

CONSECRATION

An Act of Separation or of Recognition?

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‘CONSECRATION’ IS A TERM OF MANY CONTEXTS. A great number of people, places and things can be consecrated. We are familiar, for example, with the consecration of places of worship, the consecration of food and drink, especially the bread and wine of the eucharist, and the consecration of bishops. We talk of the consecration of the lives of those taking the vows of religious life, or sometimes of the ordination of priests or ministers as consecration. In a wider context, baptism can be considered as the consecration of the life of the believer through God’s gift of grace. Most of these understandings relate to the dedication of something or someone to God for a particular divine purpose.

In these acts of consecration our thinking on the concept can all too easily be governed by the idea of ‘separation’. Something or someone is separated or ‘set apart’ from the mundane, everyday world, to fulfil a divine purpose which finds its meaning and has its primary locus apart from that world. While consecration does involve this sense of separation, some parts of the Old Testament remind us that the purpose of the consecration can be to recognize divine presence and purpose more *within* the mundane world than *separated* from it. This is evident especially at the time of the exile of the people of Judah, after the Babylonian army had conquered Jerusalem in 587 BCE. Most of the central elements of the faith of the Judaeans had been lost. The consecrated space of the temple was destroyed. The priests became refugees in a foreign land. The people were cut off from their many acts of worship focused on Jerusalem and the temple and ultimately cut off from the land promised to them by God. As Old Testament writers struggled to find new expressions of faith, they pondered again what lay at the heart of their ‘old’ faith. Both writers and people had to reconsider the way God was present in their lives and what new elements could be consecrated to remember and celebrate that, and all this had to be done without losing the vital links with the faith that had brought them this far. A study of this process in the biblical texts may cast new light on how we might understand ‘consecration’ within our own context. This is especially the case in relation to two elements

which ultimately have close connections, namely the Old Testament sabbath, as consecrated time, and the tabernacle, as descriptive of consecrated space.

Of consecrated time . . .

The concept of 'sabbath' is not something that receives a lot of attention in Christian circles these days. The keeping of sabbath would probably be considered by most Christians as a particularly Jewish observance based on stipulations and traditions in certain parts of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). Of course, it was not so long ago that many pious Christians would have applied ideas of sabbath rest to Sunday observance. Such days have largely passed now, with changing profiles of society and evolving social customs and expectations. However, a re-examination of the sabbath tradition could well be a stimulus for Christians to consider how they use their time and how they may consecrate it.

The idea of human rest on the sabbath day, the seventh day of the week, as we are familiar with it from the Bible, is one that only developed late in the history of Israel, namely at the time of the exile and within the process of rethinking which we described briefly above. The importance of the sabbath institution in late Old Testament times would seem to be underlined by the fact that the Hebrew verb *shabath*, 'to rest', occurs near the beginning of the Old Testament at the end of the first creation story in Gen 1:1–2:3:

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

But in Gen 2:1–3 the reference is not to the human institution of sabbath but rather to God's sabbath rest at the completion of creation. The human institution of sabbath is not discussed in detail until much later, in Exod 31:12–17.¹ There we read:

The LORD said to Moses: You yourself are to speak to the Israelites: 'You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people.'

Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.¹

Both passages are attributed by scholars to the Priestly (P) source, usually regarded as the latest of the four main sources which make up the final form of the Pentateuch. The material in the P source was possibly collected at the time of exile, approximately the mid-sixth century BCE. The P source connects the human and divine sabbaths in the fourth of the Ten Commandments in Exod 20:8–11, where God's rest becomes the model for human rest on the seventh day, and in Exod 31:17. An understanding of the consecration of the seventh day as a time of rest for humans depends, therefore, on understanding the significance of God's rest in Gen 2:1–3.²

The origin of the motif of God's rest at the end of creation probably lies outside the Old Testament in the notion of the divine rest found in ancient Near Eastern myth.³ In the Babylonian myth *Enuma Elish*, the god Marduk defeats the chaos monster Tiamat, and then creates an orderly cosmos from her carcass. In the process he plans to create humankind so that the gods may rest from their arduous labours:

Blood will I form and cause bone to be,
Then I will set up lullu, 'Man' shall be his name!
Yes, I will create lullu: Man!
(Upon him) shall the services of the gods be imposed
that they may be at rest. (Tablet VI.5–8)⁴

The conclusion of creation in *Enuma Elish* locates the rest of the gods immediately after sanctuaries are built for the most high gods. The divine rest is connected to the proclamation of Marduk's reign over creation and the building of his temple. All this is associated with the building of Babylon and Marduk's temple tower within the city. A similar sequence can be seen in other Mesopotamian myths.⁵

If the motif of God's rest in Gen 2:1–3 is based on the divine rest mentioned elsewhere, then it has been subjected to some creative reworking. Claus Westermann comments:

P takes over the rest of the creator from tradition and creates out of it something entirely new. He transforms it into a day of rest which

concludes the 'creation week'. We can note here very clearly P's profound insight as he brings together what he has received and what he will contribute.⁶

In P, the creation story is transformed into a succession of days. The last day, although not named the sabbath and not directly associated with the human institution, clearly points to the latter and this gives the ordering of creation its meaning. Westermann goes on: 'By fitting the motif of rest onto the creation work, P has given creation the character of an event that moves through time towards its goal'.⁷ The primeval event takes on the character of an historical event and the God who acts in history is the same God who acts in creation. In both history and creation God's action is directed toward a goal. For Westermann, 'the ultimate goal in creation is not the last work of creation, humanity, but what is hinted at in the description of the seventh day'. He concludes that in God's action 'the celebration of the holy, gives unity to the whole'.⁸

We agree with Westermann, but suggest that the human observance of the sabbath, although not mentioned in Gen 2:1-3, cannot be divorced from the divine sabbath. This is made clear in Exod 20:8-11 and 31:17. The human sabbath is the means whereby the 'celebration of the holy' can be effected. The P writer presents an orderly whole in the seven days which is to be taken literally, so that the human sabbath celebration becomes a way of participating in the goal of creation.

The key to the way the P writer reshapes the creation tradition is to be found in the fact that reference to a sanctuary or temple being built for God is missing in Gen 1:1-2:3. At the end of creation stories in the Old Testament world we usually find an association of three themes – the completion of creation, the proclamation of sovereignty of the creator god, and the construction of a sanctuary for the god. This association is familiar from non-biblical myth as noted above about Marduk. The P creation account, however, omits this sanctuary reference and stresses the association of the creation of humankind and the divine rest. In the situation of Israel's exile the P writer could hardly refer to a heavenly temple of YHWH being constructed at the end of creation when its earthly manifestation, the temple in Jerusalem, had recently been destroyed. The destruction of the temple raised the question of how the sovereignty of YHWH was to be celebrated in the community's life far from the holy city. The reshaping of the creation account in the P narrative allows this to happen. Another traditional motif of the creation narrative, namely the divine rest, replaces the temple at the conclusion of the story as the symbol of YHWH's

kingship over creation. By linking the divine rest to both the verb *shabbath* and the seven-day structure, the P writer provides a means for the sovereignty of YHWH to be celebrated in the sabbath. This allows for continuity of the celebration of the sovereignty of YHWH in exile after the destruction of the sacred space of the Jerusalem temple.⁹ P replaces the holy space, which is particular, with holy time, which is universal, and allows exiled Israelites to acknowledge the presence and sovereignty of God far from their homeland. At the same time the writer maintains the connection of sovereignty with creation.

Of consecrated space . . .

In the situation of exile, therefore, the P writer finds a new way of celebrating God's sovereignty: the loss of a permanent and stable sanctuary leads to the development of a deepened sense of sabbath, of sacred time. The P writer does not, however, completely abandon the idea of consecrated space. Return to the temple site and the land of their ancestors remained a strong element of hope for the exiled Judaeans. Alongside the deepening sabbath tradition, the P writer reworks the older narratives about Israel's Exodus wanderings, and particularly the tradition about the tabernacle, the sanctuary in those narratives. Displacement from Jerusalem and the temple, which now is also in ruins, leads the P writer to re-conceive sacred space as mobile.

However, while the nature of the sacred space changes, the P writer maintains continuity between the mobile tabernacle and Jerusalem temple. This is done in a number of ways. First, the description of the tabernacle reflects the temple. The dimensions of the tabernacle given in Exodus 26 correspond to the dimensions of the space under the wings of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies in the temple (1 Kg 6:20).¹⁰ Second, the lavish ornamentation of gold and expensive wood in P's description of the tabernacle could not reflect any structure put together in the Sinai wilderness, but could only be seen as a reflection of the decoration of the temple under royal patronage. Third, the extensive sacrificial system, which P associates with the tabernacle in Leviticus 1-7, could only realistically be maintained in the context of the elaborate infrastructure of a permanent temple complex.

In addition to this link between temple and tabernacle, we should note that, in the description of the plans and construction of the tabernacle, the P writer forges a strong connection between the tabernacle and the sabbath. In making this connection, the association between sanctuary, sovereignty and creation, which had to be broken in the creation story, is thus restored via the institution of sabbath. Let us consider this in a little detail.

The connection between sabbath and sanctuary is made explicitly in Exod 31:12–17, as already noted. However, the connection is even evident in the shaping of the traditions concerning the building of the tabernacle. Instructions for building the tabernacle begin in Exod 25:1 with a call for offerings from the people. Then follow prescriptions for the tabernacle and its cultic paraphernalia and personnel (Exod 25:1–30:38). In 31:1–11, YHWH sets aside craftsmen filled with *ruah elohim*, ‘the divine spirit’, and all wisdom and craft for the construction of the sanctuary. This is reminiscent of the appointment of especially gifted individuals for the construction of Baal’s temple in Ugaritic myth. At the conclusion of the instructions for the tabernacle in Exodus, the command to observe the sabbath is given (31:12–17). The double prohibition against work on the sabbath (vv.14 and 15) even subordinates the work on the tabernacle to the observance of the sabbath. The actual implementation of the commands of Exod 25:1–31:11 is recorded in Exodus 36–40 following chapters 25–31 almost verbatim in places. The start of the task is marked in Exod 35:1–3 by a reminder from Moses to observe the sabbath:

Moses assembled all the congregation of the Israelites and said to them: These are the things that the LORD has commanded you to do: Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy sabbath of solemn rest to the LORD; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.

Thus a deliberate and distinct pattern is used to organize the material on the construction of the tabernacle. The instructions for building end with reference to sabbath observance and the account of the actual construction itself, which follows the instructions closely, begins with a similar reference. Brevard Childs notes:

... the observance of the sabbath and the building of the tabernacle are two sides of the same reality. Just as the sabbath is a surety of Israel’s sanctity (31:13), so the meeting of God with his people in the tabernacle serves the selfsame end (29:43). There can be no genuine tension between the two signs.¹¹

Thus the structure of Exodus 25–40 binds the sabbath observance closely with the construction of the sanctuary. Both are connected with the question of the presence of YHWH with his people and their recognition of his sovereignty. Just as sabbath observance is a way of recognizing that sovereignty, far in distance and reality from the temple

site in Jerusalem, so the tradition developed about the tabernacle is a story about a mobile 'temple'. The word *mishkan*, 'tabernacle', is related to the verb *shaken*, 'to dwell'. This verb implies a note of temporality. The verb is used of what we might loosely refer to as a nomadic existence. While the Jerusalem temple remained an important element of hope during the exile, in light of its destruction it needed to be replaced by a new and temporary way of perceiving YHWH's presence with his people. Thus the P writer establishes the tradition of YHWH residing in a movable sanctuary. The people of YHWH, who themselves have been uprooted, can now begin to perceive their God as mobile, able to move in his sanctuary as he wills and to be with his people. His sovereignty can thus be conceived in ways that do not suffer the same fate as the ruins of the Jerusalem temple (cf Ezek 1-3) and is available to a displaced people.

While the tabernacle and sabbath both herald the sovereignty of God, they are also associated, as we have seen, in terms of the mode of design. Just as the tabernacle was built along lines specified by divine decree, so too is the human sabbath institution modelled on a divinely given pattern (Exod 20:8-11; 31:17). The sabbath as much as the tabernacle shares in the task of proclaiming the self-revelation of YHWH and reveals his presence. But the close connection of sabbath and sanctuary is forged in yet another way. Both are connected with creation. As we have noted, the sabbath rest of God is the fitting end of the creation account in Gen 1:1-2:3. The design of the tabernacle also reflects elements in creation. Temple building, as we noted, is in other ancient Near Eastern mythologies the climax of creation myths, signifying the kingship of the creator God. As Childs has noted, both the tabernacle and sabbath observance 'witness to God's rule over creation'.¹²

Old traditions and renewed perceptions . . .

In what we have discussed so far we have seen the Priestly writer reshape Israelite traditions about consecrated time and space in order to allow their people to maintain their faith in the face of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and before the subsequent challenge to the sovereignty of their God. At the same time the writer has maintained strong connections with past traditions, especially those to do with creation. This activity of reshaping traditions is instructive for us in itself, but what the P writer has to say about consecrated time and space in the process of reshaping is also of importance.

The understanding of consecrated time and space in the sabbath and tabernacle in the Old Testament raises questions of the celebration of

the presence of the holy in our own midst and of how we understand 'consecration', especially of time and space. Ultimately it raises the question of how we perceive ourselves in the created order. In much twentieth-century western life and culture we value time and space as commodities or luxuries. But even this value is often understood in terms of self-centredness which sees humanity at the centre of a subservient created order. Our focus upon time and space is often centred around what we do as humans, or who we are, or what we hope to achieve for ourselves or others in this world.

The understanding of the sabbath in the P material suggests a possibility of perceiving time especially as something given to us in creation within which the sovereignty of the one who gives time can be celebrated. There needs to be some time in our lives designated in such a way that it is seen clearly not as a time in which to achieve something else for ourselves or others, no matter how worthy, but rather as a time or a 'space' in which we cease to define our humanity by what we accomplish and define it in terms of being creatures before the sovereign Creator. A renewed sense of sabbath might involve taking time to celebrate the presence of One beyond ourselves, to celebrate the sovereignty of that One, to celebrate the processes and glory of creation, and to recognize ourselves as created, dependent and called to trust.

Many Christian spirituality movements might suggest they already pursue this. If so, then the Old Testament discussion on sabbath observance might be a useful point for further, fruitful reflection on the subject. But I suspect that much time spent in spiritual reflection is centred on our own being and what we might accomplish or correct. Reflection of this sort is certainly not inappropriate, but the Old Testament sabbath tradition reminds us of the need to have time when we cease to be the subjects of our own thoughts and rest in the comfort and security of the One who is Subject in all statements within creation.

Times of worship, when we usually enter a sacred space, are not excluded from this time if perceived in terms of rest and withdrawal, and of dependency on another. Whether that is the nature of much of our worship is debatable. The corollary is, of course, that our times of withdrawal are also to be recognized as times of worship. This is not a call for a return to the strict Sunday observance we noted earlier in this essay. It is not a cry to consecrate our time in such a way that it restricts our humanness. It is a call to consecrate our time so as to see ourselves in a more gentle, balanced way in relation to the time we are given, the One who gives it to us and the rest of creation.

The theme of creation is central to the continuity between the consecration of space in the sanctuary and time in the sabbath. These consecrated elements allowed Israel to recognize the sovereignty of God over creation. But there is a curiosity in this connection to creation. Israel set up the consecrated elements of creation in such a way that they in turn mirrored creation itself. In both the tabernacle and the sabbath we are dealing with miniatures of the cosmos. An element of creation itself, of the mundane world, is consecrated so that it may serve in turn in the recognition of the divine presence in the mundane world. Elements from the mundane world are consecrated, not in order to worship a God who is king over some other world or who is present in some other place. Rather, elements in the mundane world are consecrated in order to recognize the sovereignty of God over this mundane world and to recognize that this mundane world is the place where God elects to be present.

So in the end, according to this model set forth in the Priestly material, consecration is not simply an act of separation from the mundane in order to touch what is holy elsewhere. Rather it is a way of recognizing that what is mundane is in itself that which is called by God, or set apart, to be his place of dwelling, his kingdom, his 'holy' realm. Of course the world is not yet God's place of dwelling in all its fullness. Our act of setting apart of the mundane is then a way of recognizing both God's preference for the so-called mundane as well as the fact that it is not yet all that God would have it.

NOTES

¹ Exod 16:4-5, 22-30 would seem to be the exception to the above statement. This difficulty is even realized within the text (vv. 22-23).

² For a fuller discussion of what follows see H. N. Wallace, 'Genesis 2:1-3: creation and sabbath', *Pacifica* vol 1 (1988), pp 235-250.

³ See N.-E. Andreasen, *The Old Testament sabbath: a traditional-historical investigation* (Ann Arbor, 1971), pp 174-182; C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (London, 1984), p 167; A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: the story of creation* (2nd edn, Chicago, 1951), p 127; G. von Rad, *Genesis* (London, 1972), p 62.

⁴ Translation of A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, p 46.

⁵ See W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atrahasis: the Babylonian story of the flood* (Oxford, 1969).

⁶ C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, pp 89-90.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 90.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Also P. R. Ackroyd, *Exile and restoration* (Philadelphia, 1968), p 94.

¹⁰ See R. E. Friedman, 'Tabernacle' in D. N. Freedman et al. (eds), *Anchor Bible dictionary* (New York, 1992), vol 6, pp 298-299.

¹¹ B. S. Childs, *Exodus* (London, 1974), pp 541-542.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 542.