



# The Theme of Sabbath in the Bible: A Biblical Theology Approach

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**Abstract:** The theme of Sabbath is an important area of overlooked research. This paper focuses on the theme of Sabbath. My thesis is that the theme of Sabbath develops, progresses, intensifies in the Old Testament, and how is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ in the New Testament, especially in Matthew 11:28-30 and Hebrews 3-4.

**Keywords:** Sabbath, Creation, Redemption, Typology of Sabbath, Ultimate Rest

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1973, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. in an article commented that only a few major articles in the journals and fewer graduate theses have been devoted to the concept of "God's Rest" in the last century.<sup>[1]</sup> One of the reasons why this theme of rest is overlooked is because it contains too many strands of possible inquiry, in an article Jon Laansma writes, "In the OT the thematic treatment of the idea of rest consists of two main strands: the Sabbath rest (from routine labor) and the

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<sup>[1]</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Promise Theme and The Theology of Rest," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130 (1973), 135.



promise of rest (from wandering/journeying or enemy threat) in the land of Canaan. These two strands are combined in two NT passages namely Matthew 11:28-30 and Hebrews 3-4."<sup>[1]</sup> The theme of Sabbath is an important area of overlooked research. This paper focuses on the theme of Sabbath. My thesis is that the theme of Sabbath develops, progresses, intensifies in the Old Testament, and how is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ in the New Testament, especially in Matthew 11:28-30 and Hebrews 3-4.

### GOD'S SABBATH IN GENESIS 2:1-3

Genesis 2:1-3 is the foundational passage for the theme of Sabbath: "...on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested (וַיָּשָׁבֵת) on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested (שָׁבַת) from all his work that he had done in creation."<sup>[2]</sup> The theme of Sabbath first appears in Genesis 2:1-3. Notably, in 1:26-31, God created human beings on the sixth day "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (1:31). God's Sabbath in Genesis 2:1-3 has to do with the creation and the seventh day. "his work that he had done" refers to previous six days creation (Genesis 1:3-31). But on the seventh day, God rested. God's rest refers to finishing all the creation and resting on the seventh day. Unlike previous works of creation, God "sanctified" (וַיְקַדְּשׁ) the day, he declared that the day was specially devoted to him.<sup>[3]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> Jon Laansma, "Rest," ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2000), 727.

<sup>[2]</sup> Unless otherwise noted, in this paper all scriptures references are from the English Standard Version (ESV)

<sup>[3]</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 179.



God's Sabbath rest on the seventh day indicates God's sovereignty over creation, and functions as exemplar for humanity. In all versions of Ancient Near Eastern creation myths, one common motif is divine rest; In these stories, after god's victory over his archfoe, the chaos monster, the creator deity builds himself a palace from which he rules the cosmos,<sup>[1]</sup> God's Sabbath rest in the seventh day means that God's resting is connected with God's ruling and sovereignty over creation. God's Sabbath is not because he grew tired or wearied, but because his function as exemplar for God created man who has the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27) <sup>[2]</sup>.

### **THE SABBATH COMMANDMENT IN EXODUS 20:8-11 AND DEUTERONOMY 5:12-15**

After the Fall (Genesis 3), Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden. Their descendants suffered from the Fall and there was no rest for them (for example God's cursing of the ground for Adam's sake, in Genesis 3:17). God revealed his redemption plan for human beings by choosing Abram, and birthing a nation named Israel out of Abram's seed (Genesis 12:13; 32:22-32). Later on God chose Moses (Exodus 3) to deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21). The Sabbath of Genesis 2:1-3 is picked up with the fourth commandment in Exodus 20:8-11 and continues to be developed in Deuteronomy 5:12-15.<sup>[3]</sup>

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[1] Bernard Frank Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 78.

[2] Kenneth A. Strand, *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982), 24.

[3] A. G. Shead, "Sabbath" ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester,



God's creation and the "six and seven" pattern becomes the foundation for Sabbath for Israelites and it's an imitation of God.<sup>[1]</sup> In Genesis 2:1-3, emphasized is the "seventh day", and in Exodus 20:8-11, the phrase "the Sabbath day" (יום השַׁבָּת) appears at the start and the close of the commandment<sup>[2]</sup>, Exodus 20:8-11 interprets Genesis 2:1-3 and highlights "the Sabbath day" with the significant alteration of "seventh" to "Sabbath" <sup>[3]</sup>. God commands the Israelites to remember the Sabbath day (Exodus 20:8), and explains what "remember the Sabbath day" means: it states that for six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath (שַׁבָּת) to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. It continues to explain the reason for having a Sabbath day: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested (וַיָּנַח)<sup>[4]</sup> on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. God's Sabbath in Genesis 2:1-3 has the narrative function of concluding the creation account and is cited as the basis of Israel's Sabbath.<sup>[5]</sup>

### THE SABBATH AS THE SIGN IN EXODUS 31:12-17

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England; Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2000), 746.

[1] A. G. Shead, "Sabbath" ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2000), 746

[2] Ibid., 746.

[3] Ibid., 746.

[4] In Exodus 20:11, the Hebrew word for "and rested" is וַיָּנַח, and in Genesis 2:2, the Hebrew word is, וַיִּשְׁבֹּת, Exodus 20:11 interprets Genesis 2:2 by using a different Hebrew word.

[5] John Laansma, "Rest," eds. T. Desmond Alexander et al., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2000), 729.



Another important Sabbath text shows it functions as a sign between God and Israelites in Exodus 31:12-17. God's deliverance of the Israelites out of the slavery of Egypt to be God's people to worship him, therefore, the Sabbath functions as a sign for the Israelites to have rest. The statement that the Sabbath "is a sign (אֵימָנָה) between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you" (Exodus 31:13) is entirely new.<sup>[1]</sup> The context of Exodus 31:12-17 is that of instruction for keeping the Sabbath by following the directions of Yahweh (Exodus 31:11) for the sanctuary and its services, both are part of the oral communication of Yahweh to Moses on Mount Sinai.<sup>[2]</sup> God establishment of covenant with Israelites, is recorded in Exodus 19:5-6, and the commandment for keeping the Sabbath is a sign—for a perpetual covenant (Exodus 31:16). Apparently the sign is connected with the covenant and the Sabbath functions as a sign of the covenant of Sinai. <sup>[3]</sup>

### PSALM 95 IS THE PROGRESSION OF THE SABBATH IN EXODUS 20:8-11 AND DEUTERONOMY 5:12-15

Psalms 95 is a critical psalm for the development of the theme of Sabbath. It gives no indication of authorship<sup>[4]</sup>, date or liturgical setting<sup>[5]</sup>. In this Psalm, the exhortation to worship and the reasons for worship parallel Psalm 100 in moving through this sequence twice: exhortation (vv.1-2), reasons (vv.3-5); exhortation

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<sup>[1]</sup> Kenneth A. Strand, *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982), 34.

<sup>[2]</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>[3]</sup> Ibid., 36

<sup>[4]</sup> Psalms 95 is included in Hebrew hymnbook as an anonymous psalm, but in Hebrews 4:7, it is quoted as a psalm of David, see John Phillips, *Exploring Psalms: An Expository Commentary* Volume 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Academic, 2001), 62.

<sup>[5]</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms* V.3 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 89.



(vv.1-2), reasons (v.7a-c).<sup>[1]</sup>

Psalm 95 marks the progression of the Sabbath in Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15. Psalm 95:1 depicts God as a God of redemption by using the words the 'rock of our salvation' (לְצֹרֵר יְשַׁעֲנוּ). Psalm 95:7-11 also describes God's redemption for Israelites. It echoes the redemption basis for keeping the Sabbath in Deuteronomy 5:12-15. Vv.2-6 describes that God is the maker of everything (the depths of the earth and the heights of the mountains are 'his', the sea is his, for he made it in vv.4-5; the LORD, our maker in v.6). These verses stress that God is a God over creation. It echoes the creation basis for keeping the Sabbath in Exodus 20:8-11. After the exhortations and reasons for worshipping God, v.7 stresses that "today if you hear his voice...". "today" and "listen to his voice" recalls Deuteronomy is important because this is where Moses repeatedly reminds Israel that "today" he is issuing commands to them (e.g. Deuteronomy 4:40; 5:1) and that they need to "listen" (e.g. Deuteronomy 4:1; 5:1).<sup>[2]</sup> Psalm 95 is the progression of the theme of Sabbath and is the combination of Sabbath rest in Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15, with the emphasis on "today", which is a key word in the book of Deuteronomy<sup>[3]</sup>.

The psalm mentioned that "they shall not enter my rest", it means that even though eventually they entered the Promised Land, they still did not enter God's rest because of their rebellion and unbelief. This is the case from the time the psalmist speaks of "today". The psalm in v.8 warns "do not harden your hearts...", then the Psalm recalls the bad example of Israel in the wilderness, the story of Exodus. The Psalm's paranesis is set against the stark background of several

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<sup>[1]</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms V.3* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 88.

<sup>[2]</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>[3]</sup> "today" in Deuteronomy occurs no less than seventy four times, see David G. Firth & Philip S. Johnston, *Interpreting Deuteronomy: Issues and Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 178.



failures on Israel's part, especially those in Exodus 17 and Numbers 14.<sup>[1]</sup> In the Psalm, the psalmist describes "though they had seen my work", "your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof" (v.9). They had seen what Yahweh had done for them, but they still did not want to submit themselves to him.<sup>[2]</sup> The psalmist in v.10 refers to the Israel in the wilderness. In Number 14, the people's sin was so severe that Yahweh threatened to destroy the entire nation, because of their unbelief and rebellion, all those who did not listen to Yahweh's voice (Number 14:22) would not enter the land.<sup>[3]</sup> Because of their rebellion, Yahweh loathes that generation for their hearts that go astray and they have not known Yahweh's ways (v.10). Because of Israel's rebellion and their hearts going astray, Yahweh swore in the wrath that "they shall not enter my rest (מנוחתִי)" (v.11)

The Psalter in Psalm 95 uses the word "today" after the rebellion of Israelites in the wilderness, this indicates that even Joshua, who led the next generation into the land, did not give them this rest but that God had appointed a future time.<sup>[4]</sup>

### THE SABBATH AS THE SIGN IN EZEKIEL 20:12 AND ISAIAH 58:13-14

The Sabbath as the sign in Exodus 31:12-17 is recalled in Ezekiel 20:12, the identification of the Sabbath as a sign "between me and you" proves it to be a

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[1] Daniel C. Timmer, *Creation, Tabernacle, and Sabbath: The Sabbath Frame of Exodus 31:12-17; 35:1-3 in Exegetical and Theological Perspective* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 99.

[2] Ibid., 96.

[3] Ibid., 99.

[4] D. A. Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 207.



covenant sign between Yahweh, the covenant God and his chosen people Israel.<sup>[1]</sup> The context of Ezekiel 20:12 is that there is a strong condemnation of the profaning of Sabbath in the past (verses 13, 16, 21) and present (22:8; 23:38). By mentioning the Sabbath as a sign, the prophet depicts the evilness of the people at that time since they did not keep the Sabbath, or the covenant, which was the sign of the Sabbath.

In the exile, the Israelites expected a second Exodus, and the Sabbath as a sign of God's deliverance is recalled in Isaiah. The function of Sabbath is the sign of the covenant, for the returning community from exile. The priority is to restore the Sabbath, to keep it and having it becomes an important theme in Isaiah. One example is Isaiah 58:13-14, in which the prophet calls for three prohibitive injunctions: refusing to engage in one's business, not doing one's own ways and refraining from speaking idly on Sabbath. <sup>[2]</sup> Later on, Isaiah 58:13-14 played an important role in Pharisaic Judaism, the Talmud.<sup>[3]</sup>

Sabbath functions as a sign of covenant for Israelites, however, the Israelites could not keep the covenant and they broke the Sabbath and just like the new covenant in Jeremiah 31, there remains a Sabbath-rest for the people of God in the New Testament.

### **SABBATH IS FULFILLED IN JESUS CHRIST IN MATTHEW 11:28-30**

In the New Testament, Matthew 11:28-30 and Hebrews 3-4 are the two

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<sup>[1]</sup> Kenneth A. Strand, *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982), 51.

<sup>[2]</sup> Ibid., 48

<sup>[3]</sup> Ibid., 47.





passages that focuses on the Sabbath. In Matthew 11:28-30 the rest motif is contained in a saying which is considered by most scholars to be a component of Matthew's wisdom Christology.<sup>[1]</sup> From the context of Matthew 11:28-30, in v.25ff, during the increasing conflict and rejection of Jesus' ministry, Jesus made the prayer and affirmation that "the Father sovereignly hides 'these things' (perhaps the eschatological significance of the miracles) from those who 'think themselves wise (σοφῶν) and clever (συνετῶν)' and reveals himself to the 'childlike'(νηπίοις)." <sup>[2]</sup>

Jesus affirmed the statement "come to me ... and I will give you rest (κάγω ἀναπαύσω ὑμᾶς)" (Matthew 11:28), emphasized that he is the source for giving people rest. Matthew associates Jesus' promise of rest most directly with his Son of David christology under the influence of the OT rest tradition.<sup>[3]</sup> "Moreover, Matthew's placement of the rest saying just after an allusion to Isaiah 61(Matthew 11:4-6), is phrased in terms of the sabbatical year of Jubilee and immediately before two Sabbath controversies (Matthew 12:1-14 ). This suggests that the idea of Sabbath rest was in his mind as well, thus he blends the two primary OT traditions relating to rest and connect them to the present and future work of the Messiah "<sup>[4]</sup> Jesus wanted to show that ultimate rest is salvation rest in him. As a result, ἀναπαύσω connotes a refreshing and a fulfillment, and thus anticipates messianic or eschatological blessing.<sup>[5]</sup>

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[1] Jon Laansma, *'I Will Give You Rest': The 'Rest' Motif In The New Testament With Special Reference To Mt 11 And Heb 3-4* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 159.

[2] David L. Turner, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 302-303.

[3] John Laansma, "Rest," eds. T. Desmond Alexander et al., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2000), 730.

[4] Ibid., 730.

[5] Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1993), 323.



## THE TYPOLOGY OF SABBATH IS FULFILLED IN CHRIST IN HEBREWS 3:7-4:13

Hebrews 3:7-4:13 is a warning against apostasy in a book which alternates sophisticated theological exposition with paraenesis. <sup>[1]</sup>In Hebrews 3:7-19, the author of Hebrews mediates on Psalms 95:7-11, which recalls the narrative of Numbers 14, in which the rebellion of the Israelites at Kadesh was recorded.<sup>[2]</sup> The rebellion of Israelites led to the result that “They shall not enter my rest (τὴν κατάπαυσίν μου)” (Hebrews 3:11). The author of Hebrews quotes Psalms 95:7 twice and it was stated in Hebrews 3:15, as in Psalms 95’s time, that the Psalter warned the readers at that time: “today ...do not do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” For the readers of Hebrews, it also applied to the readers to not to harden their hearts “today”. Because of their rebellion in the Numbers, they could not enter God’s rest, if the readers of Hebrews continued to harden their hearts, they could not enter God’s rest either. The lesson that Israelites learned was that they could not enter because of their disbelief (Hebrews 3:19). Additionally, in Hebrews 3, the author wanted to show that the readers of Hebrews can apply the “today” of Psalm 95:11 to the present situation of his readers(3:13-15) and the next section explains.<sup>[3]</sup>

Hebrews chapter 3 quotes Psalm 95 to show that the promise of rest still remains, the rest that remains is described as a Sabbath rest, and links to the Genesis2:2 citation in that whoever enters this rest cease from their works as an

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<sup>[1]</sup> Jon Laansma, *'I Will Give You Rest': The 'Rest' Motif In The New Testament With Special Reference To Mt 11 And Heb 3-4* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 264.

<sup>[2]</sup> John Laansma, “Rest,” eds. T. Desmond Alexander et al., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2000), 731.

<sup>[3]</sup> D. A. Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 212.



analogy with God's ceasing from his after the creation (Hebrews 4:10).<sup>[1]</sup> In Hebrews Chapter 4, the author utilized Genesis 2:2 as a foundation for entering the Sabbath rest. Genesis 2 and Psalm 95 are juxtaposed in the argument.<sup>[2]</sup> Hebrews 4 connects Genesis 2 with God's Sabbath rest with the remainder rest as promised in Psalm 95 in order to testify that there remains a Sabbath rest (σαββατισμός) for God's people (Hebrews 4:9), the term σαββατισμός occurs only here in the New Testament, and it is deliberately substituted for κατάπαυσις, because the author has connected κατάπαυσις with God's rest on the seventh day and it was used for the Sabbath rest.<sup>[3]</sup> In this sense, the Sabbath in Genesis 2:1-3 and Psalm 95 functions as the type in the Old Testament, which is fulfilled in the antitype in Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

Hebrews 4:11-14 motivates the readers of it to make efforts to enter the rest (τὴν κατάπαυσιν)(4:11). It reminds readers that the word of God is living and active(4:12), which actually intends to show that God's promise of rest still works, and the rest is through our faith in Jesus Christ the high priest(4:14). The salvation rest that is in Jesus was fulfilled. It brought about a profound transformation of the Old Testament concept of Sabbath. This transformation is delineated out with regard to the day of literal rest in 4:9-10 the author indicates what is involved in the Sabbath rest the believers is to observe.<sup>[4]</sup>

## THE ULTIMATE SABBATH REST IN REVELATION 21-22

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<sup>[1]</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>[2]</sup> Jon Laansma, *'I Will Give You Rest': The 'Rest' Motif In The New Testament With Special Reference To Mt 11 And Heb 3-4* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 283.

<sup>[3]</sup> D. A. Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 213.

<sup>[4]</sup> Ibid., 214.



Hebrew 3-4 points out that through faith in Jesus Christ, those who believe in him, can enter the rest, but they are still living in a already but not yet world, the rest Christians has in Jesus points forward to the ultimate rest in the consummation of Revelation 21-22. In parallel with God's Sabbath rest from creation in Genesis 2:1-3, the new creation in Revelation 21:5 states: I am making all things new, John portrayal of the complete fulfillment of Isaiah's new creation prophecies, <sup>[1]</sup>is the ultimate rest that we are looking forward to. In the new creation, God's ruling is demonstrated in his dwelling with his people in the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:1-4 ).

## CONCLUSION

The theme of Sabbath develops from Genesis 2:1-3 and, progresses in the Sabbath commandment for the Israelites in Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15. It is a sign for the covenant in Exodus 31:12-17, Ezekiel 20:12 and Isaiah 58:13-14 and intensifies in Psalm 95 in the Old Testament. Ultimately, it is fulfilled in Jesus Christ in the New Testament, especially in Matthew 11:28-30 and Hebrews 3-4. In tracing out the trajectory of Sabbath in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, one is provided with a whole picture of this biblical theme.

Many theologians think systematic theology is built on philosophical ideas and concepts, and it is a good way to understand the Bible, however, systematic theology has its own challenges and biblical theology is a good alternative for the

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<sup>[1]</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 1052.



weakness of systematic theology. Biblical theology brings new consideration to systematic theology. In terms of the theme of the rest, systematic theology is not be able to trace out all the transformation and nuance from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

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