

SABBATH AND ECOLOGY

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On 4 December 2009 Britain's Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks called for a Sabbath devoted to the environment to be celebrated from the Friday night immediately prior to the UN-sponsored climate talks beginning the second week of December in Copenhagen. The 61-year-old rabbi said he realised that there were disagreements over climate change but that 'there are some risks you just don't take ... and one is the risk of endangering the very viability of life on earth.'¹ While it may not surprise readers that the Chief Rabbi was calling for serious consideration of the issues raised by climate change, what may be surprising is that he chose to link such issues with the celebration of Sabbath. While one may be forgiven for thinking that this was a means of encouraging Jews (and Gentiles?) merely to pray for the UN conference, it reflects a far deeper understanding of the notion of Sabbath than is generally understood. At the very least, it reflects an interlocking of humanity and the earth, with the eschatological goal of rest for both.

The Seventh Day of Rest

The codification of Sabbath observance is found in the Ten Commandments delivered at Mt Sinai (Ex 20:8-11).

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

This fourth commandment is expressed by way of remembrance—Israel is to remember the Sabbath. The manner of remembrance is to recognise in their cycle of six days of work and one day of rest, an imitation of the divine cycle of God's creative activity² and his entrance into rest. However, it is more than mere imitation, it is also anticipation. In Exodus 31:17 God describes himself as being 'refreshed' in his rest, yet this is most likely anthropomorphic in the sense of taking satisfaction and delight in the work of his creation, as the God of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps (Ps 121:4) The nature of rest in the Bible has eschatological overtones, for God's rest came at the completion and finishing of his work of creation, which he pronounced to be 'very good'.³ In the words of Henri Blocher:

The use of the anthropomorphic figure of the week for the logic of creation and of its completion allowed the author to outline a theology of the sabbath. That was the closest theme to his heart. The narrative has two peaks, mankind and the sabbath. This would be better expressed by saying that the creation of mankind crowns the work, but the sabbath is its supreme goal.⁴

The thrust of Genesis 2:2-3, to which the fourth commandment refers, is that God entered his rest, but humankind did not.⁵ There was the weekly cycle of six days of work plus one day of rest, a weekly reminder that the goal of creation is the rest into which God has already entered and into which he beckons his image bearers to follow. In other words, the heavens and the earth, including the garden provided for Adam and Eve, was a precursor of what was to come—the eschatological reality of entering into God’s Sabbath rest.⁶ As Geerhardus Vos says:

The Sabbath brings the principle of the eschatological structure of history to bear upon the mind of man after a symbolical and typical fashion. It teaches its lesson through the rhythmical succession of six days of labour and one ensuing day of rest in each successive week. Man is reminded in this way that life is not an aimless existence, that a goal lies beyond. This was true before, and apart from, redemption. The eschatological is an older strand in revelation than the soteric.⁷

In other words, the fourth commandment is not just fashioned arbitrarily upon the divine week of creation, but is intimately connected to humankind’s anticipation of an everlasting rest. When God finished creating the heavens and the earth he rested; and God blessed and consecrated the seventh day. It is this entrance into divine rest to which the fourth commandment points; in the weekly Sabbath observance Israelites are reminded of the promise of rest that lies beyond.⁸ The writer to the Hebrews makes reference to this rest in his explanation of Psalm 95, specifically citing Genesis 2:2, and the goal of rest that lies ahead for the people of God (Heb 4:1-10).⁹

Paul's reasoning in 1 Corinthians 15:42-49 is singularly instructive at this point.¹⁰ In verse 42 Paul contrasts the resurrection body with the body in the state of sin. However, he changes the contrast in verse 44 to that between the original creation body of Adam and the eschatological body of the Spirit (a contrast between the *psychical* body and the *pneumatic*¹¹ body). That it is Paul's purpose to allude to the pre-fall body of man is made clear by the unmistakable reference to Genesis 2:7 in verse 45. For Paul wants to inform his readers that ‘if there is a physical (*psychical*) body, there is also a spiritual (*pneumatic*) body.’ The very existence of Adam’s created (*psychical*) body presupposed the promise of a future (*pneumatic*) body, fit for God’s Sabbath rest, where

‘they shall run and not be weary, walk and not faint’ (Is 40:31). This is true, Paul says, even before the Fall—the anticipation of the *pneumatic* body, precedes the necessity of redemption. Thus Adam, in his state of unfulfilled potential in the Garden of Eden, upon successful completion of that preparatory period, would have progressed to God’s Sabbath rest in the *pneumatic* state.¹² While we need not speculate upon the mechanics of such a transition (or more properly, progression), the fact that such a consummation awaited Adam cannot be denied on the basis of Paul’s language in this text.¹³

The Effects of the Fall

Of course, with the entrance of sin, the eschatological hope of entering God’s rest was jeopardised. The solemn warning to Adam that disobedience would bring death (Gen 2:17) required a remedy for sin and a release from condemnation, before entering God’s rest could become a reality. Yet God’s grace and mercy prevailed in providing such a remedy in the provision of a Saviour, who would undo the effects of Adam’s sin, which had now infected not only all humanity, but also the world in which they lived.

To Adam he said, ‘Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, “You must not eat of it,”

‘Cursed is the ground because of you;
 through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.
 It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
 and you will eat the plants of the field.
 By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return
 to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and
 to dust you will return.’ (Genesis 3:17-19)

With the entrance of sin Adam had lost his original righteousness and consequently all hope of entering God’s rest apart from redemption. Yet, despite the drastic change in the environment in which Adam was now to live, the hope of God’s Sabbath rest was still secure, by the mercies of God and the promise of a redeemer (Gen 3:15). It is at this point that the eschatological became necessarily soteriological. Not only would Adam be redeemed, but creation would also join in this redemption. In the words of Paul:

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. (Romans 8:19-24)

Nevertheless, while God's curse upon the ground was due to the effects of human sin, humans exacerbated the situation by a sinful exploitation of their divine mandate to subdue and the rule the earth.¹⁴ Indeed it does not take long in the biblical narrative to see God's judgment upon humankind because 'every imagination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil continually' (Gen 6:5). Moreover, after God's salvation of Noah and his family, Noah offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Lord, who in reply renewed his commitment to creation with its rhythm of the seasons and the daily cycle of night and day.

The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: 'Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And 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 cease.' (Genesis 8:21-22)

Sabbath and the Land

The appearance of judgment followed by salvation is repeated in the enslavement of Israel under Egyptian rule and the subsequent exodus to freedom under Moses. Indeed, in the Deuteronomic version of the fourth commandment, God's salvation from Egypt provides an additional reason to keep the Sabbath. Again we see the Sabbath rest of God inevitably shaped by redemption, the means whereby God keeps his original eschatological promise to bring his people into his rest. Yet the weekly rest demanded of Israel is not just for them, their servants and their animals, it affects the way they treat creation, in particular the land. The sabbatical structure, moreover, applied beyond the seven-day week.¹⁵ The pattern of work and rest was set 'through a series of concentric circles of sevens, of seven days, seven years and seven times seven years.'¹⁶

The LORD said to Moses on Mount Sinai, 'Speak to the Israelites and say to them:

When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the LORD. For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather

their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest. Whatever the land yields during the sabbath year will be food for you—for yourself, your manservant and maidservant, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you, as well as for your livestock and the wild animals in your land. Whatever the land produces may be eaten.’ (Leviticus 25:1-7)

For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unploughed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove. Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed. (Exodus 23:10-12)

It was a high risk venture in an agrarian culture to suspend one’s planting for a whole year, especially as there is no evidence of other nations doing this in the second millennium BC. Yet God was reminding Israel of their need to be careful stewards of the land, and furthermore reminding them that God’s rest contained the promise of both new heavens and a new earth (Is 66:22-23). As Israel could trust God’s promises for the eschatological future, so they could trust him for the immediate future.

You may ask, ‘What will we eat in the seventh year if we do not plant or harvest our crops?’ I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years. While you plant during the eighth year, you will eat from the old crop and will continue to eat from it until the harvest of the ninth year comes in...Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land. (Leviticus 25:20-22, 24)

Furthermore, in order to multiply the abundance of God’s blessings to Israel, his people were to have an emphatic reminder of the sabbatical structure of creation and the prospect of entering God’s eternal rest, that a superabundant sabbath year was to be proclaimed after seven cycles of seven sabbatical years, namely, the year of Jubilee.

Count off seven sabbaths of years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years. Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to

return to his family property and each to his own clan. The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields. In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property. If you sell land to one of your countrymen or buy any from him, do not take advantage of each other. You are to buy from your countryman on the basis of the number of years since the Jubilee. And he is to sell to you on the basis of the number of years left for harvesting crops. When the years are many, you are to increase the price, and when the years are few, you are to decrease the price, because what he is really selling you is the number of crops. Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 25:8-17)

The Year of Jubilee was extensive in its reach to every part of Israelite life, providing rest, refreshment, restoration and release for masters and slaves,¹⁷ for debtors, for animals and livestock, for citizens and strangers, and for the land. As Richard Lowery expresses it:

In the biblical traditions of Sabbath and jubilee, the earth has its own vocation and purpose. Earth is called to flourishing life, to provide a hospitable, luxurious home for all earth's creatures, especially human beings...Above all, a sabbath and jubilee consciousness perceives the world as the blessed gift of God. Commodities are bought and sold, traded and trashed. Gifts, however, communicate the giver. They express the personality and love of the one who gives them. They are treated rightly, therefore, with utmost honour and care. Through sabbath and jubilee eyes, creation is seen as the blessed gift of God, the cherished, constant reminder of the God who wills abundant life for all.¹⁸

However, God's commitment to the land was expressed not only in blessing but also in judgment—judgment upon the nations for failing to keep his laws and consequential judgment upon the land. Isaiah prophesies as such in this lament over the polluted earth.

The earth dries up and withers,
 the world languishes and withers,
 the exalted of the earth languish.
 The earth is defiled by its people;
 They have disobeyed the laws,
 violated the statutes
 and broken the everlasting covenant.
 Therefore a curse consumes the earth;
 Its people must bear their guilt. (Isaiah 24:4-6a)

Jeremiah likewise prophesied God's coming judgment upon Israel with seventy years of exile for their disobedience: 'this whole land shall become a ruin and a waste' (Jer

25:11; echoing the warnings of Lev 26:14-39). Then after seventy years are completed, Jeremiah prophesies God's judgment upon Babylon 'for their iniquity' and for 'making the land an everlasting waste' (Jer 25:12).¹⁹

Moreover, the judgment upon Israel is directly related to Israel's failure to keep Sabbath and provide the land with the opportunity of enjoying its Sabbath rests. Moses had warned Israel of this impending judgment and exile if Israel spurned God's word.

Then the land will enjoy its sabbath years all the time that it lies desolate and you are in the country of your enemies; then the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths. All the time that it lies desolate, the land will have the rest it did not have during the sabbaths you lived in it.

(Leviticus 26:34-35)

Thus it is not surprising to read the final words of the Chronicler as he records the beginning of Israel's seventy years of exile in terms of sabbath restoration (for 490 years of Sabbath neglect).

The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfilment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.

(2 Chronicles 36:21-22)

When the seventy years were completed, Daniel received an angelic visit from Gabriel, whose message concerning seventy sevens is anchored in the background of Leviticus 25 and 26.²⁰ This tenfold jubilee comprehends both Israel's history until the coming of the Messiah and the ensuing history of the new covenant people until their entrance into God's eternal rest with the restoration of all things upon Jesus' return.²¹

However, as the writer to the Hebrews makes plain, Joshua did not bring the promised rest to the Israelites, for the promise of entering God's rest continued in David's time (Heb 4:8) and likewise unto the days of Daniel. It was only with the advent of Christ Jesus that the guarantee of the rest would be secured. While it is Jesus who brings rest to his people in this life (Matt 11:29-30), the eschatological rest is still future (Heb 4:11), and the Old Testament saints await their perfection when all God's people are raised in glory (Heb 11:40; compare Rev 6:9-10).

Conclusion

God's concern for the earth is grounded in biblical history. It is where God has placed his image bearers and given to them the stewardship of its resources. Humankind's treatment of the earth is a reflection of their obedience to their Creator God. Yet the

placement of Adam and Eve in the Garden of God was not all that God had in store for them. His divine activity in six days of creation followed by a seventh day of rest became an exemplar for humans, with the eschatological promise of entering into his eternal rest. Yet the rebellion of our first parents brought travail upon humankind and curse upon the ground. Despite God's judgment on the earth and its inhabitants, his eschatological purposes for the world and for his image bearers were restored by the promise of redemption for both, fulfilled in the coming of Christ.

Under Mosaic legislation, God sought to restore the good which he had created, by providing respite for human, beast and land in cycles of seven days and seven years. 'It invited the whole community to taste the goodness of God in creation.'²² In the words of Rosemary Ruether:

All the accumulated inequities of the past seven times seven years, *between humans* through debt, loss of land, and enslavement, and *to nature* in overuse of land and animals, are to be rectified. All is to be restored to right balance.²³

The restoration of all things, of course, is part of God's purposes for the world in Christ. Yet that does not absolve humankind from caring for the creation until the end. There is a moral imperative for humans, especially Christians, to care for the earth. While they know that the form of this world is passing away (1 Cor 7:31; 1 Jn 2:17), it is God's world that he has given us to enjoy and to preserve. Moreover, God will bring judgment upon the earth and its inhabitants for their abuse of the gifts of God's creation (2 Peter 3:7).

While it is not appropriate to return to Mosaic Law with its sabbath ceremonial regulations that have now reached their goal in Christ, some sabbatically minded thinking about ecology, our way of life and our use of resources may still have some benefit.²⁴ Sir Jonathan Sacks rightly saw the value of sabbatical reflection upon the issues facing our planet. The Christian (as well as the Jewish) Sabbath continues to provide a day of contemplation of the future and the final restoration of all things. If more attention had been given to sabbatical reflection, especially as it relates to land use, we may not have reaped the degradation and pollution of the earth as we now know it.

Modern revolutionary thinkers would have done better if they had taken the jubilee, rather than the millennium and the apocalyptic future, as their model of historical change. Periodic renewal and restoration of right relations is a more doable and less dangerous vision than final perfection.²⁵

Yet,

The task before us is unprecedented, intricate, complex. No single solution will be adequate to the task. To live in balance with the finite resources of the planet, will need an unfamiliar blend of restraint and innovation. We shall be required to be genuine stewards of nature and thereby co-creators of a new human world. This will require both new attitudes and new actions.²⁶

¹ *Associated Press*, London, 4 December 2009.

² For an examination of the various interpretations of the length of each day, see H. Blocher, *In the Beginning*, tr D. G. Preston, IVP, London, 1984, pp. 39-59.

³ 'By creating the world in six days and resting on the seventh, God establishes the sabbath at the beginning as part of the orders of the cosmos itself.' Theodore Hiebert, 'Creation, the Fall and Humanity's Role in the Ecosystem', *Creation and the Environment. An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*, Calvin Redekop (ed.), Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2000, p. 114.

⁴ Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning*, p. 57.

⁵ Meredith G. Kline argues that the Sabbath was akin to an enthronement of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to God's throne as his place of rest, citing 1 Chron 28:2; 2 Chron 6:18, 41f; Ps 132:7-8, 13-14; Is 66:1. *Kingdom Prologue*, privately published, 1986, vol 1, pp.27-8.

⁶ Jesus alludes to God's Sabbath rest when after healing a paralytic on the sabbath he pleads that his Father is still working (Jn 5:17). Jesus' defence only makes sense if his Father is also working on his sabbath (cf Jn 5:19b).

⁷ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1971, pp. 156f.

⁸ For a defence of the weekly sabbath as a creation ordinance see John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, Tyndale Press, London, 1957, pp. 30-35. For a contrary view, see D. A. Carson (ed.), *From Sabbath to Lord's Day. A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1982.

⁹ For a defence of the view that a weekly sabbath is still required of Christians, see G. N Davies, 'The Christian Sabbath', *RTR* 42/2 (1983), pp. 33-41.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Geerhardus Vos for my understanding of this passage. See his essay 'Eschatology and the Spirit in Paul', *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (ed.) Jr., Presbyterian & Reformed, Phillipsburg, 1980, pp. 105ff.

¹¹ The description of a steam engine does not conjure up an image of an engine composed of steam, but of an engine empowered by steam. Similarly, the *pneumatic* body is not an ethereal, nonmaterial body of ghostlike appearance, rather it is one that is empowered by the Spirit.

¹² Irenaeus speaks of the early creation and humankind as 'infantile', awaiting the perfection to come. *Adv. Haer.* 4.38. Compare Clement, *Protrepticus*, 11.

¹³ This is not to suggest that such a progression implies any imperfection in Adam as originally created. Rather, it is the growth from the bud to the flower, from the seed to the fruit, which would have characterised Adam's progression to the eschatological state.

¹⁴ Cf Michael Stead's article in this volume, 'To Rule and to Subdue in Genesis 1'.

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- ¹⁵ On the symbolism of the number seven, Gnana Robinson remarks: '[A]s far as its basic meaning and significance is concerned, there prevails considerable agreement among scholars. It is generally seen as a number which symbolises "completeness", "wholeness", "perfection" and "satisfaction."' G. Robinson, *The Origin and Development of the Old Testament Sabbath*, Lang, Frankfurt, 1988, p. 110.
- ¹⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Conclusion: Eco-Justice at the Center of the Church's Mission', *Christianity and Ecology. Sealing the Welfare of Earth and Humans*, Dieter T. Hessel & Rosemary R. Ruether (eds), Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 608.
- ¹⁷ Provision was also made for release of servants and slaves during the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:39-55).
- ¹⁸ Richard H. Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, Chalice Press, St Louis, 2000, pp. 151-2.
- ¹⁹ Accountability for being a steward of the earth's resources is not restricted to Israelites, but rather encompasses all humanity.
- ²⁰ For a stimulating approach to understanding the prophecy of Daniel 9, see Meredith G. Kline, 'The Covenant of the Seventieth Week', *The Law and the Prophets. Old Testament Studies prepared in Honor of Oswald Thompson Allis*, J. H. Skilton (ed.), Presbyterian & Reformed, Phillipsburg, 1974, pp. 452-69.
- ²¹ It is worthy of note that the introduction of Mathew's Gospel concerning Jesus' lineage is cast in a sabbatical structure of three sets of fourteen generations (= 6 x 7) to announce the arrival of the birth of the Messiah.
- ²² 'A Pastoral Statement of United States Catholic Conference 14 November 1991' in '*And God Saw That It was Good*' *Catholic Theology and the Environment*, D Christiansen & W Grazer (eds), US Catholic Conference, Washington 1996, p. 229.
- ²³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Conclusion: Eco-Justice at the Center of the Church's Mission', pp.607-8.
- ²⁴ It is not without interest that the modern concept of a statute of limitations finds its origins in the sabbatical year of release of debts under Mosaic law.
- ²⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Conclusion: Eco-Justice at the Center of the Church's Mission', p.608. However, it should be noted that the Micah Challenge did use the language of Jubilee in their promotion of debt reduction in the developing world. See also their May 2009 paper on the theology of climate change. <http://www.micahchallenge.org.au/assets/pdf/Theology-of-climate-change.pdf> accessed 14 October 2009.
- ²⁶ 'A Pastoral Statement of United States Catholic Conference 14 November 1991', p. 239. Cf the Australian Catholic Bishops' Response in 'Christians and their Duty towards Nature' in '*And God Saw That It was Good*' *Catholic Theology and the Environment*, pp. 245-257.
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Questions for discussion

1. How might Jesus' statement in Mark 2:27 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' affect our understanding of the importance of rest in this life?

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2. Can you think of examples where contemporary customs have reflected sabbatical principles, for example, a statute of limitations?
 3. How destructive is the concept of '24/7' in our modern world, where commodities are available every day, at any time of the day?
 4. What changes might you consider in your life which could reflect a sabbatical principle, with your eyes on the future that God has promised us?