

REST

A Brief Survey of an Old Testament Theme

by

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“Rest.” At the mention of this word, differing and perhaps even wistful connotations come to mind. Our modern presuppositions and assumptions likely connect rest to the idea of sleep or repose, “a bodily state characterized by minimal functional and metabolic activities.”<sup>1</sup> If not sleep, then perhaps a break, a vacation, or a “breather”? This rest is also associated with a state of physical inactivity importantly providing the body and mind with refreshment, rejuvenation. Musical “rests” highlight this phenomenon. For the singer, a rest within a measure provides just enough time to “catch one’s breath,” to refrain from working or singing in order to rejuvenate and replenish with more air. In a 24/7 digitally connected, results-oriented, sleep deprived culture, who doesn’t crave more “rest?” It’s good for us, right? After all, Genesis 2 gives evidence that God Himself rested. This is worthy to consider. God rested. Does he himself require rest? Furthermore, God then commands His people to rest. Commands. With stiff consequences for ignoring the Sabbath such as “being cut off from the people” and even death, rest’s importance is intensely illuminated within the Scriptures. But to what purpose? In today’s modern culture, a stifling legalistic view often hovers over this notion of Sabbath rest, and so, if we’re honest most of us probably prefer to do rest in our own way or skip it altogether. Was it the same for the Israelites? Does our modern view of rest correlate to Old Testament rest?

Indeed, the theme of rest permeates Scripture. In order to understand this rather illusive promise of rest within Scripture and its relevance for today, it is imperative to adequately delineate the meaning of “rest” to the ancient Israelites themselves. This process will begin by defining several Hebrew terms for rest with the intent to establish the overall character, context and purpose of rest before considering God’s disavowal of rest in Psalm 95. Holding onto Psalm 95, the process finishes with a brief survey of the Old Testament demonstrating that rest is firmly yoked to obedience and worship of God. Throughout the Old Testament, the recurring theme of divine rest highlights the tension between God’s covenant promise and the wayward journey of the Israelites. The range of evidence assents to the timeless and still pertinent truth of Augustine’s prayer: “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.”<sup>2</sup>

Within the Old Testament, several Hebrew terms denote “rest,” and each term carefully expresses an intentional nuance. Highlighted first within the creation account and possibly the most well-recognized biblical term for rest is *shabath*, to cease, desist, rest<sup>3</sup> (Genesis 2:2). Referring to God’s cessation from the act of creating, this is often equated to a cessation from work or a state of being inactive, and therefore aligns most closely to the instinctive and typical definition of rest. However, according to Randall Gleason, this assumption leads to a misconception concerning God. In his Sabbath rest, God was not inactive; rather, he “merely ceased one activity in order to continue to another.”<sup>4</sup> Scholar T. Desmond Alexander agrees. In referencing the prevailing notion that God was tired after creating, Alexander bluntly calls “such an interpretation banal.” Purposefully, God had created his own “resting place,” and he rested. J.H. Walton invokes: “God does not set up the cosmos so that only people will have a place. He also sets up the cosmos to serve as his temple in which he will find rest in the order and

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster. Accessed April 20, 2016. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rest>.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Confessions of St. Augustine*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>3</sup> "H7673 - shabath - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (KJV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 20 Apr, 2016. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=H7673&t=KJV>

<sup>4</sup> Randall Gleason, “The Old Testament Background of Rest in Hebrews 3:7-4:11.” In *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157, July-September 2000, (Dallas, Texas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 2000) 298.

equilibrium that he has established.”<sup>5</sup> Old Testament scholars agree and also cite that divine rest is associated with temple building. This conclusion stems from the ancient Near Eastern context that “when gods become involved in creative activity, they do so in order to make for themselves a resting place.”<sup>6</sup> Contextually, the Garden of Eden “is not viewed by the author of Genesis simply as a piece of Mesopotamian farmland,” but as an “archetypal sanctuary, a place where God dwells and where man should worship him.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, God’s seventh day Sabbath expresses “the completion and goal of His purposes, and the enjoyment of the perfection and harmony of creation” where there is no strife, enmity or sin in the creation, hence there is rest.<sup>8</sup> Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi, concurs, “He [God] regarded it [creation] as complete and perfect, and to acknowledge it- God stopped... God’s cessation from *doing* expresses His desire for *being* with His creation, for giving to His creatures not only *things* but *Himself*.”<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, this *shabath* rest develops into a paradigm for God’s people. Weaving it into the gift of manna, God commands *shabath* for the Israelites (Exodus 16:23).<sup>10</sup> God teaches them his rest. Having previously labored in bondage in Egypt, rest is a foreign, unaccustomed concept. These former slaves require instruction on how to set aside a day of rest to enjoy, remember and worship their Creator and Deliverer. Eminently, *shabath* observance is unique. The practice is distinctive from any rhythms of nature and no known parallel existed within the ancient Near East culture.<sup>11</sup> Rather, God designates the Sabbath as “a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy” (Exodus 31:13-17 ). To break the Sabbath, the sign of the covenant, meant to “violate the covenantal relationship, to reject the spiritual renewal of the covenant; and hence the penalty was death.”<sup>12</sup> With both physical and spiritual connotations, *shabath* rest is clearly interconnected with both the worship of God and obedience to His command.

The next Hebrew term for “rest” refers to man’s placement in the garden (Genesis 2:15). Within modern English translations, Genesis 2:15’s *yanach* (to cause to rest, cause to alight, set down)<sup>13</sup> is often overlooked. Rather, the word “put” from verse 8 is carried into verse 15. Unfortunately, the English “put” omits deep-seated and profound Hebrew context. According to Old Testament scholar John H. Sailhamer, *yanach* was not a commonly used term, but reserved for one of two special uses. First and quite notably, *yanach* was part of the Israelite worship vocabulary “signifying the placement of something in the presence of the Lord for the purpose of worship (Exodus 16:33-34, Leviticus 16:23; Numbers 17:4; Deuteronomy 26:4, 10).”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2012), 122-23.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander, 123.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander, 123-24.

<sup>8</sup> T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, editors, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*. (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 688.

<sup>9</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness*. (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Biblical Perspectives, 1990), 67.

<sup>10</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 274.

<sup>11</sup> John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary Old Testament*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press: 2000), 638.

<sup>12</sup> D.A. Carson, editor, *From Sabbath to the Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 30.

<sup>13</sup> "H3240 - yanach - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (KJV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 21 Apr, 2016. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=H3240&t=KJV>

<sup>14</sup> Gleason, 299.

Secondly, *yanach* is God's "rest" or "safety" which he provides for mankind in the land (Genesis 19:16; Deuteronomy 3:20; 12:10; 25:19). Sailhamer expounds: "Both senses of the term appear to lie behind the author's use of the word in verse 15. The man was "put" into the sanctuary of the Garden where he could "rest" and be "safe," and the man was "put" into the garden "in God's presence" where he could have fellowship with God."<sup>15</sup> A more literal translation reads, "And Jehovah God taketh the man, and causeth him to rest in the garden of Eden" (Young's Literal Translation).<sup>16</sup> Relevantly, most English translations also miss the profound and contextual meaning of man's purpose in the garden. These render that man was "put" in the Garden "to work it and take care of it." However, some Old Testament scholars contend that the Hebrew text is better understood as "to worship and obey."<sup>17</sup> "Hence, God "rested" man in the garden to worship before Him and to "obey His command."<sup>18</sup> Like *shabath*, *yanach* is also inextricably linked to both worship and obedience.

Finally, the bulk of the Old Testament "rest" words originate with the Hebrew term: *nuwach*, to rest, settle down and remain, with an original idea being "drawing breath."<sup>19</sup> Exodus 33:14 offers a prime example: "The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Here is a sense of the Israelite's "drawing breath" from and settling down with the Lord. Clearly, *nuwach* relates to and encapsulates the three patriarchal covenant promises of name, nation and particularly, land. The idea of God giving rest "expresses the greatest, the ultimate gift which YHWH bestowed upon Israel in granting the land."<sup>20</sup> His people are gifted with a place to land on, a place of serenity and cessation from effort. There is safety and security as God gives "rest from their enemies on every side" (Joshua 21:44-45). Dr. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. sums up the concept,

"Possession, inheritance and rest function almost as synonymous ideas... God's rest is the gracious gift of the land promised to the patriarchs with its attendant blessings such as the cessation of all hostile enemy action. It is also the place where the presence of the Lord dwells whether with the travelling ark or in the temple."<sup>21</sup>

Like *shabath* and *yanach*, *nuwach* encompasses both a physical and spiritual rest. Deuteronomy 12 illustrates that the land was promised to the people of Israel as their "resting place" (v. 9), in order to worship the Lord (vv. 5-7, 11-14). The idea itself also points to *yanach*, the "dedication" of certain items being rested before the presence of the Lord for liturgical purposes. Israel being "rested" in the land for the purpose of worshipping Yahweh. Furthermore, the land becomes Yahweh's "resting place" where He promises to dwell in order to bless his people (Deuteronomy 12:5-11).<sup>22</sup> This is covenant. And yet, decidedly these promises remain contingent upon Israel's obedience to the Lord (Deuteronomy 12:1-3, 31-32). Covenant, land, presence, rest, worship and obedience tightly intermingle.

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<sup>15</sup> Sailhammer, 100.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis+2%3A15&version=YLT>

<sup>17</sup> Sailhamer, 101.

<sup>18</sup> Gleason, 300.

<sup>19</sup> "H5117 - nuwach - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (KJV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 21 Apr, 2016. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=H5117&t=KJV>

<sup>20</sup> Dictionary of the Old Testament, 689.

<sup>21</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest." In *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130: 518, April 1973, (Dallas, Texas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 2000) 298.

<sup>22</sup> Gleason, 296.

Overall, the Hebrew Old Testament view of rest is best understood as “the blessing of worshiping God in the safety of His presence.”<sup>23</sup> The concept of Sabbath, Adam’s rest in the garden and Israel’s rest in the land all fit this interpretation, rest was designed for the express purpose of worshiping Yahweh.<sup>24</sup> Adam and Eve first experienced this rest in the Garden of Eden. After Adam and Eve were separated from God’s presence, God began to appear to His people: Abraham (Genesis 12:7) and Moses (Exodus 3:2) culminating in the appearance of His divine presence before the Israelites of the Exodus in the pillar of cloud (Exodus 13:21). Eventually, God promises Moses: “My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest” (33:14), thus identifying the divine presence as the source of rest.<sup>25</sup>

However, the privilege of worshiping in God’s dwelling place can be jeopardized by hardened, rebellious hearts (Ps 95:8-10). Psalm 95 presents an exuberant, joyful, Israelite call to worship, a call to enter into God’s presence (v 2). And yet, the psalmist declares that only hearts that seek after God’s heart will enter into His rest (Psalm 95:11). Psalm 95:11 is best understood as a warning against the Israelites forfeiting the right to worship before the presence of the Lord, the right to enter into his holy sanctuary and enjoy his covenantal blessings. Here the Hebrew term for rest is closely related to *nuwach*: *měnuwachah*: rest, resting place<sup>26</sup> (Psalm 23:2; Ruth 1:9; Deuteronomy 12:9). *Menuwachah* shows up in Psalm 23 making for an interesting comparison: “He leads me beside still waters” (Psalm 23:2) can be understood as “He leads to “*menuwachah*,” the “resting place.”

Assuredly, throughout the Old Testament the tension between God’s resting place and his people entering into his promise of rest is pronounced and highlighted by the fulfillment of blessings and curses. God’s presence first dwelt in the Garden of Eden, then in the tabernacle, then in the land (specifically Zion), and finally in the Solomonic temple.<sup>27</sup> In each case, access into the presence of Yahweh for worship was jeopardized by disobedience to covenant stipulations as demonstrated when Adam was excluded from the place of God’s presence in the Garden. T. Desmond Alexander explains:

“Restless wandering is a result of sin and its punishment. Thus Cain was sentenced to be a “restless wanderer” (Genesis 4:4), no longer able to settle and facing the insecurity of threats from enemies. Noah’s ark floated until it settled (*nuwach*) on Mt. Ararat (Genesis 8:4). The forty-year wandering of Israel in the wilderness was also a time of punishment for sin (Numbers 14:22-35).<sup>28</sup>

Moses, Miriam and Aaron and the Exodus generation of Israelites were refused entrance into the Promised Land where God was to dwell and bless them.<sup>29</sup> Joshua led the next generation of Israelites into the land where “The LORD gave them rest on every side” (Joshua 21:44-45) only to be followed by the cycles of disobedience and upheaval as recorded in Judges. Early in the period of the kings, David subjugates the neighboring states, thus securing “rest” for the people (2 Samuel 5:17-25; 8:1-14). Additionally, David’s conquest of Jerusalem provides a resting

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<sup>23</sup> Gleason, 301.

<sup>24</sup> Gleason, 301.

<sup>25</sup> Gleason, 301.

<sup>26</sup> "H4496 - mēnuwachah - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (KJV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 20 Apr, 2016.

<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=H4496&t=KJV>

<sup>27</sup> Gleason, 301.

<sup>28</sup> Alexander and Baker, 688.

<sup>29</sup> Gleason, 301.

place for the ark of the covenant.<sup>30</sup> His son, Solomon, dedicates the Lord's temple, as a "resting place" for the Lord. Under Solomon's reign God grants his people rest from their enemies, which allows them to worship him and to enjoy the blessings of the promised land. (I Kings 5:3-5; 8:56; I Chronicles 22:7-10). However, disobedient and wayward Israel eventually receives the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 28, including the threat that it will find "no resting place for the sole of your foot" (Deuteronomy 28:65).<sup>31</sup> Hence, throughout the Old Testament, the recurring theme of God's divine rest highlights the tension between God's covenant promise and the wayward journey of the Israelites. As Walter C. Kaiser expresses: "Rest is where the presence of God stops (as in the wilderness wanderings, Numbers 10:33) or dwells (as in Palestine, Psalm 132:8, 14; Isaiah 66:1; I Chronicles 28:2). It was for this reason that David stressed the aspects of belief and trust for this rest in Psalm 95:11."<sup>32</sup>

Finally, these very same principles and the promise of divine rest remain relevant for Christian readers today. Concerning Psalm 95, Kaiser states that "there can be no mistake that the theme is eschatological."<sup>33</sup> Kaiser demonstrates great significance of divine rest being set within the context of the "Apocalyptic or Millennial" Psalms (Psalms 93-100) so that in conjunction with contemporary worship, these psalms celebrate the second coming of Jesus. The author of Hebrews concurs. Psalm 95 is quoted repeatedly (Hebrews 3-4). Here the New Testament reader is exhorted to persevere in "hope firm to the end" (3:6). This exhortation is a continuation of the Old Testament exhortations of belief and trust. Bible scholar G.K. Beale comments:

"In other words, the command to Israel to continue in its faith and its failure to do so pointed forward to the Christian age, when a positive response would come, first in Christ (3:6a) and then in his true people. First generation Israel in the wilderness did not "enter God's rest" because it was unbelieving (3:8-10, 15-19). Psalm 95 addresses later generations of Israelites, saying the time is ripe ("Today") for them to believe and enter into God's rest in contrast to their unfaithful forefathers (3:7-8; 4:7-8). But neither were they faithful, nor did they enter God's rest (4:6) ... So the promise of God's people entering into his rest remained unfulfilled until the time of the writer of Hebrews, who repeats the exhortation of the psalmist. The time is still "Today" for God's people to heed the exhortation..."<sup>34</sup>

Kaiser equivocally sums up this same view, "The rest of God, lost in the fall, again rejected by the older wilderness generation and subsequently by their erring children is still future to us in our day."<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, the Israelite journey offers crucial insight for today's heaven bound pilgrim. Clearly, "rest" as defined by modern assumptions is inadequate. Consequently, true rest often remains a foreign concept. The Israelite choice need not be repeated. God's rest prevails as his unique, *shabbath* offer in the midst of the modern world's spiritual and physical exhaustion.

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<sup>30</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, General Editor, *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academics, 2008), 115.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander and Baker, 688.

<sup>32</sup> Kaiser, 141.

<sup>33</sup> Kaiser, 141.

<sup>34</sup> G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011), 784.

<sup>35</sup> Kaiser, 154.

Indeed, the offer of rest harkens within the New Testament through Jesus Christ. Renewing and restoring the promise of divine rest, he declares:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Faithful to his covenant promises as revealed in the Old Testament, God calls his chosen out of bondage and continues to offer his rest. The call to belief and worship yet beckons, “Come.” Therefore, as the author of Hebrews affirms (from Psalm 95) by yet again extending God’s promise: “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it” (Hebrews 4:1), let us bow down. The blessing of worshiping God in the safety of His presence remains. He has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in him.

*Lord God Almighty, all praise and adoration belong to You. Your offer of rest is full of Your unfailing love, Your amazing grace, and Your incomparable goodness. May our hearts be Yours. Help us to daily, hour by hour, live in the fullness of Your rest, enjoying the constancy of Your presence. Worshiping and obeying with humble, grateful hearts that You may ever receive glory and honor and praise. All thanks be unto You, our Lord and Savior.*

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