

Bite Size Bible Study

Sabbath – another view #132

By Pastor Lee

The people in the ancient world believed that something existed not by virtue of its material properties, *but by virtue of its having a function in an ordered system* in human terms, in relation to society and culture. In this functional system, the sun does not exist by virtue of its material properties, as a burning ball of gas. Rather it exists by virtue of the role that it has in the way that it functions for humankind.

In theory, this way of thinking could result in something being included in the "existent" category in a material way, but still considered in the "nonexistent" category in functional terms.

A spoon lying on the counter exists in the material world. We see the spoon has matter and therefore it exists – we can see it and touch it. But to an ant on the counter it is nonexistent because it has no function in its world.

Traditionally Genesis 1 is seen as an account of material origins. But day seven then becomes mystifying – it has no material properties. It appears to be nothing more than theological concern for Israel to observe the Sabbath. A reader from the ancient world would immediately recognize the role of day seven. Without hesitation he would conclude that this is a temple text and that day seven is the most important of the seven days. In a functional account, this is the true climax without which nothing else would make any sense or have any meaning. Deity rests in a temple, and only in a temple. This is what temples were built for. We might even say that this is what a temple is – a place for divine rest.

What does divine rest entail?

Most of us think of rest as disengagement from the cares, worries and tasks of life. But in the ancient world rest is what results when a crisis has been resolved or when stability has been achieved. Consequently normal routines can be established and enjoyed. For deity this means that the normal operations can be undertaken. This is more a matter of engagement without obstacles, rather than disengagement without responsibilities.

The Hebrew verb *sabat* from which our term "Sabbath" is derived, has the basic meaning of "ceasing". Semantically it refers to the completion of certain activity with which one had been occupied. This cessation leads into a new state, which is described by another set of words, the verb *nûha* and its associated noun, *měñûhâ*. The verb *nûha* involves entering a position of safety, security or stability and the noun *měñûhâ* refers to the place where that is found. The verb *sabat* describes a transition into the activity of *nûha*. We know that when God rests (ceases, *sabat*) on the seventh day, he also transitions

into the condition of stability (*nûha*) because everything has been given a function.

After His six days of creation, God takes up His rest and rules from his residence. This is not new theology for the ancient world – it is what all ancient peoples understood about their gods and their temples.

In the Old Testament the idea that rest involves engagement in the normal activities that can be carried out, when stability has been achieved, can be seen in the passages where God talks about giving Israel rest.

But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety. (Deut 12:10)

Although security and stability might allow one to relax, more importantly it allows life to resume its normal routines. When Israel's enemies no longer threaten, they can go about their lives: planting and harvesting, buying and selling, raising their families and serving their God.

When a newly elected president looks forward to taking up his residence in the White House, it is not simply so he can kick off his shoes and snooze in the Lincoln bedroom. It is so he can begin the work of running the country. Thus in ancient terms the president "takes up his rest" in the White House. The turmoil and uncertainty of the election is over, and now he can settle down to the important business of running the country.

The role of the temple in the ancient world is the place for the deity – his home, his headquarters. When the deity rests in the temple it means that he is mounting to his throne to assume his rightful place and his proper role.

When we thought of Genesis 1 as an account of material origins, creation became an action in the past that is over and done with. God made objects and now the cosmos exists (materially). Viewing Genesis 1 as an account of functional origins offers more opportunity for understanding that God's creative work continues.

We can now see Genesis 1 from a material or scientific point of view, or as function giving act. This frees us to see this chapter as an either/or. Material existence would not have to fit the seven-day period but could have occurred over time. While the functional act is easily placed in a seven day period – including the seventh day. We can now view each as true but from different perspectives. The Sabbath has importance in each perspective, and shows the depth of its importance.

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