

# GOD RESTED ON THE SEVENTH DAY

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The fourth of the Ten Commandments, as recorded in Exodus, enjoins:

*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath unto the Lord thy God, in it thou shalt not do any manner of work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy man-servant, nor thy maid-servant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested [va-yanah] on the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it (Ex. 20:8-11).*

This commandment uses as its source the first account of creation in Genesis, where it states in conclusion:

*Now the heaven and the earth were finished [va-yekhulu], and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished [va-yekhal] His work which he had made; and He rested [va-yishbot] on the seventh day from all His work which He had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and hallowed it; because in it He rested [shavat] from all his work which God in creating had made (Gen. 2:1-3).*<sup>1</sup>

This explanation of the Sabbath's origin presents a great difficulty. The description of "rest" on the part of God, is puzzling. The concept of God prevalent in Jewish tradition, at least since the days of Maimonides,<sup>2</sup> is that of a God lacking a body or even the semblance of a body. God is supreme, independent of nature, and incorporeal. The concept of a "rest" is dependent on our experience with human or animal bodies, or even with that of an earth that yields produce. It is completely material and a result of human experience with the material world. God, as we understand Him, certainly does not need a "rest." We can perhaps understand the Bible using certain anthropomorphic terms to describe God as speaking or hearing, but ascribing rest to God seems to imply weariness and a lack of power. For this reason, we find in *Genesis Rabbah* (10:9) a homiletical interpretation, the idea that while God did not in fact rest, the term is used in order to give a reward to the righteous

for helping to maintain creation, as if God worked very hard to create it and needed to rest afterwards; and conversely, to punish the wicked for contributing to the world's destruction. Another approach is taken by Philo, who explains that the verse should be understood as meaning that God caused his creations to rest, not that God rested, since "He Himself never ceases from creating."<sup>3</sup> I would like to present a more literal understanding of the verse.

The presentation of creation in chapter one of Genesis not only describes the seventh day as one of rest, but as one in which the creation process ceased — *finished* [va-yekhulu]). This has been taken to imply that it is the final day of creation as we know it. That is to say, it brings the physical world to its present stage, with no more development (or in present-day terminology, evolution) scheduled to take place.

Whereas the JPS translation ends the first creation account in Genesis with the words, *He rested from all His work which God in creating had made*, the literal translation of the last few words is *which God had created to do* (or *make*). What is the meaning of *to do* [la'asot] in this difficult expression?<sup>4</sup> Ibn Ezra claims that "to do" refers to the reproductive potential of the life forms.<sup>5</sup> Radak similarly explains that God gave all creatures the ability to reproduce themselves.<sup>6</sup> Ibn Ezra and Radak understand *to do* as referring to the future after the first week. God has now entrusted the creation of new life to the living things that He made, and there indeed can be considered a cessation of the divine creation process at the end of the first week. God has now "rested" from actively creating new life.

In modern times, critics have seized upon evolutionary biology to take issue with these biblical portrayals. Looking upon life on earth as an ongoing evolutionary process, they regard the present state of life, including humans, as part of an ongoing process that is destined to continue. Humans, the most complex product of biological evolution, will over long periods of time evolve to greater complexity, or give way to a species of greater complexity. Accordingly, since the Bible is understood to be telling us that the present biology is essentially static, and has been so since the appearance of homo sapiens, the present-day human species, the Bible must be wrong on this important point.

However, a proper understanding of chapter 1 (and the first paragraph of chapter 2) of Genesis, the first of the "two accounts of creation,"<sup>7</sup> must note that this is an ancient, and by far the first, presentation of the idea of life's evolution on earth from simple to increasingly complex forms. The biblical account of the six days describes an evolutionary process. The implication is that, in some manner, each stage is necessary for the formation of the next.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the process described is far from abstract. The animal species named are created in the same approximate order as modern biological evolutionary science postulates. The step-by-step process is emphasized in the Bible by having God declare, at the end of each day, or stage, of the account in chapter 1, *and God saw that it was good*, before proceeding to the next stage. We now know that this process was continuing for periods including billions of years.

As mentioned above, one seeming problem with the Bible's description of evolution as having halted is the scientific understanding that biological evolution is a continuous process, with a past and future, in the midst of which we happen to find ourselves at present. It is a process that has been continuing since the inception of life in the first prokaryotic cell. While present-day humans are of necessity the last stage known to us in the line of evolution, involving progression from simple to increasingly complex forms, there is no reason why evolution should not continue into the indefinite future, just as it has progressed and continued up to the present.

Proceeding further than Ibn Ezra and Radak, we can understand that the biblical account of creation may indeed imply an actual, permanent cessation of biological evolution as we know it, from the simple to the more complex. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily contradict evolutionary theory. In fact, I propose that in terms of contemporary science, this is in indeed true.

The key point here is as follows. The evolutionary process referred to in the Bible is the type presently understood, namely, evolution conducted by nature in terms of the exclusively scientific framework of thought or, in terms of its equivalent in the theistic framework, evolution conducted by God through His tools, which include of the laws of nature.<sup>9</sup>

This type of biological evolution, which has thus far yielded mankind as its most complex product, is recognized scientifically as a product of nature, and by the Bible as a product of God-controlled nature. This process yielded man,

who is now its last product to appear. All indications are, however, that this natural, or in biblical terms God-run, type of evolution to greater complexity has reached its end, for the following reason.

While biological evolution has until now advanced its products continuously, step by step, the last advance to human species involves a qualitative change, different from all the others. The lower mammals may have greatly increased complexity, or brain-power, with the advent of primates. Also, the advanced primates, such as monkeys and apes, may have substantially increased brain size, and presumably intelligence, over previous forms. However, the advance from apes to humans involves an increase of brain-power with a sharp qualitative difference, namely, man is now conscious of the process of evolution which brought him into being!

As a result of this consciousness, modern biologists have been energized to seek the explanation, or mechanism, of evolution in terms of the well-established physical sciences. The resulting research has led to our knowledge of the genes that control heredity. The manner in which they operate is, of course, rather complicated, but much effort has already been put into directly affecting this operation by chemically altering these genes.

Human modification of the process of evolution through direct alteration of genes can accomplish within the course of one or a few generations (say 25 to 75 years) what previously required hundreds of thousands or millions of years to take effect. In other words, the future course of human evolution, the most complex entity of the biomass, is no longer controlled by nature but is now in the hands of mankind. A process that takes millions of years is no longer relevant when it is replaced by one giving immediate results. In biblical language, God has now handed over the bio-evolutionary process that He once controlled to the human species, whom the Bible describes as made *in the image of God* (Gen. 1:27).

Thus, the apex of the complex bio-evolutionary process that is controlled by God has indeed ceased permanently after, and because of, the creation of man. At this point we are told that God "rested," that He finished His act of creation, and turned over the continuation of the process for mankind *to do*.

While the atheistic, or naturalist, approach to bio-evolution has strongly emphasized the linear continuity of the evolutionary process, attaching no particular importance to the situation today, the biblical evolutionary ap-

proach attaches special significance to the present-day human being created in the "image of God." This is further emphasized by the biblical implication, in the first account of creation and in the Exodus version of the Fourth Commandment, that the bio-evolutionary process engineered by God has now paused. The scientific achievement of present-day man directs him to take charge of the process.

Just what the future will hold, following mankind's new ability to control further evolution of the most complex product of evolution, i.e., himself, is hard to predict. It may lead to a society far more advanced technologically and to the desideratum of happier, healthier people. Yet will the advanced society that has already produced hydrogen bombs, and the ability to engage in chemical and biological warfare, destroy itself before much good can be achieved? Only time will tell.

#### NOTES

1. The above quotations are all from the Jewish Publication Society translation of the Bible used in the Hertz and Soncino editions.
2. H. A. Wolfson, "Maimonides on the Unity and Incorporeality of God", *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series, 56:2 (1965) pp. 112-136.
3. Philo, *On the Allegories of the Sacred Laws*, 1:3.
4. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 15.
5. Ibn Ezra on Genesis 2:3.
6. Radak on Genesis 2:3.
7. J. B. Soloveitchick, *Shiurei Harav* (New York: Hamevaser-Yeshiva University, 1974) p.64.
8. M. E. Schrader, "Evolution and the Bible: The Secular Approach," in *Divine Action and Natural Selection: Science, Faith and Evolution*, eds. J. Seckbach and R. Gordon (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2009) pp. 505-517.
9. These tools include, for example, punctuated equilibria. See Eldredge, Niles and S. J. Gould, "Punctuated Equilibria: An Alternative to Phyletic Gradualism," in T. J. M. Schopf, ed., *Models in Paleobiology* (San Francisco: Freeman Cooper, 1972) pp. 82-115.