

The Editor's Page

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We regret that this issue has been so long delayed, and we apologize to our subscribers and faithful readers for making them wait so long to receive it. Unfortunately, a journal like this operates entirely on a voluntary basis, leaving us little control over publication deadlines. Those who submit the papers for publication do so on a voluntary basis, on their own schedule. Often we struggle to find enough authors willing to submit papers for publication. Those who referee the papers are valued volunteers, busy professionals who must take time out of their regularly scheduled activities to read and respond to the papers. We could not exist without them, and we are grateful for their service to the journal, but often there are long delays in trying to find referees who are willing and able to sacrifice their time to referee the papers, then in waiting for them to complete the task between their many other responsibilities.

After the refereeing process, we have to get the authors to find the time and readiness to do the necessary work of revision. Even the editors themselves are volunteers with full-time jobs who struggle to find the time to keep the papers moving through the process toward publication. Final editing generally requires working with the authors again to work out the bugs and make sure all corrections are acceptable before publication. Ed Christian takes care of this editing and assembling the final product for publication, proofing it, and getting it through the printing stage. April Younker is responsible for subscriptions and the huge task of circulation, mailing the journal to over 2000 readers.

I am grateful for their significant contribution to this task, but the responsibility for timeliness falls at my feet. I wish we could do better. The decision has been made to produce a double issue for 2008 in an attempt not to fall farther behind in our publication schedule. We solicit your pa-

REYNOLDS: EDITOR'S PAGE

tience and forgiveness, but even more, your contributions to the process. If you have a paper to submit for publication, or if you are willing to assist us with refereeing papers, please contact me at reynolds@southern.edu and let me know what you can do to help us.

Some of the papers in this issue come from the ATS “Current Issues in Eschatology” symposium held at Andrews University, March 1-3, 2007. Podcasts of all of the presentations from that symposium (and others) may be downloaded and listened to at the ATS website (www.atsjats.org). We encourage our readers to take advantage of this service from ATS.

Revelation-Inspiration Model of a Relational God¹

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The most popular view of God among Christian theologians is a timeless God. This view is indebted to Parmenides (ca. 540–470 B.C.),² Plato (ca. 427–ca. 347 B.C.),³ and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.).⁴ Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy perceived the world of the gods (*noetos*) as the real world, and the world of humans (*aisthetes*) as merely a shadow of the real world. Between the two worlds is a chasm, an unbridgeable gulf (*chorismos*). Logically this denies the incarnation. Still, the timeless view, paradoxically, is held by theologians who accept the incarnation, but attempt to unite two mutually exclusive worldviews. In classical theology, a timeless God is considered to be immutable, impassible, and non-historical.⁵ Some scholars who recognize Greek influence on theology are John B. Cobb, Jr., David Ray Griffin,⁶ Millard Erickson,⁷ and

¹ NIV used throughout unless otherwise stated.

² Plato, *Parmenides*, *The Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1977), 4/10:237; 4/11:239, 241; 4/12:249-251; 4/13:255. See my *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 2003), 1:4-14.

³ Plato, *Timaeus*, *The Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1981), 9:75-83.

⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, *The Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1977), 141 (12.6.1); 149 (12.7.5-6); 151 (12.7.9); *The Physics* *The Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1970), 391 (4.11.220a); *On the Heavens* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1986), 4:91.

⁵ Plato, Aristotle, and Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.—50 A.D.) are Greek sources for the immutable and impassible views of God found in classical theology.

⁶ John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 8. “This concept derives from the Greeks.”

GULLEY: REVELATION-INSPIRATION MODEL OF A RELATIONAL GOD

James L. Garrett Jr.⁸ D. A. Carson sees divine impassibility as a result “of certain strands of Greek metaphysical thought, strands which insist that emotion is dangerous, treacherous, and often evil. Reason must be set against emotion; and vulnerability is a sign of weakness.” This thinking is found in Platonic and neo-Platonic writings, in Aristotle’s “unmoved mover,” in Stoic writings, and in Anselm’s *Prosologium* (chapter 6).⁹

The purpose of this article is threefold. The first purpose is to question the traditional view of God as timeless, because a timeless God cannot be the God of revelation and inspiration. Evidence for this is shown from the effects an alleged timeless God has on doctrines. The second purpose is to present the biblical God as a relational Trinity in an eternal, divine, reciprocal relationship of love, in an inner-history of temporal acts of give and take among themselves. Rather than being frozen in simultaneity (as a timeless God would be), a relational God is able to enter time and meet humans where they are, accommodating to their cognitive level to pass on revelation to them so they can communicate it in their own language, logic, and literature to be understood by readers. Revelation is not confined to Christ, for Scripture is revelation and not an ordinary book. Scripture does not merely witness to revelation as if a record of human responses to God’s revelation, and hence a human book. Revelation is given to Scripture, for the written words of Scripture are an indissoluble union of the divine and the human (as we find in Jesus Christ the living Word). Phenomenological insights are gained from Scripture to illustrate how God related to biblical writers in the revelation-inspiration process: (i) Christ’s use of the OT as authoritative proves it is divine revelation; (ii) Christ spoke the words of the Father, and the Spirit speaks the words of Christ, indicating that prophets speak/write the words of God (1 Thess 2:13); (iii) God is love (1 John 4:8-16), Christ loved people, and the fruit of the Spirit is love (Gal 5:22a). God’s loving

⁷ Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 56. “This concept of God as completely unchanging, unaffected by anything external to himself and without any passion or emotion, derives from Greek thought.” With the impassibility of God, and some views of God’s unchangeability in classical theism, the biblical tradition has been distorted by Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotelianism, 61.

⁸ James L. Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (North Richland Hills: Bibal, 1990), 1: 234.

⁹ D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 215.

respect for human freedom means most of Scripture is not dictated. The third purpose is to give examples of embedded indicators in Scripture that guide in its interpretation.

1. Timeless God: Revelation–Inspiration

A timeless God¹⁰ doesn't experience the sequence of time. All time is simultaneous to him. A timeless God doesn't enter time, for eternity is merely tangential at the outer border of time where eternity intersects with time, as in Barth's wholly other God (*Ganz anderer*) in his book *Romans*.¹¹ A timeless God is removed from human history and hence does not impart information. Although removed from human history, paradoxically God is supposed to encounter persons in history. This is a logical inconsistency.

A timeless God is also the sovereign God who predestines people without any response from them in history. This is the God of Reformation theology (Calvin). He is the remote, removed, deistic God who acts in an arbitrary way, with no interest in human freedom. For this God, verbal inspiration is really verbal dictation, where biblical writers make no contribution to biblical revelation. Although removed from human history, paradoxically God dictates words into history. This is another logical inconsistency.

II. Impossibility of a Timeless Model of Revelation–Inspiration

A timeless God cannot impart revelation and inspiration in time, the one following the other, God communicating with prophet and then prophet communicating with humans respectively. A timeless God is prevented from acting in sequential order of cause and effect, for he is beyond time, and therefore doesn't enter into time to act in a temporal way (past, present, future). When God comes in ever-repeated encounters, in acts of revelation (*actus purus*), Scripture becomes again and again revelation in repeated moments, only to be disenfranchised when

¹⁰ See *Systematic Theology: God* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 2009), 2: chapter 4, "Timeless and Spaceless God," for my fullest treatment of the topic.

¹¹ Karl Barth, *Römerbrief* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1929), ET, *Romans* (London: Oxford U, 1918, 6th ed., 1928), 497-502. Later Barth criticized his *Romans* because in it revelation was "permanently transcending time" and failed to do justice to Christ's entrance into time in John 1:14; *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956, ed., 1963), 2/1: 50. Barth can even say that his 1921 *Romans* (like Kant, Ritschl, and Bultmann) was silent about the central matter: the love of God; *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 4/2: 798.

GULLEY: REVELATION-INSPIRATION MODEL OF A RELATIONAL GOD

the encounter is absent (Neo-Orthodox theology). This “yo-yo” “revelation as encounter” rejects “Scripture as revelation.” God’s Word is emptied of revelation because God’s World is emptied of God. Often in theology errors can be traced to distorted views of God. Here are some examples of how a timeless view of God affects biblical doctrines. We look at the six loci presented in many theological systems for locations where doctrines are questioned by a timeless view of God.

Doctrine of God (Theology)

1. In Eastern theology there is a timeless generation of the Son from the Father and a timeless procession of the Spirit from the Father, which seems to elevate the Father above the Son and Spirit as their source (subordination view) which seems incompatible with each member of the Trinity as equal and eternal;¹² 2. On the basis of a timeless God, how could God provide a revelation in time of who He is, in order to answer the false charges of the great controversy?¹³ More than that, if God is a timeless God who disallows creaturely freedom and arbitrarily decides human destiny (with eternal hell for those He rejects), how could He ever be exonerated from the charges of the great controversy against Him? If God is a timeless God, the cosmic controversy will never be resolved, and eternal dualism in the universe is inevitable. More than that, if God is a timeless God, without revealing Himself in time (whether for good or evil), there’s no possibility for the great controversy to exist.¹⁴ 3. Predestination is the work of a timeless God, for human destiny is decided in eternity rather than in human history.

¹² This places a distinction between the Trinity back in eternity. See my article “A One-sided Trinity in Theology: Its Continuing Impact,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 16/1-2 (2005): 43-74.

¹³ Satan has questioned God’s love and justice in his controversy against God, and God has revealed His love and justice in human history, especially at Calvary. In order to make this revelation, God had to be in time, in human history. For a fuller understanding with sources, see “Biblical Worldview” in my *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena*, 1:387-453.

¹⁴ I am indebted to Fernando Canale for the non-existence of the cosmic controversy issue if God is timeless, and for helping me view verbal inspiration in the context of a sovereign God. On verbal inspiration see Fernando Canale, “The Revelation and Inspiration of Scripture in Adventist Theology,” Part 1, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 45/2, (2007): 206.

Doctrine of Creation (Anthropology)

1. The idea of God in eternity, above time, removed from His creation, is compatible with a Deistic or “Wholly Other” God who allegedly used evolution to create humans. That’s the best He could do and remain aloof from time/history. A timeless God cannot be a present God speaking and acting in time to create the world and its environs. For a timeless God, the speaking and acting in the creation account is not historical, it is myth or saga. 2. It is logical to discount the historical reality of creation when God is non-historical (timeless). 3. It is logical to dismiss the creation account as non-literal when the Creator is absent. 4. Creation of humans with an immortal soul is compatible with a timeless God. If humans have an immortal soul, they are to that extent removed from the reality of history with its fall, finiteness, and death. 5. Viewing creation as God’s body, as does Sallie McFague (and other Process theologians), replaces a timeless God with an imminent God, which relegates biblical creation to a “myth.”¹⁵ Scripture transcends both extremes by God’s hands-on creation of Adam and Eve in the image of the Trinity (Gen 1:26-28; 2:20b-24).

Doctrine of Christ (Christology)

1. A timeless God calls into question the mission of Jesus Christ in time and His subsequent mission in heaven. There is no ontological reality to the incarnation or death of Jesus, no bodily resurrection and ascension to heaven. A timeless God remains above time and never enters time to live or to die. 2. Even the Reformers distanced Christ from history more than warranted. John Calvin taught that Christ never gave up His omnipresence during the incarnation, so He remained at the throne of the universe while on planet-earth.¹⁶ This finds its roots in the theology of Athanasius (293-373), with the receptacle view of space (God poured Himself out into the space of this world, but remained present throughout the rest of space).¹⁷ Paradoxically, a timeless God who is omnipresent must be present in time or history.

2. Lutheran theology considers the union of the natures in Christ as a penetration of the divine into the human and of the human into the divine

¹⁵ Sallie McFague in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Platcher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 101-116.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Henry Beveridge (London: James Clark, 1962), 2: 414 (2.13.4).

¹⁷ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione, Nicene Post-Nicene Fathers* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), Second Series 4:45 (17.1, 2, 5, 6).

GULLEY: REVELATION-INSPIRATION MODEL OF A RELATIONAL GOD

(*communicatio idiomatum*). This calls into question the true divinity and the true humanity of Jesus Christ, making Him neither divine nor human, but a third being somewhere between the divine and the human, with His humanity divinized, and His divinity humanized. “Such a being cannot be the mediator between God and humankind since he is neither.”¹⁸ 4. A timeless God is static rather than dynamic and doesn’t interact with humans. A timeless God means there is no gospel in its objective or subjective dimensions. 5. A timeless God means there is no covenant relationship between God and humans throughout history. 6. A timeless God means the ministry of the ascended Christ has no historical meaning in terms of sequential happenings in heaven such as high priestly ministry followed by second advent and millennium. 7. A timeless God is the immutable and impassible God of classical theology who is removed and detached from human history, not understanding human experience. Such a timeless God cannot be a sympathetic high priest interceding for humans.

3. Christ is even removed from time in the work of the most influential Christological theologian of the 20th century (in his later *Church Dogmatics*, and not only in his earlier writing). Karl Barth’s (1886-1968) developed thinking in his theological system presents Christ as *humanitas* (humanity) and not as a human (*homo*), and to that degree Christ is somewhat removed from time/history. Barth’s historical threefold ministry of Christ (*triplex munus*) as prophet, priest, and king (chronological order in Scripture) is reduced to an internal relationship between Christ’s divine and human natures. Barth alleges that in Christ’s incarnational life there was a movement within Jesus Christ as the Son of God went into a far country (priestly ministry) and a concurrent homecoming of the Son of Man (kingly ministry), and subsequently this reality in Jesus Christ is being revealed in the prophetic ministry of Jesus Christ (this is the meaning of Christ as revelation for Barth).

Doctrine of Salvation (Soteriology)

1. To the degree that predestination determines human destiny, this impacts the doctrine of salvation. Eastern Orthodox theology fails to understand the Creator-creature distinction between God and humans. For them, salvation is not a restoration to the pre-fall historical sinlessness, but an elevation of humanity to divinity. For salvation is a divinization of

¹⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 3:303.

human nature.¹⁹ One has to ask if failure to take seriously pre-fall human nature was influenced by a timeless view of God. Herman Bavinck answers: “a human being who by development can appropriate the divine nature ceases to be a creature and passes out of time into eternity, the finite into the infinite.”²⁰ 2. Logically there is no indwelling of the Holy Spirit to transform humans, restoring the damaged image of God, when God is timeless, and confined above time.

Doctrine of the Church (Ecclesiology)

1. Because God determines destiny in eternity, this rejects the nature of the church as persons called out (*ek*, out; *kaleo*, to call) from the world in history, freely choosing their destiny by entering into covenant relationship with God. 2. The Catholic church is a timeless prolongation of the incarnation, causing communicants to depend upon the church for salvation (sacramentalism) rather than upon Christ alone. 3. The Catholic Mass is a timeless repetition of a once-for-all historical crucifixion (Heb 9:26), which detracts from the uniqueness of Calvary.

Doctrine of Final Events (Eschatology)

1. A timeless view of God affects eschatology because it doesn't grasp the biblical “already-not yet” reality in the temporal sphere between present and future time. In other words, a God beyond time doesn't do justice to the God who entered time, introducing the end of time into human history, because biblical eschatology is three-dimensional, including time as past, present, and future, making the Christian era the time of eschatology, which includes realized, present, and future aspects of eschatological reality. Only when eschatology is understood in this three dimensional relation to time can it overcome the one-sided emphases present in C. H. Dodd's “realized eschatology,”²¹

¹⁹ Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary P, 1987); Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary P, 1984).

²⁰ Bavinck, 303.

²¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936), 7, 28, 38-39, 46, 63, 93, 128, 206, 232; *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Collins, 1967), 74, 81.

GULLEY: REVELATION-INSPIRATION MODEL OF A RELATIONAL GOD

Rudolf Bultmann's "timeless" or "existential eschatology,"²² and Jürgen Moltmann's "proleptic eschatology."²³

2. Barth made a contribution over the subjectivity of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)²⁴ and Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889)²⁵ in emphasizing the objectivity of the Kingdom. It was more than just a kingdom *in* man (Schleiermacher) and a kingdom *by* man (Ritschl), for it was primarily a kingdom *to* man (Barth). It needs, however, to become a kingdom *into* man with all the ontological "givenness" that eschatological firstfruits (*aparchēn*, Rom 8:23, cf. 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5) demand. The gifts and fruits of the Spirit are the in-breaking of the future into the present in a proleptic sense, but such an entry into time, into human experience, is not possible if God is timeless.

3. There is no purpose in the final judgment if a timeless God decided everything in eternity. Once a timeless decision is made in eternity, the freedom of human decision-making is radically called into question. Behind this is an unanswered theodicy, for how can Satan and his angels be responsible for the cosmic controversy when creaturely freedom to make decisions cannot exist under a predestinating timeless God?

4. What is the future of the redeemed if God is timeless? Augustine presents humans in spiritual bodies beholding the glory of God. This beatific vision is a timeless one, for "God shall rest as on the seventh day, when He shall give us (who shall be the seventh day) rest in Himself." Time seems frozen in eternity.²⁶ Thomas Aquinas said, "Man's essential reward, which is his beatitude, consists in the perfect union of the soul with God, inasmuch as it enjoys God perfectly as seen and loved perfectly."²⁷ There seems to be no history between God and the redeemed in the future—just a beatific vision. It seems that the redeemed will become more like the timeless God, who is impassible, even when viewing those

²² Rudolph Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: UP, 1957), 49, 51-55, 120, 133, 138, 152, 155.

²³ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM, 1967), 16f, 41, 85, 179f, 192.

²⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928).

²⁵ Albrecht Ritschl, *A Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1900).

²⁶ Augustine, *The City of God, Nice Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 2: 507-511 (12. 29, 30).

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1920), 5: 2969 (96. 1).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

suffering in an alleged hell. Reformed theologian Francis Turretin expressed it this way:

The absence of friends and relatives who will be excluded from happiness will not be able to disturb the joy of the blessed because all carnal affection will be destroyed, which believers cherished in this life towards their relations. And as they will love themselves in turn in God and on account of God, so they will have no feeling of compassion towards those whom they will see excluded from the presence of God, the objects of his wrath and everlasting curse. Nay, they will rejoice in his righteous judgments and will approve of them with full assent (Rev. 15:3; 19:2).²⁸

This means that becoming like the compassionate Christ in the process of sanctification in human history does not continue in the life to come. So how can the eternal future be a better existence than Christian life today?

III. Christ as Revelation

While some scholars say Scripture is not itself revelation (Hans Frei,²⁹ George Lindbeck,³⁰ Stanley Grenz³¹), other scholars say Christ and not Scripture is revelation (the later Karl Barth,³² Thomas F. Torrance,³³ and Donald Bloesch³⁴). Even though the focus is on Christ as

²⁸ Francis Turretin, *Institutes* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997), 3: 632 (20. 12. 10).

²⁹ Hans Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology': An Evangelical Appraisal," *Trinity Journal*, 8: (1987), 22, Scripture is not revelation, but witnesses to revelation.

³⁰ George A. Lindbeck's functional view of biblical doctrines (non-propositional), *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 18, 19.

³¹ The following two books by Stanley Grenz empty Scripture of God's revelation: *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), and *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). For a detailed analysis see my *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena*, 1:100, 101.

³² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963, 1st 1936), 1/1: 98-140.

³³ T. F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology: The Realism and Christian Revelation* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 10-13, 16-17, 19, 135, 142, 144-145. Scripture is only a signifier to revelation in Christ.

³⁴ Scripture is only a witness to revelation in Christ; Donald G. Bloesch, *Christian Foundations, A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 13-14; *Christian Foundations, Holy Scripture: Revela-*

GULLEY: REVELATION-INSPIRATION MODEL OF A RELATIONAL GOD

revelation, and hence on Christ in history, this is still a form of the timeless God, because these exponents don't accept the biblical revelation-inspiration model. Instead, God encountered the biblical writers, who wrote down their responses to the encounters. So Scripture merely witnesses to divine encounters. Scripture is not revelation, because God has not communicated revelation to Scripture. To this extent God remains above Scripture, in a timeless way for all practical purposes. These theologians distance God from His Word as the Enlightenment distanced God from His world.

Encounter revelation is timeless because it is never resident in Scripture. At best the encounter of God causes Scripture to become the Word of God in a moment that needs to be repeated over and over again. In other words, there is no givenness of revelation to Scripture. This is a dynamic view of revelation that is devoid of any cognitive reality. The emphasis is on the revealing God rather than upon revelation. This means that Scripture has no ontological reality that makes it God's holy Word, setting it apart as different from any other book. This version of revelation is not found in Scripture. How do these exponents know that Christ is revelation? Only through cognitive revelation in Scripture. Hence their view of Christ as revelation is indebted to Scripture as revelation, which calls into question their claim. Furthermore, if Scripture is not revelation, how can Scripture test claims (Isa 8:20; 1 John 4:1; 1 Thess 5:21), such as New Age bibles?³⁵

IV. Biblical Model of Revelation–Inspiration

God is love (1 John 3:8-17) because God is a relational Trinity, for each divine Person participates in an eternal, divine, internal history of reciprocal love, and hence in a temporal way. There is temporal history, in the give and take, of the eternal God. It is this dynamic love present in their inner history which God longs to see reflected in human relationships, for humans were created in the image of the Trinity (Gen 1:26, 27). This means that God created relational beings, and this entails freedom to participate in mutual love. Sin broke the relationship between

tion, Inspiration and Interpretation (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 18, 48, 59, 63, 78, 173. To equate Scripture with revelation is "naive"; *Christian Foundations: Holy Scripture, Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 2:64.

³⁵ These bibles contradict each other and Scripture. See my *Christ is Coming!: A Christ-centered Approach to Last Day Events* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1998), 192-210.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

God and humans (cf. Rom 14:23) because Eve doubted Christ's spoken word (Gen 2:16,17; 3:1-6), so God seeks to restore the relationship through the "word of Christ" (*rhéματος Christou*, Rom 10:17), an objective genitive meaning "the word that proclaims Christ."³⁶ This is the ontological context for understanding the process of revelation-inspiration.

Revelation Is Cognitive

The word that proclaims Christ is a word, and not just an encounter. The word is the cognitive content of the proclamation.

(1) When God called out Samuel's name, it says, "The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him" (1 Sam 3:7). In other words, at this point no message as yet was given, only the hearing of his name. Then later it says "The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and here he revealed himself to Samuel through his word" (1 Sam 3:21). The revelation of *Yahweh* included his word, or a message from Him.

(2) David prayed, "O Lord Almighty, God of Israel, you have revealed this to your servant, saying 'I will build a house for you.' So your servant has found courage to offer you this prayer. O Sovereign Lord, you are God! Your words are trustworthy, and you have given this good promise to your servant" (2 Sam 7:27-28).

(3) Isaiah received a prophecy about Jerusalem, and he said, "The Lord Almighty has revealed this in my hearing: 'Till your dying day this sin will not be atoned for,' says the Lord, the Lord Almighty" (Isa 22:14). God's encounter with David and Isaiah included impartation of information.

(4) Nebucahnezzar forgot his dream, but "during the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision" and Daniel praised God saying, "He reveals deep and hidden things" (Dan 2:19, 22a). In other words, things unknown were revealed.

(5) That's why Paul says about Christ, "the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him" (Rom 16:25b,26).

(6) Concerning the gospel, Paul said, "I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:12).

³⁶ Douglas Moo, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 666, fn. 29.

GULLEY: REVELATION-INSPIRATION MODEL OF A RELATIONAL GOD

(7) To the Ephesians Paul speaks about “the mystery made known to me by revelation.” “In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:3-6).

From the above texts we see that God’s revelation communicates information unknown to His people, even explaining mysteries of the gospel hidden for generations. Revelation meant that God was at work in history, communicating on a cognitive level with apostles and prophets so they could understand. Thus revelation means to reveal, and thus God imparts information to humans in the midst of history. Scripture is authorized to speak about revelation because it is God’s revelation. Theologian Raoul Dederen put it this way:

Since all alike hold that the biblical writers were the recipients of the phenomenon of revelation, why not ask *them* to help us to tell us what happens when revelation occurs? Why not sit humbly at their feet and let them speak to us out of their first-hand experience, if indeed they address the issue? This is what I suggest we do³⁷

No one can define revelation better than the biblical writers. Ezekiel repeatedly says, “Then the word of the Lord came upon me” (Ezek 12:26; 13:1; 14:2; 17:1; 18:1; 21:1; 22:1; 23:1; 24:1; 26:1; 27:1; etc). “This is what the Sovereign Lord says” (Ezek 14:1; 15:6). No wonder biblical writers often use the words “God speaks,” as documented by Old

³⁷ Raoul Dederen, “The Revelation-Inspiration Phenomenon According to the Bible Writers,” in *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, ed. Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson (Berrien Springs: Adventist Theological Society), 1992, 12-13). Dederen gives examples of revelation as an encounter (“The Lord revealed *himself* to Samuel” 2 Sam 3:21 RSV), but shows that this is not all, for the full text says, “The Lord revealed *himself* to Samuel at Shiloh *by the word of the Lord*” (13, italics his). Dederen says, “Revelation is both encounter *and* propositional, a meeting and a knowing. It is a disclosure of a Person, as well as of truth” (15, italics his). The prophets said their messages were from the Lord (Amos 1:3, Jer 2:4,15) Dederen gives examples of how God communicated revelation (inspiration). Not only did the prophets receive the messages from God’s Spirit, but wrote under the power of God’s Spirit (Ezek 3:4). God put words in their mouths (Exod 4:15; Jer 1:9). All Scripture is God-inspired (2 Tim 3:16). Dederen’s article challenged me to do research on the words “revelation” or “reveal/ed” used in Scripture. I studied all the relevant “reveal/ed” terms, and they identify revelation as cognitive.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Testament scholar Gerhard Hasel.³⁸ Prophets spoke of being filled or moved by the Holy Spirit. Thus Ezekiel exclaimed, “The Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me” (Ezek 2:2). He continues, “Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon me, and he told me to say: ‘This is what the Lord says’” (Ezek 11:5). In his work of speaking God’s messages, Micah testified, “I am filled with power with the Spirit of the Lord” (Mic 3:8).

Revelation Originates with God

Contrary to the idea that Scripture is merely a recorded response to revelation, and hence a human writing, Scripture says the following:

(1) “All Scripture is God-breathed (*theopneustos*) and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16). God took the initiative in originating Scripture. It was God-breathed, reminiscent of God’s creation of Adam in Eden, for God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being” (Gen 2:7b). God-breathed Scripture produces life as the Holy Spirit imparts its meaning into the mind and heart of the reader.

(2) Revelation never originates in a community of faith, or even in a prophet of faith, as if from human origin. Peter said: “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along (*pheromenoi*) by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:20,21).

(3) That’s why Paul said: “We thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13, RSV). This is why Paul called biblical writings the “Holy Scriptures” (Rom 1:2; 2 Tim 3:12) and referred to the OT as “the very words of God” (Rom 3:2b). The writer of Hebrews refers to Scripture as “God’s word” (Heb 5:12b).

Phenomenon of Revelation-Inspiration: Christ

1. Christ is revelation (Heb 1:1,2) but never as a replacement for Scripture as revelation. This is evident from the respect he showed to the OT. He quoted it to meet the temptations of Satan in the wilderness (Matt

³⁸ Gerhard Hasel, “Divine Inspiration and the Canon of the Bible,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 5/1 (1994), 76-78. See *Prolegomena*, 1:280-284.

GULLEY: REVELATION-INSPIRATION MODEL OF A RELATIONAL GOD

4:1-10; Deut 8:3; 6:16,13), He expounded it's fuller meaning in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:21-48), quoted it in His teaching (Matt 10:35,36; 11:10; 18:16; 13:14,15,35; 19:8,19; 21:13; 22:37-40; 23:39; 24:15,29; 26:31), referred to events in it (Matt 10:15; 11:20-24; 12:39-42; 16:4), and asked His hearers if they had read certain things in it (Matt 12:3-6; 19:4-6; 21:16,42; 22:31,32). Christ stood up to the religious leaders, saying "you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but the rules taught by men.'" (Isa 29:13; Matt 15:6-9). Jesus told them, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God" (Matt 22:29). Jesus placed Scripture above human traditions, and we must do the same.

2. To discouraged disciples on the Emmaus road, who mourned His crucifixion, Christ said, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:25-27). Christ used Scripture to interpret Scripture (*sola Scriptura*), for Scripture is its own best interpreter. It takes the sacred to discern the meaning of the sacred. The holy Redeemer deferred to the holy Scriptures. Christ did not say to the discouraged disciples: "Look! It's me. I'm the risen Christ. I'm alive. You can rejoice." That would have been a much faster solution to their anguish than an extensive Bible study. But Christ didn't wish to point to Himself as revelation, but to Scripture as revelation. Christ would soon return to heaven and leave them, but the written Word would remain with them. Christ wanted His disciples to know that Revelation is revealed truths in Scripture.

3. Christ reveals the Father (John 14:9) and also reveals the relationship of God to a prophet, and a prophet to the people. For "the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God; to him God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the son" (John 3:34,35a). Christ came to do God's will (John 4:34; 6:38; Heb 10:5-7). He said, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me" (John 7:16), and "he who sent me is reliable, and what I have heard from him I tell the world" (John 8:26b). Christ said, "everything that I learned from my Father, I have made known to you" (John 15:15b). Here are insights into the process of revelation from the relationship between the Father and the God-Man.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

This relationship is a phenomenological insight into the process of revelation.

4. The phenomena of Scripture in the life of Christ are mentioned in the *Prolegomena*.³⁹ Christ said, “I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it” (John 12:49). Note the process of inspiration includes not only what to say but how to say it. Words are not dictated (verbal inspiration), but words are inspired from Father to Son (as from Holy Spirit to biblical writer). Christ adds, “The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father living in me, who is doing his work” (John 14:10b). Here the Spirit-filled life is necessary for the process of inspiration to take place. Towards the end of His mission Christ prayed to the Father and said, “I gave them the words you gave me” (John 17:8, 14a). This relationship is a phenomenological insight into the process of inspiration.

5. Jesus lived on earth as a human dependent upon God, and in this respect like all other believing humans. So He said, “I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone” (John 8:28b,29). Jesus reveals how important it is for an apostle or prophet to remain fully dependent upon God in the revelation-inspiration process, for it takes this dependence throughout the entire communication of God’s truth in order for it to be communicated. Christ’s self-testimony overthrows the theological consensus (for 1000 years) that Christ lived on earth as God, and not as man, because the Council of Nicea (325) and Chalcedon (451) didn’t address this matter.⁴⁰ Christ’s living was thus removed above the life of a human; apparently reflecting to a degree the timeless view of God.

6. Revelation is in Scripture, for divine ideas or information are communicated through human words. Thus revelation-inspiration begins with God and ends with God inspiring the prophet to communicate effectively. This is not to be understood as verbal dictation (which belongs to an overly sovereign God model), but means truths are imparted to the minds of biblical writers, and God works in the mind of the biblical

³⁹ *Prolegomena*, 1:284.

⁴⁰ The councils rightly decided that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man (*vere Deus, vere homo*), but they never spelled out the relationship between the divine and human. So for a thousand years theology stressed that the relationship was between an active divinity living in a passive humanity; Christ lived on earth as God. This had repercussions, for He could not be tempted like other humans and so could not be a sympathetic high priest in his subsequent sanctuary ministry in heaven.

GULLEY: REVELATION-INSPIRATION MODEL OF A RELATIONAL GOD

writer to choose ways to communicate, without violating human freedom. In other words: “If Christ was guided by His Father in the speaking of propositional truth, then surely the prophets, who were moved by the inspiring Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21), were under His direction in the same way.”⁴¹

Phenomenon of Revelation-Inspiration: Holy Spirit

1. The relational understanding of the Trinity assumes that the way the Holy Spirit graciously functions in the salvation process (Gal 5:22, 23) is the same way He functions in the revelation-inspiration process.⁴² The Holy Spirit demonstrates the fruit of the Spirit which is (*estin*, singular) love, (*agapé*), characterized by “joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22,23). This fruit of the Spirit describes the Spirit’s acts in human history. He acts in love revealed as patience and gentleness, which is incompatible with verbal dictation.

2. Ponder how the Spirit helped Christ. Christ entered planet earth “conceived . . . from the Holy Spirit” (Matt 1:20), baptized by the Spirit (Mark 1:9f), “led by the Spirit” (Luke 4:1), offered Himself up to die through the Spirit (Heb 9:14f), and, in part, was resurrected by the Spirit (Rom 8:11). Jesus depended upon the Spirit as much in His human life as He did in His incarnation. He said, “I drive out demons by the Spirit” (Matt 12:28). Isaiah noted the Son’s Spirit-dependence: “The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him” (Isa 11:2, cf. verse 3). Jesus testified: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me; because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners” (Luke 4:18, cf. Isa 61:1). Peter stated: “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:38).

3. A new level of Christ’s dependence on the Spirit is found from Pentecost throughout the Christian era, In the incarnation, the Spirit brought the omnipresent pre-existent Christ to one human (Mary). At Pentecost the Spirit brought the God-man to many humans (Acts 2:1-4). A double movement is involved: (a) bringing the omnipresent God to become localized as Christ and (b) bringing the localized God-man at the throne of God to become omnipresent through the Spirit. This is why

⁴¹ *Prolegomena*, 1:284.

⁴² *Prolegomena*, 1:311-316.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Jesus spoke of His departure in terms of (1) sending another (*allos* one like; not *heteros*—one unlike Himself) Comforter or Counselor (John 14:15-17), and (2) coming Himself to be with them (John 14:18). Just as Christ was dependent upon the Spirit in His incarnation and human life, so He is subsequently dependent upon the Spirit to be with and in humans.⁴³ Christ said “It is for your good that I am going away,” for besides becoming their high priest in heaven (Book of Hebrews) He could be omnipresent, and thus with all His followers, through the Spirit (Matt 28:19,20).

4. Christ said of the Spirit’s mission in the Christian era: “I have much more to say to you. More than you can now bear (cognitive information). But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you” (John 16:12-14). Christ was not merely speaking of an encounter. He spoke of the Spirit’s specific speech about coming events, words that are not the Spirit’s own, but come from Christ. Just as Christ brought glory to the Father (John 17:4), not speaking his own words (John 7:16), but speaking the Father’s

⁴³ In both incarnation and Pentecost, the Spirit comes Himself to bring Christ to humans. He comes not with His own credentials, as if to add to what Christ accomplished, as if that were not sufficient. He comes to bring Christ’s completed work to us, that it may be applied in us. He brings Christ and works on His behalf. We receive the robe of Christ’s righteousness (Isa 61:10), the wedding garment (Matt 22:11), or Christ’s perfect human life and the Spirit’s working with us to imitate that life in obedience as we receive the Giver. In the NT the Spirit is given titles never ascribed to Him in the OT. He is the “Spirit of His Son” (Gal 4:6), “Spirit of Christ” (Rom 8:9, 1 Pet 1:11), and “the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:19). W. H. Griffith Thomas could therefore say, “It is not in His Absolute Being, but as the Spirit of Christ that He is revealed in the New Testament.” (*The Holy Spirit of God* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], 141). Or as Henry B. Swete put it, “where the Spirit was Christ was, and what the Spirit wrought was wrought in fact by Christ.” For the Spirit is Christ’s “second Self” (*The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* [London: Macmillan, 1909], 301 and 300, respectively). Thus we read, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27), and “Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20); and Christ could say, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matt 28:20, KJV). The Christian life includes Christ’s invitation: “Come to me” (Matt 11:28), and “Abide in me . . . for without me ye can do nothing” (John 15:4-5, KJV). So when we speak of the Spirit’s application to us of what Christ accomplished for us, Louis Berkhof says, “Even the work of application is a work of Christ, but a work which He accomplishes through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Though this work stands out in the economy of redemption as the work of the Holy Spirit, it cannot for a moment be separated from the work of Christ” (*Systematic Theology* [London: Banner of Truth, 1969], 424).

GULLEY: REVELATION-INSPIRATION MODEL OF A RELATIONAL GOD

words (John 17:8a), so the Holy Spirit brings glory to Christ, not speaking his own words, but speaking the words of Christ. Both illustrate the prophet's word as God's words. This is cognitive speech resident in the NT, for Scripture is revelation.

5. On a different level, the Spirit works in and through biblical writers, who freely depended upon the Spirit to receive cognitive revelation and communicate this revelation through the Spirit's inspiration. The loving gentleness and indwelling of the Holy Spirit denies a timeless God and an over-riding sovereign God as found in predestination. God does not violate human freedom in the revelation-inspiration process anymore than He does in the salvation process. Knowing the biblical God gives insight into how He acted in revealing truth to the biblical writers and in inspiring them as they wrote it down. Just as the Holy Spirit brings people to Christ and providentially guides them in their Christian witness, so He does the same in bringing revelation to biblical writers and in guiding their relaying of that revelation. Thus, the phenomena in Scripture describing God gives insight into how He acted in the revelation-inspiration process. He acted in love, in time, in humans, which is impossible for a timeless God removed from human history, a sovereign God who violates human freedom.

6. The love of the Holy Spirit involves an accommodation in revealing and redeeming which preserves the individuality of humans. Thus, in Scripture the language, logic, and literature are human, though the content is divine. But the language, logic, and literature used by the Holy Spirit's inspiration convey to humans the content as God's Word to humans. Both the content and expression of the content are the divine revealed and inspired Word of God, even as the human Jesus is just as much the Son of God as he is the Son of Man.

The Divine-Human Union of the Living and Written Words of God

1. Scripture is a union of the divine and the human that is as indissoluble as the union of the divine and human in Jesus Christ. The whole of Scripture, including its human chosen words, limited to the vocabulary of the writers, freely chosen under the Spirit's guidance, is divine revelation; for divine revelation can no more be imparted without words than it can be imparted without Christ becoming human. The whole Jesus Christ (divine and human) was a revelation of God to humans. The whole written Word (divine and human) is God's revelation to humans. "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery" (Dan 2:47).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

2. This is why it is wrong for historical criticism to treat the words of Scripture as merely human (either as culture conditioned, or mere witness to revelation, or for any other reason). The words of the Bible are just as sacred as the content they communicate, not because human language is holy, but because the words communicate holy and divine revelation. Paul expressed it well: “words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words” (1 Cor 2:13b). Any attempt to sever language from revelation is like attempting to sever the humanity of Christ from His divinity. Granted, there is no equivalency in this comparison because the God-Man is unique (John 1:1-3,14, *monogenes*; one of a kind). But at least the severance of the divine and human on these two different levels is equally wrong. “What God has joined together, let no man pull asunder” is good theological advice in this context.

3. Only the true God can reveal divine information found in biblical revelation. All alleged gods are dumb (Isa 46:7; Hab 2:18,19), but God speaks to and through His prophets. For example: “In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia, a revelation was given to Daniel . . . Its message was true and it concerned a great war. The understanding of the message came to him in a vision” (Dan 10:1). “Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). This is why Christ promised that the Spirit would speak, revealing things to come (John 16:12-14), which we have in the NT.

4. Revelation is God coming down to the level of human comprehension, using language, logic, and literature that is compatible with the cognitive capacity of human prophets and of those who heard or read their messages. God’s accommodation to the level of the prophets’ thinking means God’s revelation enables prophets to grasp the meaning of what is revealed. This doesn’t mean the prophets always understood everything about the divine content brought to them (e.g., Daniel; Dan 8:27; cf. Peter didn’t understand Paul, 2 Pet 3:15,16), but it does mean that divine revelation effectively transfers God’s intent to the minds of the prophets, so that revelation-inspiration is one process of God communicating with humans in a way compatible with the way He communicates with them in covenant love in the process of salvation. Divine revelation is God acting in a temporal way. There is no divine revelation from an aloof, timeless God, and God never violates human freedom in the impartation of revelation in the process of inspiration that communicates the revelation.

What Is Involved in Inspiration?

1. Citing Ps 110:1, Christ said David spoke “by the Holy Spirit” (Mark 12:36). Paul said, “*All Scripture is God-breathed [theópneustos]* and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16,17). The word *theopneustos* means “inspiration.” The message is God-breathed (or inspired) and thus imparted by God to the minds of the biblical writer. With respect to OT prophets, Peter said the “Spirit of Christ” was “in them” (1 Pet 1:11). “David said, ‘The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue’” (2 Sam 23:2). Ezekiel said, “the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me” (Ezek 2:2). Micah said, “I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord” (Mic 3:8a). Peter said prophets “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:20,21). The words “carried along” (*pherómenoi*) indicate the level of dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

2. However, biblical writers also remained independent in their dependence, which is illustrated in Scripture. Biblical writers were totally dependent in reception of revelation, but given freedom to express the revelation in the process of inspiration.⁴⁴ Thus, “the Lord said to Moses, ‘see, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet’” (Exod 7:1). Moses spoke to Aaron, who spoke to Pharaoh, using his own words to convey the message.⁴⁵ Aaron represented Moses, giving the identical message received, but in his own words.⁴⁶ Likewise, the biblical writers represented the Holy Spirit. Sometimes they mentioned the Spirit specifically. For example, when quoting Ps 95:7-11 in Hebrews 3:7-11, the biblical writer prefaces the quote with “as the Holy Spirit says” (Heb 3:7a). In writing to Timothy, Paul said, “The Spirit clearly says that in the latter times some will abandon the

⁴⁴ The Ten Commandments are an exception (as well as lines in quotations marks). The Ten Commandments were written twice by the finger of Christ and recorded in Scripture as such, which should emphasize their importance (Exod 31:18; 34:28b; Deut 5:22b; 10:2,4).

⁴⁵ That’s why in Scripture there are so many kinds of words and literary genres, such as poetry (musician David), theology (Paul), medical (Dr. Luke), and simple (farmer Amos), to name a few.

⁴⁶ Moses spoke to Aaron in Hebrew, and Aaron spoke to Pharaoh in Egyptian, which necessitated different words but the same message. But the Holy Spirit spoke in the language of the prophets, and they spoke in the same language in the biblical writings (Hebrew and Aramaic in the OT, and Greek in the NT).

faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons” (1 Tim 4:1).

The Holy Spirit’s Function as Interpreter

1. Another function of the Holy Spirit is interpretation (hermeneutics),⁴⁷ where the reader is inspired by the Spirit to comprehend what the Spirit *gave to* the biblical writer (revelation) and *gave through* the biblical writer (inspiration). Paul said “no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us . . . The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:11b,12,14).

2. Interpreting Scripture (as teaching) is recorded in Scripture. The Lord said to Aaron “you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses (Lev 10:11). In Ezekiel’s time, The priests were “to teach . . . the difference between the holy and the common” (Ezek 44:23). In the early Christian church, the Bereans “examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11). Paul advised Timothy to present himself to God as one who “correctly handles” (*ophtom *) “the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). Christ promised that the coming Holy Spirit will “guide you into all truth” (John 15: 27). An early fulfillment of this was when the Spirit of God directed Philip to go to the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading but not understanding Isaiah 56:3-8 (Acts 8:29,32,33). “Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35).

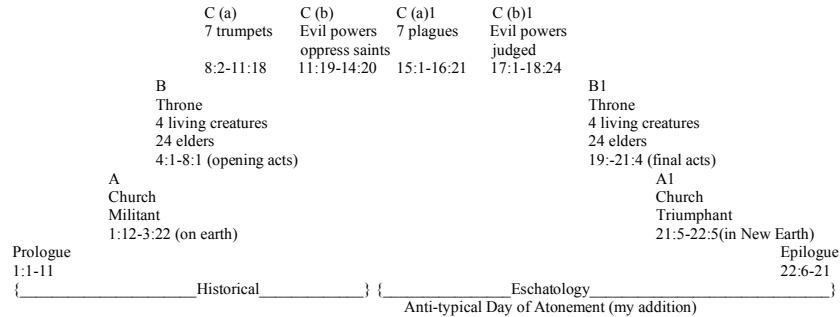
Embedded Interpretive Tools: Chiasms

Scripture mentions more than a record of interpretation; it has embedded interpretive tools that guide readers to understand what is written. These internal indicators are literary devices such as typologies, parallelisms, or chiasmic structures. Applying conventional grammatical rules of these devices reveals authorial intent of texts being examined. We limit our attention to the use of chiasms as an example. Through literary

⁴⁷ See “Biblical Hermeneutics” in *Prolegomena*, 1:637-716.

GULLEY: REVELATION-INSPIRATION MODEL OF A RELATIONAL GOD

analysis, Kenneth Strand discovered the chiastic structure of the Book of Revelation, as noted below.⁴⁸



A chiasm is a corresponding mirror inversion and is common in the OT, emphasizing the unity of a book.⁴⁹ This chiastic structure is internal evidence in Revelation for rejecting the popular preterist (past) or futurist (future) interpretations, for it includes both in an unfolding of history between them. Through this means Strand concluded that the first half of the chiasm is about history in the Christian era, whereas the second half of the chiasm is about the eschatological-judgment era of history.⁵⁰

Then Strand looks at the eight segments and finds in all eight a victorious introduction scene in the setting of the temple (1:10b-20; chaps. 4 & 5; 8:2-6; 11:19 and 15:1-61:1; 16:18-17:3a; 19:1-10; 21:5-11a).⁵¹ These visions provide hope, for Christ is on heaven’s throne. “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). As one reads through Revelation, one begins in the first apartment of heaven’s temple (seven lamps,

⁴⁸ Kenneth A. Strand, *Interpreting The Book of Revelation: Hermeneutical Guidelines, With Brief Introduction to Literary Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Naples: Ann Arbor, 1979), 52; cf. *The Open Gates of Heaven* (Ann Arbor: Braun, Brumfield, 1969).

⁴⁹ See William H. Shea, “Literary Form and Theological Function,” in *70 Weeks, Leviticus, and the Nature of Prophecy*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee 3 (Washington: Biblical Research Institute, 1986), 131-168.

⁵⁰ Kenneth A. Strand, “The Eight Basic Visions in the Book of Revelation,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 25/1 (1987): 107, 118. See also “The Eight Basic Visions,” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 1*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee 6 (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 35-49.

⁵¹ Kenneth A. Strand, “The ‘Victorious Introduction’ Scenes in the Visions in the Book of Revelation,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 25/3 (1987): 267; see also *Symposium on Revelation—Book 1*, 51-72.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

4:5; golden altar, 8:3) and then enters into the second apartment of the temple (ark of the covenant, 11:19), which concurs with the distinction between the historical and eschatological divisions of the book.⁵² In other words, the transition from first to second apartments (11:19) is the transition from the historical to the eschatological divisions of the book. Therefore, reading though Revelation, one follows the unfolding of Christ’s post-crucifixion (1:5) ministry in the heavenly temple.⁵³

Jon Paulien agrees with Strand’s basic division of the book into historical and eschatological divisions. He enlarges on the function of the Sanctuary in Revelation, and finds the following progression.⁵⁴

(1) Rev 1:12-20	EARTH
<hr/>	
(2) Rev 4 and 5 (Inauguration)	
(3) Rev 8:2-6 (Intercession)	
(4) Rev 11:19 (Judgment)	HEAVEN
(5) Rev 15:5-8 (Cessation)	
(6) Rev 19:1-10 (Absence)	
<hr/>	
(7) Rev 21:1-22:5	EARTH

Paulien points to Revelation 12-14 as the center of the eight segment chiasm, and the center of the center is Revelation 14:6-12, which is about the three angel’s messages.⁵⁵ The first angel’s message calls attention to the pre-advent judgment and thus to the anti-typical Day of Atonement. The angel proclaims the gospel to the entire world (14:6), saying: “Fear (reverence) God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water” (14:7). Only Seventh-day Adventists accept a pre-advent judgment as a part of the gospel because it allows the universe to see why some will go to heaven at the second advent and why others will not. An omniscient God doesn’t need the judgment, but it is necessary

⁵² Strand, “‘Victorious Introduction’ scenes”: 279-284.

⁵³ This agrees with the Book of Hebrews and with Daniel 7-8, which is beyond the scope of this article to explore.

⁵⁴ Jon Paulien, “Seals and Trumpets: Some Current Discussions,” in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 1*, 187, 188 (chart), 189, 192.

⁵⁵ Jon Paulien, *The Deep Things of God* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2004), 122. This center differs from Strand’s center. See 123 for Paulien’s ABC-D-C₁B₁A₁, with the final crisis (D, 11:19-15:4) as the fulcrum of the chiasm.

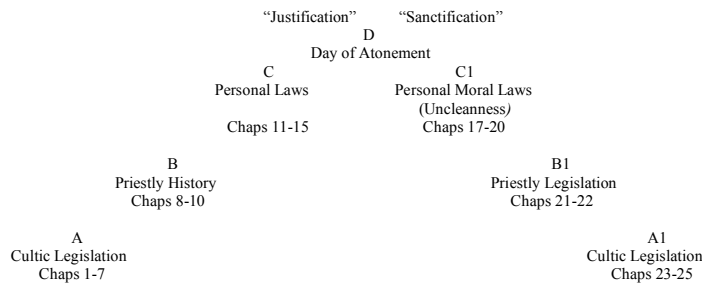
GULLEY: REVELATION-INSPIRATION MODEL OF A RELATIONAL GOD

for God to reveal his justice to answer the cosmic controversy charges against him.⁵⁶

The last sentence in the first angel’s message, “who made the heaven, the earth, the sea and the springs of water,” is an allusion to the Sabbath commandment: “For in six days the Lord made the heaven and the earth, the sea and all that is in them” (Exod 20:11a), and then he rested on the seventh day which he blessed as the Sabbath, and made it holy (vs. 11b). So the center of the chiasm reminds one of the sacred seventh-day Sabbath in the context of the pre-advent judgment, or Day of Atonement. This is significant because the worship of God as Creator (Rev 4) and as Redeemer (Rev 5) in heaven is contrasted with false worship of the sea beast in the end-time (Rev 13:4 [twice], 8,12, 15). The first angel’s message speaks of true worship of the Creator through remembering the Sabbath memorial of his creation, worship that echoes in the end-time on earth the worship of the Creator in heaven (Rev 4).

The eschatological division of Revelation is the antitypical Day of Atonement (Lev 16).

William Shea finds a chiasm in the Book of Leviticus, where the Day of Atonement is central, as follows:



The Day of Atonement is the structural and thematic center of Leviticus, for it is the central focus of the book.⁵⁷ Chapters 1-15 have a chiasmic mirror image in chapters 17-25. This literary structure “argues for the unity of Leviticus and single authorship.”⁵⁸

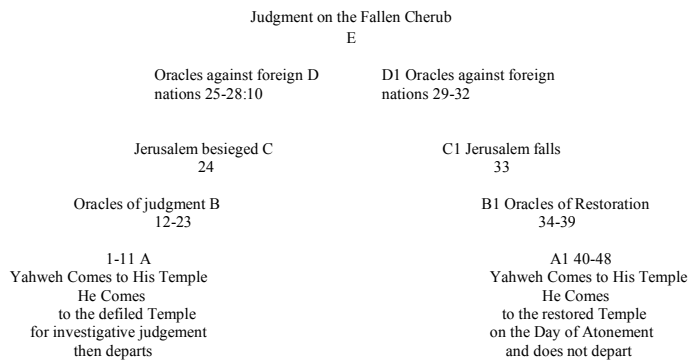
⁵⁶ For sources of those against the pre-advent judgment, and why it is held, see my “Another Look at the Pre-Advent Judgment,” in the Festschrift *For You Have Strengthened Me*: *Biblical and Theological Studies in Honor of Gerhard Pfandl in Celebration of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Martin Pröbstle with Gerald and Martin Klingbeil (Austria: Seminar Schloss Bogenhofen, 2007), 305-329.

⁵⁷ Shea, “Literary Form,” 149-151.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 166, 167.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Richard Davidson presents the chiasmic structure of Ezekiel in the following diagram. Notice that there is an inclusio, the opening and closing chapters, which focus on the investigative judgment in the defiled temple (1-11) and the Day of Atonement in the restored temple, and this Day of Atonement points to the judgment of the fallen cherub that will bring the final restoration in the antitypical Day of Atonement (Lev 16).⁵⁹



The importance of the Day of Atonement is emphasized in Revelation, Leviticus, and Ezekiel through chiasmic structuring of the books. This elevates the antitypical Day of Atonement as significant to the theological interpretation of these books, and Revelation alludes to worship in the end-time as associated with remembering God as Creator and his Sabbath, which was given to the human race (Gen 2:1-3; Mark 2:27), and not to the Jewish race, as so many Christians believe.

Satan wars against those who keep God’s commandments (Rev 17:12), and the saints are those “who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus” (Rev 14:12b). Christ said “If you love me you will obey what I command” (John 14:15) for he wrote the Ten Commandments twice with his own finger on stone, indicating permanence (Exod 31:18; 34:28b; Deut 5:22b; 10:2,4), and had them placed in the ark of the covenant (Exod 25:16) where for some time in the OT he sat “enthroned between the cherubim (1 Sam 4:4b; 2 Sam 6:2b; 2 Kgs 19:15; 1 Chron 13:6b; Ps 80:1b; 99:1; Isa 37:16); for the law is the foundation of his rule, which is eternal (Heb 1:8-13), and the law is as unchanging as

⁵⁹ Richard M. Davidson, “The Chiasmic Literary Structure in the Book of Ezekiel,” in *To Understand the Scriptures: Essays in Honor of William H. Shea*, ed. David Merling (Berrien Springs: Horn Archaeological Museum, Andrews University, 1997), 88.

GULLEY: REVELATION-INSPIRATION MODEL OF A RELATIONAL GOD

the Lawgiver, for “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8). All these facts are important to arrive at a correct interpretation of final events.

***Sola Scriptura* Interpretive Tool**

Our last example of an internal indicator to aid biblical interpretation is found in principle in Isaiah 28, where the Hebrew original reads “a little here, a little there” (vs.10,13). This refers to comparing Scripture with Scripture, known as the Protestant biblical principle of *sola Scriptura*, where Scripture interprets Scripture.⁶⁰ How important is this principle to interpreting Scripture? To answer this, we will take one example, the much-debated question of human origin.

1. Many biblical scholars and theologians who believe Scripture is inerrant paradoxically reject the Genesis creation account in six literal days. These theistic evolutionists are far more open to methodological naturalism, with the survival of the fittest through natural selection, than they are to supernatural creation without indebtedness to any natural process (the *ex nihilo* of Heb 11:3). They have succumbed to contemporary criticism of the Genesis record, believing that certain evolutionary claims seem more probable. “For after all,” they reason, “Genesis is a pre-scientific, non-historical account, and needs to be interpreted through the prevailing contemporary evolutionary worldview; even though Genesis was accepted as literal/historical for millennia prior to the twentieth century.” Scripture interpreting Scripture is the best defense for the Genesis creation record, as we will see below.

2. As a parenthesis, it is important to note that the entire Bible was written by Jews, who thought as Jews, even though the NT was written

⁶⁰ The question is raised, “Whom will he teach knowledge?” (Isa 28:9). The answer comes “here a little, there a little” (28:10,13; NEB), and “Order on order, order on order, line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there” (28:10,13; NASB). There are versions that add “For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line” to “here a little, there a little.” (28:10,13; KJV, NKJV, RSV), or “precept upon precept, precept upon precept; rule upon rule, rule upon rule; here a little, there a little” (28:10,13, Amplified), or “rule on rule, rule on rule, a little here, a little there” (28:10,13, NIV). F. Delitzsch comments: “Whom then would he teach knowledge? And to whom make preaching intelligible? . . . For precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, a little here, a little there!” *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes: Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 7/2: 6. J. Alec Motyer comments: “The mockers could then be picturing Isaiah as a patient teacher of children, building truth upon truth, one bit at a time, *a little here, a little there*” (*Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Isaiah* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999], 18:186).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

in Greek. This means the word *psyche* (soul), though it is a Greek word, has a Hebrew meaning: “the seat of the will, desires, and affections,” or used for a person or self, rather than a separate entity from the body. This warns against any mechanical understanding of the NT from classical Greek or contemporary Hellenistic influences, for the writers were Hebrews.⁶¹ By the same token, this is why the *sola Scriptura* interpretation by Scripture is so important, because the NT is indebted to its Hebrew roots in the OT much more than many interpreters concede.

3. Rejecting the literalness of the Genesis creation record is not merely rejecting two biblical chapters (Gen 1 and 2), it unwittingly rejects God’s internal interpretive tool in Scripture. We speak of *sola Scriptura*, by which Scripture interprets Scripture. What does the Bible say about creation? The independent clause translation of “In the beginning” (Gen 1:1) agrees with the primary method of creation through spoken commands (Gen 1:3,6,9,11,14,20,24,26). “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made” (Ps 33:6). “For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (Ps 33:9). It also agrees with “creation out of nothing.” For, by “faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (Heb 11:3). This is directly contrary to the evolutionary process.

4. Scripture teaches that God created everything (Rev 4:11) through Christ (Heb 1:1-4; cf. John 1:1-3; Eph 3:9; Col 1:15,16; Rev 10:6), and the everlasting gospel includes this creation by Christ (Rev 14: 6,7). The OT is full of references to God as creator (Gen 6:7; Deut 4:32; Isa 40:26; 42:5; 45:12; Amos 4:13; Mal 2:10). The NT speaks of creation (Mark 10:6; 13:19; Rom 1:20; 8:22; 2 Pet 3:4; Rev 3:14). Beings at the throne of God worship him, saying, “You are worthy our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things” (Rev 4:11). There is a call to “every nation” on earth to worship the one “who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water” (Rev 14:6,7). Creation by Christ is as central as salvation by Christ. One day he will create a new heavens and a new earth (Isa 65:17; Rev 21:1). If he can create at the end of the biblical metanarrative, why not at the beginning? Questioning biblical creation is questioning acts of the pre-incarnate Christ, which is little different from questioning Christ’s words, as Satan did in Eden (Gen 2:17; 3:1-5), which caused the fall of humankind (Gen

⁶¹ See Jacques B. Doukhan, *Israel and The Church: Two Voices for the Same God* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 12.

GULLEY: REVELATION-INSPIRATION MODEL OF A RELATIONAL GOD

3:6-19). Eve put more stock in alleged empirical evidence (Gen 3:6), as do exponents of evolution.

5. Scripture never suggests that Christ used the evolutionary process. Given a cosmic controversy and Satan's hatred of the Creator/Redeemer Christ, wouldn't one expect a counterfeit creation claim in opposition to the biblical account? Creation by God is found throughout Scripture; in fact, Christ speaks of God as Creator in reference to Genesis 1 and 2 (Matt 19:4,5), the very chapter rejected as non-literal, non-historical, and non-scientific (considered by some theologians as myth and saga).

6. Christians who look to the evolutionary process as the means God employed in creation overlook two facts: (1) If God created the humanity of the second Adam (Rom 5:15-19; 1 Cor 15:21-24,45), Jesus Christ, why couldn't he create the first Adam? (2) Theistic evolution attempts to marry two mutually exclusive worldviews (supernaturalism and naturalism). As G. C. Berkouwer put it, "science cannot become an 'interpreter' alongside of Scripture itself."⁶² We have cited one use of the *sola Scriptura* principle of interpretation that (if applied) would have kept many theologians from buying into evolutionary theory.

7. The function of the Spirit is just as important in interpretation as it was in revelation and inspiration. Just as prophets were as dependent upon God to receive the message as they were to communicate the message, so the reader is just as dependent upon God to discern the message (1 Cor 2:14), and interpret it correctly, and allow Scripture to interpret itself. God is present as the Interpreter just as He was present as the Revealer and the Inspirer. Just as there is a union of the divine and human in the revelation-inspiration process, so there is a union between the divine and the human in interpretation (John 16:13,14a) This includes God's guidance in using the historical-grammatical conventions outside of Scripture.

8. This means recognizing the important linguistic and historical contributions to interpretation. It means looking at a passage in its immediate historical context, its book context, its authorial context (compared to other biblical books by the same writer), and its biblical context. It means being true to the Reformation *sola-tota-prima Scriptura* principle of interpretation, where Scripture interprets Scripture, where the reader looks within Scripture for internal controls that open up meaning. It means thinking through all truths within the metanarrative of the cosmic

⁶² G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Holy Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 134.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

controversy. The controversy calls into question the love and justice of God, and a timeless view of God is a foundational distortion that unwittingly aids the controversy. That's why a system true to Scripture rejects a timeless model of revelation-inspiration, for it advances the cause of the controversy and is contrary to the biblical model of revelation-inspiration articulated above.

Conclusion

When information is revealed, we are dealing with more than a non-cognitive, existential, God-encounter (Brunner), we are dealing with more than Scripture as a witness to revelation (Barth), we are dealing with Scripture as revelation. Revelation imparts cognitive content that brings with it an existential encounter with God. Properly understood, information and encounter belong together. It is not one without the other.⁶³ When both are present, Scripture produces "certain transforming effects" (Anthony Thiselton)⁶⁴ because biblical interpretation is a "spiritual act" of the reader and the Holy Spirit, which "entails a 'spiral' from text to context, from its original meaning to its contextualization" (Grant Osborne).⁶⁵ Transformation doesn't take place when there is a God-encounter without cognitive content received, or if content is read without the Spirit's working through the content in the mind of the reader.

N. T. Wright, former professor at Cambridge and Oxford Universities, penned the following lines that deserve careful consideration:

As with God so with the Bible; just because our tradition tells us that the Bible says and means one thing or another, that does not excuse us from the challenging task of studying it afresh in the light of the best knowledge we have about its world and context, to see whether these things are indeed so. For me the dynamic of a commitment to Scripture is not 'we believe the Bible, so there is nothing more to be learned,' but rather, 'we believe the Bible, so we had better discover all the things in it to which our traditions, including our 'protestant' or 'evangelical' traditions, which have supposed themselves to

⁶³ "The reader believes in the cognitive, propositional revelation of Scripture but not apart from the personal encounter of the Holy Spirit through that scriptural revelation, something that far surpasses a mere functional view of Scripture and mere biblicism or bibliolatry" (*Prolegomena*, 1:707).

⁶⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 17

⁶⁵ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 5, 6.

GULLEY: REVELATION-INSPIRATION MODEL OF A RELATIONAL GOD

be “biblical” but are sometimes demonstrably not, have made us blind.⁶⁶

As Christ questioned traditions of the Jewish religion by the Word of God, so Scripture has a right to do the same for us today. We must be open to new insights, to present understanding of truth that was not grasped by biblical scholars and theologians of the past, but calls for understanding in our time. We must allow Scripture to call into question long cherished traditions and follow Christ in placing divine revelation above human traditions. We must allow biblical internal controls to function in the interpretation of Scripture

Rightly understood, all biblical interpretation should bring glory to Christ. A worship-centered hermeneutic finds the biblical reader worshipping at the author’s feet, for that reader can say with the psalmist, “my heart trembles at your word” (Ps 119:161), and know that this humble and contrite spirit is one God esteems (Isa 66:2). Such a reader will never think that he or she has arrived at a full understanding, but rather longs and prays for it. Such a reader will plead with the psalmist, “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (Ps 119:18). We must come to the text to listen and not to question.

Says John Stott, Christ’s

submission to Scripture is for us Evangelicals a sign of our submission to Christ, a test of our loyalty to him. We find it extremely impressive that our incarnate Lord, whose own authority amazed his contemporaries, should have subordinated himself to the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures as he did, regarding them as his Father’s written word.⁶⁷

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⁶⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 17.

⁶⁷ David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 85.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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Encountering Truth: A Biblical Perspective

John Wesley Taylor V
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The clatter of a mob shattered the morning calm. An accused man, noble and serene, stood before the Roman magistrate. It was the moment for judicial action. Pilate faltered. The verdict became a question: “What is truth?”¹

Pilate’s query has echoed through the corridors of time. It has become increasingly relevant in a world of growing confusion, a world steeped in strife and stereotypes, a planet concerned with relevance and rubbish. The question reaches us, how do we, as Christians, delineate truth? How do we identify and ascertain truth? How do we establish a biblical foundation for our encounter with truth?

These questions are particularly relevant in the postmodern world—a decentered, pluralistic society that has proposed the death of objective truth, preferring to think of “a diversity of truths” or simply “truth for me.” Michel Foucault, an avant-garde philosopher and sociologist whose contributions figure prominently in the postmodern shift, suggests that even the concept of truth itself is dangerous—that “truths” are merely the agendas of special interest groups with economic clout or political power, who use these ideas, packaged as advertising, propaganda, or mass media, to bully others into believing whatever the privileged find convenient.² Meanwhile, other postmodernists, such as Richard Rorty,

¹ John 18:38. All biblical passages quoted, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New King James Version, copyright 1979, 1980, 1982 Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers.

² Michel Foucault. *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. R. Howard (London: Routledge, 2001), and *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2002). Further discussion may be found in Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

argue that we should give up the search for truth altogether and be content with mere interpretation of data, without endeavoring to assess their truth value.³

Clearly, given our contemporary context, the concept of truth merits special attention, particularly from a biblical perspective. In this essay, we will seek to highlight the significance of truth for the Christian worldview, identify core tenets in the Christian view of truth, and examine the multi-faceted process of receiving God's truth. Finally, we will discuss the dilemma of error and the role of the Holy Spirit as guide and guardian of truth.

The Significance of Truth. Why is truth of consequence for the Christian? As believers, we are counseled to speak the truth, to make decisions based on truth, to live truth-focused lives, and to be sanctified through the truth.⁴ We are to "buy the truth and not sell it,"⁵ binding it about our necks and writing it upon our hearts. We are to worship in the spirit of truth, "rightly dividing the word of truth."⁶ Furthermore, Ephesians 5:9 declares that truth is a fruit of the Spirit, while Philippians 4:8 suggests that for the Christian, truth is the point of departure for all other intellectual pursuits.

Truth, moreover, is a characteristic of all who enter God's kingdom: "Open the gates, that the righteous nation which keeps the truth may enter in."⁷ The apostle John identifies the returning King as "Faithful and True" and describes the New Jerusalem as a sacred place where there is no violation of truth.⁸

In essence, truth is vital, directly influencing our lives. We act upon what we believe to be true, thus shaping the way we live. Truth also affects how we see ourselves. The belief in the divine creation of humankind, for example, joined with the doctrine of the Incarnation, provides a basis for human status and worth. At the end of the day, truth is what matters, judging what we experience and what we do.⁹

³ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979). Also, "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," in R. Hollinger (Ed.), *Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1985).

⁴ Ref. Eph 4:25; Zec 8:16; 1 Pet 1:22; John 17:17.

⁵ Prov 23:23; see also Prov 3:3.

⁶ John 4:24; 2 Tim 2:15.

⁷ Isa 26:2.

⁸ Ref. Rev 19:11; 22:15.

⁹ See Ps 96:13; Isa 42:3; and Rom 2:2.

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Tragically, however, humanity, particularly in the postmodern world, has lost the centrality of truth—it has “fallen in the street,” trampled in the bustling thoroughfare.¹⁰ Scripture cries forth, “Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem; see . . . if you can find a man . . . who seeks the truth, and I will pardon [the city].”¹¹ Sadly, though perhaps predictably, none was found.

God: The Essence of Truth. As is often the case with God, Christ answered the truth question before it was asked. He declared, “I am the . . . truth.”¹² On another occasion, Christ prayed to His Father, “Thy word is truth.”¹³ Furthermore, Scripture affirms that all God’s “work is done in truth.”¹⁴

Here then is the bold biblical delineation: *God is truth*. His nature, His very spirit, is truth. Consequently, truth is, at its core, a Being. Furthermore, if God is the essence, the embodiment of truth, it follows that all God says and all God does is truth. His words and His works are but revelations of His nature.

Here then is found the Christian response to Pilate’s question. The Word—whether spoken, written, illustrated, enacted, or incarnate—is Truth.

Consequently, for the Christian, truth exists as a divine revelation. It is authoritative, provided by One who has not only examined all the evidence, but formed the evidence.¹⁵ Thus, the multitude who had gathered on the hillside to listen observed that Jesus taught “as one having authority,”¹⁶ the inherent authority of the Word.

In sum, the Christian worldview holds that God is trustworthy and that His revelation of truth is objective and reliable.¹⁷ Human beings must therefore interact directly with the divine repositories of truth, revealed through Scripture, through God’s creation in all of its dimensions, and in the person of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we are to communicate

¹⁰ Isa 59:14.

¹¹ Jer 5:1; Hos 4:1.

¹² John 14:6; see also Deut 32:4.

¹³ John 17:17. Similarly, Ps 119:142,151 declare “Thy law is the truth” and “All thy commandments are truth.”

¹⁴ Ps 33:4. Nebuchadnezzar likewise acknowledged, “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice” (Dan 4:37).

¹⁵ John 1:3; Col 1:15-16

¹⁶ Matt 7:29

¹⁷ John 17:17; 1 Cor 1:9; 2 Pet 1:19

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

confidence in the trustworthiness of the divine revelation of truth—a “more sure word . . . which [we] do well to heed.”¹⁸

Tenets in the Christian Perspective. When one accepts that God is the very essence of truth, what does this suggest? What might be the ramifications of this perspective? There would seem to be, in fact, a number of implications.

1. *For the Christian, truth is anchored in the supernatural.* Truth begins with God, not with man.¹⁹ The Creator is ultimately the Source of all truth. Consequently, truth does not originate within nature, nor is it initiated by mankind. Human beings only discover truth; they do not create it.

2. *Truth is eternal because it resides in God.* Psalm 117:2 states that God’s truth “endures forever.”²⁰ What does this mean? Because truth is eternal, it existed before the mind of man, and hence the mind can neither create nor destroy truth. We can only choose to accept it or to reject it, to abide in the truth or to abandon truth to reside in error.²¹

As Christians, we should remember that nothing can be done “against the truth, but for the truth.”²² Human beings simply cannot obliterate truth. The world had its best chance at Calvary and failed miserably.

Our role, then, as Christians is invitational, rather than confrontational. We do not have to so much “defend truth” from annihilation, as to extend the invitation to accept God’s eternal truth.

3. *Because God is the ultimate origin of truth and God does not change, truth is unchanging.* God-centered truth is absolute and universal in scope—stable across time, place, and person.²³ In contemporary culture, relativism is pervasive, with many individuals maintaining that truth

¹⁸ 2 Pet 1:19. Such confidence in the trustworthiness of divine truth arises, as will be more fully explored, from the interplay of faith, reason, inquiry, reflection, and personal experience—all within the context of God’s character and of His will revealed in Scripture.

¹⁹ Jas 1:17; John 1:3,17

²⁰ See also Ps 100:5.

²¹ This is a vital distinction, for John 8:44 indicates that Lucifer did not abide in the truth, and therefore there is now “no truth in him.”

²² 2 Cor 13:8

²³ God’s unchangeableness is described throughout Scripture (e.g., Mal 3:6; Jas 1:17). Similarly, the stability of God’s truth is also established (e.g., Ps 100:5; Isa 43:9; Matt 5:18; Heb 13:8; 2 Thes 2:12).

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

is in a state of perpetual flux—a matter of opinion, social convention.²⁴ While circumstances do change, and there is brokenness and fragmentation evident in many aspects of life, the Christian worldview is able to provide a framework that offers stability and security.

As Christians, we can help postmodern individuals find foundations for their lives, enduring ideals that can provide a basis for living. We can share with them an understanding that the solidity of truth contributes to a personal sense of identity, direction, and belonging.

4. *All truth possesses unity because it comes from the same Source.* Since God is one, truth is one, for God is truth.²⁵ Truth, therefore, will always be in harmony with itself wherever and whenever it is found. Anything that contradicts truth is error or reveals a problem with finite human understanding.

There are perhaps several implications. (a) To know God is the key to seeing life as a meaningful whole. (b) While there is always the danger of starting with a false premise or of forcing the evidence, the greater the scope of evidence and the better its fit, the more adequate its justification as truth. (c) We should avoid creating false dichotomies within God's truth. These could include the severance of mercy and justice, the disconnecting of piety and action, or the partition of faith and learning.²⁶

5. *Truth is infinite because God is infinite.* Our circle of knowledge is surrounded by the vast universe of our ignorance. The endless extent of God's truth lies as yet virtually undiscovered.

Just as the perimeter of a circle (i.e., our contact with the unknown) increases as the area of that circle enlarges, so the more Christians learn of God's truth, the more they realize how much there is yet to know—and the more humble they will be. It's when the circle is small and our

²⁴ Jean-François Lyotard (1984, translated) proposed, for example, that truth is but an expression of the perspective of a given community. What individuals envision and accept as truth is thus dependent upon the community in which they participate. This relativity extends beyond one's perceptions of truth to its essence—a stance in which “there is no absolute truth” (Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 8).

²⁵ See Deut 6:4; 32:4; Ps 31:5.

²⁶ This suggests that we see all of life and learning in relation to God. It also reminds us that we must beware of overspecialization and knowledge fragmentation and forge both interdisciplinary and life connections. Most crucially, however, this perspective asserts that we must not create a spiritual/secular dichotomy. Rather, we should view each subject and topic as within the pattern of God's truth.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

contact with the unknown is reduced that we are tempted to think that we “know everything.”

How presumptuous then it would be for us to declare, at any time, that we have now arrived, that we now possess all the truth. Christians, then, do not have “all the truth,” but ultimately all they have will be truth.²⁷

6. *The Christian understanding of truth must be progressive.* It is not enough to stand in the truth—we are to *walk* in the path of truth.²⁸ This concept of “walking” implies new horizons. It is a call to learning and to growth.

To change the metaphor, the term “rooted and grounded in the truth” (utilized in Eph 3:17) denotes that a plant is vibrant, receiving continual nourishment, growing in the truth.

While truth does not change, our relationship to truth should develop. We recognize that our understandings of truth are but “works in progress”—that new dimensions of truth should continually²⁹ open before us.

7. *Because God is the Source of all truth, all truth is ultimately God’s truth.* Scripture states that “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights.”³⁰ This suggests that human beings are to view each dimension of their lives—work, study, relationships, recreation, etc.—as an extension of God’s truth.³¹

²⁷ This progression from partial conceptions of truth to more clear, although still finite understandings seems to be referred to in 1 Cor 13:12.

²⁸ Growth in truth is a concept found repeatedly throughout Scripture: Ps 25:5; 26:3; 43:3; 86:11; Eph 4:15; 2 Pet 3:18; 3 John 4.

²⁹ Hodges discusses at some length the progressive nature of perception and revelation. He notes, for example, that we perceive God’s redemptive purposes more fully as the history of the world unfolds before us (B. H. Hodges, “Perception is Relative and Veridical: Ecological and Biblical Perspectives on Knowing and Doing the Truth,” in H. Heie and D. L. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Reality of Christian Learning*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

³⁰ Jas 1:17; see also John 1:17.

³¹ This premise is more fully developed in Arthur Holmes’ work, *All Truth Is God’s Truth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977). In a later work, Holmes proposes that all truth is either about God, about God’s creation, or about things that God knows but never Himself created—like the technological and artistic possibilities he left for us to bring to actuality (“Toward a Christian View of Things,” in A. Holmes (Ed.), *The Making of the Christian Mind* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985]).

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

It also reminds us that we should beware of exclusivity in the claim of truth. While Christians have truth, they do not, in the Christian worldview, have a monopoly on truth. Rather, because God makes His sun shine on the evil and on the good and would have all come to a knowledge of the truth,³² non-believers also discover truth.

What is the difference then between the Christian and the non-Christian? The non-Christian stumbles across concepts of truth in his journey through life, while the Christian recognizes the Source of that truth.

In Christian education, for example, we recognize that truth can be discovered and expounded by secular minds and that these explanations can form viable components in the curriculum. At the same time, students should be brought into direct contact with the Source of truth, there discovering personal insights into God's character and his plan.

As we have examined the biblical paradigm of truth, it seems evident that certain principles are foundational. Truth, in essence, begins with God and not with man. It is revealed and not constructed.³³ It is discovered and not determined by a majority vote. It is authoritative and not merely a matter of personal preference. It is feeling that should conform to truth, rather than truth to feelings. Ideas are not true solely because they are practical; rather, they will ultimately be of value because they are true. In the final analysis, divine truth influences each dimension of our lives as we recognize that all truth is indeed God's truth.

Receiving the Truth. A biblical perspective of truth, however, implies not only principles, but also process. How do we obtain God's truth? Through reason? Through revelation? Through a combination of both? What is the role of faith, of inquiry, and of reflection? What is the place of experience? These matters seem to be particularly relevant for the Christian.

Divine revelation. God desires to reveal truth continually to humankind. Knowing would be unattainable, were it not for the self-initiated, self-revealing nature of God.³⁴ Divine revelation is the channel through

³² Ref. Matt 5:45 and 1 Tim 2:4.

³³ "Truth is regarded [by many] as a kind of pudding, or brew, which you concoct from human opinions. . . . But truth is more like a rock than a pudding—a rock which you lay bare by scraping away the soil. And the soil is largely compounded of human prejudice and passion" (Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* [Ann Arbor: Servant, 1963], 113).

³⁴ Paul notes that human knowledge is the result of truth "freely given to us by God" (1 Cor 2:12).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

which God communicates true facts and principles to human beings.³⁵ This revelation of truth is foundational and includes (a) God's creation³⁶ in each of its dimensions, (b) the Holy Scriptures, and (c) Jesus Christ, "God with us."³⁷

These "words" of God provide an ascending order of revelation in which later revelations do not displace the earlier avenues, but rather complement each form with richer meaning. In the Christian worldview, for example, we recognize that the intrusion of sin has distorted our understanding of the truth revealed through God's works, both in nature and in human society.³⁸ Consequently, the Scriptures portray in detail the truth about the untruth.

Ultimately, however, truth is a person. Christ is the fullest revelation of truth—"the express image" of the divine.³⁹ This revelation through Christ, anchored in Scripture and expanded through a personal relationship with God,⁴⁰ responds to the human condition in a way that surpasses any other presentation of truth.

Consequently, we, as human beings, must come into personal contact with divine revelation, exploring and examining God's truth revealed in nature and in human society. We should also see the Holy Scriptures as foundational in clarifying the contours of God's truth and discern its

³⁵ John Wesley's quadrilateral for truth included revelation, tradition, reason, and experience. This relationship should not be construed as equilateral, however. Wesley maintained that divine revelation was foundational and superseded all other elements (Outler, 2000).

³⁶ Although sometimes denominated *natural truth*, as opposed to *revealed truth*, God's creation is also a purposeful revelation of His character and of His plan for the universe and for humanity. See Ps 19:1-3; 85:11; Rom 1:20.

³⁷ Matt 1:23. Note that truth is revealed through the three-dimensional Word: God's creative works—the Illustrated Word (Ps 33:4; 19:1; Jas 1:18); Scripture—the Written Word (Ps 119:105,160; John 17:17); and Christ—the Living Word (John 1:14,17; 14:6).

³⁸ We must be careful not to create a Thomist synthesis of nature and special revelation. Even in Eden, special revelation was required in order to know who is God and how human beings are to relate to the world. Similarly, natural revelation was insufficient to understand the nature of man, of the Sabbath, or of the tree in the midst of the garden (Gen 1:26; 2:2-3,16-17). How much more is special revelation needed now given the distortions brought about by sin. In essence, Scripture is the foundation for understanding the world around us. Without the guiding role of the spoken and written Word of God, nature leads to idolatry (Rom 1:22-23).

³⁹ Heb 1:3. Paul further develops this concept in 2 Cor 4:6: "For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

⁴⁰ Luke 24:27; John 5:39; 17:3

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

relevance for our lives.⁴¹ Above all, we are to personally encounter Jesus Christ and experience with Him a vibrant, truth-affirming relationship.

Reason. While revelation, in each of its forms, is God's channel for truth, it does not replace human thought, nor does it bypass reason. Divine revelation is to be studied, accepted, and applied. Reasoning power is, therefore, a gift from God to help us understand truth.⁴²

As Christians, we are to be prepared to give a reasoned explanation of the beliefs that we hold.⁴³ In the early church, the Christians in Berea were commended for not blindly accepting Paul's teaching, but rather they "searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so."⁴⁴ Throughout His ministry, Christ encouraged His listeners to engage in analytical thinking.⁴⁵ Even the prophet Jeremiah was not always certain when he had received a revelation until he had checked it against the evidence.⁴⁶ Divine revelation thus informs our reason, which in turn evaluates the authenticity and the meaning of that message.

In short, reason is a God-given tool to assess the validity of the messages we receive and to interpret their significance. In so doing, the goal of reason is understanding,⁴⁷ rather than proof. Reason is not omnipotent—the beguiling allure of rationalism and the Enlightenment project.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Jo Ann Davidson insightfully discusses this foundational role of Scripture in her essay "Word Made Flesh: The Inspiration of Scripture," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 15/1 (2004): 21-33.

⁴² The fact that such a revelation is entrusted to fallible but rational human beings is eloquent testimony to God's confidence in the rational powers He gave us and in our ability to make reasoned judgments (see Holmes, 1977).

⁴³ Ref. 1 Pet 3:15.

⁴⁴ Acts 17:11.

⁴⁵ Examples may be found in Matt 16:13-15; 18:12; 21:28-32; 22:42-45; Luke 7:24-26; 13:2-4.

⁴⁶ Jer 32:6-8.

⁴⁷ Just because one does not understand something, however, does not preclude it from being true. There are statements that seem to inherently defy human logic, such as these paradoxes: "When I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Cor 12:10); "Having nothing, and yet possessing all things." (2 Cor 6:10); "Whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all." (Mark 10:44); and "Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35). Other apparent anomalies include Christ's humanity and divinity (Col 2:9; 1 Tim 2:5), the relationship of faith and works (Eph 2:8; Phil 2:12), as well as God's mercy and justice, man's free will and God's sovereignty, and God's love and human suffering.

⁴⁸ The epistemological effects of the Era of Enlightenment are further discussed in Edward E. Zinke, "Faith-Science Issues: An Epistemological Perspective," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 15/1 (2004), 63-90. A perceptive analysis of the relation-

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Rather, human reason can be trustworthy, but only within limits.⁴⁹ This recognition keeps us from enthroning intellectual pride and safeguards us from deifying reason.⁵⁰

Faith. Faith is also a gift from God.⁵¹ While neither a source nor channel of truth, faith is an openness to God's revelation of truth. In so doing, faith performs a key role in the acquisition of truth.⁵² Faith, however, goes beyond the mere discovery of truth. It is also a sincere and whole-hearted commitment to live the truth.⁵³

Contrary to popular perception, faith and reason are not antagonists. Faith is not merely an emotion; rather, it incorporates both cognitive and volitional elements. Faith, for example, is linked to trust, and trust rests on evidence of trustworthiness.⁵⁴ Such evidence is clearly found in Scripture—"faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."⁵⁵ Further confirmation of God's faithfulness is provided in the natural world and through His involvement in our lives.⁵⁶

Regardless of the source, however, this determination of credibility and dependability involves analysis and assessment, a careful examination of the evidence.

Faith thus takes the known and responsibly extends belief toward the unknown.⁵⁷ It thinks not merely in terms of probabilities, but of possibilities. In that sense, faith bridges the gap between evidence and certainty—"For I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him."⁵⁸

ship of faith, reason, and choice may be found in Humberto M. Rasi, "Faith, Reason, and Choice: Loving God with All Our Min," *Christ in the Classroom*, 31B (2005), 337-354.

⁴⁹ A number of passages in Scripture delineate these limitations; for example, Job 11:7; Prov 30:18; Rom 11:33.

⁵⁰ Warnings to this effect may be found in Ezek 28:17 and Rom 12:3, among others.

⁵¹ Eph 2:8 reminds us that faith operates within the context of grace, "a gift from God."

⁵² Jas 1:5-6, for example, clarifies that wisdom comes as the result of the believer's prayer of faith.

⁵³ Jas 2:17; see also Rom 2:8.

⁵⁴ Ps 40:3, for example, states that our testimony of God's trustworthiness can cause others to trust God. In a similar vein, Heb 10:23 indicates that steadfast faith results from confidence in God's faithfulness.

⁵⁵ Rom 10:17.

⁵⁶ Matt 6:25-30; 16:8-10.

⁵⁷ Thus, faith is the basis of things that we hope for, the evidence of things that we have not seen as yet (Heb 11:1).

⁵⁸ 2 Tim 1:12. Through faith, founded on Scripture, the Christian can be *confident* that God was the creator of life on this earth, that we are in the midst of a great contro-

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Note, however, that faith requires an object—it is confidence in something, trust in someone. You cannot, however, trust someone you do not know.⁵⁹ In order to trust an individual, you must get to know him or her personally; and in order to get to know someone, you need to spend time together—talking together, doing things together. The basis then for understanding and accepting God’s truth is to spend time with God.

In sum, all must live by faith. The atheist, for example, cannot prove that God does not exist. His very laws of science do not allow him to prove the non-existence of anything. He chooses to believe that there is no God. The question is simply, “Where will you place your faith?”⁶⁰

Inquiry. Faith cannot bypass difficult questions. Rather, faith is exploratory. It both informs and motivates inquiry. It is true that we see dimly,⁶¹ but just because the glass may be imperfect doesn’t mean that we should not strive to discover all the truth that it is possible for us to learn.

Inquiry is a divine directive. “If you seek wisdom as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.”⁶² Scripture, in fact, abounds with individuals of faith who exercised the spirit of inquiry.⁶³ The intent is to identify truth—to “hold fast what is good.”⁶⁴

Christians should therefore be encouraged to question, to probe beneath the surface. They should understand that truth loses nothing by investigation. Rather, both reason and faith are strengthened by the scru-

versy between good and evil, that Jesus Christ was God incarnate—dying in our place and soon to return to grant us eternal life in His presence. The Christian can also experience the certainty of God’s love, the forgiveness of sin, and the assurance of salvation. For biblical passages that allude to this confidence, see Ps 66:19; Prov 22:17-21; Jer 32:41; Dan 2:45; Matt 5:18; 18:3; 25:40; Mark 9:41; 10:15; 10:29-30; 11:23; Luke 1:1-4; John 3:3-5; 5:24-25; 6:7; 14:12; 16:23; Acts 2:36; 17:31; Rom 6:5; 1 Thes 1:5; 1 Tim 6:7; 2 Tim 3:14; Heb 10:22; 11:13.

⁵⁹ Ps 9:10 reminds us that “they that know your name, O Lord, will place their trust in you.”

⁶⁰ In 1 Cor 2:5, Paul urges us not to place our faith “in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.”

⁶¹ Ref. 1 Cor 13:12

⁶² Prov 2:4-5. See also Eccl 1:13; 2 Tim 2:15.

⁶³ For example, Job (Job 29:16), David (Ps 77:6), the Bereans (Acts 17:11), and the prophets (1 Pet 1:10).

⁶⁴ 1 Thes 5:21

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

tiny of research and refined in the crucible of analysis.⁶⁵ At the same time, however, we should recognize that inquiry has its limitations and that even a careful application of scholarship or of scientific methodology is not a guarantee of truthful conclusions.⁶⁶

Reflection. In order to understand truth, we must seek out opportunities for reflection. Although truth, in the Christian perspective, is neither an internal construction nor relative,⁶⁷ it is nonetheless personal. “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good.”⁶⁸ God’s truth is to be individually recognized, understood, and applied. “You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.”⁶⁹ This internalization of truth requires time, however, for thought and for meditation.

Scripture encourages us to set aside space in our hectic lives for reflection.⁷⁰ Phil 4:8, for example, reminds us: “Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on

⁶⁵ Clark and Gaede identify two extremes: “Comfortable Saints” and “Doubting Thomases” (R. A. Clark and S. D. Gaede, “Knowing Together: Reflections on a Holistic Sociology of Knowledge,” in Heie and Wolfe). Comfortable Saints focus on the premise “now we see” (1 Cor 13:12), conveniently neglecting the qualifier “in a mirror dimly.” These are advised to evaluate their beliefs more critically and to be open to the possibility that they may have embraced error. On the other hand, Thomases, immobilized by doubt, focus on the phrase “in a mirror dimly” to the exclusion of “now we see.” These must exercise faith, recognizing that there is reason enough to warrant belief in God and that they are more justified in trusting the Christian worldview than any other.

⁶⁶ See Job 11:7 and Ps 64:6. Although in research we endeavor to safeguard the truth-value of our conclusions, we recognize that we can never arrive at certainty. We can never declare, “Research has proved. . . .” Rather, we must state our conclusions under conditions of estimation and approximation, in terms of probability, possibility, and plausibility. We speak only in terms of evidence—indications that bear “witness to the truth” (John 18:37; 3 John 1:12).

⁶⁷ Clark and Gaede point out that relativism is based on a logical error: While cultural diversity is indeed evident, one cannot legitimately infer from the fact of diversity that there are or can be no universal values or beliefs—no more than a difference of opinion among different people as to what happened would mean that nothing happened.

⁶⁸ Ps 34:8

⁶⁹ Ps 51:6

⁷⁰ Passages that provide this admonition include the following, among others: Job 1:8; Ps 63:6; 77:6; 119:15,27,148; 145:5.

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

these things.” In His own ministry, Christ valued quiet time for reflection and urged His disciples to do likewise.⁷¹

Experience. Truth is not merely an abstract entity, a theoretical construct. Rather, truth is to be personally experienced. It must be lived. The concept of “present truth”⁷² suggests that truth is to be made relevant to our circumstances. It should influence our attitudes, our priorities, and our actions.

Truth, then, is not only descriptive, but prescriptive—providing both meaning and direction. There is a distinct difference, however, between knowing or believing the truth and desiring and doing the truth. The devils, for example, know and believe,⁷³ but they do not love nor live the truth.

Christ’s followers, however, must have a love for the truth.⁷⁴ We should be passionately concerned about truth. We are to yearn for fuller understandings of truth. We are to be convinced that God’s revelation of truth is but the portal to a more abundant life.⁷⁵ Then we can declare, “I delight to do Your will, O my God, And Your law is within my heart.”⁷⁶

We are also to apply God’s truth to our lives. Truth is more than words; it is action.⁷⁷ Indeed, it is the personal acceptance and application of truth that makes the Christian different from the unbeliever. Living God’s truth serves to open new understandings of truth. “If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God.”⁷⁸ We know the truth as we live the truth. Perhaps the question is not so much, “How long have you been in the truth?” but rather, “Is the truth in you?” Are you living the truth?⁷⁹

⁷¹ Specific incidents may be found in Matt 14:23; Mark 1:35; 6:31.

⁷² Ref. 2 Pet 1:12

⁷³ Ref. Jas 2:19

⁷⁴ As Paul urges in 2 Thes 2:10.

⁷⁵ John 10:10. To adopt this perspective, I must be convinced of two fundamental truths. (a) God knows everything [Ps 139:2-4]. (b) God cares about me [John 3:16]. If (a) is true but (b) is not, God might be an omniscient tyrant who delights in torture. If (b) is true but (a) is not, God could be benevolent, but bumbling—one who wishes me well, but is simply misinformed. If both are true, however, whatever God tells me to do or not to do is what I would choose if I could see everything as He does.

⁷⁶ Ps 40:8.

⁷⁷ See Matt 25:34-36; John 17:19; 1 John 1:6; 2:4.

⁷⁸ John 7:17; see also 1 John 1:8.

⁷⁹ Nearly half of the references to “truth” in Scripture place it in parallel with love, obedience, mercy, or righteousness. Truth, therefore, incorporates a moral, life-transforming dimension.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Thus, while we recognize that God's truth is not individually relative, it is to become individually *relevant*. As Christians, we should help others discover that truth is deeply meaningful on a personal level. They should come to see truth as relational, forming a living link with Christ and with the community of believers. In essence, to "know the truth" is not merely a detached, cognitive process, but a personal experience with God, an encounter that radically transforms our life.

The Problem of Error. As we have seen, God, the Source of truth, communicates truth of His own initiative to human beings.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, while God desires all "to come to the knowledge of the truth," He does not lock in human thought or free will.⁸¹ Men and women must still interpret and apply truth to the contexts of their lives. In this process, it is indeed possible to arrive at false conclusions, to exchange God's truth for a lie.⁸²

This problem of error raises important issues. How is it that men and women can receive true facts and principles from God and then come to false conclusions? Why does error haunt our quest for truth? What is the remedy for this distressing state of affairs?

First, we should recognize that the problem seems to reside in our finitude, our fallenness, and in Satan's intentional distortion of God's truth.

Cause: Our Finitude. "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!"⁸³ "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."⁸⁴ While God and His truth are infinite, we, as created beings,

⁸⁰ For example, Dan 2:47 and Rev 1:1.

⁸¹ 1 Tim 2:4; see also Job 24:15.

⁸² Ref. Rom 1:25. Note that the difficulty resides with humanity, rather than with God. "As God allows man to sin without causing his sin and being to blame, so God allows man to err without causing his error and being to blame for that" (Holmes, 1977, 54). Holmes further suggests that God permits us to err in order that we might understand both our finiteness and our need for growth.

⁸³ Rom 11:33.

⁸⁴ Isa 55:9.

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

are finite,⁸⁵ with inherent limitations in our perceptions and understanding.⁸⁶

The reality of human finiteness would seem to lead to certain implications. (a) A fixation on empirical certainty does not seem to be suitable for human beings, due to our sensory limitations, the inherent complexity of the world around us, and the impracticality of always suspending judgment until all the facts are in. Apart from God, we would find ourselves forever searching and yet “never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”⁸⁷ (b) While God’s truth is absolute and objective, our perspective on truth is constrained, our knowing is context bound. Our perceptions and understanding depend on our point of view and our focus, as well as on our prior knowledge, experience,⁸⁸ and expectations. When Peter received the vision of the unclean animals, for example, he did not at first understand its meaning. Only upon arrival at Cornelius’ house did Peter discern God’s truth.⁸⁹ Context would consequently seem to be a key factor in receiving and sharing truth.

Cause: Our Fallenness. While some error is the result of human finiteness, sin and unbelief are also implicated.⁹⁰ In the beginning of this world’s history, Eve was not satisfied with her finiteness—she wanted to know like God. This rejection of her status as a created being led to moral rebellion and ultimately to believing a lie.⁹¹ In a similar manner, our acceptance of a secular, humanist worldview warps our perception of God’s truth and results in false conclusions about God and about our role as His creation. In essence, our fallenness leads us to distort and misuse truth in self-serving ways. Our minds are easily blinded by “the god of

⁸⁵ Ps 8:5, for example, states that human beings were created, in their perfect state, “a little lower than the angels,” who themselves are limited beings (e.g., Matt 24:36).

⁸⁶ Scripture does not offset all our finiteness, nor was it intended to do so, for it is not an exhaustive revelation of all things, but rather a *sufficient* revelation of what is essential for faith and practice.

⁸⁷ 2 Tim 3:7

⁸⁸ Hodges notes, for example, that our perceptions are constrained by prior experience. On one hand, lack of prior experience may make the pickup of available information difficult or impossible. On the other, prior experience may set up expectations that cause us to “see” what is not there.

⁸⁹ Acts 10:9-17, 34-35

⁹⁰ “Just as in the problem of evil we identify both moral causes and natural causes, and thereby distinguish moral evils like crime and war from natural evils like earthquakes and cancers, so in the problem of error we must distinguish the moral causes of error from its natural causes” (Holmes, 1977, 52-53).

⁹¹ Ref. Gen 3:4-6

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

this age.”⁹² In this condition, we see only the here and now, and leave God and eternity out of our reckoning.

Cause: Satan’s Distortion. There is, however, a more subtle scheme. When Paul was evangelizing in Philippi, a certain slave girl, “who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling,” followed after Paul and his companions, calling out, “These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation.”⁹³ After she continued doing this for many days, Paul rebuked the evil spirit in the name of Jesus Christ and commanded it to come out of her. Why would Paul do that? After all, what the girl was proclaiming was true! Simply, the people of Philippi knew the girl and her trade of divination and sorcery. As the girl seemed to know Paul and was providing free publicity, the on-lookers would conclude that both were from the same league. In essence, Satan had mutated God’s immortal truth into an immoral lie.

Depicting the cosmic conflict between good and evil, John describes a great red dragon, who is “the Devil and Satan,” that employed its tail to ensnare “a third part of the stars of heaven.”⁹⁴ Isaiah 9:15 suggests that this tool was Satan’s tale of lies—his misrepresentation of God’s character and His plan for the universe, which he has adeptly marketed to the human race.⁹⁵

As Christians, we are to work concertedly to unmask the diabolic deception of God’s truth, helping others to see God as He truly is and to understand the contours of God’s plan for their lives. We are to highlight the consequence of truth—that it is relevant to our lives, influencing our beliefs, values, decisions, and actions.

Here then is the essence of the problem: While God imparts truth to men and women, our finiteness, our fallenness, and Satan’s manipulation of God’s truth can lead us to false understandings. Faith, reason, inquiry, reflection, and experience are all necessary, but insufficient. The problem, of course, is that we then tend to impute the truth of the data to the truthfulness of our conclusions, and frequently we are not even aware of our error.

⁹² 2 Cor 4:4; see also 2 Pet 2:2; 3:16.

⁹³ Acts 16:16-18.

⁹⁴ Rev 12:4,9.

⁹⁵ Passages such as Gen 3:1-5; Rev 12:9; 18:23; 19:20; 20:8, among others, describe this “marketing scheme” in some detail.

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Is the situation hopeless? The answer to the problem of error appears to reside in humility, in crosschecks, and, most significantly, in the role of the Holy Spirit.

Remedy: Humility. Given our finite and fallen condition, we are admonished “not to think of [ourselves] more highly than [we] ought to think.”⁹⁶ We are also reminded that “the humble [God] guides in justice, and the humble He teaches His way.”⁹⁷ Consequently, we should express our understandings of God’s truth without dogmatism and with care. Scripture seems to resonate with this tentative nature of knowledge—“we see through a glass darkly” and “we know only in part.”⁹⁸ Not even the greatest scientist or the most erudite theologian can claim to have arrived at a full understanding of truth or to have a definitive grasp on knowledge. Humility is warranted. Each of us has but a subset of the larger picture, with ample room for learning and growth.⁹⁹

Remedy: Crosschecks. “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety.”¹⁰⁰ Linked to humility and to the contextual nature of understanding is the recognition that we each have much to discover and to understand and that crosschecks with fellow searchers serve to broaden our limited perspectives. This shared nature of truth implies that we can all learn from each other, regardless of belief or background, provided that we, as Christians, can connect that knowledge back to its Source and apply it to our lives through the “truth-filter” of His Word.

⁹⁶ Rom 12:3.

⁹⁷ Ps 25:9; additionally, Prov 11:2; Isa 57:15; Jas 4:10.

⁹⁸ 1 Cor 13:12.

⁹⁹ In essence, while the Christian worldview maintains that universal truth does indeed exist, it also recognizes the human constraint of partial knowledge and the potential for flawed interpretation. As a result, no one can claim infallibility. Even when we speak of the infallible truth of Scripture, we cannot claim infallibility for any of our own understandings or interpretations of Scripture. Rather, we must model authenticity and humility. This includes recognizing the limits of one’s knowledge, being honest about one’s weaknesses, and expressing the tentativeness of one’s conclusions. It implies passing provisional judgment, evidencing openness to correction, and demonstrating a passion for continued growth. It also suggests that sometimes one must bow before prophetic clarification of truth, even if it runs counter to culture, common practice, or personal preference.

¹⁰⁰ Prov 11:14.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

This concept of inter-member checking may have special application within the community of believers.¹⁰¹ In apostolic times, for example, differences of opinion arose as to which requirements should devolve upon Gentile Christians. In response to the crisis, as recorded in Acts 15, the apostles convened a Council in Jerusalem, discussed the various points of view, searched the Scriptures together, and then issued a statement of doctrine which was communicated to the believers. This episode illustrates the value of multiple perspectives in detecting truth and of the community of faith in determining truth. It also reminds us that even leaders and scholars—like the apostles Peter and Paul—need to submit their (tentative) conclusions to careful evaluation and critique.

At the same time, while recognizing the positive role of crosschecks, we should be aware of the risk of “group think” and of a “herd mentality,” recognizing that even consensus is not a guarantee of true interpretations. Clearly, something more is required.¹⁰²

Remedy: The Holy Spirit. According to Christ’s words, the Holy Spirit performs a crucial role in a correct understanding of truth: “When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth.”¹⁰³ It seems that God has given His Spirit as a shield to insulate us from the warped interpretations of a secular worldview, to deflect Satan’s manipulative attacks on truth, and to enable us in our finitude and fallenness. This function of the Holy Spirit as guide and guardian of truth is vital in helping us to arrive at correct understandings of truth—true conclusions about God, His character, and His plan for our lives.

There could be a number of implications. (a) The Holy Spirit enables us to receive the “mind of Christ”¹⁰⁴—seeing life as God sees it. (b) We should not engage in intellectual activities independently of God. Regardless of the topic studied, we rely on God’s Spirit to help us perceive truth and interpret information correctly. “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know

¹⁰¹ In 1 Tim 3:15, for example, Paul indicates that the “church of the living God” has a special role in laying the foundation of understood truth.

¹⁰² Acts 15:28, for example, states that it “seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us.” Both the role of inter-believer crosschecks and of the Holy Spirit are further addressed in Richard M. Davidson’s essay “The Bible: Revelation and Authority” (The Foundation for Adventist Education, 2000. http://fae.adventist.org/essays/26Bcc_017-055.htm [accessed May 11, 2008]).

¹⁰³ John 16:13; see also John 15:26; 1 Cor 2:10; 1 John 5:6.

¹⁰⁴ Ref. 1 Cor 2:14-16; Phil 2:5.

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

the things that have been freely given to us by God.”¹⁰⁵ (c) As Christians, we need to formulate means through which the presence and influence of the Spirit may be enhanced in the church, in our homes, and in our lives, identifying attitudes and activities that help us be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In sum, while our finitude, our fallenness, and Satan’s intentional distortion of God’s truth can indeed lead us to false conclusions regarding God, His character, and His plan for our lives, God, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, has provided effective remedies. These include humility, cross-checks with fellow believers, and, most crucially, the role of the Holy Spirit as guide and guardian of truth. These elements enable us to arrive at correct, although still limited, understandings of God’s truth.

Conclusion

The infinite, eternal pattern of God’s truth lies at the heart of the Christian worldview. As Christians, we are to affirm that God is trustworthy and that His revelation of biblical truth is reliable. Through the rubric of our lives, we are to model that God’s Word is relevant and far-reaching in its application. Given the limitations of our finite and fallen condition, we should also be open and frank to the fallibility of human interpretations of truth, emphasizing the triangulating role of Scripture, the community of believers, and the Holy Spirit.

Finally, we should understand the relationship of truth and freedom. We do not so much need freedom in order to discover truth, as we are to reside in truth in order to experience freedom. Truth, in fact, offers the only freedom. “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”¹⁰⁶

Above the tumult of the mob, the eternal Judge stands serenely. It is the moment for the judicial action. He speaks and the verdict resounds throughout the universe. Truth has triumphed! Divine truth has set us free! Throughout eternity, God’s children will live and flourish in the universe of Truth.

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¹⁰⁵ 1 Cor 2:12.

¹⁰⁶ John 8:32.

Ellen White’s Interpretation and Use of the Seven Letters of Revelation

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Seventh-day Adventists hold to a historicist interpretation of biblical apocalyptic prophecies as found in the books of Daniel and Revelation. Historicism is a hermeneutical approach to apocalyptic writings that affirms that the original intent of these writings was to predict future events through symbolic descriptions and that these events can be connected to historical events as the history of the conflict between good and evil unfolds from the time of the author until the time of the end. Historicism affirms also that parts of these prophecies had relevance and partial application for the audiences that first received them, that parts of these prophecies have been fulfilled since the time of the biblical writers, while other parts are yet to be fulfilled in the future. It also affirms that spiritual insights in these writings can be relevant for any generation.

While most biblical scholars of former centuries were historicist in their interpretation of the book of Revelation, modern biblical scholarship adheres for the most part to three other approaches: (1) preterism, that the events referred to in apocalyptic writings describe symbolically the struggles between good and evil Christians were experiencing at the time of the writing of Revelation, and as such the book offers no detailed predictions of the future; (2) futurism, that the events referred to have yet to be fulfilled in the time of the last generation; or (3) idealism, that the events and struggles referred to in Revelation, while representing symbolic descriptions of what happened to God’s people at the time of the

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

writing of Revelation (same as preterism), offer also timeless truths and principles in symbolic forms to guide Christians anywhere.¹

The interpretation of the letters to the seven churches of Revelation (chapters 1-3) has been at the center of many interesting discussions in regard to these various schools of interpretation. Traditionally, among Adventists, the historicist interpretation of these letters has argued that each letter is prophetically and symbolically representing the spiritual condition found in the Christian church during a particular era since the time of the author until the second coming of Christ. In this time line the message to Ephesus represents the period of the early Christian church in the first century, the message to Smyrna the period of Roman persecution in the second and third centuries, and so on until the message to Laodicea, which represents God's people at the time of the end just prior to the Second Advent.²

Some Adventist scholars, however, have argued that these seven messages are not primarily prophetic representations of future periods of Christian history; rather, each church represents a type of the spiritual experience of the Christian church through the centuries, not a prophecy of a particular period of church history. It is argued that the book of Revelation was first intended as a message to the seven churches of Asia Minor and that the messages to each individual church depicted symbolically their true spiritual condition at the time the Book of Revelation was

¹ For more information on these four approaches to biblical prophecies, see Jon Paulien, *The Deep Things of God: An Insider's Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2004), 28-30; Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 2002), 9-11; or Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 28-29. An example of a preterist approach to the seven churches is David E. Aune, *Revelation*, 3 vols. Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1997-1998). An idealist approach to the seven churches is John R. W. Stott's *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958). For a futurist perspective, see C. C. Ryrie, *Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), and J. F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1966). An eclectic (mixed) approach also exists. "Most commentators who seek to apply Revelation will opt for some eclectic approach, usually combining some futurist, preterist, and idealist elements" (Keener, 29).

² Exponents of the traditional Adventist prophetic historicist interpretation include Uriah Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1907) and Stephen Haskell, *The Story of the Seer of Patmos* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1905). More recent Adventist scholars who promote this approach include Roy Allan Anderson, *Unfolding the Revelation*, rev. ed. (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1974) and Clinton Wahlen, "Letter to the Seven Churches: Historical or Prophetic?" *Ministry*, November 2007: 12-15.

written. Furthermore, in a way similar to Paul's epistles to specific churches, the messages to the seven churches can also have valuable insights for Christians today who find themselves in similar situations and spiritual conditions. This view combines a preterist interpretation and an idealist application.³

Given this discussion on the interpretation of the seven letters of Revelation, the purpose of this article is to explore what Ellen White said about the seven churches and how she used these messages in her writings. Being a pioneer and founder of the Seventh-day Adventist church and also regarded as possessing the prophetic gift, her insights will not only help us to understand how Adventist pioneers interpreted this section of the book of Revelation, but will also enlighten our overall discussion and current interpretation of the book of Revelation.

Ellen White's Historicist Approach to the Book of Revelation

Ellen White believed in a historicist interpretation of the book of Revelation and of the messages to the seven churches. She viewed the messages to these churches as prophetic descriptions of the spiritual struggles Christians would face through the centuries. Yet, at the same time, she understood that these symbolic messages were relevant to the spiritual needs of the local churches in John's day to whom this book was addressed and offered timeless truths and spiritual principles relevant to Christians throughout history and particularly to those living in her day. Ellen White's understanding of historicism allowed for the prophetic nature of the book and its spiritual relevance to contemporary first-century Christians and to all Christians throughout history.

In 1906, to a group of Adventist workers in California, Ellen White affirmed the prophetic historicist intent of the whole book of Revelation. She stated that Jesus sent a mighty angel to explain to the apostle John, "by the use of symbols, the things that were to come to pass until the

³ This is the interpretation preferred by both Paulien and Stefanovic, although both allow the possibility of a prophetic interpretation through various periods of church history. At the end of his commentary on each of the messages to the seven churches, Stefanovic adds, almost as an appendix, a short comment on the prophetic application of that church's message. See, 117, 121, 127, 132-133, 138, 143, and 151. See also Paulien's article "The End of Historicism?: Reflections on the Adventist Approach to Biblical Apocalyptic," in the *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 14/2 (Autumn 2003), 14-43, in which he argues that the messages to the seven churches should be seen as similar to classical prophecies (like the books of Isaiah and Micah), instead of apocalyptic prophecies (like the last chapters of Daniel or Revelation 12-14).

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

coming of Christ.” John “was bidden to write the instruction in a book for the benefit of the seven churches. This writing we now have preserved in the book of Revelation, but this book is understood by only a few. It contains the message for the last days, and we are to dwell much upon these prophecies.”⁴ “In the Revelation are portrayed the deep things of God,” she wrote in *Acts of the Apostles*.

Its truths are addressed to those living in the last days of this earth's history, as well as those living in the days of John. Some of the scenes depicted in this prophecy are in the past, some are now taking place; some bring to view the close of the great conflict between the powers of darkness and the Prince of heaven, and some reveal the triumphs and joys of the redeemed in the earth made new.⁵

More specifically, in regard to the messages to the seven churches, she affirmed the prophetic nature of these messages and their symbolic representations of different periods of Christian history.

The names of the seven churches are symbolic of the church in different periods of the Christian Era. The number 7 indicates completeness, and is symbolic of the fact that the messages extend to the end of time, while the symbols used reveal the condition of the church at different periods in the history of the world.⁶

While affirming the symbolic, prophetic, and historicist nature and intent of the letters to the seven churches, Ellen White also believed that these messages were relevant to the spiritual needs of the original churches to which the book of Revelation was addressed and to all

⁴ “The work in Oakland and San Francisco,” Manuscript 105, 1906, published in the *Paulson Collection*, 140. This article refers to many statements from the writings of Ellen White. Her unpublished letters and manuscripts are available through the Ellen G. White Estate or one of its branch offices or research centers.

⁵ *Acts of the Apostles* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 1911), 584.

⁶ *Acts of the Apostles*, 585. In a variant of this passage written a few years earlier, Ellen White said the following: “The messages given to the churches in Asia, portray the state of things existing in the churches of the religious world *today*. The names of the churches are symbolic of the Christian church in different periods of the Christian era; the number of the churches—seven—indicates completeness and is symbolic of the fact that the messages extend to the end of time, and are enforced *today*” (Manuscript 81, 1900, published in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* [Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1957, 1980], 7:959, emphasis added).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

churches during Christian history and in her day. In using this approach to the book of Revelation, she endorsed a spiritual interpretation of the letters, stating that the seven churches also represent types of churches in their struggles with good and evil, temptations and victories. “The words uttered were not alone for John on the Isle of Patmos; they were not for the [seven] churches alone,” she wrote in her diary on December 27, 1890, “but through these churches was to come the inspired message for the people, to have its powerful impression in every age to the close of this earth’s history.”⁷ A few years later, in 1902, she wrote to David Paulson, physician and founder of Hinsdale Sanitarium near Chicago, “I wish to emphasize the fact, that the churches to which John was told to send the instruction given him represent all the churches in our world, and that this revelation to him is to be studied and believed and preached by the Seventh-day Adventist Church today. Christ came personally to John to tell him ‘the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter’ (Revelation 1:19).”⁸ And again the same year, in a sermon on the study of the book of Revelation, she stated, “This testimony that Christ commanded John to write to all the churches was light that God designed should be immortalized and remain present truth until all the events foretold should come to pass.”⁹

In summary, Ellen White affirmed the symbolic nature of the book of Revelation and its prophetic description of events from the time of John until the second advent of Christ. She also affirmed the prophetic and symbolic nature and intent of the messages to the seven churches as representing different periods of Christian history from the time of John to the second advent, but also understood that these seven messages contain spiritual principles relevant to all churches through the centuries and especially in her day. Even while the letters represented prophetic descriptions of the Christian Church during its history, Ellen White also perceived the need of an appropriate contemporary use of the letters. But never did Ellen White limit the seven messages only to these seven churches in the time of John, nor did she believe that the content of the messages was to be interpreted literally. Her approach to these seven churches was never preterist. While today most interpreters of the seven

⁷ Diary entry for December 27, 1890 in Manuscript 53, 1890, published in *1888 Materials* (1987), 779.

⁸ Letter 110, 1902.

⁹ Manuscript 155, 1902, published in *Sermons and Talks* (Silver Spring: Ellen G. White Estate, 1994), volume 2, 215.

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

letters combine preterism and idealism, Ellen White combined prophetic historicism with contemporary spiritual insights. However, for the most part, her numerous references to the seven churches highlight the spiritual insights found in these letters.

In order to better understand and to get a better feel for Ellen White's interpretation and use of the seven letters of Revelation, I will devote the rest of this article to illustrating how she used and interpreted the messages to Ephesus and Sardis.

Turbulent Years

The first five years of the twentieth century were difficult ones for Adventists. In 1901 the church revamped its whole administrative organization, a decision that created and exacerbated some personality conflicts between church leaders. The following year fire destroyed two flagship institutions of the denomination in Battle Creek, Michigan, the Sanitarium and the Review and Herald publishing house. In 1903 the church headquarters were moved from Battle Creek to Washington, D.C., and then two prominent church leaders began to promote doctrines that challenged the Christian and Adventist core beliefs of the church. During all these turbulent years Ellen White dispatched letters to influential church leaders, counseling them on how to respond to these events and teachings. In these letters and in sermons she preached during this period, she often referred to the letters to the seven churches, particularly those of Ephesus, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

At the end of 1902, during this period of intense crisis in Adventism, she penned the following thought, "The message that God gave to the churches in Ephesus and Sardis are applicable to those who in this age have had great light but have not opened the door of the heart to the knock of Christ. . . . The Spirit of God is withdrawing from the world because the warnings of heaven have not been heeded. We need to beware, for a similar condition of things is coming in amongst us as a people."¹⁰ And again, a few weeks later, in January 1903, she wrote, "The messages to the church of Ephesus and to the church in Sardis have been often repeated to me by the One who gives me instruction for His people. . . . We are seeing the fulfillment of these warnings [to Ephesus and

¹⁰ Manuscript 18, 1903, written November 2, 1902 but filed in 1903, published in *Manuscript Releases* (Silver Spring: E. G. White Estate, 1990), 4:321.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Sardis]. Never have scriptures been more strictly fulfilled than these have been.”¹¹

The Letter to the Church at Ephesus

[1] To the angel of the church of Ephesus write: ‘These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: [2] ‘I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; [3] and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary. [4] Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. [5] Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. [6] But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. [7] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.’ Revelation 2:1-7 NKJV

In the message to Ephesus, the symbolic representation of Jesus walking among the seven golden lampstands reminded Ellen White of the ever-vigilant Christ who has an accurate knowledge of what is happening in his churches.

He [Jesus] is represented as walking up and down among the golden candlesticks. He is in communion with his people. He knows their true state. He observes their order, their vigilance, their piety, and their devotion; and he takes pleasure in them if he sees these fruits manifest. Although Christ is mediator in the heavenly Sanctuary, yet he walks up and down in the midst of the churches on earth. He goes about from church to church, from congregation to congregation, from soul to soul. He observes their true condition,— that which is neglected, that which is in disorder, and that which needs to be done. He is represented as walking, which signifies unrest, wakefulness, and unremitting vigilance. He is observing whether the light of

¹¹ *Testimonies for the Church* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 1948), 8:98, 99. It is interesting to note that in this comment Ellen White claimed that spiritual insights found in the letters to Ephesus and Sardis predicted and were applicable to situations the Adventist Church faced in her day.

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

any of his sentinels, or candlesticks, is burning dim or going out.¹²

Ellen White interpreted and used this message to the church at Ephesus in three different ways. First, she understood the message to be an exhortation to that local church founded by the apostle Paul in Asia Minor. "In view of the many virtues enumerated [in the letter]," she wrote in 1906,

how striking is the charge brought against the church at Ephesus: "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." This church had been highly favored. It was planted by the apostle Paul. In the same city was the temple of Diana, which, in point of grandeur, was one of the marvels of the world. The Ephesian church met with great opposition, and some of the early Christians suffered persecution; and yet some of these very ones turned from the truths that had united them with Christ's followers, and adopted, in their stead, the specious errors devised by Satan.

This change is represented as a spiritual fall. "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works"—as outlined in the preceding verses. The believers did not sense their spiritual fall. They knew not that a change had taken place in their hearts, and that they would have to repent because of the noncontinuance of their first works. But God in His mercy called for repentance, for a return to their first love and to the works that are always the result of true, Christlike love.¹³

Second, while Ellen White understood the message of this letter to apply to the church at Ephesus at the end of the first century, she also understood this message to symbolize all of first-century Christianity.

In the days of the apostles the Christian believers were filled with earnestness and enthusiasm. So untiringly did they labor for their Master that in a comparatively short time, notwithstanding fierce opposition, the gospel of the kingdom was sounded to all the inhabited parts of the earth. The zeal manifested at this time by the followers of Jesus has been recorded by the pen of inspiration for the encouragement of believers in every age. Of the church at Ephesus, which the Lord Jesus

¹² *Review and Herald*, May 31, 1887.

¹³ Manuscript 11, 1906, published in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7:957. See also *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:421-422.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

used as a symbol of the entire Christian church in the apostolic age, the faithful and true Witness declared:

“I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: and hast borne, and hast patience, and for My name’s sake hast labored, and hast not fainted.’ Revelation 2:2, 3.”¹⁴

This last reference clearly interprets the letter to Ephesus within a historicist hermeneutic. Although she believed this message was first intended for the church at Ephesus, the letter had a broader intent and purpose far beyond the confines of this Mediterranean metropolis, and it symbolically described the spiritual experience of early Christianity.

But, third, Ellen White also understood this message to be relevant to Christians in her day who also needed “to heed these words of warning, and repent of our sins.”¹⁵

Repeatedly in her writings, Ellen White used the reference to the Ephesians losing their “first love” as an exhortation to complacent and halfhearted Adventist Christians to return to their first love experience and walk with God. She understood this first love experience as Christ’s call to his people “to believe and practice His word,” to “receive and assimilate this word, making it a part of every action, of every attribute of character.”¹⁶ She saw this exhortation as a sincere invitation to demonstrate in one’s life a “broad, extended love for one another, that love which is now so sadly wanting.” A lack of such love, she said, “leads to the lack of respect for one another and the neglect of true courtesy” and manifests itself in “criticising, fault-finding, reporting words spoken in confidence, and using these to second the accusations of Satan, who is very busy in sowing distrust, jealousy, and bitterness.”¹⁷ She also saw this reference to mean that “God calls for immediate repentance and reformation. It is time for a great change to take place among the people who are looking for the second appearing of their Lord.”¹⁸

Ellen White used the letter to Ephesus very broadly and used it often, particularly in her sermons and periodical articles, to encourage church

¹⁴ *Acts of the Apostles*, 578, emphasis added.

¹⁵ *The Home Missionary*, November 1, 1897.

¹⁶ *Counsels for the Church* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 1991), 327.

¹⁷ *Bible Echo*, March 1, 1892.

¹⁸ Manuscript 136, 1902, published in *Medical Ministry* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1963), 37-38.

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

members to live a sincere and dedicated Christian life. She interpreted the message to Ephesus within a historicist perspective combined with spiritual insights relevant to the church in her day. She also interpreted the letter to Sardis in a similar manner.¹⁹

The Letter to the Church at Sardis

[1] “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: ‘I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. [2] Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die; for I have not found your works perfect before God. [3] Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. [4] You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. [5] He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. [6] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’” Revelation 3:1-6 NKJV

The prophetic historicist interpretation of the book of Revelation applies the message to Sardis to a period of about 200 years beginning with the Protestant Reformation, and includes the period of Protestant Scholasticism and the Enlightenment that followed. In the 1890s and early 1900s Ellen White referred more than 80 times to the letter to Sardis in her private letters and manuscripts with most of the references occurring between 1903 and 1905. She seldom quoted the entire letter in her writings, but rather emphasized verses 2 and 3, particularly the phrase at the beginning of verse 3: “Remember therefore how you have received and heard, and hold fast, and repent.” Many of her references to this message come in the middle of exhortations to faithfulness and often simply as a quote without any commentary.²⁰ Some references to Sardis, particularly

¹⁹ Ellen White’s use of the letter to Laodicea is similar to her use of the letter to Ephesus. She understood Laodicea to be a real church in the time of John, founded by Paul and his associates, to which the message of Revelation 3:14-22 had been first addressed (*Manuscript Releases* [Silver Spring: E. G. White Estate, 1990], 16:12). At the same time she understood this letter to be a symbolic description of the warnings given to the last church before the second advent of Christ (*Testimonies for the Church*, 6:77).

²⁰ See, for example, Letter 24, 1890; Letter 70, 1895; Letter 50a, 1897; Manuscript 35, 1901.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

in some of her sermons, are given along with references to other letters of Revelation 2 and 3: Ephesus, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.²¹

In all her references to Sardis, Ellen White gave the distinct impression that she believed this message was spiritually relevant to church leaders in her day; the letter to Sardis was not a message to be relegated to some long ago era with no contemporary significance. In a section of her diary in 1900, after referring to the letter to Sardis, she wrote, "The messages given to the churches in Asia, portray the state of things existing in the churches of the religious world today."²²

Ellen White's use of the message to Sardis is the best illustration of how she applied spiritual insights to contemporary Adventist issues. She applied the spiritual insights of the message to Sardis to three different situations. First, to urge church leaders to remain true to their Christian experience; second, to exhort them to remain genuinely committed to the mission of the church; and third, to ask them to stand steadfastly by the doctrines of the church.

1. Character Development and Sanctification. In her earliest use of the letter to Sardis to contemporary Adventist issues, Ellen White exhorted Adventist leaders regarding the importance of character development, that within the context of the grace of God and salvation by faith in Christ, one's standing before God must also be a concern of all Christians. What particularly appealed to her in the letter is the passage that says that in Sardis there are some who have a reputation of being Christians but are in fact dead. The angel exhorts these people to be watchful and to strengthen the things that remain in their spiritual lives and church, the last things that are ready to die if nothing is done to prevent spiritual death.

In 1886, in a letter to General Conference president George I. Butler, Ellen White discussed the improprieties of another pastor and commented on the urgency of being ready to stand before the judgment of God. In this situation, the letter to Sardis pointed to the need for repentance and being a genuine Christian, to not only bear the name of Christ but also to live by that name.²³ Similarly, she wrote to the employees of

²¹ See, for example, Letter 2, 1894; Manuscript 21, 1899; Letter 31, 1903; Manuscript 161, 1904.

²² Manuscript 81, 1900, published in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7:959, and *Manuscript Releases* (Washington: E. G. White Estate, 1981), 1:372.

²³ Letter 51, 1886, published in *Manuscript Releases* (Washington: E. G. White Estate, 1990), 10:266-267; cf. *Testimonies on Sexual Behavior* (Silver Spring: E. G. White Estate, 1989), 185-193.

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

the Review and Herald in January 1894 and emphasized the need for consistency in the lives of all those who claimed to be Christians. After quoting from the letter to Sardis, she went on to say, "The grand truths of the Bible are for us individually, to rule, to guide, to control our life; for this is the only way in which Christ can be properly represented to our world in grace and loveliness in the characters of all who profess to be His disciples. Nothing less than heart service will be acceptable with God. God requires the sanctification of the entire man, body, soul, and spirit."²⁴ And later that same year, to the manager of the Review and Herald office, Clement Eldridge, she pointed out that

The cause of God must be represented by men whose hearts are as tender, pure, true and compassionate as is the heart of Christ. Those who handle the sacred work in Christ's stead must have a pure heart and clean hands. They must adopt Christ's maxims; for if they fail to do so, they will be deceived, betray Christ and dishonor the truth of God.

For Ellen White, the message of the letter to Sardis urged these men to repent of their weak spiritual condition before it is too late.²⁵

2. Commitment to the Mission of the Church. Ellen White also used the letter to Sardis to exhort church leaders to be genuinely committed to the mission of the church, the gospel and the Adventist message; where she sensed a neglect of duty in the work of the gospel she urged her readers to repent. In these situations she appealed to verse 2—"I have not found your works perfect before God"—and the warning in verse 3—"Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you." In an article published in the *Review and Herald* in November 1886, she commented that

The sin especially charged against this church [Sardis] is that they have not strengthened the things that remain that are ready to die. Does this warning apply to us? God has done his part of the work for the salvation of men, and now he calls for the co-operation of the church. . . . Every follower of Christ has a part to act to bring men to accept the blessings Heaven has provided. Let us closely examine ourselves, and see if we

²⁴ Letter 70, 1894, published in *Manuscript Releases* (Washington: E. G. White Estate, 1987), 2:12-13.

²⁵ Letter 22, 1894; cf. Letter 70, 1894; Letter 36, 1895; Letter 160, 1903.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

have done this work. Let us question the motives, the actions of the life.²⁶

In a letter to Elder I. H. Evans in 1898, Mrs. White emphasized the same concept of negligence on the part of ministers and church members. “What was the sin of the Sardis church?” she asked,

It was want of love and interest to strengthen the things which remained. . . . Their works could not be perfect before God until they had done this work. They were to keep fresh in their memory the things they had heard and received, and were to communicate the same to others. They were themselves to hold fast, and repent, that they had made so little use of the truth in helping the souls that were ready to die. This work had been neglected, and they were revealing to the world that their works did not correspond with their faith. The things they had received and heard, they were to hold fast in their memory, and in love for souls, they were to communicate it. God called for repentance, because of this neglect of duty, which made their work imperfect before him. . . . There is a work to be done, not only for the churches who know the reasons of our faith, but for the souls that are ready to die outside the church.²⁷

3. Steadfastness to Adventist Teachings. Ellen White’s third way of applying the letter to Sardis to Adventist life and issues is her most direct and forceful application. Between 1903 and 1905 she confronted new teachings brought in by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and Elder A. F. Ballenger. And in confronting Kellogg’s pantheistic teachings on the nature of God and Ballenger’s views on Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, she repeatedly used the message of the letter to Sardis to exhort church leaders to unyieldingly hold on to Adventist doctrines and to not discard long-held beliefs in favor of new “fables,” “theories,” or “fallacies.” The angel’s words to Sardis were clear: “Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent.” Ellen White understood these words as referring directly to Adventist beliefs: in the midst of these doctrinal controversies, church leaders were to remember how the remnant people of God had received their distinctive beliefs and how the Holy Spirit had guided them to hear about these beliefs for the

²⁶ *Review and Herald*, November 30, 1886.

²⁷ Letter 44, 1898; see also, Letter 22, 1901; Letter 153, 1902.

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

first time.²⁸ For her, Adventist pioneers had “received” from God these distinctive beliefs; through intense Bible study, prayer, and fasting, and the witness of the Holy Spirit through the gift of prophecy, God had “given” these doctrines to the remnant church. For Ellen White, the Seventh-day Adventist message is not a human concoction or fabrication; it is a gift from heaven. Therefore church leaders were to hold fast to this message, and those who were thinking of accepting strange theories or were teaching fallacies or anything contrary to this message were called upon to repent.

Her analysis of these two men and their views is at times trenchant and blistering, but always done in order to redeem and save. In her opinion, Kellogg and Ballenger began to expound their new teachings because they had neglected character development and humility. This weakness imperceptibly led them to disregard the pure principles of truth and to be open to other theological influences. Ellen White understood that as one disregards the importance of spiritual growth and character sanctification, one may be led also to disregard the truths of the Word of God. She is convinced that those who refuse or neglect to perfect their Christian characters are more apt at accepting strange and false views. And this she saw to be the case for both Kellogg and Ballenger.

Her conflicts with Kellogg started years earlier after he repeatedly refused to accept counsels and advice from church leaders regarding his administration of the church's medical missionary work and ever-expanding network of sanitariums. His desire for unchallenged authority and preeminence had therefore alienated many church leaders. Ellen White frequently warned him of his spiritual danger and urged him to “receive the messages of warning” sent to him to save him from trials.²⁹

²⁸ In this context, Ellen White urged publishing houses to reprint articles of earlier pioneers demonstrating the biblical foundation of Adventist beliefs. “Men will arise with interpretations of Scripture which are to them truth, but which are not truth. The truth for this time, God has given us as a foundation for our faith. He Himself has taught us what is truth. One will arise, and still another with new light, which contradicts the light that God has given under the demonstration of His Holy Spirit. A few are still alive who passed through the experience gained in the establishment of this truth. God has graciously spared their lives to repeat and repeat, till the close of their lives, the experience through which they passed, even as did John the apostle till the very close of his life. And the standard-bearers who have fallen in death are to speak through the re-printing of their writings. I am instructed that thus their voices are to be heard. They are to bear their testimony as to what constitutes the truth for this time” (Letter 329, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release* 760, 19).

²⁹ *Testimonies for the Church*, 8:191; cf. Letter 215b, 1899.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Following the destruction of the Battle Creek Sanitarium in February 1902, Kellogg published a small and controversial book on human physiology, *The Living Temple*, dedicating the benefits of its sale to the reconstruction of the sanitarium. In this little book Kellogg advocated some pantheistic views that undermined the personhood of God and the reality of heaven.

At first Ellen White did not wish to get involved in any discussion of Kellogg's book; she relied on the scholars of the church to respond to the false doctrines. But when Kellogg argued in his defense that the book advocated views held by Ellen White, she decided to respond. In a letter to teachers at Emmanuel Missionary College in September 1903, she stated,

I have some things to say to our teachers in reference to the new book, "The Living Temple". Be careful how you sustain the sentiments of this book regarding the personality of God. As the Lord represents matters to me, these sentiments do not bear the endorsement of God. They are a snare that the enemy has prepared for these last days. I thought that this would surely be discerned, and that it would not be necessary for me to say anything about it. But since the claim has been made that the teachings of this book can be sustained by statements from my writings, I am compelled to speak in denial of this claim.³⁰

She went on to say that

Those who entertain these sophistries will soon find themselves in a position where the enemy can talk with them, and lead them away from God. It is represented to me that the writer of this book is on a false track. He has lost sight of the distinguishing truths for this time. He knows not whither his steps are tending.³¹

And, in conclusion, after quoting the letter to Sardis, she stated,

The sophistries regarding God and nature that are flooding the world with skepticism, are the inspiration of the fallen foe, who is himself a Bible student, who knows the truth that it is essential for the people to receive, and whose study it is to divert minds from these great truths relating to the things that

³⁰ Letter 211, 1903, published in *Spalding-Magan Collection*, 320-323.

³¹ *Ibid.*

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

are soon coming upon the world. Let our teachers beware lest they echo the soothsaying of the enemy of God and man.³²

A little later that same autumn, in a letter to Dr. David Paulson, a close associate of Kellogg, Ellen White reiterated her views of Kellogg's teachings. She qualified these teachings as "falsehoods," "Satan's snare," and "Satanic theories." "The theories that Dr. Kellogg is now advocating are similar to the theories that Satan presented to the holy pair in Eden."³³

Ellen White's clearest explanation of the message to Sardis and its relevance to Kellogg's teachings were done in a letter she wrote to George I. Butler in January 1905. Quoting from the letter to Sardis and interspersing her comments between the verses she urged Butler and those who would read her letter:

Do not yield one iota of your faith for spiritualistic ideas which will set you adrift in the mazes of uncertainty. Hold fast your past experience in the things that you have received and heard, and repent. This is a time when the truth that is received, unless put into practice, will be disregarded, and its place will be taken by that which is false, and which causes spiritual weakness and unbelief. Forgeries will be presented by Satan, and will be received as a great blessing, but they bring spiritual death. The call to repent and hold fast is made to those who have loosened their grasp on the truth that they have heard and received. God calls upon them to repent because of their unbelief in the truth in which they once rejoiced. They have become infatuated by Satan's theories, which they have received.³⁴

"Study these statements [in the letter to Sardis]," she continued.

Teach the church that the enemy will bring before them every phase of deception. Those who have not held fast with the grip of faith to the experience given them by God in the past will fail to watch now. They are in danger of listening to and heeding the sophistries of Satan. Those who have admitted the enemy to their companionship need to be watchful and repent, lest in the day of God they be found with the workers of evil, who call falsehood truth.³⁵

³² Ibid.

³³ Letter 220, 1903.

³⁴ Letter 37, 1905.

³⁵ Ibid.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

In a similar way to Kellogg's search for new truths, Elder A. F. Ballenger began to promote an interpretation of the doctrine of the sanctuary that conflicted with the core Adventist teaching on the subject. Ballenger was a minister in Great Britain in 1905 when he began to advance the idea that Christ entered the most holy place of the heavenly sanctuary at his ascension and that since then, not starting in 1844, Christ has been conducting his high priestly ministry of atonement and cleansing. His teaching created quite a stir in the church and Ellen White wrote a number of letters and manuscripts regarding Ballenger's views.³⁶ In these letters, even more than in Kellogg's case, she referred to the letter to Sardis as divine instructions on how to relate to this situation.

"Our message does not need that which Brother Ballenger is trying to draw into the web," she wrote plainly to church leaders assembled at the General Conference session of 1905.

Brother Ballenger does not discern what he is doing any more than Dr. Kellogg discerned that the book *Living Temple* contained some of the most dangerous errors that could be presented to the people of God. The most specious errors lie concealed in these theories and suppositions, which, if received, would leave the people of God in a labyrinth of error.³⁷

In all her remarks about Ballenger, Ellen White highlighted two major problems. In her diary entry for October 31, 1905, in which she discussed at length the impact of Ballenger's views on the doctrine of the sanctuary, she made a clear connection between the development of one's Christian character and a tendency to disregard Adventist beliefs. Lack of humility was at the root of Ballenger's problem, she believed.

Elder Ballenger does not see what he is trying to bring to pass.
The message that Christ came to give to John on the Isle of

³⁶ See also, Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Elmshaven Years, 1900-1905* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1981), 5:404-412.

³⁷ Manuscript 62, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release 760*. A few months later, to Elder J. A. Burden in southern California, she stated, "Elder Ballenger's proofs are not reliable. If received, they would destroy the faith of God's people in the truth that has made us what we are. We must be decided on this subject, for the points that he is trying to prove by Scripture are not sound" (Letter 329, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release 760*, 19). And to Elder C. B. Hughes, in the letter referred to at the beginning of this paper, "The theories that Elder Ballenger advocated, which remove the sanctuary truth, are just such as the enemy would bring in as matters of the utmost importance, to shake us from our foundation of faith" (Letter 40, 1906, published in *Manuscript Release 760*, 26).

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

Patmos needs now to be carefully studied by Elder Ballenger, for these words of warning tell us that men will arise claiming to have new light, whose theories, if received, would destroy our faith in the truths that have stood the test for half a century. We need to study and understand the message given in the third chapter of Revelation.³⁸

Then Ellen White quoted the first half of the letter to Sardis in Revelation 3:1-3. She understood this message to be relevant to Ballenger's experience and views. "This is a work to be done," she continued.

There is need for Elder Ballenger to humble his soul before God and to refuse to receive new interpretations of the Scriptures. We have had to meet many men who have come with just such interpretations, seeking to establish false theories and unsettling the minds of many by their readiness to talk, and by their great array of texts which they have misapplied to suit their own ideas. . . .

The warning is, 'Remember therefore how thou hast received, and heard, and hold fast, and repent' (Revelation 3:3). This is the message that I bear to Elder Ballenger. The Lord says to him, I have spared your life that you may remember how you have received and heard.

There are many who have not perfected a Christian character: their lives have not been made pure and undefiled through the sanctification of the truth, and they will bring their imperfections into the church and deny their faith, picking up strange theories which they will advance as truth.³⁹

A second problem Ellen White saw in Ballenger's life and character is one that touches the core of any intellectual person's life, including church leaders and theologians. This problem is the intellectual temptation to strive for originality and to seek something new and fascinating to impress one's listeners, a temptation from the enemy of our souls to "[lead] minds off on sidetracks."⁴⁰

To church leaders assembled to discuss Ballenger's views at the General Conference session in May 1905, she wrote,

In clear, plain language I am to say to those in attendance at this conference that Brother Ballenger has been allowing his mind to receive and believe specious error. He has been misin-

³⁸ Manuscript 145, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release 760*, 15-17.

³⁹ Manuscript 145, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release 760*, 15-17.

⁴⁰ Letter 50, 1906, to W. W. Simpson, published in *Manuscript Release 760*, 23.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

terpreting and misapplying the Scriptures upon which he has fastened his mind. He is building up theories that are not founded in truth. A warning is now to come to him and to the people, for God has not indited the message that he is bearing. This message, if accepted, would undermine the pillars of our faith.

He who claims that his teachings are sound, while at the same time he is working away from the Lord's truth, has come to the place where he needs to be converted.

A rich and inexhaustible storehouse of truth is open to all who walk humbly with God. The ideas of those whose hearts are fully in the work of God are clearly and plainly expressed, and they have no lack of variety, for there is ever before them a rich cabinet of jewels. Those who are striving for originality will overlook the precious jewels in God's cabinet in an effort to get something new.

Let not any man enter upon the work of tearing down the foundations of the truth that have made us what we are. God has led His people forward step by step though there were pitfalls of error on every side. Under the wonderful guidance of a plain, 'Thus saith the Lord,' a truth has been established that has stood the test of trial. When men arise and attempt to draw away disciples after them, meet them with the truths that have been tried as by fire.⁴¹

After quoting Revelation 3:1-3, Mrs. White concluded,

Those who seek to remove the old landmarks are not holding fast; they are not remembering how they have received and heard. Those who try to bring in theories that would remove the pillars of our faith concerning the sanctuary or concerning the personality of God or of Christ, are working as blind men. They are seeking to bring in uncertainties and to set the people of God adrift without an anchor. . . . Those who receive your interpretation of Scripture regarding the sanctuary service are receiving error and following in false paths. The enemy will work the minds of those who are eager for something new, preparing them to receive false theories and false expositions of the Scripture.⁴²

And in her diary in October 1905, she zeroed in on the real problem,

⁴¹ Manuscript 62, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release* 760, 8-9.

⁴² Manuscript 62, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release* 760, 9-10.

FORTIN: ELLEN WHITE'S INTERPRETATION AND USE

The warning comes down along the line, 'Remember therefore how thou hast received, and heard, and hold fast, and repent' (Revelation 3:3). Repent of the inclination to distinguish yourself as a man who has great light. Your supposed light is shown to me to be darkness which will lead into strange paths.⁴³

Conclusion

So what can we gain from a study of Ellen White's interpretation and use of the seven letters of Revelation? First, Ellen White believed the seven churches of Revelation were real churches to which the book of Revelation was first addressed to encourage early Christians in their spiritual journey. Second, she held a historicist interpretation of the book of Revelation and that the seven letters represent seven periods of Christian history, symbolically portraying the spiritual struggles, weaknesses, and victories of Christians through the centuries.

But, third, she also believed that the spiritual principles and timeless truths found in these letters were relevant to people in her own day. Those who faced the same struggles and weaknesses needed to hear the same messages, exhortations, and warnings. Although similar to the idealist approach to the seven churches, Ellen White did not use biblical exegesis to arrive at the timeless principles she saw as applicable to contemporary situations in Adventism. Thus, her spiritual, homiletical approach to the seven churches is to be nuanced from the idealist approach which is based on a preterist reading of the book of Revelation. She saw some parallels between the spiritual experience of the seven churches and Adventism in her day and thus applied the spiritual lessons to be gained from these messages. She understood contemporary spiritual applications of these messages as complementary to the prophetic historicist interpretation of the messages to the seven churches.

For the most part Ellen White's references to the seven letters appear mainly in her letters, manuscripts, sermons, and periodical articles, and seldom in a book she published during her lifetime. She was more pastoral and homiletical than exegetical or theological in her use of these letters. Yet, she nonetheless used the messages of these letters within a clear historicist interpretive framework. For her, the word of God is ever living and relevant to any situation: although addressed to men and women of long ago, other men and women who need to be exhorted and reminded of the importance of their relationship and walk with God can

⁴³ Manuscript 145, 1905, published in *Manuscript Release* 760, 16.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

also benefit from the same messages. Ellen White's interpretation and use of the seven letters of Revelation is a reflection of her strong belief in the relevance of the timeless truths and principles of the word of God.

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The Development of Ellen G. White's Concept of Babylon in *The Great Controversy*

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One of the liveliest topics of discussion among nineteenth-century American Christians, particularly toward the year 1844, was the identity of Babylon in the book of Revelation.¹ At this early period, there was frequent disagreement about the meaning of Babylon in Rev 14:8 and Rev 17.² However, both the Millerites and other Protestants, up through the summer of 1843, identified Babylon with the Roman Catholic Church.³ This discussion was especially popular among the members of the Millerite Movement.⁴ The early Sabbatarian Adventists,⁵ who were

¹ William Miller, *Dissertations on the True Inheritance of the Saints and the Twelve Hundred and Sixty Days of Daniel and John with An Address to the Conference of Believers in the Advent Near* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1842), 36. Cf. P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 46-48; Reinder Bruinsma, *Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes toward Roman Catholicism 1844-1965* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1994), 45; Charles Fitch, *"Come Out of Her, My People": A Sermon* (Rochester: E. Shepherd's Press, 1843), 1-4.

² Damsteegt, 179.

³ *Ibid.*, 46-47. Cf. Moses Stuart, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (New York: Allen, Morill and Wardwell, 1845), 296-297.

⁴ The Millerite Movement was an interdenominational movement that flourished in the United States from 1840 to 1844. The movement got its name from William Miller, a farmer from upstate New York, who preached that Jesus' second coming would be around the year 1843. See *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 1976 rev. ed., s.v. "Millerite Movement"; Richard W. Schwartz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, rev. ed. (Boise: Pacific Press, 2000), 35-49.

⁵ The Sabbatarian Adventists were one of the three splinter groups that came out of the Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844. Of the three divisions, the Sabbatarian

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

all former Millerites, shared in this lively discussion.⁶ This was Ellen White's immediate religio-political milieu when she wrote the book *The Great Controversy*.

In this study, we will consider four things. We will trace the development of Ellen White's concept of Babylon in the book *The Great Controversy* from the 1858 edition to the 1911 edition. We will compare her view with that of her contemporaries. We will also compare her view with that of selected 20th-century and 21st-century scholars. Finally, we will determine whether there is a progressive development (from narrow to broad) of her understanding of Babylon in *The Great Controversy*. Her ideas on this issue are especially important as *The Great Controversy* is considered to be one of her most influential and important works.⁷ Of all her books, this book has the longest history of development.

Ellen White's Concept of Babylon Vis-à-vis Her Contemporaries

The interpretation of Babylon became more significant in the context of the preaching of William Miller and his associates prior to October 22, 1844. Miller, in his lectures on prophecy, identified Babylon with the papacy. This was his interpretation of the "little horn" in Dan 7:25 and the harlot woman in Rev 17.⁸ However, Charles Fitch, in his famous sermon of 1843, identified Babylon with the Antichrist and identified Catholics and Protestants as constituting the Antichrist.⁹

The Millerites' change of concept on Babylon was due to a widespread opposition from Protestant churches against the Millerite teachings.¹⁰ This was Ellen White's immediate background when she received

Adventists emerged the last and was the smallest, but it came to see itself as the true successor of the Millerite Movement. See George R. Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Hagerstown: Review & Herald, 1999), 28-30.

⁶ Samuel Kibungei Chemurtoi, "James White and J. N. Andrews' Debate on the Identity of Babylon, 1850-1868" (M.A. thesis, AIIAS, Silang, Cavite, Philippines, 2005), 1-2.

⁷ Arthur L. White considered *The Great Controversy* to be Ellen White's most important book. A. White, *Ellen G. White: The Later Elmshaven Years* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1982), 6:305.

⁸ Miller, 36. Cf. Joshua V. Himes, *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology: Selected from Manuscripts of William Miller, With A Memoir of His Life* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1842), 46; Sylvester Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1853), 190.

⁹ Fitch, 15.

¹⁰ George Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Beliefs* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 141.

GARILVA: BABYLON IN THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

the great controversy vision of 1858. Interestingly, her first attempt to write this vision became the beginning of the book *The Great Controversy*.

Spiritual Gifts, Volume 1, 1858 Edition. The Great Controversy vision of 1858 happened in Lovett's Grove, Ohio. On March 14, 1858, there was a funeral, and James White was to give the message of comfort. As James closed his message, his wife stood up to speak.¹¹ While Ellen spoke she was caught up in vision. When the vision ended, the friends and relatives of the deceased bore the casket to the cemetery. With great solemnity, others remained to hear Ellen White relate what was shown to her.¹² In her own words she described what she saw: "In this vision at Lovett's Grove, most of the matter of the Great Controversy which I had seen ten years before, was repeated, and I was shown that I must write it out."¹³

Many considered that in this one short paragraph Ellen White introduced what was the principal topic of the Lovett's Grove vision: a view of the age-long Great Controversy in its broad sweep. In writing that she had seen most of this ten years earlier, was she referring to a particular vision ten years before or was she referring to many phases of several visions received in the late 1840s? Arthur White posed this question and gave a viable answer. He said that in the absence of a reference to a specific, all-inclusive Great Controversy vision in 1848, the second alternative was left as the only viable choice. In fact, many of the visions Ellen White received in the late 1840s gave glimpses, and even at times detailed accounts, of the controversy and the triumph of God's people over the forces of Satan.¹⁴ The 1858 *Great Controversy* edition better known as *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 1, was a diminutive book of only 219 small pages and 41 short chapters. This was published only six months after the March 14 Lovett's Grove vision. It touched the high points of the entrance of sin, the fall of man, and the plan of salvation. Then it jumped

¹¹ Ellen White states that she spoke "upon the coming of Christ and the resurrection and the cheering hope of the Christian." Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts: My Christian Experience, Views and Labors: In Connection With the Rise and Progress of the "Third Angel's Message* [vol. 2] (Battle Creek: James White, 1860), 265.

¹² Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years, 1827-1862* (Hagerstown: Review & Herald, 1985), 1:367-68. For Ellen White's own detailed account, see *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, Chapter 35, "Visit to Ohio," 265-272. For her concise account, see *Life Sketches*, 161-163.

¹³ E. G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, 270.

¹⁴ A. White, *Ellen G. White*, 1:372-73.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

to the life and ministry of Jesus. From that point onwards it treated briefly the work of the apostles, the apostasy in the Christian church, the Reformation, the Advent Movement, and the events up to the second coming and the new earth.

Spiritual Gifts, volume 1, was one of the three earliest books of Ellen White incorporated into one volume.¹⁵ In the volume *Spiritual Gifts*, she already touched on the concept of Babylon in the chapter, “The Loud Cry.” Here she made a statement in which she equated Babylon with the fallen churches of her day. She wrote, “The message of the fall of Babylon, . . . have been entering the churches since 1844. The work of this angel comes in at the right time, and joins in the last great work of the third angel’s message, as it swells into a loud cry.”¹⁶

Ellen White added, “The light that was shed upon the waiting ones penetrated every where, and those who had any light in the churches, who had not heard and rejected the three messages, answered to the call, and left the fallen churches.”¹⁷ Here Ellen White portrayed the fallen churches of her day as Babylon. Her comment on this chapter refers to Rev 14:8, and it is in connection with her 1844 experience. Babylon here must refer to the Protestant churches of her time. Prior to her 1858 Great Controversy vision, her husband, James White, in 1850, stated that the Protestant churches, having rejected the first angel’s message, had fallen spiritually and consequently had become Babylon.¹⁸ But John Nevins

¹⁵ Arthur L. White, “The Story of the Great Controversy,” *Review and Herald* (RH), August 1, 1963, 2-3. This one volume edition, published in 1882, was called *Early Writings*. Ellen White’s first three books, which composed this volume, are *Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G. White* (1851), *A Supplement to Experience and Views* (1854), and *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 1 (1858). In 1945 *Spiritual Gifts* was reproduced in a facsimile reprint and is currently available.

¹⁶ Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts: The Great Controversy Between Christ and His Angels and Satan and His Angels* [vol. 1] (Battle Creek: James White, 1858), 194.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁸ James White, “The Third Angel’s Message Rev xiv 9-12,” *The Present Truth*, April 1850, 65-69. Here are some of the reasons why James White excluded the Roman Catholic Church as Babylon in Rev 14:8: (1) The Roman Catholic Church is a “unit,” whereas Babylon signifies “mixture or confusion.” It means that the Roman Catholic Church “is one in name, and doctrine, ordinances, and all her works.” James White, “‘What is Babylon!’—The Fall—Come Out,” *RH*, Dec. 9, 1851, 58. This being the case, the Roman Catholic Church cannot qualify since Babylon is characterized by disorder. *Ibid.* (2) The second angel’s message announcing the fall of Babylon could not be applied to the Roman Catholic Church since this church has always been corrupt. James White, “The Angels of Rev xiv,” *RH*, Dec. 9, 1851, 63-64. (3) God’s people were not in the

GARILVA: BABYLON IN THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

Andrews, one of the Sabbatarian Adventists' leading biblical expositors, did not agree with James White. He argued that Babylon comprises all corrupt religious systems that had ever existed in the history of the Christian Church. This included the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant churches.¹⁹ He maintained that "we cannot restrict the term Babylon to the Papal church, for it evidently includes all those religious bodies which have become corrupt like the 'mother of harlots.'"²⁰ In 1865, classic Adventist expositor Uriah Smith identified Babylon as "the great mass of confused and corrupt Christianity."²¹

Subsequent to Ellen White's 1858 *Great Controversy* edition, some of her contemporary Protestant expositors identified Babylon with imperial Rome. Moses Stuart, for example, commented that Babylon in the book of Revelation refers to imperial Rome, specifically the city of Rome and its great power:

Babylon, not literal but figurative, i.e. Rome. . . . Babylon of old was the enemy of God's people, and persecuted and destroyed them. Babylon was then the metropolis of a most extensive empire, and itself an exceedingly great city. It was idolatrous and was noted for impiety; as the book of Daniel fully shows. On all these accounts it might well represent Rome, specially Rome in Nero's day; and particularly so, when the writer of the Apocalypse, as we have already seen on

Roman Catholic Church but in Protestant churches at the time of the proclamation of the second angels' message. *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁹ J. N. Andrews, "Thoughts on Revelation XIII and XIV," *RH*, May 19, 1851, 81. In another article, he identified Babylon with all the corrupt religious bodies that have ever existed. This included the corrupt Jewish Church, the Papal and Greek churches, and the Protestant churches. Andrews, "What is Babylon?" *RH*, Feb. 21, 1854, 36.

²⁰ Andrews, "Thoughts on Revelation," 81.

²¹ Uriah Smith, *Thoughts, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Revelation* (Battle Creek, Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1865), 233. In his 1907 edition, Smith was clearer in his description: "Babylon is not confined to the Romish Church. That this church is a very prominent component part of great Babylon, is not denied. The descriptions of chapter 17 seem to apply very particularly to that church. But the name which she bears on her forehead, 'Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth,' reveals other family connections. If this church is the mother, who are the daughters? The fact that these daughters are spoken of, shows that there are other religious bodies besides the Romish Church which come under this designation." Uriah Smith, *Daniel and the Revelation: The Response of History to the Voice of Prophecy A Verse by Verse Study of these Important Books of the Bible* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1907), 728.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

several occasions, designed to speak of Rome in a somewhat concealed, rather than in an open manner.²²

Putting Ellen White in the context of her time, we can see that her concept of Babylon in the 1858 edition was not influenced by either her contemporary Protestant expositors nor by Sabbatarian expositors like Andrews and Smith. She, however, seemed to have a view similar to that of her husband, James White.

The Spirit of Prophecy, Volume 4, 1884 Edition. In the 1870s and 1880s, more than ten years after the 1858 comprehensive vision at Lovett's Grove and after many more visions containing detailed information, Ellen White was now ready to undertake the presentation of the great controversy story in four volumes of about 400 pages each. Each of the volume had the general title *The Spirit of Prophecy* and a subtitle, *The Great Controversy*.

The Great Controversy book as we know it today is contained in *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 4, published in 1884 by both the Pacific Press and Review and Herald. The new title was *The Spirit of Prophecy: The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan From the Destruction of Jerusalem to the End of the Controversy*, volume 4.²³ The Great Controversy 1884 edition, like its three other companion volumes, was written essentially for Seventh-day Adventists who understood Ellen White's role in the church.²⁴ Volume 4 (492 pages) was especially popular and far excelled the three others in interest.

²² Moses Stuart, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, vol. 11, (New York: Allen, Morill and Wardwell, 1845), 295-296. Barnes seemed to follow partly Stuart's idea, but added that the term Babylon "may well be applied either to Babylon or Rome, literal or mystical." See Albert Barnes, *Notes Explanatory and Practical, on the Book of Revelation* (London: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1862), 388-389.

²³ A. White, *RH*, August 1, 1963, 3. The three other volumes in this series are as follows. (1) *The Spirit of Prophecy: The Great Controversy Between Christ and his Angels and Satan and His Angels*, volume 1 (1870). This was later amplified to become *Patriarchs and Prophets*. (2) *The Spirit of Prophecy: The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan. Life, Teachings, and Miracles of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, volume 2 (1877). This was later amplified to become *The Desire of Ages*. (3) *The Spirit of Prophecy: The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan. The Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, volume 3 (1878). The eleven chapters dealing with the life and work of the apostles later became *The Acts of the Apostles*. Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid. In another work he said, "The plan was to reach all Adventists in six months." See Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Lonely Years, 1876-1891* (Hagerstown: Review & Herald, 1984), 3:243.

GARILVA: BABYLON IN THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

Here Ellen White displayed a wider understanding of the concept of Babylon when she placed a distinction between the term Babylon used in Rev 14:8 and the one used in Revelation 17. In this volume she saw the Babylon symbolized by the harlot of Revelation 17 as the Roman Catholic Church, while she applied the Babylon in Rev 14:8 to the fall of the Protestant churches of her day.²⁵ She wrote,

In Revelation 17, Babylon is represented as a woman, a figure which is used in the Scriptures as the symbol of a church. A virtuous woman represents a pure church, a vile woman an apostate church. . . . The Babylon thus described represents Rome, that apostate church which has so cruelly persecuted the followers of Christ.²⁶

Of Rev 14:8 she stressed,

The first angel was followed by a second, proclaiming, “Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication” [Rev. 14:8]. This message was understood by Adventists to be an announcement of the moral fall of the churches. . . .

The term Babylon, derived from Babel, and signifying confusion, is applied in Scripture to the various forms of false or apostate religion. *But the message announcing the fall of Babylon must apply to some religious body that was once pure, and has become corrupt. It cannot be the Romish Church which is here meant; for that church has been in a fallen condition for many centuries.* But how appropriate the figure as applied to the Protestant churches all professing to derive their doctrines from the Bible, yet divided into almost innumerable sects.²⁷ (Emphasis supplied)

It is interesting to note that in 1868, James White, Ellen White’s husband, who earlier insisted that Babylon could not be the Roman Catholic Church, seemed to contradict himself by stating that Babylon in Rev 14:8

²⁵ At this early period of the Sabbatarian Adventist existence, there was frequently a disagreement between the correct interpretation of Babylon in Rev 14:8 and Rev 17, but generally they saw Rev 14:8 in the context of their 1844 experience and referring to the Protestant churches, while Rev 17 was applied to the Roman Catholic Church (Damsteegt, *Foundations*, 179).

²⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy: The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan from the Destruction of Jerusalem to the End of the Controversy*, vol. IV (Battle Creek: Steam Press, 1884), 233.

²⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, 232-33.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Rev 14:8 symbolized the Protestant churches, while Babylon in Rev 17 represented the Roman Catholic Church.²⁸ He said that Babylon included “all the false and *corrupted systems of Christianity*. That the Romanish and *Greek* churches are included in these . . .” (italics his).²⁹ Ellen White’s view in the 1884 edition did not contradict her view in the 1858 edition, but rather progressed from a narrow view to a broader one. This means that her view in the 1858 edition was included in the broader view contained in the 1884 edition. She maintained that although the term Babylon applied to every false and apostate religion, the message of the fall seemed for her specifically fulfilled in the proclamation of the second angel’s message through the Millerite movement.

Below is a table portraying Ellen White’s understanding of the concept of Babylon in comparison with her contemporaries. Where understandings parallel those of Ellen White at different periods, they are shown in the same rows. Those understandings that find no parallel with Ellen White are listed separately in the final row.

Table 1

Ellen G. White	Authors Contemporary with Ellen G. White				
<i>Ellen G. White</i> (1858, 1884, 1888)	<i>Moses Stuart</i> (1845)	<i>James White</i> (1850)	<i>J. N. Andrews</i> (1854)	<i>Albert Barnes</i> (1862)	<i>Uriah Smith</i> (1865, 1867, 1907)
<i>First edition</i> (1858) Babylon referred to the Protestant churches in her day		Babylon referred to the fallen, apostate churches			
<i>Second edition</i> (1884) Protestant churches are referred to in Rev 14:8 while Rev 17 refers to the Roman Catholic Church					
<i>Third edition</i> (1888) Babylon is a universal and eschatological entity					Babylon is the great mass of confused and corrupt Christianity (1865, 1867). Babylon signifies the universal worldly

²⁸ James White, “Signs of the Times,” *RH*, Sept. 8, 1853, 67.

²⁹ James White, *Life Incidents, in Connection with the Great Advent Movement, as Illustrated by the Three Angels of Revelation* xiv (Battle Creek: Steam Press, 1868), 231. Although James White did not give any specific reason why he changed his position, Chemurtoi gave three possible factors: (1) The need for Sabbatarian Adventist leadership to forge a common understanding on issues affecting them; (2) their developing understanding of Babylon of Rev 14:8 as separate from the fall of Babylon in Rev 18:2; and (3) White may have seen that Andrews’ view did not negate his belief that Sabbatarian Adventists are the historical fulfillment of the third angel of Rev 14. Chemurtoi, 72-74.

GARILVA: BABYLON IN THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

					church in the process of complete fulfillment in the end-time (1907)
(No parallels)	Babylon refers to imperial Rome		Babylon referred to all religious bodies that existed at that time	Babylon may either be applied to literal or mystical Rome or Babylon	

We will now go to the final edition of *The Great Controversy*, published in 1888. In this edition, Ellen White gave her fullest understanding on the issue at hand.

The Great Controversy, 1888 Edition. In 1885, Ellen White responded to an invitation to visit Europe and stayed there for two years. Adventist leaders in Europe who knew of the success of the 1884 *Great Controversy* made plans with Ellen White for the translation of the book into some of the leading languages there. Sensing that her largely Adventist readership had expanded to include a large number of non-Adventists, and wishing to present the story in greater detail, plans were made to rewrite and enlarge the volumes.³⁰ Out of this plan to enlarge the volume came the 1888 revision of *The Great Controversy*, the first to be revised and enlarged among the four volumes. Ellen White began the work in 1886 while she was residing in Basel, Switzerland, and completed it when she went back to her home in Healdsburg, California, in May, 1888.

In volume 4, she not only enlarged the presentation but also improved the phraseology. The words “Revised and Enlarged” appeared on the title page. The page size was now enlarged, and the number of pages increased. The number of chapters also climbed from 37 to 42, and the text was extended from 492 to 678 pages. The new volume bore the title *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan During the Christian Dispensation*.³¹ In this volume she displayed a much more comprehensive view of the concept of Babylon. Here is the rendering:

The message of Revelation 14, announcing the *fall* of Babylon, must apply to religious bodies that were once pure and have become corrupt. *Since this message follows the warning of the Judgment, it must be given in the last days, therefore it*

³⁰ A. White, *RH*, August 1, 1963, 4.

³¹ Arthur L. White, “Ellen G. White’s Portrayal of the Great Controversy Story,” supplement to reprint ed., *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, facsimile reproduction (Washington: Review & Herald, 1969), 522-23.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

cannot refer to the Romish Church, for that church has been in a fallen condition for many centuries.³² (Emphasis supplied)

The italicized words capture the distinctive thought that was missing in *The Spirit of Prophecy*, volume 4, 1884 edition. Their addition indicated that Ellen White's concept of Babylon had enlarged.³³ The revision of those words from her 1884 work showed that Ellen White had added a major insight into her interpretation of the text, that of the future eschatological and final fulfillment of mystical Babylon.

Another example of a reworded line from her *Spirit of Prophecy*, volume 4, 1884 edition is found in page 232. Here is the rendering: "The proclamation, 'Babylon is fallen,' was given in the summer of 1844, and as the result, about fifty thousand withdrew from these churches."³⁴

The Spirit of Prophecy, volume 4, 1884 edition wordings were limited both in words and in concept. They were basically intended for the believers at that time. The reworded line in *The Great Controversy* 1888 edition was a lot longer, much more comprehensive, and eschatological. Here is the statement:

The second angel's message of Revelation 14, was first preached in summer of 1844, and it then had a more direct application to the churches of the United States, where the warning of the judgment had been most widely proclaimed and most generally rejected, and where the declension in the churches had been most rapid. But the message of the second angel did not reach its complete fulfillment in 1844. The churches then experienced a moral fall, in consequence of their refusal of the light of the advent message; but that fall was not complete. . . . Not yet, however, can it be said that "Babylon is fallen, . . . because she made *all nations* drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication." *She has not yet made all nations do this. . . . the work of apostasy has not yet reached its culmination* (emphasis supplied).³⁵

Ellen White further commented that what happened in her time was only a part of the great and final eschatological fulfillment in the future. She mentioned some specific things that did not happen then that must

³² Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan During the Christian Dispensation*, rev. and enl. (Battle Creek: Review and Herald, 1888), 383.

³³ *Ibid.*, 390.

³⁴ E. G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, 232.

³⁵ E. G. White, *The Great Controversy* (1888 edition), 389.

GARILVA: BABYLON IN THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

first transpire before the grand and final fulfillment of the prophecy. She argued,

The Bible declares that before the coming of the Lord, Satan will work “with *all* power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness; “. . . [2 Thess 2:9-11]. *Not until this condition shall be reached, and the union of the church with the world shall be fully accomplished throughout Christendom, will the fall of Babylon be complete.*³⁶ (Emphasis supplied)

Ellen White further emphasized that “the change is a progressive one, and that *the perfect fulfillment of Rev 14:8 is yet future*” (emphasis supplied).³⁷ Again in this statement, as in the previous statement, the universal application and the eschatological consummation of the prophecy is deliberately added and placed with emphasis. Ellen White finally gave her concluding statement to close this very interesting and insightful chapter entitled “A Warning Rejected.”

Notwithstanding the spiritual darkness and alienation from God that exist in the churches which constitute Babylon, the great body of Christ’s true followers are still to be found in their communion. There are many of these who have never seen the special truths for this time. Not a few are dissatisfied with their present condition and are longing for clearer light. They look in vain for the image of Christ in the churches with which they are connected. As these bodies depart further and further from the truth, and ally themselves more closely with the world, the difference between the two classes will widen, and it will finally result in separation. The time will come when those who love God supremely can no longer remain in connection with such as are “lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.”

Revelation 18 points to the time when, as the result of rejecting the threefold warning of Rev. 14:6-12, the *church* will have fully reached the condition foretold by the second angel, and the people of God, still in *Babylon*, will be called upon to separate from her communion. This message is the last that will ever be given to the world; and it will accomplish its work. When those that “believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness” [2 Thess 2:12] shall be left to receive

³⁶ Ibid., 389-90.

³⁷ Ibid., 390.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

strong delusion and to believe a lie, then the light of truth will shine upon all whose hearts are open to receive it, and all the children of the Lord that remain in Babylon will heed the call, “Come out of her, My people” [Rev 18:4].³⁸ (Emphasis supplied)

In comparing this closing paragraph with her closing paragraph in *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, 1884 edition, one can readily see the difference both in wordings and emphasis. Here is the 1884 rendering:

At the proclamation of the first angel’s message, the people of God were in Babylon; and many true Christians are still to be found in her communion. Not a few who have never seen the special truths for this time are dissatisfied with their present position, and are longing for clearer light. They look in vain for the image of Christ in the church. As the churches depart more and more widely from the truth, and ally themselves more closely with the world, the time will come when those who fear and honor God can no longer remain in connection with them. Those that “believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness,” will be left to receive “strong delusion,” and to “believe a lie” [2 Thess. 2:11,12]. Then the spirit of persecution will again be revealed. But the light of truth will shine upon all whose hearts are open to receive it, and all the children of the Lord still in Babylon, will heed the call, “Come out of her, my people.”³⁹

³⁸ E. G. White, *The Great Controversy* (1888 edition), 390. The closing paragraph on the subject of the second angel’s message is entitled “The Loud Cry” in the 1858 *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1, and did not have a similarity in either wording or ideas. See E. G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1, 196.

³⁹ E. G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, 239-40. In the 1858 *Spiritual Gifts*, vol.1, the chapter, “The Loud Cry,” is the chapter that talks about the identity of Babylon. Its closing paragraph is quite different from that of either *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, or *The Great Controversy*. It did not touch on either the eschatological aspect or the comprehensiveness of the concept. Here is how the closing paragraph is rendered: “Servants of God, endowed with power from on high, with their faces lighted up, and shining with holy consecration, went forth fulfilling their work, and proclaiming the message from heaven, Souls that were scattered all through the religious bodies answered to the call, and the precious were hurried out of Sodom before her destruction. God’s people were fitted up and strengthened by the excellent glory which fell upon them in rich abundance, preparing them to endure the hour of temptation. A multitude of voices I heard every where, saying, Here is the patience of the saints; here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.” E. G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1, 196.

GARILVA: BABYLON IN THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

With this comparison, we can see that her *Great Controversy* 1888 edition statements on the concept of Babylon were much more substantial and had more depth and insight than her *Spirit of Prophecy*, volume 4, 1884 edition statements. With her *Great Controversy*, 1888 edition statements, Ellen White seems to have reached her broadest understanding on the concept of Babylon. Babylon included the whole world that rejects the three angels' messages in the last days. In that edition she used the word *church* in singular form to accommodate all the apostate religious political agencies against God's people. To her, *church* represented Babylon in its entirety in the final hour of this earth's history.

With this presentation, we can deduce that her *Great Controversy* 1888 edition statements on the concept of Babylon must be seen as her highest and final analysis of the subject under consideration. Furthermore, the *Great Controversy* 1888 edition is the basis of the *Great Controversy* 1911 edition presently in circulation to complete her Conflict of the Ages series.⁴⁰ The changes that transpired in the *Great Controversy* 1911 edition will be considered next.

The Great Controversy, 1911 Edition. In 1907, repairs were made to the badly worn plates, and improvements were made in the illustrations. A subject index was added, and in a sense the whole book was cosmetically dressed up.⁴¹ But from the standpoint of the texts, the 1911 revision is still the 1888 edition.⁴² In early January 1910, Pacific Press manager C. H. Jones felt that it was "necessary to print another edition." As plans to reset the types for the new edition were laid out, Ellen White thought not only of improving the physical features but also the text itself.⁴³

Since the *Great Controversy* is Ellen White's most important book, and she regarded it as a means of winning readers to the truths presented, the matter of revision was to be above the mechanical production of the

⁴⁰ The Conflict of the Ages series is Ellen White's five-volume commentary on the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation. This is the final result of the evolution of the great controversy vision that started with *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1 of the four-volume *Spirit of Prophecy* books. The books in this set in their proper order and original titles are: *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets as Illustrated in the Life of Holy Men of Israel* (1890), *The Story of Prophets and Kings as Illustrated in the Captivity and Restoration of Israel* (1917), *The Desire of Ages: The Conflict of the Ages Illustrated in the Life of Christ* (1898), *The Acts of the Apostles in the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (1911), and *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation* (1911).

⁴¹ A. White, *Ellen G. White*, 6:302.

⁴² A. White, "Ellen G. White's Portrayal," 530.

⁴³ A. White, *Ellen G. White*, 6:302, 304.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

book. So starting in early 1910, Ellen White worked together with her staff and the publisher to polish the text. Her aim was to depict the great controversy story in the most accurate and winning way. Words acceptable to both Catholics and Protestants were employed, and the aim was perfecting the text through more precise expression.⁴⁴ Here are her words:

When I learned that *Great Controversy* must be reset, I determined that we would have everything closely examined, to see if the truths it contained were stated in the very best manner, to convince those not of our faith that the Lord had guided and sustained me in the writing of its pages.

As a result of the thorough examination by our most experienced workers, some changing in the wording has been proposed. These changes I have carefully examined, and approved.⁴⁵

At last the work was done, a work a lot more demanding than what was anticipated a year earlier. But it was a joyous day on July 17, 1911, when copies of the new 1911 edition were received at Elmshaven. It was under the title *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation*.⁴⁶

The Great Controversy 1911 edition was not really a new edition in the strictest sense. As Arthur White stated, “neither Ellen White nor her staff considered what was done as actual ‘revision’, and all studiously avoided the use of the term, for it was entirely too broad in its connotation.”⁴⁷ The changes were so few and minor in nature that C. C. Crisler considered the 1911 edition as “a *reset* edition “ rather than “a *revised and improved* edition.”⁴⁸ The most notable change in the 1911 edition that one can see in regard to her concept of Babylon is the insertion of the word *alone* on page 383.

The message of Revelation 14, announcing the *fall* of Babylon, must apply to religious bodies that were once pure and have become corrupt. Since this message follows the warning of the judgment, it must be given in the last days;

⁴⁴ Ibid., 6:305.

⁴⁵ Ellen G. White to F. M. Wilcox, 25 July 1911, Letter W.56, 1911, EGWRC-AIIAS, Silang, Cavite, Philippines.

⁴⁶ A. White, *Ellen G. White*, 6:321.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 6:305.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6:323.

GARILVA: BABYLON IN THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

therefore it cannot refer to the Roman Church *alone*, for that church has been in a fallen condition for many centuries.⁴⁹

The insertion of the word *alone* intensified and clarified Ellen White's universal understanding of the concept of Babylon, even though it drew a lot of controversy and criticism.⁵⁰ Arthur White mentioned that one of the reasons for the revision was for the "selecting [of] words [to be] more precise in their meaning . . . [and] to set forth facts and truths more correctly and accurately."⁵¹ If that be the case, then the insertion of the word *alone* has indeed done its job well. That insertion has clearly stated Ellen White's position in 1911.

Her concept of Babylon in the 1911 edition did not contradict her previous view of Babylon in Rev 14, but rather clarified the whole context of her statement. Her previous statement, without the word *alone*, could be misconstrued to mean that the message was only in the context of the 1844 Millerite preaching. However, she did not deny the broader application of Rev 14 as found in her other writings. Hence, the 1911 edition solidified and clarified her whole view of Babylon. Thus, there is a progression rather than a contradiction of her concept of Babylon from the 1858 *Great Controversy* edition to the 1911 edition.⁵²

⁴⁹ E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 1911 ed., 383 (emphasis supplied).

⁵⁰ Arthur White answered this issue in his letter to G. A. Roberts. He said, "This change, which had the full approval of Mrs. White in 1911, not only harmonizes with other parts of Great Controversy, but is in harmony with other utterances written by her on the same subject. Note, for instance, Patriarchs and Prophets [1890], page 167, par. 1. Where the term 'Babylon' is used to designate 'the religious world' in its state of corruption and apostasy. This statement was written two years after the first [1888] edition of Great Controversy. Again, in Testimonies to Ministers [an 1893 statement], pages 61-62, where it is stated that 'the fallen denominational churches are Babylon.'" Arthur L. White to Elder G. A. Roberts, 15 April 1949, DF 84e 2, EGWRC-AIIAS, Silang, Cavite, Philippines. See also A. White, *Ellen G. White*, 6:326-28.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6:306.

⁵² Damsteegt has also noticed this progression, although he does not stress its universal and eschatological dimension. He states, "A distinction between Rev. 14:8 and Rev. 17 was also seen by E. G. White. In 1884 she applied Babylon, symbolized by the harlot of Rev. 17, to the Roman Catholic Church and interpreted Rev. 14:8 as a description of the fall of the Protestant harlot daughters (SP, IV, 232, 233). Later she enlarged her view of Rev. 14:8, stating that "it cannot refer to the Roman Catholic Church alone" (GC, 1911, p. 383). This implied an inclusion of both Protestant and Roman Catholic churches" (Damsteegt, 179).

**Ellen White's Concept of Babylon Vis-à-Vis
That of 20th- and 21st-Century Scholars**

Since the 1911 edition is already in the 20th-century, it is logical to cite some of the 20th- and 21st-century scholars regarding their view of Babylon. Many of these scholars identify the Babylon of Rev 14 and 17 with imperial Rome.⁵³ Mark Wilson supports this view:

Babylon made the whole world drunk when the nations drank her wine. Which first-century city does John refer to? Peter's use of Babylon (1 Pet. 5:13) provides a clue. His probable referent is Rome, the place from which he is writing. Historical tradition dates Peter's martyrdom to the Neronian persecution of 65-66. This would place the writing of 1 Peter before A.D. 70 and thereby attest to the use of Babylon for Rome before the destruction of the temple. Because of Rome's persecution, the early church names their adversary Babylon, a city opposed to God and His people.⁵⁴

Some go beyond identifying Babylon with pagan and papal Rome.⁵⁵ Others, like Alan Johnson, believe that Babylon is found wherever there

⁵³ Here is a sampling of these scholars: Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, The General Epistles and the Apocalypse (New York; London: Harper and Brothers, 1933), 6:430-431; W. A. Criswell, *Expository Sermons on Revelation*, Five volumes, complete and unabridged in one (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 184; Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1911); repr., Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 215-216; Leon Morris, *Revelation*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Bicester: InterVarsity; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 207; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 273, 310; David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52B (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 829; Craig Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary, vol. 66 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 406.

⁵⁴ Mark W. Wilson, *Revelation*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 4:333. Other Protestant evangelicals suggest that, "in the context of Revelation, it probably is best to see Babylon as a 'type' of worldly and idolatrous power under satanic control and in rebellion against God and 'antitype' of the heavenly Jerusalem" (Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. [2001], s.v. "Babylon").

⁵⁵ E. W. Bullinger, *The Apocalypse*, 3rd ed., rev. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1935); repr., *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984), 506-510. Bullinger died in 1913, and the third edition may be the work of later editors. His second edition was published in 1907.

GARILVA: BABYLON IN THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

is Satanic deception.⁵⁶ On the other hand, Adventist scholars⁵⁷ like Ranko Stefanovic view Babylon from a universal and eschatological perspective:

Babylon is a religious-political power opposing God and oppressing his people. . . . This indicates that Babylon in Revelation must be something other than the secular and political powers of the world. It rather represents the end-time worldwide religious confederacy made up of the satanic trinity (Rev. 16:19) arrayed against God and his people.⁵⁸

Stefanovic’s view is the same as Ellen White’s final view and echoes the explanation of the Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia.⁵⁹

The table below summarizes Ellen White’s position in relation to 20th- and 21st- century scholars.

Table 2

<i>Ellen G. White (1858, 1884, 1888)</i>	<i>Henry Barclay Swete (1911)</i> ⁶⁰	<i>E. W. Bullinger [1907] (1935)</i>	<i>Alan Johnson (1981)</i>	<i>Mervyn Maxwell (1985)</i>	<i>Ranko Stefanovic (2002)</i>
<i>First edition (1858)</i> Babylon was the Protestant churches in her day					
<i>Second edition (1884)</i> The Protestant churches are referred to in Rev 14:8 while the Roman Catholic church is					

⁵⁶ Further, Johnson believes that Babylon is a transhistorical reality that includes the idolatrous kingdoms of earth’s history. It is also an eschatological symbol of Satanic deception and its powers. Babylon represents the total culture of the world apart from God. Alan Johnson, “Revelation,” *The Expositor’s Biblical Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 556-557.

⁵⁷ Adventist historian Mervyn Maxwell is more typical and specific when he says that “Protestants since Luther’s day had correctly seen Babylon as a symbol of the Roman church, a Christian body whose leaders at worst rejected elements of Bible truth and persecuted Christians who chose to believe them. . . . Babylon’s daughters are Protestant churches which, like the Roman church, reject Bible truth and harass those who accept it” (C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares, Volume 2: The Message of Revelation For You and Your Family* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 1985), 367-368.

⁵⁸ Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 2002), 446-447.

⁵⁹ *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 1976 rev. ed., s. v. “Babylon, Symbolic.”

⁶⁰ Henry Barclay Swete represents those who identified Babylon with imperial Rome.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

referred to in Rev 17					
Third edition (1888) Babylon as a universal and eschatological entity				Babylon refers to the universal end-time Roman church and her daughters to the apostate Protestant churches, who reject Bible truth and harass those who accept it	Babylon is an end-time religious confederacy made up of a satanic trinity
(No parallels)	Babylon refers to imperial Rome	Babylon in Revelation goes beyond pagan and papal Rome. It represents all religions that rely on human merit	Babylon is found wherever there is satanic deception. Transhistorical reality including idolatrous historical kingdoms. Eschatological symbol of satanic deceptions and powers. Represents the world apart from God		

Summary and Conclusion

The two-hour vision at Lovett’s Grove, Ohio, on March 14, 1858, spanned the entire history of God’s activity in regard to man. The result of this vision was the small volume called *Spiritual Gifts*. The succeeding four-volume 1884 *Spirit of Prophecy* set and the other later editions of 1888 and 1911 were major expansions of the 1858 work.

In these editions, Ellen White’s use of the term Babylon was very much consistent with her time and within the prevalent religio-political milieu of her day. As those early periods of the 1850s have considerable differences in the interpretation of Babylon,⁶¹ Ellen White based her first interpretation of Rev 14:8 on the light from her 1844 experience. She therefore interpreted Babylon in *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 1, 1858 edition, as the “fallen churches” of her day, which had direct reference to the Protestant churches of her time. When she published *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 1, Ellen White devoted only 219 pages to the great controversy theme. Of these, only four pages made up the chapter entitled “The Loud Cry,” dealing with the concept of Babylon, which basically was her commentary on Rev 14:8. At the time *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 1 was written, there were only about 2,500 Sabbath-keeping Adventists. This could

⁶¹ Damsteegt, 179.

GARILVA: BABYLON IN THE GREAT CONTROVERSY

have been part of the reason why the book was brief and the presentation condensed, since this volume was primarily for Seventh-day Adventists.⁶²

The second development in Ellen White's understanding is seen in her treatment of the subject in *The Spirit of Prophecy*, volume 4, 1884 edition. She gave more space and depth in treating the subject in comparison to her first volume. Here she made a clear distinction between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches of her day. She held that the fall of Babylon in Rev 14:8 referred to the Protestant churches and that the harlot in Rev 17 referred to the Roman Catholic Church.⁶³ In 1884, when she published the expanded form of the great controversy vision under the title, *The Spirit of Prophecy: The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan from the Destruction of Jerusalem to the End of the Controversy*, volume 4, the number of pages had grown to 506. Of these, eleven pages made up the chapter devoted to the concept of Babylon entitled "The Second Angel's Message."

Finally, in 1888, when a revision was made under the title, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan during the Christian Dispensation*, Ellen White reached her fullest and broadest perception of Babylon. The book, now reaching a total of 678 pages, devoted sixteen pages to the fall of Babylon in the chapter entitled "A Warning Rejected." Here we see the concept of Babylon woven into the grand theme of the final and universal conflagration where all the forces of evil will be geared against the remnant people of God. She depicted the whole world as divided into only two groups: Babylon versus God's people. Here Ellen White added two distinct dimensions to the concept: (1) Babylon is a universal entity, and (2) the events surrounding the fall of Babylon are eschatological. The final edition in 1911 only clarified her emphasis on Babylon's universal and eschatological nature. This edition bears the final title of the book, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation*.

As we have observed, there was a growing progression and an encompassing dimension in Ellen White's concept as she grasped more of the theme of the great controversy in relation to the coming of the end. There is no indication that she repudiated her former stance. Instead, her later enlarged view just embraced the former limited perspective and

⁶² A. White, *RH*, August 1, 1963, 2.

⁶³ E. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, 232-33.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

moved on to the larger picture of the great controversy in its universal and eschatological consummation.

There are three reasons why Ellen White's concept of Babylon is progressive in nature rather than contradictory. (1) There was no indication in her statements that the concept of Babylon she gave in the 1858 edition was *exhaustive*. By exhaustive, we mean that the meaning she gave to Babylon then was *all* the meaning of the term. (2) Her broader and unfolding understanding of the meaning of Babylon in *The Great Controversy* 1884 edition in no way negates her narrower 1858 edition understanding. (3) In the same sense, her final understanding of the concept of Babylon displayed in *The Great Controversy* 1888 edition likewise did not negate her former stance.

With so many conflicting views on Babylon before, during, and after her time, her own view did not change in the sense that she did not repudiate her earlier statements. Instead, her final understanding absorbed her earlier statements and gave the concept a comprehensive, universal, and eschatological dimension. Her view grew with the passing of time, encompassing her earlier views and integrating them into her major motif of the great controversy between Christ and His people versus Satan and his confederacy, which escalates and culminates in the end time. The principle of progressive revelation expounded by Solomon is beautifully illustrated in this development: "But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" (Prov 4:18).

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Toward the Fulfillment of the Gog and Magog Prophecy of Ezekiel 38–39

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After the tragic fall of Jerusalem in 587/586 B.C., the exilic prophet Ezekiel presents in his book a unique prophecy concerning Gog from the land of Magog (Ezek 38–39)¹ that has stirred a bewildering number of different interpretations. His enigmatic prediction is certainly one of the most challenging texts of Scripture. Alexander in his article aptly writes: “The plethora of interpretations for this passage caution the student concerning dogmatism in his conclusion.”² The New Scofield Bible as well

¹ The prophecy about Gog and Magog is mentioned only once in the Old Testament—Ezek 38–39; and this terminology is also directly employed once in the New Testament, namely, in Rev 20:8–9.

Numbers 24:7, according to the Samaritan Pentateuch and LXX, reads “from Gog” instead of “from Agag.” The same wording is in Aquila, Theodotion, and Symmachus. However, this does not mean that we can identify the Gog of Ezek 38–39 with Agag, because King Agag is in the book of Numbers chronologically situated to the time of Moses, hence he did not live sometime after the Babylonian exile. Chronologically, therefore, this identification does not fit into the time framework of the prophecy and needs to be ruled out. See also Amos 7:1 in the LXX for another occurrence of Gog (projected as the king of the locusts attacking Israel); a late LXX-manuscript 93 to Esth 3:1 and 9:24 names Haman, the enemy of Israel in the book of Esther, a “Gogite.” According to Codex Vaticanus, a name “Gog” is put instead of “Og” in Deut 3:1,13; 4:47.

The term Gog occurs in 1 Chr 5:4 as a proper name. The word Magog appears as a proper name in Gen 10:2 and 1 Chr 1:5 (besides Ezek 39:6, where it designates a people).

² Ralph H. Alexander: “A Fresh Look at Ezekiel 38 and 39,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 17/3 (1974): 157. For an insightful analysis of Hal Lindsey’s book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), see T. Boersma, *Is the Bible a Jigsaw Puzzle . . . An Evaluation of Hal Lindsey’s Writings* (St. Catharines:

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

as Hal Lindsey, for example, claim that Gog refers to Russia.³ In this article, I do not discuss in depth the different popular or scholarly propositions about the identity of Gog or their opinions on the fulfillment/application of this prophecy,⁴ but explore primarily a biblical historical-eschatological interpretation: namely, how Ezek 38–39 is deciphered in its immediate context⁵ and by later biblical writers, especially

Paideia, 1978), especially the eighth chapter, entitled “Ezekiel’s Prophecy about Gog” (106–125). Boersma raises some pertinent questions about Lindsey’s hermeneutics and exegesis of the Bible.

In our study we do not deal with the possibility that the biblical text of Gog and Magog has its origin in the Babylonian didactic poem known as the Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin. See M. C. Astour, “Ezekiel’s Prophecy of Gog and the Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95/4 (1976): 567–579. For a critique of Astour, see Tremper Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1991), 125–126.

Neither do we deal with the literary or textual problems of Ezek 38–39, which are usually well-explained in commentaries.

³ The New Scofield Bible ([New York: Oxford UP, 1967], 881) comments on Ezek 38:2: “The reference is to the powers in the north of Europe, headed by Russia.” Hal Lindsey states: “Russia is Gog” (48). However, *rosh* does not designate a country; it is rather a title.

⁴ For a review of various theories about the identification of Gog and Magog, see a pertinent study of Sverre Bøe, *Gog and Magog: Ezekiel 38–39 as Pre-text for Revelation 19, 17–21 and 20, 7–10* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 14–16, 88–99. See also Alexander, 161–163; Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 432–436; J. Boehmer, “Wer ist Gog und Magog? Ein Beitrag zur Auslegung des Buches Ezechiel,” *Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie* 40 (1897), 347–355; Boersma, 116–125; Ronald E. Clemens, *Ezekiel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 170–172; Simon Cohen, “Gog,” in *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, 1941), 5:10; A. J. Greig, “Gog and Magog,” *Ministry*, February 1978, 14–15; R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament: With a Comprehensive Review of Old Testament Studies and a Special Supplement on the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 842–843; Margaret S. Odell, *Ezekiel*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 470; B. Otzen, “Gog; Magog,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 2:421–422; H. H. Rowley, *Relevance of Apocalyptic* (London, 1963), 35–37; D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic: 200 BC–AD 100* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 191–193; *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1955), 4:704–707; Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Foes from the Northern Frontier* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982); Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 25–48* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 299–302.

⁵ For the discussion about the authorship of Ezek 38–39 and how this literary unit integrates many features and themes that characterize Ezekiel’s material, see especially Paul M. Joyce, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007), 7–16, 213.

MOSKALA: THE GOG AND MAGOG PROPHECY

in the book of Revelation. This study does not seek to be the last word on the topic, but rather to enhance discussion on its christological-ecclesiological-apocalyptic fulfillment.

The Literary Structure

The literary structure of the book of Ezekiel is well-developed and quite symmetrical, which helps to put into proper perspective the prophecy regarding Gog and his allies against Israel. The whole document with its 48 chapters can be divided into seven parts:⁶

- I. God judges Israel: the glory of the Lord departs from the defiled temple (1–11).
- II. God’s judgment against Israel explained (12–23).
- III. God’s impending judgment: Siege of Jerusalem and prediction of the destruction of the temple (24).
- IV. God judges foreign nations (25–32).⁷
- V. God’s actual judgment: Fall of Jerusalem reported (33).
- VI. God comforts, gives hope, and promises restoration of Israel (34–39).
- VII. God’s vision for the restored community—the new temple and city: the glory of the Lord returns to the temple (40–48).

Compare with Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*, 426–427; G. A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), 407–408; Zimmerli, 302–304; and John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1969), 14–20.

⁶ See especially, Richard M. Davidson, “The Chiastic Literary Structure of the Book of Ezekiel,” in *To Understand the Scriptures: Essays in Honor of William H. Shea*, ed. David Merling (Berrien Springs: The Institute of Archaeology/Siegfried Horn Archaeological Museum, 1997), 71–93. For different structures, see Alexander, 158; Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), vii–x; idem, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*, vii–ix; Clemens, v–vii; Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 40–41; H. Van Dyke Parunak, “Structural Studies in Ezekiel” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1978); idem, “The Literary Architecture of Ezekiel’s *mar’ôt ‘elohim*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1980): 61–74; Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit*, The Bible Speaks Today, ed. J. A. Motyer, John R. W. Stott, and Derek Tidball (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 7–8, 39–42.

⁷ At the very center of the literary structure are two panels reflecting the spiritual warfare: (1) God’s judgment upon the anointed guardian cherub (Ezek 28:11–19); and (2) God’s vindication of His holiness and restoration of the people of Israel (Ezek 28:20–26). The last sentence of the entire book provides a fitting title for Ezekiel’s message: “The Lord is there” (Ezek 48:35).

Ezekiel's active prophetic ministry, dated from 593 until at least 571,⁸ fell into two major periods and is divided by the shocking event with the most devastating consequences—the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. The first 33 chapters fall within the years 593/592 to 587/586 B.C., during which the prophet's message, directed to Jerusalem, consists of warnings, judgments, and symbolic actions designed to bring Judah to repentance and back to her faith in God. The second period consists of the last 15 chapters and encompasses the years following the fall of Jerusalem (587/586), ending in 571/570 B.C. In the course of these years, Ezekiel is a pastor and a messenger of comfort and hope to the exiles.⁹ Immediately before the prophecy concerning Gog and Magog, there is a series of prophecies regarding the restoration of Israel (chs. 34–37), and directly after it there is a vision about the rebuilding of the new temple and the city (chs. 40–48). In between these two parts, there is a picture of God's intervention in favor of His people when enemies attack (Ezek 38–39).¹⁰

⁸ See especially Ezek 1:1–3; 29:17; and 40:1. In the fifth year of the Babylonian captivity, he was called to the prophetic office and served in this capacity for some 22 years. He was the son of Buzi, a priest of the family of Zadok (Ezek 1:3), and so like Zechariah (Zech 1:1; Neh 12:12, 16) and Jeremiah (Jer 1:1), combined both the offices of prophet and priest. The fact that Ezekiel was included among “all the princes, and all the mighty men of valor” (2 Kgs 24:14) who were taken away with Jehoiakin in 597 B.C. (Ezek 1:1–3), suggests that he could have been a member of Jerusalem's aristocracy. He was at that time most probably 25 years old (Ezek 1:2). Ezekiel was married, but his wife died about nine years after the captivity began (24:1, 16).

It is noteworthy that the book is written from a chronological perspective, and accurate dating is an interesting feature of this book. Each major section in Ezekiel is initiated by a chronological notice (1:1, 2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 29:1, 17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:21, 22; 40:1).

⁹ Even in the Babylonian captivity, divine justice was mixed with mercy. God came to His people as a teacher to impress upon them the folly of disobedience and the desirability of cooperating with Him. He did not want to be for them a stern judge to condemn them. The bitter experiences of their captivity were not so much retributive as they were remedial and pedagogical in nature (see Dan 9:4–19).

¹⁰ Contextual studies are crucial for the understanding of Ezek 38–39. The sixth part of the whole book (chs. 34–39) can be subdivided into five units with its culmination in chs. 38 and 39: (1) reproof of the shepherds of Israel (34:1–31); (2) prophecy against Edom because of her support of the Babylonians in their attack upon Judah (35:1–15); (3) the restoration of the people of Israel (36:1–38); (4) the vision of the dry bones (37:1–28); (5) prophecies against Gog and Magog (38:1–39:29).

Ezekiel 33:21 begins one section which chs. 38 and 39 close. This section contains a series of six messages delivered by Ezekiel after the reception of the news that Jerusalem

MOSKALA: THE GOG AND MAGOG PROPHECY

The statement, “This is what the Sovereign Lord says,”¹¹ appears seven times in Ezekiel 38–39 (38:3,10,14,17; 39:1,17,25), thus dividing these two chapters into seven parts. After the introduction (Ezek 38:1–2), come the following sections: (1) presentation of Gog and his allies (38:3–9); (2) Gog’s pride and plot (38:10–13); (3) Gog coming against Israel (38:14–16); (4) destruction of Gog’s forces by God’s judgment (38:17–23); (5) destruction and burial of Gog and his allies (39:1–16); (6a) Gog’s confederation at Yahweh’s sacrificial feast (39:17–22); (6b) Israel in exile for their sins (39:23–24); (7) restoration of the fortunes of Israel after captivity (39:25–29).¹² Thus, the prophecy ends with the event which is to happen first—the exodus from Babylonian captivity, because this prophecy will be fulfilled only when Israel returns to their land and their yoke of captivity ends.

Spoken About in the Past

Ezekiel 38:17 is the key verse of the prophecy: “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: ‘Are you [Gog] not the one I spoke of in former days by my servants the prophets of Israel? At that time they prophesied for years that I would bring you against them.’” This statement affirms that God through his prophets spoke about Gog in former days.¹³ It

had fallen. Each of the six messages commences with Ezekiel’s distinctive introductory speech formula: “Then the word of the Lord came to me saying” (33:23; 34:1; 35:1; 36:16; 37:14; 38:1).

Susan Niditch argues that the war scene of Ezek 38–39 provides the fitting prelude to Ezek 40–48 because in the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* and the Ugaritic epic of Baal and Anat, the enthronement of the deity follows the scene of victory in the battle (“Ezekiel 40–48 in a Visionary Context,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48/2 [1986]: 208–224). See also Paul E. Fitzpatrick, “The Disarmament of God: Ezekiel 38–39 in Its Mythic Context,” *Catholic Bible Quarterly*, Monograph Series 37 (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2004).

¹¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the NIV translation of the Bible is used.

¹² See Odell, *Ezekiel*, 465; Taylor, 242. Horace D. Hummel, *Ezekiel 21–48* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), 1099: “Chapters 38–39 are really a unit and their division into two chapters is artificial.”

¹³ Daniel Block argues that this text needs to be understood in a different way. God’s question needs to be answered negatively, which means that Gog is not the one about whom God spoke through prophets in the past. Gog is a new unknown enemy about whom no one so far has prophesied. See his commentary *The Book of Ezekiel 25–48*, 453–456.

I do not agree with Block, because the purpose of Ezekiel’s prophetic imagery is to put his message into harmony with the earlier known prophecies about the invasion of God’s enemies against Israel, as indicated by the immediate context (38:17b). Ezekiel

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

means that God spoke in the past about him in a general sense, because nowhere else in the Old Testament is a direct prophecy about Gog mentioned. The name Gog appears only one other time (1 Chr 5:4), but it is in a genealogy and not in a prophecy.

We need, therefore, to look for the main concepts of Ezekiel's prophecy that can also be detected in previous biblical prophecies, and thus the connections can be established among them. The most common concepts of many prophets and biblical writers are the topics of war and of enemies from the north. Ezekiel emphasizes that the enemy will come from the north (38:6,15; 39:2). "North" is the symbol of the antigodly power because God reigns from the north (see Ps 48:2; Isa 14:13; Job 37:22). Eichrodt explains that "a declaration made by Yahweh himself to Gog" provides evidence that God has long since forewarned the people of his coming. This shows that the enemy from the north, who play so large a part in Jeremiah's first prophecies but whom Jeremiah himself in ch. 19 interprets as meaning Babylon, is regarded as a force that has not as yet entered history and is to materialize for the first time in the shape of Gog. Such a transference was possible only because behind the

puts Gog and his allies into the stream of antigodly forces the prophets were talking about in the past. His affirmative question about the former prophets, that they "prophesied for years that I [the Sovereign Lord] would bring you against them," clearly links Ezekiel's prophecy with other prophecies and attests to the connection between them. Furthermore, it is crucial to note that the two other questions asked in Ezek 38 always presuppose a positive answer (see vv. 13 and 14). Why not, then, expect the same in v. 17? In both cases (38:13,14) as well as in v. 17, the interrogative particle *ha* is used (unless the particle *ha* in Ezek 38:17 is interpreted as a definite article; however, in that case, it would mean even a stronger connection between this prophecy concerning Gog and the messages of the other prophets). See also another allusion to the same concept in Ezek 39:8b.

The following translations support this understanding of the biblical text: KJV, NIV, NKJ, RSV, NSV, etc., because this is the natural reading of the text. This view is supported by many exegetes, such as Walter Eichrodt, *Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 525; Otzen, 422–424; M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985), 467–477; Russell, 191–193; *SDA Bible Commentary*, 4:708–709; Taylor, 243; Wright, 319; Zimmerli, 297, 312. For further discussion, see M. S. Odell, "Are You He of Whom I Spoke by My Servants the Prophets? Ezekiel 38–39 and the Problem of History in the Neobabylonian Context" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1988).

It is similar to the notion of the Antichrist. The term is used only five times in four verses in the epistles of John (1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 7), yet the concept of Antichrist is used by biblical authors in many places in the Bible but under different names—like the "little horn," the "king of the North," "false teachers," "false Messiahs," the "man of lawlessness," "Babylon," etc.

MOSKALA: THE GOG AND MAGOG PROPHECY

anonymous northern foe through whom Yahweh is to settle his final reckoning with his people is seen first one historical adversary and then another: first Assyria in the time of Isaiah (Isa 5:26 ff.; 14:31) and then Babylon in the time of Jeremiah in whom the terrors of the end seemed to be approaching. To the author of this chapter, the conditions prevailing in his times seemed capable of being explained only if he assumed that those prophecies had not as yet really been fulfilled and were still waiting their consummation.¹⁴

Berkouwer claims that “the northern powers—the north frequently having been the origin of Israel’s woes (cf. Joel 2:20)—is an image that anticipates the eclipse of the antigodly powers of the world.”¹⁵ Otzen describes five principle motifs in Ezek 38–39: “The Day of Yahweh,” “War with Chaos and War with the Nations,” “The Foe from the North,” “Attack of the Nations upon Jerusalem,” and “The Sacrificial Meal.”¹⁶ When he speaks about the foe from the north, he maintains that “in the OT tradition, this idea has undergone a historico-geographic twist, but it is certainly mythological-legendary in its origin: the evil powers of chaos that are hostile to God reside in the north, whence they are set loose.”¹⁷ This position is upheld also by Russell, who states that “already in the Old Testament and in tradition beyond the Old Testament the north was regarded as a place of menace and mystery. This hostile army is individualized and given the name: Gog of the land of Magog (38.2).”¹⁸

The principal and strongest motifs are the concepts of the “sacrificial meal” and of the “war” because they connect with other biblical passages. For example, the idea that the slain will become a sacrificial meal is also found in Jer 46:10; Zeph 1:7–8; Isa 34:5–11; and Lam 2:21–22.¹⁹

From the larger biblical perspective, it is quite obvious that “the battle here described is but the culmination of the agelong struggle between the powers of evil and the people of God. Concerning this there is frequent mention in earlier prophecies. The earliest intimation comes from the Garden of Eden in the curse pronounced upon the serpent. God predicted constant warfare between the seed of the woman, the church, and Satan. The ultimate triumph over evil was forecast in the clause, ‘it [the

¹⁴ Eichrodt, 525.

¹⁵ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 276.

¹⁶ Otzen, 423–424.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 423.

¹⁸ Russell, 190. He also mentions that in the Ras Shamra tablets, the North is the mythological home of the gods.

¹⁹ See Otzen, 424.

seed of the woman] shall bruise thy head' (Gen 3:15). Other references to the controversy and the eventual triumph of right are found in the Psalms and later prophetic books (see Ps 2; 110; Isa 26:20,21; etc.).²⁰

It is apparent that one cannot isolate Ezek 38 and 39 from other Old Testament prophecies; one needs to discern the organic unity of all prophecies. Otzen correctly summarizes: "Thus Ezk. 38–39 has the character of a mosaic of well-known OT motifs."²¹

The Main Thoughts

The leading message of Ezekiel's prophecy is transparent: in the future (38:8,16), Gog will launch from the far north (38:6,15; 39:2) his antagonistic campaign²² with his allies (38:2–8) against Israel²³ after the Jews have returned from the Assyrian-Babylonian captivity (38:8,12; 39:23,25,27,28) and are living securely in their land (38:8,14; 39:26). Then the divine judgment (38:18–22; 39:2–6,17–20) will destroy Gog and his confederacy upon the mountains of Israel (39:4,15); thus Israel (39:7,22,28) and all nations will know that Yahweh is God (38:16,23; 39:6b,7,13b,21,28) and His holiness will be vindicated (38:16b,23; 39:7,27).

²⁰ *SDA Bible Commentary*, 4:708. For interpretation of Gen 3:15, see Afolarin Olu-tunde Ojewole, "The Seed in Genesis 3:15: An Exegetical and Intertextual Study" (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2002).

²¹ Otzen, 424.

²² What is first mentioned as Yahweh's action (38:4-16; 39:2) turns into a description of Gog's own evil devise (38:10). He deliberately planned to destroy Israel (Ezek 38:10–12), and his pride led to his own destruction (see the stress on "I" in Ezek 38:11–12). Gog's pride and destruction closely reflects Lucifer's pride and fall as described in Isa 14:12–15 (compare with Ezek 28:17–19).

Similar language is used in the book of Exodus in regard to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Exod 3:19–20). Nine times this hardening is ascribed to God (Exod 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:4,8; compare with Rom 9:17–18), and another nine times Pharaoh is said to have hardened his own heart (Exod 7:13,14,22; 8:15,19,32; 9:7,34,35). In the actual account of the ten plagues (Exod 7–12) against the Egyptian gods (Exod 12:12), when the predictions are put aside, Pharaoh alone is the agent who hardened his heart in each of the first five plagues! Not until the sixth plague did God harden Pharaoh's heart (9:12), which means that his heart turned to "a mud" after his own deliberate and stubborn refusal to listen and obey God. His attitude of life was wrong. Once he made a final decision against God, God's dealings with him hardened his heart even more (like sunshine hardens clay). In this way the prediction was fulfilled that God would harden Pharaoh's heart (Exod 4:21; 7:3).

²³ Gog and his allies attack a land (Ezek 38:8,11,16), the mountains of Israel (38:8; 39:2), my people Israel (38:16), and the land of Israel (38:18).

The Time of the Prophecy's Fulfillment

The prophecy about Gog's invasion against God's people is to be fulfilled in the future (as seen from the perspective of the prophet Ezekiel) after Israel returns from the Babylonian captivity (Ezek 39:23,25,27). "Gog and Magog" are future enemies, and they will attack only after Israel is living securely in their land when they are at peace with their neighbors and under no visible threat (Ezek 38:11–12).

Ezekiel uses three time expressions—*miyyāmim rabbim*, "after many days" (38:8); *b^oach^rit hashshānim*, "in the latter years" (38:8); and *b^oach^rit hayyāmim*, "in the latter days"/"in days to come" (38:16)—which give a general future time framework to this prophecy. Boersma²⁴ and Willis²⁵ discuss in their respective studies the expression "in the latter days," and they come to the same conclusion: the phrase "in the latter days" (used thirteen times in the Hebrew portion of the Old Testament)²⁶ basically means "in the after(wards) of the days," "in the following time," "in the future," "in days to come," "in those future days," "in the latter days," and is without any specific time reference to the time of the end (for example, after the Messiah comes or at the end of the world's history). In other words, these expressions have no *specific* time reference per se. It is important to note that the biblical concept of time is always closely tied or even identified with its content, and its meaning depends on the application of the context.²⁷ The same position is also held

²⁴ Boersma, 32–43.

²⁵ See John T. Willis, "The Expression *b^oach^rit hayyāmim* in the Old Testament," *Restoration Quarterly* 22/1–2 (1979): 54–71.

²⁶ Gen 49:1; Num 24:14; Deut 4:40; 31:29; Isa 2:2; Jer 23:20; 30:24; 48:47; 49:39; Ezek 38:16; Dan 10:14; Hos 3:5; Mic 4:1. It is also used once in the Aramaic portion of the book of Daniel, namely in 2:28 as *b^oach^rit yomayyā*.

²⁷ For further study, see H. Douglas Buckwalter, "Time," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 774–775; James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (Naperville: A. R. Allenson, 1962); Ernst Jenni, "Time," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 4:646: "The abstraction 'time' belongs among the accomplishments of Greek culture. If, however, time (as a dimension) is not abstracted from the abundance of individual events, then, naturally, the events and their time constitute, to a large extent, a unit in OT thinking. It has been observed again and again how closely the Hebrew conception of time is bound up with its content, or even identified with it." See also a chapter about the Hebrew concept of time in Jacques B. Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians: A Textbook for the Study of Biblical Hebrew in Relation to Hebrew Thinking* (Lanham: UP of America, 1993), 200–207. A more cautious approach to the issue of time is presented by C. N. Pinnock, "Time," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids:

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

by Seebass; however, he argues that six of these passages should be interpreted differently due to the literary context: as a technical term with eschatological content.²⁸

Thus, the three temporal phrases mentioned above do not refer directly or automatically to the end time. In Ezek 38–39 there is no specific indicator which would necessitate putting this prophecy into the apocalyptic end-time scenario just prior to the second coming of Jesus Christ, even though it is not excluded.²⁹ Instead, the plausible position is that Ezekiel’s prophecy refers first to the events that should occur sometime after the return from the Babylonian exile.³⁰ Additional time framework is given in phrases like “when they live in safety” (38:8,14; 39:26), “attack on peaceful and unsuspecting people” (Ezek 38:11),³¹ but even these expressions are very broad in meaning. Historically speaking, the Gog prophecy could be fulfilled only in the future after the return of Israel from the Assyrian-Babylonian captivity, which occurred in 537/536 B.C. (see 2 Chr 36:22–23; Ezra 1–3,7).

However, the ultimate fulfillment of safety for Israel can only be eschatological because it will only be under God’s real rulership in His kingdom that the people of God will live in security for ever and under no threat from their enemies (Ezek 37:24–28; compare with Isa 32:18).³² Craigie rightly comments on Gog’s battle: “Be that as it may, he [Ezekiel] nevertheless has a vision of a distant world in which in spite of evil

Eerdmans, 1988), 4:852–853. For the latest discussion, see William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001); Gregory E. Ganssle, ed., *God and Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

²⁸ H. Seebass, “*ʾachʾrît*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 1:210–212. These six passages are: Isa 2:2, Mic 4:1, Hos 3:5, Ezek 38:16, Dan 2:28, and Dan 10:14.

²⁹ It is undoubtedly true that Ezekiel’s prophecies point to the physical restoration (36:18) as well as the spiritual rebirth and revival of Israel (e.g., Ezek 36:25–28). However, Ezek 38–39 does not foretell the spiritual revival or the repentance of Israel just before the end of the world.

³⁰ See Boersma, 110, and other Bible scholars.

³¹ Phrases like “unwalled villages” and “living without walls and without gates and bars” in Ezek 38:11 are parallel expressions to “living in safety” or “peaceful and unsuspecting people,” i.e., people who live in peace and without fear. Therefore, these phrases should not be interpreted literally, but as figures of speech.

³² To live “securely” means ultimately under the rulership of the Messiah, because when the Messiah comes, Israel will live in security (Ezek 34:25,28; 37:24–28). In that regard, there is a very important *Targum Neofiti* on Num 14:26. The *Neofiti* targumist put Ezekiel’s prophecy in a Messianic context: “At the very end of days Gog and Magog will go out to Jerusalem, and they will fall into the hands of the king Messiah.”

MOSKALA: THE GOG AND MAGOG PROPHECY

God's good would be established. The battle which he describes is thus in essence a final 'cosmic' battle in which evil would eventually be eliminated and righteousness be victorious."³³

Gog and His Allies

There are five nations listed as Gog's allies in Ezek 38:5–6: Persia, Cush, Put, Gomer, and Beth-Togormah, besides Meshech and Tubal already mentioned in 38:2. Thus, there are altogether seven nations in confederation whose names are derived from Gen 10:2,3,6, and Ezek 27:10,13,14.³⁴ The number seven plays a significant role in Ezekiel, symbolizing completeness or totality, and in this specific context points to a universal conspiracy, a world plot against Israel.³⁵ The number of enemies is described in figurative language: "You and all your troops and the many nations with you will go up, advancing like a storm; you will be like a cloud covering the land" (Ezek 38:9) and again: "You will advance against my people Israel like a cloud that covers the land" (Ezek 38:16).

Though many solutions to the enigma of Gog's figure have been offered, there is no consensus among scholars who Gog is. Different theories have been proposed for the names of Gog and Magog with diverse

³³ Peter C. Craigie, *Ezekiel*, The Daily Study Bible Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1983), 269.

³⁴ Alger F. Johns, "The Presentation of Ezekiel 38 in Evangelism," *Ministry*, August/September 1962, 28: "The eleven nations mentioned in [Ezekiel] chap. 38, and with only the exception of Persia, they are all sons, grandsons, or great-grandsons of Ham and Japhet, according to Genesis 10 and none of them are descendants of Shem, the patriarch." As for the identification of these nations, see discussion in T. Lust, "A Linguistic and Geographical Study of the Names of Ezekiel 38 and 39" (M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 1949); Boersma, 114–116; Otzen, 421; Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*, 432–436, 439–442.

³⁵ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*, 441: "Meshech, Tubal, Gomer, and Beth-Togorma represent the northern extreme of the world known to Israel; Paras, Cush, and Put the southern extreme, again suggesting that the whole world is involved in this attack."

The phrase "This is what the Sovereign Lord says" is used seven times in Ezek 38–39; "for seven years" (39:9) the weapons of defeated Gog's army will be used for fuel; the seven months are needed for burying the bodies (39:12,14). Previously in the book of Ezekiel (25–32), there are prophecies against the seven foreign nations (Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, and Egypt); the prophet utters seven oracles against Egypt (29:1–16,17–21; 30:1–19,20–26; 31:1–18; 32:1–16,17–32); and there are seven woes expressed (13:3,18; 16:23 [twice]; 24:6,9; 34:2).

historical³⁶ and symbolic/mythological³⁷ interpretations. Unfortunately, none of these hypotheses has sufficient biblical support to warrant its

³⁶ A brief survey of different historical interpretations is more than sufficient: Gog represents the Scythians (advocated by J. Wellhausen, W. Gesenius); Magog is identified with the Scythians (Josephus); Gog is the Lydian king Gyges (ca. 670 B.C.), and consequently the land of Magog is Lydia (popularized by F. Delitzsch, J. Herrmann, W. Zimmerli); Gog refers to the dynasty of Gagi (personal name of Persian origin) in the territory north of Assyria, which is mentioned in a text of Ashurbanipal (L. Durr); Gog relates to a territory called Gaga mentioned in an Amarna letter (I, 38), which according to the context was located north of Syria, perhaps around Carchemish (O. Weber); Gog is Gasga, a name occurring in Hittite tablets which described a location on the borders of Armenia and Cappadocia (W. F. Albright); Gog is an officer in the army of the younger Cyrus ca. 400 B.C. (N. Messel); Gog (derived from Gaga in the Amarna letter) was used as a pseudonym for Alexander the Great (H. Winckler); Gog represents an official title, a prophetic role, based upon the Septuagint rendering of several kingly names in the OT and employed as a general name for any enemy of God's people at the time of the composition of the Septuagint (Num 24:7; Amos 7:1); Magog is interpreted either as an artificial form (Assyrian *mat gugi*, land of Gog), or as a "hebraizing" of an Akkadian *matGog* (=matGaga in an Amarna letter) (H. Winkler, R. Kraetzschmar, A. R. Millard); the name of the land comes first and that the name Gog was derived from it (J. G. Aalders, J. W. Wevers); Magog is a cipher or code for Babylon—reversing the letters of Magog and reading it as the following letter of the alphabet (J. Boehmer, L. Finkelstein, more recently A. J. Greig); Gog is identified with Antiochus IV Epiphanes (L. Seinecke, T. Boersma); Gog is a pseudonym for Antiochus V Eupator, reigning from 163 to 162 B.C. (G. R. Berry); Gog is Mithridates VI, king of Pontus from 120 to 64 B.C. (N. Schmidt). For sources of different theories, see footnote 4.

³⁷ In contrast to various historical explanations of the terms Gog and Magog, there is an attempt to understand these names symbolically or mythologically: (1) A. van Hoonacker suggested that the word Gog was actually derived from the Sumerian term *gug*, meaning "darkness"; therefore, Gog was the personification of darkness and evil because of the apocalyptic elements involved, and by consequence, Magog is the land of darkness; (2) Gog's army are demons, spirits of the dead, or mythical entities (K. G. Kuhn, M. Rissi); (3) Gog is the Akkadian god Gaga, which appears in *Enuma Elish* (see M. Streck); (4) Gog is as a leader and representative of the powers hostile toward God, and thus the historical names are only masks and disguises for a mythical/symbolic power that has nothing to do with history (W. Staerk); (5) H. Gressmann accepts the Gyges hypotheses as far as the origin of the name is concerned, but he holds that mythological ideas concerning a giant of primitive times (Og = Gog?) and of gigantic locusts lie beyond this figure; (6) Gog is interpreted as the "leader and representative of the powers hostile to God" (A. Lauha); (7) Ezek 38–39 is presenting real prophecy and future historical events, but in Rev 20 the whole picture is mythological (K. G. Kuhn); (8) Gog is a symbol for the eschatological final war in the context of Messianic expectations according to rabbinic sources (*b. Sanh.* 97b). For the last point, see the article in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 7:692–695, s.v. "Gog and Magog." For sources of different theories, see footnote no. 4.

MOSKALA: THE GOG AND MAGOG PROPHECY

acceptance as the answer to Gog's identity. It seems, therefore, that the safe way of interpreting the fulfillment of Gog's prophecy is to stay within the parameters of explanation given by later biblical authors. Such an approach helps to avoid a speculative exposition of this prophecy and focuses on the canonical intertextual understanding of it.

Thus, this study does not support any historical fulfillment that falls prior to the exodus from the Babylonian exile or during it, because Ezekiel predicts a future event from his perspective. It rejects any political modern applications related to the second coming of Christ that overlook the New Testament interpretation of this prophecy.³⁸ It also opposes the mythological explanation, because the literary genre of Ezek 38–39 presupposes its historical fulfillment. On the other hand, we stand for the symbolic-historic interpretation rooted in the New Testament interpretation of this prophecy, where especially the book of Revelation provides material for the eschatological-apocalyptic understanding of Ezekiel's prophetic scenario.³⁹

³⁸ For example, in 1971, during the cold-war period, Ronald Reagan in his speech as governor of California pointed to Ezek 38–39 and stated: "Gog must be Russia . . . But it didn't seem to make sense before the Russian revolution, when Russia was a Christian state. Now it does, now that Russia has become communistic and atheistic, now that Russia has set itself against God. Now it fits the description of Gog perfectly" (cited from Millard C. Lind, *Ezekiel*. Believers Church Bible Commentary [Scottsdale, Waterloo: Herald Press, 1996], 320).

³⁹ This approach is in harmony with interpretative principles advocated by LaRondelle, Davidson, Doukhan, and Were. See Hans K. LaRondelle, "A Plea for a Christ-centered Eschatology," *Ministry* (January 1976): 18–20; idem, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1983); Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical τύπος Structures* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1981); idem, "Interpreting Old Testament Prophecy," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, Biblical Research Institute Studies, vol. 1, ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2006), 183–204; Jacques B. Doukhan, *Mystery of Israel* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2004); idem, *Israel and the Church: Two Voices for the Same God* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002); Louis F. Were, *The Certainty of the Third Angel's Message* (Berrien Springs: First Impressions, 1979).

Our methodology functions in the framework of prediction-fulfillment and can be described as historical-typological with the eschatological-apocalyptic fulfillment in two phases (separated by the millennium). Two main principles of the prophecy (enemy's attack on Israel, and God's miraculous intervention on their behalf) are applied by analogy of situation to Christ (the Representative of Israel) and His church (enlargement of historical Israel). These christological and ecclesiological fulfillments are integrated into the whole typological scenario on the basis of historical correspondences. The multiple ecclesiological fulfillments (multiplicity is limited only to this aspect) are actually multi-

On the basis of known historical documents, one can safely conclude that there is no event in the history of Israel that would match with Ezekiel's description of God's intervention against the antagonistic forces of Israel's enemies. No such past happening is ever recorded. Thus, this prophecy was not fulfilled in biblical times (from the Babylonian captivity exodus to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70), nor in a more recent time.

ple applications of the prophecy in principle that we call in this study pre-fulfillments or partial fulfillments. Finally, there is the antitypical eschatological-apocalyptic fulfillment of Gog's prophecy in two stages, which is the primary fulfillment of Ezekiel's predictions and its culmination. John's deliberate triple usage of Ezek 38–39 in the book of Revelation (in chs. 16, 19, and 20) provides a safeguard to our method of interpretation. In doing this, we retain the original context of the war concept.

In addition, Ezekiel hints to the future antitypical fulfillment by providing some typological indicators in the text itself: the non-historicity of Gog's figure; symbolism of place-names ("the Valley of the Travelers," and "the Valley of the Horde or Multitude of Gog"); symbolism of the number seven; temporal phrases like "in the latter days" or "when my people Israel are living in safety"; enemies coming from the north; and proclamation that the former prophets spoke about Gog.

Our interpretative model of Gog's prophecy differs from the apotelesmatic principle on two crucial points: (1) We stand for the specific historical-eschatological/apocalyptic fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy, while the apotelesmatic principle, on the other hand, speaks only about multiple applications/fulfillments. It seems that in the apotelesmatic system of interpretation there is no room for a specific or unique fulfillment. We distinguish between multiple applications in principle and the primary fulfillment and do not see all the fulfillments on the same level. (2) Our approach to the prophecy is historicist, and we do not integrate into our understanding of Gog's prophecy presuppositions and principles of symbolic, preterist, or futurist/dispensationalist schools of prophetic interpretation. Our typological structure is ingrained in actual history, and the antitypical fulfillment is bigger than type. Symbols point to historical realities of a higher level and not to abstract truth or ideas.

The Apotelesmatic principle of interpretation of Scripture (from the Greek word "apotelesma" meaning a conclusion or completion) refers to the fulfillment of a prophecy/prediction from the end, it means that each generation can see the prediction from their perspective as the final fulfillment. Desmond Ford defines the apotelesmatic principle in the following way: "This principle affirms that a prophecy fulfilled, or in fulfilled part, or unfulfilled at the appointed time, may have a later or recurring, or consummated fulfillment (*Daniel 8:14, The Day of Atonement, and the Investigative Judgment* [Casselberry: Euangelion, 1980], 302). For details, see William H. Shea, "The Apotelesmatic Principle: Philosophy, Practice, and Purpose" (Andrews University, unpublished paper, no date).

MOSKALA: THE GOG AND MAGOG PROPHECY

Partial Historical Fulfillment

The closest but partial historical fulfillment of this prophecy in Old Testament times and the intertestamental period occurred during the Maccabean wars (2nd century B.C.), when a few hundred Jews under the leadership of Judah Maccabee revolted against the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 B.C.) and unexpectedly defeated his enormous and well-trained Hellenistic army.⁴⁰ The Maccabees waged war against this oppressive Hellenistic ruler, who not only wanted to subjugate them but also change their culture and even religion.⁴¹ The commemoration of their surprising victory gave birth to the Hanukkah festival.

From the many different proposals for a historical fulfillment of Gog's prophecy, the interpretation that identifies Gog with Antiochus IV Epiphanes seems most plausible.⁴² However, it needs to be stressed that this explanation does not provide the full historical fulfillment, since not all details predicted in the prophecy were literally fulfilled: as for example, Antiochus IV Epiphanes did not die in Israel; his army was not defeated in the manner asserted in Ezekiel; Israel did not live at that time

⁴⁰ See, especially, 1 Macc 2–4 and 2 Macc 8–9. The knowledge about Maccabean wars and Antiochus IV Epiphanes is derived from two primary sources: (1) First and Second Maccabees, see Jonathan A. Goldstein, *I Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 41 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976); idem, *II Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 41A (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983); Alphonse P. Spilly, *First Maccabees: Second Maccabees*, Collegeville Bible Commentary, vol. 12 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1985); and (2) Polybius, see *The Histories*, trans. W. R. Paton, The Loeb Classical Library, vols. 5 and 6, (London: Heinemann, 1922–1927).

⁴¹ Boersma, 122: “The Seleucid dynasty managed to acquire a position of considerable power in northern Syria, extending its influence into Armenia and Asia Minor in the direction of the Black Sea. The center of Seleucid power was in northern Syria; the court capital was Antioch, located on the river Orontes. This corresponds exactly to the area that Ezekiel's prophecy refers.”

⁴² See Jan G. Aalders, *Gog en Magog in Ezechiël*, Academisch Proefschrift—Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1951), 170–172; Boersma, 125. One of the reasons why I support this interpretation is that it is reflected by parallelism in Dan 11, where the figure of the king of the North plays a dominant role. The king from the North represents Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the beginning/middle of this chapter (11:13ff., and it is a matter of scholarly debate how many verses should be taken for describing him), and the same figure is used to point (among others) to the end-time Antichrist at the end of the chapter (and again it is a matter of discussion which texts should be taken as portraying him). Both figures are depicted as “king(s) from the North.” However, a detailed analysis and exposition of Dan 11 is the subject for another study.

altogether in security, etc. Therefore, Antiochus IV Epiphanes can only be partially identified with the antagonistic figure of Gog, the leader of the confederacy against Israel.

This does not mean that this prophecy concerning Gog could not occur exactly as predicted; one can envision the historical, literal fulfillment of Gog's prophecy in the context of Messianic expectations and Israel's faithfulness to God's leadership and His word. Nevertheless, we need to recognize that many Old Testament classical prophecies⁴³ were conditional, and because "the conditions were never met, the predictions were not fulfilled in literal Israel. Nor can all the details be projected into the future so as to have a fulfillment then. Only those features reiterated later by sacred writers can be taken positively to have future application."⁴⁴

Our principle of interpretation lies in the recognition that the predicted future situation (described in historical terms although historically

⁴³ A rich blend of different literary styles and features of Ezek 38–39 can be described in the following ways (examples are not exhaustive): (1) classical predictive prophecy—Ezek 38:1–6,17; 39:1–2; (2) rhetorical style—Ezek 38:7,10–13; 39:1–3; (3) apocalyptic features—Ezek 38:19–23; 39:17 (cataclysmic dramatic description of the end of Gog and his allies including hailstones, bloodshed, earthquake, and burning sulphur; God's miraculous intervention; non-historicity of Gog's figure; symbolism of names for places; symbolism of the number seven; sacrificial banquet; orientation to the distant future); (4) repetitious formulas—Ezek 38:16,23; 39:7,27,28; (5) drama—Ezek 39:9–16; (6) promise—Ezek 39:28,29; (7) judgment oracle—Ezek 38:2 (compare with Ezek 29:1).

On the issue of the literary genre and the discussion of whether Ezek 38–39 is apocalyptic, see Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1990), 202–204, 210; Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*, 427–431; Bøe, 86–88; Hummel, 1101–1102; Odell, *Ezekiel*, 466; Taylor, 245. Joyce states: "These chapters [Ezek 38–39] exemplify certain proto-apocalyptic features: radical eschatology, a strong emphasis on divine agency, and dualism, not only between present and future but also between good and evil. They also exercise a significant influence on later apocalyptic tradition" (213). John W. Wevers, *Ezekiel*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982 [first published 1969]), argues on the basis of similarities between Ezek 38–39 and Ezek 25–32: "The original impetus must be that of an oracle against the nation" (201).

⁴⁴ *SDA Bible Commentary*, 4:709. For the detailed ideal scenario of what would happen to Israel, Jerusalem, and the temple if they would have been faithful to God, see Davidson, "Interpreting Old Testament Prophecy," 193–200.

Because the divine conditions and described background were not met in fullness, so also the prophecy was not literally fulfilled. If the people of God, for example, had rebuilt without any delay the city and the temple after their return from the Babylonian exile (see Ezra 4, Hag 1–2, Dan 10), Gog's prophecy could have been literally fulfilled in time and space.

MOSKALA: THE GOG AND MAGOG PROPHECY

not necessarily fulfilled) plays a crucial role in the typological structure. When there is a potential historical fulfillment in view, one encounters a “model” situation which functions as a type, and this type provides a foundation for the antitypical fulfillment of the prophecy. One needs to have in mind, however, that the antitypical fulfillment will be on a larger scale, because the type is always smaller than the antitype. This “bigger” feature of the antitype as a progression or intensification of the type is called a “Steigerung.”⁴⁵

Fulfillment in Principle

If there is no clear-cut and full historical fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, one must carefully study “if” and “how” the New Testament writers interpret them, whether explicitly or implicitly. Jesus Christ’s teaching must be taken as the key interpretative factor and the New Testament inspired writers as the best expositors of these Old Testament predictions. Our basic hermeneutical principle in studying them is that the New Testament removes the geographical and ethnic restrictions of Old Testament prophecies while maintaining the Middle East imagery.⁴⁶ One needs to scrutinize the possibility regarding Gog’s prophecy if the biblical text has christological (Christ-centered), ecclesiological (church-centered), and/or eschatological (end-time-centered) fulfillment. This means that we need to search for the principle ideas of the prophecy concerning Gog and Magog and then relate it to Christ, His people, and eschatological/apocalyptic time.⁴⁷

The principle thoughts derived from Ezek 38–39 can be summarized into two points: (A) the confederacy of enemies attacks God’s people; and (B) God intervenes on behalf of His people. This pattern was executed in the life of Jesus Christ and can be also seen implemented in

⁴⁵ For a detail explanation of the “Steigerung” (“escalation”) principle, see Davidson, *Typology in Scripture*, 96, 276, 281, 290, 313; Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: Die typologische Deutung des Alten Testaments im Neuen* (Guetersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1939; reprint ed., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966), 19, 244; idem, “τύπο.” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 8:252.

⁴⁶ LaRondelle, “A Plea,” 18–20; idem., *The Israel of God in Prophecy*.

⁴⁷ About the hermeneutical rules related to different functions of typology and how they work, see Davidson, “Interpreting Old Testament Prophecy,” 183–204; and idem, *In the Footsteps of Joshua* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1995), 24–35. For general rules of interpreting the Bible, see idem, “Biblical Interpretation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Commentary Reference Series, vol. 12 (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 58–104.

many instances during Church history. Moreover, Ezekiel's predictions are fulfilled in the eschatological-apocalyptic time, according to the book of Revelation.

1. Jesus Christ, the Personified Israel, as the Fulfillment of the Prophecy in Principle. The pattern of Gog's prophecy was fulfilled in principle in the life of Jesus Christ, who is the Personified Israel,⁴⁸ and as such, the Representative of Israel⁴⁹ (see especially Exod 4:22; Isa 41:8–10; 42:1–9; 49:1–7; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12; 61:1–3; Hos 6:1–3; 11:1; compare with Matt 2:15; Acts 8:30–35). The first aspect, “the armies of Gog and Magog” united to crush Jesus, was fulfilled by Herod and Pilate, who, although enemies, were united in a confederacy in order to put Jesus to death. That conspiracy included the Gentiles and the people of Israel, and thus Jesus Christ experienced a universal plot against His person. Acts 4:27 attests to the situation in large: “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.” The second aspect was fulfilled by God's intervention on behalf of Christ, when He raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:24,32; 3:15,26; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30,34,37, etc.). His enemies were defeated, and Christ became the Victor.

2. Multiple Ecclesiological Fulfillment of the Prophecy in Principle. The prophecy regarding Gog is also in principle fulfilled in many analogical situations throughout the history of the Church. The New Testament authors note that what happened to Jesus Christ will be experienced by His people, because what occurred in His life will be tasted by

⁴⁸ On the corporate personality, see studies of Philip Kaufman, “The One and the Many: Corporate Personality,” *Worship* 42 (1968): 546–558; C. Lattey, “Vicarious Solidarity in the Old Testament,” *Vetus Testamentum* 1 (1951): 267–274; J. R. Porter, “Legal Aspects of Corporate Personality,” *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965): 361–380; Stanley E. Porter, “Two Myths: Corporate Personality and Language Mentality Determinism,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990): 289–307; H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); J. W. Rogerson, “Corporate Personality,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:1156–1157. For the pitfalls of the concept of corporate personality, see the pertinent study of Richard M. Davidson, “Corporative Solidarity in the Old Testament” (Andrews University, unpublished paper, 1997).

The first coming of Jesus Christ inaugurated in His person the eschatological aeon which broke down into our history. From this perspective, the last-day events started with the incarnation and the cross (see Heb 1:1,2; 9:29; 1 Pet 1:20; 4:7; Acts 2:17; 1 Cor 10:11; 2 Pet 3:3; 1 Tim 4:1; 1 Thess 4:16–17).

⁴⁹ Davidson coins the term “Representative Israelite” in his chapter “Interpreting Old Testament Prophecy,” 194.

MOSKALA: THE GOG AND MAGOG PROPHECY

those who faithfully follow Him (Matt 5:10–12; John 15:18–16:2; 2 Cor 1:5; 1 Pet 1:12–14). As He was persecuted, so will be His people, but as He was rescued, so will be God’s children (Isa 25:9; 63:9). Moreover, in the light of the New Testament teaching, the Church is a renewed Israel (Matt 21:43–44; Rom 2:28–29; 9:6–8; 10:12–13; 11:25–27; 1 Cor 10:32; Gal 3:7–9,26–29; Eph 3:6–10; 1 Pet 2:9), not in the sense of a replacement of the historical Israel by a new entity (a view called supercessionism), but her enlargement (Eph 3:6–10; Rom 11:25–26; 1 Cor 12:12–13).⁵⁰ It means that a faithful remnant of historical Israel is enlarged by believing Gentiles who “together with Israel” (Eph 3:6) form one body, the Church (1 Cor 12:12–13,27; Eph 1:22–23; 3:4–12). This community of faith consists of faithful Jews and Gentiles alike who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and have entered into a covenant relationship with the Lord. Consequently, any attack on God’s community, His covenant people, is an attack against God Himself (Zech 2:8), because Jesus intimately identifies with His followers who share Abraham’s faith (Matt 25:40,45; Luke 10:16; Acts 9:1,4–6). The persecution of the people of God followed by His intervention on their behalf points in principle to the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophecy.⁵¹ In other words, when enemies of the Lord persecute God’s faithful followers, the Church with whom He closely associates as the Head of that body (Eph 1:22–23; Col 1:18), one encounters the christological-ecclesiological fulfillment of Ezek 38–39, because Gog and Magog take the face of the enemies of Christ and His Church.⁵²

The spirit of rebellion against God’s people can be discovered in situations of crisis throughout history. It is sufficient to illustrate the point with a few examples: (1) Nero’s persecution of the Early Church; (2) the dominant Medieval Church’s fight against the Valdenses, Husites, or the Reformation; (3) communism’s attempts to crush religion

⁵⁰ For the enlargement of true Israel by the joining of believing Gentiles, see an excellent study of Doukhan, *Mystery of Israel*; idem, *Israel and the Church: Two Voices for the Same God*. Doukhan profoundly explains the devastating consequences of supercessionist or replacement theory.

⁵¹ Boersma correctly says that “the one flock, gathered from Israel, from the Jews and from the Gentiles, will be a further fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophecy” (112).

⁵² This activity is a reminder of the antigodly behavior of the little horn of Dan 7–8 who persecutes God’s people and fights against the law of God (Dan 7:21, 25; 8:24–25).

It is significant to notice that the New Testament authors apply Ezekiel’s prediction of the cleansing of the land of Israel to the church of Christ (Titus 2:14; Eph 5:26; Heb 9:14). See also Boersma, 108–109.

and God's followers. In all of these crucial moments of history, the survival and victory of God's people was unexpected. The conspiracy against the faithful followers of God who responded in obedience to Him and His law failed. During those perilous situations, one can ultimately recognize God's protective hand on behalf of His people.

Thus, there are multiple pre-fulfillments of Ezek 38–39 during the history of the Church. When the situation is analogical in principle, one can discern preliminary fulfillment of the prophecy about Gog and Magog. It is important to stress that these fulfillments are only partial or typological since these multiple fulfillments in principle are anticipating the complete, or full-fulfillment of the prophecy in the eschatological time when God intervenes in fullness to definitely defeat and annihilate all God's enemies under the leadership of Satan. The remaining section of this chapter will take a closer look at the eschatological/apocalyptic final and primary fulfillment described in the book of Revelation.⁵³

The Fulfillment of the Prophecy:

The Eschatological-Apocalyptic Fulfillment in Two Phases

The prophecy of Ezek 38–39 has two eschatological-apocalyptic fulfillments—one connected with the second coming of Christ, and another associated with the end of the millennium. We need to ask how and where the prophecy of Ezekiel on Gog is interpreted in the apocalyptic book of Revelation.

⁵³ It is highly significant to note that the vocabulary, echoes, imagery, concepts, themes, pre-texts, and allusions of the book of Ezekiel are used very often in the book of Revelation, even though verses from the book of Ezekiel are not directly quoted in Revelation. Consult Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece* ([Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1979], 764–765); Albert Vanhoye, “L’utilisation du livre d’Ezechiel dans l’Apocalypse,” *Biblica* 43/3 (1962): 436–476; C. Mackay, “Ezekiel in the New Testament,” *Church Quarterly Review* 162 (January–March 1961): 4–16; Bøe, 6–19; Marko Jauhainen, *The Use of Zechariah in Revelation*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2, Reihe, 199 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005); Jean Pierre Ruiz, *Ezechiel in the Apocalypse: The Transformation of Prophetic Language in Revelation 16,17–19,10*, European University Studies, Series 23, Theology (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989), 11–180; and Dieter Säger, ed., *Das Ezechielbuch in der Johannesoffenbarung*, Biblisch-theologische Studien 76 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2006).

Ruiz writes that Revelation is the New Testament book that “uses the Old Testament the most, while citing it the least” (63). Ellen G. White claims that “in the Revelation all the books of the Bible meet and end” (*The Acts of Apostles* [Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1911], 585).

MOSKALA: THE GOG AND MAGOG PROPHECY

1. The Pre-millennial Fulfillment. (a) The events described in Ezek 38:19–22a⁵⁴ find their echo in Rev 16:18–21, where terms like “great earthquake,” “hailstones,” “fiery wrath,” “plague,” “mountains,” are used.⁵⁵ Significantly, the new symbolic term “Babylon” (Rev 16:19) is employed in this passage instead of “Gog and Magog.”⁵⁶ The great hailstones mentioned in Ezek 38:22a are referred to in the seventh plague, when hail weighing about a talent will magnify the destruction already wrought (Rev 16:21). The fire may be the “lightning” of Rev 16:18.⁵⁷

In Ezekiel God’s intervention swiftly and completely devastates Gog and his allies; however, in Rev 16 the seven plagues gradually strike the wicked. The horizon is broadened so that the final destruction of the wicked will be universal as the last plague takes place at the second coming of Jesus Christ, during which all the wicked will die (2 Thess 1:7–9; 2:8–10; 2 Pet 3:11–12; Rev 19:20). The eschatological universal battle is presented apocalyptically: a major earthquake takes place, the cities collapse, every island flees away, the mountains are thrown down, the hailstones fall (Rev 16:17–21). However, the people of God do not need to enter into the battle, according to the further depiction of the fall of

⁵⁴ Ezekiel 38:22 reflects God’s judgment upon Sodom in Gen 19:24. See Joyce, 215.

⁵⁵ See Bøe, 5, 274–276; Ruiz, 261–265; Jan Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and their Development*. JSNTSS 93 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic P, 1994), 121–125; Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*, JSNTSS 115 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic P, 1995), 122; Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Text Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 976; George Wesley Buchanan, *The Book of Revelation: Its Introduction and Prophecy*, The Mellen Biblical Commentary: Intertextual (Lewiston: Mellen Biblical P, 1993), 440.

Behind Rev 16:18–21 is also the plague sequence of the Exodus story as well as the theophany language at Sinai (Exod 7–13; 19:16–19; 20:18). See Ruiz, 258–291; Moyise, 123–124. However, several echoes of Ezek 38 in Rev 16 make the Old Testament background clear. Ruiz points to the following correspondences of both texts: (1) actions are the manifestations of God’s wrath; (2) reference to earthquakes; (3) effects of the earthquakes on the mountains; and (4) hail is part of God’s judgment (Ruiz, 263–265).

⁵⁶ It is interesting that in the book of Ezekiel there is no oracle against Babylon in the section regarding foreign nations (chs. 25–32). John uses names of the Old Testament in a symbolic way, like “Jezebel” (2:20) and “Balaam” (2:14).

⁵⁷ In Rev 16 the description culminates with the second coming of Christ (the seventh plague). It is important to note that also other New Testament writers portray fearful cataclysmic events with dramatic convulsions of nature that will precede the coming of the Son of Man (Luke 21:25,26; 2 Thess 1:5–11; 2 Pet 3:10–14). See also the description of this situation in a developed imagery described by Ellen G. White in *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1950), 638.

Babylon in Rev 17, because panic breaks loose in “Babylon’s” army, and they strike each other down (17:16–18).

The relationship between Ezek 38–39 and Rev 16 is further strengthened by the battle description.⁵⁸ Revelation 16:12 notes that the great river Euphrates will dry up to prepare the way for the kings from the East.⁵⁹ The Euphrates was a river in Babylon that flowed from the north. According to Rev 17:15, water is a symbol for nations. In the book of Ezekiel, these nations from the north are Gog’s allies, paralleling the Euphrates river of Rev 16:12. The drying up of the river would be referring to Gog’s loss of support. In the same way as the army turned on one another in Ezek 38:21b, so will the followers of the beast have an internal fight, according to Rev 17:16. This is a picture of the division and a foreshadowing of Gog’s ultimate judgment of destruction and annihilation. The judgment is clearly described in the seventh plague, where Babylon is Gog, and ch. 17 depicts the punishment of this great Antichrist’s power. Fisch aptly comments on the text of Ezek 38:21: “In the panic created by God’s presence, the heathen hordes will not distinguish between friend and foe but wildly strike with their swords, killing one another. This happened in the past (cf. Judg vii.22; 1 Sam xiv.20).”⁶⁰

(b) The prophecy of Ezek 38–39 is further applied in Rev 19 to the events closely related to the second coming of Christ. Revelation 19:17–18 implements the imagery and phraseology of Ezek 39:17–20 about the

⁵⁸ The battle of Armageddon in Rev 16 describes the same situation of the opposition of the wicked, who behave like Gog and Magog in Ezekiel’s prophecy, to the people of God. This analogical situation relates Rev 16 with its seven last plagues to Ezek 38–39.

⁵⁹ A historical type of this occurred when Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. On the fall of Babylon, see James B. Prichard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. with suppl. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969), 306; Herodotus, *The History*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987), 1.191; and Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1914), 7.5.15, 29–30.

⁶⁰ Solomon Fisch, *Ezekiel; Hebrew Text & English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*, Soncino Books of the Bible Series (London: Soncino, 1950), 258. He also states that “the universal panic will be caused by God’s manifestation in behalf of Israel” (257). On God’s judgments upon His people and/or pagan nations, see, for example, Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 22 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 363–388; idem, *Ezekiel 21–37: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 22A (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 415–449, 572–593; Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel. The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 447–450.

MOSKALA: THE GOG AND MAGOG PROPHECY

animal “banquet.”⁶¹ In this passage, the prophecy refers to the conflict between the followers of Jesus Christ and their enemies: “the beast,” “the false prophet,” and “the kings of the earth.” These are new names for Gog and Magog. In both passages the birds are invited to the great supper of God.⁶² In Ezek 39 birds eat the defeated forces of Gog and his allies, while in Rev 19 birds prey on the defeated army of the beast and the false prophet who are thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur (Rev 19:20). Imagery of the banquet interconnects this prophecy with other biblical authors (Isa 34:5–11; Jer 46:10; Lam 2:21–22; Zeph 1:7–9), but the parallel between Ezek 39 and Rev 19 is the most specific.⁶³ Revelation 19:19 describes the conspiracy of the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, who together with the false prophet have gathered to make war against Christ and those who are with Him. Then Rev 19:20–21 depicts God’s intervention and their total defeat.

The new names for Gog and Magog in the bird’s banquet imagery (the beast and the false prophet) lead into the whole corpus of prophecy about the beast, the false prophet, and their interconnection, especially in Rev 13, where the plot to put God’s people to death is pictured (Rev

⁶¹ This intertextuality is plainly attested. See Buchanan, 511; Bøe, 276–277. The “great supper of God” (Rev 19:17) is in sharp contrast to the “wedding supper of the Lamb” (Rev 19:7).

It is interesting that in Ezekiel this banquet is called “the sacrifice” or “the great sacrifice” or “my table” (39:17–20). Even though the drinking of blood was included, this activity was strictly forbidden during the sacrificial meal in Israel (Lev 7:26–27; 17:10–14; 19:26; Deut 12:16; 15:23). Thus, Ezekiel’s description is actually a parody on the genuine sacrificial feast. Fisch interprets that “my feast” literally means “my sacrifice” and states: “The two ideas are interconnected, since one was usually the occasion of the other” (262). On the other hand, the drinking of blood is omitted in Rev 19 (only the eating of flesh is retained) in order to not create any association with the celebration of the “Lord’s supper” when symbols of flesh and blood are partaken.

⁶² In Ezek 39 birds and beasts are invited to prey on dead bodies, but in Rev 19 only birds are mentioned in order that the reader would be not confused and try to identify these creatures with beasts of Rev 13.

⁶³ Thus Bøe, 378: “It is true that the phenomenon of birds and beasts eating the flesh of dead soldiers can be found here and there in ancient literature, but Ezek 39, 17–20 is unique in the highly elaborated way it uses the topic, as well as in the insistence on seeing this as God’s enterprise. We have not found any other ancient text which takes up this thematic except for Ezek 39, Rev 19, 17–21 and a short note in the *Sibylline Oracles* 3 (cf. ch. 5,3,1). . . . John is making use of Ezekiel’s invitation, not only of a common theme. . . . This use appears to be conscious on John’s part.” Bøe came to this unequivocal conclusion on the basis of the penetrating comparative study on the topic. See Bøe, 276–300.

13:15–17).⁶⁴ Revelation 14:9 describes the power opposing the three angels' messages as "the beast and the image of the beast," and Rev 17 presents God's judgment upon Babylon, because Gog here represents those who are engaged in a false system of worship.⁶⁵ Thus, John clearly uses the imagery of the prophecy of Ezek 38–39, but changes the terminology to avoid any confusion with the Antichrist powers. Only in Rev 20, in the climactic depiction of the antigodly powers, does he actually employ the terms "Gog and Magog."⁶⁶ Since John's readers should have been familiar with Ezekiel's apocalyptic prophecy, he thus reinterpreted the account of Ezek 38–39 without distorting the original intent of the prophecy by pointing to an ultimate eschatological/apocalyptic fulfillment.⁶⁷

2. The Post-millennial Fulfillment. Revelation 20:8–10 describes a final, complete, and definitive fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy regarding Gog and his antagonistic forces. The names of Gog and Magog⁶⁸ are employed as a collective term for every foe of God and His faithful people. The culmination depicts the last judgment of God when Satan, described in the book of Revelation as the archenemy of God (Rev 12:7–12), and all his allies are destroyed. The devil has been the leader of the opposition, standing behind acts of rebellion from the very beginning.

⁶⁴ Gog's disguised attacks are aimed especially against God's faithful remnant (Rev 12:17; 14:12; 17:14).

⁶⁵ In the book of Revelation, Gog and Magog are spiritual Babylon (a very broad term which covers like an umbrella all other antigodly symbols)—a false apostate religious system in all forms that persecutes those who believe or think differently. It is a system that fights against God's law, is proud, and uses state power to enforce its requirements. Babylon is everywhere people try to be saved and reach heaven by their own works, achievements, obedience, or performance (see Gen 11:4; Dan 1:1–2; 7:25; 8:11–12; Rev 17:1–6; 18:7).

⁶⁶ For the list of correspondences and differences between Rev 19:17–21 and 20:7–10, see Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 394.

⁶⁷ For further discussion, see commentaries of David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52c (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1046–1050, 1093–1108; Buchanan, 440, 536–554; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 348–350, 360–367; Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 2002), 549–572.

⁶⁸ The rhyming word-pair "Gog and Magog" is a hapax legomenon in the whole Bible. However, the study of the LXX opens "the way for a shift away from 'Gog from the land of Magog' over to 'Gog and Magog', like we find it in Revelation as well as in some other parts of the Gog and Magog traditions" (Bøe, 385). See his discussion of the matter on pages 133 and 312–315.

MOSKALA: THE GOG AND MAGOG PROPHECY

Gog and Magog in Rev 20 are more than just a confederacy of a few nations, they have evolved into an universal symbol representing God's eschatological enemies.

In Rev 20 Gog and Magog fight against the New Jerusalem, whereas in Ezek 38–39 they fight against the “mountains of Israel.”⁶⁹ But the most important thing is not the city or the mountains, but the people who live there. The emphasis is on the people, the true remnant of God, and the city or the mountains are only the setting or frame of the real context. Gog attacks God's people, who are the center of attraction because they belong to Him.⁷⁰ Ezekiel 38:12 hints at the city of Jerusalem when noting that the enemies are going to attack people “living at the center of the land.” If so, then the earthly Jerusalem in Ezek 38–39 is replaced by the New Jerusalem in Rev 20.

In Revelation there is a constant play with numbers.⁷¹ The number seven is dominant (seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven plagues, etc.). It is interesting that the numerical value of the Hebrew letters of the phrase “Gog and Magog” is seventy (7 x 10).⁷² Seventy is the number of nations listed in the table of nations in Gen 10 (the Japhethites are fourteen nations; the Hamites form thirty nations, and the Semites twenty-six nations). Thus, seventy nations symbolize the totality of nations, and in the case of Rev 20, all the wicked people and nations who have ever rebelled against God.

Revelation 20 explains the meaning of Gog and Magog more fully. In Ezekiel Gog rises from the north along with other nations, but in Revelation they come from the four corners of the earth. Louis Were rightly argues that “the number four is employed in the Scripture for the whole world.”⁷³ It means that Ezekiel's prophecy is made universal in Revelation. As the second coming of Christ and the final judgment is a

⁶⁹ In Ezekiel the term “mountains of Israel” plays an important role. He uses this phrase in a double sense: (1) literal—real mountains; (2) metaphorical—the people of Israel (36:1,8,9; 6:2,8; etc.) Therefore the expression “against the mountains of Israel” and “against Israel” are parallel. This expression is a synecdoche.

⁷⁰ Otzen thinks that Ezek 38 and 39 are based on a tradition in which the nations attack Jerusalem (424).

⁷¹ On the symbolism of numbers, see John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968).

⁷² “Gog” (3 + 6 + 3 = 12); “and” (6); “Magog” (40 + 3 + 6 + 3 = 52): 12 + 6 + 52 = 70.

⁷³ Were, *The Certainty*, 207.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

cosmic event, so is the destruction of Gog's forces at the second coming and at the end of the millennium.⁷⁴ In this sense,

the prophecy of Ezek 38–39 does not concern merely the Middle East, but is a prophecy comprehending the *whole* world. All the Hebrew prophets present the *world-wide* scenes of the last days in a Palestinian setting and, . . . the Revelation employs the local scenes of the Old Testament in predicting the world-wide events of the last days.⁷⁵

The local stands as a type for the global. Thus, the definition of Gog and Magog becomes clear: according to Rev. 20:8, Gog and Magog are symbolic names for the hosts of the wicked of all generations of the humankind who oppose God Himself and His people.⁷⁶

Summary and Conclusion

The prophecy of Ezek 38–39 describes the failure of the confederacy of Gog and his allies against Israel because God intervenes on behalf of His people and utterly destroys their enemies.⁷⁷ This prediction of attack and defeat, however, never occurred in history, even though it could have

⁷⁴ Boersma is right when he states: "Throughout history God will destroy the power of the Antichrist and he will definitely do so during the consummation. Ezekiel's prophecy will not be completely fulfilled until fire descends from heaven to consume the nations from the four corners of the earth, that is, Gog and Magog, Rev. 20:7–10" (124).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Taylor, 245: "Gog is to be understood as the personification of the cosmic forces of evil."

⁷⁷ What is described in Ezekiel and Revelation after Gog's defeat? Ezekiel 40–48 focuses on the temple, whose Holy of Holies is most probably in the form of a cube (Ezek 41:3–4; compare with 1 Kgs 6:20), and in Rev 21–22 the emphasis is on the New Jerusalem, which may be also in the form of a cube (Rev 20:16). John does not see the temple in the New Jerusalem (Rev 20:22) because the whole city is the temple. The local temple of Ezekiel's vision is made universal in the book of Revelation (see Gregory K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004], 23–26). In both cases, it is underlined that God dwells among his people! The last sentence of Ezekiel's prophecy ends: "The Lord is there" (48:35), and Rev 21:3 affirms: "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." Thus, it is significant that both biblical books end with the Gog's battle, the vision about the New Jerusalem/Temple, and the Presence of God.

See also George R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible New Series (London: Oliphants, 1974), 297; and George B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 256.

MOSKALA: THE GOG AND MAGOG PROPHECY

happened under different circumstances. But this potential historical situation serves as a type for a threefold fulfillment: (1) in Christ (the Personified Israel and the Representative of Israel)—the christological fulfillment; (2) in the church (Israel consisting of believing Jews and Gentiles)—the ecclesiological fulfillment; and (3) at the time of the end in two phases (at the second coming of Christ and at the end of the millennium)—the antitypical eschatological/apocalyptic fulfillment. The first two fulfillments are only fulfillments in principle, but the third one is the primary or full-fulfillment.

This study demonstrates that the cross, the central point in salvation history, enlarged the application of the prophecy concerning Gog and Magog. Before the cross it referred to a literal war in Palestine against Israel as a nation, but after the cross it describes the eschatological war against God and His people. John's triple usage of Ezek 38–39 in chs. 16, 19, and 20, makes it evident that he deliberately employs its imagery and interprets it.⁷⁸ He universalizes Ezekiel's prophecy. Gog and Magog are no longer local political enemies of ethnic Israel, but eschatological adversaries of all generations of the wicked people from Adam to the second coming of Christ who stubbornly rebel against God, His values, and His faithful followers. Bøe's final conclusion in his study stresses this point: "John is the first writer known to us who leaves the ethnic and national understanding of Gog and Magog as the enemy of Israel."⁷⁹

Thus, the phrase "Gog and Magog," used at the culmination point in Revelation, is the cipher or code under which God's hostile forces are masking but manifested historically on many occasions, in various characters, figures, and symbols. The activities of Antiochus IV Epiphanes provide a fitting example of it, and he may be understood as a partial fulfillment of Gog's prophecy and a prelude to the antagonistic powers like

⁷⁸ Bøe, 381: "The cluster of allusions to Ezekiel 38–39 found in Revelation 19,17–21 and 20,7–10, together with the reference to Ezekiel's oracles in the use of the names Gog and Magog in Rev 20,8, point to a deliberate and reflected meditation on Ezekiel's prophecies." Revelation's threefold usage of Gog's prophecy in 16:18–21; 19:17–20, and 20:7–10 provides solid hermeneutical guidance, backs our methodology, and shields against eisegesis. Many scholars recognize that Ezek 38–39 is used in these three places in Revelation: see, for example, Randall Fowler White, *Victory and House Building in Revelation 20:1–21:8: A Thematic Study (Millennialism)* (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1987), 149–151; G. K. Beale and Sean M. McDonough, "Revelation," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1137, 1144, 1149.

⁷⁹ Bøe, 388. He explains: "This harmonizes with the nature of the people of God throughout Revelation, being a universal rather than an ethnic group of people" (ibid.).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

the little horn of Dan 7–8, the beasts of Rev 13, and Babylon of the book of Revelation. From the time of Jesus, who tasted the full attack of Gog and Magog forces in principle, this disguised Antichrist power was growing in intensity and magnitude. Throughout history, by analogy of situation, one can discern the Antichrist's power at work (from Nero's persecution, through different attacks on the faithful followers of God by the Inquisition, to the atheistic and communist persecution, Christian and Islamic extremism, and religious terrorism).⁸⁰ There are institutions, nations, communities, denominations, societies, regimes, atheism, capitalism, materialism, spiritualism, and other kinds of isms that may stand in opposition against God and His people; and in this case, it is a situation where the principles of Gog's prophecy apply. This application in principle does not preclude a particular apocalyptic fulfillment at the end of time; on the contrary, it leads to it (see figure 1).

Figure 2 depicts the development and growth of Gog's power. The apostasy and enmity of this antigodly force matures, ripens, and builds to a crescendo in the last generation at the end of the world's history. This generation will attack God's people during the battle of Harmageddon. However, this rebellion will climax after the millennium with the all-encompassing generations of the evil-doers aligned against God and His followers who live securely in the New Jerusalem. With the passage of time, Gog incorporates all unrepentant sinners and becomes a symbol for the whole rebellious world. This happens, however, in progression and involves a long-growing process.

The fulfillment of the Gog and Magog prophecy in Revelation is a perfect description of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, a war with many battles. The outcome of this war, described under a mosaic of different symbols, leads to either life or death. Jesus is the Victor, since He won the key battle of this war when He died on the cross. God's love, truth, and justice triumphed and will conquer once again (Rev 17:14). He is the Victor of the ultimate war, and everyone who chooses Him, identifies and stands with Him, can share in His victory (Rev 3:20–21; 12:10–11; 16:15).⁸¹

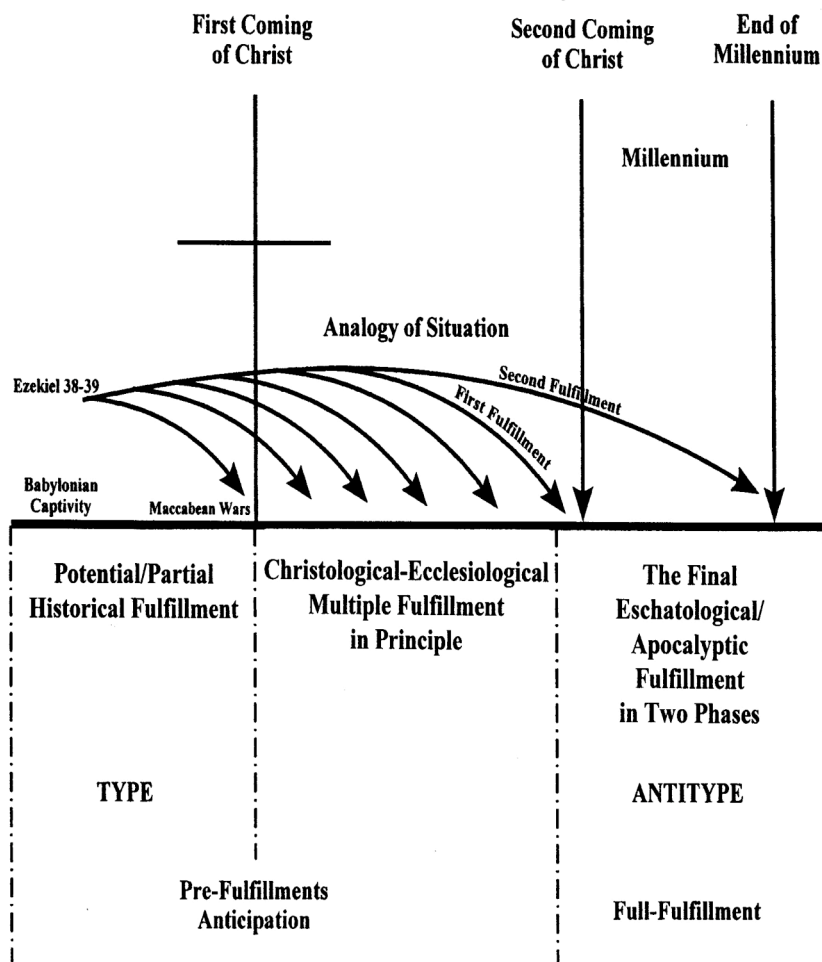
⁸⁰ Greig correctly says that "atheistic communism could well find a place among this depiction of the enemies of God, but it is the referent of a symbol much more encompassing than communism itself" (14–15).

⁸¹ See George E. Vandeman, *Showdown in the Middle East* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1980), 16.

Satan makes an effort to mislead believers regarding the true nature of prophecy. In our days, his plans are the same as they were when Jesus came into the world for the first

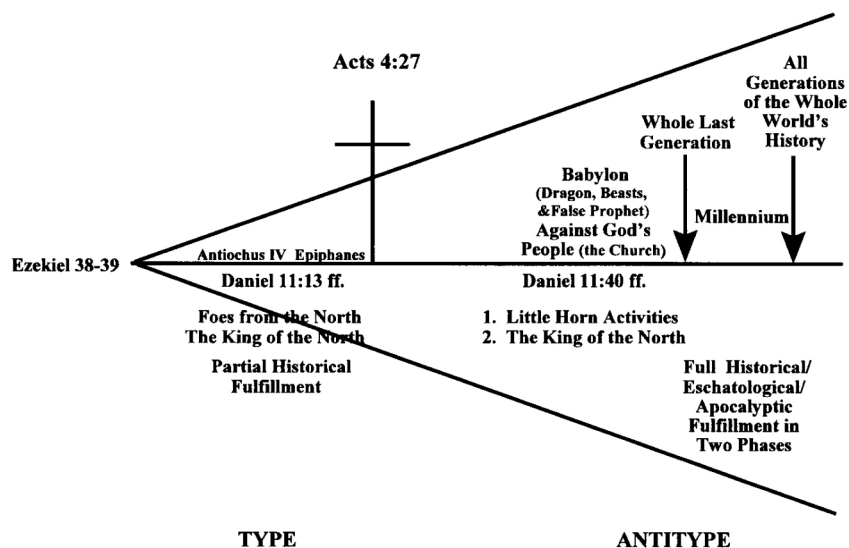
MOSKALA: THE GOG AND MAGOG PROPHECY

Figure 1



time. At that time, God's people believed in a political Messiah, and thus they were diverted from essential spiritual truth into political events, selfish ambitions, and their own interests. This kind of seduction is also present in our time when believers are misled to interpret Ezekiel's prophecy about Gog and Magog as political events in Palestine: as the war between West and East, as God's judgment upon Russia and its allies. Such a view is popular among some Christians (especially among the dispensationalists) and politicians, but it leads to a cheap religious sensationalism and not to Christ.

Figure 2



◀ This figure means the enlargement and growing of the Antichrist power.

In spite of the judgment scenario of Ezek 38–39, this passage brings a message of hope, because it assures God’s people that the Lord will ultimately destroy all who destroy the qualities of life (Rev 11:18). He is the Sovereign Ruler and in control of history. His victory is certain and incontestable as it depends on Him, not on us humans! He will accomplish His purposes. He will intervene in human history on behalf of His people at the apocalyptic time of the end. When God’s victory is complete, then every knee will go down before God and acknowledge that His judgments are just (Phil 2:10–11; Rev 15:3–4). Thus, the leading tone of Ezekiel’s prophecy is comforting.⁸² This prophecy demonstrates

⁸² Hummel aptly states: “What has happened is that Ezekiel’s prophecy of a penultimate event in human history (‘the latter years/days,’ 38:8, 16) has become a prophecy of the final, ultimate, universal victory by the Messiah over the cosmic forces of evil. In NT context, this means that the victory of Jesus won on Calvary over our sin, death, and the devil is in principle complete (‘it is finished,’ John 19:30), but still awaits its consummation at the end of human history. Every time we partake of Eucharist, we proleptically

MOSKALA: THE GOG AND MAGOG PROPHECY

God's wonderful love and care for His people as well as His sovereignty, victory, greatness, and power.

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join the celestial victors in 'a foretaste of the feast to come'" (1103). Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 247: "It reveals clearly to us Christians how strong are the principalities and powers that would overthrow us. Yet this fact should not cause us discouragement, since the greatness of our foes only serves to reveal to us again how much greater our God is." On this message of hope with practical applications, see Lamar Eugene Cooper, Sr., *Ezekiel: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary, vol. 17 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 345–348.

An Investigation of Luther’s View of the Bondage of the Will with Implications for Soteriology and Theodicy

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Martin Luther sparked one of the greatest movements of Christian history when he challenged tenets of the Catholic faith in 1517, and his influence is still very strong.¹ One of Luther’s major contributions to theology was his emphasis on grace. This was extracted from the writings of Paul and also influenced by the works of the great church father Augustine. This paper endeavors to look at Luther’s view of the human will in the context of his soteriology of grace. Specifically, what is Luther’s conception of the freedom of the will? Does the human nature have any such thing as free will in its post-fall state? Moreover, how does Luther define the process of salvation? In other words, why are some saved and others lost? These and other questions must be addressed from Luther’s perspective. Luther lays out his views on the will of God and the will of man in a polemic against the viewpoints of Desiderius Erasmus in the book, *The Bondage of the Will*. Therein, Luther’s soteriology is made explicit. This paper will look at Luther’s theology and interact with it from a biblical perspective with the purpose of exposing Luther’s theology of the will. The coherence or incoherence of Luther’s theology of the human will is also of great importance to this study. The issue of the will also bears heavily on the ability to uphold the goodness

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, 5 vols., *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984), 4:139.

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

and justice of God. How does Luther's approach integrate with some biblical passages on the nature of God and the nature of salvation?

Martin Luther's famous struggle and arduous trial (*Anfechtung*) over his own salvation through works brought him to the conclusion that "by his own understanding or strength he could not believe in Jesus Christ or come to him."² Luther was "very troubled by the idea of *iustitia Dei*, the 'righteousness of God.'"³ He thought of God as a completely impartial judge, a dispassionate umpire. He states, "I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners . . ."⁴ Thus Luther became certain that he could not be saved.⁵ Accordingly, the promise of salvation was bitter, it was "as if God had promised a blind man a million dollars, provided that he could see."⁶ Luther struggled long and arduously, but finally found light. He discovered that the righteousness of God is not His just condemnation of sinners but "the righteousness which is given to us so that we may meet that precondition."⁷ Luther then spent a career preaching the grace of God. The primacy of grace thus became fundamental to his Christian belief. So when the issue of free will was raised, Luther saw it as a great threat to his doctrine of salvation. His position is laid out clearly in his dispute with Erasmus entitled *The Bondage of the Will* (*De servo arbitrio*). He always considered this a very important work, saying "'none of my works is worth anything except' the catechism and *De servo arbitrio*."⁸

It is important to understand the context of this work before Luther's arguments are examined. The opponent of Luther was a towering scholar.⁹ Erasmus originally was a supporter of Luther's and had called for reforms himself. However, as things heated up, he felt that he needed to distance himself. By speaking out against predestination, Erasmus "would be able to separate himself from the reformer without rejecting

² Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 11.

³ Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (New York: Blackwell, 1988), 93.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer IV*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 34:336.

⁵ McGrath, 93.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁸ Kolb, 15.

⁹ "If any figure stands head and shoulders above other northern European humanists . . . it was Erasmus of Rotterdam" (McGrath, 53). Erasmus is also famous for his compilation of the New Testament in the original Greek.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

his own call for reform.”¹⁰ Luther, on the other hand, considered Erasmus to be merely a “moralist” or a proponent of “works-piety”¹¹ and thought that “Erasmus had no notion of the nature of the gospel.”¹² This made Luther less likely to consider Erasmus’ view on its merits. They also disagreed on the interpretation of Scripture. Gerhard O. Forde represents Erasmus’ method as a “box score” method, whereas Luther might rely on just “one passage” to convince of truth.¹³ Erasmus also held the view that Scripture should be interpreted carefully by trained scholars, whereas Luther thought the Bible should interpret itself and that everyone should read it for themselves.¹⁴ Their concerns over the application of Scripture were likewise at odds. As will be seen shortly, their definition of the very meaning of terms was often very different, and thus they often “talked past each other.”¹⁵ The tone of the argument is often quite strong and argumentative. However, it must be understood that polemic was a commonly accepted style of writing, and thus the words of Luther may seem harsher to the contemporary reader than they really are.¹⁶ Moreover, this was more than an academic dispute to Luther, it was a

¹⁰ Kolb, 12.

¹¹ Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?: An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther’s Major Work, the Bondage of the Will* (New York: Newman, 1969), 287.

¹² Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 3:56. For an interesting early 20th century analysis of Luther and Erasmus, see Robert H. Murray, *Erasmus and Luther: Their Attitude to Toleration* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1920).

¹³ Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther Vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 24.

¹⁴ Kolb, 22.

¹⁵ Kolb, 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17. Gerrish refers to “Luther’s cheerful truculence and fondness for overstatement [which] may have appeared to make predestination a bone of contention between Rome and Wittenberg” (Brian A. Gerrish, “Sovereign Grace: Is Reformed Theology Obsolete?” *Interpretation* 57/1 [2003]: 55). McSorley states that at this time “an opponent was read not in order to understand him, but to refute him!” (McSorley, 287).

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

matter of Christian warfare.¹⁷ Based on this belief, “Luther was driven by his concern for terrified consciences.”¹⁸

Luther's Concept of Free Will

Definition of Free Will. Martin Luther states the prime question of “whether God foresees anything contingently, or whether we do all things of necessity.”¹⁹ In his answer he defines “free will” by saying, “all who hear mention of ‘free-will’ take it to mean . . . a will that can and does do, God-ward, all that it pleases, restrained by no law and no command; for you would not call a slave, who acts at the beck of his lord, free.”²⁰ Thus, for Luther, the term free will delineates a will that is able to do just about anything.²¹ Conversely, Erasmus defines his view by saying, “By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them.”²² This definition clearly allows power to the human will, especially in matters of salvation.²³ These conflicting definitions continue to be problematic throughout the debate.²⁴

¹⁷ Kolb notes that “Luther was certain that their exchange was part of the final combat between God and the devil. The warfare between God and Satan took place throughout human history in the clash of God’s truth with the devil’s lies, and Luther sensed the end of history at hand, when only an intensification of the conflict could be expected” (Kolb, 18). For a study of Luther’s view of reason, philosophy, and scholasticism, see Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

¹⁸ Kolb, 23.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 79.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

²¹ This is an extreme definition of freedom of will that would be very difficult to defend. In effect, one would have to be omnipotent to have free will, which is why Luther holds that only God has free will. However, this definition is not the one defended by advocates of free will, even though it is the one Luther argues against most often, as we will see.

²² Desiderius Erasmus, “De Libero Arbitrio,” in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 47.

²³ However, it is not clear what the phrase “apply himself” entails. Luther found Erasmus’ view incoherent because it “leaves man effort and endeavour, but does not leave him anything that he may ascribe to his own strength” (Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 144). It is true that Erasmus’ view is historically viewed as inconsistent, and it need not be defended here. For an excellent discussion of Erasmus’ own struggle between contradictions during his debate with Luther, see James D. Tracy, “Two Erasmuses, Two

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Another important distinction for understanding Luther's position is his definition of contingency and necessity. First, Luther clarifies that "*being done contingently* does not, in Latin, signify that the thing done is itself contingent, but that it is done by a contingent and mutable will—such as is not to be found in God."²⁵ On the other hand, Luther says that "*necessity* . . . cannot accurately be used of either man's will or God's."²⁶ Luther does, however, speak of a "necessity of immutability." He writes that the human will is not compelled: "I did not say 'of compulsion'; I meant, by a necessity, not of *compulsion*, but of what they call *immutability*."²⁷ By this he means one acts "spontaneously and voluntarily. And this willingness or volition is something which he cannot in his own strength eliminate, restrain or alter."²⁸ Thus, all that occurs, including the

Luthers: Erasmus' Strategy in Defense of De Libero Arbitrio," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 78 (1987): 37-60.

²⁴ This effectively limits any constructive dialogue on the subject. For, in the definitions themselves there is given no ground between an absolutely free will as previously defined and a will that is enslaved. Thus, it seems one must be a Pelagian or a determinist.

²⁵ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 81. He states also on contingency, "If the will of God were such that, when the work had been done and while it yet remained in being, the will ceased . . . then it could be truly said that things happen contingently and mutably" (Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 81). Thus, since God is absolutely immutable for Luther, He cannot do anything "mutably" or contingently. This not only denies freedom to humans, but by implication to God himself. And because God is omnipotent, everything must happen necessarily, even though Luther would not utilize this terminology. For a discussion of the problem of the classical conception of divine immutability, see Bruce A. Ware, "An Evangelical Reexamination of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," (1984; Dissertation presented to Fuller Theological Seminary). See also an interesting perspective in Isaak August Dorner, *Divine Immutability: A Critical Reconsideration*, trans. Robert R. Williams and Claude Welch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

²⁶ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 81. McSorley contends that "Luther did not really grasp the distinction of the two kinds of necessity" (McSorley, 317).

²⁷ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 102. He maintains paradoxically that "The will, whether it be God's or man's, does what it does, good or bad, under no compulsion, but just as it wants or pleases, as if totally free" (Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 81). This is what is now called compatibilism, or sometimes monergism. For an excellent introduction to monergism, see Terrence L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?: Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004). For an excellent discussion of the issues and a moderate Calvinist view, see Norman Geisler, *Chosen but Free* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1999). For an excellent and thorough collection of the contemporary debate on free will, see Robert Kane, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

²⁸ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 102. Here again it seems Luther is really talking about power, or potency. That one cannot do something for lack of power does not neces-

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

will of man, is under necessity based on the immutability of God's will and God's decree, yet paradoxically the will is not compelled.

The Will of Humanity. Based on these definitions, Luther's view of the human will is clarified. According to Luther, there is a will in man, but it is not free. "You are no doubt right in assigning to man a will of some sort, but to credit him with a will that is free in the things of God is too much."²⁹ The term "free" makes the will too powerful. He reacts to any conception of this free will by saying, "what is here left to grace and the Holy Ghost? This is plainly to ascribe divinity to 'free-will'!"³⁰ But for Luther the will is not neutral; rather, because of sin, it is in total bondage. Luther therefore rejects free will due to its implication of a neutral will that denies human sinfulness.³¹

Luther does qualify this rejection. "I am not speaking of 'natural being', but of 'gracious being', as they call it. I know that 'free-will' can do some things by nature; it can eat, drink, beget, rule, etc."³² Forde thus claims Luther is not teaching determinism writing, "It is something more

sarily mean that one has no free will, especially if there were allowed a supplementary source of power, such as a prevenient grace. He further defines the term by saying, "This is what we mean by *necessity of immutability*: that the will cannot change itself, nor give itself another bent, but rather, is the more provoked to crave the more it is opposed, as its chafing proves; for this would not occur, were it free or had 'free-will'" (Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 103).

²⁹ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 137. Luther is very concerned about upholding the sovereignty of God. This may have influenced his conception of the human will.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 140. It seems that the problem here lies primarily in the definition of free will. Erasmus has not argued for a conception of an omnipotent will, and he does not deny a place to the Holy Spirit. But Luther sees no middle ground that preserves his concept of God's sovereignty and grace.

³¹ Gonzalez, 56. B. A. Gerrish notes that for Luther, "God has taken salvation out of the control of our wills and has placed it under the control of his. It is but a short step from here to a full-blown doctrine of divine determinism" (Brian A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982], 135).

³² Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 265. This seems to contradict some other statements. We will look at the internal coherence of Luther's view in a subsequent section. Moreover, the *Loci Communes*, written by Luther's companion Philip Melancthon early in his career, makes it explicit that "If you relate human will (*voluntas*) to predestination, there is freedom neither in external nor internal acts, but all things take place according to divine determination" (Philip Melancthon, "Loci Communes," in *Melancthon and Bucer*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969], 30). Thus, Melancthon makes clear that whether you speak of *voluntas* or *arbitrium*, there is no freedom in either when one holds that all takes place by divine determination. Melancthon later revised his views on free will.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

like an addiction. We all do what we want to do! That is precisely our bondage. We are not jerked around by a transcendent puppeteer.”³³ At the same time, Luther paradoxically holds that everything happens according to necessity of God’s immutability. Moreover, when it pertains to matters of salvation Luther unequivocally denies any role to the human will. When Erasmus questions what man would endeavor to repent if he were certain he had no free will. Luther replies “Nobody [will reform his life]! Nobody can! God has not time for your practitioners of self-reformation, for they are hypocrites. The elect, who fear God, will be reformed by His Holy Spirit.”³⁴ Here we can see the strength of Luther’s *sola gratia*. For Luther, only God controls the will of man.³⁵ Moreover, God as the Creator meant “that God’s willing creates an absolute necessity embracing all of his creation.”³⁶

The Will as Beast Ridden. Luther states unequivocally that “in all that bears on salvation or damnation, [man] has no ‘free-will,’ but is a captive, prisoner and bondsman, either to the will of God, or to the will of Satan.”³⁷ He goes on to say, “For if a man has lost his freedom, and is

³³ Forde, 37. McSorley agrees, saying that Luther’s position is “not really a denial of man’s natural free will” (McSorley, 327). This is due to Luther’s position that man is free in immaterial matters but bound in matters of salvation.

³⁴ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 99. Moreover, Luther has clearly espoused that everything happens according to necessity by the will of God. Thus, even if we are doing “what we want to do,” it is still God who controls the will and controls all events. Thus, if we are not puppets, we are still seemingly like a computer that runs on software that is pre-programmed.

³⁵ He cites selected biblical verses to support this position. Among them are those that speak of God directing man’s steps, preparing hearts, and holding the power of salvation (Jer 10:23; Prov 16:1; Rom 3:16).

³⁶ Kolb, 26, 29. Further, Luther was influenced toward this absoluteness of God’s will while studying at Erfurt, especially by Gabriel Biel, where he “assimilated a definition of God as the almighty Creator, who according to his absolute power could do anything he pleases, who conformed to no external standard, who defined the Good by his Word or covenant.” Yet, he rejected Biel and Ockham’s view of human responsibility that gave some part to the will in salvation. McSorley contends that this position is not solely from Scripture but also includes “philosophical or metaphysical thinking,” thus he cannot claim to argue solely from Scripture (McSorley, 311).

³⁷ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 107. The inclusion of the possibility of being in bondage to Satan raises a question regarding the will of God and that of Satan. This problem will be taken up in a subsequent section. For a philosophical discussion of foreknowledge and free will, see Ted A. Warfield, “Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom Are Compatible,” *Nous* 31/1 (1997): 80-86. See also the critique of Warfield’s view by Anthony Brueckner, “On an Attempt to Demonstrate the Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom,” *Faith and Philosophy* 17/1 (2000): 132-148.

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

forced to serve sin, and cannot will good, what conclusion can more justly be drawn concerning him, than that he sins and wills necessarily?"³⁸ Elsewhere Luther holds that no man has any power to change his will, for "God does not lie, but does all things immutably, and that his will can neither be resisted nor changed nor hindered."³⁹ Luther compares this captive will to a beast with either God or Satan as its rider. "If Satan rides, it goes where Satan wills. If God rides, it goes where God wills. In either case there is no 'free choice.'"⁴⁰ Yet, sin is still not God's fault, for "the rider [God] of the horse is not responsible for the lameness which gives him a bad ride."⁴¹ Moreover, under Satan's sway man's "reason (*ratio*) is blinded; his will (*voluntas*) is hostile to God; he wants only to sin; and his choice (*arbitrium*) is always sinful."⁴² Thus, the will is bound to the will of its rider and can do nothing about it.⁴³

Erasmus questions Luther's view and notes the "paradox that all we do is done, not by 'free-will' but of mere necessity and Augustine's view that God works in us both good and evil; that He rewards His own good works in us, and punishes His own evil works in us?"⁴⁴ Erasmus goes on "What a flood-gate of iniquity . . . would the spread of such news open to the people! What wicked man would amend his life? Who would believe that God loved him? Who would fight against his flesh?"⁴⁵ Despite

³⁸ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 149. Luther uses the word "forced" here, yet elsewhere he claims the will is not compelled.

³⁹ Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer III*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, Luther's Works (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 33:42. On Luther's view of choice, Kolb comments, "the reformer fashioned this new universe out of elements from his own personal experience and from his instruction at the university" (Kolb, 28).

⁴⁰ Forde, 58.

⁴¹ Kolb, 53. Luther states, "It is the fault, therefore, of the instruments, which God does not allow to be idle, that evil things are done, with God himself setting them in motion. It is just as if a carpenter were cutting badly with a chipped and jagged ax. Hence it comes about that the ungodly man cannot but continually err and sin, because he is caught up in the movement of divine power and not allowed to be idle, but wills, desires, and acts according to the kind of person he himself is" (Luther, *Career of the Reformer III*, 176).

⁴² Packer and Johnston, 49. Notice the fluctuation between God and Satan as the controller of the will.

⁴³ Packer and Johnston state that "If man could choose his own rider, his will would indeed be free, and he would be sovereign over his own salvation" (*ibid.*, 53). However, the Bible does speak of resisting the devil (James 4:7).

⁴⁴ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 97.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Erasmus' point, Luther refuses to wrestle with this issue. "It should be enough to simply say that God has willed . . . and the reason of the Divine will is not to be sought, but simply to be adored."⁴⁶

Luther's View of Soteriology

The Human Condition. The condition of humanity is foundational to Luther's view of salvation, especially the total depravity of man's nature (Gen 6:5,21).⁴⁷ This is a primary basis for his soteriology. He states, "If we believe that Christ has redeemed human creatures by his blood, we are bound to confess that the whole human being was lost. Otherwise, we should make Christ either superfluous or the redeemer of only the lowest part of humanity . . . and that would be blasphemy and sacrilege."⁴⁸ Further, he writes, "salvation is not of our own strength or counsel, but depends on the working of God alone . . . does it not clearly follow that when God is not present to work in us, all is evil, and of necessity we act in a way that contributes nothing towards salvation?"⁴⁹ This view of salvation is tied to his belief in justification by faith in which "God does everything necessary for salvation."⁵⁰ Thus, there is no part that man plays in his own salvation. For Luther, anything man could do would only detract from the glory of God. Rather, "the best, infallible preparation for grace, and the only disposing factor for its reception, is God's eternal choosing and predestination."⁵¹ Therefore, "man's destiny

⁴⁶ Ibid., 100. For an interesting view that Erasmus' fate was to lay the groundwork for this reformatory work, see Terrence M. Reynolds, "Was Erasmus Responsible for Luther?: A Study of the Relationship of the Two Reformers and Their Clash over the Question of the Will," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 41/4 (1977): 18-34.

⁴⁷ The will is completely evil and in bondage. "The whole man is captured by sin, not just certain portions of man" (Mark Migotti, "Luther's Word on Man's Will: A Case Study in Comparative Intellectual History," *Religious Studies* 20/D (1984): 660).

⁴⁸ Luther, *Career of the Reformer III*, 293. On the importance of the view of the sinfulness of sin for postmodernity, see a brief but nuanced discussion by Kathryn A. Kleinhans, "The Bondage of the Will as Good News for Postmodern Selves," *Dialog* 39/2 (2000): 93-98.

⁴⁹ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 102.

⁵⁰ McGrath, 100.

⁵¹ Luther, *Career of the Reformer III*, 190. Some, like Kenneth Hagen, claim that Luther did not hold the view of double predestination. Hagen writes, "Only in connection with the doctrine of redemption is an evangelical doctrine of predestination possible" (Kenneth Hagen, "Luther's Understanding of the Bondage of the Will, and the Problem of Free Will in Melancthon and Later Theologians," *Reformation & Revival* 7/4 (1998): 139. Moreover, he writes, "while He [God] creates in man the possibility to believe, the

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

depends entirely upon the free decision of God.”⁵² Luther considered this belief in a bound will “the corner-stone of the gospel and the very foundation of faith.”⁵³

Grace and Divine Mercy. In Luther’s theology it is supremely clear that humans cannot be saved unless the grace of God works in them. For “nothing we do has any saving significance prior to His working in us.”⁵⁴ There is no place for the will in matters of salvation, but only grace. Erasmus holds man has free will and simultaneously allows that grace is needed for man to will good. Luther finds this inconsistent, saying, “man without grace cannot will good . . . so there is found in your ‘free-will’ at the same moment a yes and a no”⁵⁵ Yet, might there be room for a will that can accept or reject the grace of God? For Luther, to allow this would be an offense to the power of God’s grace. “If God’s grace is wanting, if it is taken away from that small power [of the will that Erasmus posits] what can it do?”⁵⁶ On the contrary, humans can do nothing without God’s grace. “Hence, it follows that “free will” without God’s grace is not free at all, but is the permanent prisoner and bondsman of evil.”⁵⁷ There is no halfway between salvation and damnation. “For if God is in us, Satan is out of us, and then it is present with us to will only good.”⁵⁸ Thus grace is all in all.

He also raises the issue of meritorious works. This exemplifies his overarching concern about faith versus works and his dispute with Roman Catholicism. He will not allow any salvific part to the will, for this might mean the will has somehow merited salvation. He states, “if ‘free-will’ merits a ‘tiny bit’, and grace the rest, why does ‘free-will’ receive the total reward?”⁵⁹ Even the slightest will in man becomes, for him, salvation by works. He leaves no room for unmerited grace as a gift that can be accepted or rejected. It is clear, then, that Luther felt he needed to

ability to reject remains” (Hagen, 140). However, Hagen does not cite Luther on this point, and Luther suggests much to the contrary throughout *The Bondage of the Will*.

⁵² Packer and Johnston, 53.

⁵³ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁴ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 102.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 145. He continues his critique of Erasmus and finds it inconsistent that “though [the will] by its own power it can only go down, and can go up only with the help of another” (ibid., 143).

⁵⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁵⁷ Ibid. There seems to be lacking here a distinction between power and will which might be a helpful nuance.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 147.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 237.

deny free will to maintain the sovereignty of God's grace, and thus the whole basis of his theology, "for this was the real matter under debate."⁶⁰ Because of his concept of salvation, central to his reforms, he was obliged to "uphold the absolute necessity of God's grace for every human act that has any relevance for salvation."⁶¹ There is no place for contingency; all is performed by the will and the power of God. The will is bound, and thus, salvation is bestowed solely by God, with no input from the human will. Luther states, "to believers he [God] gives the righteousness of God; to unbelievers he [God] denies it."⁶²

Luther's Biblical Interpretation

Luther relies on many texts to support his interpretation of the bondage of the will. Some prominent ones include "I know whom I have chosen" (John 13:18) and "The Lord knoweth them that are his" (2 Tim 2:19).⁶³ This, coupled with Luther's view of foreknowledge as God's decree, asserts a predestinarian view of salvation. He also references Isaiah 46:10, "Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done, Saying, 'My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure.'" Moreover, God made "promises before the world began" and "whom he will he hardeneth" (Tit 1:2; Rom 9:18,22). Luther also references the narrative of Balaam in Num 22, claiming it as proof against free will. "Thus Balaam's inability to say what he wished is a clear proof from the Scriptures that man is not in his own power, nor free in choosing and doing what he does. Were it not so, no such case could stand in the Scriptures."⁶⁴

Love of Jacob, Hatred of Esau. Luther finds some of his most prominent examples in Rom 9. He begins by discussing Romans 9:13, where God declares "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." Luther comments, "God chose Jacob and chose him before he was born . . . He

⁶⁰ Packer and Johnston, 47.

⁶¹ McSorley, 304. McSorley goes on to say, "Despite some ambiguities, Luther's early attacks on free will should be interpreted as a defense of the Augustinian doctrine of the powerlessness of free will without grace in matters of salvation" (McSorley, 369). Packer and Johnston contend that the alternative would be that "Man earns his passage; man, in the last analysis, saves himself" (Packer and Johnston, 49). Forde agrees saying, "The entire gospel is destroyed if one tries like Erasmus, and most theologians still do these days, to avoid the problem of necessity" (Forde, 68).

⁶² Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 290.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

so hated Esau that He removed his place of abode in the desert.”⁶⁵ This is a primary proof for the decrees of God. Luther goes on to accuse Israel of being ungrateful for the grace of God. “I know that men are grafted in by faith and cut off by unbelief, and that they must be exhorted to believe, lest they be cut off. But it does not hence follow, nor does this prove, that they can believe or disbelieve by the power of ‘free-will’, which is the point we are discussing.”⁶⁶ Even still, he holds that we have no will either to believe or not to believe. “Paul teaches that faith and unbelief come to us by no work of our own, but through the love and hatred of God.”⁶⁷

Pharaoh. Luther also utilizes the hardening of Pharaoh that Paul speaks of in Romans 9. He writes that Pharaoh “allowed his own ungodly corruption, under Satan’s sway, to blaze with anger, to swell with pride, to boil with rage and to advance along the path of scornful recklessness.”⁶⁸ This would not have occurred without the effective will of God, for “His evil will would not have been moved or hardened of itself, but as the omnipotent Agent makes it act . . .”⁶⁹ Thus God acts on Pharaoh’s heart. “God presents from without to his villainous heart that which by nature he hates; at the same time, He continues by omnipotent action to move within him the evil which he finds there.”⁷⁰ Notice that God is the causative agent, yet from within; this helps us understand Luther’s concept that the will is not compelled, yet at the same time, in bondage. Erasmus, contrastingly, holds that “God hardens when He does not straightway punish the sinner.”⁷¹ But, for Luther, under the decree of God Pharaoh had no choice but to be hardened. If it were not so, “God could not with such certainty have foretold his hardening.”⁷² Thus, he

⁶⁵ Ibid., 227. Luther interprets this somewhat differently in his commentary on Romans, where he views this as a statement that natural descent is of no value. He writes, “It did not help Esau that he descended from so good a father and so good a mother . . . How much less will it benefit the unbelieving Jews who are born so long afterwards . . .” (Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976], 122). He does go on, however, to assert that this election of Jacob was, in fact, salvific (124).

⁶⁶ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 228.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 229.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 206.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 207.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 195. Luther actually considers this “plausible” but does not accept it, asking “how is it proved?” (ibid., 195).

⁷² Ibid., 211.

must have caused it. “If He [God] cannot lie, then Pharaoh cannot but be hardened.”⁷³

The Potter and the Clay. On Paul’s reference to the potter and the clay in Romans 9:19-23, Luther states, “He is speaking of men, comparing them to clay, and God to a potter.”⁷⁴ Thus, God is the only agent in this operation, and the clay cannot form itself. Erasmus appeals to the other places where this metaphor arises in the OT, but Luther rejects this approach. He writes, “Paul does not appear to have taken this passage from the prophets . . .”⁷⁵ Yet, it is clear that Paul is alluding to the prominent OT appearances of this metaphor. Nevertheless, for Luther this passage shows the omnipotence of God and absolute lack of free will in man. It is obvious that we are the clay and don’t control our circumstances, “for there is no doubt that afflictions come from God against our will, and impose on us necessity of bearing them.”⁷⁶ Thus, Luther considers his position to be on firm biblical footing. According to his methodology, Romans 9 alone would give him enough proof of his position.

Issues in Luther’s View of the Human Will

Foreknowledge and Free Will. Luther sees the problem strictly as “whether God foresees anything contingently, or whether we do all things of necessity.”⁷⁷ Luther is explicit in his answer that “God foreknows nothing contingently, but that He foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His own immutable, eternal, and infallible will.”⁷⁸ In other words, His foreknowledge is bound to His decree—they are the same. He admits that there is an illusion of free will. Yet, “however it

⁷³ Ibid., 212. Fifteen years later, Luther was asked about the hardening of the heart, “Luther averred that God’s hardening of the Egyptian should be understood ‘literally’ (*proprie*) rather than ‘figuratively,’ but not as if God actively caused the rejection in Pharaoh’s heart because ‘God does not do evil though his omnipotence does all things. God hardened Pharaoh, who was evil, by not sending him his Spirit and his grace. Why such things happen lies beyond proper human inquiry’” (Martin Luther, *Tischreden*, Dr. Martin Luther’s Werke [Weimar: Bohlau, 1883-1993], 4:642-43; quoted in Kolb, 53).

⁷⁴ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 219.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 229.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 230. Luther here seems to refer to external factors that limit the possibilities of the human will. However, it seems extreme for Luther to suggest that external factors amount to “necessity.” On the contrary, it seems more than possible that the issue of external influences and/or constraints does not require a total denial of free will but, rather, the exclusion of an absolutely free or omnipotent will.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 79.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 80.

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

may appear to us to be done mutably and contingently, it is in reality done necessarily and immutably in respect of God's will."⁷⁹ Luther, accordingly, asks how one who believes in contingency can believe God's promises. Further, Luther asks the question, "Do you suppose that He does not will what He foreknows, or that he does not foreknow what He wills?"⁸⁰ Luther sees no will that thwarts God's will, all happens according to God's determining.

He takes the case of Judas to illustrate his point:

If God foreknew that Judas would be a traitor, Judas became a traitor of necessity, and it was not in the power of Judas or of any creature to act differently, or to change his will, from that which God had foreseen. It is true that Judas acted willingly, and not under compulsion, but his willing was the work of God, brought into being by His omnipotence, like everything else.⁸¹

He goes on to assert "it would certainly be a hard question, I allow—indeed, an insoluble one—if you sought to establish *both* the foreknowledge of God *and* the freedom of man together."⁸² Moreover, he states, "Either God makes mistakes in His foreknowledge, and errors in His action (which is impossible), or else we act, and are caused to act, according to foreknowledge and action."⁸³ This is in accord with Luther's view of necessity, the will and foreknowledge of God are bound up together in His decrees. Nevertheless, "Judas betrayed Christ willingly. My point is that this act of will in Judas was certainly infallibly bound to take place, if God foreknew it."⁸⁴ Therefore, there was no other alternative, for "how could Judas change his will while God's infallible foreknowledge stands?"⁸⁵ When Luther states that Judas sinned willingly, he does not mean that Judas could have done otherwise, but simply that he did what was in his will to do. This does not refer to freedom, but the nuance of lack of compulsion.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 213.

⁸² Ibid., 215. He even uses the Gentile belief in fate for support saying "for even the Gentiles ascribed to their gods 'fate inevitable!'" (ibid., 216).

⁸³ Ibid., 217.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 220.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

However, is it true that God's foreknowledge must deprive man of freedom? Must contingency and freedom injure God's foreknowledge?⁸⁶ For Luther, the answer is yes. However, consider this example. A free agent may choose to read this or choose not to read this. That God knows you would read this does not necessarily entail that you have no choice. The perceived problem is that if God knew *before* what you would do, then you have no choice in the *present*. However, the problem is not the perfect knowledge of your action, but the timing of the action.⁸⁷ Rather, if the problem is conceived from a different angle, it may be that if you would not read this, God would have known you would not read it. In other words, God would not be in error in His foreknowledge, but He would foreknow your free decisions themselves.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, because

⁸⁶ The issue of God's foreknowledge has been a subject of great discussion recently. For a critical analysis of God's foreknowledge in relation to his freedom, see the view of Open Theism. For an excellent introduction to Open Theism by multiple proponents, see Clark H. Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994). See also William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989); Clark H. Pinnock, *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1989). For further delineations of this view, see Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible & Spiritual Conflict* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1997); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998). For a thorough investigation and critique, see Millard J. Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). See also William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom: The Coherence of Freedom* (New York: Leiden, 1991); William Lane Craig, "Hasker on Divine Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies* 67 (1992): 57-78; Norman L. Geisler, H. Wayne House, and Max Herrera, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001); Steve Nichols, "An Early Response to Open Theism," *Reformation and Revival* 12/2 (2003): 111-129.

⁸⁷ This raises the question of God's relation to time. The possibility remains that God transcends time so that His foreknowledge does not create the time problems that we perceive. How he does this is unknown, but it may be possible. This is not to assert that God is timeless, or ahistorical, but that He is not necessarily restricted by time. For an excellent and brief discussion of the historicity of God and foreknowledge in relation to free will, see Fernando Canale, "Doctrine of God," in *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000). For a critique of timelessness and presentation of God's historicity and analogical temporality, see Fernando Canale, *A Criticism of Theological Reason: Time and Timelessness as Primordial Presuppositions* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1987).

⁸⁸ This is a very controversial and complicated question in contemporary discussion. A detailed discussion of this problem is beyond the scope of this project. However, for an excellent discussion of these issues see Kane, ed.

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

of Luther's definition of foreknowledge as nearly synonymous with the will and of omnipotence as causation of every action in the world, he must hold this view: "If the foreknowledge and omnipotence of God are admitted, then we must be under necessity."⁸⁹

Divine Will and Human Responsibility. Luther's rejection of any freedom of the will begs the question, is it coherent to assert that the human will is bound *and* that it is responsible for sin and deserving of punishment? How can one be morally responsible for one's actions, if they are the only actions one could take? Luther comments:

I say that man without the grace of God nonetheless remains under the general omnipotence of the God who effects, moves, and impels all things in a necessary, infallible course; but the fact of man's thus being carried along is 'nothing'—that is, avails nothing in God's sight, nor is reckoned anything but sin.⁹⁰

All humans are responsible for their own actions and sinners deserving of punishment. Luther allows "merely that the creature co-operates with the operation of God!"⁹¹ He goes on to state, "Paul co-operates with God in teaching the Corinthians; he preaches without, and God teaches within. The work of each is in that case distinct."⁹² Moreover, "all things, even the ungodly, co-operate with God."⁹³ Luther is thus not always consistent in his pastoral concerns about the will. For instance, he often speaks as though the will can be negatively affected by the writings of Erasmus. He also states, "For as long as they do not know the limits of their ability, they will not know what they should do, they cannot repent

⁸⁹ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 218.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 265. In an interesting and brief article Roland Goeden wrestles with the implications of a will in bondage for religious education. He accepts Luther's view and comes to the conclusion that it is liberating, saying, "If nothing is at stake, then I can fight for justice, peace, and better environment, sometimes more relaxed than as if everything depends on my success and on being a model" (Roland Goeden, "Luther's 'Bondage of the Will' and Its Contribution to Education," *Religious Education* 80 (Spring 1985): 271. However, this begs the question, why fight at all? Moreover, what if one's actions really do affect the world and responsibilities are neglected due to a false sense of complacency?

⁹¹ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 267.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

when they err . . .”⁹⁴ Elsewhere he counsels, “If you accept the gospel and God’s Word and cling to it and grasp it, and remain faithful to the end, then you will be saved, and if not, you will be damned, 2 Timothy 2:[12].”⁹⁵ This seems to imply that human beings have some control over whether or not they will repent.⁹⁶ However, this has already been categorically denied elsewhere.

Accordingly, this “co-operation” should not be confused with a free operation on the human will’s part. Luther seems to only mean that humans are not compelled in their actions. Nonetheless, those actions are willed by God, and the human will is bound in its course. The lack of compulsion simply denotes the belief that humans don’t act against their will because their will itself is bound.⁹⁷ So, when a human acts, it is never compelled against its will, yet the very will is controlled by God.

Consequently, human beings seem to merit their own punishment but not reward. Yet, only “God makes believers righteous, and unbelievers ungodly, unrighteous, under wrath.”⁹⁸ Thus, Luther holds that humans are justly condemned. The unrighteous deserve destruction, even though they cannot do otherwise but be unrighteous. He states, “To say man does not seek God, is the same as saying: man cannot seek God . . . If there were potency or power in man to will good, the movement of Divine omnipotence would not suffer it to remain inactive or keep holiday.”⁹⁹ How, then, can God be just if he arbitrarily selects, from eternity, who will be saved and who will be damned? Kolb notes the enormity of

⁹⁴ Ibid., 78. Luther makes many statements to this effect that imply detriment from Erasmus’ doctrines by making people think in error. Yet, if God wills all that happens, it does not follow that any human’s salvation should be affected by a misunderstanding, or that one would change one’s mind if one knew better.

⁹⁵ Martin Luther, *Briefe*, Dr. Martin Luther’s Werke (Weimar: Bohlaus, 1883-1993), 10:492-494, 494.214-218; quoted in Kolb, 41.

⁹⁶ Forde notes that the language of free choice “is so firmly embedded in the language that we would be rendered virtually speechless in our speaking about human activity and morals without it . . .” (48). Yet this very language is used consistently in the Bible. Luther himself uses the “language of willing” in his own writing and speaking (49). This is especially true of his speaking on Christian conduct. He states, “A Christian man is the most free Lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone” (Martin Luther, *Christian Liberty*, trans. A. A. Buchheim [Philadelphia: United Lutheran, 1929], 6).

⁹⁷ Forde comments, “We do what we want. And that is just the trouble! We are bound to do what we want.” Forde, 54.

⁹⁸ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 275.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 281.

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

this issue, saying, “The tension between the two defies solution, in spite of the best efforts of human reason.”¹⁰⁰ Luther is clear: “God, he says, works every human deed, whether good or evil. He works in the evil man according to that man’s nature, as He finds it.”¹⁰¹ Therefore all responsibility lies with God for good and for evil.

The Divine Will and the Will of Satan. There is some ambiguity in regard to the relationship of Satan in Luther’s view. As part of his denial of free will, Luther emphasizes Satan as holding the human will in bondage. He writes, “in all that bears on salvation or damnation, [one] has no ‘free-will,’ but is a captive, prisoner and bonds slave, either to the will of God, or to the will of Satan.”¹⁰² This theme runs throughout Luther’s polemic. He also states, “how mighty is the dominion and power of Satan over the sons of men, which prevents them hearing and grasping the plainest words of God.”¹⁰³ Therefore man cannot be the cause of sin. Rather, “the cause is the wickedness of Satan, who is enthroned and reigns over us in our weakness, and who himself resists the Word of God. If Satan did not do so, the whole world could be converted by a single word of God, heard once; there would be no need of more.”¹⁰⁴ So Satan actively works against God. Does this mean that he has freedom? Does he work against the immutable will of God? Luther acknowledges that Satan blinds people, saying some “by reason, of the working of Satan, their god, cannot see the plainest proofs of the Trinity in the Godhead and of the humanity of Christ.”¹⁰⁵ He goes on to say:

So the Word of God and the traditions of men fight each other in implacable opposition. God and Satan are personally engaged in this same conflict, each labouring [sic] to destroy the works and subvert the doctrines of the other, like two kings

¹⁰⁰ Kolb, 64. According to McSorley this idea of bondage of the will “makes it impossible . . . to give a satisfactory explanation of man’s responsibility for sin” (McSorley, 340). Kolb calls this an “insoluble problem of how God can condemn those who were born in sin and guilt and have no power of their own to free themselves” (Kolb, 64).

¹⁰¹ Packer and Johnston, 51.

¹⁰² Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 107.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 73. Luther utilizes Jesus’ teaching about Satan as “the strong man” in Luke 11. He goes on to assert that “if a stronger appears, and overcomes Satan, we are once more servants and captives, but now desiring and willingly doing what He wills—which is royal freedom” (*ibid.*, 103).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

laying waste each other's kingdoms. 'He that is not with me,' said Christ, 'is against me.' (Luke 11.23)¹⁰⁶

This is actually characterized by Luther as a real war; he states, "there is no middle kingdom between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, which are ever at war with each other."¹⁰⁷ Satan, in this war, prevents man from choosing to serve God. "The power of 'free-will' amounts to this: because Satan rules over it, it rejects even grace, and the Spirit who fulfils the law—so excellently do its own 'endeavour' and 'effort' avail to fulfil the law."¹⁰⁸

Yet how can Satan war against God? Would this not entail that Satan has a free will of his own? If one applies the same rules to Satan's will as to the human will, this is impossible. If God determines all from eternity past and is absolutely immutable, Satan can have no free will. Thus, in order for Luther to be consistent, God must actually be controlling Satan, and God Himself holds humans in bondage and is, in effect, working against Himself. Is it possible to reconcile these seemingly opposed viewpoints? Luther, contrary to what he elsewhere implies, admits that God is behind the works of Satan, saying, "He moves and works of necessity even in Satan and the ungodly. But He works according to what they are, and what He finds them to be: which means, since they are evil and perverted themselves, that when they are impelled to action by this movement of Divine omnipotence they do only that which is perverted and evil."¹⁰⁹ Therefore, God's omnipotence holds primacy, regardless of the consequences for His character.

Luther himself acknowledges the apparent contradiction at this juncture. He says, "If I could by any means understand how this same God, who makes such a show of wrath and unrighteousness, can yet be merciful and just, there would be no need for faith."¹¹⁰ Thus, he seems resigned to the fact that he does not understand how God can be just, and at the same time condemn humans to eternal death based only on His immutable will. This brings us to the problem of God's justice, the problem of theodicy which is tied to the doctrine of the human will.

¹⁰⁶ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 93.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 204. Packer and Johnston write, "it is God who energises [sic] Satan, according to his nature, and such power as Satan has is held and exercised by God's own appointment" (Packer and Johnston, 51).

¹¹⁰ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 101.

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

The Problem of Theodicy. The question of free will is very closely related to theodicy. There is a “persistent problem that arises when God is seen as condemning those whom He wills not to save.”¹¹¹ Luther acknowledges this difficulty but deflects the immediate question by focusing on the theology of the cross.¹¹² Even amidst the question of God’s justice, Luther “trusted that the God who had come to engage evil at its ugliest on the cross would triumph finally over evil.”¹¹³ Yet, this does not answer why God condemns some and saves others based on His will alone. Luther himself struggles with this problem, saying:

And who would not stumble at it? I have stumbled at it myself more than once, down to the deepest pit of despair, so that I wished I had never been a man . . . this is why so much toil and trouble has been devoted to clearing the goodness of God, throwing the blame on man’s will.¹¹⁴

Luther admits the difficulty but cannot affirm free will, saying:

Though He saves so few and damns so many; to believe that He is just, though of His own will He makes us perforce proper subjects for damnation, and seems (in Erasmus’ words) ‘to delight in the torments of poor wretches and to be a fitter object for hate than for love.’¹¹⁵

Even though it is beyond understanding, Luther asserts that when “God saves those who don’t deserve it ‘man’s heart does not accuse . . . nor demand to know why He wills to do so.’”¹¹⁶ But what about those who are lost? He goes on to say:

Why then does He not alter those evil wills which He moves? This question touches on the secrets of His majesty, where ‘His judgments are past finding out’ (cf. Rom. 11.33). It is not for us to inquire into these mysteries, but to adore them. If

¹¹¹ Tiessen, 15.

¹¹² For a thorough and scholarly discussion of Luther’s theology of the cross see Alister McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

¹¹³ Kolb, 63.

¹¹⁴ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 217.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 234.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

flesh and blood take offence here, and grumble, well, let them grumble.¹¹⁷

Luther's contention that one ought not be troubled by this issue does not seem satisfactory. The problem of evil and God's justice is too real and present to dismiss lightly. The problem was very real for Luther, and he honestly had no satisfactory answer, but he believed in the goodness of God by faith. Luther's faith in God is admirable, but the question of God's goodness still remains.

The Hidden God. How did Luther attempt to conceive of the justice of God? The main attempt is the concept of the *deus absconditus*, the hidden God. Roland Bainton states that for Luther, "there are almost two Gods, the inscrutable God whose ways are past finding out and the God made known to us in Christ."¹¹⁸ Luther seemingly retained the idea of God hidden as vestige "from his Ockhamist instructors" that God is beyond human grasp.¹¹⁹ God is unknowable beyond what is revealed, and, thus, hidden.¹²⁰ God revealed is found primarily in the incarnation. Luther imagines Jesus saying, "from an unrevealed God I will become a revealed God. Nevertheless, I will remain the same God. I will be made flesh, or send My Son . . ." ¹²¹

Luther holds Isaiah 45:7 as an example that God creates evil. It says, "I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 208. He goes on to say, "Why did God let Adam fall, and why did He create us all tainted with the same sin, when He might have kept Adam safe, and might have created us of other material, or of seed that had first been cleansed? God is He for Whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule or standard. . . . If any rule or standard, or cause or ground, existed for it, it could no longer be the will of God" (ibid., 209).

¹¹⁸ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Meridian, 1995), 48. For an interesting study of reflection on this concept of Luther, see John Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed: The Interpretation of Luther's Deus Absconditus and Its Significance for Religious Thought* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1953).

¹¹⁹ Kolb, 35.

¹²⁰ Steven Paulson states that "it is not so much that God cannot be seen that concerns Luther, but that God actually and actively *hides*" (Steven D. Paulson, "Luther on the Hidden God," *Word & World* 19 (Fall 1999): 363).

¹²¹ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26-30*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 5:45. However, behind this "revealed dualism of cosmic conflict between God and evil lies the hidden mystery of absolute Divine sovereignty; evil is brought to expression only by the omnipotent working of the good God" (Packer and Johnston, 51). Forde comments that "Luther could even say that apart from Jesus God is indistinguishable from the devil" (Forde, 45).

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

LORD do all these *things*.” However, this evil might be understood as being in contrast to peace, often meaning prosperity and calamity. This need not be in reference to ontological evil.¹²² Yet Luther is unconvinced; he holds that God Himself creates evil and good in His hidden will, hence He is the author not just of goodness, but also of evil. “Thus God conceals His eternal mercy and loving kindness beneath eternal wrath, His righteousness beneath unrighteousness.”¹²³ How are we to understand this internal dualism in God’s nature? Can it be reconciled with the justice of God? In Ezekiel 18:32, God Himself declares His desire for life, not death, “For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth.”¹²⁴ Erasmus says “If He does not will our death, it must be laid to the charge of our own will if we perish.”¹²⁵

Here is Luther’s response to the biblical statement:

Ezekiel speaks of the published offer of God’s mercy, not of the dreadful hidden will of God, Who, according to His own counsel, ordains such persons as He wills to receive and partaken of the mercy preached and offered. This will is not to be inquired into, but to be reverently adored, as by far the most awesome secret of the Divine Majesty. He has kept it to Himself, and forbidden us to know it; and it is much more worthy of reverence than an infinite number of Corycian caverns!¹²⁶

So, must it be assumed that God is not here speaking the whole truth? Is the “published offer” of God different from His real will? But to avoid further consideration of this incongruency, Luther counsels that we

¹²² There are also a number of passages throughout the writings of the prophets in the OT which state that the Lord brings evil, but these are in the context of discipline for sin. Another passage Luther utilizes is 1 Sam 2:6, “The Lord killed and maketh alive; He bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up.” For Luther this shows that God brings forth good and evil. However, this passage is in the context of God’s relation to an already sinful planet. That God punishes is not the same as Him bringing forth evil into existence and willing all evil on the earth. He also mentions Isaiah 63:17 that asks the Lord “why has thou made us to err?” In contrast to Luther, Jerome and Origen claim that “He is said to “make to err” in that He does not at once recall from error” (Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 195).

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 101. Gerrish states that this is “a moment antithetical to the attributes of mercy and love. The image of God does not, after all, fully coincide with the picture of Jesus” (Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage*, 138).

¹²⁴ See also 1 Tim 2:5-6; Tit 2:11; 2 Pet 3:9.

¹²⁵ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 167.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.

should not think of these things. “Wherever God hides Himself, and wills to be unknown to us, there we have no concern.”¹²⁷ He claims the problem lies in the interpreter that “makes no distinction between God preached and God hidden.”¹²⁸ However, the Bible seems to make the opposite distinction, that God is always the same. Malachi 3:6 asserts that God is not arbitrary, but that men can take confidence in His perfect character, “For I am the Lord, I change not.” Yet, in order to try to harmonize God’s call to sinners in Scripture and a lack of will in man, he uses the construction of two different wills in one God. “Thus, He does not will the death of a sinner—that is, in His word, but He wills it by His inscrutable will.”¹²⁹ Gerrish comments that this view has the “fearful cost of reducing the universal benevolence of the revealed will to a mere appearance.”¹³⁰ Beyond this, by the very principle of Scripture as a basis for all doctrine, by *sola scriptura* itself, God “in His word” is the standard. How can we say regarding God the opposite of what He says about Himself in the Bible? Thus it is very problematic to claim two wills in God and leaves the problem of theodicy in full force.

Analysis of Biblical Support

It is important to look at Luther’s use of biblical texts to support his doctrine about the bondage of the will. Do his texts clearly teach this doctrine? As we consider his use of Scripture we should note, as Justo Gonzalez puts it, that “Luther felt free to take certain liberties with the canon of Scripture, while still insisting on the primacy of Scripture over tradition.”¹³¹ As we saw earlier, Luther reinterpreted the “righteousness of God” to refer to His impartation of righteousness alone. He came to this understanding by utilizing the questionable methodology of the “tropological sense” of Scripture.¹³² Furthermore, Gonzalez states, Luther

¹²⁷ Ibid., 170.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid. He goes on to say, “So it is right to say: ‘If God does not desire our death, it must be laid to the charge of our own will if we perish’: this, I repeat, is right if you spoke of God preached” (ibid., 171).

¹³⁰ Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage*, 144.

¹³¹ Gonzalez, 49.

¹³² McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 101. This was based on a method of interpretation called the Quadriga where Scripture was considered to have four senses. These were the literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical. In the tropological sense, “certain passages were interpreted to produce ethical guidance for Christian conduct.” For more on this see McGrath, 148.

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

“felt free to confess that he was inclined to toss [James] out of the canon . . . Therefore, Luther was no biblicist. His primary authority was not the canon of the Bible, but the gospel that he found in the Bible and that was the touchstone for its interpretation.”¹³³

We have seen many texts that Luther uses to support his doctrine; let us now examine these.¹³⁴ Luther's use of Romans 9 as a proof of predestination is widely disputed. For instance, the context seems to refer not to the question of how people are saved but to the question of whether God has lived up to His promises to His chosen people Israel. Thus, by referring to God's loving Jacob, Paul is pointing to the fact that Israel was chosen by God through no merit of its own.¹³⁵ Israel has no claim to exclusivity because God is free to bestow mercy on whom He will, specifically, to the Gentiles. Yet, He has not rejected Israel, but the Gentiles also will be “grafted in.” Christ has made a way for anyone to come to Christ. Thus, seemingly, the passage lends itself to a widening of the availability of salvation rather than God's choosing of whom He will save and whom He will damn.

The narrative of Pharaoh's hardening is also very interesting. Luther holds God as moving evil within Pharaoh *and* moving upon Him from without in circumstances. It does not seem that the text necessitates holding that God controlled Pharaoh's will, as the hardening can simply mean that God worked through circumstance to push Pharaoh's hand towards decision. Moreover, it should be recognized that the Bible not only says God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but also that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (See Ex 8:15,32; 9:34; 1 Sam 6:6) .

The potter and the clay metaphor is also very important to note. This is clearly an allusion by Paul to the OT metaphor, which does not seem to have predestinarian overtones. God is clearly affirmed as omnipotent, He is the Creator and the shaper, and in comparison to him humans are like clay.¹³⁶ The analogy need not be stretched so far that we are viewed as inanimate like clay. Clay is dead, humans are living. The preface to

¹³³ Gonzalez, 50. James “always caused him difficulties through its insistence on works over against faith” (Gonzalez, 49). Luther writes, “The epistle of James gives us much trouble . . . Accordingly, if they will not admit of my interpretations, then I shall make rubble also out of it. I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove, as the priest in Kalenberg did” (Luther, *Career of the Reformer IV*, 317).

¹³⁴ See the previous section on Luther's Biblical Support

¹³⁵ It is also important to note that the word “hated” for Esau may be correctly understood as a comparative term, and not as a term meaning disdain for Esau.

¹³⁶ Man was made by God, the potter, from clay in Genesis 2.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Jeremiah 18 uses the potter and the clay example and proceeds to lay out the conditional response of God based on the people's choice (Jer 18:7-10).¹³⁷ Surely, God's power is emphasized in this imagery, but not to the point of complete impotence of the human. The metaphor need not be interpreted as determinist to be consistent with its own context in both Paul and the OT (See also 2 Tim 2:21).

Finally, a little might be said about the case of Balaam. First, this is an exceptional case in Scripture and is not necessarily a paradigm for God's operation. Nevertheless, Balaam's will is thwarted by God's power. Balaam desires to curse Israel and ends up blessing Israel. First, it should be remembered that Balaam claimed to speak for God. Thus, it could be suggested that this circumstance qualified the situation, since Balaam did not have the right to claim to speak for God and thereby injure others. Moreover, there was nothing that God overruled which would keep Balaam from salvation. In other words, by God intervening and overpowering Balaam's will He injured neither Balaam, nor his opportunity for salvation.¹³⁸

We have seen the texts Luther uses to support his position, but what about those that seem to disagree with his view? One example is Matt 23:37, where Jesus states, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, *thou* that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under *her* wings, and ye would not!" This text suggests that it is God's will that Jerusalem be spared and that man's will is to blame. Luther responds, "why the Majesty does not remove or change this fault of will in every man . . . or why He lays this fault to the charge of the will, when man cannot avoid it, it is not lawful to ask."¹³⁹ But why is it not lawful to ask? The text asserts that the situation is not Jesus' will. Luther tries to

¹³⁷ For further analysis of this passage, see John C. Peckham, "The Passible Potter and the Contingent Clay: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis of Jeremiah 18:1-10," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 18/1 (2007): 130-150.

¹³⁸ The question may be asked why God doesn't overrule all wills for salvation. If God were to overrule all wills, than free will would be obsolete, as Luther claims. This would mean that no one can freely enter into a love relationship with God. The Creator does not desire automatons, or robots, but beings that can love and be loved. I have suggested that God may have overruled Balaam's speech in this case, and without contradicting His policy of free will, based at least partly on Balaam's presumption to speak for God and the nature of the case. This does not mean that God arbitrarily overrules wills whenever He pleases; the weight of Scripture is to the contrary of this notion.

¹³⁹ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 171.

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

reconcile this text with his own view, saying, "He [God] has granted him [man] a free use of things at his own will, and not hedged him in with any laws of commands."¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, to be consistent with Luther's other statements, God still must have decreed the human will, and so this falls short as a solution. This and other passages seem to require some freedom of the human will to make any sense.

There are many other places where prophets, or God, or Jesus plead with people to repent and to come to Him. There are also many conditional statements that those who believe will be saved (i.e. John 3:16). There is also another prominent example of texts that suggest free will in the Bible. Notice Luther's treatment of Matt 19:17, which says, "if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." Luther does not accept the text as it reads, but revises it to be in accordance with a will in bondage. His revision states "if ever thou shalt have the will to keep the commandments (which you will have, not of yourself, but of God, who gives it to whom He will), then they also shall preserve thee." This is not what the text says, but is indicative of Luther's interpretation of conditional statements.

McSorley states, "In the course of his argument against Erasmus, Luther lays down a principle which forces him to stand alone in the history of Christian biblical interpretation."¹⁴¹ He dismisses all of these texts based on a single grammatical argument. He states derisively that "a conditional statement asserts nothing indicatively."¹⁴² In other words, God's call for man to do something doesn't mean that man can do it, it does not imply ability to act. McSorley reacts that this is "clearly exaggerated and one-sided because it ignores the rules of personal dialogue."¹⁴³ In other words, this rule cannot really sweep away all the pleadings of God with man throughout the Bible. Why would God make so many calls for repentance in the Bible? Luther claims it is "so as to bring him [man] by experience of himself to a knowledge of his disease

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 150.

¹⁴¹ McSorley, 350.

¹⁴² Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 151. In another place Luther explains, "For they show us what we ought to do, but do not give us the power to do it. They were ordained, however, for the purpose of showing man to himself; that through them he may learn his own impotence for good, and may despair of his own strength" (Luther, *Christian Liberty*, 12).

¹⁴³ McSorley, 351.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

or weakness, to which he cannot lead him by any other course.”¹⁴⁴ So it seems the call is to provoke the sinner, but what good can provocation even do for one who has no power of the will? In response to the common assertion that this would mean God is mocking us, Luther replies, “Why should not this conclusion follow rather: therefore, God is trying us, that by His law He may bring us to a knowledge of our impotence.”¹⁴⁵ Thus these exhortations tell us, “not what we can do, but what we ought to do.”¹⁴⁶ However, this is against a multitude of evidence to the contrary. The clear reading of the texts are that God genuinely desires all to be saved (2 Pet 3:9; Tit 2:11; 1 Tim 2:4) and that they can come to Him if they will choose to do so.

It is interesting to note, however, that Luther, in his final translation in the German Bible (1546) of 1 Tim 2:4 actually changed the word $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$, literally “saved,” to “helped.”¹⁴⁷ On this translation Lowell Green comments, “Therefore, (a) God wills all people to receive help for their temporal needs; (b) God wills all people to know that he alone is the source of all temporal good.”¹⁴⁸ Luther states, “Accordingly, when we make a distinction of salvation between faithful and faithless people, we must draw from those passages this conclusion, that Paul here refers to general salvation.”¹⁴⁹ For Luther, this verse does not speak of salvation meaning eternal life, but refers to temporal helps and general knowledge.

Luther is right in asserting that these calls do not mean “that these things can be done by our own strength!”¹⁵⁰ Yet, what if God makes it possible for man to repent *in God’s own strength*? Luther says of these invitations to turn, “it does not follow from this that man is converted by

¹⁴⁴ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 151. Luther comments, “reason thinks that man is mocked by an impossible command.” Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 158.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 153. He goes on to say, “although the first man was not impotent, inasmuch as grace assisted him, yet God by this commandment shows him clearly enough how impotent he would be without grace” (*ibid.*, 156. However, he will not allow a prevenient assisting grace to resolve this dilemma.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁴⁷ Lowell C. Green, “Luther’s Understanding of the Freedom of God and the Salvation of Man: His Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:4,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 87 (1996): 58.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: 59. See Luther’s full commentary on 1 Tim 2:4 in Martin Luther, *Lectures on 1 Timothy*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, Luther’s Works (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1999), 28:260-261.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁵⁰ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 159.

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

his own power.”¹⁵¹ This is unchallenged, even by Erasmus, but Luther still considers free will to necessarily mean omnipotent and unassisted will, which confuses the issue. Affirming this limited free will to respond to the biblical call to repentance does not mean that humans can save themselves, but that God has offered grace and has made provision so that they can choose to accept that grace.¹⁵² The gift is no less free because it has been willingly accepted. Thus, it seems that the matter of the definition of freedom, specifically the extent of free will, greatly contributes to the conflict.

Conclusion

Martin Luther stands as a pillar of faith and reform, and Christianity owes a great debt of gratitude to his faith and courage in standing up against persecution for a biblical faith in Jesus Christ. This paper has focused on but one part of Luther's theology, and narrowly at one aspect of Luther's view of justification by faith. This should not be taken as a rebuke of Luther, his reforms, or his whole theology, but as a wrestling with the need for further reform and theological diligence. It is apparent that Luther was sincere and faithful in his desire to protect God's sovereignty and grace from injury. That God sent His Son to save us is at the heart of Luther's argument, as it should be in all biblical theology.

Many understandable factors contributed to Luther's predestinarian view, including his experience with a works-based faith, the polemic context with Erasmus, and his belief that free will was against the gospel in the writings of Paul.¹⁵³ Luther's doctrine of the will might have been quite different if it had developed outside of the polemic concept against Erasmus and works righteousness in the reform movement. Luther was also very influenced by Augustine's writings on predestination, themselves products of the polemic with Pelagius and a neoplatonic ontology.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁵² There are biblical statements that literally assert that works are rewarded, and people are judged “according to their works”(See 2 Chron 15:7; Job 34:11; 2 Tim 2:21). These should not be dismissed simply because they challenge a certain conception of grace. Neither do these statements injure grace, but might be understood in a balanced model of salvation that deals with God's graceful and primary work and the human's cooperation in that work.

¹⁵³ Without rejecting predestination, due to its lack of clarity and abundance of controversy, Gerrish proposes that “This *witness* to grace, not the predestinarian *theology* of grace, is where the preachers of the Reformed church must take their stand” (Gerrish, 57).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Luther sincerely desired to protect grace from anything that might undermine it. This may have clouded his ability to see the meaning in passages such as 1 Tim 2:4. Theologians of today can learn a great lesson from this. There is always a danger in pure polemics. Often positions are defended and stretched beyond their biblical basis in the heat of debate. We should remember to take a step back and examine our own presuppositions and honestly engage the thoughts of those who differ from our interpretation. Luther was often not granted the freedom of this option. He was constantly facing persecution, even death, and to give any ground would have seemed to him like compromise. Thus, I believe we can understand where Luther was coming from, even if we may not agree with his conclusions on the human will.

Luther's view on the will is not always a coherent picture regarding the God of the Bible. As McSorley states, Luther's refusal to allow any "misuse of free will" in the fall makes him "affirm the justice of God while at the same time affirming that God condemns those who are unfree and who therefore are not deserving of condemnation."¹⁵⁴ This is a blight on the character of God and a danger to people who might give up any thought of turning to God in despair at such a doctrine.

Of course, Luther is absolutely correct that no one deserves grace, but what separates those who receive condemnation? Does God really only give grace to some? Is Jesus Christ's death only applicable to some, or did he die for all? These questions have raged throughout the centuries of Christian history and continue to be topics of debate. Luther's proposed solution, the hiddenness of God, implies a duality in God which is beyond understanding. But if the hidden God is unknown, why does Luther have so much to attribute to the hiddenness of God? It would be more congruent with Luther's methodology if he would stick to what is said about the revealed God.¹⁵⁵ In revelation, God is said to be the Savior *and* He is spoken of as a God of judgment. Thus, both poles are spoken

¹⁵⁴ McSorley, 344.

¹⁵⁵ Robert Shofner, on the other hand, holds that though it often seems that "Luther frequently says a great deal more than this, 'God hidden, God revealed' principle will support . . ." in reality he does not. He contends that Luther speaks of the hidden God to the extent that Scripture does. However, if Scripture speaks of these activities, are they not then revealed? Doesn't Luther still overstep the bounds when he proposes that the reason some are saved and some are lost must reside in the hidden God? This paper contends that he does.

PECKHAM: LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

in the revelation about God, thus about the revealed God.¹⁵⁶ The Bible claims of this same God that He “is not willing that any should perish” (2 Pet 3:9). How is this reconcilable with the idea of a God that wills only some to be saved?¹⁵⁷ It is not, unless God is viewed as different in His hiddenness than in His revelation.¹⁵⁸ But what would this then say about His revelation?

Further, it seems that Luther's conclusion that only some receive grace is utterly connected to his conception of God's sovereign grace. If grace is irresistible, then only those who receive grace are consequently saved. But if, contrary to this, grace is not irresistible, God could theoretically offer grace to all, even though all might not accept it. The Bible claims also that God desires all men to be saved (2 Pet 3:9, Titus 2, 1 Tim 2) and draws all to Himself (John 12:32). If it is God's will that all be saved, surely every person has the opportunity for salvation. Luther once acknowledged this, saying, “God wants all to be saved and participate in his eternal bliss (1 Tim 2:4). God does not want sinners to die but to be turned to him and live (Ezek. 18:32). Thus, Luther's correspondent should know, God's grace is without limit toward those who trust in him.”¹⁵⁹ In saying this, however, Luther did not give up his predestinarian view.¹⁶⁰ Luther felt a burden to uphold the depravity of the will and feared any conception of freedom, meaning neutrality of the will.¹⁶¹ Luther was right to react against a works-based salvation and a belief that man could save himself without God's grace. However, is it not possible that the neutrality of the will can be denied, the fall and effects of sin on

¹⁵⁶ Jesus Himself, the ultimate revelation of God for Luther, is spoken of as a judge, a characteristic which would fall under the category of hidden for Luther.

¹⁵⁷ The tragedy of a logical conclusion, that only some are willed to be saved is countered by the idea of universalism. This idea still posits that God decrees those who are saved, but the conflict is seemingly avoided because God saves everyone. This would not work in Luther's system because of the demands of justice. The demands of justice in the Bible also preclude such a position on salvation.

¹⁵⁸ There is a place for speaking of God hidden, in the sense that we do not and cannot know everything about God, for He is beyond understanding. The problem arises when it is implied that the hidden God is actually different and other than the revealed God. This would make the revelation of God inconsistent with God's true character that we don't know. Thus, there is a lot about God that we don't understand, but it need not be seen as inconsistent with what the Bible does proclaim about Him.

¹⁵⁹ Luther, *Career of the Reformer III*, 140.

¹⁶⁰ Pannenberg claimed Luther changed his position to a freedom of the will later in life, but there is no objective evidence that supports this claim (McSorley, 356-357).

¹⁶¹ Forde, 55.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

man can be affirmed, *and* God can grant each sinner opportunity and ability to respond to the gospel?

A potential solution to this paradox might be an amendment of the view of the reception of grace with a possibility to refuse God's grace. Without such a nuance, one is left with utter determinism. Furthermore, if there is no choice, even unmeritorious, included in salvation, then it seems difficult to see God as the righteous judge. If God predestines the will, apart from any human contribution, then the fall of man was God's responsibility. If He does not, then the option is given to choose to serve or not to serve Him. The latter seems to be in accord with God's call for repentance throughout the Bible.

Allowing the human will a choice in salvation would still preserve a serious view of the sinfulness and depravity that has attached itself to human nature after the fall. In this model, man's freedom does not consist of power to overcome sin solely by his own will, but only through the power of God offered freely as a gift. The acceptance of the gift is not meritorious, and salvation is not earned. Moreover, God's omnipotence is not damaged, for it is His power that He extends to creation, granting them the actual power to effect history. His power is no less because He chooses not to overrule all wills but His own. Rather, His power is extended as it manifests itself in love. Through Jesus Christ, God's power is "made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Far from meaning that man can save himself, God shows that man can only be saved through Jesus Christ, and He beckons the weary to come to Him (Matt 11:28-30). The actuality and power of this very choice is explicit in a most famous text of the Bible, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16)."

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