

The Call of Abraham

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THE CALL
of ABRAHAM

ESSAYS ON THE ELECTION OF ISRAEL
IN HONOR OF JON D. LEVENSON



edited by

GARY A. ANDERSON

and

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Contents

List of Abbreviations	ix
Introduction	1

Part I

THE HEBREW BIBLE

1	Election in Genesis 1	7
	RICHARD J. CLIFFORD, S.J.	
2	Abraham's Election in Faith	23
	W. RANDALL GARR	
3	Can Election Be Forfeited?	44
	JOEL S. KAMINSKY	
4	Election and the Transformation of <i>Hērem</i>	67
	R. W. L. MOBERLY	
5	Job as Prototype of Dying and Rising Israel	99
	KATHRYN SCHIFFERDECKER	

Part II

RECEPTION OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

6	Does Tobit Fear God for Nought? GARY A. ANDERSON	115
7	Divine Sovereignty and the Election of Israel in the Wisdom of Ben Sira GREG SCHMIDT GOERING	144
8	The Chosenness of Israel in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha MATTHIAS HENZE	170
9	“A House of Prayer for All Peoples” (Isaiah 56:7) in Rabbinic Thought MARC HIRSHMAN	199
10	The Descent of the Wicked Angels and the Persistence of Evil JAMES KUGEL	210
11	The Election of Israel Imperilled: Early Christian Views of the “Sacrifice of Isaac” KEVIN MADIGAN	236
12	The Salvation of Israel in Romans 9–11 MARK REASONER	256
13	<i>Populus Dei</i> : Luther on Jacob and the Election of Israel (Genesis 25) BROOKS SCHRAMM	280

Part III

THEOLOGICAL ESSAYS

14	Election and Affection: On God's Sovereignty and Human Action <small>LEORA BATNITZKY</small>	309
15	Christ and Israel: An Unsolved Problem in Catholic Theology <small>BRUCE D. MARSHALL</small>	330
	Publications by Jon D. Levenson	351
	Doctoral Dissertations Supervised by Jon D. Levenson	357
	List of Contributors	359
	Index of Sources	361
	Index of Modern Authors	388

Abbreviations

HEBREW BIBLE/OLD TESTAMENT

Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy
Josh	Joshua
Judg	Judges
1–2 Sam	1–2 Samuel
1–2 Kgs	1–2 Kings
1–2 Chr	1–2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh	Nehemiah
Ps/Pss	Psalms
Prov	Proverbs
Eccl	Ecclesiastes
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Lam	Lamentations
Ezek	Ezekiel
Mic	Micah
Hab	Habakkuk

x Abbreviations

Hag	Haggai
Zech	Zechariah
Mal	Malachi
Tob	Tobit
Sir	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus

NEW TESTAMENT

Matt	Matthew
Rom	Romans
1 Cor	1 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians
Eph	Ephesians
Phil	Philippians
2 Thess	2 Thessalonians
Heb	Hebrews
Jas	James
Rev	Revelation

POST-BIBLICAL JEWISH TEXTS

Pseudepigrapha

<i>Apoc. Ab.</i>	<i>Apocalypse of Abraham</i>
<i>2 Bar.</i>	<i>2 Baruch (Syriac Apocalypse)</i>
<i>1 En.</i>	<i>1 Enoch (Ethiopic Apocalypse)</i>
<i>4 Ezra</i>	<i>4 Ezra</i>
<i>Jub.</i>	<i>Jubilees</i>
3 Macc	3 Maccabees
4 Macc	4 Maccabees
<i>Pss. Sol.</i>	<i>Psalms of Solomon</i>
<i>Syr. Jub.</i>	<i>Syriac Jubilees</i>
<i>T. Ash.</i>	<i>Testament of Asher</i>

<i>T. Levi</i>	<i>Testament of Levi</i>
<i>T. Zeb.</i>	<i>Testament of Zebulun</i>
<i>T. Mos.</i>	<i>Testament of Moses</i>

Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Texts

1QpHab	<i>Pesher Habakkuk</i>
1QS	<i>Serek Hayabad</i> or <i>Rule of the Community</i>
4QEn ^g	<i>4QEnoch^g</i>
4QpNah	<i>Pesher Nahum</i>
4QpPs ^a	<i>4Q Psalms Pesher^a</i>
4QpsJub ^a	<i>4QpseudoJubilees^a</i>
4QpsJub ^b	<i>4QpseudoJubilees^b</i>

Josephus

<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
<i>J.W.</i>	<i>Jewish War</i>

Rabbinic Writings

<i>b.</i>	<i>Babylonian Talmud</i>
<i>B. Bat.</i>	<i>Baba Batra</i>
<i>Ber.</i>	<i>Berakot</i>
<i>Deut. Rab.</i>	<i>Deuteronomy Rabbah</i>
<i>Exod. Rab.</i>	<i>Exodus Rabbah</i>
<i>Gen. Rab.</i>	<i>Genesis Rabbah</i>
<i>Lev. Rab.</i>	<i>Leviticus Rabbah</i>
<i>m.</i>	<i>Mishna</i>
<i>Mek.</i>	<i>Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael</i>
<i>Pesiq. Rab.</i>	<i>Pesiqta Rabbati</i>
<i>Qidd.</i>	<i>Qiddushin</i>
<i>Sanh.</i>	<i>Sanhedrin</i>
<i>Sifre Deut.</i>	<i>Sifre Deuteronomy</i>
<i>Sifre Num.</i>	<i>Sifre Numbers</i>

xii Abbreviations

S. 'Olam Rab. Seder 'Olam Rabbah

Sotab Sotab

t. Tosefta

Tanh. Tanhuma

Ter. Terumot

POST-BIBLICAL CHRISTIAN TEXTS

Barn. Barnabas

1 Clem. 1 Clement

Did. Didache

Clement of Alexandria

Strom. Stromata

Eusebius

Hist. Eccl. Historia Ecclesiastica

Irenaeus

Haer. Adversus Haereses

Jerome

Vir. Ill. De viris illustribus

Origen

Hom. Gen. Homilies on Genesis

Tertullian

Praescr. De praescriptione haereticorum

Pud. De pudicitia

Thomas Aquinas

In IV Sent. S. Thomae Aquinatis Scriptum Super Sententiis, vol. 4

STh Summa Theologiae

VATICAN II TEXTS

AG	<i>Ad Gentes</i>
GS	<i>Gaudium et Spes</i>
LG	<i>Lumen Gentium</i>
NA	<i>Nostra Aetate</i>

TEXTS AND VERSIONS

LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NAB	New American Bible
NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
Sam. Pent.	Samaritan Pentateuch
Syr.	Syriac

SECONDARY SOURCES: JOURNALS, PERIODICALS,
MAJOR REFERENCE WORKS, AND SERIES

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>AB</i>	<i>Assyriologische Bibliothek</i>
<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York, 1992.
ABS	Archaeology and Biblical Studies
ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
AnBib	Analecta biblica
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
BDB	Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford, 1907.
BFCT	Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie

<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
<i>BIOSCS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the International Organization for Septuagint And Cognate Studies</i>
<i>BJS</i>	Brown Judaic Studies
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>BZAW</i>	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CBQMS</i>	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
<i>CC</i>	Continental Commentaries
<i>CEJL</i>	Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature
<i>CRINT</i>	Compendia rerum iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
<i>CTR</i>	<i>Criswell Theological Review</i>
<i>CTU</i>	<i>Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit</i>
<i>DB</i>	<i>Dictionnaire de la Bible</i> . Edited by F. Vigouroux. 5 vols. 1895–1912.
<i>DJD</i>	Discoveries in the Judean Desert
<i>DSD</i>	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
<i>FAT</i>	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
<i>GKC</i>	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . Edited by E. Kautzsch. Translated by A. E. Cowley. 2d. ed. Oxford, 1910.
<i>HALOT</i>	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . By L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner and J. J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden, 1994–1999.
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
<i>HSM</i>	Harvard Semitic Monographs
<i>HSS</i>	Harvard Semitic Studies
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HTS</i>	Harvard Theological Studies
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>IBC</i>	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
<i>ICC</i>	International Critical Commentary
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>

<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods</i>
JSJSup	Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods Supplements
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSQ</i>	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
JTIS	Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplements
<i>Judaism</i>	<i>Judaism</i>
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament
L.A.B.	Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
NCB	New Century Bible
<i>NETS</i>	<i>A New English Translation of the Septuagint</i> . Edited by Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright. Oxford, 2007.
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
<i>OTP</i>	<i>Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> . Edited by J. H. Charlesworth. 2 vols. New York, 1983.
<i>RES</i>	<i>Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique</i>
<i>RES</i>	<i>Revue des études sémitiques</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>RRJ</i>	<i>The Review of Rabbinic Judaism</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLEJL	Society of Biblical Literature Early Judaism and Its Literature
SBLSCS	Society of Biblical Literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies
<i>SC</i>	<i>Sources chrétiennes</i> . Paris: Cerf, 1943–
SHR	Studies in the History of Religions
<i>STDJ</i>	<i>Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah</i>

SVTP	<i>Studia in Veteris Testamenti pseudepigraphica</i>
<i>Tarbiz</i>	<i>Tarbiz</i>
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 8 vols. Grand Rapids, 1974–.
TLOT	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by E. Jenni, with assistance from C. Westermann. Translated by M. E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, Mass., 1997.
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplements
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WC	Westminster Commentaries
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZBK.AT	Zürcher Bibelkommentare. Altes Testament
ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

Introduction

This volume of essays is a Festschrift for Professor Jon D. Levenson, the Albert A. List Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity School in honor of his sixty-fifth birthday. Unlike similar volumes, which tend to be collections of loosely related essays, we have opted to focus on one theme that we believe animates much of Jon Levenson's scholarship: the theological meaning of Israel's election. Thus we asked each contributor for an essay in his or her discipline focused as squarely as possible on that theme. Furthermore, we encouraged the authors to emulate the clear and concise style characteristic of both Levenson's scholarly and his more popular writing, in the hope of making this book accessible to lay readers and useful in the classroom setting. We think that the resulting volume not only engages the life-long work of Jon Levenson but sheds new light on a topic of great import to Judaism and Christianity and contributes to the ongoing dialogue between these two faith traditions.

Perhaps a brief historical overview is in order here. Up until the last decades of the twentieth century, much of modern biblical scholarship portrayed Judaism as an inherently particularistic religion that could never fully embrace the type of universalism that many claimed to have pervaded Christianity from its origins. That assumption was animated by a number of factors, but especially by the belief that Judaism's affirmation of Jewish election impeded its ability to break free from the confines of nationalistic particularism. In such a reading, Jesus and even

more so Paul are understood to be the towering figures who created a new religion by opening election to everyone and thus universalizing biblical religion. This view was undergirded by a tendency to confuse Enlightenment universalism with certain universalist strands of biblical thinking and to assume that modern universalism was indeed identical with the biblical strands of universalism found in a Christian approach to scripture.

This problematic understanding of Judaism and Christianity has been critiqued from differing angles by scholars in a number of fields. One of the most important and theologically incisive voices on this topic has been that of Jon D. Levenson. His careful but very wide-ranging scholarship on the Hebrew Bible and its theological reuse in later Judaic and Christian sources has influenced a generation of Jewish and Christian thinkers. Levenson's seminal book, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, demonstrated that both Judaism and Christianity equally embraced the notion of election, even if they understood the meaning of their elect status in unique ways. Rather than rejecting the Hebrew Bible's election theology, Christianity amplified it, as seen most clearly in the way that Jesus's life, death, and resurrection mirror major narrative and ritual texts from the Hebrew Bible. Levenson went on to demonstrate that those who understood Jesus and Paul as universalists were imposing a set of modern and wrongheaded assumptions on these figures, both of whom loudly affirmed the notion of Israel's special election.

To be clear, Levenson does not go on to argue that the shared affirmation of election theology means that the fundamental truth claims of these two religions can be easily reconciled. On the contrary, he demonstrates that in many ways Judaism and Christianity are divided by a common heritage because their understandings of biblical election theology are at once structurally analogous and unique. While this might be a cause for despair, Levenson's thinking has actually laid the groundwork for a more authentic Jewish-Christian dialogue inasmuch as he has helped both Jewish and Christian thinkers understand their deepest theological claims more clearly and cogently.

Focusing on the theme of Israel's election, this volume seeks to present to a broad audience the rich theological dialogue that Professor

Levenson's thoughtful and wide-ranging scholarship has given rise to over the last three decades. These essays span a host of fields including: Hebrew Bible (Clifford, Garr, Kaminsky, Moberly, Schifferdecker), apocryphal and pseudepigraphic literature (Anderson, Goering, Henze, Kugel), New Testament (Reasoner), rabbinics (Hirshman), history of Christian exegesis (Madigan, Schramm) and modern theology (Battitzky, Marshall). They are penned by Jews, Catholics, and Protestants. A number of essays take up particular insights in Levenson's work, thus illuminating them from a range of disciplines and perspectives. All the contributors to this volume have had their thinking deepened by Levenson's thoughtful scholarship, and our lives have been enriched by our personal and professional interactions with Jon.

We write this with the knowledge that Professor Levenson is still hale and healthy and busy working on more contributions to the study of the Hebrew Bible. We wish him many more productive years and the traditional blessing that he reach a hundred and twenty years!

Gary A. Anderson and Joel S. Kaminsky

PART I



The Hebrew Bible

CHAPTER 1



Election in Genesis 1

RICHARD J. CLIFFORD, S.J.

Genesis 1:1–2:4 (hereafter Gen 1) is a composition of the Priestly source (P), a source that has among its interests Israel's distinctive public worship and the chronology of events in the story of the human race and of Israel. The P preamble to the Pentateuch, Gen 1, narrates the coming into being of heaven and earth (the Hebrew idiom for the universe), an event that took place long before the origin of Israel in the person of its ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. One would expect therefore that P, given its care for chronology, would in Gen 1 have studiously avoided anachronistic references to Israel, and especially to its liturgical life, which for P began at Mount Sinai (Exod 19–Num 10). This article explores the surprising fact that Gen 1 contains covert references to several defining features of Israel, viz., the Sabbath, the temple, the dietary laws, and the conquest. Despite its care for proper chronology, P evidently shared the ancient conviction that

important elements of the world “were there from the beginning” and acquired their significance at their origin. If one may borrow from computer language, P’s references to Israel are “locked” in the disk of Gen 1 and are accessible only to those possessing the required code.

If allusions to Israel are indeed locked in Gen 1, the fact has implications for the meaning of election in the Bible. The Gen 1 allusions to Israel have been read in at least two ways. According to the first, Gen 1 is communicating to insiders that God’s real interest in creating the world was Israel; others nations are mentioned, but they are present only as backdrop and audience for God’s business with Israel. According to the second, the foreshadowing means that from the beginning there existed a complementarity between the elect nation and the other nations. The tasks and hopes of Israel and the nations, respectively, might be differently expressed and differently timed, but they are closely related. Israel is an example of a nation doing important things in its own way while sharing the experience and aspirations of other nations.

TWO PRELIMINARY COMMENTS ON THE GEN 1 COSMOGONY

Genre and Structure

Like many ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies, Gen 1 is introductory, preparing readers to appreciate the great literary work that follows. As Mark Smith points out, “the placement of Genesis 1 at the very beginning of the Bible stakes a claim, asserting the primary status of its account over and above other biblical versions of creation.”¹ Given the pronounced theocentrism and traditionalism of the ancient Near East, scribes assumed that the meaning of a reality was clearest at the moment of its creation, when God’s imprint, so to speak, was freshest and most visible. Gen 1 lets the reader know what to look for in the vast and compendious Pentateuch, not only in the primeval history, but in Gen 12–50, and indeed in the entire Pentateuch.

One of the most striking features of Gen 1 is its seven-day structure. That structure can help us see the introductory function of Gen 1. The six days on which God works are arranged in matching panels (days 1–3 and 4–6), with God’s day of cessation from work placed out-

side the series in the climactic seventh spot. (See table below.) With qualifications that we will discuss below, days 1–3 depict the creation of the *domains* of sea, sky, and earth, and days 4–6, the creation of *their mobile inhabitants*, classified according to their means of locomotion—wings flapping in the sky, fins propelling (*rāmas*) through the sea, animals crawling with legs (*rāmas*) or walking on all fours on land. In the perspective of Gen 1, life is concretized as movement; what moves on its own power is alive. Days 4–6 display the energy permeating the universe. Day 7, however, is a reminder of the text’s profound theocentrism, drawing attention to the creator rather than the creation.

The Pre-creation State (1:1–2)

Panel I: Creation of Static Domains	Panel II: Creation of Their Mobile Occupants
Day 1. 1:3–5 [1] Light/darkness	Day 4. 1:14–19 [5] Luminaries
Day 2. 1:6–8 [2] Water/dome/sea	Day 5. 1:20–23 [6] Fish and birds
Day 3. 1:9–13 [3] Water/dry ground (vv. 9–10) [4] Plant life (vv. 11–13)	Day 6. 1:24–31 [7] Land animals (vv. 24–25) [8] Human beings (vv. 26–31)
Day 7: Post-creation Rest. 2:1–3	

Though appearing at first reading to be rigid, the text actually alternates between fixed and flexible. The “two-panel” scheme (vv. 3–13 // 13–31) conflicts with the act-oriented scheme in days 1–4. God’s shaping of “heaven and earth” is completed on the fourth day, not the third, for only on the fourth day is the sky hung with the greater and lesser lights. The panels therefore overlap: the making of domains (the chief work of days 1–3) is completed only on day 4, whereas the populating of the domains (the chief work of days 4–6) gets underway on day 3.

“Heaven and earth” is the Hebrew idiom for the universe in which each noun is qualified by the other. As Luis Stadelmann notes, “the term *ʔrs* means primarily the entire area in which man thinks of himself

as living, as opposed to the regions of heaven or the underworld.”²² “The heavens” in Gen 1 is more accurately rendered “sky.” God’s heaven is a completely different reality, existing prior to any creation, and inhabited by the perennially existing *bēnē ʿēlōhīm*, lit. “sons of God,” heavenly beings. The universe depicted in Gen 1 is best described in Shakespeare’s phrase, “O brave new world, That has such people in’t!” (*The Tempest* 5.1). The new world is deliberately put in parallel to the heavenly world and its inhabitants while remaining quite distinct from it. In this new heaven and earth, earthly beings will play a role analogous to the role played by beings in the heavenly world. Earth’s inhabitants are even called *šābāʾ*, “host,” in Gen 2:1, a term that elsewhere refers to the heavenly host (e.g., 1 Kgs 22:19; Pss 103:21, 148:2). Psalm 115:16 catches both the parallelism and the difference: “The heaven of heavens belong to YHWH, but earth he has given to human beings.” The priority of the heavenly beings and their respectful relationship to earthlings is nicely expressed by the divine assembly’s decision to create human beings “in our image, after our likeness” (Gen 1:26).

Many ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies have as their purpose to ground present-day realities in the primal moment when the gods laid down the fundamentals of the universe. Several cosmogonies describe the ordering of heavenly bodies that determine the reckoning of time and thus of feast days honoring the gods. In other cosmogonies, the construction of a temple is part and parcel of creation. In still others, kingship is an original feature of the primordial world. Many cosmogonies lay down the basic features that constitute a particular people, e.g., they mention the particular land on which the people will live.

Dating and Original Context

The Pentateuch reworks many preexilic traditions and presents them in a new synthesis for an exilic audience. “Exilic” can refer both to those actually suffering exile in the sixth century B.C.E. and to those experiencing the crisis of meaning that came in its wake decades after the physical event. Such audiences needed to hear Gen 1 highlight relevant themes in order to restore their faith and sense of hope. Among the relevant themes would have been God’s sovereign power and free commitment to “heaven and earth,” the extraordinary worth of human be-

ings, the divine intent that the species of “man” continue in existence through progeny and through possessing land to sustain itself, and the reaffirmation of the importance of key Israelite institutions such as the Sabbath, the temple, and dietary laws. To all of these issues Gen 1 has something to say, for as we shall see, the Pentateuch was designed in part to help anxious and displaced exiles reread their traditions as promise and assurance. Gen 1 directs them to read their traditions in just that way.

THE SABBATH

And since God finished on the sixth³ day the work he had been doing, he ceased (*šābat*) on the seventh day from all the work he had been doing. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, for on it he ceased (*šābat*) from all the work he had done in creation.⁴ (Gen 2:2)

The most obvious connection between Gen 1 and later Israelite institutions is God’s six-day work week followed by a seventh day of cessation from work. Elsewhere in the Bible, and especially in the P source in the Pentateuch, the seventh day of the week is called the Sabbath (*baššabbāt*), but the word does not occur in Gen 1. Genesis 1 twice uses the similar-sounding verb *šābat*, “to cease (doing an act),” to characterize the seventh day (Gen 2:2, 3). There is debate on whether *šābat* and *šābbat* are etymologically related and, if they are, whether the noun comes from the verb or the verb from the noun. To be precise, Gen 1 does not describe the institution of the Sabbath, but simply shows God working six days and ceasing from work on the seventh. The NRSV and NABRE render *šābat* in Gen 2:2, 3 “rested,” but LXX and NJPS render more accurately “ceased (working),” for the primary meaning of *šābat* is to cease doing something, not to rest. Nonetheless, Gen 2:2–3 provides a basis for the later institutionalization of seventh-day rest.

The first occurrence of the word Sabbath in the Pentateuch is in the P verse, Exod 16:23, in which Moses tells the people: “This is what the YHWH meant: Tomorrow is a day of rest, a holy Sabbath (*šabbātôn šabbat qōdeš*) of YHWH.” In the largely P narrative in Exod 16, Israel

encounters for the first time, it seems, God's way of acting in a six-plus-one day mode, for the people had not yet been commanded to observe the Sabbath. They only came to know the six-plus-one manner of acting through their experience of receiving the manna. Each day they gathered the day's yield. Gathering more did not increase the yield, nor did storing up manna for the next day prove useful, for stored-up manna became maggots and foul smelling (vv. 17–20). On the seventh day, the Sabbath, things were different. On the day before Sabbath, the people were told to lay in a two-day supply and were guaranteed that the stored portion would not become foul. They were “to stay where they were,” i.e., not go out and gather. “So the people remained inactive (*šābat*) on the seventh day” (vv. 29–30 NJPS). Through their formative experience in the wilderness, the people came to learn God's rhythm in working and dealing with them.

The people's wilderness experience prepared them for the next stage of “learning the Sabbath.” It was at Sinai, according to P, that Israel came to be a nation with a law. In the Decalogue (Exod 20:8–11), the people's wilderness experience of the manna distribution becomes concretely expressed as a commandment. In Exod 25:1–31:17, Moses gives seven speeches detailing how the people are to build the tabernacle. Six of the speeches concern its construction, and the seventh (Exod 31:12–17, P) concerns the Sabbath: “You shall nonetheless keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, YHWH, sanctify you” (NSRV). (“Nonetheless (*ʾak*)” in the sentence indicates that the Sabbath is to be observed even while the tabernacle is constructed.) Six days of work plus one of rest follows the order of creation. Israel's observance of that order in the Sabbath makes known to other nations that they are God's special people. Sabbath observance is thus a sign of the “covenant for all time” (Exod 31:16): “It shall be a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel. For in six days YHWH made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he ceased from work and was refreshed” (Exod 31:17 NJPS).

In Priestly theology, God brought the world into being in a particular rhythm of work and cessation from work. Israel has the great privilege of knowing that rhythm through experience and command-