

Sabbath Economics: 'Present Truth' in Search of a Home

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This paper explores the economic implications of the weekly Sabbath, the Sabbath Year, the Jubilee, and the Sabbath texts in the prophets. It closes by asking whether the economic portfolio of the Sabbath has a home in Seventh-day Adventist theology.

Sabbath Economics in the Weekly Sabbath

The theological errand of the Sabbath text in Genesis is easier to ascertain than its economic aspiration. The text says that God *finished*, *rested*, and *blessed* (Gen 2:1-3). These are conspicuous actions that seem deliberate and almost formal in nature. All of them have God as their subject; we are only told what *God* did. There is no mention of human obligation or human reciprocity. The centering of God and de-centering of human beings in the story is captured humorously by John Dominic Crossan. “We humans are not the climax of creation. We are the work of a late Friday afternoon, and no one does one’s best work on a late Friday afternoon—possibly not even God? No, the climax of creation is the Sabbath, when ‘on the seventh day God finished the work that God had done.’”¹

God’s original Sabbath deed sends the most important message right from the outset. “By resting on the seventh day, God is thereby shown to have entered into the time of the created order,” says Terence Fretheim.² Jürgen Moltmann writes that the God who rests and hallows the

¹ John Dominic Crossan, “Divine Violence in the Christian Bible,” in *The Bible and the American Future*, ed. Robert L. Jewett with Wayne Alloway and John G. Lacey (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 211.

² Terence E. Fretheim, *God and the World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 63.

Sabbath “adopts the community of creation as his own milieu.”³ This means that God is not walking away from what God has created, henceforth to watch the earth and human experience in a posture of detachment. These readers see the Sabbath as a signifier of God’s commitment to the world. We have, theologically, the Sabbath defined not as a divine *commandment* but as divine *commitment*. This understanding reorients the Sabbath away from the notion of a *memorial* of a past event to an experience of God’s *presence*. By the conventional function of memorials, they are an attempt to retain a sliver of the event or the person that is memorialized. In truth, however, a memorial mostly drives home the *absence* of the person. Sabbath as divine *presence* is far better than Sabbath as *memorial*—if proof is needed that the seventh day does not play at the periphery of the things that matter. Samuel Terrien contends that “[t]he reality of the presence of God stands at the center of biblical faith.”⁴ If this reality is also the center of the Sabbath, it, too, belongs at the center.

These are *theological* foundation stones. What of the economics of the Sabbath in Genesis?

First, even though the Sabbath has God at the center and thus *de-centers* human beings, it does not leave human experience in limbo. Richard Bauckham agrees with Crossan that the Sabbath is the climax of creation,⁵ and he debunks the illusion that human beings were meant “to have a controlling charge of the Earth.”⁶ With the loss of the illusory, oversized role—including the illusory, oversized role that interpreters erroneously anchor in the notion of ‘dominion’ in Genesis (Gen 1:28)—comes the rediscovery of membership in the *community*. This means

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1985), 279.

⁴ Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward A New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), xxvii.

⁵ Richard J. Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 15.

⁶ Bauckham, *Rediscovering the Community of Creation*, 5-6.

membership in the *community of creation*, as Bauckham notes. “Humans are not demi-gods with creative power, set like God above creation, but creatures among other creatures, dependent, like other creatures, on the material world of which they are part, and immersed in a web of reciprocal relationships with other creatures,” he writes.⁷ Such a Sabbath perspective brings relief and not only restraint. The economic implication is incalculable. Human beings are *providers* only in a limited sense. In the most basic sense, we are *provided for* by God, who is the great provider for all the members of the community of creation.

The idea of God as *provider* is not something that can only be inferred. It is time to read a text and to present evidence.

God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so (Gen 1:29-30).

Is this a picture of Someone who *provides*, Yes or No? Is it a representation of *community*, Yes or No? Is it a scene of *communion*, too, table fellowship for all the members of the community of creation, Yes or No? Non-human creatures are also included. As James Barr points out, the Genesis account does not envisage the idea of human beings “using the animals for meat and no terrifying consequences for the animal world.”⁸ In economic terms, worry is unnecessary; there is food security for everyone. This might well be the first economic lesson of the Sabbath.

The economy of seeds in the Genesis account of creation takes the message of provision a step further.

⁷ Bauckham, *Rediscovering the Community of Creation*, 27-28.

⁸ James Barr, “Man and Nature: The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament,” in *Ecology and Religion in History*, ed. David and Eileen Spring (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 62-63.

Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good (Gen 1:11-12).

If ‘seed’ is perceived in economic terms, what does it mean? The word occurs six times in these two verses even though translations reduce it to four times to diminish the sense of redundancy. Before the first chapter in Genesis is over, the word has appeared four more times, two more of which fall victim to pruning by the translator’s knife (Gen 1:29). In all, ‘seed’ occurs ten times in the first chapter of Genesis (Gen 1:10-11, 29). God is not creating plants only but “plants yielding seed;” God is not making fruit trees grow but “fruit with the seed in it” (Gen 1:11).⁹ We see the earth bringing forth “plants yielding seed of every kind,” and we see “trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it” (Gen 1:12).

What is the biology, theology, and economics of seeds? Do not seeds reverberate with renewal, diversity, sustainability, predictability, security, and abundance? The saying that you cannot have your cake and eat it, too, is true until you apply it to seeds. Seeds ensure that a new plant will spring up when the mother plant is eaten, and the seeds of the mother plant are often too numerous to count. Another saying holds that there is no such a thing as a free lunch. This saying is also evidence-based, but it is contradicted by the existence of seeds. Given seeds, especially as seeds are introduced in Genesis, there is such a thing as a free lunch. And free lunches have economic implications. They reduce anxiety, and they exist because there is a *Provider*. Plants and fruit trees with seeds have the connotation not only of abundance and renewal but also of gift and security. They are Lesson One of the economics of the weekly Sabbath.

⁹ Ellen Bernstein (*The Splendor of Creation: A Biblical Ecology* [Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005], 37) shows awareness of ‘seed’ as the element to which the narrator draws attention.

Perhaps we already have enough evidence to conclude that theology and economics are closely intertwined in the ideology of the Sabbath. The term *eco-theology* is familiar. We can now add the term *theo-economics*, and we will claim that both terms are at home in the most prestigious Sabbath texts in the Old Testament.

More Sabbath Economics is to come in Lesson Two, the Sabbath and the provision of manna in the exodus story. The Bible says that the people's "cry for help rose up to God" (Exod 2:23). It adds that "God heard their groaning, and *God remembered* his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Exod 2:24). This exchange happens in the context of oppression and destitution, both of which can safely be called 'economic hardship.' We cannot do the whole story in detail, only the most striking *economic* aspect at the point when God sets a table of manna in the desert. We are told that in the daily accounting, "those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed" (Exod 16:18). The manna bolsters the concept of God as *provider*, but it comes with a twist that confounds economic theory. Should not *output* be proportional to *effort*? Is not the relationship between effort and output the most sacred equation in economics: you work hard, and you have more to show for it? Why would God attenuate this relation to the point of making mockery of it? There is more than one interpretation and one possible lesson, of course. In basic economic terms, however, the gift looms larger than the effort, and the economic portfolio of the Sabbath in Genesis remains intact.

Second, and now to the specific economic choreography of the Sabbath in this story. "On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece" (Exod. 16:22). The next day, the Israelites are surprised to discover that the manna "did not become foul, and there were no worms in it" (Exod 16:24). "What is the point of this Sabbath magic?" I have asked in my book,

The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day.¹⁰ Here, we can focus the question to make it say, ‘What is the *economic* point?’ At the very least we have *provision* more than we have *production*, and we have divine *commitment* more than divine *commandment*. The wanderers in the desert need not record the seventh day in the expense column, as though deprived of a day that could be used to improve their lot in life. The day is *given*; it is not taken away. Their needs will be met even if they do not work that day, and they will not gain anything if they do. In *Sabbath* economics, the relationship between effort and output is breaking up even if the idea continues to thrive in other economic paradigms.¹¹

For the final economic message of the weekly Sabbath, we turn to the Ten Commandments in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Even if we were to argue that the economic messages in Genesis 1-2 and Exodus 16 are only vague contours and preliminary conjectures, we shall not need to hedge our bets with respect to the economic implications in the Ten Commandment texts. “But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work-- you, your son or your daughter, your male or female *slave*, your *livestock*, or the *alien resident* in your towns,” we read in Exodus 20 (Exod 20:10). Slaves and resident aliens are the most vulnerable in society, the ‘have-nots.’ They receive special mention in the Sabbath stipulations. We can be reasonably sure that no other ancient legislation is equally solicitous. Livestock will be a similar exception, legislation for the benefit of non-human creatures. The sentiment underlying these injunctions is *compassion*. If we extrapolate to make these injunctions and their underlying sentiment into the rudiments of an economic system, we shall have an economic system built on compassion and a system, too, that specifies beneficiaries not normally included even today. In fact, the absence of compassion could well be one of the

¹⁰ Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 84.

¹¹ Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*, 82–85.

foremost characteristics of our profit-driven societies. With reference to how modern societies treat animals, Jacques Derrida says that we live in a time when “[w]ar is waged over the matter of pity.”¹² Jonathan Safran Foer describes the problem from a different angle, but he, too, sees society at war. “We have waged war, or rather let a war be waged, against all the animals we eat. This war is new and has a name: factory farming.”¹³ Matthew Scully writes that for “the 355,000 pigs slaughtered every day in America, even the smallest mercies have been withdrawn.”¹⁴ When we allow the weekly Sabbath to put its ideological and practical wares on display—concern for slaves, care for immigrants, mercy toward non-human creatures—the Sabbath will be executing a mission of present truth in a war zone where it has rarely been allowed to go.

“But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work-- you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you,” we read in the Sabbath commandment in Deuteronomy (Deut 5:14). This is almost the same wording as in Exodus, but the text prods us to go a step further. “*As well as you*” means equal needs and equal rights—it makes the egalitarian, inclusive aspirations of the Sabbath explicit. Before we leave the economic implications of the weekly Sabbath, we shall be told that the socioeconomic concern of the seventh day has become its *raison d’être*. “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; *therefore* the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day” (Deut 5:15). *This* Sabbath is not so much a memorial of past event as it is

¹² Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (PCP; New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 27.

¹³ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 33.

¹⁴ Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 29.

a present corrective—and a corrective known for feeling the plight of the enslaved, the immigrant, and the poor.

The Economics of the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee

Economics is writ large in the two Sabbath outposts in the Old Testament, the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee. Norman Habel shows that in Leviticus (Lev 25:2–4) the “land, not the tenants, seems to be the primary subject of the Sabbath Year legislation.”¹⁵ The text says literally that “the land shall cease” or that “the land shall rest,” treating the land as subject. The land rest is mandated in the same tone of solicitude that we find with respect to the weekly Sabbath. While the ecological interest of the Sabbath Year seems certain, the explicit economic intent recapitulates and reinforces the concerns of the weekly Sabbath. God tells the new tenants that “the seventh year you shall let it [the land] rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard” (Exod 23:11). Picture the owner or proprietor of the land looking out on his field during the Sabbath Year. Who are those people out there, picking the fruit off his trees during the Sabbath Year? And what are those strangers doing in his olive grows? And the wild animals—what are they doing in his grain field?

The Jubilee, the most remote outpost and offspring of the Sabbath, offers relief from debt and restoration of property lost during the preceding forty-nine years (Lev 25:10).¹⁶ This is probably the most explicit and radical feature of ‘Sabbath Economics’ in the Old Testament. Norman Habel captures the economic texture by calling the ordinance “economic amnesty,”¹⁷

¹⁵ Norman C. Habel, *The Land Is Mine* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 103.

¹⁶ Robert North, S.J., *Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1954) and *The Biblical Jubilee...after Fifty Years* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2000).

¹⁷ Habel, *The Land Is Mine*, 104.

and Jacob Milgrom sees a socio-economic mechanism to prevent “the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor which Israel’s prophets can only condemn, but which Israel’s priests attempt to rectify in Leviticus 25.”¹⁸ The Jubilee sets a limit to acquisition of land, on the one hand,¹⁹ and, on the other, provides a safety net for the person threatened with destitution. Its relevance to ecology relates primarily to the question of land ownership. “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for *the land is mine*; with me you are but aliens and tenants,” the Israelites are instructed (Lev 25:23).

The Jubilee legislation establishes a framework for an irreducibly decentralized agrarian economy. This is extremely important from an ecological point of view, but it also prevents the land from being treated as a commodity. Crops can be sold, but land, the ground where the crop is grown and harvested, cannot be sold in perpetuity. The ‘economic amnesty’ applies to people, as well (Lev 28:29). Debts are canceled and lost property restored. Walter Brueggemann describes the sabbatarian structures of the Old Testament as a remedy for social injustice, on the one hand, and over-taxation of the land, on the other. “Landed people are tempted to create a *sabbathless* society in which land is never rested, debts are never canceled, slaves are never released, nothing is changed from the way it now is and has always been,” he says.²⁰

We can pause for a moment to look at these ideals from the point of view of economic ideals and practice in our time. The most basic elements of human existence—land, animals, seeds, and labor—are reduced to commodities. They are items for the marketplace in what is often a system of predation, exploitation, and cruelty. The compassionate tenets of the Sabbath

¹⁸ Jacob Milgrom, “Leviticus 25 and Some Postulates of the Jubilee,” in *The Jubilee Challenge*, 32; cf. also, Milgrom, *Leviticus: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 3 vols. (AB; New York: Doubleday), 3:2145–2212; cf. also Robert Gnuse, “Jubilee Legislation in Leviticus: Israel’s Vision of Social Reform,” *BTB* 15 (1985), 47.

¹⁹ Thus Derek Tidball (*The Message of Leviticus: Free to Be Holy* [Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005], 295), “With this system in place there was no room for property speculation.”

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 60.

and its outposts, the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee, are conspicuously absent. Sabbath Economics rejects the notion that land should be seen as ‘real estate,’ its value computed according to a monetary measure. To Sabbath Economics, it is unimaginable that seeds could become one of the hottest items in the commodity markets, that seeds can be patented, that violators can be sued for patent infringement, and that seeds can be equipped with terminator genes and thus stripped of their essential self-renewing property of God’s original gift economy. In Sabbath Economics, animals have the right to flourish, compassion for non-human creatures an explicit tenet of the Sabbath.²¹

Sabbath Economics in the Prophetic Texts

By now it is clear that God has invested the Sabbath with a social conscience, placing a social and economic obligation on the Sabbath keeper. We found *compassion* to be the underlying sentiment in Genesis and the priestly texts. In the prophets, the *compassionate* tenor of the Sabbath sounds at a higher decibel. Centuries after Moses, the prophet Amos speaks to fellow citizens who continue to observe the Sabbath, but the observance is divorced from concern for the poor and the oppressed. The prophet’s countrymen look impatiently toward the setting sun, asking, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat” (Amos 8:5–6). The practices of the business community reek with stinginess and profiteering.

Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of

²¹ For more details, see Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Letter to the Romans: Paul among the Ecologists* (Earth Bible; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2016), 295-308.,

sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way (Amos 2:6–7).

Amos repudiates this brand of religion even though it retains the form of Sabbath observance (Amos 5:21). So does his younger contemporary Isaiah—and the prophetic texts across the entire Book of Isaiah, if you prefer to put it that way. This prophet is equally determined to deliver the Sabbath from the stigma of being the symbol of a callous, materialistic, and acquisition-bent society. “When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand?” he asks (Isa 1:12). “Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity” (Isa 1:12–13).

In the closing part of Isaiah, the Sabbath returns with a vision of inclusion (Isa 56:1-8) and an unparalleled lesson on ‘Sabbath Economics’ (Isa 58:1-14). “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” aggrieved believers ask (Isa 58:3). The answer is cast in economic terms. “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers” (Isa 58:3). To this prophet, oppression and economic injustice are inimical to the ethos of the Sabbath.

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor
into your house;
when you see the naked,
to cover them,
and not to hide yourself
from your own kin? (Isa. 58:6-7)

The ideological clarity, the practical specifics, and the emotional intensity make ‘Sabbath Economics’ a legitimate subject of Sabbath theology. Indeed, the prominence of the topic is so striking that no Sabbath theology worth its salt can leave it out without betraying the essential character of the seventh day.

The people addressed by Amos and Isaiah are not irreligious, but they are committed to a lifestyle of material gain and personal prosperity at the expense of seeking justice for people less fortunate. In the words of Shaul M. Paul,

Amos delivered a devastating diatribe against the nation’s distorted panacea of the cult—the opium of the masses. For him, as for many of the other classical prophets, cultic zeal could neither engender public weal nor atone for infringements upon the moral law. Ritual can never be a surrogate for ethics. “God desires devotion, not devotions,” *right* more than *rite*. When the cult became a substitute for moral behavior, it was severely denounced and condemned.²²

In the alternative offered by Amos and Isaiah, social justice, not religious ritual, is central. “Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,” Amos objects (on God’s behalf), “I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps” (Amos 5:22–23). What is sought, instead, is a religion that delivers benefits to those most needy. “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). To Gary V. Smith, this text is “an admonition to change the central focus of worship from the performance of the ritual to the establishment of justice and righteousness.”²³ This is the tenor of the prophetic message, and it is specifically linked to the Sabbath. “And, as in every other relevant passage of the Old Testament, we have the interest of

²² Shalom M. Paul, *Amos* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 2, emphasis added.

²³ Gary V. Smith, *Amos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 187.

the Sabbath bound up in the same cause with the interests of the poor,” says George Adam Smith.²⁴

Can sentiments like these be translated into meaningful action in the present? Some readers think so, and they say it with the urgency of someone who has stumbled upon “present truth.” William H. Willimon, formerly the pastor at Duke University Chapel, hails the Sabbath as “an act of prophetic resistance” in a culture dedicated to ceaseless and ecologically exhausting productivity.²⁵ *Resistance* to a culture of production, consumption, and instant gratification is also a theme that has also been picked up by Walter Brueggemann in his interpretation of these texts.²⁶

Returning to Isaiah, we now realize that we cannot truly affirm the Sabbath apart from the *economic* and *social* concerns that undergird his Sabbath vision.

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests
on my holy day;
if you call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD
honorable;
if you honor it,
not going your own ways,
serving your own interests,
or pursuing your own affairs;
then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride
upon the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage
of your ancestor Jacob,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken (Isa. 58:13-14)

²⁴ George Adam Smith, *The Twelve Prophets*, vol. I, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1928), 190; see also Page H. Kelly, *Amos: Prophet of Social Justice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 116.

²⁵ William H. Willimon, ‘Lord of the Sabbath’, *Christian Century* 108 (1991), 515.

²⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2014).

The Sabbath as “a delight”—have we not experienced it in the serenity and joy of Sabbath fellowship? “Delight in the LORD”—has not this, too, albeit imperfectly, been our experience in the Sabbath keeping communities of which many of us are a part? We have, and yet it could also be possible that we have not. Theologically, the notion of the Sabbath as divine *commitment* rather than divine *commandment* reduces the human contribution in meaningful Sabbath observance. For many, the reorientation from *commandment* to *commitment* will be a major reset with respect to the message and meaning of the Sabbath.

But the divine *commitment* seeks expression in the human community in grateful and *compassionate* living in the world—with sensitivity to the needs and rights of refugees, immigrants, have-nots, and non-human creatures. We cannot read these texts without noticing the striking *economic* concerns of the divine commitment, and it seems equally certain that God’s commitment is meant to be actualized in the practices of the Sabbath observing community.

Sabbath Economics and Seventh-day Adventist Theology

I said at the beginning that my paper will close by asking whether the economic portfolio of the Sabbath has a home in Seventh-day Adventist theology, or, stating it negatively, whether ‘Sabbath Economics’ is doomed to indefinite homelessness. I plan to do no more than ask.

Does the Sabbath, and now with the economic portfolio that has been described by visionaries, prophets, and priests in the Old Testament, have a home in Seventh-day Adventist theology?²⁷

²⁷ I have left out New Testament texts in this paper, but Sabbath as divine commitment is equally the tenor of the Sabbath in the Gospels and the Book of Revelation.