The Sabbath in Redemptive History
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Introduction
Ever since the Reformation, the meaning of the Sabbath has been a heavily debated topic among Protestants. According to Richard Gaffin, four general interpretations on the Sabbath have arisen from these debates. First, the “Antinomian” view holds, based upon an imposed dichotomy between law and gospel, that the Sabbath has been abolished in Christ and should not be observed by the Church. Second, the “Seventh Day Sabbatarian” view takes the exact opposite position, teaching that the fourth commandment is binding to Christians in the same manner as it was to Old Testament Israel. Third, the “Ecclesiastical” views hold that the Sabbath was “strictly Mosaic in origin” and therefore does not apply to the Church. The Lord’s Day, or Sunday, was established either by the early Church, the apostles, or Christ, though unrecorded in the Scriptures. Fourth, the “Sabbatarian” view holds that the Sabbath is creational in its origin and is therefore applicable to the Church today. However, the observance of the Sabbath today by the Church is not the same as it was for Old Testament Israel; it has been “adjusted” by the coming of Christ. Thus, the Sabbath was moved from Saturday to Sunday. In keeping with the Reformed tradition, this paper will assume the Sabbatarian view of the Sabbath, though with a redemptive-historical emphasis.

The Sabbath in the Old Testament has two aspects: the Sabbath as legislation and the Sabbath as consummation. Both of these aspects exist side by side in the Old and New Testaments. The Sabbath understood as legislation is that aspect of the Sabbath that is mandated by God for man to obey. The Sabbath understood as consummation is that aspect of the Sabbath in which Creation is used as a paradigm for the redemption of the world. In the same way that the Sabbath is the consummation of creation, Sabbath rest is also the consummation of redemption. The distinction between these two aspects of the Sabbath is not a sharp distinction; there is overlap between the two. Yet this distinction is helpful to understanding the Sabbath as a whole. Sabbath as legislation and Sabbath as consummation can be thought of as two flip-sides of the same “Sabbath coin.” Yet both of these aspects can be traced throughout redemptive-history. The purpose of this paper is to trace the redemptive-historical significance of both the Sabbath as legislation and the Sabbath as consummation through the Old Testament, as well as to explore their fulfillment and continuation in Christ.

Sabbath as Legislation

 Origins in Creation
Genesis 2:1-3 describes the ordination of the Sabbath, stating that, after He had
completed all His works of Creation, God “blessed” and “sanctified” the seventh day, and “rested from all that He had done” (NASB).[2] God sanctified the seventh day during creation, before the Fall. Therefore, the ordination of the seventh day as Sabbath is a creational structure. Genesis 1:1 - 2:3 describes God’s creative works in a “six and one” pattern: six days of work for one day of rest. This is parallel to the Sabbath cycle which is still observed today. Furthermore, it must be noted here that the Sabbath day was not consecrated with respect to Himself, but with respect to His Creation and for the sake of man (Mark 2:27).[3] As O. Palmer Robertson has said, “it was for the good of man and the whole creation” that “God instituted the Sabbath.”[4] God rested from His works on the seventh day, and then sanctified that day for us.

Yet it must not be thought that when God rested on the seventh day that He rested from all His works. Jesus said with respect to the Sabbath, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working,” (John 5:17) implying that both Jesus and the Father work on the Sabbath. Rather, John Murray has shown that when God rested on the seventh day, He rested from one specific kind of work—that is, His creative works of Genesis 1.[5] “The contrast is between the work of creation and what is not the work of creation.”[6]

These creative works were not resumed after the seventh day. Genesis 2:2 says that God had completed all His works by the seventh day. There were no more acts of creation to be done. Creation was complete and finished. Furthermore, the absence of the ending characteristic of the other six days, “And there was evening and there was morning. . .,” also indicates that God’s creative works were not resumed. The seventh day was the last and final day of creation.

John Murray has said that since the ordination of the Sabbath was a creational structure, presumably even Adam would have observed it.[7] Yet according to him, Adam’s observance of the Sabbath was distinct from the creation mandates. The creation mandates were given as a “reminder of his relation to, dependence upon, and responsibility to, God.” The ordination of the Sabbath, however, was given for two reasons. First, to teach Adam that his life on earth was “patterned after a divine example,” for the cycle ordained for man was patterned after God’s creative works. And second, it provided “a time for specific worship.”[8] In the same way God’s rest was a rest only from His creative works, Adam’s rest was a rest from his providing works in order to worship God.

While Murray’s view has been accepted by many, it is not necessary to conclude from the fact that the sabbath is rooted in creation that the sabbath was therefore prescriptive upon Adam and his offspring. Exodus 20:8-11 does not claim that people have
observed the sabbath day every week since creation, only that a weekly sabbath observance is patterned after creation. There is no prescription to observe a weekly sabbath until the command at Mt. Sinai.

**The Sabbath Day**

**Old Testament: Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue (Exodus 20:8-11)**
The Sabbath day was instituted after the Exodus from Egypt in the fourth commandment of the Decalogue (Exodus 20:8-11): “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy... For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.” The institution of the Sabbath day for the nation of Israel reflected the creational structure outlined in Genesis 1:1 - 2:3. Israel was to work six days as God had worked, and then rest on the seventh as God had rested. Thus the people of God were to imitate God’s creative works, even as Adam was to imitate God’s works. As Geerhardus Vos has said that the principle behind the Sabbath “consists in this, that man must copy God in his course of life.”[9] Also, it appears that this command was not something new to the Israelites, for the command was to remember the Sabbath day, presupposing they already knew what it was. Furthermore, the legislation of the Sabbath was larger than just rest from work for the Israelite people, for the “sojourner” and even livestock were to observe the Sabbath.

The Sabbath day was a means of provision for the Israelite community. It was a command, but it also a provided a day of rest for the Israelite community. God had told the Israelites that when they gathered manna on the sixth day, they would bring in “twice as much as they gather daily” (Exodus 16:5). Thus, by God’s gracious provision, “seven days of livelihood would come from six days of labor.”[10] God had rested on the seventh day and was refreshed (Exodus 31:17). In the same way, the Israelites were blessed with the opportunity to imitate God and refresh themselves on Sabbath day (Exodus 23:12).

In as much as the Sabbath was a means of provision for Israel, it was also a means of redemption for Israel. When Adam had sinned, God cursed his work, saying, “Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field; By the sweat of your face You shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:17b-20).

The institution of the Sabbath provided one day of the week without the effects of the curse on Adam. This also provided a way for the Israelites to look forward to a time of
complete redemption, when no curse would be found. The Sabbath was a creational structure, but God used it to provide redemption for His people as they moved into the land of Canaan.

**New Testament fulfillment**

As is the case with all Old Testament themes, the Sabbath is fulfilled in the New Testament “already and not yet.” The complex of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection established a New Creation for the people of God with a new created order (2 Corinthians 5:17). In this new Creation, Christians have a new Sabbath in Him. In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus says, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light.” In this new Creation, the Sabbath allows us to approach God, not on the basis of our futile works and toil, but on the basis of faith (Galatians 2:20). Through this new Sabbath God has given us rest from our works where we can live a life of faith to God.

The Sabbath is still a creational ordinance and a command which Christians should observe, but the ordinance of the Sabbath has been “adjusted” by the coming of Christ. Christ rose from the dead on Sunday, establishing rest for the people of God apart from our works. For Christians therefore, the Sabbath has been moved to Sunday in order to celebrate the day when Christ established rest for His people.[11]

As much as we have received a new Sabbath now, it has not yet been fully realized. The people of God as well as Creation still feel the effects of the curse. The labor of providing for the family is still a frustrating toil. Childbirth is still painful. Christians still struggle with sin in their lives. Yet at the consummation of the kingdom of God, when God establishes a New Heavens and a New Earth, the curse will no longer have any affect on Christians. No more will there be toil in the work of provision and no more will the people struggle with sin. Complete rest from the curse and from the effects of sin will be realized, but only in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

**The Sabbath Year**

**The Old Testament (Leviticus 25:1-7)**

The people of Israel, when they entered the land of Canaan, were to allow the land to celebrate a Sabbath every seventh year (Leviticus 25:2-4). This is distinct from the Sabbath day in that it was established with an emphasis on the land. The Israelites were to refrain from sowing in their fields and pruning their vineyards (v. 4). The purpose of the Sabbath year was, according to Robertson, to “protect the land from abuse” and “provide refreshment for man” from their labors. [12] This law demonstrated to the
Israelite community that, although they had been given the land as their inheritance, God was still the primary owner of the land. The land was to be maintained in the manner God Himself prescribed. The Sabbath year was similar to the Sabbath day in that it was a provision for Israel and for the Israelite people. The Israelites would receive seven years of sustenance from the land with only six years of labor. Leviticus 25:20-21 says that if the Israelite community were to doubt God’s provision, He would bless them so much “in the sixth year that it will bring forth the crop for three years.” Yet the Sabbath year was also redemptive. God provided Israel one year without the curse of toil in working the ground. As O. Palmer Robertson has said, “man was not to be captive to the creation.” One year out of every seven years would not be affected by the curse. Thus the Sabbath year ordinance was a good thing and a blessing for Israel.

Yet the Sabbath year was also a command, and disobedience would result in punishment. Leviticus 26 implies that if Israel were to disobey the Sabbath (among other commands), she would be “scattered among the nations” and her cities would “become waste” (v. 33). While the people are exiled, “the land will rest and enjoy its Sabbaths” which could not observe while the Israelites occupied the land (vv. 34-35). Hill and Walton have noticed that “according to the prophet Jeremiah, it was the neglect of the Sabbatical laws and the consequent rejection of covenant instruction” which caused the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon (2 Chronicles 36:17-21, Jeremiah 25:8-14). Thus, the seventy years of captivity was at least in part because Israel had disobeyed Sabbath. The land needed ten Sabbaths to recover from the sins of Israel.

Daniel, near the end of the seventy years of captivity, was concerned about the fact that Jerusalem had not been restored (Daniel 9:1,2) and prayed to God for forgiveness and restoration (Daniel 9:3-19). Yet the Israelites had not yet repented of their sins. Therefore, God’s answer to Daniel’s prayer described “seventy weeks” yet to come, standing for seventy times seven years (Daniel 9:24-27). This delay of the restoration amounts to a prophesy of the coming of Christ. Although a remnant did come back to Israel, full restoration did not occur until the coming of Christ. Thus, the eschatological hope for restoration of Israel was a “structure. . . along Sabbatical lines.”

New Testament Fulfillment
As stated before, Christ’s death and resurrection brought a New Creation in the form of the kingdom of God. After Christ’s death and resurrection, the kingdom of God lost its geo-political boundaries. Gentiles are now a part of the people of God in the Church, which is the New Israel, and Jews and Gentiles have become one people (John 10:16,
Ephesians 2:11-22). Thus, the restoration of the land of Israel was the establishment of the Church.

Yet the restoration of the land was not a complete restoration. The earth was created to be a sanctuary for God. However, sin corrupted the world and was no longer a suitable temple. The Jewish temple and Israel were intended to be a new sanctuary for God, though it was incomplete. Because of His resurrection, Christ has replaced the Jewish temple with His own body and now He lives in Christians, so that we are His temples on earth. This in part fulfilled the ultimate goal of all the covenants: God dwelling among His people with Him being their God and they being His people (cf. Ezekiel 27:26-28). However, complete fulfillment of these goals will not be realized until the Second Coming of Christ, at which time He will establish a New Heavens and New Earth.

In the New Jerusalem described in Revelation 22, there will be no temple, “for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple” (v. 22). Creation will be completely restored and will once again be a sanctuary for the Lord, and God will dwell on earth among men; He will be their God, and they will His people forever.

The New Heavens and the New Earth will also fully relieve Creation from the effects of the curse. As a result of the Fall and as a part of the curse, God caused all creation to be “subjected to futility” (Romans 8:20). The creation today still feels the effects of this curse. The present creation “groans,” anxiously longing for its redemption. Yet at the consummation, “the creation itself will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). A picture of this restored Creation is in Revelation 22:1-5. It is apparent from this description that, in the New Heavens and the New Earth, “there shall no longer be any curse.” (Revelation 22:3).

**Year of Jubilee**

**Old Testament (Leviticus 25:8-17)**

Israel was to “count off seven sabbaths of years” (v. 8) that is forty-nine years, and after this time had passed, on the day of atonement, they were to “sound the ram’s horn” (v. 9) and proclaim liberty through the land. In this fiftieth year, any debts that Israelites had were to be canceled. Anyone who had to sell his property to another Israelite would receive back his property. Furthermore, the Israelites were not to sow or reap the aftergrowth, but were to “eat the crops out of the field” (vv. 11-12). The fiftieth year was to be a Sabbath to the Lord.

Of course, the practical purpose for the year of Jubilee was to prevent the redistribution of the land among the tribes. God would give each tribe a part of the land as an inheritance when they entered and conquered the land. These laws prevented one tribe
from taking over another tribe’s land. Yet beyond this, the year of Jubilee displays God’s care and provision for those who were struck by misfortune. If an Israelite became so poor that he had to sell his property, the purchaser who bought his property would have to return the property to the previous owner in the year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:23 - 28). Furthermore, the Israelites were not to take other Israelites as slaves. If an Israelite became so indebted that he sold himself to another Israelite, the indebted Israelite was to serve as a “hired man” with his purchaser until the year of Jubilee, but then he would be freed so that he could return to his family and homeland (Lev. 25:39 - 44).

The redemptive significance for the year of Jubilee is obvious. On the day of atonement in the fiftieth year, liberty would be proclaimed throughout the land and all debts were to be canceled. Israelite servants would be freed and their property would be returned to those whom God had given it. Isaiah’s prophesies, looking forward to Israel’s restoration from exile, used this Sabbatical imagery and associated it with the coming of the Messiah (Isaiah 61:1 - 3). The coming of the Messiah would “bring good news to the afflicted,... bind up the broken hearted, . . . proclaim liberty to prisoners,” and “proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (vv. 1-2).

New Testament Fulfillment
Jesus Christ, in Luke 4:17-21, quoted Isaiah 61:1-2 and said that He had fulfilled this passage in the hearing of those with Him. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of Israel’s Messianic and Sabbatical hopes. From the time of Adam, humanity has been captive to sin and death (Romans 5:12-21); thus, every man owes anunpayable debt to God (Matthew 6:12; 18:27, 32; Romans 3:23). Jesus Christ, upon His death and resurrection for us, has provided atonement for our sins. By His atoning work, Jesus Christ has proclaimed liberty to captives and has canceled out all our debts which we have owed to Him (Colossians 2:14). Jesus Christ has given us freedom from our sins.

Furthermore, Jesus Christ has promised us an inheritance “which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away (1 Peter 1:4). In the same way the year of Jubilee restored the inheritance of the Israelites given to them by God through Joshua, Jesus Christ has given the “promise of the eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15) to those in the New Israel, the Church. The Holy Spirit whom God has been given to us seals us in Him as a pledge, our guarantee of this eternal inheritance (Ephesians 1:13-14), which we will receive in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

However, the promise of the year of Jubilee has not been completely realized. Although our debt has been canceled and we have been set free from the penalty of sin, the effects of sin still affect our lives. Until we are fully redeemed in the New Heavens and the
New Earth, we will continue to struggle to sin. At the consummation, however, all effects of sin will be completely wiped away. Furthermore, we have only received a promise of the inheritance, which is “reserved in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:4). Although this inheritance is guaranteed, we will not receive this inheritance until the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Sabbath as Consummation

**During Creation**

**The Progress of Creation**

The Creation account of Genesis 1 describes the process of God creating order out of chaos. Genesis 1:2 describes the chaotic state of the pre-formed earth, saying, “And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.” This passage describes chaotic nature of this “pre-formed” earth in two ways. First, the earth, before God began to shape it, is described as הָ토ָהוּ וָבֹהוּ (or tohu wabohu) -- that is, “formless and void.” Bruce Waltke has suggested that the intent of this phrase is to say that the world was “unformed and unfilled.” [21] Second, the passage states that “darkness was over the surface of the deep.” Both “darkness” and “the deep” are hostile to life—that is, unfit for human habitation. [22]

The six days of creation describe the process of forming and filling the earth in order to make it habitable for life. The first three days of Creation describe God forming the earth by creating “habitable realms.” This was accomplished by separating opposites. In day one, God separated light from darkness. In day two, God separated sky from water. In day three, God separated earth from sea. The second three days of Creation describe God filling the earth with rulers over the habitable realms. On day four, God created the sun to rule over the day and the moon to rule the night. On day five, God created fish and fowl to rule the sea and sky. On day six, God created animals and man to rule over the land. By the time of creation of man on the sixth day, therefore, the world has been fully formed and fully filled, specially crafted and designed for human habitation. [23]

God consummated His creation by resting on the seventh day and sanctifying it. The fact that God rested on the seventh day signifies that His creation was now orderly and complete. Thus, the Sabbath is the consummation and goal of Creation. Creation began in chaos and, by acts of forming and filling, was completed in rest and order. Table 1 graphically displays this progression of creation.

**Table 1: Progress of Creation**
### Acts of Forming (First Three Days)

- 1. Separation of Light from Darkness
- 2. Separation of Sky from Sea
- 3. Separation of Earth from Sea
- 4. Creation of the sun, moon, and stars
- 5. Creation of fish and fowl
- 6. Creation of beasts and humans
- 7. Establishment of Sabbath (consummation, enthronement, and consecration)

### Acts of Filling (Second Three Days)

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### The meaning of the Sabbath in Creation

Meredith Kline, in his book *Kingdom Prologue*, states that the Sabbath proclaims God as the “Omega Consummator.” He then describes three characteristics of the Sabbath as portrayed in Genesis 2:1-3: consummation, enthronement, and consecration. First, Kline describes the Sabbath as a consummation of Creation. This has previously been discussed to some degree. The Sabbath completed the creation of the world, which was to be a temple for God. In Genesis 1:1-2:3, God is portrayed as a Divine Architect, designing and building a house for Himself. The first six days were characterized by works of creation, saying at the beginning of each day, “Let there be.” Yet on the seventh day, however, God rested over His creation and (hypothetically) said, “It is finished.” Thus, Kline says, “As a celebration of the finishing of the world-temple, the Sabbath proclaims the name of the Creator to be Consummator.”

Second, the Sabbath expresses the enthronement of God over His creation. God was not wearied after six days of creation. He did not need to “recoup” from His creative works (Exodus 20:11 and 31:17 are anthropomorphic language). Rather, “the Creator’s Sabbath rest is much more a matter of taking satisfaction and delight in his consummated building.” Since God is the Creator of the world, His acts of Creation display God as King over creation. Thus, God’s rest on the seventh day has a “royal” character to it. Not only was creation to be a temple for God, it was also to be a “cosmic palace and accordingly his resting is an occupying of his palace, a royal session.” It should be noted here that “temple” and “palace” in Hebrew are the same word (הֵיכָל), so the concept of the world being God’s temple and His palace are very similar concepts.

Third, the Sabbath was the consecration of the seventh day creation. This concept builds on the theme discussed earlier that God, in the first three days, formed habitable realms, and in the second three days, filled those realms with their rulers. Kline noticed that the days of creation are organized thematically by Moses in order to bring out the “hierarchical order” of the narrative. On the fourth, fifth, and sixth days, God created rulers in a hierarchical manner to rule over the realms He created on the first three days. The rulers created on each successive day were given more authority than the
Man’s rule was even extended to cover the whole earth, not just the realm of land created on the third day. On the seventh day, God consecrated the Sabbath day “and set it apart as sacred to the Creator. It belongs to the Lord of the covenant and witnesses to God’s ultimate proprietorship of the land and to his lordship over the life of man.” All the works of the six days of creation were “consecrated to man,” whom God has set as ruler and king over His creation. Yet man is only a “vassel-king.” Ultimately, creation and man himself is consecrated to God, who is Lord over creation, man, and the Sabbath.

During the Time of Noah
The purpose of the Flood of Noah was to bring rest to the earth from man’s sin. Genesis 3:1 - 6:8 describes the extent to which humanity had fallen into sin. Genesis 5:28-29 says that Lamech named his son Noah because he “shall give us rest from our work and from the toil of our hands arising from the ground which the Lord has cursed” (v. 29). The word “Noah” (נֹח or Noach) comes from the word (נוּח or nuach), which means “rest” in the sense of settlement “in a particular place. . . with overtones of finality, or. . . victory, salvation, etc.” William J. Dumbrell notes that nuach means “rest” in the sense of “ease” or “refreshment.” This is not the same word as what is translated “sabbath” (שבת or shabbat), which indicates rest in the sense of “repose.” However, two Old Testament texts use both these words together with sabbatical significance. Exodus 20:8-11 is a command to “Remember the Sabbath day” (v. 8) because “in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth. . . and rested [נּוּ ח or nuach] on the seventh day” (v. 11). Exodus 31:12-18 is also a command to “observe my sabbaths” (v. 13) because “on the seventh day He [the Lord] ceased from labor, and was refreshed [נּוּ ח or nuach]” (v. 17).

During the Flood, God caused the created order to collapse upon itself. In essence, “God played the tape of creation in reverse.” Genesis 7 describes the progression of the Flood. Genesis 7:11-12 states that when the Flood began, “all the fountains of the great deep burst open and the floodgates of the sky were opened. And rain fell upon the earth.” Thus water came down from above and up from below, collapsing the two realms created on the second day (air and sea) together. Furthermore, Genesis 7:19 states, “the water prevailed more and more upon the earth, so that all the high mountains everywhere under the heavens were covered.” Thus all the land was covered, collapsing the two realms created on the third day (land and sea) together. All the “rulers” who lived in those realms created on the second and third day (birds, fish, animals, and man) were destroyed. Only the realms of day and night, and thus their rulers (sun, moon, and stars) were not destroyed. At the height of the Flood, the earth became a chaotic sea, formless and void, uninhabitable by life.
“But God remembered Noah” and preserved his life. The recession of the Flood in Genesis 8:1-5 is also reminiscent of creation. God “caused a wind [רוח, or ruah] to pass over the earth, and the water subsided” (Gen. 8:1). Another translation of רוח is “spirit.” Perhaps it is not coincidental that Moses chose to use this word in this context. Genesis 1:2 states that the Spirit (רוּחַ) of God was hovering over the chaotic waters, from which He formed the world. In Genesis 8:1 it is a wind sent by God which causes the chaotic waters to subside. At any rate, this wind continued to restore the realms of land, air, and sea into their proper order until the ark “rested” on Mount Ararat (v. 4). The world was restored to its proper order by a work of “recreation” by God.

Genesis 8:6-12 uses sabbatical imagery to describe the final waiting period before Noah could leave the ark. Noah sent out a dove to see if the water had been completely abated, but the dove returned because it found no “resting place” (vv. 8-9). Seven days later, Noah sent out the dove again, and it returned with an olive branch, signifying that the water had receded and life was being restored to the earth (vv. 10-11). Seven days later, Noah sent out the dove a third time, and it did not return, implying that it had found a resting place (v. 12), because creation was ready for Noah to leave the ark and return to the land. The seven day cycles and the dove’s resting place imply a sabbatical imagery to the consummation of the flood.

Thus, the restoration of the created order was a recreation of what was destroyed by the Flood. The consummation of this recreation was Sabbath rest from the sin of mankind. Creation was “refreshed” from the sinfulness of man. Furthermore, Genesis 9:1-2 reiterates the giving of the cultural mandate to Adam in Genesis 1:28, implying that the restoration of creation was a new creation, a new Eden, which was to be a place of rest for Noah and his descendents. Thus, in keeping with the purpose of the naming of Noah, the flood brought “relief from the toil that he [Noah] should bring” (Gen. 5:29).

**From Exodus to Conquest**

**The Literary Purpose of Genesis 1:1-2:3**

As stated before, the historical significance of the creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:3 is that it describes a progression from chaos to order. The question must then be asked, what significance did Moses intend for this account to have for Israelites in their travels from Egypt to Canaan? Richard Pratt has suggested that the meaning of the creation account to the Mosaic audience was to teach them that “the initial order of the universe was contrary to life in Egypt but attainable in Canaan.” The lives of the Israelites in Egypt were characterized by chaos. They were slaves, harshly mistreated, and greatly overworked. However, Canaan promised to be a land of rest and blessing—a land
“flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8). Thus, literary purpose of the creation account to the Mosaic audience was to encourage the Israelites to live Egypt behind them and continue on their journey to the Promised Land.

This understanding of the creation account is evident in descriptions of both Egypt and Canaan. Genesis 1:2 describes the pre-formed, chaotic earth as “formless” and states that the Spirit of God was “hovering” over the waters. These two words are found nowhere else in Mosaic literature except in Deuteronomy 32:10-11. Verse 10 describes the land of Egypt as a “howling waste,” using the same word translated “formless” in Genesis 1:2. Verse 11 states that the Lord cared for and protected Israel as an eagle that “hovers” over its young, using the same word translated “moving” or “hovering” in Genesis 1:2. Here Moses draws a parallel between the chaotic, formless earth of Genesis 1:2 and the Israelite captivity in Egypt. He also draws a parallel between the Spirit hovering over and creating order out of the chaotic waters and the “Glory-Spirit” hovering as an eagle over Israel. Thus, “Deuteronomy 32 refers to God’s work of redemptive re-creation in the exodus event.”

In contrast to Egypt, the land of Canaan is pictured as being “Eden recaptured.” Canaan is a fertile land, a “land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut. 8:8-10, 26:9). Canaan is “a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs” (Deut. 8:7). In the land of Canaan, God would bless them above all peoples (Deut. 7:14), provide them with security and heal them of their sicknesses (Deut. 7:15). Yet, also like Adam in Eden, the condition for living in the land was to keep the covenant. If this covenant was “irretrievably breached,” they were to “be expelled from the land.” Dumbrell has stated that “one can hardly escape the impression that what is being depicted through such references is Eden recaptured, paradise recovered.”

Moses repeatedly states that the land of Canaan would be a land of rest for the Israelites, especially in the book of Deuteronomy. The land of Canaan is described as a resting place which God will give Israel (Deut. 3:20, 12:9). The conquering of the land of Canaan under Joshua is said to be God giving rest from surrounding enemies (Deut 12:10, 25:19). If the Israelites were to break the covenant and be exiled, they would find no rest in any other nation (Deut 28:64-65). Thus the land of Canaan, when occupied by Israel, was to be a restored Eden and a place of Sabbath rest for Israel in which they could “enjoy the gifts of creation in the way in which they had been meant to be used.”

Psalm 95:7b-11 is an exhortation not to sin in the way that the first generation Israelites had in the wilderness in Meribah and Massah. Meribah and Massah are two names for
the place where the Israelites had tested the Lord in Exodus 17:1-7. The Israelites complained because God had not given them water, but God produced water from the rock through Moses. God’s judgment that the first generation Israelites would not enter Canaan was given later, after the rebellion of the spies (Numbers 13-14). Yet the Psalter considered the sin of Israel at Meribah to be one of the sins which led to the final judgment in Numbers 14. He said of the first generation Israelites, “Truly they shall not enter into My rest” (v. 11). Thus the first generation did not enter the rest God had promised the nation of Israel.

The Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)
Whereas the motivation to keep the fourth commandment in Exodus 20:8-11 was God’s pattern in the creation of the world, the motivation to keep the same commandment in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 was God’s pattern in the redemption of Israel from Egypt:

Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. . . And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day.

Yet, given the understanding that the redemption of Israel from slavery was an act of recreation of the way the world was intended to be, it is not difficult to see the reason for this difference in motivation. Dumbrell states that these two “applications” are not contradictory; rather, they are “in fact complementary, since it is the Exodus redemption which makes the new life in the land, and thus, the Edenic values recaptured, possible.”[40] Moses and Israel saw the progression of the Exodus from captivity in Egypt, through the wilderness wanderings, to the conquest of the land of Canaan as the establishment of the rest to which the progress of creation prefigured. In the same way that the Sabbath was the goal and consummation of creation, rest in conquest of the land of Canaan was the goal and consummation of the Exodus.

During The Monarchy
Joshua 23:1 states that through the conquest of Joshua, “the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their enemies on every side.” Thus Joshua established rest for the land of Israel by defeating their enemies. Yet the book of Judges shows that the conquest under Joshua was not complete. In fact, Judges argues that the Israelites would not be able to complete the conquest until they had a king.[41] In 2 Samuel 7:1, after David defeated the Philistines, the text states that “the Lord had given [David] rest on every side from all his enemies.” Thus David “achieved what the Judges had failed to do.”[42] As a reward for David’s obedience, God promised in His covenant with him
that He will continue to give him “rest from all [his] enemies” (2 Sam. 7:11).

There is a parallel between 2 Samuel 7 and Deuteronomy 12. Deuteronomy 12 is an expectation of the time when all the enemies of Israel are defeated (vv. 9-10). When this is accomplished, the Israelites were to make sacrifices to God (v. 11). Yet they were not to go to an of the old “cultic places” that were previously in the land (v. 13). Rather, they were to go to “the place which the Lord chooses in one of [the] tribes” (v14). Thus, God always intended for Israel to have a centralized place of worship. In 2 Samuel 7, David accomplished the goal of rest anticipated by Deuteronomy 12 and then desired to build a temple for God—a centralized place of worship for Israel. Although the actual task of building the temple was left to David’s son, it was David who made all the plans and preparation for its building and who was the “architect of rest” for Israel.

According to Hebrews 4:7, David was the author of Psalm 95. As stated before, this Psalm reflects upon the sins of the first generation Israelites and claims that, because of their sins, they would not enter God’s rest—that is, they could not enter the land of Canaan. However, David lived after the conquest of Canaan, and using this instance in the past, he calls the people of his day not to “harden their hearts” in order that they may enter God’s rest. Therefore, David must have looked forward to a rest to come, and he must not have considered the conquest of Canaan to be the final rest for the people of God. To what rest did David refer? The New Testament proclaims that Jesus Christ, consummate David is the final architect of rest for the people of God.

**New Testament Understanding**

**Already**

Salvation in Christ is viewed by the New Testament as a new creation. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (NIV) and then claims that “the old things [have] passed away; behold, new things have come” (NASB). The things of the old creation have passed away, while the things of the new creation have come. John, begins his gospel in an obvious parallel with the beginning of Genesis, saying,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. . . There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man” (John 1:1-5, 9).

Here John seems to be giving theological meaning to the creation of light on the first
day of creation. And Paul seems to echo this thought when he says, “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6).

In the same way that the goal and consummation of creation was Sabbath rest, the goal and consummation of this new creation is Sabbath rest, fully realized in the New Heavens and New Earth. Yet Christ’s work in His first coming has provided, in part, a Sabbath rest for the people of God. Jesus proclaims this rest in Matthew 11:28-30, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light.” Richard Gaffin states that these verses describe an “eschatological rest already present for believers.” Philip Hughes has also suggested that this verse describes a “rest which Christians even now experience in Christ in the midst of a variety of afflictions.” Thus, in Him we have rest and salvation apart from the works of the Law, not because He abolished the Law, but because He fulfilled it (Matthew 5:17). The Law was never intended to be a means of salvation, as the Pharisees had taught. Jesus offers us salvation, and rest from our works on the basis of His work for us on the cross.

Not Yet

Although we have rest in Him on the basis of faith, there is yet a final rest still to come. Hebrews 3:7-4:13 is an exposition of Psalm 95. As discussed earlier, David in this Psalm compares the Israelites of his day to the first generation Israelites in the wilderness. He wrote this Psalm to encourage the Israelites to not “harden their hearts” (Ps 95:8) as the first generation Israelites had; otherwise, they would not enter His rest (v. 11). The “rest” referred to in this Psalm is entrance in the Promised Land. However, the author of Hebrews argues that if the conquest under Joshua had given them rest, and if David lived after the conquest, why did David speak of a future rest? (Hebrews 4:8). Therefore, the author of Hebrews concludes that “there remains therefore, a Sabbath rest for the people of god” (v. 9) and encourages us to “be diligent to enter that rest” (v. 11).

The author of Hebrews compares us as Christians to the Israelites in the wilderness. As Richard Gaffin has said, “Israel in the wilderness and believers under the new covenant are in analogous situations.” Jesus, our superior Moses-Joshua, has delivered us from our bondage to sin and death, represented by the Exodus, yet He has not yet led us into “that experience of salvation which is unthreatened and unchallenged, represented by rest and peace in Canaan.” According to the author of Hebrews, we as Christians
are still in the wilderness. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10:1-11, uses this same paradigm to encourage obedience to Christ. He states that the stories of the Israelites in the wilderness provide “examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved’ (v. 6). Paul then lists many of the sins of the wilderness Israelites, and exhorts us to not fall into these sins as the wilderness Israelites had had. Then in verse 11, Paul reiterates his statement in verse 6 and writes that the wilderness stories were “written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.” Thus, even though “the ends of the ages” has come upon us, according to Paul we are still in the wilderness; the Promised Land is still to come.

In Hebrews 4:3-4, the author identifies the rest attained by those who believe with the rest which God established on the seventh day of creation: For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, “As I swore in My wrath, They shall not enter My rest,” although His works were finished from the foundation of the world. For He has thus said somewhere concerning the seventh day, “And God rested on the seventh day from all His works.”

The Garden of Eden was to be a place of rest where Adam could share in the rest that God had established on the seventh day of Creation. Yet as a result of Adam’s sin, he and Eve were cast from the garden and were no longer able to share in that rest. The author of Hebrews, by identifying our future “eschatological redemption-rest” with God’s rest in creation, is stating that God’s goal in redemption is nothing less than the restoration of mankind to his original place of rest in Eden. Gaffin states that the writer of Hebrews “knows of only one rest, ‘my rest,’ entered by God at creation and by believers at the consummation.” Thus, the New Heavens and the New Earth will be a cosmic Eden in which man will experience true rest in the blessings of true fellowship with God.

The picture of the New Heavens and New Earth given in Revelation 21:1-22:5 is that of a new, cosmic Eden. In this restored world order, there will be “no longer any sea” (21:1). At first, this may seem difficult to reconcile with Revelation 4:6 which refers to a “sea of glass” before the throne of God. However, Revelation 21:1 is a contrast with Genesis 1:2, where the Spirit of God was hovering over the chaotic waters. The chaotic sea was also the place from where Leviathan came, who was a symbol of all that is evil in the world, both for the Psalter (Psalm 74:12-15) and for the prophets (Isaiah 27:1). The intent, therefore, of saying that there will be no longer any sea is to say that there will no longer be any chaotic sea—there will no longer be any evil. The seas will be seas of glass. Order and rest will be restored to the earth. All evil will be wiped away because Leviathan (the dragon or the devil) will have been
thrown into the lake of fire (20:10).

Furthermore, the restored earth will be a place of restored fellowship with God. Revelation 21:3-4 proclaims the final realization of the goal of all the former covenants between God and Israel (stated explicitly or implicitly) in this formulaic expression:

the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.

There will not be any temple in this restored Eden, (21:22) for all sin will be destroyed. God will dwell freely among men. The “river of the water of life” (22:1) and the “tree of life” (22:2) will be present in this restored earth, signifying eternal life for believers and heightening the imagery of the New Jerusalem as a restored Eden. Thus, the New Heavens and the New Earth will be an eternal Sabbath with God in a restored Eden where no sin and no curse will be found (22:3) and we will once again have perfect fellowship with God.

**Conclusion**

Redemption, as should now be well established, is a re-creation of the present heavens and earth. This re-creation is nothing less than a restoration of the original cosmic order, which established in Creation and which was corrupted by the Fall. The goal of this re-creation, therefore, is Sabbath rest. This rest is realized in part now, but will only be completely realized in the New Heavens and New Earth. This is true whether the Sabbath is expressed as legislation or as consummation.

The Sabbath as legislation was established when God rested on the seventh day of creation and sanctified it. Its legislation to us allows us to imitate God in His creative acts. Six days we are to work, while on the seventh day we rest in the same way God rested. The Sabbath is a provision for us in that God will bless our labors so as to provide for a seventh day without work. Yet it is also redemptive in that it gives us a rest from the curse. One day a week there is no need for toil. Yet it will not be until the consummation that we will experience life without any effects of the curse. Thus the full realization of the Sabbath as legislation is reserved for the New Heavens and the New Earth.

The Sabbath as consummation was established in the progress of creation. The progress of creation in Genesis 1 was a process of forming order out of chaos and filling
that order with rulers. The Sabbath on the seventh day was the consummation of this process. Sabbath rest is also pictured as the consummation of redemption. This is foreshadowed in the land of Canaan. Moses and Joshua led the people of God out of the chaos and bondage in Egypt into the land of Canaan, which was a new Eden—a place of rest for the people of God. Yet the author of Hebrews proclaims that Christ is a new and superior Moses-Joshua who has led us out of the chaos and bondage of sin and is leading us to the new and superior Promised Land. However, this Sabbath rest is still future; it will not be fully realized until the New Heavens and the New Earth. There is much more that could be said about the Sabbath as a redemptive-historical theme in the Bible. The following are two topics for further consideration which could not be addressed here, given the scope of this paper:

1. A discussion of the relationship between the progress of creation and the cultural mandate. The progress of creation was one of “forming” and “filling.” The cultural mandate is a mandate to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). The observance of the Sabbath by man was an imitation of the “rest” of God. Does this mean that the cultural mandate is a command to imitate God’s creative works? Is there a parallel between God’s creative works and man’s observance of the cultural mandate?

2. A discussion of the relationship between Sabbath rest and the presence of God. The goal of creation is Sabbath rest. The goal of creation is also unhindered fellowship with God. The seventh day of creation, the establishment of temple in Israel, and the New Heavens and the New Earth are all three expressions of the presence of God on earth as well as Sabbath rest. Although a connection between the two is somewhat implied in this paper, a further analysis of this connection would be fruitful.

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[2] Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Bible will be from the New American Standard Version.


[4] Ibid.


[7] Ibid. 32.

[8] Ibid. 33-34.


[11] Much more may be said concerning the movement of the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.


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