Title: The meaning of ḫēpēs in Isaiah 58:13: a study of the concept of Sabbath observance

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Abstract:

Scholars differ in determining the meaning of the term ḫēpēs in Isaiah 58:13. Generally, they may be divided into two schools of interpretation. Some render the term “pleasure” while others consider “business” as the more appropriate translation of the term. This study attempts to define the meaning of the term ḫēpēs in Isa 58:13 and describe its relationship to the concept of Sabbath observance.

The first step of the study is of an etymological and semantic nature where the use of the term ḫēpēs is traced in biblical and cognate languages, followed by a thorough survey of the use of the term in OT literature. The second step of the study consists of an exegesis of Isaiah 58:13 in the immediate context of the whole passage of Isaiah 58.

The result of this investigation shows that both the etymology and semantic import of the term ḫēpēs portray an individual’s inclination or striving to achieve something, and any stages of the process to realize it. Further investigation reveals how in the book of Isaiah the term ḫēpēs has a particular theological connotation.

In Isaiah 58 the term ḫēpēs stands for a nation’s aspirations, and its struggle for survival in coping with political, social and economic problems. This effort is manifested in both
religious and secular activities. It also demonstrates that ḫēpēṣ is connected with the act of oppression, contention and violence.

In Isaiah 58:13 the Sabbath is presented as holy, delightful, and honorable. In the light of Isaiah’s theology, the Sabbath stands for God’s ḫēpēṣ in contrast to human ḫēpēṣ. Sabbath observance primarily concerns worship in its fundamental essence: it consists of a meaningful encounter with God which is to be reflected in one’s moral behavior.