

Exegesis of Exodus 16:22-30

"Therefore, let us strive to enter into that rest..."¹

Sr. Mary Ignatius Nesbit, OP

THEOLOGY 611: Interpreting the New Testament

Shane Mitchell Owens

April 28, 2020

¹ Hebrews 4: 11 NAB

²² On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers for each person. When all the leaders of the community came and reported this to Moses, ²³ he told them, “That is what the LORD has prescribed. Tomorrow is a day of rest, a holy sabbath of the LORD. Whatever you want to bake, bake; whatever you want to boil, boil; but whatever is left put away and keep until the morning.” ²⁴ When they put it away until the morning, as Moses commanded, it did not stink nor were there worms in it. ²⁵ Moses then said, “Eat it today, for today is the sabbath of the LORD. Today you will not find any in the field. ²⁶ Six days you will gather it, but on the seventh day, the sabbath, it will not be there.” ²⁷ Still, on the seventh day some of the people went out to gather it, but they did not find any. ²⁸ Then the LORD said to Moses: How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my instructions? ²⁹ Take note! The LORD has given you the sabbath. That is why on the sixth day he gives you food for two days. Each of you stay where you are and let no one go out on the seventh day. ³⁰ After that the people rested on the seventh day. ²

Introduction:

This passage from Exodus is the first place where God commands the Israelites to observe the Sabbath rest, four chapters before the Ten Commandments are outlined in Exodus 20. This has deep and fascinating implications for our understanding of Sabbath and what it means for us. Often when we think of the Sabbath, we think of acts of worship and praise, attendance at services, etc. However, this passage reveals that the first Sabbath obligated not action, but *rest*. In fact, it seems to oblige a radical stillness: “Each of you stay where you are and let no one go out...”³ What can this tell us about God’s original intention in giving us the Sabbath? By studying this passage we can come to a deeper understanding of the “riches and depth of divine contemplation” to which God calls his children.⁴

² Exodus 16: 22-30 NAB

³ Exodus 16: 29b

⁴ Thomas Joseph OP. White, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 123.

Historical Background:

One of the most important historical issues to examine while reading this passage is the origin of the Sabbath. Many scholars suggest that there was already an idea of a weekly day of rest in other near eastern cultures before the Exodus. For example, according to John Challenor, “astrologers in ancient Sumer and Babylon declared certain days, including the seventh of every lunar cycle, unlucky. To work was to incur divine displeasure, so a rest was established...”⁵ J.T. Nichols notes that seven was a holy number to the Babylonians and that Babylonian monuments have been discovered which denote a seven day week with the seventh being a day in which no work was to be done.⁶ The Assyrians also had a word for Sabbath meaning “a day of rest for the heart.”⁷ He concludes from this that “the Hebrew Sabbath and the weekly division of time is a very ancient pre-Mosaic institution not originating with the Israelites, but brought to them from South Babylonia.”⁸ Other scholars disagree and insist that the Hebrews had no knowledge of a Sabbath before this event.⁹ Thomas Joseph White, in his commentary on Exodus, concludes that while either hypothesis could be true, the Sabbath “takes on an absolutely unique meaning within the context of the ancient Hebrew faith and the Mosaic law.”¹⁰ William Johnstone agrees, noting that while the Hebrews already had a common noun for sabbath, meaning the ceasing of work, this “develops into the institution of ‘the Sabbath,’” observed as a religious practice, beginning here in the sixteenth chapter of Exodus.¹¹

Next, is there any background information that could help us understand the manna itself? Is it a natural occurrence? Some have noted that insects that live on the Sinai Peninsula and feed of tamarisk trees emit a substance that is edible.¹² However, this would not explain the many miraculous features of the manna. “The [insect] explanation is clearly inadequate for the unfailing regularity of the manna wherever the Israelites go for forty years in the uninhabited wilderness, and for the main point of the story: that it fails to fall on the Sabbath.”¹³ Thomas Joseph White suggests the possibility that the miracle of the manna was one in which God “‘educes’ a greater quantity of substances from already existing natural entities.”¹⁴ With this theory, we can harmonize the possibility natural causes for the manna, while still acknowledging the obviously miraculous nature of its appearance.

Lastly, it is helpful to understand the unit of measure used in this passage: the omer. Moses instructs the Israelites to collect an omer per person, and two omers on the sixth day. Wilbur Fields calculates that it would be about six and a half pints. This may sound like too much food for one person, but he speculates that it was rather light and “fluffy” when prepared!¹⁵

⁵ John Challenor and Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Pentateuch* (Chicago, IL: ACTA Foundation, 1971)

⁶ J.T. Nichols, “The Origin of the Hebrew Sabbath” (1891)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Wilbur Fields, *Exploring Exodus* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1976)

¹⁰ Thomas Joseph OP. White, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016)

¹¹ Johnstone, William. *Exodus 1-19* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2014)

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Thomas Joseph White, *Exodus*

¹⁵ Wilbur Fields, *Exploring Exodus*

Grammatical Elements:

The most important word to examine in Exodus 16: 22-30 is the word Sabbath. The word Sabbath is derived from the Hebrew word for rest or cease, *shabbat*.¹⁶ This noun comes from the verb *sbt*, meaning to rest.¹⁷ The meaning of this word is significant. While the word Sabbath eventually comes to be associated with active things like worship, praise, and sacrifice, its original meaning was to cease, rest, or simply *stop*. We can draw from this that one of the deepest purposes of the Sabbath is to draw us back into the eternal rest of God from which we come. “The created order is said to rest in God because it derives from God’s preexistent eternal wisdom. The contemplation of God is eternally immutable and unchanging, simple and perfectly actual. This is the eternal rest of divine peace from which the word originates...”¹⁸ This worship and contemplation of God is not something active on our part but something we must stop and rest in order to receive.

In verse 23, The Lord tells the Israelites that the following day would be a day of *complete* rest (the word here is *shabbaton*, an intensified form of the word *shabbat*).¹⁹ This shows that God is crowning this word with a new meaning and intensity in using it to name a day dedicated to his honor. Finally, in verse 29, the Lord speaks of *the* Sabbath, used with its definite article for the first time, showing that the Sabbath is now being instituted as a weekly religious practice.²⁰

The way the Sabbath is first described is also worthy of note. Moses describes the seventh day as a holy day *to the Lord* (vs. 23). This preposition *to* could mean *of the Lord*, denoting that Israel is sharing in the rest of the Lord, or *for the Lord*, denoting that it is in his honor, or both.²¹

In verse 28, after some of the Israelites go to gather food on the Sabbath, God asks, “How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and laws?” The word for refuse (*manthm* in Hebrew) is the same word used repeatedly earlier in Exodus to refer to Pharaoh.²² According to Johnstone, “It has dark echoes of intransigence, of unwillingness to learn and to acknowledge.”²³ This shows the great importance God places on observance of the Sabbath and the obedience to this commandment that he expects of his people.

In this same verse, the word for “laws” (sometimes translated as “instructions”) is the plural of the word for Torah, “the sum total of YHWH’s revelation to Israel.”²⁴ This shows the connection between the whole Torah and the observance of the Sabbath. In refusing to observe the Sabbath, these Israelites have bucked at the whole law of God.

¹⁶ Wilbur Fields, *Exploring Exodus*

¹⁷ Johnstone, William. *Exodus 1-19* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2014)

¹⁸ Thomas Joseph OP. White, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), pg. 123.

¹⁹ Johnstone, William. *Exodus 1-19* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2014)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Rhetorical Features:

The book of Exodus is the second book of the Pentateuch (or Torah) the first five books of the Old Testament. These books “constitute a single, continuous work with an unbroken story line that extends from the creation of the world to the threshold of Israel’s conquest of Canaan.”²⁵ The books of the Torah, including Exodus, are historical in genre, recounting the early history of the Israelite people. The two major historical events recounted in Exodus are the departure of the Israelites from Egypt and the covenant at Mount Sinai. “In Exodus, the history of the patriarchs is carried forward to the formation of the nation of Israel through the Sinai covenant and its renewal after the idolatry of God’s people.”²⁶ According to Johnstone, “without doubt, the Exodus narrative reflects the general outline of events in ancient Near Eastern history.”²⁷ However, “the biblical account is at once less than historical and more than historical. It generalizes the specific past exclusively from Israel’s point of view.”²⁸ While the Pentateuch, and specifically Exodus, are historical books, they should not be compared strictly with history books of our age. For example, “the book of Exodus pays little or no attention to specific features of ancient Egyptian history and to reconstructing, as a modern historian might, the past for its own sake on its own terms.”²⁹ In Exodus the real history of Israel is truly recounted but in a way that “imagines the past as model. It places the Israelites once again in the primal time of their mythic origins in the wilderness. There, God reveals the Torah as they set out on their generation-long trek through the typological wilderness towards the Promised Land, the ideal possession of which they will attain only in the end-time.”³⁰

Within the story of Exodus, this particular passage takes place when the Israelites have left Egypt and are journeying toward Sinai. The structure of this passage could be organized in the following way:

Exodus 16: 22-30 The Institution of the Sabbath

- I. The Sixth Day (Verse 22-24)
 - A. The people gather twice the normal amount of manna (22)
 - B. Moses explains the Sabbath (23)
 - C. The extra manna does not become foul (24)
- II. The Seventh Day (Verse 25-30)
 - A. Moses explains the Sabbath (25-26)
 - B. Some Israelites try to gather manna on the Sabbath (27)
 - C. The Lord rebukes them and commands the Sabbath (28-29)
 - D. The people observe the Sabbath (30)

Because this is a historical narrative, there is very little figurative language. In verse twenty-eight, however, the Lord asks the people, “How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and laws?” This is obviously a rhetorical question expressing God’s frustration with Israel’s constant lack of faith and obedience.

²⁵ Scott Hahn, *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2009), pg. 269

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Johnstone, William. *Exodus 1-19* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2014), pg. 5

²⁸ Ibid. pg. 7

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

Canonical Placement and Intra-canonical Themes:

There are five main sections in the book of Exodus: Exodus 1-12 (deliverance from Egypt), Exodus 13-18 (journey from Egypt to Sinai), Exodus 19-24 (Mount Sinai and the covenant), Exodus 25-31 (cultic rituals), and Exodus 32-40 (Israel's fall and restoration).³¹ The overall structure of the book is a movement *out* from Egypt and *into* a covenantal relationship with God. In fact, during the whole book, the Israelites are almost always in movement. This is interesting to realize in connection with Exodus 16:22-30, in which God tells the Israelites, "On the seventh day, everyone is to stay home and no one is to go out."³² In the midst of this great story of movement, God commands Israel to be rooted in him by the observance of the Sabbath. They are wandering now, in order to escape from slavery and learn to obey God, but God's ultimate plan is for their *rest in him*, in the promised-land and in heaven. In this way, the observance of the Sabbath, commanded for the first time in Exodus 16:22-30, sheds light on the whole book of Exodus.

Exodus 16:22-30 takes place in the second section of the book, Exodus 13-18. This section acts as a bridge between the exodus event and the covenant on Mount Sinai. It "is meant to illustrate the exodus or going out of Israel from the Gentile nations as a preparation for their eventual instruction in the law and their entry into the land of Israel."³³ It begins with the crossing of the Red Sea (13:17-15:21) and proceeds with Israel's journey to Sinai (15:22-17) and closes with advice from Jethro (18). During this journey, God provides quail, manna, water, and victory in battle to elicit the people's trust and obedience. This extravagant providence of God is placed here meaningfully to prepare them for the covenant at Sinai.

Looking more closely at Exodus 16, this chapter is sometimes titled "Bread from Heaven."³⁴ The section immediately preceding verses 22-30, recounts the first appearance of the quail and manna (verses 13-21). This obviously miraculous appearance should induce the Israelites to trust and obey God when he commands the Sabbath in verse 22-30. The section immediately after 22-30 is about the memorial manna that will be kept in the ark. God's loving gift of the manna (and of the Sabbath) should be remembered always by the Israelites by preserving an urn of manna in the Ark.

Lastly, this passage in Exodus has important links to the biblical canon as a whole. In fact, the theme of the Sabbath runs through the whole Bible. Beginning with Genesis 2:3, God invites us to share in his own eternal rest. Throughout the Old Testament, "the Sabbath observance became a distinguishing practice of the Jewish community in Diaspora and Return, as a means of protection from assimilation and dis-integration."³⁵ In the Gospels, Christ reaffirms the call to share in God's rest and makes it possible through his death and resurrection. "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."³⁶ Finally, the book of revelation tells of the final Sabbath where the faithful will "find rest from their labors,"³⁷ and recline at the "wedding feast of the Lamb."³⁸

³¹ Thomas Joseph White, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), pg. 6-7.

³² Exodus 16: 29b

³³ Thomas Joseph White, *Exodus*. pg. 6

³⁴ Wilbur Fields, *Exploring Exodus* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1976), pg. 340.

³⁵ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961) 475-83.

³⁶ Matthew 11: 28

³⁷ Revelation 14: 13

³⁸ Revelations 19: 9

Magisterial Interpretation:

In examining Exodus 16:22-30 it is crucial to look at it in light of the magisterial teaching of the Church. How has the Church understood this passage over time and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Firstly, the Church understands this passage in connection with the Christian observance of Sunday. In a beautiful passage from the *Catena Aurea*, Raban is quoted thus:

By the Parasceve is meant 'preparation;' and they gave this name to the sixth day of the week, on which they made ready the things needed for the Sabbath, as was commanded respecting the manna, "On the sixth day they gathered twice as much." (Ex 16, 22) Because on the sixth day man was made, and on the seventh God rested; therefore on the sixth day Jesus died for man, and rested the Sabbath day in the tomb.

Here Raban, echoing the consistent mind of the Church, connects Exodus 16:12 with both Genesis 2:3, when God sanctified the seventh day by his rest, and the Paschal Mystery.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church also quotes this section of Exodus in its exposition on the Our Father. Commenting on the phrase "Give us this day our daily bread," the Catechism notes that the phrase "this day" was first given to us by the Lord in the sixteenth chapter of Exodus.³⁹ It is an "expression of trust" in which God invites us into the eternal "'today' of God."⁴⁰ Connecting the "this day" of Exodus 16 with the same phrase (used only once in the New Testament) in the Our Father, the Church shows that the call to take nourishment and rest in God that begins in the wilderness of Exodus is fulfilled in Christ. As Christians, we are invited to rest in God through Christ and are fed not with manna, but with the Word himself. The catechism links the Exodus Sabbath with the Christian Sunday by quoting St. Ambrose saying that the "today" of Sabbath rest is "when Christ rises."⁴¹ "...This day' is the Day of the Lord, the day of the feast of the kingdom, anticipated in the Eucharist that is already the foretaste of the kingdom to come."⁴²

Lastly, St. John Chrysostom draws from this passage a timeless moral lesson on the dangers of greed. Recalling that some of the Israelites disobeyed God by keeping manna over to the next day he explains that "worms were bred from their covetousness."⁴³ He calls Christians to "tremble at the example of that punishment. For what happened in that instance, this same result may one now also see in the case of covetous men."⁴⁴ He thus links this passage with the Christian virtues of trust and simplicity. Just as God provided manna and the Sabbath rest for the Israelites and expected obedience and trust in return, so through Christ does he call us to obedience, humility, and generosity.

³⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., 2836.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 2837

⁴³ John Chrysostom, *Homily XI on Corinthians 5:29*

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Liturgical Usage:

Although verses 22-30 of Exodus 16 are not read in the Church's liturgy, verses 2-4 and 12-15 are read on the 18th Sunday in ordinary time (year B). Its placement in the Church's calendar and the readings it is placed with can shed light on the chapter as a whole.⁴⁵ These verses recount the grumbling of the Israelites in their hunger. In response, God tells Moses he will "rain down bread from heaven for [the Israelites]."⁴⁶ Upon finding the manna in the desert for the first time, Moses declares, "'This is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat."⁴⁷ The responsorial psalm is psalm 78, a beautiful song of praise and thanksgiving for the manna God provided the Israelites in the wilderness. The second reading is from the letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians, calling Christians to put away "deceitful desires and be renewed in the spirit of your minds."⁴⁸ Here St. Paul is calling us to a higher understanding and preparing us for the enlightenment of the Gospel. While Exodus displays God's condescension and goodness in providing for the Israelites in their desires, those desires too often remain fallen, selfish, and deceitful. Only Christ, revealed to us in the Gospel, can heal our desires at the root and feed us with God himself.

The Gospel for this Sunday is from John chapter six, the bread of life discourses. Echoing St. Paul, Jesus calls the people beyond their desires for earthly satisfaction: "Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."⁴⁹ Still not understanding, the people ask Jesus for a sign, hinting that something like the manna which Moses gave in the desert would be agreeable. Jesus answers, "'Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven."⁵⁰ Perhaps beginning to rise above their "deceitful desire" and be "renewed in the spirit of their minds,"⁵¹ the people ask eagerly for this bread. Jesus answers, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst." What God, in his goodness, provided the Israelites in the desert is now fulfilled and surpassed. By giving them manna and instituting the Sabbath in Exodus 16, God slowly led the Israelites into relationship with him. This bond would be completed and sealed by the death and resurrection of his Son, who would feed them each Sunday with his own body in the Eucharist.

It is interesting to note that this profoundly Eucharistic collection of readings will usually fall just about half-way through ordinary time. The 18th Sunday in ordinary time falls during the long stretch between Pentecost and Advent. Perhaps this is to remind us of our constant need of the bread from heaven to sustain us on our sometimes tedious journey through the desert of this life. In the midst of this journey, we can remain rooted in God, like the Israelites, by observing the Sabbath rest and receiving the bread from heaven.

⁴⁵ "18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Lectionary: 113," accessed April 26, 2020, <http://usccb.org/bible/readings/>

⁴⁶ Exodus 16: 4

⁴⁷ Exodus 16: 15b

⁴⁸ Ephesians 4: 22-23

⁴⁹ John 6: 27

⁵⁰ John 6: 32

⁵¹ Ephesians 16:15b

Conclusion: The Four Senses

In interpreting the scriptures, the Church traditionally distinguishes between its literal and spiritual senses. The spiritual sense can be further divided into the typological, tropological (moral), and anagogical senses.⁵² Accordingly, we will conclude this study of Exodus 16: 22-30 in light of each of these four senses.

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, all three spiritual senses are rooted in the literal sense.⁵³ We must first, then, examine the literal meaning of this passage. Exodus is a historical book recounting the actual journey of the Israelites through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Exodus 16: 22-30 constitutes an important moment in this wider story because “the notion of the Sabbath is introduced in the Torah for the first time explicitly” here.⁵⁴ Here God institutes the Sabbath rest on the seventh day of every week. It is part of the literal sense as well, that this observance by the Israelites, while not conferring grace on its own, is an important part of God’s covenant of grace. God is mysteriously present “in the minds and hearts of the chosen people, by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love”⁵⁵ and really draws them into relationship with him by their observance of the Sabbath.

The most obvious and most commented upon typological element in Exodus 16 is certainly the manna. This manna can be seen as a type of Jesus, particularly his presence in the Eucharist, in many ways. Manna provided physical nourishment; Jesus provided spiritual nourishment by his word and the Eucharist. The manna saves the Israelites from starvation; Jesus saves us from eternal death. In sum, “The manna is certainly a type of Jesus, the living bread who came down from heaven.”⁵⁶ The Sabbath also has typological significance. According to John Paul II in his encyclical *Dies Domini*, the Christian observance of Sunday is not a replacement of the Hebrew Sabbath, but its “fulfillment.”⁵⁷ In this way, the Sabbath could be seen as a prefigurement or type of the Christian Sunday.

Exodus 16: 22-30 also provides us with important tropological lessons. Above all it is a call to obedience and trust in the Lord. God instructs the people to keep the manna overnight on the sixth day and it does not rot.⁵⁸ He commands them *not* to gather manna on the seventh and when they disobey they find none.⁵⁹ This serves as a lesson for us to trust in the Lord’s providence and obey his commands.

Lastly, this passage contains deep anagogical meaning. According to Thomas Joseph White, the institution of the Sabbath in Exodus 16: 22-30 “points us... towards the *exitus* and *reditus* of the creation and the covenant.”⁶⁰ Observance of the Sabbath draws us back into the “eternal rest of divine peace from which the world originates...”⁶¹ In this way, the call to Sabbath rest is fulfilled in heaven where we will rest in God, the “Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”⁶²

⁵² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., 115-118

⁵³ *Ibid.* 116

⁵⁴ Thomas Joseph White, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), pg. 123.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* pg. 233.

⁵⁶ Wilbur Fields, *Exploring Exodus* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1976), pg. 355.

⁵⁷ John Paul II, *Dies Domini* (Vatican City, 1998), 59.

⁵⁸ Exodus 16: 24

⁵⁹ Exodus 16: 27

⁶⁰ Thomas Joseph White, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), pg. 123.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Revelation 21: 6b

Bibliography

"18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Lectionary: 113." United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Accessed April 26, 2020. <http://usccb.org/bible/readings/>

Aquinas, Thomas. *Catena Aurea*, Bibla Clerus, accessed April 25, 2020.

Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012.

Challenor, John, and Joseph Blenkinsopp. *Pentateuch*. Chicago, IL: ACTA Foundation, 1971.

Chrysostom, John. *Homily XL. 1 Corinthians 15,29, 4004*. Biblia Clerus, accessed April 25, 2020.

De Vaux, Roland. *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961.

Fields, Wilbur. *Exploring Exodus*. Joplin, MO: College Press, 1976.

Hahn, Scott. *Catholic Bible Dictionary*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 2009.

John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, Vatican City, 1998.

Johnstone, William. 2014. *Exodus 1-19*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary. Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.fr.opal-libraries.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1440526&site=ehost-live>.

Nichols, J. T. "The Origin of the Hebrew Sabbath." *The Old and New Testament Student* 12, no. 1 (1891): 36-42. Accessed April 7, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/3157542.

White, Thomas Joseph OP. *Exodus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016.

"18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Lectionary: 113." Accessed April 26, 2020. <http://usccb.org/bible/readings/>