

Introduction to Chapter 4: An Israelite View of Genesis 1

Imagine that slavery is all that you, your parents, and your grandparents remember. While living in the New Kingdom of Egypt, you learned that the sun god Re spoke the god Ptah—his Word—into being as the firstborn of all creation. Then Ptah created the rest of the gods and the entire universe out of nothing.¹

You have heard the Babylonians tell another part of the story. They say that a problem arose: the gods got tired of having to work to provide food for themselves. At that time, the god Kingu chose to align himself with Tiamat, the cosmic sea monster. The hero Marduk split her in two, separating the vapors in the sky from the waters of the seas. Then he executed Kingu and mixed his blood with dirt to create the first people to do the gods' work.²

Since the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II is also worshiped as a god (the Son of Re),³ you had always known that your sole reason for existence was to labor as his slave. About a year ago, a man named Moses emerged from the desert to confront the pharaoh. He claimed that the God of your ancestors had sent him to deliver you from the horrors of Egyptian servitude (Exod 3:79, 4:29–31). You watched in awe as the one who called himself “I AM” (Exod 3:14) used Moses to bring judgment upon the gods and goddesses of Egypt: those of the Nile (Exod 7:20–21), the sun (Exod 10:21–23), agriculture (Exod 9:22–26, 31–32), and cattle (Exod 9:17).

I AM did not spare even the future god of Egypt, the son of Ramses the Great (Exod 12:21–30). Amazingly, the region where your people lived remained untouched by most of these plagues. After Rameses freed you from slavery, he changed his mind, sending chariots to prevent your escape. I AM split the Sea of Reeds so that you could walk through and then destroyed Pharaoh's army as it followed you (Exod 14).

Soon after that, when I AM made a covenant with your nation on Mount Sinai (Exod 24:38), Moses called everyone together to learn the history of God's dealings with your ancestors. While much of what you heard sounded like what you had been taught in Egypt, there were shocking differences. Most importantly, you discovered that the gods did not make your ancestors from the blood of a rebellious god.⁴ Instead, the one who spoke the entire universe—his temple—into being made you in his image (Gen 1:26–27).

An image in a temple does the work of a god and has his authority.⁵ Therefore, God's intention for you, as his image-bearer, is to serve as his representative.⁶ You can fulfill his purposes through your faithful stewardship in tending, guarding, and governing the earth while displaying the Lord's glory to other people and extending his kingdom among them (Gen 1:28).⁷

¹John A. Wilson, trans., “Theology of Memphis,” in *ANET*, lines 53–4, 4–6.

https://archive.org/stream/Pritchard1950ANET_20160815/Pritchard_1950_ANET#page/n29/mode/2up.

²E. A. Speiser, trans., “Enuma Elish (The Creation Epic),” in *ANET*, 4.135–40, 67.

https://archive.org/stream/Pritchard1950ANET_20160815/Pritchard_1950_ANET#page/n91/mode/2up.

³W. F. Albright and George E. Mendenhall, trans., “The Amarna Letters, RA XIX,” in *ANET*, lines 1–10, 485.

https://archive.org/stream/Pritchard1950ANET_20160815/Pritchard_1950_ANET#page/n509/mode/2up.

⁴“The Creation Epic” (Enuma Elish), *ANET*, lines 6.1–36, 68.

⁵Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 129.

⁶Hart, “Genesis 1:1–2:3 as a Prologue to the Book of Genesis,” 315–36, 317–19,

http://tyndalehouse.com/tyndbul/library/TynBull_1995_46_2_06_Hart_Gen1Prologue.pdf.

⁷Walton, *Genesis*, 130.

God Completes the Heavens and the Earth

1) Gen 2:1–2: In a summation of Genesis 1,⁸ Moses wrote, “And the heavens and the earth were completed.” This depiction of “the seventh day” differs in tone from the earlier six. However, since it functions as the epilogue of creation, it belongs thematically with Genesis 1.⁹ Marking the significance of this day, Moses mentioned the number seven—which represents perfect completion—three times.¹⁰ God had ceased his creative activity,¹¹ for “the heavens and the earth and all their inhabitants were finished.”¹² During the process of creation, the Lord subdued space. On the seventh day, he blessed time.¹³ Thus the Sabbath is when we observe and celebrate the significance of time.¹⁴

Moses continued, “And God had finished on the seventh day his work which he had done.”¹⁵ Contrary to what some translations imply, by the onset of this day, God had already completed his activity.¹⁶ Moses employed an ordinary term for “work” (*melacah*) the same word to describe what people do.¹⁷ Unlike the other designation used in the Old Testament specifically for manual labor, the one written here can describe any work. This includes the activity of a fine craftsman (Exod 36:8).¹⁸

“And he ceased from labor on the seventh day, from all the work which he had done.” The verb translated as “ceased” also appears in Josh 5:12.¹⁹ Even though the noun “Sabbath” never appears in this verse, the verb *shabbath* implies the concept, which means “cease” or “rest.”²⁰ God had been working not only to prepare the cosmos for humanity,²¹ but also to achieve for himself a place of rest.²² The biblical term “rest” refers to a state of peace which one enters after completing tasks.²³

Silence and stillness entered the atmosphere. All that God had planned for the universe was now in place.²⁴ He settled into the stable ambiance he had created and experienced refreshment.²⁵

Likewise, the Egyptian Theology of Memphis states that the god Ptah created everything

⁸ Gesenius, *GKC*, 328, <https://archive.org/stream/geseniushebrewgr00geseuoft#page/328/mode/2up>.

⁹ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 34–5.

¹⁰ Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 67.

¹¹ Walton, *Genesis*, 146.

¹² Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 35.

¹³ Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 67.

¹⁴ Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 73.

¹⁵ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 35.

¹⁶ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 142.

¹⁷ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 35.

¹⁸ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 142.

¹⁹ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, “שָׁבַת” (*shabbath*) *BDB*, 991–2.

<https://archive.org/stream/hebrewenglishlex00browuoft#page/990/mode/2up>. Note the similarity with the word for “seventh” (*shabiyith*).

²⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 142.

²¹ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 53.

²² Walton, *Genesis*, 148.

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, 69.

²⁴ Hamilton, *Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 141.

²⁵ Walton, *Genesis*, 147.

by thinking and speaking it into being. He then rested after making shrines and images for the lesser gods he had generated.²⁶

In contrast, in *Enuma Elish*, the boisterous antics of some lesser gods disturbed the rest of the chief god Apsu. He complained to the water goddess Tiamat, “Their ways are truly loathsome unto me. By day I find no relief, nor repose by night. I will destroy, I will wreck their ways that quiet may be restored. Let us have rest!”²⁷ Tiamat reacted to his desire to kill the other gods by rebelling. Thus, the absence of rest led to that primordial conflict.²⁸ After the battle, Marduk said to the other gods that people “shall be charged with the service of the gods that they might be at ease!”²⁹ Freed from the menial tasks of managing the earth and providing food for themselves, the gods could finally rest.³⁰

Similarly, an Akkadian creation myth states, “That which is slight he shall raise to abundance, the work of god man shall bear!...Create, then...and let him bear the yoke! The yoke he shall bear...the work of god man shall bear!”³¹ Thus, in Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) thought, people labored so the gods could rest.³²

According to *Enuma Elish*, Marduk received control of the other gods and the entire cosmos after defeating Tiamat. In gratitude to him, the other gods built the sacred city of Babylon so that Marduk could rest.³³

“The [gods] opened their mouths and said to Marduk, their lord, ‘Now, O lord, you who have caused our deliverance, what shall be our homage to you? Let us build a shrine whose name shall be called “Lo, a chamber for our nightly rest”; let us repose in it! Let us build a throne, a recess for his abode! On the day that we arrive we shall repose in it.’ When Marduk heard this, brightly glowed his features, like the day, ‘Construct Babylon, whose building you have requested, let its brickwork be fashioned. You shall name it “The Sanctuary.”’ The [gods] applied the implement; for one whole year they molded bricks. When the second year arrived, they...set up in it an abode for Marduk, Enlil, (and) Ea. In their presence he was seated in grandeur.”³⁴

Therefore, striking differences exist between scriptural and ANE concepts of divine respite.³⁵ Not only does he not require food, the Lord never needs recovery from any kind of disturbance.³⁶ Nevertheless, God sought a dwelling place of rest (Ps 132:7–8, 13–14; Num 10:33–36).³⁷ Both the tabernacle and the temple were constructed as replicas of the cosmos (Ps 78:68–69). Indeed, nearly identical language describes the creation of the cosmos, the tabernacle,

²⁶ “Theology of Memphis,” *ANET*, line 59, 5,

https://archive.org/stream/Pritchard1950ANET_20160815/Pritchard_1950_ANET#page/n29/mode/2up. Another translation for “Ptah was satisfied” is “Ptah rested.”

²⁷ “The Creation Epic” (*Enuma Elish*), *ANET*, tablet 1:35–40, 61,

https://archive.org/stream/Pritchard1950ANET_20160815/Pritchard_1950_ANET#page/n85/mode/2up.

²⁸ Walton, *Genesis*, 150.

²⁹ “The Creation Epic” (*Enuma Elish*), *ANET*, 6:8, 68,

https://archive.org/stream/Pritchard1950ANET_20160815/Pritchard_1950_ANET#page/n93/mode/2up.

³⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 143.

³¹ E. A. Speiser, trans., “Creation of Man by the Mother Goddess,” in *ANET*, obv. 1–9, 99,

https://archive.org/stream/Pritchard1950ANET_20160815/Pritchard_1950_ANET#page/n123/mode/2up.

³² Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 53.

³³ Walton, *Genesis*, 150.

³⁴ “The Creation Epic” (*Enuma Elish*), in *ANET*, tablet 6:47–65, 68–9. Italics mine.

https://archive.org/stream/Pritchard1950ANET_20160815/Pritchard_1950_ANET#page/n93/mode/2up.

³⁵ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 143.

³⁶ Matthews, Chavalas, and Walton, *IVPBBCOT*, Gen 2:3.

³⁷ Matthews, Chavalas, and Walton, *IVPBBCOT*, Gen 2:3.

and the temple (cf. Gen 1:31 with Exod 39:43; Gen 2:1 with Exod 39:32; Gen 2:2 with Exod 40:33; and Gen 2:3 with Exod 39:43).

The glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle, the temple, and all the earth (Exod 40:34–35; 1 Ki 8:8–13; Isa 6:1–3). Echoing Gen 1, the description of the construction of the tabernacle centers upon seven distinct commands (Exod 25:1; Exod 30:11, 17, 22, 34; Exod 31:1, 12). Solomon’s temple was built in seven years and dedicated in the seventh month during a seven-day festival (1 Ki 6:38; 1 Ki 8:1–2, 65).³⁸

In ANE literature, taking seven days to build or dedicate a temple occurs often. According to poetry about Baal and Anath, “On the seventh d[ay], the fire dies down in the house, the f[la]me in the palace. The silver turns into blocks, the gold is turned into bricks...Baal exults, ‘My h[ouse] have I built of silver. My palace, indeed, of gold.’”³⁹

Similarly, when Gudea built a Sumerian temple, the construction lasted seven days: “It took one year to bring the great stones in slabs and it took another year to fashion them, although not even two or three days did he let pass idly. Then it needed a day's work to set up each one but by the seventh day he had set them all up around the house.”⁴⁰

In the ANE, temples are places for divine rest, sanctuaries of sacred space (Lev 19:30; 2 Chron 6:41–7:1).⁴¹ For God to inhabit his place of rest signifies his enthronement, taking his rightful place as the sovereign ruler of the universe (Ps 93; Ps 104:1–4).⁴² Thus the Lord’s seventh day continues even now, for he still inhabits his temple (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16; 1 Pet 2:5).⁴³ In this epilogue of creation, the phrase “evening and morning” does not occur,⁴⁴ affirming that the Lord remains in his state of Sabbath rest.

a) Read Gen 2:1–2. How are the biblical concepts of God resting like and different from the ANE texts? What evidence do we have that the whole cosmos is God’s temple?

The Lord Blesses the Seventh Day

b) Gen 2:3: Moses wrote, “Then God blessed the seventh day and set it apart (*qadash*) because on it he ceased from labor, from all of his work which God created in order to make [the cosmos].” The apex of creation occurred on the seventh day, rather than taking place on the sixth. Prior to this, the Lord called all the days “good” (*tov*) or “very (*meod*) good.” In contrast,

³⁸ Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, 60–1.

³⁹ “Poems About Baal and Anath,” in *ANET*, 6:131–8, 134,

https://archive.org/stream/Pritchard1950ANET_20160815/Pritchard_1950_ANET#page/n159/mode/2up.

⁴⁰ Oxford University Faculty of Oriental Studies, “The Building of Ningirsu’s Temple (Gudea, Cylinders A and B),” in *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*, 617–22 <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section2/tr217.htm>.

⁴¹ Walton, *Genesis*, 151.

⁴² Walton, *Genesis*, 148–9.

⁴³ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Vol. 1* (trans. James Anderson; Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 157.

⁴⁴ Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 68.

God designated the seventh day as “holy” (qadosh).⁴⁵ The verb form also means⁴⁶ “set apart,” “observed as holy,” “consecrated,” “honored as sacred,” and “dedicated.”⁴⁷

Interestingly, “the seventh day” is one of only two days of creation which features a definite article (“the”). A review of the fifty-nine occurrences of the word “seventh” in the five books written by Moses indicates this number always appears with a definite article. All but three of these references concern the Sabbath, release from servitude, or some aspect of priestly service.⁴⁸ Therefore, a definite article most likely appears in association with this day because God meant for us to follow his pattern of Sabbath rest on every seventh day. Although the cosmos does not center around people, the Lord instituted the Sabbath for the benefit of humanity.⁴⁹

This participation of humans in God’s rest is a unique concept within the Ancient Near East (ANE).⁵⁰ Israel appears to have first observed the Sabbath during their time in the wilderness (Exod 16:22–30).⁵¹ By consecrating the Sabbath, the Lord divided days into ordinary time and holy time, creating a dichotomy between days of work and of rest (Exod 20:8–11).⁵² Those who observe it shall enjoy God’s blessing.⁵³

The number seven was important throughout the ANE. Mesopotamians restricted what could be done on the 7th, 14th, 19th, 21st, and 28th days of each month. However, unlike in Israel, the day with the greatest prohibitions was the nineteenth. Ugaritic Tablet 3, which dates from Moses’s era, specifies certain rituals and sacrifices for each day, with special emphasis upon the seventh.⁵⁴

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the protagonist met an ancient man who survived the flood. He recalled:

“Six days and [six] nights blows the flood wind, as the south-storm sweeps the land. When the seventh day arrived, the flood[-carrying] south-storm subsided... The sea grew quiet, the tempest was still, the flood ceased.” After the ship ran aground, “When the seventh day arrived... Then I let out [all the people and animals] to the four winds and offered a sacrifice... Seven and seven cult-vessels I set up.”⁵⁵

According to the Ugaritic Legend of King Keret, the monarch marched for six days and arrived at his enemy’s city at dawn on the seventh. After six days of battle, the besieged king made a pact with Keret in exchange for plunder. Keret fell asleep and awoke on the seventh day to sacrifice a lamb and a dove to El, the god who helped him.⁵⁶

⁴⁵ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 143.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Vol. 1*, 157.

⁴⁷ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, “שִׁבְעִי” (*qadhosh*), *BDB*, 872, <https://archive.org/stream/hebrewenglishlex00browuoft#page/872/mode/2up>.

⁴⁸ Result of a word search of “שִׁבְעִי” (*shibiiy*) in Logos 6.

⁴⁹ Walton, *Genesis*, 152.

⁵⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 143.

⁵¹ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 36.

⁵² Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, 143.

⁵³ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 36.

⁵⁴ Cyrus Herzyl Gordon, “The Biblical Sabbath: Its Origin and Observance in the Ancient Near East,” *Judaism* 31, no. 1 (Winter 1982): 12–6, 13–4, <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/4879351/biblical-sabbath-origin-observance-ancient-near-east>.

⁵⁵ E. A. Speiser, trans., “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” in *ANET*, 11:127–9, 145, 155–7, 94, https://archive.org/stream/Pritchard1950ANET_20160815/Pritchard_1950_ANET#page/n119/mode/2up.

⁵⁶ H. L. Ginsberg, trans., “The Legend of King Keret,” in *ANET*, tablet 3, 144, https://archive.org/stream/Pritchard1950ANET_20160815/Pritchard_1950_ANET#page/n169/mode/2up.

However, within the ANE, only Israel set the seventh day apart for rest.⁵⁷ Ceasing from daily activities on the Sabbath is a sign of God’s covenant with his people (Exod 31:12–17).⁵⁸ In fact, God’s pattern of work in Gen 1:1–2:3 forms the basis of the fourth commandment (Exod 20:8–11).⁵⁹ Since God ceased from his work, so should those he created in his image.⁶⁰ When we keep the Sabbath, we assert that God reigns over the cosmos and we do not. Taking a day off from working to provide for our needs enables us to regain the Lord’s perspective of life (Isa 58:13–14).⁶¹ Furthermore, by ceasing to subdue the earth on every seventh day, we confess our allegiance to God.⁶²

Although the Bible stipulates which sacrifices the Lord commanded Israel to offer on the Sabbath (Num 28:9–10; Ezek 46:4–5), we have little information concerning what one was to do on that day of the week. Most of what we know centers upon what we should not do. In ancient Israel, worship does not appear to be the Sabbath’s most important aspect.⁶³

By the time of Christ, Sabbath observance on the seventh day of the week included the reading and discussion of the Old Testament (Mark 1:21; Luke 4:14–21; Acts 13:13–15; Acts 15:21; Acts 17:1–3).⁶⁴ First Corinthians, a letter written during 54–55 AD,⁶⁵ indicates that gentile congregations met together for worship, not on the Sabbath, but on Sunday. This practice originated in recognition that Jesus had risen “on the first day of the week,” making it the Lord’s Day (Matt 28:1; 1 Cor 16:1–2; Acts 20:7).⁶⁶

b) Read Gen 2:3. Why did God cease from work on the seventh day? What are the implications of the Lord’s blessing of the Sabbath and making it holy for our lives? Why did gentile congregations meet on the first day of the week, rather than on the seventh?

Lord of the Sabbath

2) Matt 12:1–8: By setting apart a holy day every week, God provides us with rest from our normal daily activities.⁶⁷ When we observe the Sabbath, we not only obey the Lord’s command, we behave as he did. In this passage, Jesus described God’s motive in mandating a day of rest.⁶⁸

⁵⁷ Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 71.

⁵⁸ Walton, *Genesis*, 153.

⁵⁹ Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 71.

⁶⁰ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 36.

⁶¹ Walton, *Genesis*, 152–4.

⁶² Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 67.

⁶³ Walton, *Genesis*, 153–4.

⁶⁴ Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 71.

⁶⁵ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 3.

⁶⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, Rev. Ed.* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 899–900.

⁶⁷ John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1998), 289.

⁶⁸ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 438.

The Lord never intended the Sabbath to become a burden but a day of delighting in his provision and blessing (Exod 20:8–11; Isa 56:4–7).

Religious Jews recognized that the exile had occurred due to their failure to observe the Mosaic law faithfully (Deut 30:1–10; Neh 9:26–31). By the time of Christ, Sabbath observance separated the Jewish people from other religious groups. However, various sects within Judaism debated over what constituted work. Therefore, the Pharisees developed an extensive set of stipulations as a guide for people to follow.⁶⁹

Two major sections of the Mishnah (*m. Shabbat* and *m. Erubin*) spell out these guidelines in thirty-four chapters of excruciating detail. By putting “a fence around the law” (*m. Avot* 1:1), the Pharisees sought to prevent people from violating the actual command. They left nothing to private interpretation,⁷⁰ banning these thirty-nine categories of work on the Sabbath:

“To sow, to plough, to mow, to gather into sheaves, to thrash, to winnow, to sift [corn], to grind, to sieve, to knead, to bake, to shear wool, to wash wool, to card, to dye, to spin, to warp, to shoot two threads, to weave two threads, to cut and tie two threads, to tie, to untie, to sew two stitches, to tear thread with intent to sew two stitches, to catch a stag [game], to slaughter it, to skin, to salt [cure] a hide, to singe a hide, to tan, to cut up a skin, to write two letters, to erase with intent to write two letters, to build, to demolish, to extinguish fire, to kindle fire, to hammer, to carry [or convey] from one [place] into another (*m. Shabbat* 7.2).⁷¹

Christ disparaged these types of onerous regulations in Matt 12 and elsewhere in the gospels, not the Sabbath itself. He focused upon the intent of God’s commandment to observe a day of rest.⁷² In fact, shortly before this confrontation Christ invited people to come to him to receive true rest (Matt 11:28–30).⁷³ The rabbinic additions to the law made the Sabbath a burden, not a blessing.⁷⁴ When religious practices become rigid codes of conduct, they often contradict the purpose of God by failing to express love and concern for the needs of others.⁷⁵ Since Jesus censured the Pharisees’ entire industry of making new rules, and thereby drew away their followers, the leaders of that Jewish sect wanted to dispose of him.⁷⁶

This passage begins with Jesus and his disciples taking a Sabbath’s day stroll along a path through a field. The law permitted those who were hungry to eat from other people’s crops. It even stated that farmers should not reap the edges of a field to provide food for the poor (Deut. 23:24–25; Deut 24:19–22).⁷⁷

However, the Pharisees considered picking grain equivalent to harvesting (Exod 34:21). To make the grain edible, the disciples rubbed it between their hands. That constituted threshing, according to these opponents of Christ (Luke 6:1–2).⁷⁸ One Pharisee wrote, “Whoever carries out [any article of] food equal to [the size of] a dried fig is guilty. And victuals may be computed

⁶⁹Wilkins, *Matthew*, 438.

⁷⁰R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 455–6.

⁷¹D. A. Sola and M. J. Raphall, trans., *Eighteen Treatises from the Mishna* (London: Sherwood, Golbert, and Piper, 1843), *m. Shabbat* 7.2, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/etm/index.htm>.

⁷²France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 456.

⁷³Wilkins, *Matthew*, 438.

⁷⁴France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 454–5.

⁷⁵Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1998), 331.

⁷⁶France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 456.

⁷⁷Wilkins, *Matthew*, 439.

⁷⁸France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 457.

together, as the legal quantity is the same for all; excepting peels, [shells], kernels, and stalks; [likewise] bran, fine or coarse” (*m. Shabbat* 7.4).⁷⁹

That Pharisees loitered around a Galilean wheat field on the Sabbath seems quite unusual.⁸⁰ Due to increasing tensions over Jesus’s ministry, they were almost certainly waiting for an opportunity to accuse him of violating the law. “When the Pharisees saw [this], they said ‘Behold! Your disciples are doing what is not authorized to do on the Sabbath.’” In their view, “what is authorized” applied to both explicit Old Testament (OT) commands and the Mishnah.⁸¹

Although it appears that Jesus was not participating in this activity,⁸² the Pharisees addressed him because a teacher was responsible for the behavior of his disciples.⁸³ They regarded this as Jesus’s failure to train his devotees.⁸⁴ Instead of discussing the dietary requirements of his followers, Christ replied based upon his authority to interpret the law.⁸⁵

Jesus did not chide his disciples. In fact, he used two analogies to defend them against the charge of lawlessness.⁸⁶ “But he said to them, ‘Have you not read what David did when he hungered and those with him, how he entered into the house of God, and the bread of presentation they ate, which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but only for the priests?’” (1 Sam 21:1–6). In that culture—which focused upon maintaining honor and avoiding shame—Jesus highly insulted the experts by asking whether they had read the OT.⁸⁷

Initially, it seems that David’s actions had no relation to the seventh day of the week.⁸⁸ However, the priests ate and replaced the twelve loaves of consecrated bread on every Sabbath (Lev 24:5–9).⁸⁹ Jesus also noted that David entered the sanctuary, a location strictly forbidden to anyone but a Levite (Num 3:5–10).⁹⁰ Although they both acted unlawfully, the OT condemned neither David nor the priest.⁹¹ Abimelech recognized David as a man anointed by God who needed his help.⁹² Therefore, Christ asserted that the law exists to serve God’s people, not for God’s people to serve the law.⁹³

Jesus then delivered another analogy, “Or have you not read in the law that, ‘On the Sabbath, the priests in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and are innocent?’” Butchering animals and replacing ceremonial loaves of bread both constitute “work” (Num 28:1–2, 9–10). The Babylonian Talmud asserts that sacrificial service supersedes the Sabbath (*b. Shabbat*, 132b). Since the law requires the priests’ activity, they remain guiltless, just as with circumcision (John 7:23–24).⁹⁴

⁷⁹Sola and Raphall, trans., *Eighteen Treatises from the Mishna*, Shabbat 7.4. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/etm/index.htm>.

⁸⁰Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 351.

⁸¹Wilkins, *Matthew*, 439.

⁸²Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 328.

⁸³France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 457–8.

⁸⁴Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 355.

⁸⁵France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 457.

⁸⁶Wilkins, *Matthew*, 439.

⁸⁷Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 355.

⁸⁸Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 329.

⁸⁹Wilkins, *Matthew*, 439–40.

⁹⁰France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 458.

⁹¹Wilkins, *Matthew*, 440.

⁹²France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 459.

⁹³Wilkins, *Matthew*, 440.

⁹⁴France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 459–60.

At this point, Jesus employed a traditional form of Jewish debate known as a “how much more” argument.⁹⁵ “But I say to you” drew attention to his imminent declaration and asserted his authority.⁹⁶ Overstating how shocking Christ’s words were to his original audience would be difficult.⁹⁷ He proclaimed, “But I say to you, than the temple, something greater is here.”⁹⁸

For Israel, the temple was much more than a place of worship. God met with his people there, and it was a powerful symbol of their national identity. Under Roman rule, its priestly administration was the only form of self-government the Jewish people possessed. They considered threatening the temple treason (Matt 26:59–62).⁹⁹

Although the word “something” could refer to Jesus himself, Christ was likely speaking of his presence and ministry with his disciples. They were ushering in a new era in the kingdom of God (Matt 1:23; 1 Cor 3:16–17; 1 Pet 2:5–6). Since the Lord permitted David and his men to do what was unlawful, he allowed the actions of the Son of David and his disciples as well (Matt 22:41–46).¹⁰⁰

Jesus then quoted the Greek translation of Hosea 6:6 in a way which implied that the Pharisees knew the verse. He said, “But if you had known what this means, ‘Mercy I desire and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.” By declaring his disciples “innocent,” Jesus asserted that the Pharisees erroneously interpreted the law. They found fault where God saw none (Matt 9:10–13), for mercy takes precedence over conformity to external regulations (Mark 2:27; Matt 23:23).¹⁰¹ Indeed, God’s mercy prevented him from striking dead the priests who served on the Sabbath.¹⁰²

Christ concluded with another startling announcement which conveyed his authority and his identity.¹⁰³ He asserted, “For Lord of the Sabbath is the Son of Man.” The title “Son of Man” alludes to Dan 7:13–14. Therefore, Jesus affirmed that the Father had given him authority over all people. Since he was already Lord,¹⁰⁴ he determined how to adhere to the Sabbath (Matt 5:17). God intended the seventh day to bring rest and rejoicing. Thus, his disciples did not violate it by satisfying their hunger.¹⁰⁵

So, do we as people living under the new covenant of freedom from the law have to observe the Sabbath (Rom 7:4–6)?¹⁰⁶ Paul clarified that whether and how one keeps the Sabbath depends upon individual conscience (Col 2:16; Rom 14:5–6).¹⁰⁷ The time which God set apart as holy serves as his gift to his representatives on earth, not as a burden.¹⁰⁸ Just as he designed the rest of creation for humanity’s sake, so he made the Sabbath.¹⁰⁹ Despite the many benefits of

⁹⁵ Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 356.

⁹⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 299.

⁹⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 460.

⁹⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 329–30.

⁹⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 460.

¹⁰⁰ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 329–30.

¹⁰¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 461–2.

¹⁰² Wilkins, *Matthew*, 441.

¹⁰³ Wilkins, *Matthew*, 441.

¹⁰⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 462.

¹⁰⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 330–1.

¹⁰⁶ Walton, *Genesis*, 158.

¹⁰⁷ Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 72.

¹⁰⁸ Walton, *Genesis*, 158.

¹⁰⁹ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 38.

Sabbath observance, no one should be coerced into keeping it.¹¹⁰

Even in rest, the Lord continues to create (John 5:15–17).¹¹¹ Since creation naturally flows from him, he never intended for us to do absolutely nothing on one day of the week. While gathering for worship is a great idea, we can do even more to express our appreciation for all that God has done for us (Heb 10:23–25; Heb 13:15–16). This enables us to creatively observe the Sabbath, reflecting our love and reverence for the Lord, and extending his kingdom throughout the earth.¹¹²

For Christians, the Sabbath comprises many things. It is a day of rest; a day of victory; a day of worship; and a day of hope, as we anticipate our ultimate rest in the Lord’s presence. In a sense, God created all the other days of the week to usher in the seventh day.¹¹³

Read Matt 12:1–8. Why were the Pharisees’ interpretation of Sabbath regulations in error? What made Christ’s statements so provocative? Why did God institute the Sabbath? How do you think we should observe it?

Entering God’s Rest

3) Heb 4:1–13: This passage provides a stunning example of repetition yielding thematic unity. By repeating the word “rest” with slight alterations, the author of Hebrews emphasized the importance of entry into God’s rest.¹¹⁴ These two paragraphs occur after a description of the Israelites in Moses’s day. They had failed to enter the promised land due to their unbelief that God would safely lead them there (Num 14:28–35).

The Lord has prepared his place of eternal “rest” since the seventh day of creation (Gen 2:2).¹¹⁵ Those who received the book of Hebrews suffered from persecution (Heb 13:3, 13). Therefore, knowledge of God’s place of rest gave them the hope they needed to endure.¹¹⁶

a) Read Heb 4:1–13. What promise still stands? Why did the promise given to those who were delivered from Egypt do them no good? How can you avoid their fate?

¹¹⁰ Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 72.

¹¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, 69.

¹¹² Walton, *Genesis*, 159.

¹¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, 70.

¹¹⁴ David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 153.

¹¹⁵ Gareth L. Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 197.

¹¹⁶ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 245.

Obtaining Eternal Redemption

b) Heb 9:11–14: The second half of verse 12 says, “By his own blood he entered once for all the Most Holy Place, obtaining eternal redemption.” The true, spiritual rest of the Lord, in which he cleanses us from sin, cannot be entered by our effort but by applying the work of Christ (2 Cor 5:17–21).¹¹⁷

Read Heb 9:11–14. How does a person apply the work of Christ to enter God’s rest? Is that something which you have experienced? What difference has it made in your life

¹¹⁷George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 155.