

## The God of sabbath

By [Peter J. Leithart](#)

June 30, 2008

The God of Israel and of Jesus is the God of Exodus who leads His people from the desert to the promised land, from a dry and dusty land to a well-watered garden, from slavery toward sabbath.

Jesus condemns the Jewish leaders for being tone-deaf to the tune of the times. “This generation,” the generation that witnessed the ministry of John and Jesus, can’t keep in step. When John sings a dirge, they dance; when Jesus hosts a feast, they decide to mourn. “He who has ears to hear, let him hear,” but this generation doesn’t seem to have ears. They need a Savior who restores hearing to the deaf.

“This generation” reminds us of the generation of the Exodus that forgot Yahweh’s works and rebelled repeatedly in the wilderness. Confronting “this generation,” Jesus is a new Moses, offering to lead Israel out of oppressive bondage to sin and Satan. Like Moses, he comes with a yoke yet promises rest to those who receive him.

A river flows through the garden of Eden, and later splits into four rivers, which flowed to the corners of the earth. For the inhabitants of the arid ancient near east, water is a restoration of Eden.

Before it is destroyed with fire from heaven, Sodom is a “well watered” place, “like the garden of Yahweh” (Gen. 13:10). As Israel journeys through the wilderness, Yahweh leads them to oases (Exo. 15:27), or, failing that, creates oases from burning rocks and sand (Exo. 17:1-7). Yahweh gives Israel a land that drinks rain from heaven (Deut. 11:10-12), and John closes the Bible with a vision of an Edenic river city (Rev. 22:1-2).

In the Bible, if you’ve found abundant water, you’ve found your way back to paradise. If you find water, you’ve entered sabbath.

In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter points to biblical “type scenes” that occur at wells, and these too are restorations of Eden. Genesis 24, the first betrothal scene since Genesis 2, is the Bible’s first romance, and it reverberates with echoes of Eden. Abraham’s servant arrives at a well with his animals, where he finds the woman who will marry his master’s son. It’s the garden all over again, with Rebekah playing the role of Eve and Isaac the new Adam. Abraham is a new Adam, his seed a new humanity.

Paul too longed for sabbath, and expresses the anguish of that longing in Romans 7. Discussion of Romans 7 has often focused on the identity of the “I.” Is Paul describing his own experience? Is he talking about himself before his conversion, or his experience as a Christian struggling with sin?

Valuable as they are, these sorts of questions miss the function of Romans 7 in Paul’s argument. Though Paul doesn’t ignore individual experience, his main goal in Romans is to show how the righteousness of God revealed in Jesus (1:16-17) is compatible with Israel’s rejection of her Messiah (Rom. 9-11). Romans justifies the ways of God with Israel.

Torah, Paul says, is glorious, but ultimately a ministry of condemnation and death (Rom. 7:9-11; cf. 2 Cor. 3:5-7, 9). There is no flaw in the law; the problem is that the spiritual law kills the fleshly man (Rom. 7:14). Torah administers death by dividing the fleshly man in two. While he serves the law of God “with my mind,” he is in the flesh and thus also serves the “law of sin” (v. 25).

If he is going to be whole, he has to be as spiritual as the law. If he is going to be whole, he needs to be brought from the desert of flesh to the garden of Spirit.

Thanks be to God: Jesus and the Spirit liberate from the law of sin and death, so that we can take the yoke of Jesus not only in mind but in action (Rom. 8:1-4). Paul’s gospel is this: The righteous God of Romans is the God of Israel, who is the God of Exodus, the God of sabbath.