

The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest

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In 1933 Gerhard Von Rad aptly observed that “Among the many benefits of redemption offered to man by Holy Scripture, that of ‘rest’ has been almost overlooked in biblical theology....”¹ Forty years have not substantially changed that assessment of the situation. In fact, except for the brief and conflicting opinions delivered in commentaries on Hebrews 3 and 4, only a few major articles in the journals and fewer graduate theses have been devoted to the concept of “God’s Rest” in the last century. Most biblical theologies of the Old Testament and New Testament, biblical encyclopedias, theological wordbooks, *Festschriften*, and systematic theologies are ominously silent on the topic. The question is why?

While reasons may vary, the overriding cause lies in the sheer difficulty of the concept. Added to this obstacle are the problems of one’s hermeneutical posture and his solution to the authoritative boundaries placed by the biblical writers on the lines of continuity and discontinuity found between the two testaments. But it is for precisely this reason that expositors of Scripture should be willing to re-examine once again this neglected biblical concept, for it promises to provide another clue to contemporary readers as to how the two testaments are related to each other.

The Promise Theme Promise Theology in Genesis

No other theme provides such a comprehensive insight into the plan and program of our Lord in both testaments as the “promise.”² Beginning with the promise of a victorious “seed” in Genesis 3:15, the content of this single, all encompassing theme builds. A constellation of terms is used in the Old Testament to teach that the promise is God’s “word,” “blessing,” and “oath,”³ to his chosen “seed,” while the New Testament focuses the now enlarged picture by limiting the terminology to that of God’s “promise,” *epangelia*.⁴ Both testaments can also depict the promise

1. Gerhard Von Rad, “There Remains Still a Rest for the People of God,” *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. by E. W. Trueman Dicken (New York, 1966), p. 94.

2. See the writer’s articles: “The Eschatological Hermeneutics of ‘Evangelicalism’: Promise Theology,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, XIII (Spring, 1970), 91–99 (henceforth “Hermeneutics”); “The Old Promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31–34,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, XV (Winter, 1972), 11–23 (henceforth “New Covenant”); and the forthcoming “The Blessing of David: The Chapter for Humanity.”

3. Cf. Kaiser, “New Covenant,” XV, 12 nn. 4–8

4. Luke 24:29; Acts 1:4; 2:33, 39; 7:17; 13:23, 32; 26:6; Rom 4:13, 14, 16, 20; 9:4, 8, 9; 15:8; 2 Cor 1:20; 7:1; Gal 3:14, 16, 17, 18, 21, 22, 29; 4:23, 28; Eph 1:13; 2:12; 3:6; 6:2; 1 Tim 4:8; 2 Tim 1:1; Heb 4:1; 6:12, 15, 17; 7:6; 8:6; 9:15; 10:36; 11:9 (*bis*), 13, 17, 33, 39; 2 Peter 1:4; 3:4, 9, 13. The verbal form appears in Rom 1:2; 4:21; Gal 3:19; Heb 6:13; 10:23; 11:11; 12:26; James 1:12; 2:15; 1 John 2:25–26. Cf. the fine article by Julius Schniewind and Gerhard Friedrich, “ἐπαγγέλλω,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel and trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, II (Grand Rapids, 1964), 576–86.

doctrine under one of the most ubiquitous formulas in the canon: “I will be your God, you shall be my people, and I will dwell in the midst of you.”⁵

Basically the promise consists of three elements: first, a “seed” or a line of heirs culminating in a chief *heir par excellence* which is promised to Eve, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen 3:15; 12:3, 7 ; 13:14–16 ; 15:4, 5, 13, 18 ; 16:10; 17:2, 7, 9, 19 ; 21:12; 22:17 ; 26:24 ; 27:28, 29 ; 28:14); second, the land of Canaan which is given to the Patriarchs and their descendants forever as an *inheritance* (Gen 12:1, 7; 13:15, 17 ; 15:7, 18 ; 17:8 ; 24:7 ; 26:2, 3 ; 28:13 ; 49:8–12) and third, the climactic element: that the Patriarchs are the recipients of these basic three elements: (1) Abraham’s seed through Isaac would be by this *heritage* (Gen 12:3; 18:18 ; 22:18 ; 26:4 ; 28:14). This last item Paul clearly calls the “gospel” in Galatians 3:8.

There were additional items in Genesis which elaborated on these basic three elements: (1) Abraham’s seed through Isaac would be countless as the stars and sand of the seashore, (2) they would be a great nation, (3) that kings would come from Abraham, Sarah, and Jacob, and (4) Abraham’s name would be great.

Promise Theology in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers

The Exodus narratives do not interrupt the promise; instead they perpetuate the same announcements already given to the patriarchs (Exod 2:24; 3:13, 15, 16, 17 ; 4:5 ; 6:2–5 ; 13:5 ; 32:13 ; 33:1 ; Lev 26:42, 45; Num 10:29; 14:23 ; 32:11). But the new addition to the promise is this: “I will take you for my people” (Exod 6:7). Already in Genesis 17:7–8 and 28:21 the first part of this tripartite formula had been promised, namely, “I will be your God.” Now the emphasis will fall on the fact that Israel will be Yahweh’s “son”, his “firstborn son,” a people for his possession.⁶ Herein lies the heart of the theological development of the promise in these three pentateuchal books (Exod 29:45–46; Lev 11:45; 22:33 ; 25:38 ; 26:12, 45 ; Num 15:41). Of course the provision of the tabernacle introduces the third aspect of the tripartite formula: “I will tabernacle, dwell (*šākan*) in the midst of you” (especially Exod 29:45–46; but also in Exod 24:16; 25:8 ; 40:35 ; Num 5:3; 35:34). With this word one of the greatest formulas for the promise theme is completed.

5. Cf. Kaiser, “New Covenant,” XV, 12–13 n. 10.

6. The word describing the people as God’s “distinctive,” “peculiar,” or “moveable treasure” is *sOḡullāh*. The word has shown up in Akkadian as *sikiltum* (cf. Moshe Greenberg, “*Hebrew sOḡullā: Akkadian sikiltu*,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, LXXI [July-September, 1951], 172–74). At Alalah, King abba-El is the *sikiltum* of the goddess, while a Ugaritic vassal is the *sglt* of his suzerain (Ch. Virolleaud, *Le Palais royal d’ Ugarit*, V [Paris, 1965], 84; text: 18.38; 11.7–12). Therefore the root means basically “to set aside” a property for a good purpose; the root being *sakalu*. See M. Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” “*Journal of the American Oriental Society*, XC (April-June, 1970), 195 n. 103.

Here began the heart of the Bible's own story of progress. God promises to be something and to do something for a select people so as to bring blessing to all mankind and creation. Therefore, this article has as one of its foundations that the key category for understanding biblical revelation is the Bible's own foundational concept, namely, the "promise." If some object saying that the theme of covenant is more prominent, the response is simple there were *many* formal covenants, but the content of these covenants of redemption was at once *single*, continuous and eternal; hence the word to Eve, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and Jeremiah (31:31–34) is a united plan, but exhibiting many expanding and interlocking specifications in the progress of redemption. One such addition to the promise is the theme of "rest."

The exciting potential offered in the theology of rest is that the Bible deliberately takes a word which is intimately involved in the physical inheritance of the land of Canaan which had been part of God's promise to Abraham and uses it to include both a physical concept and a deeply spiritual meaning. The rest which God gives is at once historical (Canaan), soteriological (salvation), and eschatological (the kingdom and our reign with Christ). This is another beautiful illustration of the corporate solidarity of some of these themes in Scripture. Each step in the onward movement of such themes as the promise with its sub-themes such as the rest from God, the Messiah, and the Seed, points back to the beginning and to the ultimate goal intended by God. Each successive historical step harmoniously combines the beginning step in which the totality was programmatically announced with the end in which that totality shall be unfolded. Therefore, things combined in the promise stage were often disjoined in their actual historical fulfillment, but never in their ideological or theological connection. Each part implied the whole doctrine and the whole stood for each of successive participating steps as they were (and are) being enacted. This can be seen in an Isaac or a Solomon who epitomized the promised heir at that point in history, but then it was always with the tension expressed in Hebrews: "not yet" was the full realization accomplished.

The Theology of Rest

One of the new provisions added to the expanding revelation of the Promise theme was the provision of "rest" for Israel. So special was this rest that Yahweh would call it *His rest* (Ps 95:11; Isa 66:1). It is precisely this aspect of the Promise theme which provides that key link between the end of the book of Numbers and the time of David: the corresponding texts for this period of time being Deuteronomy 12:9–10 and 2 Samuel 7:1, 11.

But before the reader quickly assumes that the former is the promise of "the rest" and "the inheritance" of Canaan while the latter is the historical fulfillment of that "rest" under David, he must come to terms with the historical midpoint in Joshua 21:44–45:

"The LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers; not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their power. Not one of all the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass."

But this only yields a conundrum. If Joshua fulfilled the promised rest, what is 2 Samuel 7:1 claiming? How often was this state of rest fulfilled? Not only must we work with Joshua and David as the fulfillers of the promise but even Solomon was included, for he was named the “man of rest” (1 Chron 22:9; 1 Kings 8:56). Even later this same divine rest appears after periods of bloodshed and trouble in the reigns of King Asa (2 Chron 14:5, 6; 15:15) and King Jehoshaphat (2 Chron 20:30).

Even the repeated notices of “rest” in Judges (3:1, 30 ; 5:31 ; 8:28) reflect *šāqat* periods which were not the permanent rest promised in the *ḥuāḥ* group of words. The same *šāqat* type is observed in Joshua 11:23 and 14:15 where the land is given this type of “rest” from war. It is a temporary lull in the continuous surge of the restless sea, Isaiah 57:20, a “respite” from days of trouble, Psalm 94:13. This type of rest must be separated from what God calls “My Rest.”

Nevertheless, there still are a number of *ḥuāḥ* types offered at different times.

No wonder the Psalmist says the invitation to enter into God’s Rest is still open (Ps 95:11). And that was where the writer of Hebrews boldly announced that the “today” of the ancient promise was still open even in his day. Therefore, that ancient aspect of the promise doctrine can be ours by faith even now in these “last days.”

The Rest Vocabulary

The Hebrew root *ḥuāḥ*, “to rest” supplies the majority of the words for this concept.⁷ Whenever the *hiphil* stem of this root is followed by the preposition *lé* plus a person or group, it usually assumes a technical status. The resulting form in some twenty instances is *ḥenāḥ lé*. This rest is a place granted by the Lord (Exod 33:14; Deut 3:20; Josh 1:13, 15; 22:4 ; 2 Chron 14:5), a peace and security from all enemies (Deut 12:10; 25:19 ; Josh 21:44; 23:1 ; 2 Sam 7:1, 11; 1 Kings 5:18 [5:4] ; 1 Chron 22:9, 18; 23:25 ; 2 Chron 14:6; 15:15 ; 20:30 ; 32:22 —probable reading?) or the cessation of sorrow and labor in the future (Isa 14:3; 28:12).⁸

The noun is *ḥenāḥ*, “resting-place,” “rest.” Here again this form also assumes a technical usage. Perhaps the earliest instance was in Jacob’s blessing Issachar with a land which would be a good resting-place (Gen 49:15). The geographical, material, and spatial association of this rest are strong in Deuteronomy 12:9; 1 Kings 8:56; 1 Chronicles 22:9; Isaiah 28:12; Micah 2:10, consequently there is the frequent association of the *māqôm* theme. It is “a place” where Yahweh

7. A proper name reflecting this verb is that of Noah, Gen 5:29.

8. Notice the other *hiphil* usages of this root use other prepositions, e.g., *bē* in Ezek 5:13; 16:42 ; 21:22 ; 24:13 or are followed by such accusatives as “his hand” in Exod 17:11; or “my spirit” in Zech 6:8. Also when the *hiphil* form is followed by an accusative of a thing with a place name, the meaning is “to deposit,” “lay or set down” or “let lie.”

would “plant” his people Israel so that they could dwell in their own place without being disturbed any more, for example Deuteronomy 1:33, 2 Samuel 7:10.⁹

In spite of all the emphasis on the promised land as the rest of God for Israel, the spiritual element also is prominent in this noun form. This finds expression whenever this rest is connected with the themes of the ark of God or the temple. Rest is where the presence of God stops (as in the wilderness wanderings, Num 10:33) or dwells (as in Palestine, Ps 132:8, 14; Isa 66:1; 1 Chron 28:2). It was for this reason, no doubt, that David stressed the aspects of belief and trust for this rest in Psalm 95:11. As with the verb, so here again this rest is associated with Israel’s return to the land, Isaiah 11:15.¹⁰

A related noun form is *mānôah*. Out of its seven appearances, four should be included as part of our technical vocabulary: Deuteronomy 28:65 (a disobedient Israel would find no rest while being dispersed among the nations), Lamentations 1:3 (Judah did not find rest in Babylon), Psalm 116:7 (the Psalmist will return to God’s rest after his resurrection from the dead!), and 1 Chronicles 6:16 [6:31] (a resting place for the ark).¹¹

The case built up from all the technical uses of the root *nûah*, is inescapable: God’s rest is the gracious gift of the land promised to the patriarchs with its attendant blessings such as the cessation of all hostile enemy action. It is also the place where the presence of the Lord dwells whether with the travelling ark or in the temple.

Rest as the Inheritance of the Land

One of the great ideas dominating the theology of Deuteronomy is that future moment when God will cause Israel to possess the land of Canaan. Possession, inheritance, and rest function almost as synonymous ideas here. Since the gift is as sure as the word of the promising God, therefore everything waits on this one “until”: “until the Lord has given rest...and until they also possess the land (Deut 3:20).

Repeatedly, the emphasis is on the fact that Yahweh has promised the patriarchs this gift of the land (Deut 1:8, 21, 35, 38 and 65 other times in Deut.).¹² But with this same promise to Abraham,

9. See the suggestive discussion in R. A. Carlson, *David, the Chosen King: A Traditio-Historical Approach to the Second Book of Samuel* (Stockholm, 1964), pp. 99-121.

10. There are six other passages where this noun is used of quietness (Jer 51:59; Ps 23:2), security (Ruth 1:9), the abiding judgment of the Word of the Lord (Zech 9:1), ease (2 Sam 14:17) and the textual problem of Judg 20:43. Though related to the idea discussed, they are applied to distinct situations from that under consideration. Note the appearance of this form in the Judean place name Manahath, 1 Chron 8:6; 2:54; and the Edomite site, Gen 36:23 = 1 Chron 1:40.

11. The other three references include two spoken of birds not resting (Gen 8:9; Isa 34:14) and of security for Ruth (Ruth 3:1). A proper name reflecting this noun is Manoah, the father of Samson, Judg 13:2.

Isaac, and Jacob, the Lord spoke simultaneously to Moses' generation in the wilderness (Deut 2:29 *et passim*). Canaan was to be Israel's inheritance and resting place.

But this rest was also *God's* rest. If one misses this point, he will have the same problem that G. Von Rad had: "It is now quite clear that this notion that the land belongs to Yahweh as stated in Leviticus 25:23; Joshua 22:19 is of a totally different order from that of the promise of the land to the early patriarchs."¹³

On the contrary, the land of Canaan was the (*nahälāh*) "the inheritance of the LORD" (Exod 15:17; 1 Sam 26:19; 2 Sam 21:3; 1 Kings 8:36), therefore it was His to give away. It was His "possession" (*yéruššāh* in 2 Chronicles 20:1 1 and *ahuzzah* in Joshua 22:19). Even more significantly, the people of Israel themselves were the "possession" of the LORD (Exod 19:5; Deut 4:20; 9:26, 29 ; 32:8, 9 ; 1 Sam 10:1; 2 Sam 14:16; 20:19).¹⁴ This latter concept is never tied directly into the concept of God's rest, though the idea is relevant when the discussion turns to "heirs" and "joint heirs" in the "inheritance to come." At that point, suddenly the complex of ideas moves from a geographical fixation to again include a spiritual reality as well. This would tie in with the emphasis on the presence of the Lord in the *nūah* words discussed above.

The Later Development of the Theology of Rest

In spite of all the insights afforded the researcher into the preceding definitions and distinctions, the climaxing statements on any theology of rest are to be found in Psalm 95 and Hebrews 3:7—4:13 .

Psalm 95

This psalm is one of a series of Psalms (93—100) variously designated as "Apocalyptic Psalms" or "Theocratic Psalms" (Delitzsch), "Millennial Anthems" (Tholuck),¹⁵ "Songs of the Millennium" (Binnie), "Group of Millennial Psalms" (Herder), "Second Advent Psalms" (Rawlinson), "Enthronement Psalms" (Mowinckel) and "Royal Psalms" (Perowne). Whatever title is used, there can be no mistaking that the theme is eschatological and that it depicts a time when the Lord alone is King reigning over all peoples and lands (93:1 ; 96:10 ; 97:1 ; 99:1). Not

12. See Johannes Hermann, "κληρος," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel and trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, III (Grand Rapids, 1966); 771 for the listing. Also the lists in J. Plöger, *Literarkritische formgeschichtliche und stilkritische Untersuchungen zum Deuteronomium*, vol. XXVI of *Bonner biblische Beiträge* (Bonn, 1967), pp. 124-26; 65-79 as cited by Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "The Gift of God: The Deuteronomic Theology of the Land," *Interpretation*, XXII (October, 1969), 451-61.

13. Gerhard Von Rad, "The Promised Land and Yahweh's Land in the Hexateuch," *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. by E. W. Trueman Dicken (New York, 1966), p. 86.

14. Hermann, III, 772. Also see the discussion on *ségullah* above in n. 6.

15. Nathaniel West, *The Thousand Years: Studies in the Eschatology in Both Testaments* (New York, 1880), pp. 74-75.

only in the grand symphonic conclusion to these millennial psalms is there a song (Ps 100) but the theme of a “new song” appears in 96:1 and 98:1¹⁶ which, if it is not messianic by its very name, it is certainly such by content in Psalms 96 and 98. Indeed, the Lord comes to rule (cf. Ugaritic usage of šapat) the earth, the world and the people in it with righteousness and his truth (Ps 96:13; 97:9).

Therefore, each of these psalms alike tells the story of a divine kingdom which is yet to be set up on the earth. It anticipates the universal outburst of joy which shall greet this future event. In order to accomplish this result, the psalms seem to group themselves in pairs, that is, Psalm 93 goes with 94; 95 with 96; 97 with 98, and 99 with 100. The pattern thus established is the announcement of the Lord’s reign in the first of the pairs (especially in 93, 97, 99 and perhaps in 95’s special order) followed by the outburst of praise to the Lord with that “new Song” (especially 96, 98 and climactically 100).¹⁷

Now the interesting point to be made in connection with our study is that the divine rest is set in the context of these psalms celebrating the second advent of our Lord. Participation in this kingdom of God, this rest of God, is to be made now on the basis of a decision in the present moment before those events connected with the second coming overtake anyone.

Therefore in this pair of psalms, a warning and exhortation to enter this rest appears between a triple invitation to praise the Lord based on the fact that He is the only King, Creator, and Shepherd (95:1–7a), and the contents of the new song (96:1–13). The connection then between 95 and 96 is just the inverse pattern found in Isaiah 2:2–5. There the exhortation of verse 5 follows the glorious announcement of the kingdom of God in verses 2–4, but our Psalm (95:7b–11) warns before it breaks into the triumphant strains of Psalm 96 with its announcement in song of the final, universal reign of the Lord.

Once these connections are observed in Psalms 93—100, it follows that the psalmist’s understanding of “rest” is tied up with the events of the second advent. It also follows that the generation of the wilderness could have participated in this future kingdom or rest of God to some extent, but they refused to do so in unbelief; therefore they were twice the losers: temporally and spiritually, in that historic moment and in the second advent!

The picture that begins to emerge is one where this eschatological rest (the “inheritance” or land of Israel which figures in a central role in the kingdom of God) is entered into by faith in the historic present. As a token of His ability and willingness to finally do all that He has promised concerning this promise of the land made to the patriarchs, the Lord gave to Israel in the historic past the land of Canaan to Joshua. This was an “earnest” or “down payment” on God’s final complete rest yet to come.

16. Cf. Pss 33:3; 40:3; 144:9; 149:1; Isa 42:10; Rev 5:9.

17. Ps 94 is a prayer of request and thanks to God for being our “rock.” This prepares us for the theme in Ps 95:1 “The rock of our salvation.”

The Rest Given to Joshua

The problem arises if the Lord “swore in (his) anger” (Ps 95:11) that not one of the evil generation should enter in the good land which he planned to give to the patriarchs (except Joshua and Caleb),¹⁸ how then did anyone arrive there in Joshua’s day?

Scripture responds that it was “because Caleb wholly followed the Lord” (Deut 1:36) as did Joshua, therefore they went in by faith. Therefore as Numbers 14:7–9 teaches, they set a proper value upon God’s promised inheritance (it was “exceeding good”), they had a proper confidence in God (“If Jehovah delight in us, then He will bring us into the land”) and they feared the sin of rebellion¹⁹ (“only rebel not against Jehovah”). It also notes that the little children whom the old generation feared would become statistics and disaster victims, would instead receive the land by grace as a gift (Jos 1:39).

But how is it possible to have this “rest” under Joshua (1:13, 15 ; 11:23 ; 21:44 ; 22:4 ; 23:1) and yet not have it if it is to be connected with some everlasting kingdom-rest as argued from the millennial Psalm 95? Wasn’t Joshua living in the promised “rest home” (Exod 33:14) and “inheritance” or “rest” (Deut 12:9)? Why did God seemingly go back on His eternal word and resort to placing this rest safely out of everyone’s reach in the millennium?

The solution is along the same lines as observed in the case of the patriarchs themselves. Even though they were already living in Canaan, it still was as yet just a promised land to them. It is repeatedly called “the land of their sojourning” (Gen 17:8; 28:4 ; 36:7 ; 37:1 ; 47:1 ; Exod 6:4) and not their “possession.” That is how Stephen put it in his speech in Acts 7:4–5: “God removed him from there into this land...yet he gave him no inheritance in it...but promised to give it to him in possession and to his descendants...” Indeed, they did possess a small parcel of that land, their burial grounds, and this was simply an “earnest” or “down payment” on the whole land. In a similar way, Joshua, Caleb and the new generation received the land. The emphasis in Joshua 21:43–45 is still upon the promised word which hasn’t failed Israel, nor will it.

But on the matter of whether Israel will retain its privilege of remaining in the land, that is another matter. Israel had set before her the alternatives of “life and good, death and evil.” It was all to be decided on how she responded to one command: Love the Lord your God. The proof that she was doing just that would be seen by how she kept the Lord’s commandments (Deut 30:15–20).

There was to be the crux of the matter-would Israel choose life? Would she live? Really live? Even live on the land which the Lord swore to give to their fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?

18. An “oriental negative.” For additional examples of this literary device, cf. Josh 11:22; Exod 9:3, 6; Gal 2:20; 1 Chron 7:10; 1:14, 16 , etc. The passages on which this oath is based are Num 14:21–23; 32:10–12 ; Deut 1:34–36. Notice that in Num 14:21–23, the oath is that they should not see the *land* which God promised to the patriarchs while in Ps 95 it is the *rest of God* which they shall not enter into. This is another confirmation of the geographical aspect of the rest of God.

19. As pointed out by G. H. Lang, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London, 1951), p. 78.

This conditional “if” did not “pave the way for a declension from grace into law” as Von Rad²⁰ suggests any more than the conditional aspect found in connection with the Davidic promise lowered it into a works salvation. On the contrary, the Davidic promise remains externally valid and immutable as the One who gave it (2 Sam 7:13, 16; Ps 89:27, 28, 35, 36; 2 Sam 23:5; Isa 55:3).

The “if” in the Davidic covenant (Ps 132:12; 89:29–32 ; 2 Sam 7:14b–15; 1 Kings 2:4; 8:25 ; 9:4–5) can only refer in those contexts to *individual* and *personal* invalidation of the benefits of the covenant, but they can never affect the certainty of God’s eternal oath.

Therefore the promise of the inheritance of God’s rest is protected even in the case of subsequent sins by the recipient’s descendants. It would not be a case of “slipping into Law” or even of “slipping from grace.” Neither the days of Joshua nor of David were any kind of blank check for their descendants to rest on their father’s laurels. The word of promise could also be theirs, if they would appropriate it by faith. If not, they were the losers, however, the promise was not thereby revoked, withdrawn or thereby nullified for any succeeding generation: rather that word was eternal!

As for the eschatological aspects of the rest theme in the millennial psalms of the Davidic period,² ¹ the answer is that the promise of God is a single, eternal plan encompassing the end, beginning and all the points of history in between. Certainly the final triumph of the promised “Seed” and outreach of that salvation in its completed fulfillment awaits the second advent of the Messiah. Why then, should not this rest likewise participate? Was it not a part of the promise doctrine?

Rest in Hebrews 3:7—4:13

The synthesis of this study lies in the concluding word of divine revelation concerning the rest of God located in Hebrews 3:7—4:13 . The scope of this subject is now almost breathtaking, for as Patrick Fairbairn observed,

“Not only does he [the writer to the Hebrews] thus connect believers under the Gospel with believers under the law in respect to the promised rest, but the promise itself he connects with the very commencement of the world’s history-with that rest of God which He is said to have taken, when He ceased from all His works ...”²²

There is however, the prior question of the writer of Hebrew’s hermeneutical approach. Is he guilty of a forced exegesis in which he is merely accommodating the old threats and promises formerly addressed to Israel for Christian readers? Is this piece of text in Hebrews a sample of the

20. Von Rad, “Promised Land,” p. 91. The passages where he finds this conditionality are Deut 4:25–26; 6:18 ; 8:1 ; 11:8–9 ; 18:21 ; 16:20 .

21. The LXX calls Ps 95 a psalm of David. Heb 4:7 says, “in (or) through David” which may just be equivalent to “The Psalms.” However, Ps 96, the twin psalm of 95, is ascribed to David and repeated with very little change in 1 Chron 16:23–33.

22. Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture* (New York and London, 1900), Appendix E: “The Relation of Canaan to the State of Final Rest,” p. 418.

writer's fanciful misapplication of Old Testament texts for Christian ears and eyes? Or has he just plain allegorized the Canaan Rest into some spiritual dimension or into a symbol of heaven?

Each of these charges fails to sustain its case in light of the Old Testament context of Psalm 95, the Old Testament usage of "rest" and the total message of Hebrews. Any one of the above suggested exegetical moves would have destroyed his message totally. This promise which was left to us concerning the divine rest (Heb 4:1) is part of the promise which he argues is immutable (Heb 6:7) and better than those of the Sinaitic Covenant (Heb 8:6).²³ Indeed, he is still looking forward to receiving the fulfillment of the promise of the eternal inheritance (Heb 9:15) made to Abraham.

If that inheritance was to be the firm possession of the land as Hebrews 11:9 most assuredly asserts, then the joint heirs of this promise with Abraham are not only Isaac and Jacob, but all who have received the same promise with him (Heb 11:9; Gal 4:28; 3:29; Matt 5:5).²⁴ Therefore the writer has no more intention of severing the physical and spiritual aspects of this rest than he has of isolating the promise of the geographical land of Canaan from the spiritual and material aspects of the kingdom of God. Both are germane to his argument.

The Number of Divine Rests

It is common to observe in some commentaries²⁵ on this passage that there are three or four rests mentioned in Hebrews 3:7—4:11. The list generally highlights three or four of the following:

1. The Divine Rest (4:1–3, 10–11) or Rest of Faith
2. The Creation Rest (4:4)
3. The Sabbath Rest (4:4, 9) or the Rest that Remains (6–9)
4. The Canaan Rest (4:8)
5. The Redemptive Rest (4:10)
6. The Eternal Rest (4:9)

While it is true that the writer does use the noun *katapausis* in 3:11, 18; 4:1, 3(*bis*), 5, 10, 11, and the verb *katapauomai* in 4:4, 8 along with the unique appearance of *sabbatismos*²⁶ in 4:10 to describe this rest, there is every indication that he conceives of a single rest from God. Indeed,

23. Cf. Kaiser, "New Covenant," XV, 11–23. Also see E. W. Hengstenberg, "The New Covenant," *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. (Grand Rapids, 1972), pp. 237–51.

24. Cf. Werner Foerster, "κληρονόμος," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel and trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, III (Grand Rapids, 1966), 781–85 for some thought provoking comments.

25. Cf. H. Orton Wiley, *The Epistle to Hebrews* (Kansas City, MO, 1959), pp. 140–44; Edgar Ainslie, *Christ the Anchor* (Orange, CA, n.d.), p. 83; Walter Wright, *Hebrews* (Chicago, 1952), pp. 42–51; Clarence S. Roddy, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, 1962), 46–48.

there may be aspects of this divine rest which are more obvious at one period than another, but it would be unfair to the writer's point to subdivide this rest. In fact, everyone is startled at first when he suddenly introduces the "sabbath rest" into his argument. But even here he directly connects it with the "rest" under discussion.

It is not that the Sabbath is a type of the eschaton or of heaven, but it was the commencement of the divine rest which the Creator entered into after his six days of creative work. He had intended that man should also share this sabbath with Him, but then there was the Fall. Now the way back to this sabbath rest is made available in promise form and finally in the actual inheritance of all that was promised. Therefore, the rest is distinctively God's single rest.

The Present Offer of the Divine Rest

Modern man can share in the ancient word made to Israel, for the promise "being left" (4:1) "remains for some to enter it" (4:6). Put it another way, the "sabbath rest" "remains" (4:9), so "let's labor to enter that rest" (4:11). Four times then the text emphasizes that this offer is still current and unfulfilled.

The way all men, past and present, can enter in is by believing the promise which is also called the "gospel" in 4:2. The text explicitly notes that this "good news" was preached in the wilderness even as it is preached to us, but because they did not exercise "faith" in that announced word of promise, they never entered this rest (4:2).

However, believers can and do enter that rest. They have believed and obeyed that promise (4:3, 7; cf. on "believe" and "obey" John 3:36).

The Nature of the Divine Rest

This special rest which God called "my rest" is an important aspect of the emerging promise theme (epangelias, 4:1) in both testaments. Since Paul is bold to equate this promise with the gospel, especially the phrase "In thy seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gal 3:8), it is no wonder that our writer is also bold to proclaim that the wilderness generation also had the same basic gospel proclaimed to them (4:2; cf 3:17 for the antecedent of "as well as unto them"). Thus, the correlation of some aspects of "my rest," promise and gospel are explicit.

Added to this base is another correlation: the rest into which God entered at the close of creation is linked with the rest into which all creatures must enter before they can be perfected. But again, the entrance to this rest is gained once again by faith, thereby making the same point made in the promise, gospel, rest correlation made above.

Another question still insists on projecting itself into our thoughts, and it is the one that Franz Delitzsch posed and then answered.

26. See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, 1964), p. 72 n. 13 for earliest attested extra-biblical occurrences of this word.

But it may be asked, although the elder generation that came out of Egypt perished in the wilderness, did not the younger generation, under Joshua, actually enter into the promised rest? To this question the author has now to reply; for it is a mistake to maintain, as most commentators do, that he at once identifies the entrance into God's rest promised by Moses, with that which is the true counterpart of the divine Sabbath after the works of creation. The entrance into rest which Moses promised was (as is expressed in a hundred passages, and as our author himself well knew) simply the taking possession of the land of Canaan. *But things combined in the promise were disjoined in the fulfilment. It became manifest that the taking possession of Canaan did not cover the whole extent of the promise and did not exhaust it.*²⁷

Therefore there was more to that rest than simply occupying the land of Canaan. It was that, indeed; but it was also combined with the whole extent of the spiritual aspects of the promise.

One can hardly do better than to view this "rest of God" in a way that involves a corporate solidarity of the whole rest with all its parts or as a collective single program which purposely embraces several *related aspects* realized in marked and progressive *stages*.

From the initial divine rest inaugurated at creation to its final realization once again in that millennial reign of the world's new sabbath with the intervening periods of proleptical entrance by faith and the momentary inheritance of Canaan by Israel, it is all one piece; a single divine rest with related aspects. This is the thesis championed by George N. H. Peters:

The land of Canaan is called "*rest*," and it is God's "*rest*"... It is not typical of something else, for that would overthrow the covenant and its promises.... After a res[urrection] from the dead, an entrance into this "*rest*" is to be obtained. Thus e.g. Ps 116 has "*return unto thy rest, O my soul; for the Lord dealt bountifully with thee.... I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living.*" The identical "*rest*" promised is the one obtained after a res. The Jews thus understood the "*rest*" to denote the land, and the making of this rest glorious, etc., to mean that under the Messiah it would be renewed and beautified. Paul in writing to Jews²⁸ does not contradict, but positively confirms this idea of the future inheritance, for instead of calling this rest the third heaven (as many unwarrantedly add), he (Heb 3 and 4) quotes Ps 95, and designates the same "*rest*" the Psalmist does into which certain ones could not enter, but fell in the wilderness. He argues that through unbelief we too shall be cut off, but through faith in Christ, and by the power of Jesus, we too shall enter in "*His rest*" according to the promise. ...*The unity of the Spirit and Divine Plan required, employs the reasoning best calculated to establish them in the only true idea of the inheritance promised to the Patriarchs and to all God's people.*²⁹

27. Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. by, Thomas L. Kingsbury (Edinburgh 1886), I, 195 (italics mine).

28. Peters will later refer to such works as Barnabas *Epistle* xv; Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* v; Justin Martyr *Questions and Answers* 71; *Dialogue with Trypho*; Papias as seen in Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* iii. 39; Tertullian *Adversus Marcionem* iii. 24, etc.

29. Geo. N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (New York and London, 1884), II, 441–42; see also pp. 448–60, 463, 467, 469, 470–71.

Conclusion

The rest of God is distinctively His own rest which He offers to share first with Israel and through them with all the sons of men who will also enter into it by faith. While there were antecedent aspects of that final rest to come, chiefly in the divine rest provided by the inheritance of the land of Canaan; because it was not accompanied by the inward response of faith to the whole promise of God, of which this rest was just a part, the land of Canaan still awaits Israel and the people of God. The rest of God, lost in the fall, again rejected by the older wilderness generation and subsequently by their erring children is still future to us in our day.

The dead will enter into its full enjoyment after their resurrection from the dead (Ps 116:7), therefore it is not to be identified with heaven. Rather it is fixed by Isaiah 11:10 as being “in that day” when “the Lord will extend his hand a second time to recover the remnant of his people” (Isa 11:11). In that eschatological setting, “his rest” (not “dwellings” as in RSV) shall be glorious. Then the Lord shall choose Jerusalem as His dwelling place, and this new David will say, “This is my resting place for ever” (Ps 132:14).