

# The End of Days

## The Theological Relevance of Creation and Sabbath for the End Time

DISCUSSIONS ABOUND in almost every corridor about ‘the end of days.’ The issue is covered in books, movies, magazine articles, and television shows, as well as in the rise of cults and cult suicides. The present longing for God’s coming is only one more step in an already awakened interest in the Sacred that occurred in the nineties, beginning with John Dominic Crossan’s *The Historical Jesus* (1991), continuing with *Time Magazine’s* Are the Bible’s Stories True? (1995), and ending with *Newsweek’s* 2000 Years of Jesus (1999).

That people are anticipating God’s ‘second coming’ has also been documented. In a poll commissioned by *U.S. News and World Report* in 1994, it was six out of ten. According to a poll conducted by the Associated Press in 1997, it was one in four Christian adults or about twenty-six million people. In one of the more recent, ‘The Way the World Ends’ by *Newsweek* in 1999, forty percent of Americans said that they believe the world will end as it is described in the Book of Revelation. In response to such interest, PBS’ *Frontline* ran its two-part look at Apocalypse or the Book of Revelation in December 1999.

That people are anticipating God’s ‘Second Coming’ is correct in the sense that what is expected is God’s ‘second personal return to the earth’ since the incarnation some two thousand years ago. More precisely, however, what is anticipated is God’s ‘Final Coming.’ In a biblical view, God is an active God, a God whose being flows, moves, and reaches out toward humanity every moment of every day (Ps 104; 139). Many have read the “Footprints in the Sand” or had it read to them. It concludes by saying that the two sets of footprints turned to one, referring to God carrying us when we were unable to walk ourselves. The truth, however, is not that God carries us when we are unable to walk ourselves, but that we have been carried night and day every moment of our existence.

The anticipation of ‘the end of days’ is not a misguided or misplaced belief. It is real and it has biblical roots in the larger context of God’s creation. The term ‘creation’ recognizes God’s creation in its totality from beginning to end. Important for this interpretation is the use of the Hebrew verb *bara*, which means ‘to create’ or ‘to initiate something new.’ As used in the Old Testament, the verb *bara* has God, *and only God*, as its subject, i.e., *bara* only refers to divine activity, never to what human hands can create.

The God who creates (*bara*) ‘in the beginning’ the heavens and the earth (Ge 1.1) is also the God who creates ‘in history.’ The people of Israel saw themselves as having been ‘created’ and ‘delivered’ by God: “I am the LORD, your Holy One, who created you” (Isa 43.1, 15) and “who created your salvation” (45.8). The Hebrew verb for ‘create’ is again *bara*, meaning that God is the source of life and salvation.

And finally, ‘God will create the new heavens and the new earth’ (65.17). The verb for ‘create’ is once again *bara*. This means it is creation *in the beginning*, creation *in history*, and creation *in the end-time* taken together that make up the biblical view of God’s creation (Jurgen Moltmann develops this view of ‘continuous creation’ quite extensively in his book *God in Creation*).

The tendency for too long was to discuss creation only in the context of Genesis 1.1–3.24. Further still, the tendency was to view human beings as the high point of creation. Both views are now widely recognized as having come far short in their understanding of God’s creation. The story of creation-in-the-beginning is not six days but seven: “By the seventh day God had finished, so on this seventh day God rested, blessing it and making it holy” (Ge 2.1-3). The culmination of creation-in-the-beginning is not the creation of human beings but God’s *rest*.

Although the word ‘Sabbath’ is not used here, the Hebrew verb translated ‘rest’ is the origin of the noun Sabbath. Finally, it cannot go unnoticed that in the story of creation-in-the-beginning each day was followed by night except the seventh day, making it a ‘Sabbath-without-end.’ In this way God’s rest in the beginning looks forward to creation’s promised final rest.

The God who creates the heavens and the earth in the beginning also creates in history a people through whom God intends to recover a creation gone awry. Israel’s faith in God did not take root in the Genesis creation story and then move on to Moses and the Exodus. It is the opposite that is true. Reflection on God’s acts in a covenant history with Israel is what gave rise to their faith in creation-in-the-beginning. What links the two is the Sabbath. Exodus 20.8-11 connects keeping the Sabbath with creation as it is described in Genesis, while Deuteronomy 5.15 connects the Sabbath with Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. By linking the Sabbath with the ‘God of creation’ on the one hand (Ex 20.8-11) and the ‘deliverance of God’s people’ on the other (Dt 5.15), the biblical writers emphasize that the God who creates an alternative community in history is the same God who created in the beginning.

The Sabbath that God celebrates with creation in the beginning finds its expression in history through three practices. The most familiar and most readily acknowledged practice was that of observing the weekly Sabbath. The weekly Sabbath is next extended to the land: “For six years sow your fields, but the seventh year the land is to have a Sabbath of rest” (Lev 25.1-7). A later application, according to Deuteronomy 15.1-11, even included the canceling of debt and care for the poor with the land’s Sabbath. And finally, ‘after counting off seven sabbaths of years or a period of forty-nine years, there was to be the Year of Jubilee,’ which meant the cancellation of debts, the liberation of slaves, and the return of land to its original family owners (Lev 25.8-55).

What is less familiar in the Sabbath practices is their inclusive nature. The practices of sabbath-keeping were the historical experiences of God's covenant with the 'whole of life.' God's covenant with Noah makes this point (Ge 9.1-17): "I make my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature – the birds, the livestock, and the wild animals" (vv. 8-9). In short – 'I make my covenant with *every living creature* on earth' (vv. 10, 12, 15, 16, 17). This is why the whole Israelite community participated in the Sabbaths, including the adults, children and servants, the animals and the land in their care, and the strangers in their community. In this way a Sabbath kept in history recalled or remembered God's Sabbath in the beginning when all of creation rested with God and in God's presence.

Any attempt to make 'sabbath-keeping' in history merely a private, personal experience, as well as a strictly human experience, is rendered one-sided by the practices of sabbath-keeping. The intent is not to suggest that Old Testament Sabbath practices be replicated, but that we develop and nurture a 'Sabbath-consciousness,' or what Jeffrey Sobosan called 'the cherishing of life'.

What emerges are Sabbath practices that have important spiritual, humanitarian, economical, and ecological implications, and thereby, political implications. 'Spiritual' because sabbath-keeping is a sign of God's covenant with creation; 'humanitarian' because of God's concern for the insiders and the outsiders, the haves and the have-nots, the church and the unchurched; 'economical' because of God's assurance to the poor for what is called the living wage; 'ecological' because of God's own respect for the land, water, wildlife and plant life; and therefore 'political,' because of the public relevance of sabbath-keeping for all of life.

In not so subtle terms 'sabbath-keeping' is about *justice*, about well being for the whole of life. Sabbath keeping is about justice, because each has a responsibility to the other, as well as a relationship to the other. And who is the other? It can be anyone or any-thing, friend or foe, animate or inanimate. Each intentional act of self-giving love on behalf of another acts as a foretaste in time for what is promised beyond time. Similarly the giving of the land to Israel was a 'partial fulfillment' of God's promised rest. Partial because what is ultimately promised is an eternal Sabbath-without-end when God will be 'all in all' (Heb 4.1-11; I Co 15.28).

Creation in history not only looks back to what was previously created in the beginning, but it also looks toward God's final coming. Many believe that we are on the threshold of Jesus' return. Psalm 90.4 and Second Peter 3.8 both say that 'a thousand years is as a day unto the LORD.' The story of creation can then be understood this way: the seven days of creation in the beginning represent a seven thousand year period in history. The first four days correspond to the four thousand years of the Old Testament or the time of Abraham and Sarah to Jesus'

birth. The next two days, days five and six, correspond to the two thousand years since Christ's birth. The seventh day then corresponds to Christ's 'thousand-year reign' spoken of in Revelation chapter twenty.

God's concern with these specific 6000 years does not mean that God's creation is only 6000 years old. It simply means that God has set aside these specific years as the time when God will bring God's intention for creation to its completion. Whether such an interpretation is accurate or not, this is what many today expect. The signs, they say, are all around us: the formation of the European union of nations, the increase in natural disasters, the possibility of an economic collapse of Russia which may lead to a reunion of its nations, and the state of affairs currently happening in Israel with the Palestinians.

Make no mistake, however it happens, the Bible clearly expects 'the end of days.' The end of days, however, is not the end of the world, but the end of all worldly empires. The destruction of empires that also included Israel is 'the great reversal of fortunes' forecasted as God's judgment on injustice (Lk 1.46-55). It is not a sin to have wealth, but to achieve wealth, as well as retain it, through acts of violence or dishonest gain is to invite 'the day of the LORD' or destruction (Isa 2.1-22; 34.1-8; Joel 2.30-31; Mt 24.1ff.; Rev 6.12-17).

So the end of the world is a promised end to 'all worldly empires,' not the destruction of the world (earth) itself. This is why in the Book of Revelation that 'the beast out of the sea' and 'the beast out of the earth' are depicted as coming from below, while 'the new Jerusalem comes down from heaven' (Rev 13.1-18; 21.1-3). This is also why when praying the Lord's Prayer we say, "May God's kingdom *come on earth* as it is in heaven."

The completion of 'creation in history' has already begun with the resurrection of Jesus. While the resurrection of Jesus is a powerful event, it is not the climax of history. The symbol of 'eternal life' means that Christ is 'the first-born of many brothers and sisters' (Ro 8.29; Eph 1.5; Col 1.18). So as important as the resurrection of Jesus is to faith, it is only a partial truth, which if left alone becomes a distortion of Easter. Easter is inadequate without its completing event.

The hope of God's creation-in-the-end-time is the promise of 'a new heaven and new earth' that embraces God's whole creation. Reconciliation is not just for the human being, but has cosmic dimensions, i.e., "the whole creation groans and travails for its promised fulfillment" (Ro 8.22; cf. Ro 8.21; Col 1.20; II Pe 3.13). So it is together *with* the earth, not *apart from*, that we will be brought to completion.

We are always quick to say, and rightly so, that no one can know the year, day or hour that the Messiah will return. Some say, however, we can know the month. Two of the three major feasts in the Old Testament were fulfilled with specific first century historical events, e.g., the Feast of Passover corresponds to Jesus' crucifixion and the Feast of Weeks corresponds to the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1 & 2).

The fulfillment of both occurred in their specific Old Testament time periods for those celebrations: the Feast of Passover in March/April and the Feast of Weeks fifty days later in May/June.

Has the Feast of Ingathering been fulfilled? Its historical time of celebration is Sept/Oct. Some argue that while the new creation has begun with the resurrection, it is yet to be completed. What was begun with the resurrection will be consummated, then, with the actual fulfillment of the Feast of Ingathering in Sept/Oct of an unknown year. Another interesting parallel is the fact that preceding this feast is a Sabbath of rest commemorated with trumpet blasts (Lev. 23.23-25). Paul then writes in his first letter to the Thessalonians, “For the Lord himself ... with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first” (I Thess 4.16).

Finally, the Feast of Ingathering is completed on the eighth day, following seven days, with a Sacred Assembly which completed the three Old Testament feasts. “After that, we who are still alive,” continues Paul, “will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so will be with the Lord forever” (I Thess 4.17). The first day of creation-in-the-beginning following the seven days depicted in Genesis 1 is in actuality the eighth day of creation-in-the-beginning. David was the eighth son of Jesse (I Sa 16.10-11) and Jesus a descendant of David. Jesus was raised on Sunday, making the first day of God’s new creation the eighth day.

In Revelation 20.1–22.5, the new heaven and the new earth presuppose the end to all worldly empires, which is symbolized by the absence of the sea (21.1). ‘The coming down of the New Jerusalem’ is a visual image of the believers’ union in Christ (21.3). As promised, “what we had only before seen dimly, we now see face-to-face” (22.4). The absence of ‘night’ (21.25; 22.5) corresponds to the absence of night with God’s first Sabbath-rest in the beginning. In this way God’s rest on the seventh day in the beginning anticipated creation’s destination and fulfillment as a ‘Sabbath-rest-without-end.’ And it is with this final coming of God that the earth shall be baptized or fully immersed in God’s presence when God shall be ‘all in all’ (I Co. 15.28).