

The Sabbath Commandment in Deuteronomy 5:12–15

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A comparison of the Sabbath commandment in Exod 20:8-11 with the same commandment in Deut 5:12-15 is intriguing. On one hand, the similarities between the Decalogue in Exod 20 and the one in Deut 5 are impressive. On the other hand, there are a number of differences which may puzzle the reader and may raise all kinds of questions. In this short article we will list the similarities and differences first, take a brief look at the Sabbath commandments in Exod 20 and Deut 5 individually, and then focus more extensively on the Sabbath commandment as found in Deuteronomy.

I. Similarities and Differences Between Exod 20:8-11 and Deut 5:12-15

The following list contains the Sabbath commandments of Exod 20 and Deut 5 in a rather literal translation. Such a display allows for an easy comparison. Similarities appearing in exactly the same places are underlined. Those found in different places within the two passages are printed in bold.

Exodus 20

⁸ **Remember** the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath of Yahweh your God; you shall not do any work, you and your son and your daughter, your male and your female servant and your cattle and your sojourner within your gates.

Deuteronomy 5

¹² Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy, as Yahweh your God commanded you.

¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

¹⁴ but the seventh day is a Sabbath of Yahweh your God; you shall not do any work, you and your son and your daughter and your male servant and your female servant and your ox and your donkey and any of your cattle and your sojourner within your gates, so that your male servant and your female servant may **rest** as well as you.

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¹¹ For in six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore Yahweh blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹⁵ **You shall remember that** you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Yahweh your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore Yahweh your God commanded you to do (observe) the Sabbath day.

This list shows that there is a high degree of correspondence in the first three verses of both lists. Yet, even in this part the Sabbath commandment in Deuteronomy is longer than in Exodus.

(1) Whereas Exod 20:8 starts with “remember,” Deut 5:12 begins with “observe.” The word “remember” is also found in Deuteronomy, but only in 5:15. Although different words are used, the concept is the same. Both verses—Exod 20:8 and Deut 5:12—emphasize that the Sabbath should be kept holy. Deut 5:12 adds a phrase which is not found in Exodus “as Yahweh your God commanded you.” Thus, the first verse of the Sabbath commandment in Deuteronomy contains a homiletical expansion. It reminds the hearers and readers of the ultimate source of authority. We will return to this important observation later.

(2) Exod 20:9 and Deut 5:13 are completely identical.

(3) The third verse in both lists is again quite similar. Deuteronomy inserts “and” before “male servant,” adds “your ox and your donkey” and the word “any” (literally: “all”) before “your cattle,” and elaborates on the male servant and female servant at the end of this verse. The term “to rest” is found here, which in Exodus occurs in the last verse. Whereas in Exod 20:11 God rested, in Deut 5:14 humans rest.

So far we have mainly found expansions of the Exodus text in Deuteronomy. However, with the last verses little similarity is found between the two Sabbath passages. A number of words correspond, namely “Yahweh,” “the Sabbath day,” “therefore,” “earth/land,” and “for/that.”¹ But the theme is quite different. Whereas Exodus focuses on creation, Deuteronomy stresses deliverance from Egypt and thus redemption. Theologically, the two concepts are complementary² and point to the rich theological meaning of the Sabbath.³ The Sabbath reminds us of creation. The Sabbath is also clearly linked to salvation. Deuteronomy expands its meaning by making it a memorial of redemption.

Looking at some important vocabulary the following picture emerges:

¹“Earth” and “land” are translations of the same Hebrew word. However, in Exodus the entire earth is addressed, whereas in Deuteronomy the term is limited to the land of Egypt. The English words “for” and “that” are also translations of the same Hebrew term.

²Cf., P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 157.

³Cf., Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, Word Biblical Commentary 6A (Dallas: Word, 1991), 118.

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Term or Phrase	Number of Occurrences in Exodus	Number of Occurrences in Deuteronomy
Sabbath	3	3
Day	6	4
To sanctify / keep holy	2	1
Yahweh	3	4
(Yahweh your God)	1	4
(as Yahweh your God has commanded you)	–	2
Six	2	1
Seventh	2	1
You shall / shall not do all your work	2	2
To serve / servant	1	4
(your male servant and your female servant)	1	2
To do	3	3
(to do—God)	1	–
(to do—humanity)	2	3
The heavens, earth, sea, and all which is in them	1	–

This list points to some of the important differences in both passages. Most of them are due to the expansions in Deuteronomy and the different reasons for Sabbath keeping provided in both. The emphasis on creation in Exod 20:8-11 produces creation-related language (“the heavens, earth, sea, and all which is in them”), highlights the six days of creation and the seventh day of rest more frequently and uses the verb “to do” not only for humanity but especially for God in his creative activity, whereas the emphasis on redemption in Deut 5:12-15 stresses servitude and serving as well as liberation from it. Therefore, in the Deuteronomy passage the word family “to serve” is employed more often than in the Exodus passage.

The phrase “as Yahweh, your God, has commanded you” is found twice in Deut 5:12-15, but not at all in Exod 20:8-11. This accounts for the more frequent use of the divine names in the Deuteronomy passage. Whereas Exod 20:8-11 uses most of the time one of God’s names, “Yahweh,” Deuteronomy employs the phrase “Yahweh, your God” only. Thus, it is more personal in tone. On the other hand, the Exodus passage sounds more universal.

Whereas Deut 5 mentions the act of keeping the Sabbath holy once, Exod 20 uses the Hebrew word twice. However, in Exod 20 it is humanity that is once called to keep the day holy and God who makes it holy. The reference to Gen 2:2-3 requires a repetition of the term in Exod 20. God’s sanctification of the Sabbath is absent in Deut 5 because the reference to creation is replaced by the reference to the Exodus experience.

Nevertheless, both commandments share a common outline:

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1. First command:	Remember / keep the Sabbath holy	Exod 20:8; Deut 5:12
2. Second command:	To work six days	Exod 20:9; Deut 5:13
3. Third command:	Not to work on the seventh day	Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14
4. Reasons:	Creation / Salvation	Exod 20:11; Deut 5:16

The major difference between the two forms of the Sabbath commandment is not in the calls to remember the Sabbath but in the reasons provided for keeping it holy. Even though the reasons are different, the charge to keep it remains the same. However, the origin of the Sabbath is not stated in Deuteronomy. The Sabbath is not instituted because of the Exodus from Egypt. The Sabbath is based on creation. But the people are called to obey the commandment because of creation and because of salvation, as experienced in the exodus.

II. The Sabbath Commandment of Exodus 20

The Sabbath commandment in Exod 20 starts and ends with the same three Hebrew words, forming what is called an inclusion. An inclusion is like an envelope encompassing other material.

Remember	<i><u>the day of the Sabbath to keep it holy.</u></i>	Exod 20:8
Therefore Yahweh blessed	<i><u>the day of the Sabbath and made it holy</u></i>	Exod 20:11

In Exodus 20 there is a special emphasis on the holiness of the Sabbath. This holiness and the divine blessing of the day are associated with a historical act, namely the six-day creation. The commandment can be outlined as follows:

The holiness of the Sabbath: command	Exod 20:8
Work on six days: command	Exod 20:9
No work on the seventh day: command	Exod 20:10
The holiness of the Sabbath: God's example in creation and his blessing	Exod 20:11

Exodus 20:11 is important in that it makes a statement about the origin of the Sabbath and offers a reason for its observance, namely God's creative activity. God created the earth and life on it and instituted the Sabbath right in the beginning of world's history. Verse 11 discusses what the Lord was doing during the creation week. Four areas are mentioned: heaven, earth, sea, and all that is in them. However, with regard to the seventh day three activities of God are stressed: He rested, blessed the Sabbath, and made it holy. They are found in the same order in Gen 2:2-3.⁴

⁴The term "to rest" is repeated in Gen 2:3. The verb "to rest" in Gen 2 is different from the verb "to rest" in Exod 20. In Gen 2 *šābat* is used, pointing to the Sabbath, which is not directly mentioned in Gen 2. Exod 20, which talks about the Sabbath, uses a synonym (*nūaḥ*).

III. The Sabbath Commandment of Deuteronomy 5

The Sabbath commandment in Deut 5 also contains an inclusion, but it is somewhat different. Instead of the three Hebrew words found in the beginning and at the end of the Exodus passage, only two correspond directly in Deuteronomy, namely “the Sabbath day.”⁵ The infinitive “to keep it holy” is replaced by the Hebrew word translated “to keep.” However, in addition, we find a phrase at the beginning and the end of the passage that does not occur in Exodus:

Observe <i>the day of the Sabbath</i> to keep it holy	
as <i>Yahweh your God commanded you</i>	Deut 5:12
. . . therefore <i>Yahweh your God commanded you</i>	
to keep <i>the day of the Sabbath</i>	Deut 5:15

Deuteronomy 5 stresses that the keeping of the Sabbath is commanded by “the LORD your God.” In addition, there is a strong emphasis on God’s redemptive activity, which—like creation in Exod 20—is a historical act. The Sabbath commandment of Deut 5 can be outlined in the following way:

Observance of the Sabbath: commanded by Yahweh your God	Deut 5:12
Work on six days: command	Deut 5:13
No work on the seventh day: command	Deut 5:14
Observance of the Sabbath: commanded by Yahweh your God who has led you out of slavery	Deut 5:15

Whereas in Exodus the remembrance of the Sabbath is associated with creation, in Deuteronomy God’s people are called to keep Sabbath as they remember their liberation. In both cases the element of remembering and looking back at the great things which the Lord has done is present. God acts in human history. His mighty acts are remembered when keeping the Sabbath. But the act of remembering has also a prospective outlook, i.e., remembering in order to obey.

IV. Deuteronomy’s Sabbath Commandment in Its Context

After having observed the basic similarities but also the differences between the two Sabbath commandments, we now have to ask the question, How can we explain these differences?

We have noticed that the Sabbath commandment in Deut 5 contains the phrases “as Yahweh your God commanded you” and “therefore Yahweh your God commanded you.” These phrases differ only with regard to the first word. However, such phrases are not limited to the Sabbath commandment. “As Yahweh your God commanded you” is repeated in the next commandment: “Honor

⁵Cf., Christensen, 117.

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your father and your mother, as Yahweh your God has commanded you . . .” (Deut 5:16). It is found again in Deut 5:33 outside of the Decalogue, but still in the same context. Whereas the singular was used within the Ten Commandments, now the plural is found: “. . . as Yahweh your (plural) God has commanded you (plural).” A similar formula occurs in Deut 5:33; 6:1, 17, 20, 25. The plural may indicate that in Deuteronomy we have a “sermon” addressed to the people.

Moses is speaking to Israel. He reiterates the Ten Commandments as well as other laws and admonitions. While reciting the Decalogue he inserts the words “as / therefore Yahweh your God has commanded you,” thus emphasizing that the Ten Commandments are of divine origin and are authoritative. In Exod 20:1 we read: “Then God spoke all these words, saying.” Deuteronomy is different: “The LORD spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire, while I was standing between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain. He said . . .” (Deut 5:4-5). Obviously, in Exodus we find the Ten Commandments as proclaimed by the Lord,⁶ whereas in Deuteronomy Moses affirms the Decalogue.

While Moses repeats the Ten Commandments, he apparently comments on them in several places. These comments are minor and do not alter the meaning or authority of God’s law. In the Sabbath commandments only the reasons for keeping the seventh day differ. In Deut 18:15, which points to Jesus, God calls Moses a prophet. As the people of Israel were obliged to obey what Moses told them in the name of the Lord, so people are called to obey the prophet like Moses, Jesus,⁷ who proclaimed his law in the Sermon on the Mount. The comments of Moses on the Decalogue were made under prophetic inspiration. His comments provide additional insights into the will and character of God, although on the literal level they were not part of the Decalogue proclaimed by God on Sinai. In Deuteronomy, Moses may have expressed the significance of the Ten Commandments for Israel, whereas through the reference to creation the Decalogue in Exodus is more universal.⁸

Deuteronomy 5:22 refers back to the Sinai experience, declaring that there a theophany occurred; there God spoke to Israel; there the Decalogue was written on tables of stone. The phrase “and he added no more” stresses that the Decalogue was limited in content. No other commandments were part of it. It “highlights the special ‘canonical’ authority of the Decalogue.”⁹ “These words” are the Ten Commandments as found in Exod 20, which were repeated in a slightly modified way in Deut 5. It is important that we do not stretch this verse

⁶See Exod 20:18-23; Deut 9:10

⁷See John 6:14; Acts 3:17-26.

⁸See, e.g., footnote 1 and the usage of the term “earth/land” in both passages.

⁹Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 84.

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beyond what it is trying to say. Obviously, the Decalogue as found in Exod 20 was written on tables of stone, but the repetition by Moses in Deut 5 is still in agreement with the version proclaimed by the Lord himself.¹⁰ A close look at verse 22 reveals that

the strict chronological order of events is not the main concern of the narrative. According to Exod. 19-34 the tablets containing the decalogue were not delivered to Moses until after he had mediated between Yahweh and the people and had received the additional covenant commandments, cf. Exod. 24:12; 32:15f.; Dt. 9:7ff. Through referring to the tablets at this point the author immediately completes the narrative of the decalogue.¹¹

By leaving out a reference to the other commandments, which were not part of the Decalogue, and by postponing them till later as well as by mentioning their inscription on tables of stone immediately after their recitation, Moses stresses the uniqueness of the Ten Commandments and singles them out among the other laws. This means that this text contains a historical gap, yet without being incorrect or untruthful. In many parts of Scripture summaries of events are employed that do not point to every little detail.¹² However, this also means the text cannot be pressed to denote that the precise wording of Deut 5:6-21 must have been the text contained on the tables of stone or that there is a contradiction between Deut 5:22 and Exod 24:12; 31:18, which are based on Exod 20. A literalistic interpretation of the text deprives it of its theological intention.

Therefore, we have to return to the question: What are the effects that Moses' additions have on the Decalogue? We have already noted that the phrases "as / therefore Yahweh your God commanded you" stress the divine origin of the Decalogue as well as of the Sabbath. Since this phrase is repeated in the fifth commandment, it ties together the commandments to keep the Sabbath and to honor one's parents. In both of them the relational aspect is strongly emphasized. Furthermore, the so-called first table of the law, commandments focusing on humanity's relationship with God, and the so-called second table of the law, commandments stressing interpersonal relations, are linked. This concept is enhanced by the specific emphasis on male and female servants, twice

¹⁰Keil and Delitzsch, *Old Testament Commentaries: Genesis to Judges 6:32* (Grand Rapids: Associated Publishers and Authors, n.d.), 471, while commenting on Exod 20 state: "But instead of this objective ground for the sabbatical festival . . ., when Moses recapitulated the decalogue, he adduced only the subjective aspect of rest or refreshing (Deut. v. 14,15), reminding the people, just as in Ex. xxiii. 12, of their bondage in Egypt and their deliverance from it by the strong arm of Jehovah, and then adding, "therefore (that thou mightest remember this deliverance from bondage) Jehovah commanded thee to keep the Sabbath-day." This is not in variance with the reason given in the present verse [Exod 20:11], but simply gives prominence to a subjective aspect . . ."

¹¹A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 172.

¹²See, e.g., John 20:30-31; 21:25.

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found in verse 14 and elaborated upon in verse 15, when Israel's slavery and liberation are narrated.

"As Yahweh commanded" (vv. 12, 15, 16) communicates awareness that this listing of the Decalogue is a "second delivery" in the dramatic staging of Deuteronomy, a quotation of something already heard in the past. As a "source citation formula" (cf. 4:23; 6:17; 13:6 [ET 5]; 20:17), it signals to the reader that an earlier text is being used. Fittingly, this phrase appears only in the commandments concerning Sabbath and parents, the two that positively "command" (rather than forbid) behaviors. Moreover, since these two commandments are the only ones whose motivations differ from those of Exod 20, "as Yahweh commanded" may stress that the imperatives themselves have been transmitted unchanged, even if the motivations have been expanded.¹³

In Deut 5:15 "the land of Egypt" appears. The same expression is found in Deut 5:6, the first commandment.¹⁴ In addition, the verb "to bring out," the divine name "Yahweh your God," and the term "slave" occur in both verses. In Deuteronomy the Sabbath commandment is in a special way connected to the first commandment. By keeping the Sabbath we accept Yahweh Elohim as the only God and Lord and reject all other gods and idols. At the same time we enjoy liberation and salvation.

But there are not only connections to the first and the fifth commandments. Deut 5:14 contains the addition "your ox and your donkey." Instead of talking about animals in general only, Moses seems to mention ox and donkey deliberately. Ox and donkey are found in the same order and with the same Hebrew words being used in Deut 5:21, the tenth commandment. Thus, the Sabbath commandment and the commandment not to covet are associated. Whoever has found rest in the Lord on the Sabbath day has also found rest from coveting and craving for material goods, especially those which are his or her neighbors'.

Deuteronomy also groups together the commandments in vv. 17-20 with "and." Joining these last commandments together with conjunctions forms them into a cohesive block and creates a concentric pattern of longer and shorter textual units that places the Sabbath commandment at the center of the pattern.¹⁵ Verses 6-11 describe one's duties to Yahweh and vv. 16-21 deal with relationships among humans. By dealing with both these topics simultaneously, the Deuteronomic Sabbath commandment forms a bridge between these two sections.¹⁶

¹³Nelson, 82-83.

¹⁴See also Exod 20:2.

¹⁵In a footnote the author states: "Long (vv. 6-10), short (v. 11), the long unit on Sabbath (vv. 12-15), short (v.16), long (vv.17-21) . . ."

¹⁶Nelson, 81-82.

Conclusion

The Sabbath commandment in Deuteronomy agrees completely with the one found in Exod 20 that the Sabbath should be kept holy and that after six days of labor on the specific seventh day, the Sabbath, humanity should rest. There are some differences with regard to the reasons given. Moses, in repeating the Sabbath commandment, has—under inspiration—made some expansions which in an until then unprecedented way have linked the Sabbath commandment to the rest of the Ten Commandments, to the effect that the climax of the Decalogue is the Sabbath commandment. Scholars have recognized this: “Deuteronomy is more explicit than Exodus regarding the Sabbath commandment.”¹⁷ “Deuteronomy’s distinctive formulation of the Ten Commandments increases the importance of the Sabbath.” The Sabbath commandment “is at the center of the [structural] pattern. The Sabbath commandment is given a central, mediating position . . .”¹⁸

Therefore, it is no wonder that in the Book of Revelation the moral law and especially the Sabbath are found center-stage during the last conflict. The Ten Commandments are indirectly and more directly referred to in Rev 11:19; 12:17; and 14:12. In Rev 14:7 the Sabbath commandment, however, according to the Exodus text, is part of the specific end time proclamation of the first angel’s message.¹⁹

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¹⁷Earl S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” in *Expositors’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by F. E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 3:55.

¹⁸Nelson, 81,82.

¹⁹This verse contains the wording of the Sabbath commandment as found in Exod 20:11 and therefore includes a call to observe the Sabbath and honor God as the Creator. Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1945), 1:164, in a paragraph entitled “The Third Angel’s Message,” wrote: “. . . they see the fourth commandment living among the ten holy precepts, while a brighter light shines upon it than upon the other nine, and a halo of glory is all around it.”