

# “WHY ARE YOU MAKING PEOPLE STOP WORKING?”: THE WORDING OF THE SHABAT COMMANDMENT AND THE CRY OF THE SLAVES IN THE EXODUS

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## Abstract

This work will analyze the wording of the fourth commandment of the Decalogue, suggesting the possibility of this text being a response to Pharaoh's question in his previous dialogue with Moses: why are you making the people stop their work? To this end, it will present bibliographical research, supporting a brief exegesis of two versions of the commandment, as presented in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, analyzing their historical and literary context. It will verify possible motivations for the author of Exodus to specifically mention Pharaoh's discomfort with the cessation of activities in his domain and how the wording of the fourth commandment opposes the current culture regarding religion and the socioeconomic system based on the production and exploitation of labor.

**Keywords:** Rest; Work; Commandment.

# “POR QUE ESTÁS FAZENDO O POVO PARAR DE TRABALHAR?”: A REDAÇÃO DO MANDAMENTO DO SHABAT E O CLAMOR DOS ESCRAVOS NO ÊXODO

## Resumo

Este trabalho analisará a redação do quarto mandamento do Decálogo, sugerindo a possibilidade deste texto ser uma resposta à pergunta do Faraó em seu diálogo anterior com Moisés: “por que você está fazendo o povo parar de trabalhar?” Para tanto, apresentará pesquisa bibliográfica, apoiando uma breve exegese de duas versões do mandamento, tal como apresentadas nos livros de Êxodo e Deuteronômio, analisando seu contexto histórico e literário. Verificará possíveis motivações para o autor do Êxodo mencionar especificamente o desconforto do Faraó com a cessação das atividades em seu domínio e como a redação do quarto mandamento se contrapõe à cultura vigente em relação à religião e ao sistema socioeconômico baseado na produção e exploração do trabalho.

**Palavras-chave:** Descanso. Trabalho. Mandamento.

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# "¿POR QUÉ HACES QUE EL PUEBLO DEJE DE TRABAJAR? LA REDACCIÓN DEL MANDAMIENTO DEL SHABAT Y EL GRITO DE LOS ESCLAVOS EN EL ÉXODO

## Resumen

Este trabajo analizará la redacción del cuarto mandamiento del Decálogo, sugiriendo la posibilidad de que este texto sea una respuesta a la pregunta del Faraón en su diálogo anterior con Moisés: "¿Por qué haces que el pueblo deje de trabajar?". Para ello, presentará una investigación bibliográfica, apoyando una breve exégesis de dos versiones del mandamiento, tal como se presentan en los libros del Éxodo y del Deuteronomio, analizando su contexto histórico y literario. Verificará posibles motivaciones para que el autor del Éxodo mencione específicamente el malestar del Faraón con el cese de actividades en su dominio y cómo la redacción del cuarto mandamiento se opone a la cultura imperante en relación con la religión y el sistema socioeconómico basado en la producción y explotación del trabajo.

**Palabras clave:** Descanso; Trabajo; Mandamiento.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Exodus is a kind of backdrop to the Old Testament narrative (SCHWANTES, 1988b, p. 9). Without a doubt, it is from it that many of the later texts and narratives are presented. The formation of Israel and its writings have their genesis explained in this passage in particular (MARQUES, 2015). Often indirectly and, on considerable occasions, directly, we see the Old Testament making mention of the events that culminated in the departure of the Hebrews from the land of Egypt.



The Exodus narrative, however, also has its own background. The author mentions this process being triggered by the cry of an exploited people (BRUEGGEMANN, 2017, p. 37), living under conditions of slavery, in a foreign land and without perspectives of social advances (SCHWANTES, 1988a, p. 31-32). This cry for help finds its counterpoint in the narration of the dialogue between Moses and the Egyptian Pharaoh, when the king questions the reasons for his Hebrew servants to leave their tasks. Interestingly, this question seems to remain momentarily unanswered, at least in a more direct way. The reasons for the cessation of activities, apparently, will be presented later, already in the wording of the commandment regarding rest (BRUEGGEMANN, 2017, p. 35). It is there, both in the version recorded in the book of Exodus and in its re-presentation in the book of Deuteronomy, that the reasons and reasons for the people to stop their tasks are mentioned. More than that, this same essay seems to be connected to the cry of the vulnerable that opens this entire narrative (ANTONIAZZI, 1986, p. 57).

From this plot, we arrive at the question that will guide this work: would the wording of the Shabat commandment have any relation to the question asked by Pharaoh in Exod 5:4?

This research aims to identify possible connections between the text of the commandment regarding rest and the situation experienced by the Hebrews in their situation of slavery in Egypt. To this goal, it will use bibliographical research and analysis of the literary and historical contexts in which the mentioned narrative and the orders regarding weekly rest are presented.

This search is justified by the possibility of verifying similar circumstances regarding the rhythm of production and work proposed by Egyptian society and a lifestyle that would later be opposed by Yahweh in the history of the Hebrews. This same rhythm that enslaves and diminishes the fullness of life seems to be present in contemporary society (BLOCK; BRUEGGEMANN; MCKNIGHT, 2016, p. 49), the result of a discourse that praises production at any cost, but which has its counterpoint precisely in the order to cease activities.



## THE TEXT

Three texts provide direction for this research: the dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh, recorded in Exod 5:4, and the two presentations of the commandment about the rest, in its versions according to Exod 20:8-11 and Deut 5:12-15. In addition to these, it is necessary to mention the first two chapters of the book of Exodus, especially Exod 2:23. It is from there, from the condition in which the Hebrew people are found, under the burden of slavery, raising their cry for mercy, that the narrative presented makes sense. For the sake of objectivity, only the highlighted texts will be treated in terms of translation and brief literary analysis.

## TRANSLATION<sup>3</sup>

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן תִּפְרִיעוּ אֶת-הָעָם מִמַּעֲשֵׂי יָדָם לְסַבְּלֵתֵיכֶם

The king of Egypt said, Moses and Aaron, why do you make the people stop their work? Go to your forced labor. (Exod 5:4)

זְכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ: שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלֹאכְתְּךָ: וְיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבְּתָה לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כָל-מְלָאכָה אַתָּה וּבִנְךָ וּבִתְּךָ עַבְדְּךָ וְאַמְתָּךָ וּבַהֶמְתֶּךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ: כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת-יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֶת-הַיָּם וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-בָּם וַיָּנַח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל-כֵּן בֵּרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֶׁהוּ: ס

Remember the Sabbath day to be sanctified. Six days you *will serve*<sup>4</sup> and do your occupations. But the seventh is the Sabbath of the Lord Jehovah. You shall not do work, neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor the foreigner who is in your gates. For in six days Jehovah made the heavens and the earth and everything in them, and he rested on the seventh. That's why Yahweh blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exod 20:8-11)

שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלֹאכְתְּךָ: וְיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבְּתָה לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כָל-מְלָאכָה אַתָּה וּבִנְךָ וּבִתְּךָ עַבְדְּךָ וְאַמְתְּךָ וּבַהֶמְתֶּךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ לְמַעַן יָנוּחַ עַבְדְּךָ וְאַמְתְּךָ כַּמֹּד: וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי-עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ

Six days you will labor and do your work. The seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord God. You shall not do any work in it, neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any

<sup>3</sup> Text in Hebrew as per **Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia**. 5<sup>a</sup> ed. Tübingen: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997. Suggestive translation made by the researchers.

<sup>4</sup> The term “will serve” may sound strange, when most of the time we find the option for “work” in our Bibles in Portuguese. However, as Reimer points out, the original Hebrew uses the same idea five times, whether as a verb or as a noun: house of servants (vs. 2), you will serve (vs. 5), you will serve (vs. 9), servant (vs. 10 and 17). It is interesting to note how the same concept unfolds throughout the text. Due to this consistency, it seemed opportune to make these relationships clear, which are not just literary (see GRUEN, 1986, p. 9).



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בְּאַרְץ מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּצְאֶךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִשָּׁם בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה וּבְזָרַע נְטוּיָהּ  
עַל-כֵּן צִוְּךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת: ֹס  
of your livestock, nor the foreigner who is at your door; that your servant and your maidservant may rest, as (you). (Deut 5:12-15)

## AUTHORSHIP

Judeo-Christian tradition has traditionally viewed Moses as the author of the Pentateuch (SCHMIDT, 1994) and, therefore, as the writer of the texts presented. However, from the elaboration of the Documentary Hypothesis, a much later, post-exilic writing of the Pentateuch was suggested, and the indication of Moses as the author only occurred because he was attributed the figure of the prototype of a legislator. Since then, the controversy over the authorship of the Pentateuch can be presented by a pun: would it be Mosaic authorship or a mosaic of authorship (BAXTER, 1960, p. 22)? This is because the Documentary Hypothesis presents arguments for the need for multiple authors, from different times and using different sources (GOTTWALD, 1998) that, later, they were arranged in a harmonious way as seen today.

Currently, we see researchers going in another direction, maintaining the position of Mosaic and pre-exilic authorship. Among these, however, we are not aware of any scholar claiming that Moses wrote the Pentateuch as we have it today, in its entirety. It is almost unanimous that there is post-Mosaic material in the text of the Pentateuch.<sup>5</sup> Moses would have been the author of part, some, or most of the text. We can mention, in this group, conservative Protestant writers, such as, for example, P. C. Craigie, R. K. Harrison, K. A. Kitchen, M. Kline, G. T. Manley, S. J. Schultz and J. A. Thompson (HAMILTON, 2006, p. 430). This work will follow this line of thought. As evidence for this Mosaic authorship, subject to subsequent revision or redaction, mentions in the OT of Moses' authorship can be cited (Exod 17:14; 24:4; 34:27; Deut 31:9, 19; Josh 1:7,8; Judg 3:4; Ezr 6:18; Dan 9:11 e Mal 4:4), quotes from Jesus reinforcing this idea (Mar 7:10; Lk 20:37; Jn 5:45-47) as well as others throughout the NT (Matt 8:4; 19:7; Lk 24:44; Jn 1:45; 8:5; 9:29; Acts 3:22; 6:14; 13:39; 15:1,21; 26:22; 28:23; 1Cor 9:9;

<sup>5</sup> We can mention among these post-Mosaic texts Moses' own epitaph in Deut 34 – the description of his physical state, his death and burial, the 30-day mourning on the part of the Israelites or the idea that a prophet like Moses never rose again. - point strongly to another author. The mention in Gen 14:14 of the city of Dan is another indication of a later redactor – the city only became known as such after the Israelite conquest, around 1405 BC – since at the time of Abraham and Moses the city was known as Leshem (Judg 18:27-29; Josh 19:47).



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2Cor 3:15; Heb 9:19; Rev 15:3).<sup>6</sup> This research points to a single authorship in the texts analyzed, in a question-answer process that requires the same construction.

## **LITERARY ANALYSIS**

The form of a text says a lot about its interpretation, intention and meaning (KUNZ, 2008, p. 35). The texts analyzed usually have their literary genres classified as narrative (Exod 5:4) (BLOOM, 2001, p. 11) and legal literature (Exod 20:8-11 e Deut 5:12-15) (ZUCK, 1994, p. 148-156).

By definition, the narrative genre is a story told to convey a message through people, problems, and circumstances (PESCH, 2017, p. 13). They usually present a problem, bring the implications, a climax with a solution, and end with the problem solved (KUNZ, 2008, p. 35). As for the text under analysis, it is worth remembering that, in the immediate context, the question "Why are you making people stop their tasks?" remains unanswered. The narrative continues, reaching its climax with the extraordinary signs and the departure of the Hebrew people from Egypt, but this specific issue receives no solution.

The legal genre, in turn, is found in a large part of the Pentateuch, being naturally related to norms and laws (KUNZ, 2008, p. 36). Despite being one of the most important genres of the Pentateuch, it is often one of the most misunderstood (RUBENS, 2022). Often its readers approach the law with concepts of purpose, function, and nature that reflect an understanding of the contemporary world and not the ancient worldview held by the author and his receiving audience (VOGT, 2015, p. 26). These laws, especially this "law of Moses", are commandments and instructions given to the people of the covenant, so that they could maintain a relationship with the Lord and establish a more fair society (WRIGHT, 2016). In the text analyzed in Deuteronomy, this characteristic of social protection is even more evident. Fraternal, supportive and inclusive relationships can be perceived in a network of protection for the poor, vulnerable, and excluded (KRAMER, 2007, p. 432).

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<sup>6</sup> Some current theologians understand that it is possible that such mentions occur not due to Mosaic authorship, but as a way of giving canonical-theological relevance to the text. This concept, however, comes up against the precision of the narrated details and in the vision of Palestine as a territory yet to be conquered (see BRUEGGEMANN, 2001, p. 18).



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At this point, there seems to be a connection between the texts analyzed. While the Exodus narrative is initiated by a yearning for freedom and justice, intensified by Pharaoh's question about the reasons for a change in the status quo, in the wording of the commandment about rest that a more fair society is seen as a result of obedience to the proposed alliance.

## **DATING**

For this study, the dating of the departure of the Hebrews from Egypt, as recorded in the book of Exodus, is also of considerable importance. However, there is no unanimity regarding the date of the Hebrews' departure from Egypt. Based on 1 Kings 6:1, which states that the event occurred 480 years before Solomon began building the Temple in Jerusalem, some scholars argue for a date between 1460 BC and 1425 BC, having occurred during the reign of Thutmose III or his son, Amenhotep II (NICHOL, 2011, p. 523). The hypothesis of Amenhotep II would have in its favor the fact that he had his capital in Memphis (a city close to Goshen) and the fact that he did not leave his throne to his firstborn son (which would fit the description of the death of the firstborn sons of Exod 13:29), but for his youngest, Thutmose IV. This second motive is implied from the so-called "dream stele", where Thutmose IV states that he inherited the throne through the premature death of his older brother (MERRIL, 2001, p. 56).

Other writers, using the fact that Thutmose III had his capital in Thebes (far to the south and far from the land of Goshen and the granary cities of Pithom and Pi-Ramesses), without having carried out major constructions in the delta region, added to the narrative of Moses circulated east of Edom and Moab, which were not established at the time of Thutmose III, the exodus is believed to have occurred around 1250, during the rule of Ramesses II (MERRIL, 2001, p. 64). For them, the 480 years mentioned in 1 Kings 6:1 would be an editorial comment built on the belief that between Moses and Solomon, 12 generations would have passed, each 40 years old.

Despite the varied dating dates for the Exodus, for the present research this does not pose a problem, since, whether we use the date of the 15th century BC or the 13th century BC, we will find an Egypt surrounded by economic pressure for production.



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Whether motivated by the strong emphasis on foreign trade, inherited by the skillful Hatshepsut, for those who see the event taking place under Thutmose III (Hatshepsut's nephew) (NICHOL, 2011, p. 523) or Amenhotep II, or the cost of the great constructions of Ramses II (RATTINI, 2019), the fact is that Egypt needed grain, its currency at the time. This is the time when the bronze alloy was discovered, much more effective, from a military-military point of view, than the pure copper, used until then. The problem is that to obtain bronze it is necessary to use tin and there were no tin mines in Egypt. The solution was to buy tin from other nations, using the surplus grain from Egyptian production (VERSIGNASSI, 2019). It is in the context of this need for full silos and large warehouses that the cry of slave labor gains meaning. To pay for this entire process, production, and work would have to be constant.

## THE EGYPTIAN “FULL SILO” SYSTEM

As seen, Egypt's economic situation is a determining factor in understanding Pharaoh's discomfort with the possible stoppage of the Hebrews from their tasks. It was necessary to constantly produce to maintain the structure in force at the time. Added to this is the fact that the economy was closely related to religion. Full silos were proof of the blessing of the gods, and the pharaoh, as a divine representation, had the obligation to guarantee this reality (BRUEGGEMANN, 2017, p. 34). Therefore, in Egypt there can be no cessation of work. It would not only be a financial loss, but it would also be a decrease in the favor of the gods. In the “house of slavery”, Pharaoh cannot give the people rest (Exod 5:7-8) nor allow the people to celebrate (Exod 5:1-5). Production is necessary (Exod 5:18) at any cost (ANTONIAZZI, 1986, p. 61).

In Exodus 5 we see a staunch defense of this system. Pharaoh demands more production. The slaves need to produce more bricks, which must be used to build more “supply cities” in which Pharaoh can store more material wealth in the form of grain (Exod 1:11). Since the system was designed to produce more and more surplus (Gen 47:13-26), there is always more need for storage silos which, in turn, creates a need for more bricks to build them (BRUEGGEMANN, 2017, p. 34). In this context, a request to “cease activities” seems absurd. Apparently, this “stopping the tasks” was the worst situation to be dealt with by a government that had already found a solution for an increase in the foreign population (Exod





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1:9,16), did not see any difficulties with the transfer of land (Gen 47:5, 6), other religious manifestations (Exod 8:8, 25) and even the departure of captives from their territory (8:28). Stopping activities, apparently, was something even worse to deal with.

It is clear that such a system cannot provide Sabbath rest. There is no rest for the pharaoh in his supervision and monitoring of production. Therefore, there can be no rest for Pharaoh's taskmasters; and of course, there can be no rest for the slaves who must fulfill Pharaoh's quotas. In this reality based on constant production, one can imagine that the Egyptian gods also did not rest because of their commitment to the aggrandizement of the pharaoh's system, since the glory of the pharaoh redounded to the glory of the Egyptian gods (BRUEGGEMANN, 2017, p. 37). Religion ended up legitimizing the entire system.

## THE RESPONSE OF REST

After leaving Egypt, it is with this vision of society and work and production relations that the Hebrews begin their journey. Israel, in the narrative, is finally freed from Pharaoh's system of anxiety and arrives in the desert; there the people are given bread that is not permitted to be stored (Exod 16:13-21). The culture of constant tasks loses its meaning here. If there is no way to store it, there is no reason to work beyond what is necessary for daily maintenance. Another notable point is that, although the portion of bread is daily, provision is made for a Sabbath of rest without harvest.

The writing of the Decalogue was built on this clash of realities. The presentation of Yahweh as the liberator from slavery opens the portion by mentioning the condition of the Hebrews in Egypt (BACCHIOCCHI, 1980, p. 116-117). This presentation can be contrasted with another of Pharaoh's sentences: "Who is the Lord? I don't know him..." (Exod 5:2). More than that, the text mentioning Egypt as a "land of slavery" (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6) seems to contrast with the current situation of Israel. As in the Historical Introduction of the vassalage treaties of that time, a benefit given to the vassal by the sovereign is being reinforced. Interestingly, in the cry answered (cited here as a reason for loyalty), there is no mention of land ownership, social status or even any memory of a happier past. The people's outcry was in relation to work and its conditions (Exod 3:7; 5:6-22).



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When arriving at the commandment regarding rest, once again the contrast with slavery in Egypt is recalled: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there" (Deut 5:15). The memory that Pharaoh's oppressive system was broken is presented as a motivator for obedience to a different rhythm of production and work. This time it is not the overflow of silos that will guide the work relationships of the Hebrews. Rest will be present, regardless of the harvest situation or the economic moment (Exod 34:21) (REIMER, 1998, p. 19). The narrative indicates that in the government of Yahweh, rest will be a counterpoint to the king of Egypt's system of anxiety.

Not only physical rest is cited as a contrast to the situation in Egypt. By mentioning that everyone must rest: "sons and daughters, slaves, oxen, donkeys, foreigners" the text seems to be responding to another conflict experienced by the Hebrews: inequality. Sabbath is the day of equality when everyone is at rest. Everyone's production is not the same. Performance is not the same for everyone. Not everyone is equal in consumption, as some have greater access to consumer goods than others. In a society defined by production and consumption, like the Egyptian one, there are enormous imbalances of value and meaning (BRUEGGEMANN, 2017, p. 63). Because this day breaks the pattern of production and consumption, everyone is equal – equal value, equal access, equal rest.

The motivational clause for the commandment of rest in the wording of Exodus 20 also includes a reminder of origin. As previously stated, constant work was seen as a gift from the gods in Egypt. The origins of the people were marked by the possibility given by the deities for them to work and fill their deposits. In the Sabbath commandment, rest is linked to a divine origin. Stop because Yahweh stopped (BACCHIOCCHI, 1980, p. 84).

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

We saw in this article that the wording of the Sabbath commandment seems to answer Pharaoh's question as to the reasons for the Hebrews to cease their activities. Yahweh would be leading his people to another system of priorities, aligned not with work and production, but with rest and social equality.



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It is clear that the culture of accumulation and social differences, so present today, is not new. It is easy to see, in Pharaoh's compulsion for more grains (his measure of wealth) beyond what he could need, parallels with situations in daily life also marked by the accumulation of goods by some while others just survive, without equivalent opportunities for rest or gain. In a society guided by production and consumption, the desire for more has created a restlessness that does not allow any sabbatical rest for the dominator or anyone under his control. Following the path of mammon (capital, wealth), which is the path of endless desire, endless productivity and endless restlessness requires a life without any Sabbath (BRUEGGEMANN, 2007, p. 65).

The lack of rest in our contemporary society seems to be obvious and endemic. So endemic, that even religious circles are continually affected by this lifestyle that is fought in the essence of the Sabbath. Beyond to the full silos, the text, as presented, indicates a social concern, highlighted for those who are in a vulnerable situation.

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