

The Sabbath

The first Creation account ends with the capstone of the Priestly version of the origins of the world, the institution of the Sabbath and the day of rest:

“Thus the heavens and the earth and all their array were completed. Since on the seventh day God was finished with the work he had been doing, he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had undertaken. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation. Such is the story of the heavens and the earth at their creation.” Genesis 2:1-4

The end piece of the first Creation account draws our attention to the overall structure of what we have just read, namely that creation proceeded in an orderly manner over six days with a divinely mandated seventh day of rest at the end. Before we examine the meaning of the Sabbath, a few words need to be said about the significance of the structure of the first Creation account that we see throughout this first chapter of Genesis. One of the chief pieces of evidence that scholars use when examining the Book of Genesis to show that we are dealing with a Priestly writer (someone well educated in the law of the Jewish people and writing during the time of the Babylonian captivity from 587 BC – 532 BC) is the fact that he has indeed structured the account into distinct periods or days and that he has ended his account with a small piece of Torah (the laws of the Jews taken from the first five books of the Bible). If we look ahead in the Bible to the Book of Exodus and the revelation of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai, we see the following:

“Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day. Six days may you labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord, your God ...In six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord has blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” Exodus 20:8-11

It is not by accident that what we read in Exodus and what we read in Genesis 2:1-4 are similar as the Priestly writer in all probability composed both accounts. As we saw in our overview this stems from the belief that the Priestly writer (the final compiler of the first five books of the bible) gave the overall order to the entire collection.

Looking back on the history of his people, the Jews, he saw the institution of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai as *the* definitive pronouncement of the Lord God. As such, what God said on Mt. Sinai informed the way the Jews perceived everything in their lives, including their history. What God revealed on that mountain to Moses was the eternal law and, as such, stretched back in time to the very beginnings of creation in the mind of the Priestly writer and his community.

This first Creation account reflects the revelation given on Mt. Sinai, looks back to the beginning of all things, and sees the eternal word of God in action. We must remember that the first individuals to compile the sacred texts, which became the Old Testament, did so out of a desire to explain their relationship to God, to answer the question of who they as a people were, and what was their relationship to the Lord. For the Jews, especially the Priestly writer, this question could best be answered through the lens of the Torah, the Law. The Torah or Law defined them as a people, guided their future, and most importantly, gave structure to all that had gone before.

The pronouncement of the Sabbath in the Creation account is also a good place for us to take stock of the vision of God that we find in Genesis 1:1-2:4. It is very important to pause and review a little at this point because we are on the verge of receiving a different portrait very soon, namely, in the second Creation account which complements the first. The God of this first Creation account is majestic and powerful. He creates with His Word, He blesses, and He gives commands. The vision we get of God in this first Creation account is one of an omnipotent being who brings about Creation in a decidedly ordered way, starting with inanimate objects, working up to the animals and culminating in His greatest creation, mankind, upon whom He places the responsibility of all that has gone before. It is important to remember all this, especially as we investigate what is to follow.

What is the Sabbath?

The word Sabbath is the English translation of the Hebrew *Shabbat*, derived from the Hebrew verb meaning to cease or stop, a word which early on in the tradition was associated with the seventh day of the week. For the Jews, *Shabbat* starts on Friday at sundown and ends on Saturday when the first stars come out. The observance of the Shabbat for the Jews recalls many events in their history. In addition to the day of rest mandated upon Mt. Sinai (Exodus 20:8-11), and the day of rest the Lord God took after the works of creation were accomplished (Genesis 2:1-4), it also reminds them of their delivery from Egypt and the Passover remembrance:

“For remember that you too were once slaves in Egypt, and the Lord, your God, brought you from there with his strong hand and outstretched arm. That is why the Lord, your God, has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” Deuteronomy 5:15

For the Jews, therefore, the *Shabbat* has many layers of meaning spanning their entire history and spanning the entire bible. It was and continues to be one of the most important observances of their religion, an observance which brings sanctity to the last day of the week.

The Sabbath and Roman Catholicism

For Roman Catholics, however, the most significant day of the week is not the last day of the week, but the first, Sunday. Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week (remember for the Jews and first Christians the first day of the week is our Sunday) and as such this day recalls the first Creation.¹ This is where your careful reading of Genesis will indeed bear some good fruit, for you now are intimately familiar with the occurrences on the days of creation in the first Creation account. Sunday, the Lord's Day, looks back to the very beginning of time to the opening words in Sacred Scripture and draws the wonderful parallel between the creation of the world and the new creation that is ushered in by Christ's Resurrection.²

The Church Fathers and Genesis, St. Bede

Many of the Doctors of the Church, and St. Bede is the only Doctor of the Church from England, saw in the Sabbath rest in the Book of Genesis a foreshadowing of the eternal rest all those who devote themselves to the Lord will attain: "Under the law the people were ordered to work for six days and to rest on the seventh...because the Lord completed the creation of the world in six days and desisted from his work on the seventh. Mystically speaking, we are counseled by all this that those who in life devote themselves to good works for the Lord's sake are in the future led by the Lord to Sabbath, that is to eternal rest." Homilies on the Gospels 2.1-7

Sunday, the Lord's Day, is distinct from the Jewish *Shabbat* yet preserves the idea that one day of the week is reserved for the Lord. In the Roman Catholic tradition, however, the moral obligation of the day of rest initiated in the Old Testament has taken on greater obligations. From the earliest days of Christianity, Sunday, or the Lord's Day, was the day set aside not only for rest but also for communal worship. As such, this day is considered a holy day of obligation for all Roman Catholics, a day upon which all the faithful are bound to participate in the Mass.³

In the first sentence of [Genesis 2:4](#), "*Such is the story of the heavens and the earth at their creation,*" our first Creation account comes to a close. You will notice in some translations of the Book of Genesis that the phrase "the story of the heavens" is often translated as "the generations of heaven and of the earth." Keep an eye out for these phrases as you continue to read the Book of Genesis. The Priestly writer, the one who gives structure to all that we are about to read, is very fond of organizing material into story blocks which he sets apart often times by the word "generation" or "story."

¹ CCC, 2174.

² CCC, 2174.

³ CCC 2180, CIC, can. 1247.

We must leave our friend the Priestly writer for a bit as we embark upon a new story, hear a new voice, the voice of the Yahwist who is about to tell us his story of Creation. It is a wonderful Creation account which complements all we have read before; however, it is distinct from the first account. Clearly the Holy Spirit had more to say on the matter.

The Magisterium and the Sabbath

"From this follows the obligation of the cessation of work and labor on Sundays and certain festivals. This rest from labor is not to be understood as mere idleness; much less must it be an occasion of spending money and a vicious excess, as many would desire it to be; but it should be rest from labor consecrated by religion. Repose united with religious observance disposes man to forget for a while the business of this daily life, and to turn his thoughts to heavenly things and to the worship which he so strictly owes to the Eternal Deity. It is this, above all, which is the reason and motive for the Sunday rest; a rest sanctioned by God's great law of the ancient covenant, "Remember thou keep holy the Sabbath day" (Exod. xx, 8), and taught to the world by His own mysterious "rest" after the creation of man, "He rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done" (Gen 2:2)

Leo XIII, Rerum Novarum, 32

The Second Creation Account

With the beginning of the second Creation account in Genesis we begin to hear a new voice, the voice of the Yahwist. The Yahwist has a slightly different story to tell about the beginning of the world and his focus is somewhat different than what we have read before in the Priestly version of events in Genesis 1:1-2:4. For the Yahwist, the Lord is a bit more hands on, a God who gets down into the dirt, literally to "form" Adam and, from Adam, Eve. In Hebrew the word the Yahwist uses to describe how Adam is created is *yasar*, a word which is used throughout the Old Testament when describing the work of the hands. Compare this to the Priestly writer who would only talk of the Lord "creating."

In addition to a much more anthropomorphic depiction of the Lord, the Yahwist also has a decidedly different focus, namely he is much more concerned with the creation of Man and Woman than with the greater cosmological happenings of the first Creation account. As you read this second Creation account you notice that the order of Creation is quite a bit different than what we have seen. In this second Creation account, Man is made far earlier in the process sometime directly after the making of the earth and the heavens (Genesis 2:4-5) with the animals being created afterwards. The most striking change is that in this second Creation account we are told that woman was made *from* man. We are also given a foreshadowing about what will happen next in the story as the Divine Author lays out a commandment which will drive the subsequent chapters (and indeed the rest of human history):

"The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it. The Lord God gave man this order: 'You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and bad. From that tree you shall not eat; the moment you eat from it you are surely doomed to die.'" Genesis 2:15-17

For all the differences, and we will get to those differences shortly, the two accounts indeed have much in common. As with the first Creation account, there is no question as to who the Creator is, i.e. the Lord. He may go about things in a different order or different words may be used to describe how He brings about this creation, but there is no question that the creative activity belongs to the Lord and the Lord alone. Similarly, just as God gave dominion and authority to mankind in the first Creation account, Man is vested with similar authority in the second. Notice it is Man and not God who gets the honor of naming the creatures that God creates. The power of the name and consequently the power *to* name were indeed great in the ancient world. If you knew someone's name, you knew that person intimately.

Perhaps the greatest parallel and the one which has the greatest import for our study lies in what went on at the actual moment of the creation of Man. In the first Creation account we were told that mankind was made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). Here our intimate connection to God is revealed in a different way, namely, *"...the Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being."* Genesis 2:7 It is the actual breath of God which animates Man and turns him from clay into a living being, a creature with a soul. As with the first Creation account in which we were made in the image and likeness of God, in the second we are given the spirit of God.

The Church Fathers and Genesis, St. Gregory Nazianzus

The soul is the breath of God, a substance of heaven mixed with the lowest earth, a light entombed in a cave, yet wholly and unquenchable. ...He spoke, and taking some of the newly minted earth in his immortal hands made an image into which he imparted some of his own life. He sent his spirit, a beam from the invisible divinity. Dogmatic Hymns 7

Man and Woman, Two Yet One

The motivation behind God creating a Woman for Man tells you as much about God as it does about the second human. It was done out of a twofold desire that Man not be alone and that he have a suitable partner for whatever work the Lord God intended him to do in the garden (Genesis 2:18). Clearly the Divine Author indicates that a different person, a different being is being created. Yet, although they are both distinct human persons, they are also one:

"This one, at last is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called 'woman' for out of 'her man' this one has been taken. That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body." Genesis 2:23-24

You really cannot overestimate the importance of the idea of marriage in the Old Testament. First, we are dealing with an idea that is going to be brought up again and again, not only in the Book of Genesis but throughout Sacred Scripture, an idea whose origins lie before you in Genesis 2:21-24.

The sacred importance of the bond between a man and a woman that we see for the first time is emphasized by the prophets such as *Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Malachi* as well as in the *Song of Songs*. Books like *Ruth* and *Tobit* center around the idea of marriage. Finally, in the New Testament, we see how the New Covenant with Jesus Christ prepares us for the wedding feast of the lamb in [John 2:1-11](#)⁴. It is no accident that the sacred union between a man and a woman is used to describe the relationship between Christ and His Church.

The Magisterium and Marriage

*The Eucharist draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate Logos, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving. The imagery of marriage between God and Israel is now realized in a way previously inconceivable: it had meant standing in God's presence, but now it becomes union with God through sharing in Jesus' self-gift, sharing in his body and blood. The sacramental "mysticism", grounded in God's condescension towards us, operates at a radically different level and lifts us to far greater heights than anything that any human mystical elevation could ever accomplish. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 13*

What is most important about the story of this union between Man and Woman that we see for the first time in Scripture is that it is a union which 'came from the hand of the Creator.' It was something that was part of the order of Creation from the very beginning.

The Creation Story Thus Far

As we are on the verge of the story of the Fall, we need to pause and take stock of how Creation looks before the momentous actions that are about to transpire. The Garden of Eden, the place inhabited by Man and Woman, is a place created by God for his creations. The ultimate of His creations in terms of authority, are Man and Woman, i.e. humanity. This first couple has literally been made for each other and is to work together in the stewardship that is required of them as God's representatives on earth. They have been given all they need for sustenance ([Genesis 1:29](#)) and only have one directive, and that is to "*Be fertile and multiply*" [Genesis 1:28](#). The only prohibition, the only thing God has not granted to them, is access to the tree of knowledge of good and bad. With the exception of this one tree, the world and all that is in it is theirs.

⁴ CCC, 1612.

