

The Sabbath in Genesis?

Who was the first man to keep the sabbath? As recorded in Scripture, that is. Was it Adam? If he kept the sabbath, how do we know he did? Did any of the patriarchs keep the sabbath? Noah? Abraham? Which scripture tells us so? Again, who was the first man to break the sabbath? Which scripture tells us of the first case of it? If sabbath-keeping was a creation ordinance, why do we not find at least one instance of its observance in Genesis? We read much about work and marriage in Genesis – why not the sabbath? We read of many sins in Genesis – but never once of sabbath-breaking. Why not?

We know the patriarchs sacrificed. We can, therefore, deduce that God conveyed his mind to the patriarchs regarding sacrifice. We know this because we see them sacrificing, repeatedly (Gen. 4:3-5; 8:20; 12:8; 13:18; 15:9-10,17; 22:13; 26:25; 33:20; 35:7 (reasonably assuming the references to an altar imply blood sacrifices)).¹ Indeed, we have examples of God directly commanding such (Gen. 15:9; 22:2). Adam and Eve certainly learnt the principle from God's action in clothing them with animal skins (Gen. 3:21). No wonder, then, that Abel sacrificed. But where do we find any man keeping the sabbath before Exodus? The biblical silence speaks volumes. While in Genesis we have relative silence over a command to sacrifice, but examples of men sacrificing, we have neither command nor example of sabbath-observance among men.

When God made his covenant with Noah (Gen. 8:20-9:17), he commanded him to 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth', and he gave him dominion over the creatures – echoes of Genesis 1:28. But there was no mention of the sabbath. Indeed, in light of the fact that the sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic covenant,² it is noteworthy that the sign of the Noahic covenant was the rainbow (Gen. 9:12-17), not the sabbath. Similarly,

¹ 'An altar is any structure upon which offerings such as sacrifices are made for religious purposes' (Wikipedia).

² See previous chapter.

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when God made his covenant with Abraham, he did not mention the sabbath; the sign of the covenant was circumcision (Gen. 15:18-21; 17:1-14). So although Abraham obeyed God's commandments (Gen. 26:5), there is no evidence whatsoever that the sabbath was included in this. And, although I would not build my case upon it, it is worth mentioning that when Joseph exercised what amounted to absolute power in Egypt, he instituted laws which lasted far beyond his day, laws which took due account of current religious regulations in the land (Gen. 47:20-26), yet the sabbath is significant in his arrangements only by its absence.

But what about Genesis 2:2-3? Although sabbatarians would almost certainly open their case by looking at Genesis, for the reasons I have given, this is a mistake. Having said that, we do have Genesis 2:2-3:

On the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested 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 from all his work that he had done in creation (Gen. 2:2-3).

Let me start with some negatives. Sabbath-observance was not a creation ordinance. Genesis 2:2-3 does not teach it. It does not say that God commanded Adam to observe the sabbath. Nor does it give the slightest support for saying that God commanded all men in Adam to observe the sabbath. The sabbath was not given to all men in Adam. It was not even given to the patriarchs.³ As we have seen, it was given to the Jews through Moses (Ex. 31:12-17; Neh. 9:14; Ezek. 20:12). It was a central part of God's covenant with Israel, his special

³ Compare John 7:22. Circumcision was given to Abraham and was later incorporated in the Mosaic economy. Christ made it very clear that the original giving of circumcision was to 'the fathers', not to Moses. Where is the corresponding passage for what is supposed to have happened for the sabbath (namely, that God gave the day to Adam, and restated it to Moses)?

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people (Deut. 4:1-8,44-45; 5:1-3; 29:1,10-15,25,29).⁴ It lasted as long as the law, the old covenant – which was until the coming of Christ (Gal. 3:19). Forcing Genesis 2:2-3 to teach that it was ordained for the human race undermines, at a stroke, all the biblical teaching just set out.

What is more, let us take a look at the consequences of the sabbatarian view. If we grant, for the sake of argument, that the sabbatarian is right, and God did command Adam to keep the sabbath, he was in effect, giving him the fourth commandment. More, he must have been giving him all ten (and more). After all, we know that the ten commandments stand or fall together (Jas. 2:10-11).⁵ I say the sabbatarian case depends upon Adam having the ten commandments. If Adam was given a commandment to observe the sabbath, what else could it be, other than the fourth of the ten?

Adam, therefore, must have been given the law against sabbath-breaking (and, with it, the law against idolatry, blasphemy, adultery, lying, theft, and so on). And he must have been given all this *before* he had sinned. Really? At a time when he had no concept of sin, no idea what theft was, had no opportunity to commit adultery, let alone any concept of it, even before he had a wife (see below), yet God gave him the law on these and many other matters, and did so for his immediate and continued obedience, with all the warnings and punishments for disobedience. And all before he fell! Really? In particular, if Adam was given the fourth commandment, he was told the consequences of breaking it? Really? If so, let us compare God's command to Adam not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: God spelled out the consequences of disobedience, and did so explicitly:

⁴ The words 'him who is not here with us today' (Deut. 29:14-15) refer to the descendants of the children of Israel, not to all the rest of the human race.

⁵ In addition, since the sabbath is intimately linked with the old covenant throughout the entirety of the law, he must also have been given all the other 600 or more laws which constituted 'the law'. The Bible knows nothing of the Reformed (in truth, the Medieval) tripartite division of the law.

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The LORD God commanded the man: ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die’ (Gen. 2:16-17).

Do not miss the: ‘You must not eat from the tree... *for* when you eat of it you will surely die’.⁶ Similarly for the sabbath, *if* God had commanded Adam to keep the sabbath, Adam must have had the punishment for sabbath-breaking made clear to him – before he fell. And so for all the other commands. Where do we read this?

Did Adam have the fourth commandment? If so, what did he make of the servants and the alien mentioned in that commandment? Who were they? We could widen the debate: When he was given the tenth commandment, whatever did Adam make about coveting his neighbour’s wife? What was ‘coveting’, who was his ‘neighbour’, and who was his ‘neighbour’s wife’? Indeed, who or what was a ‘wife’?

God’s seventh-day rest was the climax of creation. And this is of the utmost importance. God sanctified the seventh day, the final day of the week, resting from his work of creation. That is, he separated it, marked it out with a purpose in mind – a purpose which involved man, certainly – but a purpose which would only come to fruition at the proper time.⁷ What purpose? If sabbatarians are right, then the climax of God’s creation was that Adam (and, therefore, all men) should enjoy rest on the seventh day of each week. This is creation’s *climax*? Really? This cannot be right. It takes far too low a view of God’s goal in creation. The climax of creation, God’s intention in creating the universe, was incomparably higher than a rest day for the human race. The ‘rest’ in question is very much more than a weekly rest for man.

⁶ When God commands, he spells out the consequences of disobedience. Take just two examples: Josh. 24:14-27; John 3:16-21,36.

⁷ Compare Gal. 1:15, which refers to God’s electing, separating decree concerning Saul, a decree to be fulfilled in due time. Compare also Rom. 8:29-30.

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As with creation, so with every work of God, the ultimate end was God and his glory: ‘For of him and through him and to him are all things, to whom be glory for ever’ (Rom. 11:36; see also Rev. 4:11). In particular, Christ is the beginning and the end of everything. Everything! He is ‘the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end’ (Rev. 1:8,11; 21:6; 22:13). ‘Christ is all, and is in all’ (Col. 3:11). ‘By him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth... All things were created through him and for him... that in all things he might have the pre-eminence’ (Col. 1:16-18).

Let me underline this: all things – including the seventh-day rest of creation – all things were created *for* Christ – *for Christ, not man* – that in all things – in *all* things, including the seventh-day rest – Christ might have the pre-eminence. Creation did not reach a climax with something merely *for man*; certainly it was not a weekly day of rest for him during his earthly pilgrimage. Creation’s end, its climax, was Christ; it was for him, for his praise, for his glory. And in that, of course, the ultimate and eternal glory of God:

God also has highly exalted [Christ] and given him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9-11).

Then comes the end, when [Christ] delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when he puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign till he has put all enemies under his feet... Now when all things are made subject to him, then the Son himself will also be subject to him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:24-28).⁸

In particular, as these extracts show, it was salvation in and through the work of Christ – surely God’s greatest accomplishment – that always was and still remains the real

⁸ See also John 3:14; 5:19-27; 8:28; 12:28,32-34; 1 Cor. 3:21-23; Heb. 2:5-9.

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sabbath. This was the real climax of creation. And, it goes without saying, it was in God's mind right at the start. Notice how the Genesis record of the seventh day does not have the usual 'evening and morning' attached to it; there was an in-built sense of eternity in God's observance of a ceasing day even at the beginning. God's blessing of the seventh day was not concerned with a weekly one-seventh proportion of man's experience of the revolving 168 hours, as sabbatarians claim, with their 'one day in seven'. God had in mind the ultimate rest – rest in Christ. Christ is the climax of creation; his glory, and the believer's eternal rest in him is the true sabbath (Heb. 4:9-11).⁹ All the other 'rests' were pointing to this (Heb. 3:7 – 4:11); in particular, God's rest on the seventh day after creation augured this great eternal sabbath in Christ.

And of course this is true, not only of that original seventh day, but of the weekly sabbath for Israel in the Mosaic covenant – which is not in Genesis 2, of course. How could it be? Israel did not exist at that time; nor did Moses or his law! Indeed, are we not told explicitly that the law was introduced 430 years *after* Abraham (Gal. 3:17)? And yet many sabbatarians want us to believe that it was given to Adam hundreds of years *before* Abraham! Are we not told that the law was added *because* of transgressions (Gal. 3:19)? Yet many sabbatarians want us to believe that the law was given to Adam *before* he had sinned!

No! The sabbath was given to *Israel*, given to Israel through Moses in the wilderness, and later ratified on Sinai. Moreover, it symbolised spiritual rest for the believer in Christ now, in the new covenant, leading to his eternal rest in him (Heb. 4:3-10), as did all the rest of the old covenant.

It is this that puts the seventh day in its proper setting, far beyond a mere weekly rest for man.¹⁰

⁹ Many people see only a day of the week in Heb. 4:9-11; it is a travesty. See below for 'Hebrews 4:9-11'.

¹⁰ If this might be thought somewhat strained, compare Gen. 1:1 – 2:3 with John 1:1-5. Note also the principle in 1 Cor. 15:46: 'The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual'. In this case, the weekly sabbath pictured the spiritual sabbath, leading to the

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The upshot is, the sabbath was not a creation *ordinance*. This is borne out by the fact that in the entire book of Genesis there is not a single command to any man to keep the sabbath, there is no example of any man keeping the sabbath, and there is no condemnation of any man for breaking the sabbath. In short, the sabbath – as far as a weekly observance for man is concerned – is completely unknown in Genesis.

God rested on the seventh day, but there is no record in the creation account that he commanded man to observe it. Genesis 2:2-3 is a statement of what God *did*, not Adam's *duty* – of God's *action*, not his *command*. It was *God's rest*, not *man's*. This is to state the obvious. But, sadly, the obvious needs to be stated! Indeed, it seems to me that the passage is a revelation of this to Moses when he wrote the book, not a record of God's revelation to Adam. That is to say, is there any proof that Adam even knew that God rested on the seventh day, let alone that God commanded him to keep it? There is no evidence whatsoever to justify the claim that God revealed to Adam that he rested or that he commanded Adam to keep the day. Indeed, there is no *biblical* evidence that Adam knew that God rested.

What is more, we must take full cognisance of Genesis 2:20-24. Adam knew that he was given Eve, and that she had come from his bone; he said so. But when the scripture goes on to assert: 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh' (Gen. 2:24), this strikes me as a later (Mosaic) explanation – an explanation, not an insertion. What concept, in the day the woman was formed, would Adam and Eve have of 'father' and 'mother'? Of course, 'the man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame' (Gen. 2:25) could be Adamic, yes, but even this may be a Mosaic comment. I think it very likely.

And what about Noah and the flood? Noah had to take animals, both clean and unclean, into the ark (Gen. 7:2,8; 8:20). But what is this 'clean' and 'unclean'? Where is that defined? In the law in the book of Leviticus, and beyond. In other words,

eternal sabbath. I will return to the old (Testament and covenant) being the shadow of the substance of the new.

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Moses, with hindsight, is explaining, offering a comment on Noah's obedience and action under a principle which God must have revealed to Abel years before.

All I am saying is, we must not forget that Adam, Noah and the other patriarchs did not have the book of Genesis to read. And this has ramifications for us. The truth is, we must not read our current practice drawn from centuries of Christendom¹¹ back into the Bible. Yet, how often this is done! What are we told in Scripture? God rested, God sanctified and blessed the seventh day, yes. But did he command man to keep it? Does it say so? No! And as for accuracy, please note that the English word *sabbath* does not appear in the creation record; as a matter of fact, it does not appear in the whole of Genesis. These points must not be dismissed as trivial, or glossed over.

¹¹ Nor covenant theology.