

# God's Rest in Hebrews 4:1–11

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## Abstract

The 'rest' mentioned in Hebrews 4:1–11 has been used by a number of 'progressive' creationists<sup>1,2</sup> as 'evidence' that the Bible can be reconciled with the billions of years postulated by evolutionists/uniformitarians. Because this passage includes a quotation from Genesis 2:2, God's rest has been equated with the seventh day of creation. Considering God has been resting from His creative work since the time of creation, it is argued that the seventh day is still continuing and is therefore not a 24-hour day. These same progressive creationists then argue that if the seventh day was not a literal 24-hour day, then the other six days are also not 24-hour days.

However, this argument is based on faulty exegesis and a total neglect of the historical and literary context, and is therefore fundamentally flawed.

## God's REST: What is IT?

The notion of 'rest' is first mentioned in Hebrews 3:11, which is part of a quotation from Psalm 95:7–11, regarding the unbelief of the Israelites after they fled Egypt (3:18). God punished them by not allowing any adult over 20 (apart from Caleb and Joshua) to enter His 'rest' (Numbers 14:28–35), which was the Land of Canaan, the Promised Land.

In Hebrews 4:1, the author states that the promise of entering God's rest still stands. However, verses 2–3a make it clear that he is now talking about entering the Kingdom of God, rather than possessing the land. Because of this, the 'Promised Land' is set up as a *type* of the kingdom, and both may be referred to as 'God's rest.'

## God's rest AND Genesis 2:2

In Hebrews 4:4, the author quotes Genesis 2:2 to point out that the invitation to enter God's 'rest' has not just been there since the time of the Exodus, but has actually been there ever since the creation of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross, H. N., *Creation and Time*, NavPress, 1994, Colorado Springs, CO, USA.

<sup>2</sup> Stoner, D. W., *A New Look at an Old Earth*, Harvest House, Eugene, OR, USA, 1997.

The Greek word translated 'rested' is *katepausen* (*katepausen*), an aorist active indicative verb — the same word used in the Septuagint's<sup>3</sup> (LXX) translation of Genesis 2:2 to render the Hebrew *wayyishbot*, a waw-consecutive imperfect.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that the primary sense of *katepausen* is that of ceasing from labour, and coming to a state of rest. The two most respected Greek lexicons give the definitions '(cause to) stop, bring to an end,'<sup>5</sup> 'to cease one's work or activity, resulting in a period of rest.'<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew *wayyishbot* also has a similar meaning: 'cease, desist, rest'<sup>7</sup> or 'cease, stop...stop working.'<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the exact same form of this verb is translated as 'stopped' in Joshua 5:12 and Job 32:1. Note also, the prepositional phrase 'from all his work.' God did not simply 'stop' or 'rest,' He stopped/rested *from all His work*.

In Biblical Greek, the aorist tense is generally used to refer to an event without actually saying anything specific about its nature or duration.<sup>9</sup> However, in the indicative mood, the aorist usually indicates past time. Therefore, based on the grammar of Genesis 2:2 in the LXX and Hebrews 4:4, all that can be said for sure about this rest is that God rested on the seventh day, which was in the past. It is not possible to determine from the grammar alone how long this rest lasted or whether it is still in progress. The specific nature of this rest must be determined from the context. Therefore, since God ceased from all His creative work in the past, and He has not created again, it is fair to conclude that God is still resting *from His creative work*.

Note, however, that the aorist indicative can have an *ingressive* sense; that is, the focus is on the *beginning* of the action or an *entrance into a state*.<sup>10</sup> Given that God is still resting from His creative work, the author of Hebrews and the translators of the LXX appear to be focussing on the fact that on the seventh day '...God *began* to rest.' Note also, that the Hebrew *wayyishbot*, a waw-consecutive imperfect, can have a similar meaning.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore God's rest should be viewed as a long period of time beginning with the seventh day of creation, not as equivalent to the seventh day.<sup>12</sup> Note also that this

<sup>3</sup> The Septuagint was a Greek translation of the OT composed in ca. 250 BC, which was in widespread use by Jews outside Israel in NT times.

<sup>4</sup> Kautzsch, E., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, p. 133, translated by Cowley, A. E., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1910, explains this as: "...progress in the sequence of time, is regularly indicated by a *pregnant* and [in Hebrew, the letter waw] (*called waw consecutive*)..."

<sup>5</sup> Bauer, W., Gingrich, F. W. and Danker, F. W., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Louw, J. P. and Nida, E. A., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, F., Driver, S. R. and Briggs, C. A., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Hendrickson, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Holladay, W. L. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1988.

<sup>9</sup> See Wallace, D.B., *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, p. 554, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Wallace, Ref. 9, p. 558.

<sup>11</sup> The waw-consecutive imperfect can also have an ingressive sense. See Waltke, B. K. O'Connor, M., *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990, p. 554.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Ellingworth, P., *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, p. 249, 1993.

reference to Creation confirms that the author has gone beyond the events of the Exodus, and that the Kingdom of God is now in view.

## Entering God's rest

Hebrew 4:3 makes it clear that those who believe will enter God's rest, and this concept is picked up again in verses 9–11.

Verse 10 contains a couple of important grammatical features, but unfortunately this verse is often poorly translated in English versions. The first element of interest is the relationship of εἰσελθὼν (*eiselthōn* = 'having entered') to κατεπαύσεν, especially in regard to their timing. Κατεπαύσεν is an aorist active indicative denoting an action (or the beginning of an action) in past time. Εἰσελθὼν is an aorist active participle, and therefore inherits its timing from the main verb,<sup>13</sup> which in this case is κατεπαύσεν. This is highlighted in the NASB's translation: '*For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His.*' This rendering is certainly the most accurate reflection of the timing of 'entering' and 'resting.'<sup>14</sup>

The other grammatical feature is the inclusion of the word 'did' in the second clause. Although the word 'did' is not actually in the text itself, as indicated by the italics in the KJV, it rightly belongs there. The supply of an 'understood' verb is a common occurrence in Greek. This phenomenon is known as *ellipsis* and often occurs when clauses are conjuncted. The missing verb in the second clause is understood to be the same verb as in the first clause. In this case, the understood verb is κατεπαύσεν (*katēpausen*) which, as noted above, is an aorist active indicative denoting an action (or beginning of an action) in past time. Therefore, translations such as the NIV, NASB, NRSV, RSV, and NKJV are correct in rendering it as '*...just as God did from his.*' Again, this is an *understood* word, not an *added* word. Greek and English have very different grammars so a literal word-for-word translation is often not a very accurate one and in some cases, not even possible.

In light of the above, verse 10 would best be translated: '*for anyone who has entered God's rest, has also rested from his own work, just as God did from His.*'

People who believe will enter God's rest and cease to do their own work just as God ceased to do His (4:9–10). This does not mean that God has been idle, since Jesus Christ, who is fully God and fully Man, continuously upholds His creation (Col. 1:16–17), and He stated that His Father is working (John 5:17). Rather, the completion of creation marks the end of a magnificent whole. Leon Morris writes:

*'There was nothing to add to what God had done, and he entered a rest from creating, a rest marked by the knowledge that everything that he had made was very good (Genesis 1:31). So we should think of the rest as something like the*

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<sup>13</sup> Wallace, Ref. 9, pp. 614–615.

<sup>14</sup> The NIV, although usually very reliable, is a bit too 'free' here, as is the liberal and ecumenist NRSV.

*satisfaction that comes from accomplishment, from the completion of a task, from the exercise of creativity.*<sup>15</sup>

There is also a sense in which entering the Kingdom of God implies a ceasing from one's own work and resting securely on what Christ has done.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Jesus Himself spoke about rest for the souls of men (Matthew 11:28–30).

## **Conclusion**

The 'rest' of Hebrews 4 clearly refers to the Kingdom of God. This type of rest was alluded to right back at the time of creation, as well as at the time of the Exodus. Nowhere in the text is it equated with the seventh day of creation, nor is there any grammatical or contextual data suggesting any such equation. Thus, the progressive creationists' claim that the seventh day of creation is still continuing is without any exegetical foundation whatsoever, making it a worthless argument for non-literal creation days.

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<sup>15</sup> Morris, L. and Burdick, D.W., *Hebrews and James*, Expositors Bible Commentary, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, p. 41, 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Morris and Burdick, Ref. 15, p. 43.