity”—to sum up the experience of the Tao, referring to the most proper form of human existence. The

understanding of “non-activity” is perhaps best captured in the satirical and humorous writings of Chuang-tzu. In his second discourse (齊物論), he likens the human *doing* and *experiences* to a howling wind that passes through an immense forest, creating great noise and violent movements (2:5). Eventually, however, even the monstrous wind dies down and returns to the original calm, that is to say, to non-activity.

However, Chuang-tzu, seems to go much further than Lao-tzu because he relegates the existence that consists of activities and particularity to the realm of dreams. For example, after a dream he wondered whether he had dreamed he was a butterfly, or whether a butterfly had dreamed that it was Chuang-tzu (2:32). His point is that, like a wind or a dream, all forms of particular existence arise out of non-activity and non-being and eventually return to non-activity and non-being.

Even with his idiosyncratic understanding, Chuang-tzu, like Lao-tzu, understands the Tao as referring to a state of being that is in perfect harmony with the most pristine state of being. In fact, for Chuang-tzu, even, or perhaps particularly, the human intellectual activities of giving names to things and making distinctions between things are a deviation from the pristine state.⁹

To illustrate this point, Chuang-tzu likens human intellectual activity to captured monkeys that became upset when told they were going to get three acorns in the morning and four in the evening, but became elated when their captor changed his mind and told them that, instead, they would get four acorns in the morning and three in the afternoon (2:13; 朝三暮四). Similarly, human norms, knowledge, and doings merely amount to different ways of “monkeying around” with the same reality without being able to affect change in its fundamental makeup.

Chuang-tzu tries to demonstrate how far afield from the “real” reality the human conception of beauty is by saying that a fish would swim away in panic if the “most beautiful” woman were to approach it (2:23). For Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, anything that, to any degree, requires human intervention or articulation for its continued existence is a deviation from the Tao. Accordingly, for them, nonactivity refers to a doing that does not interfere with, that is to say, a doing completely at peace with the pristine rhythm of nature. It does not refer to not doing anything at all.

Seen from the perspective of the Tao, the biblical

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commandment not to perform any work on the Sabbath has interesting implications concerning human interference in nature. To begin, the call for cessation of work on the Sabbath implies that the work of humans, being that of subduing the creation under their domination (Gen 1:28), necessarily interferes with its pristine rhythm. Conversely, not doing any work on the Sabbath means turning aside from work in order to harmonize one's life with the pristine rhythm of the creation.

Thus, the biblical injunction to keep the Sabbath from sundown to sundown (Lev. 23:32), and to keep from igniting a fire on the Sabbath (Num. 32:35), are perhaps an order to put out, on the Sabbath, the artificial lights that keep humans awake and working at night and to return to the rhythm of nature, going to sleep when the sun sets and waking up when the sun rises.

The institutions of the sabbatical year and the jubilees also perhaps coincide with the principle of the Tao. On these years, according to Leviticus 25:8-15, the ground is to lie fallow, undisturbed in its original rhythm, debts canceled, and people allowed to return to their original ancestral homes.

Therefore, the Sabbath is not a day on which one does nothing. Rather, it is a day on which one does nothing artificial, that is, nothing that is external to or intrudes upon the original rhythm of nature. In many ways, then, the Sabbath is the Tao; and the Tao is the Sabbath. Like the Tao, the Sabbath lurks behind the entire realm of human existence—biological, social, political, and economic—and silently beckons us to return to the unadorned simplicity and rest of the original creation.

The Rhythm of the Sabbath

Although largely mystical in orientation, the *Tao-te-ching* is a utopian piece of literature with practical consequences.¹⁰ For example, it teaches that when the ruler conforms, without any deviation, to the rhythm of nature, everything will automatically turn out perfectly:

When I practice *wu-wei* (無爲), the people will,
Of their own accord, become transformed (化).
When I love keeping myself quiet, the people will,
Of their own accord, live correctly (正).
When I do no administration (無事), the people will,
On their own, become wealthy (富).¹¹

In my view, this kind of utopian vision has had something of a subversive effect on society. According to

Milton M. Chiu, "the Taoists tended to withdraw from government offices and urban living and seek seclusion and isolation in the mountain regions. They loved to live modestly and enjoyed nature."¹² Consequently, it comes as no surprise that many Chinese have come to feel that "[the *Tao-te-ching*] has no great value for the common, everyday practical relations of human life."¹³

Although it could be argued that the history of Sabbath keeping has shown, in some Sabbatarian circles, similar phenomena, and that in some ways the ideals of Isaiah 58:13-14, resemble those of *Tao-te-ching* 57, the utopian vision of the Sabbath is different from that of Lao-tzu in important ways.

First, the Sabbath calls for a regular rhythm of rest and work, not only allowing but blessing activities that, like farming, may not strictly accord with the original rhythm of nature. Second, the call for Sabbath keeping denies the possibility that there could be human activities that do not intrude upon and interfere with the rhythm of nature: all human activities interfere with nature's own rhythm, pure and simple. Otherwise, at least for those whose activities perfectly conform to nature, the Sabbath would be unnecessary. Human work is simultaneously sacred and intrusive.

The most fascinating concept in this connection is the notion that God kept the Sabbath (Gen. 2:3; Exod. 20:11). Why would God need to keep the Sabbath? It appears to me that even God's own creative work constitutes an intrusion upon the pristine condition of the universe that is even deeper than nature itself, and is itself subject to the second law of thermodynamics. Psalms 102:25-28 eloquently states:

Of old thou didst lay the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of thy hands. They will *perish*, but thou dost endure; they will all *wear out* like a garment. *Thou changest them* like raiment, and they pass away; but thou art the same, and thy years have no end. (Italics mine)

The creation is inherently unstable, and the inevitable entropy of all matter cannot be prevented. Perhaps the keeping of the Sabbath on a weekly basis and every seven years, in which the intrusive work of humans regularly comes to a halt for brief periods of time, is meant to delay the final and inevitable deterioration of the creation.¹⁴ In the *Tao-te-ching*, the rhythm of life consists of surge and ebb, development and destruction, and rise and fall. In this ever-constant "movement, flow, and change" that patterns life, one

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encounters the Tao at its lowest point, in the valley of existence.¹⁵

Similarly, the Sabbath is experienced as humans bring their activities to a halt, along with their insatiable desire to impose improvement upon nature, and descend with abandonment to where they can find the lowest possible common denominator with the rest of the creation. As harsh as it may sound, perhaps it is during these brief moments in which the intellect-induced activities of humans recede that the rest of creation catches its breath and heals itself.¹⁶

Conclusion

My aim in this article has been to explain the concept of cessation of work from the perspective of the Tao. The keeping of the Sabbath, as described here, is difficult to carry out even on the personal level, and it is even more unlikely to be carried out on a larger scale. But I wanted to raise to the level of consciousness the warnings, inherent in both the *Tao-te-ching* and the biblical concept of the Sabbath, that human activities are at odds with the rhythm of nature, and if allowed to continue unchecked, we will hasten our own self-destruction, which is perhaps evident from the unprecedented worldwide ecological and political disturbances that we are experiencing today.

By understanding the consequences of our nonstop activities, we can hopefully put things into perspective, and, God willing, delay the loss of what we cherish most: life.

Notes and References

1. Concerning the history and current trends, as well as the difficulties, involved in *Tao-te-ching* research, see Julia M. Hardy, "Influential Western Interpretation of the Tao-te-ching," *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*, L. Kohn and M. LaFargue, eds. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 165-88.

2. See W. J. Clennel, *The Historical Development of Religion in China*, rev. ed. (London: Percy, Lund, Humphries, 1926), 63-80, for details of the Taoist religions. See also, Y. C. Yang, *China's Religious Heritage* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1943), 143: "The Taoist philosophy and the Taoist Religions are very different from each other." I cite these older works because they are eyewitness accounts of the Taoist religion in pre-communist China.

3. All Bible quotations are from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

4. Yang, *China's Religious Heritage*, 148.

5. My translation. The opening bicola 道可道非常道 名可名非常名 is very difficult to translate but its basic meaning is reasonably clear.

6. Compare chapters 15, 19, 32; Lao-tzu very often uses 樸 as a metaphor of the nature's pristine rhythm.

7. According to some scholars, the word *empty* (虛), can have a metaphysical meaning. See Yong Ok Kim, *Nojarwa 21 Seghi* [= Lao-tzu and the 21st Century] (Seoul, Korea: Tong-Na-Mu, 1999), 1:189-95.

8. Yang, *China's Religious Heritage*, 155.

9. Kang-nam Oh, *Chuang-tzu* (Seoul, Korea: Hyn-Am-Sa, 1999), 88-89.

10. Benjamin Schwartz, "The Thought of the Tao-te-ching," in *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*, Kohn and LaFargue, 189-95. I agree with Schwartz that *Tao-te-ching* is not only mystical, but also "multifaceted" (189). I disagree that the mysticism of the *Tao-te-ching* is as metaphysical as Schwartz makes it out to be (compare pages 194-95).

11. Chapter 57; my translation.

12. Milton M. Chiu, *The Tao of Chinese Religion* (New York: University Press of America, 1984), 273; Yang, *China's Religious Heritage*, 159.

13. Yang, *China's Religious Heritage*, 152.

14. In chapter 51, Lao-tzu hints that he is not against productivity, but that his aim is to remind humans that the Tao is the fountainhead of all things, indeed life itself (道生之, 德畜之, 物成之, 物成之). Lao-tzu does not suggest a regular cycle of returning to the origin of life, unlike the Sabbath. Rather, he believes that if one remains with the Tao, the rest will take care of itself.

15. Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (Berkeley, Calif.: Shambhala, 1975), 192.

16. Compare Kang-nam Oh, *Tao-te-ching* (Seoul, Korea: Hyun-Am-Sa, 1995), 145, 275.

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