

THE ART OF REMEMBERING:

It Matters How We Tell the Sabbath Story

BY MATHILDE FREY

Mathilde Frey's presidential address at the November 2020 meeting of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies

This year's conference offers us the opportunity to explore the biblical theme of the Sabbath. At the same time, we acknowledge that we are on sacred ground of a millennia-old tradition of Shabbat belonging to the Jewish people who, even in the face of great tragedy, held to the customs of Sabbath-keeping. We honor their commitment as we examine the Sabbath, contemplate its meaning, and benefit from their legacy.

I remember the girl, 8 years of age, standing before a towering, gray-haired madman teacher, trembling. To the left of her outstretched arms the classroom held its breath; "1 ... 2 ... 3," the voice thundered as his thin stick struck her palms, "8 ... 9 ... 10." It happened only on Monday mornings. She swallowed her tears as she walked to her seat in third row. With her fingers sore and throbbing she picked up the pencil. Each letter had to be neat, legible, and on the line; the numbers had to fit perfectly inside the small, square boxes in the math notebook. He came to check. And, in her mind was Sabbath. When she arrived



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home, she told mom and dad. Mother's eyes turned sad and worried. How could anyone do that to her daughter? The father took the girl's hands, blew a kiss into her palms, and held them close. He did not speak, but from that day on he held her hand, always, and everywhere. And so, Monday mornings happened again.

Sabbath is a remarkable thing. Sabbath comes from a place which no human commands nor conquers. My furious teacher of the 1970s in Romania never got a hold of her. But neither have I. So, today, as I speak to you about Sabbath, I fear I may bring insult on what God called holy first, for I have no command over her, and I have not conquered her.¹ However, if I knew how to

search out Sabbath, how to let her channel my thoughts, speak my words, and sing my songs, I would listen to her rhythmic beat more often.

I was compelled, as I was preparing for this address, to open my German Bible. I have a Luther Bible: the 1984 edition. It is the classic German translation. The language is still somewhat archaic, and it includes the apocrypha. The year of publication coincides with my family's emigration from Romania to what then was West Germany. I acquired this Bible a few years later when I was a student in the Seminary in Bogenhofen, Austria. I received the news that my father needed surgery for a malignant brain tumor, and I wrote on the first blank page in my Bible, "Broken, to be made beautiful." He passed away too soon, and for a while Sabbath slipped away too. It is easy to go about without missing her, because Sabbath does not come to us like an intruder, forcing its way in, nor does she occupy space like a frozen stone in the landscape, a sculpture celebrating hero-like triumphs of centuries past.

The Sabbath's memory is of a different kind of texture. She objects to and mocks our long-held claim that "history belongs to the victors." Sabbath has built its own memorial of an anti-heroic, self-effacing aesthetic, multi-faceted, open and complex, retelling her story again and again with slightly ironic nostalgia, yet pushing us toward a grander narrative than one has ever envisioned. If it were not so, I contend, she would not have lasted through the madness of the ages. It is this Sabbath memorial, rich in paradoxes, that is able to link historical structures to ahistorical notions, merging the past with the future in a committed, all-embracing pledge to the present world. Reading her story in the ancient language of biblical eras is not then a technical, aseptic act to acquire more information, but a demanding vision that transforms our fears into joy and our apprehensions into resilience. Is such a Sabbath voice present in the biblical account? How would such a Sabbath story speak into a world that seems more alienated than ever, headed with giant leaps toward an unsustainable life? These are the questions I attempt to examine in this paper.

"The reason that God refrains from further activity on the seventh day is that he has found the object of his love and has no need of any further works."² These are Karl Barth's words about the Sabbath in his treatise on

the doctrine of Creation in the first chapter of Genesis. By "resting on the seventh day, He [God] does not separate Himself from the world but binds Himself the more closely to it."³ Barth defined the relationship between God and humans as the covenant of grace: "It was with man and his true humanity, as His direct and proper counterpart, that God now associated Himself in His true deity. Hence the history of the covenant was really established in the event of the seventh day."⁴ Barth then interpreted the covenant between God and humanity "as a covenant of grace and redemption to be fulfilled in Christ."⁵ In his treatment of the Sabbath commandments in the Pentateuch, Barth concluded that the Sabbath commandment is the fundamental command of all of God's commandments. It combines law and gospel; it is inclusive of all human beings;⁶ and it reminds the Sabbath observer of God as the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. In addition, Barth recognized an eschatological aspect in the Sabbath, a hidden relationship between the Sabbath and the day of YHWH as judgment day.⁷

Gerhard Hasel, the late Adventist theologian, echoes Barth's assertions:

The Sabbath is grounded in Creation and linked with redemption. It is an agent of rest from work and confronts man's religious and social relationship. It is a perpetual sign and an everlasting covenant. It relates to the meaning of time. Its nature is universal, and it serves all mankind. It is concerned with worship as well as with joy and satisfaction. The themes of Creation, Sabbath, redemption, and sanctification are inseparably linked together, and with the Sabbath's covenant aspect, they reach into the eschatological future.⁸



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While Barth's and Hasel's expositions on the Sabbath cause a theologian's mind and heart to soar to ever greater heights because she recognizes every other biblical-theological doctrine in the Sabbath (especially the Adventist theologian), the question is whether the 20-year-old college student's mind—the mind we are in the business of shaping—does that as well. Which, I am sure, we all understand is not the case. How then are we to go about telling the Sabbath? Should the doctrinal enterprise continue? Making it more precise in its wording, supporting it with another lengthy parenthesis list of biblical references taken out of context?

An award-winning film I greatly enjoyed shortly before I moved from the Philippines to the US was *Life of Pi*. The movie is a marvelous achievement of storytelling combined with scenes of visual mastery. The protagonist is “Pi” Patel, an Indian Tamil boy who explores issues of spirituality and metaphysics from an early age. After a cataclysmic shipwreck, he finds himself stranded with a ferocious Bengal tiger in a lifeboat. Together they face nature's majestic grandeur and fury in the Pacific Ocean on an epic survival journey of 227 days. The intense preoccupation with practical matters, and the problems Pi must solve, form the dramatic heart of the film. How will he secure food and clean water for himself and for Richard Parker, the tiger? How will he stay sane and hopeful? How will he be able to train the tiger so as not to be devoured by him? Pi has realized that caring for the tiger is also keeping himself alive. After his eventual rescue, the insurance investigators who listen to his fantastic story are reluctant to write it up for their report. It cannot be possibly be true. “Fine,” Pi says, “let me tell you a different version of what happened.” This other story also tells of the storm and everyone perishing in

the ocean except for Pi, but it contains the brutal details of cannibalism committed by humans fighting for their self-preservation, and so becomes the more “believable” story. As Pi Patel, years later, relates all this to a writer, an intriguing dialogue sets the end of the film:

Patel: “So which story do you prefer?”

Writer: “The one with the tiger. That's the better story.”

Patel: “Thank you. And so it goes with God.”

Writer: “It's an amazing story.”

Sabbath has no other record of origin or witness than the Bible. This is the general agreement among Bible scholars and ancient Near Eastern authorities. Likewise, the scientific quest for Sabbath in the field of source criticism has basically come to a standstill, which feels so fittingly ironic in the context of a day that derives its meaning and possibly its name from stopping one's labors. In other words, the “believable” story searched for with great vigor in the modern academic world is now unavailable, left with a blank page. Therefore, postmoderns have every reason to be disappointed. Alternative explorations did open up over the course of the last century. These approaches provided for a more favorable treatment of the biblical text, as well as allowing for the voice of the age-old Jewish scholarship to be heard on its own tradition. Nonetheless, in academia, the Sabbath is considered an unresolved item, rather ineffective for the serious and intellectual biblical scholar. Despite that, the same scholarly works have accomplished meticulous and comprehensive studies on the biblical Sabbath texts and recognize, and, may I also say, admire the Sabbath's prestigious place and function in the biblical

text. It is for this reason then, that scholars of other fields as well as non-scholars provide us with a wealth of literature on the topic of the Sabbath.

Among Adventist scholarship, Sabbath suffers, but for a few outstanding contributions, among them Sigve Tonstad's *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*, Sabbath has become a safeguarded but unexplored matter of study. I say this with great sorrow, as I think of the proposals and guidelines I have received to produce work that would defend the day's rightness in terms of its placing in our "Adventist" calendar, in terms of its beginning and ending time, or to confirm the kinds of things one would be allowed and not allowed to do on Sabbath, to name just a few such requests.

I believe Sabbath in a confined space, including a religious space, lasts for a while, for a few generations. Beyond that, Sabbath will stand as a signpost of deliverance, a freedom road worth travelling even under duress. For Sabbath is not like a fixed monument of stone but of spirit matter "never to pass away," as Heschel so insightfully writes.⁹ Freedom is its essence.

To set apart one day a week for freedom, a day on which we would not use the instruments which have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction, a day for being with ourselves, a day . . . of independence of external obligations, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow [humans] and the forces of nature—is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for [humanity]'s progress than the Sabbath? [edited for gender neutrality]¹⁰

Let Sabbath Speak

In the second part of this paper, I will address one

Sabbath text, Exodus 23:12. The intent is to let the voices lying dormant under or inside an age-old text be heard as witnesses to the Sabbath in a world in much need of spirit.

Exodus 23:12, reads: "Six days you are to do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease [*shabat*] for the sake of your ox and your donkey that they may rest, and the son of your slave woman be refreshed, as well as the stranger" (my own translation).

The rarely used verb "breathe, refresh" (*nafash*) in the Hebrew Bible sets this Sabbath commandment apart from the Decalogue versions in Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15. When this verb occurs again in the Hebrew Bible (Exod. 31:17; 2 Sam. 16:14) it designates the catching of one's breath during a time of pause.¹¹ In 2 Samuel 16:14, the verb speaks of king David and his people recovering from fatigue during their flight from Absalom. In Exodus 31:17, God is described as being refreshed after the work of creation. Scholars suggest that the anthropomorphic language employed for God's refreshment on the seventh day is used as an example for human Sabbath rest and refreshment.¹²

The context of Exodus 23:12 provides a particular aspect to understanding the verb "breathe, refresh" in relation to the Sabbath. Only three verses above, the text reads "You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings [*nefesh*] of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 23:9, NASB). The verb *nafash* relates to the cognate noun *nefesh*, which is often translated as "soul," but regards the whole life of a person. The resonance between the verb and the noun highlights the experience of the Israelite Sabbath-keeper who has been a stranger in Egypt and knows of weariness and depletion, and therefore, s/he will give opportunity for the slave and the stranger to breathe.

Just a few verses further into the context of Exodus 23:12, the law code calls for compassionate concern

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The Decalogue versions list “your stranger” (*gercha*) among those who should not work on Sabbath. Exodus 23:12 reads “the stranger” (*hager*). By eliminating the pronoun “your” and placing the definite article *ha* before the noun *ger*, the allusion to Hagar, the stranger and slave from Egypt, is unmistakable.

toward the oppressed, whose social and legal status made them potential victims of injustice: the poor, the widow, the orphan, the resident alien, and the slave. The law provides an analogue to God’s empathetic listening to the people’s cries during their sufferings in Egypt (Exod. 22:21–27; 23:6–11).¹³ The cry and compassion motif is fundamental to the entire book of Exodus, functioning like a trigger device: “The Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry” (Exod. 3:7). Voices cry out and God listens: voices we easily ignore, or pretend not to hear. As I wrote this last sentence, I almost made the mistake of using the German verb *überhören*, which would turn the sentence on its head when saying “voices, we overhear.” But, as the exodus story confirms, it is not we who “overhear” in English, it is we who ignore, and God who listens. But it is we who *überhören* in German and God is the one who does the *zuhören*. It is always God who listens, no matter the language we speak, or even when we do not speak.

Furthermore, Exodus 23:12 defines who is to catch a breath when the Israelite Sabbath-keeper rests, namely “the son/child of your slave woman.” This slave child is not mentioned in the Sabbath commandment of the two prominent Decalogue versions (Exod. 20:10; Deut. 5:14),



Hagar and Ishmael as a sculpture in Linköping, Sweden

but only the male and the female servant.¹⁴ Scholars have shed light on the slave son based on comparative Near Eastern studies. Ancient Near Eastern slave laws stated that the children issued from unions between a male slave and the wife given to him by the master belonged to the master (Exod. 21:4) and were identified as children of the male servant.¹⁵ However, in Exodus 23:12 the slave child is a slave woman’s son. Evidently, there is a divergence to be noted in the phrase, “the son of your slave woman.”

Intertextual and linguistic study on references to slave women and their children sheds more light on the Sabbath commandment in Exodus 23:12. The slave woman, the *amah* of the Sabbath commandments (Exod. 20:11; 23:12; Deut. 5:14), is the discarded one of Genesis 21. She has become useless, for the rightful heir has come. Hagar, the slave woman, the *amah* in Abraham’s house, was pushed out, together with her child.¹⁶

In Genesis 21, during Hagar’s expulsion from the household of Abraham and Sarah, Ishmael is not named,

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but twice identified as, “son of the slave woman” (Gen. 21:10, 13).¹⁷ Furthermore, the contextual motif of God who hears the cry of the weary and oppressed appears in Hagar’s story when the angel states that “God has heard the voice of the boy” (Gen. 21:17; cf. 16:11). Note, again, follow closely, listen: there is the cry; it was Hagar crying out in distress. We become acquainted with that cry when we hear about it the first time; “the Lord has listened to your affliction” the angel said in Genesis 16:7. Now she is in the same situation and worse, and she cried. There is the boy, no word or sound is coming from his lips, but “God heard the voice of the boy.”

The punch word in Exodus 23:12 comes as the last, with “the stranger.” Whereas the Sabbath commandments in Exodus 20:11 and Deuteronomy 5:14 mention the “stranger,” there is a difference to Exodus 23:12 that may be minimal to us but all the more important when read in the Hebrew language. The Decalogue versions list “your stranger” (*gercha*) among those who should not work on Sabbath. Exodus 23:12 reads “the stranger” (*hager*). By eliminating the pronoun “your” and placing the definite article *ha* before the noun *ger*, the allusion to Hagar, the stranger and slave from Egypt, is unmistakable. This deviation is even more interesting because of the previous three nouns, “your ox, your donkey, and the son of your female servant,” which all have the pronominal suffix “your” (*cha*) following the Decalogue texts. Only *hager*, “the stranger,” is different, and brings the sequence to an unexpected end. *Hager*, “the stranger”: she is living in Abraham’s house, carrying his child, but without name.

The context of Exodus 23:12 has done diligent preparation work to sensitize the Hebrew audience in recognizing the pun: “You shall not wrong a stranger [*ger*] or oppress him, for you were strangers [*gerim*] in the

land of Egypt” (Exod. 22:20 [20:21]); also, “You shall not oppress a stranger [*ger*], since you yourselves know the feelings of the stranger [*hager*], for you also were strangers [*gerim*] in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 23:9 NASB).

The Sabbath commandment of the Covenant Code is clearly put in the context of the theological motif of God’s compassionate listening to the cry of the oppressed. While we identify Hagar as the paramount “stranger” in the biblical text, an even more subtle rhetorical aspect of the narrative is that she is not the one doing what a stranger in good biblical language expresses as sojourning through the land. She is taken from her land Egypt, but Abraham is the one who “sojourns” (*gur*) in the land promised to his descendants, and then comes to acknowledge himself “a stranger [*ger*] among you” (Gen. 23:4).

Moreover, in a household where the stranger slave girl with child was faced with utter disgust, Sabbath disrupted the patriarchal world of Israel and called for equality among the members. In that sense, the Sabbath urges the redeemed Israelite to distance himself from the power structures of society and receive the stranger and the outcast as his own kin. In so doing, the Sabbath-keeper identifies with the slave woman, Hagar, the archetypal “the stranger” (*hager*). The Sabbath-keeper will bring good news to the afflicted mother, bind up her broken heart, and provide space for regeneration to her and the dying child (Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18).¹⁸

Tonstad introduced his monograph on the Sabbath with the words, “The seventh day is like a jar buried deep in the sands of time, preserving a treasure long lost and forgotten.”¹⁹ The mysteries of the jar are some of the most amazing stories in need of being recovered. Hagar, the stranger, the slave woman, is part of it; Ishmael is crying out with unspoken words. Who will hear their cries? Will

we let Sabbath tell its own stories?

Elie Wiesel, the holocaust survivor, teaching in a classroom of 20-year-old college students about life in the presence of tragedy, spoke of wounded faith, “I believe in wounded faith. Only a wounded faith can exist after those events.”²⁰ What is wounded faith? In Wiesel’s case, he became a witness to humanity for being human despite inhumaneness.²¹

I still remember the girl. She has accompanied me across the continents. She stood by as I searched for the meaning of the Sabbath, one who is able to hold sore palms, aching souls, and crying voices. Faith began in that classroom in a small town in Romania.

Endnotes

1. The feminine pronoun is in reference to the Talmud, speaking of the Sabbath as queen and bride, Shabbath 119a, “Rabbi Hanina would wrap himself in his garment and stand at nightfall on Shabbat eve, and say: Come and we will go out to greet Shabbat the queen. Rabbi Yannai put on his garment on Shabbat eve and said: Enter, O bride. Enter, O bride.”

2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III-1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 215.

3. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 223.

4. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 217.

5. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 222; Hans K. LaRondelle, “Contemporary Theologies of the Sabbath” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, ed. Kenneth A. Strand (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982), 280.

6. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III-4, 53–55.

7. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 56–58.

8. Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Sabbath in the Pentateuch,” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, ed. by Kenneth A. Strand (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982), 21.

9. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), 98.

10. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 28.

11. Daniel C. Fredericks, “שָׁפַח,” *NIDOTTE* 3: 133. The Akkadian *napasu* has a similar meaning, i.e., “to blow, breathe (freely), to become wide.” Cf. *HALOT* 1: 711.

12. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 245, 404; John H. Sailhammer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 309.

13. Paul Hanson, “The Theological Significance of Contradiction within the Book of the Covenant,” in *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology*, ed. George W. Coats and Burke O. Long (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 110–31; Eduard Nielsen, *The Ten Commandments in New Perspective* (London: SCM, 1967), 113–14; Felix Mathys, “Sabbatruhe und Sabbatfest: Überlegungen zur Entwicklung und Bedeutung des Sabbat im AT,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 28 (1972): 246.

14. The Samaritan Pentateuch replaced the anomalous reading of Exodus 23:12 with the standard “your male servant and your female servant” as indicated in the apparatus of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

15. Calum Carmichael, *The Laws of Deuteronomy* (London: Cornell

University Press, 1974), 87.

16. Hagar’s story as slave woman is recorded in Genesis 16, 21, and parts of 25. However, it is only in Genesis 21 where she is called *amah*. Genesis 16 and 25 refer to her as a *shifcha*. For a discussion of the semantics of the two Hebrew terms שִׁפְחָה and אִמָּה, see Alfred Jepsen, “*Amah und Schifchah*,” *Vetus Testamentum* 8 (1958): 293–97.

17. The Hebrew Bible uses the phrase “son of the female servant” again in the book of Judges regarding Abimelech, the son of a slave woman (Judg. 9:18), but more significantly in the book of Psalms (Pss. 86:16; 116:16). The Psalmist seems to allude to both Genesis 21 and Exodus 23, calling himself “son of your female servant” (Ps. 116:16) who cries out in distress and danger of life (116:8) and the Lord inclined his ear (116:2) and “loosed my bonds” (116:16). The Psalm culminates in the words, “Return to your rest, O my soul [*nefesh*], for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you” (116:7). All significant characteristics of the Sabbath commandment in Exodus 23:12 and its context are included in this Psalm: the theological motif of God’s compassionate listening to the cry of the one who is about to die, as well as the terminology of the Sabbath commandment—“rest,” “soul,” and “son of your maid servant.”

18. See Hans Walter Wolf, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 139: “These are people who are particularly without redress against any orders given to them. Though a master might not dare to exact work on the sabbath from his adult woman slave, he was much more easily able to exert pressure on her son, or on the foreign worker, who was all too easily viewed as being outside the sphere of liberty set by Yahweh’s commandment. This version of the sabbath commandment therefore picks up the borderline case: the sabbath has been instituted for the sake of all those who are especially hard-driven and especially dependent.”

19. Sigve Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 2.

20. Ariel Burger, *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel’s Classroom* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 82.

21. Burger, *Witness*, 240.



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