

IS HESCHEL'S SABBATH BIBLICAL?

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In 1951, the Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel published a small book¹ that has inspired a whole new generation of Christian theology concerning the Sabbath. J. A. Sanders suggests that Heschel's "influence on Christianity, especially since the publication . . . of *The Sabbath* and *Man Is Not Alone*, has been remarkable."² In fact, some Christians are using Heschel's ideas to call Christianity back to the Sabbath. For instance, Philippe de Robert notes that while

the sanctification of time is characteristic of biblical thought and of Judaism . . . , it can be asked, however, what has become of this conception in Christianity. Is there a place for *Sabbath* in our spiritual life? . . . Abraham Heschel says that Jewish ritual can be characterized as "an architecture of time." Is there not a need to rebuild such a structure, to order our time, which has been dislocated in function from the sabbatical rhythm? Isn't the sanctifying of time to first enter into a discipline of personal prayer, communal worship and family renewal? Isn't this wisdom that has been lost, and that we can learn anew from Judaism?³

Perhaps what has made Heschel's view of the Sabbath so revolutionary is the practical nature of his approach to the subject. Instead of focusing on the importance of avoiding the retribution of an offended God, he focuses on the advantages to be gained by keeping the Sabbath and the disadvantages of not keeping it. He demonstrates that we could be missing an extraordinary—possibly even necessary—experience by allowing the Sabbath time period to come and go without benefitting from it.⁴ In fact, he even goes so far as to suggest that the quality (and quantity?) of human existence is jeopardized by an absent-mindedness of

¹Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Noonday, 1951).

²J. A. Sanders, "An Apostle to the Gentiles," *Conservative Judaism*, 28 (Fall 1973): 61-63. Also, Cottrell claims that "Jewish rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel has had considerable impact on Christian as well as Jewish thinking through his book *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*" (Raymond F. Cottrell, "The Sabbath in the New World," in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, ed. Kenneth A. Strand [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982], 260).

³Philippe de Robert, "La Sanctification du Temps Selon Abraham Heschel," *Foi et Vie* 71 (1972): 4-10.

⁴Heschel, 13ff.

the Sabbath in our exploitation of time to conquer space:

How proud we often are of our victories in the war with nature, proud of the multitude of instruments we have succeeded in inventing, of the abundance of commodities we have been able to produce. Yet our victories have come to resemble defeats. In spite of our triumphs, we have fallen victims to the work of our hands; it is as if the forces we had conquered have conquered us.⁵

In spite of all the Jewish and Christian commentary on Heschel's writings, less discussion about his views on the Sabbath has taken place compared to some of his more philosophical works. In fact, there is no published critique of *The Sabbath*. Christian writers' references to the ideas in this work seem to be done with little or no question as to their relation to Scripture.

Is it really safe to assume that Heschel's view of the Sabbath is grounded in the OT? Actually, the book makes no explicit claim to be an exposition of the OT teaching on the Sabbath. Thus, the problem is not with the claims of the author (since he makes none concerning the biblicality of the work), but rather the problem is that the work continues to be used by Christian theologians without any explanation or critique of its relation to Scripture. In order to address this problem, a comparison will be made between *The Sabbath*⁶ and Scripture, especially the OT, on their views of *time, holiness, and the Sabbath*.

Heschel's Understanding of Time, Holiness, and the Sabbath

Time

In an allegory regarding the origin of the Sabbath, Heschel suggests that time was "one," "eternal," and "transitory," preexisting the spatial aspects of creation.⁷ The process of creation, however, divided time into seven days whereby it "entered into an intimate relationship with the world of space."⁸ But in humanity's experience, time and space become antagonistic.⁹ Human nature tends to favor space over time and we are the worse for it. This is not to say, however, that Heschel denies the value of

⁵Heschel, 27; see also Sakae Kubo, *God Meets Man: A Theology of the Sabbath and Second Advent* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1978), 23ff.

⁶Fortunately, Heschel's views on the Sabbath are expressed in a single work (*The Sabbath*), which will be the focus of this study.

⁷Heschel, 51.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 5.

space. He affirms both as long as each are given their due significance.¹⁰

But, though space cannot be replaced by time, time gains the priority due to the fact that "it is not a thing that lends significance to a moment; it is the moment that lends significance to things."¹¹ Heschel goes on to show that this is demonstrated in the religion of the OT, which emphasized time over space.¹²

According to Heschel, time gains a superior significance in religion due to the special relationship between it and holiness.¹³ Thus, time gains its significance over space in that it is a "means" of attaining holiness. "Time is the presence of God in the world of space, and it is within time that we are able to sense the unity of all things."¹⁴ In the words of one of his commentators: "It is a form of the *Shechinah*."¹⁵ Thus one cannot help but ask how Heschel distinguishes between time and ultimate reality, between time and God.

Holiness

Heschel wishes to emphasize that "holiness is not an unearthly concept."¹⁶ He sees no "dualism of the earthly and sublime."¹⁷ Rather, "all things are sublime."¹⁸ Anything in the universe that obeys God's command to exist is holy; by existing, humanity is in "contact with His will."¹⁹ The implication of this view is not always explicit, though in at least one instance Heschel is quite clear that "man is the source and the initiator of holiness in this world."²⁰

¹⁰Ibid., 6.

¹¹Ibid. Heschel states: "We appreciate things that are displayed in the realm of Space. The truth, however, is that the genuinely precious is encountered in the realm of Time, rather than space" (*The Earth is the Lord's: The Inner World of the Jew in East Europe* [New York: Farrar, Strause & Giroux, 1949], 13).

¹²Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 8.

¹³Heschel states: "The universe was created in six days, but the climax of creation was the seventh day. Things that come into being in the six days are good, but the seventh day is holy. The Sabbath is *holiness in time*" (*God In Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* [New York: Farrar, Strause & Giroux, 1955], 417, emphasis original).

¹⁴Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 100; see also Donald J. Moore, *The Human and the Holy: The Spirituality of Abraham Joshua Heschel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), 155.

¹⁵Franklin Sherman, *The Promise of Heschel* (New York: Lippincott, 1970), 63.

¹⁶Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 266-267.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

Notice that Heschel's emphasis is on the *activity* of the human. Perhaps Heschel views holiness as "innate" or "potential" in the works of creation, which would include humanity. Of course, Heschel could be trying to emphasize the *attitude* of the human, rather than the *behavior*, but the "source" is still the human.

Sabbath

Probably the most significant element of Heschel's view of the Sabbath is its potency for the sanctification of its observers. Heschel says that "something happens to a man on the Sabbath day."²¹ On the Sabbath *neshamah yeterah* ("additional soul") is given to the worshiper and it is removed at the close of the Sabbath.²² In another statement he adds: "Nothing is essentially required save a soul to receive more soul. For the Sabbath 'maintains all souls.' It is the world of souls: spirit in the form of time. . . . Every seventh day a miracle comes to pass, the resurrection of the soul, of the soul of man and of the soul of all things."²³

Heschel defines this extra "soul" through a statement by Rabbi Hayim: "We have seen the tremendous change that the holiness of the Sabbath brings about in the life of the saint. The light of holiness blazes in his heart like tongues of fire, and he is overcome with rapture and yearning to serve God . . . all night and all day."²⁴ In other words, through the Sabbath, the human soul connects with the divine soul in the form of sanctified time:

What is the Sabbath? *Spirit in the form of time*. With our bodies we belong to space; our spirit, our souls, soar to eternity, aspire to be holy. The Sabbath is an ascent to the summit. It gives us the opportunity to sanctify time, to raise the good to the level of the holy, to behold the holy by abstaining from profanity.²⁵

It is in this realm of holiness that the human can interface with the divine. The source of change is not from outside, but from within: "For Heschel, the human psyche undergoes a "self-transformation." In poetic reflection on the discouragements of the weekdays, Heschel exclaims: "All week there is only hope of redemption. But when the Sabbath is entering the world, man is touched by a moment of actual redemption; as if for a moment the spirit of the Messiah moved over the face of the earth."²⁶

²¹Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 87.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., 82-83.

²⁴Ibid., 88-89.

²⁵Ibid., 75.

²⁶Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 68.

It can be said that Heschel sees time as a *means* of attaining holiness, where it is the innate presence of the divine will being accomplished in the life of creation. The Sabbath is the point where humanity sanctifies time and the individual transforms the self into a state in which he or she communes with the divine. How, then, does Heschel's view compare with Scripture?

Time, Holiness, and the Sabbath in the Bible

The most significant and positive comparison between Heschel's view of the Sabbath and the Bible is ironically in the NT accounts of Jesus' liberating the Sabbath experience from burdensome regulations ("the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath," Mark 2:27).²⁷ Heschel is in agreement with Jesus' spirit of freeing both Jews and Christians from making the Sabbath a drudgery that is far from a "delight."

There are, however, some contrasts between Heschel's view of the Sabbath and that of the Bible. Three issues best describe this contrast. Before looking at these, however, it should be noted that Heschel never claims that his view is biblical. He uses Scripture when it appropriately emphasizes his thought, but there is no indication that his view is intended to be a biblical theology of the Sabbath. Rather, it might be better described as a Jewish philosophy of the Sabbath. The validity of Heschel's views, in light of his apparent intentions, is not being questioned or criticized. What is questioned is the validity of using Heschel's views as biblical theology.

Time vs. Space in Genesis

To begin, Heschel's argument is founded on the idea that the significance of the Sabbath lies in its creation in time, whereas all other aspects of the creation process took place in space. While the creative process that took place during the first six days was called good, the Sabbath was pronounced "holy."

It would, however, be difficult to support from Scripture the idea that the seventh day was holy simply because the Sabbath involved "time." Genesis 2:1-3 states that the seventh day was blessed and sanctified "because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made." Thus, it is *God* who sanctifies the day, not its temporal nature. The focus of this narrative is on God, not time. And it is his "finishing" and "resting," rather than a movement from spatial to temporal realities, that is emphasized. If Heschel's philosophical suggestions concerning

²⁷All scriptural references are from the NASB.

space and time are supported by this narrative, they are definitely not central to the thought being expressed.

Further, Heschel argues that the designation of “good” for what was created on the first six days and the holiness bestowed on the seventh demonstrates a hierarchy of the time/space dimensions. But can it be demonstrated that God’s “work” on the six days is limited to space, whereas his “rest” on the seventh involves only time?

In this context, the word “rested” (from *shabat*) means “to cease,” “to stop working.” But this “ceasing” was because God had “completed His work.” He was not merely taking a break. Thus, God sanctified the Sabbath, not because of his inactivity, but “because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made [completed].” Therefore, sanctification does not appear to be the result of a shift from spatial to temporal dimensions, but rather it comes as a result of God’s celebration of the completion of his work.

Heschel rightly argues that labor focuses on space, whereas rest does not. This must be granted. However, the text does not support the idea that space or time are the causes behind the declaration of holiness in regard to the Sabbath. Rather, the text suggests that it is the *celebration of the completion of Creation* that prompted God to sanctify this day.

Time, Sabbath, and Holiness in the Old Testament

Although there is a connection between the Sabbath and holiness, there is no evidence to support the idea that time serves as a medium for holiness any more than space does. If this were the case, why do the terms “holy” and “most holy,” as they are used in Scripture, almost exclusively refer to things or places? Heschel’s explanation for this is that it is only through their relationship to time that these things are made to be holy. *Contra* Heschel, the OT suggests that something’s relationship to God is what makes things, time, and people holy.²⁸ All holiness, whether of time or any other manifestation, is derived from God, the only one who can claim to own this unique quality. As Scripture says: “There is no one holy like the Lord, indeed there is no one besides you” (1 Sam 2:2).

Regarding the Sabbath and holiness, Heschel’s view consists of two conclusions: that by keeping the Sabbath holy *humans* are sanctifying time,²⁹ and that through this process of participating with holy time

²⁸For instance, “be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:44); holy ground due to God’s immanence (Exod 3:5); the holy and most holy places of the sanctuary in relation to the *shekinah* (Deut 7:6; 14:2, 21; 28:9; Josh 5:15).

²⁹Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 75.

humanity achieves holiness for itself.³⁰

First, the Sabbath commandment does not say that *humans* sanctify time, including the seventh day. Rather, it says to “remember” the Sabbath day, “keep” it holy, and “guard” its holiness (Exod 20:8). The Sabbath was not instituted by humanity, but by God (Gen 2:1-3) with humanity in mind. Therefore, if we are to benefit from the Sabbath, it must be *remembered*. Furthermore, the Sabbath was not made holy by humanity, but by God (Gen 2:3). Thus, humans must *keep* it holy. That is, its holiness must not be jeopardized (profaned) by working, pursuing our own pleasure, or doing evil (Exod 20:9ff; 31:14ff; Isa 58:13-14; Ezek 23:38). Of course in this sense, humanity affects the Sabbath’s holiness by affirming it or denying it through personal experience, but nowhere does the OT state that humans *make it holy*. Therefore, the OT does not seem to support Heschel’s view.

Second, concerning the holiness achieved by humans through the keeping of the Sabbath, God states: “You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for *this* is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you” (Exod 31:13, emphasis added). Thus, it is not a holiness that I achieve for myself, but as I keep his Sabbath holy, God promises to make me holy. Therefore, the Sabbath is a promise of redemption.

The Sabbath and Its Lord in the New Testament

As Christians reflect on Heschel’s view, it is important to consider it in the light of the Hebrew Bible and the NT. Heschel’s desire to unburden the Sabbath is similar to Christ’s own efforts in the Gospels. Actually, Heschel comes close to equating the Sabbath with the Messiah.³¹ It certainly appears that he sees the Sabbath as having redemptive value.³² This is evident in his view of how the Sabbath and time are a “means of attaining holiness.” But this is not surprising in the context of his understanding that humanity and the rest of creation have holiness as a latent, inherent quality that must be aroused. In this way, with his optimistic anthropology and view of the law (the Sabbath) as a means of redemption, Heschel is quite within the continuity of Rabbinic Judaism. Nevertheless, he seems to attribute efficacious redemptive qualities to the Sabbath and time in combination with human effort, which results in holiness and communion with divinity. Nowhere in his view is there thought of a personal Messiah without whom redemption and holiness would be impossible.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., 68.

³²Ibid.

Thus, Heschel's views appear to be alien to the NT, which does not speak of inherent holiness except in reference to Christ. The only holiness humans can claim is the "sharing" by humanity of God's holiness (Heb 12:10). The NT does teach that humanity can experience holiness and communion with God, but only through a relation to Christ, the Messiah (Eph 1:4; John 14:6). Thus, redemption and holiness are promised, but neither the Sabbath, nor time and space, nor any other concept or reality can effect salvation, for "there is salvation in no one [no thing] else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Conclusion

Based on a comparison of Heschel's views with the OT and the NT, there seems to be a significant contrast. Heschel sees in humanity an innate holiness that, when in tune with time over space (such as occurs in a special way on the Sabbath), one achieves a state of holiness whereby communion with divinity becomes a reality. Scripture affirms, however, that God made the Sabbath holy, while humanity, who is able to *share* God's holiness through the mediation of Jesus the Messiah, can enjoy communion with God. Of course one of the highlights of this communion is humanity's responsibility to protect the holiness God bestowed on the seventh day, wherein they "delight" in God and in his Son, the Messiah.