

Sabbath

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This paper will explore the biblical-theological theme of Sabbath, a topic that is central to the Creator's relationship with His creation. It is interwoven from the first pages of Scripture to the last. Sabbath represents God's everlasting presence that mankind gets to experience in union with Him. Sabbath is the Hebrew word for rest. Two pairs of Hebrew and Greek words represent rest throughout Scripture; *Sabat/ anapausis* and *nuakh/ katapausis*. The first pair of words, *sabat* (Hebrew) and *anapausis* (Greek) mean "to cease" or "stop working". *Sabat* should encourage the reader to think of rest as "an hourly job where you clock out at the end of a shift. The work is done, and there's no more until you clock back in."¹ The other key pair word for rest is *nuakh* (Hebrew) and *katapausis* (Greek). These mean to "dwell" or "settle" and should spark in the reader's imagination a type of rest that is similar to "sitting in front of a fire with a loved one or unpacking a suitcase to stay at grandma's house for the holidays."² Whether sabbath is for mankind to *nuakh* in God's presence and rule over creation or to *sabat* in commemoration of God's sovereignty, the chief imagery of sabbath is echoed across Scripture is God's Seventh Day rest.

Creation to Abraham

The Genesis One creation narrative depicts every day of creation ending with "there was evening and there was morning" except on the seventh day, when God had completed His work and rested. This Seventh Day rest is portrayed as having no end. As theologian Richard Lowery put it, "Literarily, the sun has not yet set on God's Sabbath."³ The significance of this was to demonstrate God's presence alone was sufficient for His creation to live abundantly in His peace.

¹ Missy Takano, "What Is the Sabbath in the Bible and Should Christians Observe It?" *Bible Project*. <https://bibleproject.com/blog/keeping-the-sabbath-is-it-still-relevant-to-christians-today/>

² Ibid.

³ Richard H Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee* (Chalice Press, 2012), 90.

With creation complete and the cosmos filled with His glory, God took humanity and rested/dwelted/settled (*nuakh*) them into the garden of Eden to work and rule it. God's *nuakh* allowed for humanity to participate in His presence and rule over creation. The abiding rest was conditional. Humanity had the choice to either obey God and remain in His rest or create life and rest on their own. This was represented in eating from the tree of life or taking of the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. Humanity rebelled and as a result was exiled from the heaven and earth dwelling place known as the garden of Eden. They were sent to work and labor the ground in painful toil, outside the garden.

Humanity's evil heart worsened in its rebellion towards God. Eventually, God sent a worldwide de-creation flood that killed everyone except one faithful remnant, Noah. God promised Noah "Even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood, never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never *sabat*." The author hyperlinks Genesis 8:21-22 to Genesis 1 demonstrating God's covenant with Noah as a recreation. Even the sentence structure concluding with day and night echoes the creation narrative. It is also meant to remind the reader that although this is a recreation story, humanity is still outside the garden of Eden. While Genesis 1 depicted God's unending rest, Genesis 8 depicted a creation that will "never rest" (not until God's redemptive plan finds its fulfillment). The first biblical epoch ends with a glimpse of hope and future rest but humanity still remained outside Eden and still experienced painful toils for choosing life outside God's rule.

Abraham to Moses

Abraham's fickle trust and faith in God's sovereign rule over his life exemplified the early theme of sabbath. At times, Abraham trusted God's reign as supreme in His life. An example of this is observed in Abraham's departure from his nephew, Lot. Abraham demonstrated great trust in God's provision by letting Lot choose the "better" land. As a result, the Genesis 13 story portrays Abraham *nuakh* in a new garden just as Adam and Eden *nuakh* in the garden. In other instances, Abraham completely defiled his covenant with God. This is most clearly demonstrated in Abraham's relationship to Hagar. Abraham distrusted God's promise of a seed and ended up raping his wife's servant, Hagar. Abraham *sabat* from the very thing that God desired for all of creation: to *nuakh* in His Lordship. The sequential generations followed their patriarch's suite and eventually found themselves far removed from the garden scene of Eden and enslaved in a foreign land to a foreign nation.

Moses to David

God heard Israel's cries of oppression and chose a man named Moses to face the Egyptian king and lead the Israelites out of slavery. After nine de-creation plagues, God took the life of every firstborn child in Egypt but spared the life of those whose house had blood of an unblemished lamb pasted on it. This event, known as Passover, is important enough that God commanded Israel to celebrate it yearly as an act of remembrance that He alone saves. The Passover (the Feast of Unleavened Bread) is rooted in Sabbath and God's Seventh Day rest, identified in Genesis, for it was always to be celebrated on the fourteenth day (a multiplication of seven) and is followed by a seven-day festival of unleavened bread that begins and ends with a "super sabbath" rest.⁴ Furthermore, the first Passover restarted the calendar for the Israelites.

⁴ Tim Mackie. *Seventh-Day Rest*. The Bible Project, (December 09, 2019). <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/seventy-times-seven-prophetic-math/>.

God's words in Exodus 12:1-2 about Passover being a "beginning" parallels with Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning". Passover is comparative to creation as a seven-day ritual that is meant to experience His everlasting rest just like the original creation narrative culminated with His unending rest.

One of the first commands God gave the Israelites after entering into a covenant was to keep the Sabbath Day holy by *sabat*-ing of all work for one day. In Deuteronomy 5:12-15, God linked partaking in the Sabbath day to Israel's remembrance of how He brought them out of Egypt. The Sabbath symbolized more than just an act of remembering but the actual implementation of God's presence and rule of the Israelites, just as it was in their liberation from slavery. Old Testament theologian Leigh Trevaskis observed that the sabbath law had roots in the creation story. By connecting Israel's remembrance of her redemption from Egypt with sabbatical rest, the exodus story became infused with further theological significance. Precisely as God's Seventh Day rest in the creation story marked the emergence of His creation, Israel's sabbath rest attested to her emergence as God's new creation through His act of redemption.⁵

Sabbath was also a prominent theme for Israel during their journey in the desert from Egypt to Mount Sinai through the giving of "heaven bread", manna, that God provided for His people. For over four hundred years, Israel painfully toiled the ground for their provisions and food while in Egypt. But in an instant, Israel no longer had to labor for food because God rained down bread from the skies for Israel. This links back to the garden scene from Genesis 2 where humanity experienced unending *nuakh* while working for provisions. The rhythms of gathering and not gathering the manna on the Sabbath is an imitation of God's own patterns of work and rest in Genesis 1. God created on days one through six and after creation was complete, He

⁵ Leigh Trevaskis, "The Purpose of Leviticus 24 within Its Literary Context." *Vetus Testamentum* 59, no. 2 (2009), 298–99.

rested on day seven. This parallels with Israel's collection of manna on days one through six, and after completing their collection they were told to rest on the seventh day. God told Israel to take a seventh day rest from collecting manna to test if Israel would trust Him for abundant life that only He offered or if they would choose to live life on their own terms.

David to Incarnation

As we already observed, God gave the Israelite nation laws and festivals such as the Passover, Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the Year of Jubilee, to follow in order to experience His Seventh Day rest. Instead, Israel rebelled and forsook the Sabbath and violated the covenant. This resulted in an “anti-jubilee” curse upon His people.⁶ Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel extensively wrote on God's judgment upon Israel via exile and desolation (Jer. 25:11, Ez. 22:26-29). But God's faithfulness would not be subdued. The author of Chronicles highlighted that during Israel's exile the desolate land enjoyed seventy years of sabbath rest (2 Chron. 36:20-21). Seventy is a multiplication of seven and suggest a benevolent Seventh Day rest. The symbolism is profound. There is no better way to represent Israel's story through the times of the kings and prophets than when a rebellious humanity rejected God's sovereign rule, He did not cease to restore His creation back to the unending rest from Genesis 1-2. This impression led prophets like Isaiah to see the announcement of a jubilee not merely as a practice but as a metaphor and image for a future hope and a future rest that could only come through an appointed Messiah.⁷

Incarnation

Sabbath was an important theme and practice instituted by God to the Israelites. The Israelite's Sabbath culminated (and repeated) on the fiftieth year in a Year of Jubilee. It was a full

⁶ Tim Mackie, *Seventh-Day Rest*. The Bible Project, (December 09, 2019). <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/seventy-times-seven-prophetic-math/>.

⁷ Bradley C. Gregory, “The Postexilic Exile in Third Isaiah: In Light of Second Temple Hermeneutics”.

year dedicated to rest and restoration: the land from work, the oppressed from slavery, and the debtor of debt (Lev. 25). Isaiah took the concept of Jubilee as a law and proclaimed it as a future deliverance (Isa. 61:1-3) (Gregory). The words of Isaiah 61 are rooted in the Year of Jubilee from Leviticus 25, which are rooted in the Sabbath rest that Israel observed in order to remember their liberation from Egypt. Jesus began his ministry by declaring He was the fulfillment of this restoration (Luke 4:16-30). He linked the Sabbath rest in the Year of Jubilee to the freedom and ultimate rest that He was bringing through His perfect life, surrendered death, and miraculous resurrection. This is what the apostle Paul reminded the church of Galatia about, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1). The freedom that Christ “bought” was not only for the elected Israelites, but for all humanity.

Although the controversies caused by Jesus’ actions on the Sabbath were seen by some as divisive, His declaration of being “Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:1-14) was fundamentally paralleled to His pronouncement of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 3:2, Luke 17:20-21, Mark 1:15). Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, believed He alone offered ultimate rest. For this reason, Jesus tells all who were weary and burdened to come to Him for rest; to take up His easy yoke and light burdened because only in Him could one find true rest for their soul (Matt. 11:28). Theologian Samuele Bacchiocchi explains that “The metaphor of the ‘yoke’ was commonly used to express subordination and loyalty to God, especially through obedience to his law. Thus Jeremiah speaks of the leaders of the people who knew ‘the law of their God, but they all alike had broken the yoke, they had burst the bonds’ (Jer. 5:5). In the following chapter, the same prophet says to the people: ‘Find rest for your souls’ by learning anew obedience to God’s

law” (Jer. 6:6).⁸ Mathew displays the ‘yoke’ of Christ, not as a commitment to the Torah, but as a dedication to a Person, Jesus the Christ, who is Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 11:25-30).

Church Age

The new covenant of Jesus brought a sabbath that was no longer external to His followers. Consequentially, through the indwelling of His Spirit, followers of Jesus Christ can experience His Seventh Day rest similar to the *nuakh* that Adam and Eve had in the garden. This rest is entered not by obedience to laws, days, of festivities (Gal. 4:8-10) but solely by believing in Jesus Christ. Jesus confirmed this by placing greater importance on the concept of Sabbath, His Lordship, than the observation of taking one day out of seven to rest. Jesus prescribed that the sabbath pointed to a time of constant communion between God and mankind.⁹ Scripture echoes Jesus’ words as the author of Hebrews takes Psalms 95 reference to the promised land and God’s temple as a place of rest, and declared that those who have Christ indwelling Spirit have become the new rest (Alexander, 749). Because of this reality, Christians in fact do observe the Sabbath by entering into God’s rest found in Jesus Christ.

New Heavens and New Earth

History’s conception found in the Genesis creation narrative is overwhelmingly paralleled in its conclusion found in Revelation’s new creation narrative. Just as in God’s original formation of the cosmos where mankind experienced His presence and participated in His rule, so too will humanity *nuakh* in the new heavens and new earth in His unending Sabbath. The Apostle John used creation imagery to make this point, saying “the city does not need the sun or the moon to

⁸ Samuele Bacchiocchi, "Matthew 11:28-30: Jesus' Rest and the Sabbath." *Andrews University Seminary Studies (AUSS)* 22.3 (1984), 300-303.

⁹ Tim Mackie. *Seventh-Day Rest*. The Bible Project, (December 09, 2019). <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/seventy-times-seven-prophetic-math/>.

shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp...and the glory and honor of the nations will be brought to it...and have the right to eat from the tree of life” (Rev. 21:23).

Jesus is God’s rest to mankind, and those who place their faith in Him have His indwelling Spirit, but still, complete sabbath rest has yet to reach its fulfillment. The war against human rebellion is still being waged every day in the hearts of His creation, allowing followers of Jesus Christ to only experience glimpses of His Sabbath rest. But even these glimpses and short-lived experiences serve as a reminder (just like the Sabbath reminder of Israel’s emancipation from slavery) that history is moving closer and closer towards an ultimate fulfillment in the union of a new heaven and new earth that will experience His eternal Seventh Day rest.

In conclusion, Sabbath is a vital aspect to the Creator-creation relationship. Scriptures portray Sabbath as a call to cease from (*sabat/ anapausis*) and an invitation to dwell and abide in (*nuakh/ katapausis*). The most prominent imagery of sabbath is a Seventh Day rest observed in the opening pages of Genesis where creation and mankind experienced an unending state of God’s presence, rest, and rule. But mankind rebelled and God cursed His creation. His perfect union ceased and humanity was banished from the garden. Genesis 3:15 set the stage for a promised Son of Adam to restore humanity back to the garden to *nuakh* in Him. After entering into a covenant with His people, God instructed Israel to *sabat* one day of the week as a remembrance of her redemption from Egypt. Just as God’s Seventh Day rest in the creation story marked the emergence of his new creation, Israel’s sabbatical rest testified to her emergence as God’s new creation. Despite Israel’s continued corruption and rejection of God’s law, His redemption over creation never ceased. This impression led Isaiah to see the announcement of a jubilee, an ultimate sabbath which was rooted in the Sabbath rest that Israel observed in order to remember their liberation from Egypt, not as a law, but as a symbol of a future hope and rest that

could only come through an appointed Messiah. Jesus Christ came onto the scene proclaiming He was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus claimed He was Lord of the Sabbath and that He alone offered Seventh Day rest through his life, death, and resurrection. All those filled with the indwelling of His spirit through Jesus Christ can partake in His sabbath, similar to the *nuakh* that Adam and Eve had in the garden. But these short-lived experiences of His *sabat* and *nuakh* serve as a reminder, like the Sabbath reminder of Israel's liberation from slavery, that there will be a day when all believers will live in a new heaven and new earth in a Seventh Day rest with God's glory as an eternal light and Jesus Christ as the lamp (Rev. 21:23)

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