

# Šabbat, Tasāwa, or both? Connections Between the Qur'anic and the Biblical Seventh Day of Creation

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## Introduction

In my first semester of learning Arabic at Boston University, we were learning the days of the week and our native speaking, Muslim teacher was enunciating the proper pronunciation. When it came to pronouncing Saturday—*al-sabt*—she was quick to emphasize, and later continuously drill the idea into our heads, that we should avoid at all costs pronouncing a subtle 'a' in the middle of the word—*al-sabat*—so as to avoid being confused with a Jew. In some Muslim countries, she told us, the prejudice would be immediately felt. This story illustrates the difficulty of speaking about the Sabbath in a Muslim context.

Muslims argue that Friday is the day of worship, while Jews and other Christian denominations (such as Adventists) defend the sanctification of the Sabbath. This distinction, in Islamic history, has been one of the major factors of religious conflict. We will argue in this paper that there is a creative way for Adventists to initiate a dialogue with Muslims on overlapping concepts about the Sabbath. More specifically, we will argue that the Qur'anic depiction of Allah as establishing himself (Arabic *تَسَاو*, *tasāwa*) on his throne on the seventh day of creation parallels similar descriptions of deities in Ancient Near Eastern creation accounts and Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible, and Second Temple Judaism. We will point to two take aways from this similarity: 1) that the act of Allah sitting on his throne after creation is part of a string of tradition that goes back to ancient Mesopotamian religions and makes its way into Islam; and 2) that overlapping concepts such as this one may move us away from polemical arguments about the day of rest and toward the establishment of common ground of beliefs between

Adventists and Muslims; in addition to common ground, we will argue that, understood in light of this tradition, the Sabbath can be valued by the Muslim community given the Sabbath day's theocentricity.

### **The seventh day of creation in Islam**

Much unlike the Biblical accounts of creation, the narrative of Allah's creation is scattered throughout the Qur'an. Instead of a continuous story, what we find are bits of information in a handful of Sūrah's. Though there are plenty of Sūrah's that attest to the fact that Allah is the creator of heaven and earth (2:29; 7:54; 10:3; 11:7; 20:4; 25:59; 32:4; 50:38; 57:4; 79:27-33; 91:5-10), there is very little else contained in the Islamic Scripture. We know from several accounts that Allah created the heavens and the earth in six days (20:6; 25:59; 32:4; 50:38; 54:7). We also know that he created the earth and its components, followed by the creation of the seven heavens (41:9-12).<sup>1</sup> The closest we get of any order of creation during these six days is in Sūrah 79:27-33, which reads:

"Are you a more difficult creation or is the heaven? Allah constructed it. He raised its ceiling and proportioned it. And He darkened its night and extracted its brightness. And after that He spread the earth he extracted from it its water and its pasture, and the mountains He set firmly as provision for you and your grazing livestock."

Though these verses show that Allah first made the distinction between night and day and then created the earthly nature, it is far from Yahweh's detailed daily checklist in the Genesis account. Finally, the only other piece of information we can attain from the Qur'an about creation is that, after the six days of intense work, Allah was not tired. According to Sūrah 50:38: "We created the heavens, the earth and what is between them in six periods, and no weariness touched Us."

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<sup>1</sup> The creation of seven heavens is repeated many times in the Qur'an (2:29; 23:17; 65:12; 67:3; 71:15-16; 78:12).

This last detail about the story of creation is no mere afterthought. Many scholars have noted its apparent polemical intention. By adding that Allah was not tired, this part of the narrative serves as a challenge to the Judeo-Christian's depiction of God resting after His creative act on the seventh day of the week. To this day, Muslim apologists respond to the question of Sabbath keeping by citing verse of the Qur'an that deny his becoming weary.

If God was not tired after creating the heavens and earth in six days, then what did he do? Still in the Qur'an, we have a glimpse of the answer. In Sūrah 57:4, it reads: "It is He who created the heavens and earth in six days and then established Himself above the Throne." The context of the verse is an attempt to establish Allah's knowledge of everything that goes on throughout his creation. The previous verse tells us that "He is the First and the Last, the Ascendant and the Intimate, and He is, of all things, Knowing." More specifically, the passages intend to impress the reader with Allah's watchfulness over everything the believer does, for "He is with you wherever you are. And Allah, of what you do, is Seeing." (v. 5) Given its context, the verse that asserts that Allah establishes himself on his throne after the six days of creation seems to underscore his dominion over creation.

Though the Qur'anic verse cited earlier indicates that Allah established himself on his throne, it is not clear that this happens on the seventh day of creation. For this information, Muslims have relied on details given in the Hadith. The Hadith, in the Islamic tradition, is the collection of sayings and actions of prophet Mohammad, considered equally authoritative and inspired as the Qur'an. The collections that are considered reliable, that is, those which can be reliably traced back to the companions of the prophet, are closely studied as auxiliary material for understanding Islamic theory and practice. Hadiths about the week of creation vary

significantly in content, sometimes even rendering contradictory stories.<sup>2</sup> From the collections of Hadith on the week of creation, it is very clear that Mohammad and his companions were mostly concerned with a detailed account of the sixth day (*jumaa'*), when Adam and Eve are created and which is established as the Muslim day of prayer.

Nonetheless, in a Hadith passed down by Ibn Abbas, the uncle of prophet Mohammad, we are given more detailed information about the seventh day. In this Hadith, Mohammad is said to have been approached by a group of Jews asking about the sequence of the days of creation. After listing all of the things created on each day of the week (the earth on Sunday and Monday, mountains on Tuesday, trees, water, cities, and the cultivable land on Wednesday, heaven on Thursday, and stars, moon and the angels in the first part of Friday and

In the first of these three hours He created the terms (of human life), who would live and who would die. In the second, He cast harm upon everything that is useful for mankind. And in the third, (He created) Adam and had him dwell in Paradise. He commanded Iblis to prostrate himself before Adam, and He drove Adam out of Paradise at the end of the hour. When the Jews asked: What then, Muhammad? He said: 'Then He sat straight upon the Throne.'

Though the passage does not explicitly relate Allah's sitting upon his throne on Saturday, the rest of the Hadith confirms this interpretation. The Jews tell Mohammad that he would be correct if he had finished the narrative with "Then God rested." Mohammad's reaction to this suggestion betrays the religious conflict:

Whereupon the Prophet got very angry, and it was revealed: 'We have created the heavens and the earth and what is between them in six days, and fatigue did not touch Us. Thus be patient with what you say.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Only to mention a few regarding Allah's activity during the Saturday of creation, one Hadith (52:10) speaks of Allah creating clay on Saturday: Abu Huraira, "*Book of Characteristics of the Day of Judgment, Paradise, and Hell*," Sunnah.com, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/52/10>) and another that he created the earth (Abu Huraira, "*The Book of Miscellaneous ahadith of Significant Values*," Sunnah.com, <https://sunnah.com/riyadussalihin/18/47>).

<sup>3</sup> Franz Rosenthal, trans. *The History of al-Tabari, Volume 1: General Introduction and from the Creation to the Flood* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989) 188.

A very similar story is recounted in a Hadith transmitted through 'Ikrimah.<sup>4</sup> Allah's throne, in Islamic tradition, is said to be one of the things that he had created long before the creation of the heavens and the earth. Nonetheless, at the end of the week of creation, Allah sits back on it and, according to several other Hadiths, writes a Book that states "My mercy has preceded my anger."<sup>5</sup>

The Qur'an and the Hadith are far from being the first religious documents to depict God sitting upon his throne after an act of creation. As we will see in the second part of our paper, there is a long tradition of this idea in Mesopotamian and Israelite religions.

### **An Ancient Tradition**

The tradition of a deity sitting on a throne after a creative deed is commonplace in the ancient Near East, the world in which the Hebrew Bible authors lived. Out of the hundreds of texts from that part of the world, two in particular clearly describe the connection between creation and the enthronement of a deity. The first is one of the Mesopotamian creation stories, the Enuma Elish, and the second is the Ugaritic epic known by scholars as "The Ba'al Cycle." I will briefly summarize them both.

The seven tablets that compose the epic of Enuma Elish narrate the intricate relationship between theogony, the creation of gods, and cosmogony, the creation of the world, in the Mesopotamian thought. The text describes in detail the birth of several gods and the war that erupted between them before the creation of the world. The tablets depict the battle between the

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<sup>4</sup> "Then, when they [the Jews] asked about Saturday and mentioned God's rest(ing on it), he exclaimed: God be praised! God then revealed: 'We have created the heavens and the earth and what is between them in six days, and fatigue did not touch Us'" (Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari*, 190).

<sup>5</sup> Abu Hurairah, "Book of Oneness, Uniqueness of Allah (Tawheed)," Sunnah.com, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/97/179>.

armies of Enki, the god of freshwater, and of Tiamat, the primordial goddess of salt water. From among Enki's troops, Marduk emerged to become the victorious warrior against Tiamat and her general Qingu. Marduk killed Tiamat and created the heavens and the earth with the carcass of her body. He also made her eyes bring forth the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. With Qingu's blood, Ea created humanity, to carry the service of the gods.

After these creative acts, all the gods praised Marduk for his military prowess manifested during the battle and offered him the building of a shrine. They said: "Let us make a shrine of great renown: Your chamber will be our resting place wherein we may repose. Let us erect a shrine to house a pedestal wherein we may repose when we finish (the work)." (6:51-54) What follows is Marduk's acceptance of the proposition and his request to build Babylon, the city where his shrine is located (6:55-58). After its completion, Marduk "sat in splendour before them" (Akk. *ina tarbāti maḥaršunu ūšibamma*).<sup>6</sup>

My second example, the Ba'al cycle, which was discovered among the thousand cuneiform tablets from the ancient city of Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra), sheds light into the Canaanite religion of certain parts of the Levant in the 2nd millennium BC.<sup>7</sup> It describes the obstacles the storm god Ba'al conquered before becoming king on Mount Šaphon. The six tablets can be summarized as follows: in the beginning, the god 'El, the head of the Ugaritic pantheon, showed favoritism towards Yam, the god of the sea, but later he favored Ba'al, the storm god. 'El's shared favoritism led to a battle between the two gods. According to the text, Baal prevailed over Yam and became king. Given that any king needs a palace, Baal requested the construction of a royal abode for himself. When 'Athirat (biblical 'Ašerah) received a

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<sup>6</sup> For a critical edition of the entire epic, see Philippe Talon, *The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth: Enūma Eliš*, SAACT 4 (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2005). For the date and purpose of the Mesopotamian creation epic, see Jonathan Tenney, "The Elevation of Marduk Revisited: Festivals and Sacrifices at Nippur During the High Kassite Period," *JCS* 68 (2016) 153-180.

<sup>7</sup> Dennis Pardee, "The Ba'lu Myth," *COS* 1:241-274.

positive answer from the god 'El for Baal's request, the project was executed by the god Kothar-wa-Khasis.

There is a critical similarity between this story and Enuma Elish: both stories present a god (Marduk and Ba'al) defeating deities associated with water (Tiamat and Yam). In the Near Eastern ideology, water was a symbol of chaos. A god capable of taming the forces of chaos was seen as capable of establishing order, i.e., creation. Moreover, the victorious deity triumphantly sits on his throne after his military achievement. Though there is no explicit mention of a throne in the Ba'al epic, the gifting of a palace implies the presence of a royal seat.

In sum, the Enuma Elish and the Ba'al Cycle are ancient Near Eastern examples of the tradition depicting gods sitting on their throne after completing their creative work.

Now, there are echoes of this tradition in the Hebrew Bible. The author of Genesis 1, for example, starts his account describing a chaotic world (Heb. *tohu wavohu* [תהו ובהו]) where there was darkness on the face of the abyss (Heb. *tehom* [תהום], word that echoes 'Tiamat'), and where the Spirit of God hovered over the waters. There is no battle between God and other deities in Genesis 1. He is sovereign over all his creation from the first verse onwards. It is because God has the chaos under control that he can create the world as described throughout the six days of Genesis 1. On the seventh day, Yahweh rested (or ceased) from the work he has done up until that point. Instead of Yahweh's triumphant entry into his temple and sitting on his throne, similar to what Marduk and Ba'al did in their stories, the creation account of Genesis portrays Yahweh resting from his activities. Despite this difference, I argue that Yahweh's rest on the seventh day echoes the sitting of Marduk and Ba'al in their royal abodes. First, the verbal root *šabbat* "to rest," (*שבת*, *š-b-t*) reminds the reader of the verbal root "to sit" (*שב*, *y-š-b*). The similarity between the two roots increases when we notice that Genesis 2:2 uses a prefix conjugation of the

root *šbt*, adding the consonant *y* (י) in front of *š-b-t* (ישבת). You can see the similarity between these roots in this slide. Graphically, *šbt* (שבת) resembles *yšb* (ישב). An attentive reader of the Hebrew text would notice the graphic similarity between to rest (שבת) and to sit (ישב).<sup>8</sup> Second, as Abraham Heschel has argued, Sabbath is God’s sanctuary in time. It is not a coincidence that the same Hebrew word that is used in Isa 58:13 to describe the sabbath as a “delight,” the Hebrew term *oneg* (ענג), is used in Isa 13:22, and only in this passage, to portray the palaces of the city of Babylon. Thus, I suggest that Yahweh’s resting on Sabbath in Genesis 2:1-3 is analogous to Marduk’s and Ba’al’s seating on their thrones in their royal palaces.

Another echo of this tradition in the Hebrew Bible is Psalm 29. This Psalm describes a theophanic thunderstorm moving from the Mediterranean Sea toward the coast of Lebanon and further inland.<sup>9</sup> The voice of the Lord, i.e., a thunder, is against the mighty waters in v. 2, just as Marduk and Ba’al fought against deities associated with water in their respective stories. The Psalm is clearly about the creation of the world. For instance, the reference to the stormy waters is analogous to the chaos at the beginning of Genesis 1. The final verses of the Psalm take the reader to God’s temple. In 29:9, the psalmist presents worshippers proclaiming “Glory” to God and also a description of him seated (Heb. ישב, *yšb*) over “the flood” (מבול), an important Hebrew word for chaotic waters (29:10). It is because God defeated the chaos that He was enthroned as a king forever. Though the Sabbath does not appear in this chapter, God’s enthronement occurs right after creation just as the Sabbath follows the six days of creation in Genesis 1.

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<sup>8</sup> This observation is grounded in the recent work of Jeffrey Cooley (Boston College) on Judean epistemology. Cooley argues that the Judean scribes responsible for the Hebrew Bible created knowledge through a careful analysis of their documents, including orthographic details and the disposition of letters on the text, just as their Mesopotamian counterparts did with their clay tablets. See Jeffrey Cooley, “Judean Scribalism, Documentary Epistemology, and the Name ישראל,” in *The Scaffolding of Our Thoughts: Essays on Assyriology and the History of Science in Honor of Francesca Rochberg*, eds. C Jay Crisostomo et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2018) 207-252.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting from Heaven: God as Warrior and as God of Heaven in the Hebrew Psalter and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography* (Fribourg: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999) 84-100, 288-290.

The correlation between Sabbath and Yahweh's throne is also perceptible in certain texts produced in the last centuries before the Christian Era, a period known as Second Temple Judaism. Among them is the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, a series of 13 songs, one for each of the first 13 sabbaths of the year.<sup>10</sup> These songs depict the worship around the throne of God in his heavenly temple.<sup>11</sup>

The most important songs for our study are #9-13, which describes the heavenly temple, the holy of holies, and the throne of God. These songs take the reader from outside the heavenly temple into the holy of holies. The 9<sup>th</sup> song describes the outer court of the temple, vestibules, and the holy place. The 10<sup>th</sup> song takes the worshipper near the veil separating the holy place from the holy of holies. The fragmentary 11<sup>th</sup> song ends with a presentation of the holy of holies and the praise of multiple chariot thrones (an imagery known from the book of Ezekiel).<sup>12</sup> Finally, the 12<sup>th</sup> song reaches the apotheosis with priestly angels offering sacrifices to God, who is seated on his throne. By singing these songs every Sabbath, the worshipers could not help but to associate the hours of the seventh-day of the week with God seated on his throne in his holy temple.

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<sup>10</sup> Most likely they were repeated every quarter, see J. Maier, "Shîrê 'Ôlat hash-Shabbat: Some Observations on their Calendric Implications and on their Style," in *The Madrid Qumran Congress*, eds. J. Treballe and L. Vegas Montaner (Leiden: Brill, 1992) 2:544.

<sup>11</sup> For a critical edition of all these documents, see Carol Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice: A Critical Edition* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985). For a general introduction and discussion of the main themes of these songs, Mark Smith, "Biblical and Canaanite Notes to the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice from Qumran," *RevQ* 12/48 (1987) 581-588; James H. Charlesworth and Carol A. Newsom, *Angelic Liturgy: Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999); Newsom, "Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice," in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, eds. Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Noam Mizrahi, "The Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice and Biblical Priestly Literature: A Linguistic Consideration," *HTR* 104 (2010) 33-58. For an Adventist perspective on these documents, see William H. Shea, "Sabbath Hymns for the Heavenly Sanctuary," in *Symposium on Revelation, Book I*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992) 391-407.

<sup>12</sup> Noam Mizrahi, "The Eleventh Song of the Sabbath Sacrifice: Literary Form and Exegetical Content," *Tarbiš* 87 (2019) 5-35 [Hebrew].

## **SDAs and Muslims**

As we have seen in the second part of this paper, there are clear examples of the deity establishing himself on a throne after an act of creation in prominent texts from Ancient Mesopotamia, in the Hebrew Bible, and Second Temple Judaism. Because of the reduced scope of this paper, and of our own academic training, we did not analyze examples in the New Testament, though there is at least one clear reference in the Book of Revelation. The examples cited testify to an ancient tradition of God sitting upon his throne in order to establish his sovereignty over the created order. God, like a monarch, sits and receives praises both for his power and for his dominion. This tradition is clearly depicted in the Qur'anic story of creation when Allah, after creating the heavens and the earth in six days, establishes himself (istawaa) on his throne and writes in his book. We do not take this as mere coincidence. Our first argument is that it points to a string of tradition, picked up by the authors of the Qur'an and the Hadith. This first argument, however, is the least important one. In fact, the existence or not of a string of tradition is not even necessary for our second argument, which focuses on the practical relevance of this commonality for inter-religious dialogue.

As we mentioned in the introduction, Jewish-Muslim and Christian-Muslim relations have been strained since their inception, and the sanctified day of each religious tradition has been one of the culprits. Though many Adventists have worked hard to bridge the religious gap between Adventism and Islam in recent times, the 24-hour gap between Juma'a (Friday) and Sabbath has seemed unsurpassable. In this paper, we have pointed to a possible way of filling that gap: God seated on his throne after six days of creation. First, we have shown that the Islamic imagery of God sitting upon his throne on the seventh day is compatible with those

found in the Old Testament. Second, we have shown that the purpose of this image—to establish God's sovereignty over creation—is one that both Christians and Muslims would be happy to endorse.

There is a third, and possibly more shaky argument to be made. The Hadiths reason overwhelmingly that Friday is the day of rest in honor of the creation of humans. The practice seems to reflect a fairly anthropocentric mindset. By requesting the Muslim to pay further attention to the day on which Allah establishes himself as king of creation, Adventists can suggest a more theocentric principle, one that, in fact, would blend well with the theocentric Islamic theology and worship. Though it is on Friday that God creates the beings who most fully share his attributes, it is on the Sabbath day that Allah establishes his two most important attributes: his sovereignty and his mercy.

Based on this study, we would like to suggest that conversations between Adventists and Muslims about the proper day of rest need not be apologetic or polemical in nature, but may be constructed upon shared agreement.