

Perpetuity of the Sabbath: Evidence from the creation accounts

Disputes about the “eternity” of the Sabbath remain rife, even today. Some theologians argue that the Sabbath is largely a Jewish institution, because it was during the Exodus that God prescribed it to the Jews. The Genesis Creation, it is argued, indicates nothing about the perpetuity of the Sabbath but is merely descriptive rather than prescriptive.¹ In contrast, others argue that the Genesis Creation accounts give hints that the Sabbath was meant to be a perpetual institution for the entire human race.

This article explores three aspects in the Creation accounts of Genesis regarding the “eternity” of the Sabbath: man’s creation in the image of God, God’s blessing the Sabbath, and God’s sanctification of the Sabbath.

Man in the image of God

The account in [Genesis 1:26, 27](#) indicates that God created man in His image. Man was created to function in the manner that reflected God’s own functioning. Some of the ways in which God intended man to function in His likeness include the ability to rule the rest of creation ([Gen. 1:26](#)) just as God rules the whole universe. Humans were to relate well with one another, in partnership and unity, as God demonstrated during Creation by using the plural “we” ([Gen. 1:26](#); see also [Gen. 2:23, 24](#)). They were also to communicate with God, just as God communicated with the first pair ([Gen. 2:16, 17](#)).

“Rest” was another dimension in which man was to emulate God. [Exodus 20:10, 11](#) indicates that the Israelites were to rest on the Sabbath, the seventh day, just as God had. The instruction is not an afterthought to be required of the Israelites centuries later; rather, just as God had rested on the seventh day ([Gen. 2:2](#)), human beings, who were created in His image, were to follow His example. Man would observe the seventh day just as God had observed it and pass it on to future generations. In this sense, the image of God would be perpetuated throughout all generations.

Further, at Creation, the first pair was placed in the Garden of Eden. Here, these people were expected to increase in numbers. These “numbers” would be living outside the garden, because they would fill the whole earth ([Gen. 1:28](#)), while Eden would remain just a small and limited locality on earth (assuming that sin had not arisen). God intended that the pattern and lifestyle He had articulated for man would be replicated in future generations, who would learn and copy what had been delivered to Adam in the garden. The implication is that the instructions and experience conveyed to the first pair—created in the image of God—would be a model to be replicated in future generations as they lived and utilized the ground ([Gen. 2:15](#)). Consequently, the “very good” maxim would equally be their story. Because the Sabbath institution had been introduced to the first

pair, it would certainly be replicated in these generations bearing the image of God as part of their lifestyle.

Church historian Dorothy Bass wrote that the term *remember* in [Exodus 20:8](#) in the giving of the commandments on Sinai “is grounded in the first creation story in Genesis.” In that respect, this injunction becomes a reminder that the pattern that humans ought to follow is six days work and one day of rest, just as God had done, because, as Bass writes, “in both work and rest, human beings are in the image of God.”²

God blessed

In [Genesis 2:3](#) God blessed the seventh day, the same day that He also rested. Blessing (brk) is also what He had done to the human pair ([Gen. 1:28](#)), as well as with sea animals and the birds of the air (1:22). Nothing else in the Creation accounts was “blessed” as these were. This connection in blessing man, animals, and the Sabbath cannot be overlooked. Clearly, from this *blessing formula* God considered these items, singled out for blessing, as outstandingly significant.

In the first two instances where the term *blessing* is employed as it relates to animals and man (1:22, 28), blessing is associated with a duplicating activity. “God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth,’ ” and “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.’ ”³ The blessing pronounced upon the animals and human beings has the

consequence of ensuring that both animals and human beings reproduce and perpetuate their kind into future generations. In commenting on [Genesis 1:22](#), the Keil and Delitzsch *Commentary on the Old Testament* considers the term *blessing* in the following way: that it was “the actual communication of the capacity to propagate and increase in numbers.”⁴ In that regard, as long as and wherever there could be these creatures, propagation would be expected of them.⁵

Robert Sherman argues that God’s blessings set things in motion for the future.⁶ Hence, New Testament scholar Willard Swartley rightly asserts that “Sabbath, rest, and seventh day are permanently and unalterably linked together by God for all creation for all time. God both created the seventh-day Sabbath and commanded its holy observance for all time.”⁷

Because the term *blessing* is used in the context of activities to be continued, it is only fair that its use in connection with the Sabbath, in [Genesis 2](#), be understood in a similar sense. That is to say, the institution of the Sabbath was intended by the Creator to be perpetuated throughout time. This means that as long as there would be time, there would be the perpetuation of the Sabbath rest.

God sanctified

The word *sanctified* is a verb form of the Hebrew adjective *qdš*, which can be translated as “to be consecrated, dedicated, holy, sanctified, separate/ set apart from common

use." *Sanctified* can also be seen as something cut off or separated from the rest—for the purpose of specific usage. J. C. Lambert in the *Net Bible* indicates that "holiness attaches itself first of all, not to visible objects, but to the invisible Yahweh, and to places, seasons, things and human beings only in so far as they are associated with Him. . . .

". . . Nothing is holy in itself, but anything becomes holy by its consecration to [or by] Him."⁸

In other words, an item cannot be holy if it is not associated with God.

Abraham Heschel reasons that *holy* is a distinguished term in the Bible, which "more than any other, is representative of the mystery and majesty of the divine."⁹ This is in agreement with E. F. Harrison's thinking that holiness is a basic aspect with God that fundamentally conveys "His separateness, i.e., His uniqueness, His distinction as the Wholly Other, the One who cannot be confused with the gods devised by men ([Exod. 15:11](#))."¹⁰ In that regard, items said to bear holiness express their uniqueness or distinction from others of their nature. Holiness, Lambert adds, "expresses a relation, which consists negatively in separation from common use, and positively in dedication to the service of Yahweh."¹¹

Scripture portrays God as holy in several instances. Two Bible writers connect His eternal nature with holiness. Habakkuk asserts this link when he writes: "O LORD, are you not from everlasting? / My God, my Holy One, we will not die. / O LORD, you have

appointed them [the Babylonians] to execute judgment; / O Rock, you have ordained them to punish" ([Hab. 1:12](#)). As Habakkuk deals with his perplexing question as to why God seems to be overlooking the evil committed in the land, God responds that He will use the Babylonians to inflict His judgments upon the chosen nation. He describes "God" as both "everlasting" and "holy." This nature gives the writer confidence that the dependable and unchanging God has not overlooked the situation in Judah—for He has assigned the Babylonians the responsibility of punishing the Jews.

The second writer, John the revelator, describes the worship scenario in heaven in [Revelation 4](#). In verse 8 he portrays the God who is worshiped in the following terms: "Holy, holy, holy / is the Lord God Almighty / who was, and is, and is to come." It is interesting that the revelator perceives the God who is worshiped in heaven as the One who has not changed, the One who will not change. His nature of holiness has remained intact throughout the ages.

Inconsistency with the holy nature of God, the Sabbath intimates its connectedness with Him. But the Sabbath equally elucidates its "durability" beyond limits of epochs/eras. From this fundamental theological understanding, it is fair to conclude that if God's nature remains unchanged, then forever the term *holy* and its derivative forms must express His majesty—otherwise He will cease to be "majestically holy." Because holiness expresses God's mystery and majesty, the institution of the Sabbath as set forth in

Genesis shall continue to be a constant reminder of the holiness of God by virtue of its association with God.¹²

Conclusion

As seen in the above study, the Genesis Creation account points in directions that indicate the seventh day is more universal than many think. As this study has sought to

show, God has given hints to perpetuity of this eternal memorial of His Creation—the seventh-day Sabbath. Thus, Heschel was right: “the Sabbath and eternity are one—or of the same essence.” Every week when the Sabbath comes we have a perpetual reminder of the majesty, power, and holiness of God.

¹ Stephen P. Bohr, for instance, has highlighted how the “descriptive” as opposed to “prescriptive” observance trend of argument regarding the Sabbath is rife in theological circles. “Issues Relating to the Ordination of Women with Special Emphasis on [1 Peter 2:9, 10](#) and [Galatians 3:28](#),” July 23, 2013, 5, 6, <http://www.adventistarchives.org/a-study-of-i-peter-2.9,-10-and-galatians-3.28.pdf>.

² Dorothy C. Bass, “Christian Formation in and for Sabbath Rest,” *Interpretation* 51, no. 1 (January 2005): 29.

³ Scriptural references are taken from the New International Version.

⁴ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, electronic edition (Hendrickson Publishers, 1996).

⁵ In [Genesis 9:1](#), after the Flood, God again blessed the human race. He set the whole earth before the remaining human beings and told them it was all their own, while it remains, to them and their heirs, so that the stream of their race should be supplied with a constant succession.

⁶ Robert Sherman, “Reclaimed by Sabbath Rest,” *Interpretation* 51, no. 1 (January 2005): 41. In the same vein, he points out that the Sabbath bears blessings on its own and becomes the “calendar unit by which future holy days and seasons are determined” (ibid).

⁷ Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983), 67.

⁸ J. C. Lambert, *Net Bible* online, s.v. “Holiness,” accessed June 11, 2013, <http://classic.net.bible.org/dictionary.php?word=Holiness>.

⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2003), xvi.

¹⁰ E. F. Harrison, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Holiness,” electronic edition, revised, (Eerdmans, 1979). Parenthesis original.

¹¹ J. C. Lambert, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. “Holiness,” accessed May 23, 2013, <http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/H/holiness.html>.

¹² It is a basic understanding in biblical theology that the Ten Commandments describe the character that should be demonstrated by believers in God. A closer observation of the commandments indicates that the term *holy* is applied to one word only, the Sabbath. In a sense, in the entire Decalogue, it is only the Sabbath that perpetuates the holiness of God—which is the basis upon which He requires man to fashion his character. As long as this character (in which holiness is an element) shall be perpetually required of believers in God (see, for instance, [Heb. 12:14](#)), it becomes impossible to imagine a non-eternity of the Sabbath.