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Discovering and Understanding “Sabbath Rest” in Hebrews 3:7-4:11

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Abstract

The book of Hebrews is a complex and intricate book full of Old Testament references. Intertextuality, or the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, plays an important role in Hebrews, specifically in the context of 3:7-4:11. In this passage there occurs a phrase unique to the whole Bible, "Sabbath rest" (4:9). While this phrase seems to point to some sort of eschatological reality, there are numerous factors which play a role in determining what this "Sabbath rest" actually is. In order to come to a proper understanding of the meaning and significance of this phrase, an analysis of the author's use of intertextuality must be conducted.

Discovering and Understanding “Sabbath Rest” in Hebrews 3:7-4:11**Introduction**

The study of intertextuality is a field that has received increased attention only relatively recently in biblical scholarship (within the last century, particularly the past few decades). This issue of how the New Testament authors use the Old Testament (or conversely, how the Old Testament influences the New Testament) is one that is often highly complex, full of slight nuances, overlapping between particular uses, and at times ambiguous. However, intertextuality is no small issue to be overlooked, for it holds an important key for correctly understanding Scripture, especially the New Testament.

Intertextuality is much more than just Old Testament quotes that are cited in the New Testament. In fact there is a wide range of functions which intertextuality serves in the writings of the New Testament. In *The Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, Swartley lists seven ways the Old Testament influences the New Testament. They are as follows:

(1) quotations of earlier texts, often to claim fulfillment of prophecy; (2) allusions, echoes or very brief quotations of older narrative to thus extend the older “truth-world” in a “just-as” pattern; (3) recital of Israel’s past or the story of Jesus to convince listeners of some truth; (4) citing persons or events for moral (or immoral) example; (5) typological argument to argue for fulfillment of hope; (6) allegorical reflection on older texts to emphasize new theological realities; and (7) creative new use of older images, stock expressions and sequences of thought in a new ordering and composition.¹

These seven uses provide a comprehensive perspective of intertextuality in Scripture. In light of their variety, these seven also illustrate further the potential difficulty of

¹Willard M. Swartley, “Intertextuality in Early Christian Literature,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, eds. Ralph Martin and Peter Davidson (Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 536.

identifying and understanding specific instances of intertextuality in the New Testament. These uses must also be kept in mind when analyzing the writings of the New Testament which utilize intertextuality (and there are few, if any, that do not). It should be noted that not every specific instance of intertextuality can be relegated exclusively to one use, but often there is overlapping where two or perhaps even more of these uses could (or do) apply to a single passage.

One particular place in Scripture where intertextuality is used extensively is in the book of Hebrews. Hebrews is a complicated and controversial book which seems at first to be against the Old Testament. However, a closer study will reveal that it is actually the reverse: through several uses of intertextuality (including an elaborate use of typology), it appears that the author of Hebrews² uses the Old Testament as a primary basis and evidence for his high Christology. There are also other salvation concepts that are drawn out of the Old Testament by the Hebrews' author, one of which includes the concept of rest. This motif is seen throughout the Old Testament and is consummated in the New Testament in the person and work of Christ. One problematic passage in Hebrews which deals with the idea of rest is Hebrews 4:9 (set in the broader context of Heb. 3:7-4:11). Here is found the curious phrase "Sabbath rest," which is not found anywhere else in

²Much ink has been spilled about the authorship of Hebrews, but it will not be treated here because it is not essential to this particular topic (i.e., intertextuality and Sabbath rest). For various textual reasons, this author believes him to likely be Luke (author of Acts, Gospel of Luke), though in the end the authorship is simply unknown. For more on the authorship of Hebrews see:

-David Alan Black, "On the Pauline Authorship of Hebrews (Part 1) : Overlooked Affinities between Hebrews and Paul," *Faith and Mission* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 32-51.

-David Alan Black, "On the Pauline Authorship of Hebrews (Part 2): The External Evidence Reconsidered," *Faith and Mission* 16, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 78-86.

-David Allen, *Lukan Authorship of Hebrews*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010).

- Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). He has probably the best analysis on Hebrews authorship. See the section in his commentary, "The circumstances in which Hebrews was written: The Author," p. 3-20.

Scripture. In fact, this is the first time it is found in extant Greek literature, not appearing again until later Greek texts. The uniqueness of this phrase has posed a problem for biblical scholars, and various interpretations have been proposed. However, a clear and sound interpretation for this phrase is often hard to find. It is here that a correct understanding of intertextuality becomes useful. In order to understand Hebrews in general and specifically the idea of rest, one must understand how the author uses intertextuality in the logic of his argument. Of course other considerations can be made (i.e., linguistics, exegesis), but it appears that by studying the Hebrews author's use of intertextuality (particularly of typology), a better understanding of the meaning and significance of the phrase "Sabbath rest" in Hebrews 4:9 can be attained.

Background to the Book of Hebrews

Hebrews is a book which emphasizes a high Christology over the institutions and leaders in the Old Testament. The book most likely "originated as a written sermon or homily with the concluding epistolary greetings added later for its distribution."³ A prominent concern of the author is that his readers persevere in the faith through persecution. His readers were primarily Jewish Christians who were considering turning back to Judaism or Judaizing the gospel in light of external persecution from fellow Jews. The persecution they were experiencing was harsh (including social pressure and even death) and thus was discouraging the Jewish believers to continue holding a strong personal and public stance for Christ. The Hebrews' author wanted to make sure that his readers understood the absolutely complete and sufficient person and work of Christ in

³Randall Gleason, "The Old Testament Background of Rest in Hebrews 3:7-4:11," *Bibliotheca sacra*, 157, no. 627 (2000) [ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials]; available from EBSCOhost, 284.

conveying God's grace to His people. This is to be contrasted with the Old Testament Law and system (and indeed even other realities like angels) which are all found to be lacking in their ability to convey saving grace. The author of Hebrews gives several warnings to his readers that turning away from Christ to follow another system, work, or institution (or person) would be a serious mistake with grave (and even eternal) consequences. These warnings and especially the ones in Hebrews 4 and 6 have been hotly contested in regards to the issue of eternal security. These passages will not be dealt with in this work, but it is important to note that Hebrews 3:7-4:11 bears a similar type of warning (though perhaps not as harsh).

Hebrews is a complex and intricate book which has been the subject of much discussion and debate. Many factors make studying it an intense activity. Among these include the extensive vocabulary and complicated grammatical structures used in the text, the fact that the author does not name himself, the extensive use of the Old Testament (and the author's seemingly anti-Old Testament position), and the author's use of intertextuality. Certainly all of these points need to be considered when studying Hebrews, but intertextuality is of particular importance to interpreting the author's intended meaning. In his book the Hebrews' author gives multiple citations (direct and indirect quotes), allusions, and types from the Old Testament in order to further his argument. This argument is namely that Christ is superior to prophets, angels, Moses and the Levitical priesthood, and that He is the great King and High Priest. On the basis of Christ's superiority the author exhorts his readers to persevere in faithful obedience to the Lord and not fall away into apostasy (which in this case means going back to Judaism because of persecution from fellow Jews).

Now that the basic premise of the book has been identified, it is important to look at the various ways in which the Hebrews' author uses intertextuality throughout his book. Swartley notes that of the seven uses of intertextuality (mentioned above), types 1 and 2 are seen in chapter one, type 4 in chapter eleven, type 5 is seen throughout (the author uses a sustained typological argument to show the superiority of Jesus), and type 7 is seen in chapters 11 and 12 concerning the metaphorical transformation of Zion (12:22).⁴ At this point it should be noted that of the seven uses which Swartley defines, the author of Hebrews uses types 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7 at least (possibly type 3 as well). So no less than six of the seven uses of intertextuality are evident in this epistle. This stems in part from the author's extensive use of the Old Testament (as already mentioned). In light of this diverse usage of intertextuality in Hebrews, it will be all the more necessary to carefully identify which uses apply to the text in question and clarify both the unity and distinctions between them. Of all of the ways in which intertextuality is used by New Testament authors, typology is perhaps the most controversial and the most difficult to control. In light of the Hebrews author's extended use of typology in his book (as well as in the text in question), it is important to lay a foundation for the nature and meaning of typology.

Typology

Typology as a hermeneutical discipline has come a very long way. The Church fathers often had gross misunderstandings of typology in Scripture which led to wild interpretations. Take for example Origen, who interpreted virtually everything in

⁴Swartley, "Intertextuality in Early Christian Literature," 537.

Scripture (especially the Old Testament) as having an allegorical-spiritual meaning. In other words, little value was placed on the literal meaning and much emphasis was placed on the “spiritual” meaning behind the person, event, or institution. Although there were those who did advocate the literal meaning of the text as being more prominent, Origen’s fourfold sense⁵ reigned supreme until the Reformation. The Reformers Luther and Calvin restored the literal meaning of Scripture to the status of being crucial to a correct understanding of Scripture. However, with the coming of the Age of Enlightenment and rationalism typology was almost dealt a death blow until the 20th century. Apart from the work of Patrick Fairbairn and a few others, many biblical scholars succumbed to historical-critical scholarship and the idea that the OT and NT have no unity. This meant that typology was “merely an historical curiosity, of little importance or significance for the modern reader.”⁶ Then in 1939, Goppelt published his dissertation which is still considered to be foundational for modern understanding of the NT use of typology.⁷ Since then there has been an explosion of studies and articles concerning the nature and implications of typology.

One such study is *Typology in Scripture*, Richard Davidson’s doctoral dissertation published in 1981. Davidson maintains that the key underlying problem with all the studies and works on typology before him is that they come at the text with an a priori

⁵Davidson notes the four distinctions include the “literal sense and three spiritual senses-- the allegorical, tropological (i.e. moral or anthropological), and the anagogical (i.e. heavenly or eschatological).” Richard Davidson, *Typology in Scripture* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1981), 25.

⁶Ibid., 51.

⁷Ibid., 55.

understanding of typology instead of developing it from the text. As Davidson argues, “A solid semasiological and exegetical foundation for understanding the nature of typology has never been laid.”⁸ Of course, Davidson then proceeds to lay this foundation in order to ensure greater accuracy in his understanding of the nature of typology in Scripture. His conclusions are helpful indeed, but are by no means exhaustive. Still, his comprehensive approach to both the history and structural development of typology proves invaluable to the discussion. Davidson’s definition for typology is particularly helpful:

Typology as a hermeneutical endeavor on the part of the biblical writers may be viewed as the study of certain OT salvation-historical realities (persons, events, or institutions) which God has specifically designed to correspond to, and be prospective/predictive prefigurations of, their ineluctable and absolutely escalated eschatological fulfillment aspects (Christological/ecclesiological/apocalyptic) in NT salvation history.⁹

One’s response to Davidson’s definition should be mixed. While his definition does seek to construct a true typology from the text instead of imposing his own preconceived notions and speculations, it is by no means all-encompassing. Many specific instances of typology can fit under this definition, but there are also those which cannot (i.e., Stephen being a type of both Moses and Christ in Acts 7, and the apostles at times typifying Christ in Acts). Certain aspects of Davidson’s definition simply do not ring true all of the time. For example, typology is not necessarily always prospective or predictive, nor is it always escalated or eschatological (like the Acts 7 example). However, the main criticism that can be made of Davidson’s view is that he places too much emphasis on

⁸Ibid., 113.

⁹Ibid., 405-406.

typology as a concrete, structured method of interpretation. That is, he has developed a “hard and fast,” one-size-fits-all definition which he applies to every instance of typology in Scripture. Further analysis of typology suggests that it is much less concrete and often much more difficult to define than Davidson might claim.

David Baker observes two different perspectives of typology: the first (which is more dated, before the last 30 years) sees typology as “prefiguration” (i.e. Fritsch, Davidson), the second (which is more recent, within the last 30 years) sees typology as “correspondence” (i.e., G.W. Lampe, Swartley).¹⁰ However, both see that typology has a historical basis. In general, the consensus today is that “typology is a form of historical interpretation, based on the Bible itself.”¹¹ This consensus is important to note, because one of the criticisms of the legitimacy of typology is that it is fanciful, allegorical interpretation of Scripture. Indeed, many have abused typology in this way in the past (i.e., Origen, above), but the fact that it has been abused does not mean that typology itself is not legitimate. Baker distinguishes the two by contrasting the historical nature of typology with the “fanciful nature of allegory which often entirely ignores the historical situation.”¹² He explains that typology “requires a real correspondence between the events, persons, and institutions in question, but allegory can find ‘spiritual’ significance

¹⁰David Baker, “Typology and Christian use of the Old Testament,” in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Text?* ed. G.K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 315.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 324.

in unimportant details or words.”¹³ This distinction between allegory and typology is both widely recognized and displays an accurate understanding of typology.

At this point the general consensus concerning the nature of typology stops and varying definitions abound. That is, while most scholars agree that typology is concerned with historical facts and is distinct from allegory, the views concerning the nature and meaning of typology are quite diverse and cover the entire theological spectrum.

Generally speaking, more dispensational scholars tend to discount typology as an invalid interpretive method, believing that “typology has no basis in grammatico-historical exegesis of underlying OT texts.”¹⁴ However, many scholars (among them dispensationalists like Baker) today hold a cautious view of a controlled typology as the New Testament application (but not the interpretation) of the Old Testament.¹⁵ On the other hand, those with a more covenant theological bent might be more inclined to accept typology as interpreting the literal fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New Testament, while still retaining in part its Old Testament meaning. This reflects a more organic unity of the two Testaments and is more in line with Davidson. The question that seems to be the primary determining factor of one’s perspective is that posed by Baker: is a type simply a picture or illustration for another truth (correspondence), or is it something more (i.e., does it prefigure and predict)?

The answer to this question is a long and tedious one; however, since this thesis is on Sabbath rest and not typology, the answer will be condensed. It should be noted first

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴G. P. Hugenberger, “Introductory Notes on Typology,” in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Text?* ed. G.K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 334.

¹⁵Ibid., 333-35.

that many additional questions must be answered to understand typology, such as whether or not it is a concrete exegetical method (Davidson) or whether it is simply the application of Scripture. The problem with both of these extremes as well as the two extremes in the previous question (correspondence or prefiguration) is that typology in Scripture is too fluid and diverse an entity to fit into one category or another. It contains elements of most of the varying perspectives, but it cannot be constricted to an airtight definition. That is, there are sometimes instances where types carry predictive elements, but not every type is “prophetic” or “prefigures” the antitype. Furthermore, typology is not an exegetical or hermeneutical method so much as it is a way of understanding certain aspects of God’s redemptive activity in salvation-history. Hugenberger’s explanation of typology is particularly helpful in coming to a better understanding. In his article he contrasts typology with moralism and allegory:

Typology, on the other hand, begins with a fact related to a person, event, or institution, as recorded in the Old Testament, which is then understood in the context of redemptive history. It proceeds by way of discovering that symbolism or significance which the *original* reader of the biblical record, or observer, would have been justified in attaching to this fact. It then correlates this significance to a later fact within redemptive history which, the typologist must establish, shares an analogous meaning to the first fact (not merely a superficial resemblance) and also fulfills or is modeled on the pattern of the first fact. Support for this claim may be discovered in patterns in the structure of redemptive history, in the existence of narrative typologies, or in other catenas of correspondence, etc. With these conditions met, the significance of the first fact, the type, illumines the second fact, the antitype.¹⁶

This explanation seems to balance the several different elements of typology in that a type is a fact, it is understood in the context of redemptive history, it has meaning for the original reader or observer, and it (type) correlates this meaning to a later fact (antitype)

¹⁶G. P. Hugenberger, “Introductory Notes on Typology,” 341.

in redemptive history to illumine the later fact (antitype) in light of the first (type). One aspect that can be added and which is relevant to Hebrews is that a type can be both horizontal (earlier and later facts in history) and vertical (earthly reality and heavenly reality). Finally, John Stek adds another important qualifier to typology when he says that God used typical persons, institutions, and events in Scripture to “advance His saving purposes and speak clearly and fully to men of what He was yet to do for them.”¹⁷ That is, the correspondences between types and antitypes did not happen by accident. God used types both to advance and to reveal His redemptive activity in the world. All typical relationships were divinely ordained by God, at the very least to reveal His redemptive activity to man (often in retrospect and to some degree prospectively). Most types also helped to further God’s redemptive plan in some way. In other words, types do not just show what God has done in history, they also helped him get there in some way (albeit incomplete). This is certainly not true of every type, but it does apply to a majority, for if it were not for what God actually did through types, the fulfillment in the antitypes would have far less significance. Of course, there are also those types like Melchizedek which have only an analogical relationship to their antitype (in this case Jesus).¹⁸ All in all, Hugenburger’s explanation is sufficient when understood with these latter qualifiers (i.e. vertical typology, divine intent, and God’s advancement of His redemptive plan through most types). At the very least it is important to remember that typology is simply a way of understanding God’s redemptive activity in salvation-history.

¹⁷John Stek, “Biblical Typology Yesterday and Today,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 5, no 2 N (1979) [ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials]; available from EBSCOhost, 162.

¹⁸Swartley, “Intertextuality in Early Christian Literature,” 537.

One key issue that is referenced in regards to Hebrews is the apparent influence Philo seems to have had on it. Therefore, in addition to a discussion of typology, a brief discussion on Philonic influence must be conducted before any analysis of the text is considered. There have been numerous scholars in the past who have argued for a heavy Philonic influence in the book of Hebrews. Philo's writings reflect a dual emphasis on Greek wisdom and Jewish religious tradition. The 1st century Christian Church wrestled with these two influences as it was birthed out of the Jewish tradition but heavily influenced by the dominating Hellenized world. Hebrews is the most similar book of the Bible to Philo in that it seems to synthesis these two entities and exhibit a recognizable Philonic undertone in its writings. The following similarities shared by Philo and Hebrews are noted by Swartley: both show a preference for the Pentateuch, Moses, priesthood, and the Jewish cult, both see Old Testament persons and events as symbols of deeper realities, and both distinguish between the immature knowledge of revelation and the true deeper understanding.¹⁹ At this point Swartley seeks to juxtapose the greater differences with the "superficial similarities" of Hebrews and Philo to demonstrate that Hebrews cannot be labeled "Philonic."²⁰ He argues that Hebrews exalts Christ as defining wisdom by interpreting the LXX through typology and finding Christ there, while Philo interpreted the LXX through allegory and found the foundation of all wisdom (especially Greek) there.²¹ Furthermore, the dualism of Philo is ontological (matter opposed to spirit, God is transcendent, humanity's goal is to reach enlightened level of

¹⁹Ibid., 933.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

true spiritual being), while the dualism in Hebrews is eschatological (matter not evil, God involved in two worlds, heavenly and earthly are tightly bound as present age flows into age to come- Heb. 9:23-28).²² However, Luke Timothy Johnson sees these differences not as negating Philonic influence, but rather supporting it in the sense of being a “reworked Platonism” (he sees Philo and Hebrews as being influenced by the Platonic worldview).²³ Whereas Platonism is ahistorical, Hebrews is grounded in historical awareness in which the “past serves as a type or example for the present, which is ‘greater’ and ‘more real’ (see 4:11).”²⁴ Hebrews also distinguishes between heaven and earth existentially (heaven is where God is, earth is where man is) as well as cosmologically.²⁵ Two big differences between Hebrews and Platonism are that Hebrews exalts rather than denigrates the physical and also emphasizes change (the Platonic ideal is changeless).²⁶ Johnson concludes by saying that “Platonism is here stretched and reshaped around belief in a historical human savior whose death and resurrection made both his body and time axiologically rich.”²⁷ Johnson further suggests that Philo could have written Hebrews if he had been a Christian since his views are so closely related to the views in this book.²⁸ The final analysis appears to be that the author of Hebrews

²²Ibid.

²³Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 420-422.

²⁴Ibid., 422.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

likely was influenced by Philo in some way, or at least was under similar philosophical influence and insights to Philo. The Bible was written in a certain context, and that context influenced the manner in which revelation was given (though not the content of it). To say that Hebrews reflects no Philonic thought or influence is to overreact to the past scholarship that has given too much credit to Philo for influencing Hebrews (some even say that he authored it). Hebrews seems to be distinct from Philo in many ways and displays a different type of Platonic worldview (if it can even truly be called Platonic). The use of typology in Hebrews is evidence of this, for typology is distinct from the Platonic theory primarily by being grounded in historical facts. Even the vertical typology (earthly v. heavenly) found in Hebrews is different from Platonism in that neither is more or less real than the other, the heavenly is simply better (i.e., more complete). In regards to the issue of rest, the rest of Canaan being the type was no less real than the Sabbath rest that is still offered to believers. The rest of Canaan was truly a rest. However, it was not a complete rest, nor was it a final rest. Rather, it functioned in part as a picture of the rest which was both established at creation and still waiting to be consummated at the end of the age. It seems to be evident that there are both similarities and differences between Hebrews and the Platonic worldview (and thus Philonic thought). In summary, the biggest differences which separate Hebrews from the Platonic theory as well as Philo are that Hebrews argues for the fulfillment of hope by means of God's redemptive activity in history and through humanity; historical fact and the created world are the means by which God accomplished His ultimate redemption.

Analysis of the Text

Context of Hebrews 3:7-4:11

Now that typology and Philonic influence have been discussed more fully, the way in which the author uses intertextuality to develop his argument in 3:7-4:11 can be determined. Returning to the seven uses which Swartley lays out, there seem to be at least four options which could possibly be relevant to the passage in question (Hebrews 3:7-4:11). These are: 2) “allusions, echoes or brief quotes of older narrative to extend the older “truth-world” in a “just-as” pattern,” 3) “recital of Israel’s past or story of Jesus to convince listeners of some truth,” 5) “typological argument to argue for fulfillment of hope,” 7) “creative new use of older images, stock expressions and sequences of thought in a new ordering and composition.”²⁹ As this passage is analyzed, these uses will be discussed in terms of their possible use and relevance to the argument. Additionally, other influences such as Jewish exegetical principles and Philonic influence will be discussed in terms of their use and significance to the meaning of the passage.

Hebrews 3:7-4:11 is actually introduced in 3:6b, which says that believers are of Christ’s house “if we hold fast our confidence and boast of our hope firm until the end.” The remainder of the passage is essentially a long exhortation to persevere in faithful obedience to the end in order to attain to that hope (in this case identified as rest). The Hebrews’ author uses an extensive quote from Psalm 95 in 3:7-11 which forms the basis of his exhortation. His use of this quote can be labeled in terms of types 3 and 5 of the uses of intertextuality. The use of this Psalm here seems to be an instance of type 3, or the recital of Israel’s past to convince the listeners of some truth. The author’s recital of

²⁹Swartley, “Intertextuality in Early Christian Literature,” 536.

the wilderness generation (which is what Psalm 95 is referring to), their rebellion in the wilderness and God's subsequent wrath in which he denied them entrance into the land ("rest") is used by the author to demonstrate the fact that God's rest is received through faith (which is evidenced by faithful obedience). This is clear in 3:19, which concludes that the underlying reason for this denial of rest to the wilderness generation was "because of unbelief."

Psalm 95 is also used typologically to further the author's argument for why his readers should persevere in faithful obedience to Christ. It is widely recognized that to have a legitimate type/antitype relationship, true historical and theological correspondences must exist.³⁰ Such correspondences can be seen in the typological connection and comparison between the wilderness generation of Numbers 14 and the readers of Hebrews. The main correspondence between the two is the opportunity of each to enter the promised rest, which the wilderness generation failed to do because of their disobedience (3:18, 4:6, 4:11) due to lack of faith (3:19, 4:2).³¹ The harsh punishment of that rebellious generation serves as a warning to the Hebrews readers that whoever would enter God's rest must do so by faithful perseverance (4:1, 11). The wilderness generation thus functions as type to antitype of the Hebrews readership. The promise of rest given to the wilderness generation is now extended in a similar test of faith to the Hebrews readership. Just as the wilderness generation was presented with the opportunity to respond to the "good news preached to them" (4:6) by faithful obedience

³⁰Gleason, "The Old Testament background of rest," 285.

³¹Harold Attridge, "Let us strive to enter that rest: the logic of Hebrews 4:1-11," *Harvard Theological Review* 73, no. 1-2 (1980), [ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials]: available from EBSCOhost, 280.

to God's command to take the land, so the author challenges his readers to persevere through persecution in faith and to "hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end" (3:6). Furthermore, just as the disobedience of the wilderness generation resulted in God's forbiddance into His rest, so the Hebrews are warned to fear the punishment of falling away from the living God, which similarly consists in coming short of entrance into His rest (4:1).

Entering the promised rest is indeed the theme of this entire passage. Therefore, the fact that it is exhorted requires that it is still a possibility, which is what the author seeks to show in his typology.³² Coming to a precise definition of rest (as well as "Sabbath-rest") is not a simple task. Kaiser points out that many commentaries suggest several different "rests" in Hebrews, which he lists as follows: "Divine Rest (4:1-3, 10-11)/Rest of Faith, Creation Rest (4:4), Sabbath Rest (4:4,9)/Rest that Remains (6-9), Canaan Rest (4:8), Redemptive Rest (4:10), Eternal Rest (4:9)."³³ However, Kaiser argues that this rest of God should not be subdivided but rather it "involves a corporate solidarity of the whole rest with all its parts or as a collective single program which purposely embraces several *related aspects* realized in marked and progressive *stages*."³⁴ What is useful about Kaiser's statement is that it further illustrates both the heightening (or escalating) aspect and the salvation-historical framework of typology. The rest promised to the Israelites did not constitute the complete rest God still has in store for His

³²Ibid., 281.

³³Walter C. Kaiser, Jr, "Promise theme and the theology of rest," *Bibliotheca sacra* 130, no. 518 (1973) [ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials] EBSCOhost, 147.

³⁴Ibid., 148.

people (both to the Hebrews readership and to believers today). This is made clear by the fact that the Hebrews' author explicitly states that Joshua did not bring them into God's ultimate rest, for if He did there would be no remaining rest "today." The question then is what did the rest of Canaan consist of and how did it function in salvation history? To answer this question Genesis 2:2 must be studied in order to clarify the meaning of God's rest.

In Hebrews chapter 4, the author continues his exhortation for faithfulness but now begins to elucidate the promise of rest to his present audience. After a transition in 4:1-2 from the wilderness generation to the present readership, the Hebrews' author continues his discussion with a more in depth interpretation of "rest." Here he utilizes an important Jewish exegetical principle known as *gezerasawa*, in which a verbal analogy between two passages warrants consideration of both passages in an interpretation of each.³⁵ The two passages in question are Psalm 95:11 (4:3, 5) and Genesis 2:2 (4:4). The cognates "rest" and "rested" provide the connection between the two passages and demonstrate that the "rest" addressed in Psalm 95 is a Sabbath rest.³⁶ George Guthrie notes that "on the basis of this family of terms the author interprets these two Old Testament passages."³⁷ The implications (according to Guthrie) are: 1) the "rest" of the psalm was available to the wilderness generation and has also been around since creation; it is not limited to a specific time or place, and 2) the "rest" of the psalm is identified with that of God on the seventh day of creation, it is a Sabbath rest (4:9), including a cessation

³⁵Swartley, "Intertextuality in Early Christian Literature," 844.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷George H. Guthrie, "Hebrews," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G. K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 958.

from one's works "as God did from his" (4:10).³⁸ Thus, the author interprets the "rest" of Psalm 95 as still available and as a Sabbath rest involving the cessation of works.³⁹

The citation of Genesis 2:2 reveals a few notable pieces of information. First, as noted above, the author uses Gen. 2:2 in order to explain the meaning of "rest" in Psalm 95. Essentially, this rest is God's cessation from His creation activity to enjoy His creation.⁴⁰ Furthermore, this primordial rest of God which He Himself entered when Creation was complete functions as the antitype for the rest in Psalm 95.⁴¹ In other words, the rest promised in Canaan receives its meaning and significance from the reality of God's own rest on the seventh day of Creation. The implication then is that the rest of Psalm 95 and the rest that still remains for the Hebrews readers is the ultimate future rest of God which He has been celebrating since the creation of the world.⁴² The typology, then, works as follows. The wilderness generation was offered the promise of rest in the land of Canaan, which primarily included physical blessings (safety from enemies, successful crops, etc.). They failed to enter this rest because of disobedience, however. Instead of trusting in God to provide for them to overcome the opposition, they desired to return to Egypt. Their punishment was death in the wilderness. The Hebrews readership faces the same promise for entering God's rest, and they are to overcome opposition

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Gleason, "The Old Testament background of rest," 298.

⁴¹Attridge, "Let us strive to enter that rest," 284.

⁴²John Laansma, "I Will Give You Rest': The Background and Significance of the Rest Motif in the New Testament," *Tyndale Bulletin* 46, no. 2 (1995) [ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials]; available from EBSCOhost, 387.

(enduring persecution) through faithful obedience to Christ. They have good reason to fear that abandoning their trust in the gospel will result in a failure to enter God's rest just like the wilderness generation. But as has been continuously maintained, the entire passage in Hebrews is a warning against unbelief in which both the fear of the consequences and the promise of God's rest are to motivate the believer to persevere through everything. The argument of Hebrews is a heightened argument (as typological arguments generally are). The rest of Canaan is primarily physical, but it pictures the Sabbath rest, which is the goal of God inaugurated at Creation and consummating at the end of the world.

***Sabbatismos* or "Sabbath-rest"**

At this point in the passage (4:6-10) the Hebrews' expounds on the rest that remains as being the "Sabbath rest" (4:9). Having discussed the context of the passage and the author's use of typology, attention can finally be given to the phrase "Sabbath rest." This word *sabbatismos*, of course, is unique to the biblical text, which explains why there are a wide variety of interpretations that have been proffered. In light of the discussion thus far, it is crucial to remember that the meaning of every word is determined by its context, no matter how commonly or uniquely used. Without even studying this unique word it is already evident from the context that the rest that remains in the "today" for NT believers is the same as God's primordial rest in Genesis. Furthermore, it seems that it will be in some way characterized by an enjoyment of God's presence, since that is what His rest consisted of before the Fall.

Though these conclusions may be somewhat unfounded by the text thus far, they certainly appear to be confirmed by the use of the term *sabbatismos*. This word seems to

have been derived from the verb *sabbatizein*, meaning “to observe/to celebrate the Sabbath.”⁴³ Robert Grossmann notes that the suffix *-smos* is used here to make the verb into a nominal form as it is “a very common suffix used to denominate verbs so that they may serve in the place of nouns in sentence structure.”⁴⁴ He further argues for several reasons that *sabbatismos* is only referring here to the continuance of the 4th commandment and nothing more. That is, all that is being said is that the 4th commandment is still in effect for New Testament believers; there remains a weekly Sabbath keeping, but this is not the eternal Sabbath (which is designated by the word *katapausis*).⁴⁵

While Grossmann’s analysis of the etymology of *sabbatismos* is helpful, his analysis of the broader context seems to be inaccurate. It is here that knowledge of intertextuality is beneficial. For in this word the use of both type 7 and possibly type 2 of intertextuality can be seen. The word *sabbatismos* carries with it the allusion back to not only the 4th commandment but also the seventh day of creation, upon which the 4th commandment is modeled. This is also supported by the immediate context of Hebrews, which has just mentioned Genesis 2:2. However, the context points to the fact that the author is using this word to replace *katapausis*.⁴⁶ Therefore, it becomes clearer that he is

⁴³ William Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, World Biblical Commentary 47A (Nashville: Word, Inc., 1991), 101.

⁴⁴Robert E. Grossmann, “The Sabbath of Hebrews 4:9,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 2, no. 2 (1986) [ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials]; available from EBSCOhost, 126.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 132.

⁴⁶Khiok-Khng Yeo has written an excellent work on the usage and distinction of *katapausis* and *sabbatismos* and how they fit into a theology of rest. See Khiok-Khng Yeo, “The Meaning and Usage of the Theology of “rest” (katapausis and sabbatismos) in Hebrews 3:7-4:13,” *Asia Journal of Theology*, 5, no. 1 (1991): 2-33.

using the image of the Sabbath (and ultimately seventh day of Creation) in a new way (i.e., type 7), to point to something that is *future*. That something is most likely not simply a continuance of the 4th commandment (although this may be implied as will be seen later), but seems to contain some kind of fulfillment of hope. Of course, this is exactly what the author's typology has been pointing to all along, that there is a promise of rest (4:1) that is in the future (4:6, 8-9) which the believers should hope in and persevere toward (4:11). The question is then: what are the dimensions of this eschatological rest?

It seems that the author has specifically invented this word to replace *katapausis* and give a new description or definition of the rest that remains.⁴⁷ Lane observes that “the deliberate choice of *sabbatismos*... must have been dictated by the fact that it conveyed a nuance not found in *katapausis*.”⁴⁸ Ellingworth agrees with Grossman that “the context suggests that *sabbatismos* may retain a verbal meaning, ‘sabbath-keeping.’”⁴⁹ He further suggests that the primary distinction between *sabbatismos* and *katapausis* seems to be “that they denote respectively temporal and spatial aspects of the same reality.”⁵⁰ This could point to the fact that God's ultimate rest is both a place and a

⁴⁷O'Brien notes that “this powerful declaration of v. 9 is parallel to that of 6a, except that here the substitution of the term *sabbatismos* (‘sabbath celebration’) for the usual word *katapausis* (‘resting place’) is significant, and suggests that the character of the future rest for God's people is defined or described. Had the author intended to say only ‘there remains a resting place for the people of God,’ we might have expected him to retain the word *katapausis*. Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 170.

⁴⁸Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 101.

⁴⁹Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 255.

⁵⁰Ibid.

state, contra Attridge.⁵¹ In other words, God's Sabbath rest is not only a state of enjoying God's presence but also includes a concrete eschatological reality (whether it be the New Jerusalem, the Millennial reign of Christ on Earth, heaven, a combination of more than one of these, or something else). It is at least very likely that *sabbatismos* refers to God's own Sabbath-rest after creation.⁵² It then follows from the evolution of the word itself that this rest includes a Sabbath celebration, because this term "stresses festivity and joy, expressed in worship and praise of God."⁵³ O'Brien argues that the use of the word *sabbatismos* in place of *katapausis* is "intended to spell out the fact that life for the people of God (both Old Testament saints and New Testament believers) in his resting place will be 'an eternal, festive Sabbath celebration.'"⁵⁴ In other words, while *katapausis* refers primarily to a place, the substitution of *sabbatismos* is not synonymous but "explains *what takes place* in God's resting place."⁵⁵ Attridge agrees at least that God's rest includes a spiritual state when he states that entering God's rest means "to have a share in God's eternal 'sabbatical' repose."⁵⁶ However it becomes clearer now that there is certainly the likelihood that rest could mean both a place and state. In Canaan, the *place* of God's rest which he promised seems to be emphasized more, while

⁵¹Attridge, "Let us strive to enter that rest," 283.

⁵²Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 71.

⁵³O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 171.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid., 164. (italics added for emphasis)

⁵⁶Attridge, "Let us strive to enter that rest," 283.

the ultimate rest He promises for all who enter by faith includes not only an actual place but also a state of celebration and worship in God's presence.

Conclusion

Before coming to a final conclusion on the meaning and significance of "Sabbath rest," there is one more aspect to consider. Essentially, when is this Sabbath rest entered? It seems in many ways to be a future, eschatological rest. However, there are some indicators within the context which seem to point to a present reality as well. First, the author focuses on the word "today" from Psalm 95 to show that it is ultimately prophetic, announcing a new day of opportunity which has now finally come.⁵⁷ Second, the use of the present tense of "enter" in 4:3, 10 adds to the immediacy of the passage, seeming to point to a present reality. In response to this present-future tension, many exegetes have noted the "already-but-not-yet" aspect so characteristic of Hebrews (as well as other NT authors). Thus, entrance into the promised rest is available now, but is yet to be consummated. Lane holds that the verb *eiserchometha* in 4:3 is a "true present" and not simply proleptic; the promise of rest is "predicated upon reality, and believers are already to enjoy the rest referred to in the quotation of Ps. 95:11."⁵⁸ In response, O'Brien gives several reasons why the Sabbath rest seems to be solely future. First, the present tense of the verb is not decisive on settling the issue. Second, the promise of a remaining rest is unfulfilled (4:1, 6, 9). Third, the structure of 4:3-11 is related to 10:32-39, in which the readers are encouraged to endure to receive the promise, thus pointing to a

⁵⁷Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 100-101.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 99.

consummation. Fourth, v. 3a is more likely a paraenesis than a theological expression. Fifth, the imagery of Ps. 95 and its parallel to the wilderness generation point to a corporate entrance into God's rest (a future event). Sixth, the admonition in 4:11 to make every effort to enter the rest seems to put the rest in front of the listener who is encouraged to "listen" "today."⁵⁹ While O'Brien's view of "Sabbath rest" seems to be more accurate than most, there seems to be another way to incorporate the present force of the passage.

At this point Grossman's view concerning *sabbatismos* strictly referring to a weekly Sabbath-keeping must be revisited.⁶⁰ While the evidence in the context seems to support primarily a future aspect in terms of Sabbath rest, it does hold a present reality for believers that cannot be ignored. Grossmann's view fails to recognize the fact that *sabbatismos* includes an eschatological rest in the presence of God, but he does keep from completely ignoring the present reality of this rest for believers. A more balanced view is found in Andrew Lincoln, who emphasizes the present aspect of *sabbatismos* without diminishing the future, eschatological aspect. In light of the present tense of *eisrhometha* in 4:3 (which Lincoln takes to be a true present), he draws the conclusion

⁵⁹O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 165-166.

⁶⁰Grossmann, "The Sabbath of Hebrews 4:9," 125. In his article, Grossmann maintains that "*sabbatismos* is nothing more or less than a weekly resting from labor." He does not argue for the continued observance of the Fourth Commandment, but rather that *sabbatismos* is simply a reiteration of the "weekly rest day requirement" which has been in effect since the seventh day of Creation and was included in the Fourth Commandment. That is, it is the principle of ceasing from labor one day a week which the word *sabbatismos* and previous context of Hebrews 4 call for, not for the specific observance of the Fourth Commandment itself. In particular, Grossmann points out that the ceremonial aspects of the Law (including the Fourth Commandment) were fulfilled in Christ; it is the underlying principle of the "rest command" (working six days, resting one) which is applied to believers in Hebrews and, by extension, to believers today.

that “God’s promise has become reality in accordance with His plan and purpose.”⁶¹

Ultimately, Sabbath rest was inaugurated by Christ in the salvation God provided; those who believe already enter into that rest and are now waiting for it to be consummated at the end. For Lincoln, there is an “already” and a “not yet” in that consummation, and the “decisive turn of events [which] occurred in Christ shows that the ‘already’ outweighs the ‘not yet.’”⁶² Lincoln’s observations are quite helpful to the discussion. He demonstrates that a relationship with Christ (i.e., salvation) is in a very real sense a concern of the author of Hebrews. That is, the author encourages his readers to stay faithful to Christ (3:7) and approach Him in their time of need (4:14-16). On the other hand, a salvation experience may not be the main force of *sabbatismos*, nor the primary focus of the author. O’Brien’s argument for a primarily futuristic perspective in Sabbath rest utilized evidence that cannot easily be ignored. The tension between the already and not yet of the passage is a tension which is difficult to balance, but which must be carefully balanced nonetheless.

Therefore, in light of the already-but-not-yet realization that characterizes Hebrews and is so strong in Hebrews 4, this author submits that the Sabbath rest of Hebrews 4:9 has been initiated by God since the seventh day and will be consummated fully in the future. However, it can be anticipated in the present through persevering in faithfulness, particularly by observing the principle of Sabbath-rest (but not the Fourth Commandment, see footnote below). That is, although the Sabbath rest of God will not

⁶¹Andrew T. Lincoln, “Sabbath, Rest, and Eschatology in the New Testament,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 212.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 214-215.

be truly entered until the end, believers anticipate it and in some ways receive a taste of it by observing a weekly rest from labor. This is in line with the purpose of the Fourth Commandment, which was to follow God's example on the seventh day of cessation of activity and enjoyment of His creation. The Sabbath was meant to function originally as a holy day unto the Lord, a remembering of God's creation activity and of His past deliverance from slavery. It was a sign of the covenant between God and His people. Ultimately, it was to be a day of festivity and celebration in addition to rest.⁶³ In Hebrews, observing a weekly Sabbath rest now is a way for the believer to celebrate God's presence in his life as he faithfully perseveres toward entrance into the eternal resting place and unhindered state of celebration and praise in God's presence.⁶⁴ The exhortation is to keep persevering in obedience to Him who promises His own rest, which He has been enjoying since the creation of the world.

This emphasis on perseverance in faithfulness is what Herold Weiss interprets as the main point of Hebrews 3:7-4:11; it is the only way to enter into God's rest. Weiss says that when "God had completed his work of creation, he began an uninterrupted rest which humans may penetrate by faith and anticipate by hope but which they will enter when the immovable kingdom is established."⁶⁵ When believers have finished their laboring in this life, they will enter into the unshakable kingdom in which God's rest has

⁶³O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 171.

⁶⁴John Bowman's review of Hofias shows that Hofias also agrees with the idea of Sabbath rest as a future celebration and praise in God's presence. See John Wick Bowman, "Review of Katapausis: Die Vorstellung vom endzeitlichen Ruheort im Hebraerbrief" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91, no. 2 (Je 1972): 275-276.

⁶⁵Herold Weiss, "Sabbatismos in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58, no. 4 O (1996) [ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials database]; Available from EBSCOhost, 686.

been celebrated since the creation of the world.⁶⁶ It is by faith and hope that believers endure, living on the basis of the reality of that divine, unshakable rest and entering into it finally when it is revealed at the end (i.e., when it is established).⁶⁷ Finally, believers do not need to fret about staying faithful in their own strength, for the great King and High Priest is always interceding on behalf of His people (2:17-18) and ruling on His eternal throne (1:3, 8), able to dispense mercy and grace on those who are in need (4:16). He who rules the universe has experienced the same testing all men have, yet without sin (4:15). Therefore, He is completely qualified to come to the aid of those who are tested (2:18), helping them to endure to the end and enter His rest.

⁶⁶Ibid., 684.

⁶⁷Ibid., 685-86.

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