

**The Sabbath Commandment:  
A Social-Cultural Analysis of Deuteronomy 5:12-15**

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the Sabbath commandment (Deuteronomy 5:12-16) through the lens of social and cultural texture. Results reveal that the concept of a formal Sabbath for the entire society was counterculture and reformist to the customs of Egypt, which the Hebrew people had just fled. The results also offer implications for modern organizational leaders. Two companies, Chick-fil-A and Netflix, are examined for the methods used to encourage rest.

The modern workforce is experiencing significant increases in burnout and over-exertion. Maslach and Leiter (1997) offer a strong admonition to organizational leaders to take responsibility for their people, particularly when it comes to rest. However, a social and cultural texture analysis of the Sabbath commandment found in Deuteronomy 5 reveals that the call to rest may come from a higher power. This paper analyzes the Sabbath commandment (Deuteronomy 5:12-16) through the lens of social and cultural texture and reveal that, despite being an old command, it was also countercultural to the norms to which the Hebrew people were accustomed.

### Social and Cultural Texture

Social and cultural texture is one of five textures analyzed using Robbin's (1996) Social-Rhetorical Interpretation model. The social and cultural texture of a given text considers the nature of the text as a part of a society and culture. Social and cultural texture emerges from taking into consideration how the text perceives the world (specific social topics), how it reveals cultural attitudes and norms (common social and cultural topics) and how it uncovers the dominant cultural system (final cultural categories). Within the Sabbath commandment, there are various social and cultural texture insights.

The Sabbath Commandment, indeed the entire texture of the Ten Commandments, contains a reformist discourse, which is one of seven types of specific social topics that could appear in a text (Robbins, 1996). A reformist discourse is a type of sub-texture which views the world as corrupt because its social systems are corrupt. If these systems can be changed, then salvation can be present in the world. This type of response assumes that evil, and evil systems, can reformed through supernatural insight and instruction. The essential reformist discourse orientation is investigating into the systems of the world and recommendations for reforming it.

The Sabbath commandment is delivered at a time when the Hebrew people have just fled the captivity of Egypt and are wandering in the desert. This wandering period, and the Ten Commandments specifically, are interventions in which the old manners and customs of a sinful Egypt are replaced by God's chosen plan for how his people will act. The later section of the selected text encourages the Hebrew people to recall their time in Egypt, when they were in bondage and even the slightest rest was a blessing (Gill, 2011). In addition to encouraging them to rest (Deuteronomy 5:12), God is also commanding the Hebrew people to encourage their animals and servants to rest (Deuteronomy 5:15). This is a different schedule of work than the one to which the Hebrew people were accustomed. While there is some evidence that the Egyptian culture observed days of rest, it is believed that this observance was not extended to servants and slaves (Gordon, 2001).

Among common social and cultural topics, the select text contains insights into the economic exchange systems. This refers to the type of economy a society has and how it operates (Robbins, 1996). In that time, the Mediterranean world operates on an agrarian-based exchange system, where the ability to work the land and produce food was central to economic existence. God speaks to this system regarding the Sabbath as well, commanding the Hebrew people cattle, oxen and slaves to join in on the day of rest (Deuteronomy 5:14). God is commanding the economic system to halt every seven days and take time to rest. Gill (2011) recognizes this is not the first time a Sabbath commandment was issued. Indeed, the Hebrew people were also not the first to observe a Sabbath (Gordon, 2001). However, the Sabbath commandment is the first time the idea of rest included all of society, including slaves. Therefore, this is a new way of operating for the Hebrew people, who grew accustomed to the

day-after-day toil of life in Egypt. Even before Egypt, they were likely not used to the idea of the entire society halting for a daylong period every seven days.

The Sabbath commandment contains an interesting textual insight into the dominant culture of the time. The rhetoric used in the selected text is countercultural, one of the seven final culture categories of social and cultural texture (Robbins, 1996). This rhetoric rejects the characteristics of the dominant culture and points to a new and bright future if the people involved will work toward reform. As mentioned elsewhere, the Hebrew people had fled Egypt and were wandering the desert, on their way to the Promised Land. The Ten Commandments enter as a central part of the large covenant contract God's makes with the people (Phillips, 1973). This covenant, if followed, reforms the formerly dominant culture of Egypt and establishes a new set of manners and customs for the Hebrew people. The Sabbath commandment, as the longest single commandment in the set of ten, is implicated as a significant and important reform for the culture of the old to the culture of the new.

#### Discussion

Living and working so far in the future from the time of the ten commandments, it can be difficult to understand just how countercultural they were or to appreciate how many elements may still be countercultural to our time. The developed world is an industrial and informational economy that differs greatly from the agricultural economy of the Biblical world. However, it is a world where individuals are increasingly experiencing burnout and over-exertion (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Technology doesn't appear to be as labor-saving an innovation as it was originally hailed. Instead, it has created an always on culture where employees respond to emails and phone calls outside of traditional business hours. Despite its incredible connective ability, many workers report feeling increasingly alienated in their work. Factors such as these are outside of

worker's control, and therefore cases of burnout and overexertion are no longer just attributable to an individual not knowing their limits (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Just as God had commanded the Hebrew people to do with their servants, perhaps modern day leaders should take responsibility for the rest of both themselves and their followers. This can be difficult in a world that increasingly demands round the clock commerce. However, two companies stand out for their commitment to rest, through orthodox and unorthodox methods: Chick-Fil-A and Netflix.

For almost as long as its existence, Chick-Fil-A has remained committed to being closed on Sundays (Cathy, 2002). While the fast food chain's founder, S. Truett Cathy, initially created the policy to allow time for himself and his family to attend church service and enjoy some relaxation, the company continues to enforce closure of all its stores on Sundays. This closure includes locations that strongly favor seven-day-a-week service, such as airports and shopping malls. However, the firm believes giving its people the opportunity to rest is worth significantly more in the long term than the potential revenue to be had from another day per week of sales.

While Chick-Fil-A holds fast to the ancient practice of a Sabbath day every seven days, Netflix takes a little different approach. For the first few years of its existence, Netflix maintained a traditional vacation policy: N number of days off per year (Pink, 2010). However, employees found themselves responding to email on weekends and vacation days just to be able to get work done. Because of the round-the-clock nature of the work, Netflix had always lacked a clearly defined nine to five workday, yet it had a neatly spelled out vacation policy. In 2009 that changed. Netflix CEO Reed Hastings issued a new vacation policy: no policy. Hastings (2009, p. 66) claims, "We should focus on what people get done, not how many hours or days worked. Just as we don't have a nine to five day policy, we don't need a vacation policy." This policy

accomplishes two things: first, it provides more freedom and empowerment to each individual employee. In addition, it sends a clear message to employees: “when you need to, rest.”

Taken together, these two companies demonstrate the importance of encouraging rest throughout an organization. Over-exertion and extended periods of constant work will inevitably lead to burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Some organizations can issue more strict commands, such as the one God issued in Sabbath commandment or the policy observed by Chick-Fil-A. Other organizations may have to get creative in their rest policies, or perhaps scrap the policies altogether such as Netflix has done. Regardless of the tactic used, the end result is what truly matters: rest.

### Conclusion

A social and cultural texture analysis of the Sabbath commandment in Deuteronomy 5 reveals just how countercultural and reformist the concept of a regular Sabbath for an entire society was. While the Sabbath commandment had been issued in the past, it had not included provisions for every thing underneath the authority of the Hebrew people (Gill, 2011). Despite the changes of time and the significant differences in economic exchange, the concept of a Sabbath or time of rest seems just as countercultural to the modern developed world. Two companies, Chick-Fil-A and Netflix, approach the encouragement of rest from vastly different angles yet send the same important message to leaders of all organizations: let your people rest.

## References

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