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The Holiness of the Sabbath

The Sabbath, a day of rest set aside by God to help his people refresh themselves and remember Him is a blessed and holy day. In his work *The Sabbath* Abraham Heschel presents a meditation on this important act of worship from a Jewish perspective that is both thought provoking and accessible to the average reader. While aimed at a Jewish audience, followers of Christ can learn much from its pages. Grounded in the scriptures of the Old Testament and this beautifully written book is just as relevant to believers of the new covenant as to believers in the old. Heschel demonstrates that the Sabbath is holy because of a partnership between God and man.

From the start Heschel challenges us by confronting our relationship with technology (3). He claims that our need to conquer space is driving our technological advances (3). This “conquest of space” (3) leads us to sacrifice our most precious “ingredient of existence”: Time (3). Most of us can relate to this on some level, with the desire to “[gain] power in the realm of space” (3) while we “forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time (3).

Heschel presents the Sabbath-ideal and time as separate but interconnected ideas. Time was created first (ESV Genesis 1.5) while the Sabbath was created on the seventh day (ESV Genesis 2.3). While we experience time every day of the week, it is being pushed out more and

more by our desire to occupy more space. The Sabbath was created by God not as rest from time but from space (10).

Heschel believes we have an antagonistic relationship to time, not unlike our relationship with God. His rationale rings more true now than when he wrote the book in 1951. He decries our empiricist nature, how we arrogantly assume that only those things we can touch and that “occupy space” are real. “Even God”, he writes, “is conceived by most of us as a thing” (5).

More directly he writes:

There is much enthusiasm for the idea that God is present in the universe, but that idea is taken to mean His presence in space rather than in time, in nature rather than in history; as if He were a thing, not a spirit (5).

The Sabbath exists in the realm of the spirit, where “there is no difference between a second and a century, between an hour and an age” (98). Our life, writes Heschel, should not be to amass a “wealth of information” (6), but rather to “face sacred moments” (6). The Sabbath was created in order to provide us with a moment in time where we can rest from activity and praise God through his timelessness. “It is a day for praise, not a day for petitions” (30).

Heschel describes the purpose of the Sabbath in many ways. It is a day to dominate self rather than the world (13). During the first six days we give ourselves over to our jobs, duties, and obligations. On the seventh day we rest and discipline ourselves to the worship of God. We are also admonished not to view the Sabbath as an interlude but as the “climax of living” (14). In essence the Sabbath is the very point of living. It is what Adam and Eve gave up in the garden – perfect rest. The Sabbath is a whole-life offering to God, not something we celebrate with just our minds or our hearts, but it is a time when “not only the hands of man celebrate the day, [but] the tongue and the soul” as well (14).

Our relationship to the Sabbath is of equal importance to that of the Sabbath's relationship to God. "The Sabbath is meaningful to man and is meaningful to God" (53). By noting this dual relationship Heschel draws us into a discussion regarding the essential nature of the Sabbath: it is Holy. According to Heschel early Rabbi's believed that the blessing of the seventh day was an act of creation whereby he created holiness (54). Without the Sabbath, there "would be no holiness in our realm of time" (54).

The Sabbath is necessarily holy, having been blessed by God (ESV Genesis 2.3). Heschel correctly points out that Genesis declared the last day of creation as "*qadosh*, holy" (9). God blessed the seventh day and made it holy..." (ESV Genesis 2.3). This passage in Genesis does not specifically identify this day as the first Sabbath but the connection between the idea of God resting from work and the command in Exodus 20:8 is clear. "The Sabbath is all holiness," (82) writes Heschel. "Even when men forsake the Sabbath, its holiness remains" (82). It is this essential thought we will examine in greater detail.

Heschel's assertion that the Sabbath remains holy regardless of our human participation is of extreme importance to his overall argument. This is seen clearly even before we hear from the author himself. His daughter in writing the introduction writes:

*While the holiness of the land and of festivals depends on the actions of the Jewish people, who have to sanctify them, the holiness of the Sabbath . . . preceded the holiness of Israel. **Even if people fail to observe the Sabbath, it remains holy** (xiv) [Emphasis added].*

This notion seems in accord with the biblical text, specifically Genesis 2:3. If God declares something blessed and thereby makes it holy, only He can make it common. There is a potential conflict to be found with the Sabbath command in the Exodus decalogue. Exodus 20:8

reads “Remember the Sabbath day, **to keep** it Holy,” (ESV/NASB) and “Remember the Sabbath day, **by keeping** it Holy” (NIV/NLT). As noted previously Exodus 20:8 is not the first time we hear about a Sabbath-like idea, but it is the first time it is codified into Law for God’s people to follow as a sign of the covenant. The phrases “to keep” and “by keeping” seem to imply that the Sabbath day is not Holy until we sanctify it. Genesis 2:2-3 records that the seventh day is blessed by God and declared Holy from the very beginning of creation. How then do we reconcile this apparent contradiction and is it possible to harmonize the biblical text with Heschel’s assertion? To answer the first part of the question we must reconcile the two texts.

Let us look first to the meaning of the word Sabbath. It is a “derivation of a Hebrew word which means ‘cease’ or ‘desist’” (Elwell and Beitzel). In this case, we are to cease all forms of work and turn our focus wholly to God. This aligns perfectly with the meaning in Genesis 2:3 and we can state that the Sabbath talked about in Exodus 20:8 is the same as the event described in Genesis 2:3. In both Genesis 2:3 and Exodus 20:8 the Hebrew word translated “holy” comes from the same Hebrew root meaning “to sanctify” (Logos), that is to be set apart or consecrated (Brown). Vine’s tells us that *to sanctify* means “an act whereby, or a state wherein, people or things are set aside ... in the worship of God: they are consecrated or “made sacred”(Vine’s 210). The Sabbath was not made holy in order to separate us from God but to be set apart *to* Him. The rest it offers is not an idle rest, but an inward turn to reflect on God and find true rest in Him.

Further demonstrating our *attachment* to God, Vine’s states that a sanctified person should be “withheld from workaday use (or profane use) and to be treated with special care as a possession of God” (210). God owns us and God owns the Sabbath.

So, believers are attached to God and so is the Sabbath, but what to do with Exodus 20:8? Let us look at the text again: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” (ESV) As stated the

Hebrew word for ‘keep’ means “to sanctify” but is translated “keep holy” in the ESV (Logos). It is also variously translated “dedicate”, “sanctified”, “set apart”, “manifest my holiness”, and more (Logos).

Using the other translations as a guide, it appears that *to keep* does not mean the Sabbath is dependent on us. Rather, we are to observe – keep– it holy and similarly orient ourselves towards holiness on the Sabbath day. Heschel’s assertion that the Sabbath remains holy separate from any involvement on our part is scripturally correct. Heschel resolves this apparent contradiction when he writes “the Sabbath is holy by the grace of God and is still in need of all the holiness which man may lend to it” (54). It is man who “illuminates the day with the light of his soul” (54) – the light that was given to us by God.

The Sabbath, both the book and the holy creation of which it speaks are gifts from God. Heschel does an outstanding job of staring into space and time and deciphering the interaction between the first six days and how we ought to interact with God on the seventh day. For the Christian reader it fills your heart with appreciation and sorrow. We appreciate the creator God who created a day set apart to himself for us to draw closer to Him. We feel sorrow for the drastic liberties we have taken in failing to observe it with its deserved reverence and awe under the New Testament covenant.

Works Cited

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