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CREATED TO REST
A
THEOLOGICAL REVIEW
OF THE
GLOBAL PAUSE FOR THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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MA (hons.)

Introduction

In November 2019, several persons in Wuhan, China became ill with a viral infection. As the cases grew, medical professionals determined that this was a new strain of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in December 2019. The disease was then named Coronavirus disease 2019, abbreviated as COVID-19. As the virus spread across the city and the country, the outbreak threatened the region and the globe.

Chinese officials implemented lockdowns in the most affected areas, but not soon enough to stem a global pandemic. By March 2020, over two hundred countries were noted as having a person who was tested positive for CoVid-19 (covid19.who.int) City by city, country by country, the call went out for persons to stop moving and stay home to slow or prevent the spread of this disease. Curfews, quarantines, isolation and social distancing orders as well as closed borders and lockdowns were implemented in all corners of the globe. Earth came to a rest. This pause resulted in significant ecological benefits across the globe. In this paper, I examine the Old Testament theology of Rest and the implications for humanity today.

1 Ecological Impact of CoVid-19 Pause

1.1 Seismic Quiet

In January 2020, the outbreak of COVID-19 was declared a global health emergency (Sohrabi, Alsafi et al 2020). By March, the World Health Organization recognised it as a pandemic. Emergency measures were put into effect to slow the spread of the virus. These emergency measures were different levels of lockdown, stay-in-place orders, and curfew. The result was a disruption to social and economic behaviour, production and travel (Lecocq, Hicks, van Noten et al 2020).

As the world slowed to a pause, scientists stated that Earth took notice. Seismologists around the world collectively reported a fifty percent reduction in seismic noise during the global lockdown(Lecocq, Hicks, van Noten et al 2020). For the first time, the effect of human

traffic on seismic activity was minimised for a clearer baseline. The Earth's natural seismic noise level could be detected in the stillness.

1.2 Nitrous oxide and Carbon emissions

The extreme shifts in daily activity allowed research scientists an exceptional opportunity to study their environmental impact. It was found that there was significant reduction in the levels of nitrous oxide emissions in the atmosphere (Bauwens, Compernelle et al 2020). Chinese residents experienced an 18 percent drop in carbon emissions between February and March (National Geographic 2020). This was accredited to the fall in coal consumption and industrial output (CarbonBrief 2020). This country's rest resulted in the avoidance of approximately 250 million metric tons of carbon pollution. Many persons reported via social media that the sky was clearer than they could ever remember. The stars of the night sky had returned.

According to National Geographic (2020), estimates for the European Union are that harmful emissions will reduce by approximately 400 million metric tons in 2020 due to the declining power demands and depressed manufacturing industry. The United States of America did not mandate a federal lockdown, though many states went into go-slow and stay-in-place modes. With their limited data, experts expect that the CoVid-19 pandemic will also have a ripple effect on their atmosphere. In the short-term, the reduction in ground transportation relayed a significant reduction in carbon emissions.

1.3 Wildlife and Marine Life

Scientists have noted the increased sightings of avian, wildlife and marine species in areas where human movement was reduced. Creatures of air, land, and sea have been observed in spaces where they would normally avoid due to human occupation (C19-wild.org). The lack of human invasive activity allowed the animals to temporarily reclaim parts of their natural habitat. According to UN Environment (2020), humans have been increasingly encroaching on the natural habitat of wildlife by deforestation, climate change and other harmful ecological practices.

2 Biblical Theology of Rest

2.1 Rest as part of Creation

In the beginning, Elohim created the heavens and the earth. When all was formed, He rested from His creative works on the seventh day. Genesis 2 verses 1- 3 states that He blessed and sanctified the seventh day because He had rested from creation on that day. From the Biblical story of creation, therefore, while all other six days had tangible and material elements created, this additional seventh day was only noted for being a day of rest.

The Hebrew word for 'rest' is שָׁבַת, which is transliterated as *shabat*. Shabat is also translated as "to cease or desist". In other words, shabat indicates coming to a complete pause or halt. This is the closing part of creation. Most cultures, historically and still today, use a seven-day week to reckon times for work and rest. Noteworthy, too, is that many languages call the seventh day by their translation of "shabat". In Spanish, it is el sábado. In Latin, it is Sabbatum. In Greek, it is Sabato.

2.2 Rest for Humanity

The Bible records that the people who were faithful to the Creator as their God, particularly the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were instructed to rest on the seventh day. This seventh day was called “the Sabbath of YHWH” (Exodus 20:10, Deuteronomy 5:14). Upon leaving captivity and slavery in Egypt, the Israelites were reminded to keep this day as sacred unto their God. From the Mosaic covenant, the Israelites with all others who were among them, including their servants, their animals and the foreigners were to do no work on the seventh day (Exodus 20:8-11).

During their journey through the wilderness into the Promised land of Canaan, the Israelites were again reminded of this instruction to rest at the end of the week. Exodus 16 records YHWH’s provision and instructions for this emancipated nation.

22On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much... 23He said to them, “This is what the LORD commanded: ‘Tomorrow is to be a day of sabbath rest, a holy sabbath to the LORD... 26Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any.’” 27Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none... 29Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where they are on the seventh day; no one is to go out.” 30So the people rested on the seventh day.

They were expected to go out and carry out their regular activities for six days and rest on the seventh day. No one was to go out. Provisions were to be secured prior to the night-and-day stay-in order. The people were commanded to observe a weekly rest.

2.3 Rest for the Land

Rest was not reserved for people only. The Mosaic laws had instructions regarding rest for the land. In an agriculture-based economy, Leviticus 25 explains that the people were to give the land a rest every seventh year, in honour of YHWH.

¹ The LORD said ... ‘When you enter the land I will give you, let it have a special time of rest, to honor the LORD. ³ You may plant seed in your field for six years, and you may trim your vineyards for six years and bring in their fruits. ⁴ But during the seventh year, you must let the land rest. This will be a special time to honor the LORD. You must not plant seed in your field or trim your vineyards. ⁵ You must not cut the crops that grow by themselves after harvest, or gather the grapes from your vines that are not trimmed. The land will have a year of rest.

The practice of leaving the land go fallow allows the soil to renew itself naturally. The nutrients and richness return after a period of rest. The food produced on the land during the period of rest is still good for consumption. However, no pest control, pruning, weeding or turning of the soil should take place. To date, many countries with a significant agricultural sector have policies which regulate fallow ground (TheEcologist.org 2008).

3 Humans' Responsibility to the Earth

3.1 To Serve and To Protect

According to Season of Creation (2010), it is a part of the believers' mission to 'serve' Earth. Genesis 2:15 in Hebrew reads,

וַיִּקַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם וַיִּנְתְּהוּ בְּגַן-עֵדֶן לְעֹבְדָהּ וּלְשֹׁמְרָהּ:

The words in bold are often translated "to work and to keep it". The first root word is עָבַד (a'bad) which means more than just to work. It means also 'to serve' – in the same way that a slave would serve a master or a priest would serve in worship. The limiting translation of tilling or cultivation is in the Niphal form of the verb, not the Qal as is used in this passage. The root of the second word is שָׁמַר (shamar) which also means 'to guard, watch, protect'. Therefore, Man was commissioned 'to serve and to protect' the earth.

As part of this guardian role, man is responsible for the care and oversight of all other lifeforms – birds, fish, animals and plants. Humans are the custodians of the quality of life on Earth. Its proper use, maintenance and rest are mankind's duty. Failure to serve and protect the Earth will result in the interruption of life as we know it as the land and seas will be renewed, and humanity will pay the price.

3.2 Advocate for Ecological Responsibility

In 2005, the National Council of Churches presented an open letter to the church and society in the United States of America regarding the need for better stewardship of the environment. The Council proposed that the Church should assume its role as advocate for ecological justice. It is part of the Church's mission, as instructed by God, to be the caretakers of the earth and our fellow men.

While climate change and ecological abuses have been taking place, the Church in general has been silent. This duty of protector of the earth has been left to independent foundations or individual advocates. Rest for mankind and rest for the earth should be regulated with written policies and guidelines to secure a sustainable environment for the future generations.

Butt (2001) recognised the need for rest in the earth. Recalling the American experience of the midwestern Dust Bowl of the 1930s, Butt pointed out the consequences of abusing and misusing the land and not giving the land rest. The period of rejuvenation is needed for a sustainable and habitable land.

3.3 Recognise the Creator

Capp (2013) states that a lack of rest is prompted by wrong motives. In his theology of rest, Capp points out that rest reminds humans that they are not God. It is YHWH alone who needs neither slumber nor sleep, according to Psalm 121:4. Rest requires that humans recognise, therefore, that we are not in control. Humans cannot maintain a "24/7" schedule for 365 days per year. They must relinquish control to others and surrender to repose. When one relies on the Creator for sustenance, rest is accepted as the gift He gave and a reminder of His continued providence.

3.4 Self-regulation and Accountability

Norman Habel (2011) proported that the church included a Season of Creation in the liturgical calendar as a reminder that we are responsible and accountable for the rest of creation. We are called to honour and defend it for our generation and for those to come. Williams (2015) calls for acknowledgement of the ‘homo energos’ – the current evolutionary phase of mankind which is globally dependent on a lifestyle of high energy consumption. This consumption must be moderated by a public understanding of man’s responsibility to care for the environment.

5 Conclusion

Rest is critical to the cycle of production and rejuvenation that maintains life on Earth. The 2020 global pandemic gave humanity and earth pause to rest from a constant bustle and to reflect on what is important. Our seeming need to consume immense amounts of energy and maintain a ‘24/7’ world, constantly on the go, was halted as Nature refracted the overwhelming impact on Earth’s resources.

To restore balance, the land and the people must routinely rest. Mankind and nature were designed by the Creator to enjoy periods of rest on a regular basis. Humans must be ecologically responsible in our endeavours, maintaining balance across all ecosystems. If we fail to regulate ourselves judiciously, Nature will force humans to pause as with the case of the Coronavirus 2019 outbreak which stemmed from an exorbitant consumption of wildlife animals in Wuhan, China.

The impact of the global pandemic should not be soon forgotten. The insights gained scientifically warrant further study and action by governments and by individuals. Self-regulation guided by the biblical principles of rest and stewardship of the earth is effectively the best way to move towards a sustainable environment. The church must add its voice to the advocacy for ecological responsibility within the congregation and also in the community.

Rest is beneficial to humans physically, socially, spiritually and mentally. The financial benefits of long-term appropriate use and management of earth’s resources outweigh short-term gains by exorbitant consumption. The twenty-first century level of energy consumption and demand for production must be counter-balanced with the impact on the body and the environment. “Sabbath” was made for man, and Man was put to serve and protect the earth, including by providing scheduled times of rest.

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