

Perspective Digest

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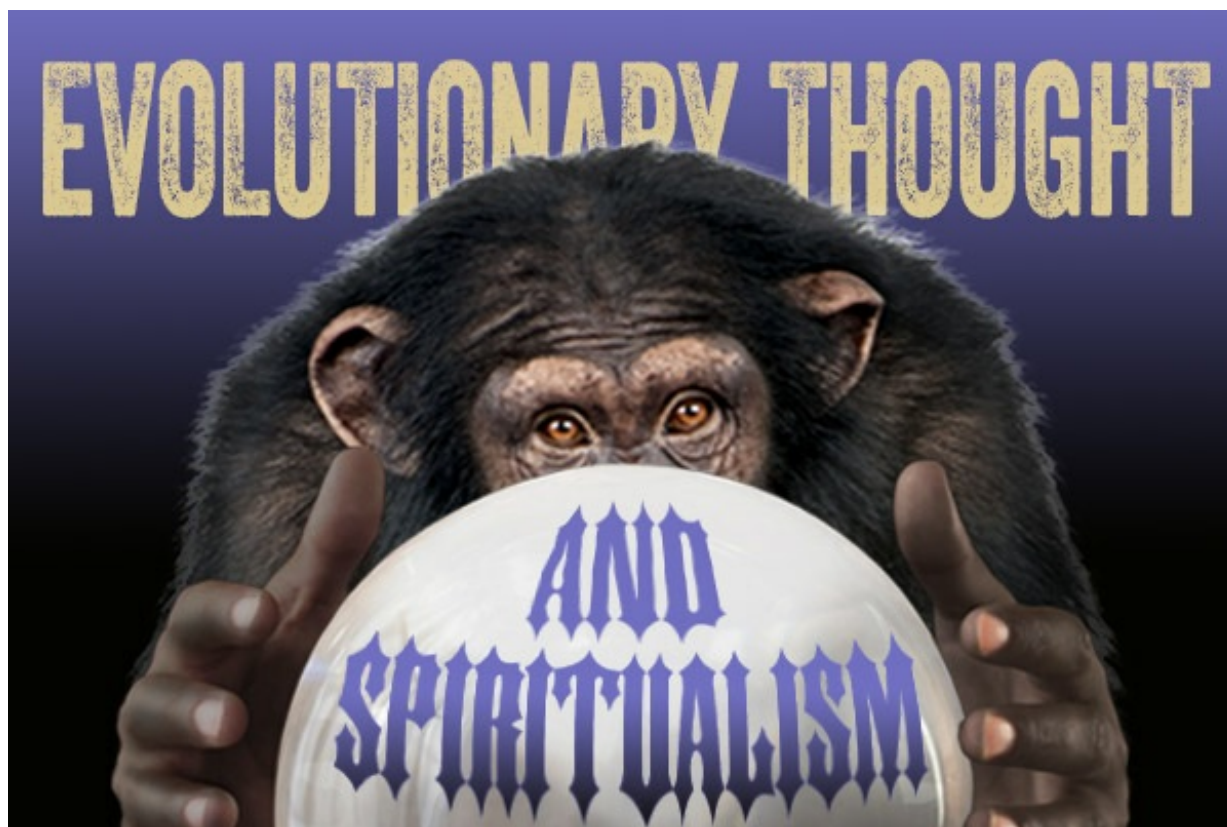


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Darwin's original evolutionary idea has itself evolved significantly over the years.

The Darwinian/neo-Darwinian theory of evolution has had a sweeping influence on contemporary thought. Its influence on the sciences has spilled beyond biology to chemistry, geology, physics, and engineering. In the humanities, it provides the model for understanding historical, social, and political change.

This theory has also influenced religion, but there the relationship has been less than friendly, since it makes claims that stand in direct conflict with the teaching of some of the major world religions. Hence, "despite the long theological dialogue with evolutionary theory, many people continue to view evolution as inherently antitheistic and inseparably wedded to a worldview that denies God and objective morality."¹ In Christianity, the flashpoint has frequently been the idea of creation, the notion that reality as we know it has its cause in the activity of a creator God. The debate, then, centers on issues regarding origins.

As important as the theory's impact on issues of origins is, there are equally pertinent issues regarding eschatology in evolutionary thinking. More specifically, evolutionary thought has impacted contemporary spiritualism. The Bible predicts an intense period of spiritualistic activities as the world's history draws to a close, and evolutionary thinking seems to provide the needed framework for these phenomena.

Two Popular Contemporary Themes

Evolution and spirituality are two topics that receive considerable scholarly and popular attention in contemporary culture. As to the influence of evolutionary thinking on both science and the humanities, recent polling in America, for example, shows that higher education consistently correlates with belief in evolution. "In the general population, 46 per cent of Americans believe that God created humans just as they are about 10,000 years ago, but only 25 per cent of people with a postgraduate degree believe this."² Equally significant is a CBS 2005 study, showing that a majority of Americans believe that it is possible to accept evolution while believing in God. Only 29 percent rejected the claim.³ The story is not significantly different in the popular media, where evolution is roundly presented as *the* truth.

Regarding spirituality, several authors have noted contemporary Western culture's fascination with the subject. Christopher Partridge writes extensively on the phenomenon of *occulture*, a term coined to depict the situation in which "Western societies, while becoming increasingly secular on one level are also permeated by a vast reservoir of spiritual ideas, beliefs, and practices drawn from a variety of traditions and places."⁴

Others, such as James A. Herrick, write about a New Religious Synthesis that has been occurring for the last three centuries, blending strands of religious thought and spawning in the United States alone between 1,000 and 2,000 new religious movements in the 20th century. There is also a rise of "an eclectic mix of religious and spiritual ideas, beliefs and practices" at the level of popular belief, notes Wade Clark Roof, providing as evidence the "widespread belief in angels and reincarnation; the appeal of religious and quasi-religious shrines, retreat centers, and theme parks; interest in metaphysical and theosophical teachings; prosperity theology and 'possibility thinking'; and large proportions of Americans reporting mystical experiences."⁵

It is legitimate to ask why the focus appears to have shifted to spirituality. Typically, spiritualism is connected with the belief that the living can conduct conversations with the spirits of the deceased, while spirituality addresses the concern of human beings with their spiritual relationship to the cosmos. But the connection between contemporary spirituality and spiritualism becomes immediately apparent when one recalls that modern spiritualism arose in the United States at the end of the 1840s as part of the larger culture's effort to reconcile science and religion. In the 19th century in the United States and Europe, the intersection of matter and spirit had been explored in experiments with mesmerism.

Since the 1960s, there has been a revival of spiritualism under the banner of what is called "synthetic spiritualities," such as the New Age Movement. And it is precisely in its new garb of contemporary spirituality that spiritualism draws close to evolution. Ellen G. White took notice that "spiritualism teaches 'that man is the creature of progression; that it is his destiny from his birth to progress, even to eternity, toward the Godhead,'"⁶ thereby seeing the connection between evolution and spiritualism. True to their roots in modern spiritualism, the new spiritualities seek to construct a worldview that integrates and harmonizes science with religion. Evolutionary thought has contributed to this constructive effort, and thereby forged an alliance between evolutionary thinking and spiritualism.

Spiritualism and the End Time

The Book of Revelation is the main apocalyptic writing in the New Testament and thus provides the natural place to look for end-time phenomena. The book's insights on spiritualism are set in the context of an overall eschatological conflict of cosmic proportions between good and evil, God and the devil. A key aspect of the devil's strategy in the conflict is the use of imitations and counterfeits designed to deceive God's faithful followers. For example, the divine Trinity introduced at the beginning of the book (Rev. 1:4, 5) has its satanic counterpart in the middle of the book (Revelation 12 and 13) consisting of the dragon or Satan, the sea beast, and the beast out of the earth. Similarly, an imitation of the lamb is also found in the sea beast.

Against this backdrop are found evil powers such as the dragon (Revelation 12), unclean spirits (16:13), and demons (18:2) as well as evil activities such as sorcery (9:21; 18:23), signs and wonders (13:13; 16:14; 19:20), and deception (2:20; 12:9; 13:14; 18:23; 20:3, 8, 10).

The Dragon

The great red dragon, the brain behind all the evil powers, is also called the serpent of old, the devil, and Satan. The dragon deceives the world directly as well as through his ally, the land beast (12:9; 13:14), in association with an unclean and demonic spirit coming out of his mouth (16:13). This is going to occur in the last stages of earth's history, namely in connection with the seven last plagues. The depiction of the dragon as serpent requires a brief comment. The evil horses of the sixth trumpet have their power in their mouths and in their tails, which are like serpents (9:19). Since in both Egyptian and Persian religions, snakes had demonic force, the presence of a snake at the tip of the tail "injuring" people suggests a universal picture of demonic activity.

Unclean Spirits and Demons

Unclean spirits are mentioned in Revelation 16:13 and 18:2, where they are connected to Babylon. The description of the drying up of Babylon's Euphrates in Revelation 16:13 is part of the sixth plague, and in Revelation

18:2 demons and unclean spirits inhabit Babylon. Revelation 16:14 depicts these unclean spirits as demons that perform miraculous but counterfeit signs, messengers with a “deceptive message” whose aim is to lead people into worshiping false gods by means of their counterfeit miracles. “For the end-time, this would point to a strong role for spiritualism unifying the world for a common cause.”⁷

Evil Activities

Prominent among the evil activities occurring toward the end of time is sorcery. The word family for this activity occurs strongly in the Book of Revelation (four times) with the only use elsewhere in the New Testament found in Galatians 5:20. Lexical definitions of the term associate it closely with magic. Magic is the science of the occult, the art of bringing about results beyond human power by superhuman agencies. Revelation 9:21; 18:23; 21:8; and 22:15 evidence widespread practice of sorcery at the end time. Closely connected to sorcery are the workings of signs and wonders associated with both the false prophet and the land beast (19:20), and with demonic spirits (16:14). Ultimately, the practice of sorcery and miraculous signs and wonders in Revelation has the goal of deception. Thus the great signs that the land beast performs (13:14) deceive the inhabitants of the earth and are mentioned again in Revelation 19:20. These signs are described in terms of occult activities.

Evolution and the Occult

It is certainly impossible to spell out in great detail the forms that the Book of Revelation’s predicted occult phenomena might take in the time of the end. But contemporary evolutionary thinking clearly has a noteworthy affinity to the occult. This contemporary connection between evolution and the occult has a long, checkered history that cannot be fully developed here.

But to give a needed brief account: Darwinian evolution arose out of the ashes of a long, deconstructive frontal attack on the Christian worldview. Renaissance scholars such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) and Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) were known for their deep interest in occult Greek and Egyptian teachings contained in mystical works. Among the emphases in mystical teaching that filtered through Western culture and shaped popular thinking about the supernatural were the following: a pantheistic view that saw divinity in everything and an unspeakable and indescribable view of divinity that made mysticism the highest spiritual experience.⁸ Equally relevant was the mystical view of humankind as the product of a long spiritual evolutionary process.

Together with a developing interest in Kabbalistic teaching, there began a curiosity in a mystical/magical worldview, which in turn received a boost from Neoplatonic philosophy already becoming influential among European humanists and intellectuals. Neoplatonism taught that even spirits could sometimes reveal the secrets of the cosmos to the diligent seeker of truth. This intermingling of science and magic, fueled by Neoplatonism, became evident in the flourishing interest in astrology and alchemy during the 16th century. Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), Tycho Brahe (1546-1601), and Isaac Newton (1642-1727) were key figures in these developments.

One significant consequence of the blending of Neoplatonism and science was the development of a sense of a primitive core of all religions, and a search for a universally harmonious theological system. Hence the basis for religious pluralism was born, and with it the subsequent development, during the modern period, of biblical criticism through the influence of such persons as Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677), John Locke (1632-1704), and David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874).

Evolution and Pantheism

In the wake of biblical criticism during the modern period, the biblical view of origins was one of the first casualties. Following modernity’s critique of the Bible and its worldview of creation, fall, and redemption, it was evident that a new explanation of the human condition would be needed. Charles Darwin’s evolutionary thoughts in *The Origin of Species* (1859) provided a watershed moment in the West’s understanding of life’s origins and development.

Darwin’s early defenders had a clear spiritual vision for evolution. T. H. Huxley (1825-1895), Francis Galton (1822-1911), and Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) all read into Charles Darwin’s theory a humanly directed evolutionary *spiritual* future for the human race. T. H. Huxley’s grandson, Sir Julian Huxley (1887-1975), carried the religious implications of Darwin’s theory much further with his “transhumanism” project. Here, humans will control the

evolutionary process to transcend themselves and create a new humanity capable of enhanced aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual experiences. Spiritually, Huxley's transhumanism was "to teach people the techniques of achieving spiritual experience (after all, one can acquire the technique of dancing or tennis, so why not of mystical ecstasy or spiritual peace?)."9

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), with whom Julian Huxley corresponded, is deemed to be perhaps the 20th century's greatest advocate of spiritual evolution. His interest in both science and religion led him to pursue relentlessly a program in which "religion and evolution should neither be confused nor divorced. They are destined to form one single continuous organism, in which their respective lives prolong, are dependent on, and complete one another, without being identified or lost. . . . Since it is in our age that the duality has become so markedly apparent, it is for us to effect a synthesis."10

Teilhard's commitment to promote a new understanding of holiness after World War I meant for him that Christians needed to learn to recognize and revere the sacredness of matter and the cosmos. As he saw it, "the experience of the cosmos is a necessary dimension of human experience that must be integrated into the Christian faith."11 The core of Teilhard's mysticism is a "communion with God through earth," based on a new synthesis in which "the human being is united with the Absolute, with God, by means of the unification of the universe."12

David Lewin observes, "Rather than supposing that the spiritual life supersedes the material, the historical and the experiential dimensions of being, Teilhard points to their confluence in a unity that establishes the irreducible meaning of every moment and every place. God is thus all in all."13 Essentially, we arrive in a universe in which there is only one substance, which is at once God and nature, body, and spirit (or matter and energy). Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), and Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) include the distinguished list of thinkers who embraced some form of monistic, pantheistic thinking.

Evolution and Spiritual Consciousness Today

The monistic, pantheistic influence of the modern period set the stage for the new face of spiritualism—the new spirituality. The pivotal role of evolution in this process has not been missed.

"Synthetic spiritualities, such as those found in the New Age movement, seek to construct a world-view that integrates and harmonizes science and religion. Evolution becomes an overarching concept that incorporates the sense of deep time and imbues the development of a global spiritual consciousness as an evolutionary advance for the cosmos. Many here are prompted by the visionary theology of Teilhard de Chardin. . . . Others in the New Age movement seek to integrate the mystery articulated in Hinduism and Buddhism with advanced discoveries in physics, such as indeterminacy and quantum theory."14

An amazing confluence of evolutionary thought, Eastern mysticism, and physics is what has been unfolding before our eyes. A few quotes will illustrate the point. Paul Davies, a well-known physicist, cosmologist, and astrobiologist remarks:

"In the first quarter of this [twentieth] century two momentous theories were proposed: the theory of relativity and quantum theory. From them sprang most of twentieth-century physics. But the new physics soon revealed more than simply a better model of the physical world. Physicists began to realize that their discoveries demanded a radical reformulation of the most fundamental aspects of reality. They learned to approach their subject in totally unexpected and novel ways that seem to turn common sense on its head and find closer accord with mysticism than materialism."15

Similarly, James Herrick refers to scientists who believe that when physicists and astronomers probe the deep recesses of the universe, they find an indefinite and apparently infinite field of energy—a vacuum or void. Quantum physicists who speak of this void or vacuum see it as similar to the Buddhist concept of *Sunyata* and conclude: "The ineffable vacuum or void is, moreover, the ground of all true religious experience. . . . The void, then, is that ultimate and divine ground of being experienced by mystics."16 Herrick quotes scientists Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall who conclude that the vacuum has the same characteristics as consciousness, and therefore, believe that religion's perennial question of who humans are has received a scientific answer: "Each one of us is an excitation of the vacuum, an individual being on the sea of Being."17 Furthermore, from the perspective of particle physics, these two

authors suggest that of the only two sorts of particles that make up the universe, bosons and fermions, the former must be the *spiritual* or mental particles.

Conclusion

Darwin's original evolutionary idea has evolved significantly over the years. Besides the changes within the field of biology itself that led to neo-Darwinism, evolutionary thinking has expanded to the point that it now underlies several academic disciplines in the sciences and humanities. The relationship between evolutionary thinking and physics in particular is potent. In the process, evolutionary thought has spawned a speculative, pantheistic metaphysics that sees mind, nature, and society to be one and the same. In the realm of religion, these developments have given rise to renewed interest in mysticism and spirituality, providing a new and respectable face to spiritualism.

For Christians, and Seventh-day Adventists in particular, these developments are remarkable in view of the Book of Revelation's predicted rise in spiritualism at the time of the end. In this regard, one cannot help wondering at the near-simultaneous appearing of Darwinism, modern spiritualism, and the Advent Movement around the middle of the 19th century!

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Contemporary neo-atheistic and even some biblical interpretations offer challenging innovative twists and argumentation.

“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).¹ For biblically thinking Christians, knowing Christ existentially means eternal life. Baptist pastor Jeremy LaBorde rightly states, “What you believe to be true will control you, whether it’s true or not.”²

Richard Rice aptly observes: “Our understanding of God has enormous practical significance. . . . What we think of God and how we respond to Him are closely related. An inaccurate view of God can have disastrous effect on personal religious experience. We could never love a hostile, tyrannical being. . . . And we could not respect a mild, indulgent figure who never took us seriously. Our personal religious experience can be healthy only if we hold an adequate conception of God.”³

Happiness and balance in life depend on the right picture of God. However, recent attacks on God’s character in different forms—not only by atheists but even by Christian thinkers—have influenced many, and it leads to a realization of the importance of theodicy, which is a combination of two Greek words, *theos* (“God”) and *diké* (“justice”). Theodicy refers to a discussion of the problem of evil and a defense of the justice of God in the context of the existence of evil.

Atheism in My Life

Atheism was part of my personal journey even though I was never an atheist; for almost 40 years, I was confronted daily with this ideology. I was born and grew up in an atheistic state (the former Czechoslovakia, today the Czech Republic, one of the strongholds of atheism) and went to atheistic schools. All ideology was atheistic and based upon the evolutionary theory and the premise of the survival of the fittest.

Even though I was from a Seventh-day Adventist family, one of the integral members of our family was my uncle, who lived with us and was a staunch atheist. He tried hard to persuade me that the evolutionary hypothesis was the best explanation for the origins of life and that to believe in God was nonsense, believable only by the weak,

uneducated, and aged.

My story is connected even with persecution under the atheistic government. I was ridiculed in schools for being a Seventh-day Adventist Christian; my father had immense difficulties at work for his beliefs, especially in regard to Sabbath observance; my father-in-law was imprisoned for his faith. During my studies, I had to listen to many atheistic lectures and read atheistic books. In my university studies in Prague, I had some of the best Marxist philosophers teach me their ideology and philosophy. I was constantly confronted with atheism.

I have learned that atheism is also a kind of religion that is based upon reason as the highest authority. In such a system, evolutionary theory is untouchable, and some of atheistic thinkers—Lenin, Marx, Engels, Nietzsche, Sartre, and others—are “worshiped.”

Today neoatheists—and even some Christian scholars, theologians, and apologists—are not working contextually and theologically with the biblical material. They are highly selective and retell the biblical story with their own twist in order to ridicule the Christian faith in God and who He is in order to deny His existence. They do not do justice to the original intent of the biblical text and to the overall actual biblical picture of God. But everything in spiritual life depends on a true picture of God.

Classical Atheism—Main Claim and Reasoning

Atheists' principal assertion is that religion is a human invention, that it is wrong, and only for the weak. “Man makes religion,” Karl Marx famously said: “religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. . . . Religion is the opium of the people!”⁴ Lenin claimed: “‘Religion is the opium of the people’: this saying of Marx is the cornerstone of the entire ideology of Marxism about religion.”⁵

Often people found answers to their hard questions in atheism. The evolutionary hypothesis provided an easy solution to the issue of the origin of life. The strongest arguments against Christianity, however, were based on the injustice in the world and the suffering of the innocents. How could a good and omnipotent God allow concentration camps, torture, rape, and violence against women and children? Because these evils exist, it is asserted, God does not exist. Atheists point with contempt to countless religious wars, the Dark Ages, the Inquisition, and the teachings of the Christian churches, such as the doctrine of hell, the intercessory ministry of the saints, and the belief in miracles.

Bertrand Russell explained that if one wanted to be intellectually honest and scientifically informed, such a person could not believe in God. He also rejected Christianity because of the doctrine of hell: “There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ’s moral character,” he wrote, “and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture; and the Christ of the Gospels, if you could take Him as His chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that.”⁶

Ellen G. White has a powerful comment on the damaging influence of a wrong understanding of the doctrine of hell: “It is beyond the power of the human mind to estimate the evil which has been wrought by the heresy of eternal torment. The religion of the Bible, full of love and goodness, and abounding in compassion, is darkened by superstition and clothed with terror. When we consider in what false colors Satan has painted the character of God, can we wonder that our merciful Creator is feared, dreaded, and even hated?”⁷

Classical atheists usually did not paint a dark picture of God. It was enough for them to assert God’s non-existence and the folly of believing in God. Some even expressed their frustration and nostalgia, because the reasons to believe in God were not good enough, even though the human heart longs for a loving God in whom to rest. Thomas Hardy in his poem “God’s Funeral” expresses the melancholy that God is dead; Matthew Arnold in the poem “Dover Beach” eloquently describes these strange feelings when one loses the certainty and beauty of faith.

One would expect that with the fall of the Iron Curtain and communism in 1989 and the 1990s that the atheistic ideology would have died as well. While the ideology of atheism and its propaganda was losing ground, however, it was resurrected especially after September 11, 2001, because people realized as never before the passion of organized religion for power.

Atheism is now reviving and working in more subtle ways. It has also become quite aggressive and is still built on the foundation of the Darwinian theory of evolution. This theory has also nurtured the evolution of religion from many gods to a more pure form of one God and then to the pinnacle of the evolution of religion—no God. For the atheist, one's own reason and scientific worldview decide everything.

Neo-Atheism

With the rise of neo-atheism comes a new phenomenon. The naturalistic origin of life is now mixed with aggressive attacks on religion, including especially Islam and Christianity. They repeat the old atheistic arguments with better scientific reasoning and new tactics. They try to demonstrate that not only is it foolish to believe in God, but that religion is evil, dangerous, and harmful. They viciously attack the God of the Old Testament as well as religion in general, yet they express their anger with charm and elegance. The writings of four principles represent neo-atheism in the world today:

- Richard Dawkins is the most famous of the four, and a prolific author. Emeritus professor of evolutionary biology at the University of Oxford, he aggressively challenges the Christian religion. Dawkins formulated the most articulate and vicious attack on the God of the Bible. "The God of the Old Testament," he wrote, "is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."⁸

Marcion in the second century A.D. had already expressed negative thoughts about the God of the Old Testament, but Dawkins plays *forte fortissimo* with the same melody and strongly claims that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures is a moral monster. Moreover, Dawkins advocates an opinion that everything has only a biological origin. He also criticizes the teaching of hell by many Christians.

- Sam Harris also is a critic of religion. His first book, *The End of Faith*, fueled a debate about the validity of religion. In his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, he takes a stand against child sacrifices to bloodthirsty gods and argues that the atoning sacrifice of Jesus for humanity's transgressions is reminiscent of these perverted religious practices. Then he added *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* because he realized that people think that science and evolution have nothing to say on the subject of morality and the formation of human values. He tries to answer this puzzle through science, because otherwise people's ethical behavior is one of the primary justifications for the Christian faith.

- Christopher Hitchens, recently deceased, was a polemicist and journalist who made a direct case against religion. The title of his main book eloquently describes the reason and his aim for writing the book *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. This phrase is a play on a common Muslim saying that means, "God/Allah is great." Hitchens denies the relevancy of any religion and defines religion as a social poison. As a result of his reading of the major religious texts, he states that religion is a manmade wish, a cause of dangerous sexual control, and a distortion of our understanding of origins. He argues for a secular life based on science and reason.

- Daniel Dennett, a Tufts University cognitive scientist, published in 1991 a thought-provoking book *Consciousness Explained*, and anyone reading it will agree that to explain human consciousness is not an easy task. Dennett explains everything from the naturalistic viewpoint. He claims that human consciousness, rather than being "hard-wired" into the brain's innate machinery, is more like software that runs on the hardware of the human brain and is largely the product of cultural evolution.

In another of his books, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, Dennett argues for the power of the theory of natural selection. Populist argumentation for undergirding Darwin's theory of evolution leads him to the conclusion that the evolutionary hypothesis is like a powerful acid, a "universal solvent, capable of cutting right to the heart of everything in sight" which dissolves everything. At the end, he states that "the truly dangerous aspect of Darwin's idea is its seductiveness."⁹ Dennett in his discussion of morality and religion claims that Christians manufacture terror, psychological abuse, hell, and phobias.¹⁰

The views of these neo-atheistic thinkers and scientists are founded on naive views of human nature and the denial of the power of sin. This positivistic understanding of our nature is doomed to fail as the history of humanity demonstrates. The selfishness of the human heart is naturally incurable and is not going from bad to good but from bad to worse. In Communism everyone was considered equal, but some people (members of the leading party)

were *more* equal. Corruption, unfortunately, is a notorious problem in any political system.

It is true that many crimes have been committed and wars fought in the name of God or Allah. (As Seventh-day Adventists, we strongly protest the misuse of religion—the Inquisition, slavery, terrorist attacks, etc.). Violence in the name of God is a black spot, a curse, and a plague in the history of Christianity and brings great shame on Christians. But atrocities have also been committed by atheistic dictators as a result of a denial of God: Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, and Mao Tse-tung.

One telling illustration from the French Revolution should suffice. In 1793, when religion was replaced by reason, as Madame Roland, an advocate of democratic principles, was going to her execution, she bowed mockingly toward the statue of liberty in the Place de la Revolution and uttered the words for which she is now remembered: “O Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name!”¹¹

The inhumanity, in fact, is a common element in sinful human nature, regardless of whether perpetrators are religious or atheist. The sinful heart cannot be changed merely by education, better economy, or different circumstances. Only a true conversion performed by the power of God’s grace, His Spirit, and His Word can ultimately affect the human heart. No true unselfish love is possible on the basis of biological inclinations. At best, human behavior may demonstrate altruistic love, but even it is tinged with selfishness. From a consistent evolutionary perspective, it is impossible for genuine self-sacrifice or morality to spring from the natural heart. According to atheistic ideology, only the most powerful and strongest survive in the end.

Dark Pictures of God’s Character by Christian Theologians

Besides these four spokesmen for neo-atheism, some Christian thinkers paint a dark picture of God with their pragmatic and biblical-theological arguments that have appeared in current literature. Difficult texts of the biblical narratives are elaborated upon, usually with the author’s own interpretation.

Theological constructs are many and one must seriously ask if they best describe and explain the meaning of difficult biblical texts. For example, the biblical scholar Julia O’Brien wrestles with images of God as “an abusive husband,” “authoritarian father,” and “angry warrior.”¹² David Penchansky entitles the six chapters of his book as follows: “The Insecure God,” “The Irrational God,” “The Vindictive God,” “The Dangerous God,” “The Malevolent God,” and “The Abusive God.”¹³ Readers of the Holy Scriptures sincerely struggle with such descriptions of God. One of the strongest attacks on the loving character of God is expressed by Bart D. Ehrman, the leading authority on the early church, New Testament textual criticism, and the life of Jesus, in his book *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*.

The most popular arguments for putting God down are the following:

- God is not good because there is so much innocent suffering in the world, and He is blamed for all evil;
- Abraham is told to sacrifice his own son because God is a bloodthirsty monster demanding a human sacrifice (Genesis 22);
- Child abuse—42 children were killed by two bears because they were ridiculing the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 2:23–25);
- God is not great or good, contrary to most popular religious sayings;
- Joshua committed genocide in Canaan;
- Wars were perpetrated in the name of God and under His command;
- God is cruel because He allows people to suffer, for example, punishing the Egyptians with 10 plagues including the killing of their firstborn sons;
- God is a jealous and egocentric being in His expectation that other gods need to be destroyed;
- Ethnocentrism and racism, calling Abraham, for example, founder of a specific nation to be the bearer of light and cursing Canaan;
- Bride-price and sex scandals;
- Inferiority of women to men;
- Institution of Levirate marriage;
- Polygamy in the Old Testament;
- Old Testament legislation is filled with violence, such as an eye for an eye and capital punishment;

- Incest of Lot with his two daughters;
- Rape and violence in the Book of Judges;
- Life of David—warrior, polygamist, murderer, adulterer, yet a man after the heart of God;
- Innocent suffering of Job for proving “nothing” in the end.

Epicurus, a Greek philosopher of the third century B.C., declared: “Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to. If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent. If he can, but does not want to, he is wicked. If God can abolish evil, and God really wants to do it, why is there evil in the world?”¹⁴ Because evil conflicts with the existence of God, many rush to easy, simplistic, and false conclusions: either God does not exist or He does not care. How can an allegedly perfect, loving, and omnipotent God exist with so much evil, suffering, and death in the world?

What is to be done with these issues and the vast atheistic and theological literature on the biblical picture of God? Making God immoral or impotent is nothing new, but the recent neo-atheistic and even some biblical interpretations come with innovative twists and argumentation that are disturbing, shocking, and humiliating.

The Book of Job Scandal

The innocent suffering of Job is the most notorious and significant objection to belief in the goodness and fairness of God. One must ask, what is the primary purpose of this ancient document? Is the author intending to answer the question of why the innocent suffer, as is usually asserted? Is it a story about the wager between God and Satan, about who is right and who will win?

Bart Ehrman states his negative response to these questions emphatically: “God himself caused the misery, pain, agony, and loss that Job experienced. . . . And to what end? For ‘no reason’—other than to prove to the Satan that Job wouldn’t curse God even if he had every right to do so. . . . God did this to him in order to win a bet with the Satan. . . . But God is evidently above justice and can do whatever he pleases if he wants to prove a point.”¹⁵

But what God *allows* He does not *cause* or *do*. The biblical text reveals that it was Satan who brought on Job’s calamities and not God (Job 1:12; 2:6, 7). God is the Creator of life and created everything very good (Gen. 1:31). Evil comes from another source (Matt. 13:38, 39).

The most crucial issue in the book is not Job’s suffering; neither is it the capricious or private wager between God and Satan, because the whole drama of the book begins in heaven when the sons of God assemble before the sovereign Lord (Job 1:6). In this cosmic scenario, the Great Controversy unfolds, thus signaling that the problem is universal. The recognition of this cosmic dimension is the crucial issue.

Satan opposes God, pronouncing Job righteous (1:8; 2:3) and attacks Him with a frightful and seemingly innocent question: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (1:9). This cynical inquiry introduces the whole plot of the book, because Satan categorically denies that God is just in justifying Job and proclaiming him perfect. At first glance, the remark appears to be directed against Job, but in reality it is an attack upon God by trying to disprove His statement about Job. Thus the main theme of the Book of Job is God’s justice—the trustworthiness of His word. The real drama turns on the fact that God is for us and proclaims us just, and the Book of Job is really a quest for God’s visible presence in life.

How can Satan be defeated? This question needs to be answered to shed light on the whole issue of theodicy and the conflict in the Book of Job. Surprisingly, Satan cannot be defeated by logic because each argument has a counterargument. To refute someone only with external facts has no lasting results. If Satan could be defeated through debate, God would have done it a long time ago, for He is the Truth (Ex. 34:6; Deut. 32:4; Ps. 31:5; Jer. 10:10; John 17:17).

Can Satan be defeated by force? Nothing would please him more than to face force in whatever form. This is exactly what he wants to prove about God. He wants to accuse Him of using force, but he lacks evidence; he cannot demonstrate it. Of course, Satan could be silenced by the power of God if God chose to do so. The omnipotent Creator is also the mighty Warrior (Ex. 15:3; Isa. 42:13; Jer. 20:11). In that case, however, God would be accused of not playing fair because He is stronger and thus has an advantage over Satan. The Great Controversy needs to be won—but in a different way, by moral power.

Satan can be defeated only by someone who is *weaker* than he is, and God can do it only with pure ammunition—love, truth, justice, freedom, and order. Satan draws different weapons from an evil arsenal: ambition,

pride, selfishness, lies, deceit, violence, anger, hatred, prejudice, racism, terrorism, addictions, manipulation, etc. How often it is questioned why Almighty God allows tragedies to happen in the lives of good people, forgetting that God's victory is not won by power or force. A gracious Lord does not act like Superman. He wins by humility.

This is the reason for the incarnation. The God of the whole universe had to become weak in order to defeat evil. Only with the frailties of humanity could He defeat Satan. On the cross of Calvary, the Creator God demonstrated His love, truth, and justice. The suffering God, hanging on the cross, is a victorious God. He lived a life in total dependence on and in relationship with His Father.

What a paradox! Sin began with pride but was overcome by humility (Phil. 2:5–11).

In the story of Job, only Job himself, who was weaker than the devil, could refute Satan's argument, defeat him, and thus prove that God was right when He justified him and stood by Job's side. Job overcame the devil not because he was so good or strong (Job 10:6; 14:17), but because he totally surrendered his life to God. He did this in full confidence and trust in the God who gave him strength and victory (13:15; 19:25–27; 42:5). Paul says eloquently, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

When Job demonstrated that he loved God above all, God's standing by him was vindicated. His justice prevailed. God is just in justifying us because His grace and presence, even though very often unseen and silent, sustains His people. God demonstrates that He rules in love and justice. The beauty of God's character shines brilliantly because God is a God of love, truth, and justice.

The Christian's Primary Task

The first task of the followers of Christ is to present to the world an accurate picture of God. This is the work that needs to be accomplished before the second coming of Christ, because Satan has grossly distorted the character of God from the very beginning (Gen. 3:1–6). Postmodern attacks on God, His character, and the Scriptures are more sophisticated and stronger than ever. The task of Christ's disciple is to be a witness for God and let His glory shine through his or her character (Rev. 14:4).

Revelation 18:1 states that at the end of history the glory of God will shine throughout the world. The last work of God's people will be to let God illuminate the world with His glory through them. This will be the most powerful argument in favor of God's existence and love, and His true character will be defended. We are a spectacle to the world and to the whole universe (1 Cor. 4:9). God's people need to live to the glory of God, reflecting in their characters the loving character of God.

According to 2 Thessalonians 1:3 to 5, the believers' living faith and love are the evidence that God is true and His judgments are just. Ellen G. White explains the Christian's role in the parable about the 10 virgins: "It is the darkness of misapprehension of God that is enshrouding the world. Men are losing their knowledge of His character. It has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. At this time a message from God is to be proclaimed, a message illuminating in its influence and saving in its power. His character is to be made known. Into the darkness of the world is to be shed the light of His glory, the light of His goodness, mercy, and truth. . . . *The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love.* The children of God are to manifest His glory. In their own life and character they are to reveal what the grace of God has done for them."¹⁶

Many biblical texts affirm God's abundant love (Ex. 34:6, 7; Ps. 100:5; 117:2; 136:1–26; Rom. 5:5, 8; 1 John 3:1; 4:16). Personally experiencing God's goodness (Ps. 34:8) leads to repentance (Rom. 2:4). The God of the Bible is the God of love, truth, justice, freedom, and order.

The best proof of God's existence and His goodness is our personal experience with Him. Only our appreciation of Christ's ultimate sacrifice for us on the Cross can give inner peace and assurance of His love in times when calamities, struggles, and tragedies of life strike. Christ-like Christians are the best proof for God's presence. Loving Christians are the ultimate argument for the God of love.

In times of great suffering, there are no easy answers. In those situations, we need to focus on the big picture of God's revelation that ultimately testifies about the goodness of God. An inscription was found on a wall in a cellar in Cologne, Germany, where Jews hid from the Nazis. The anonymous author left behind the following profound words: "I believe in the sun even when it does not shine. I believe in love, even when I do not feel it. I believe in God, even when He is silent."¹⁷

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God's kingdom restored will truly be worth the wait.

Timetables for last-day events are periodically published. At the close of the 20th century, some predicted that the Earth would disintegrate at the turn of the millennium. The year 2000 came, and this didn't happen. Then it was suggested that the calculation was wrong, and 2001 was the actual beginning of the new millennium. But we are still here—and the media continue to ridicule.

Yet biblical prophecies portraying this world's end still draw attention. Turmoil of war ever looms. Skepticism is prevalent everywhere—which Jesus anticipated (“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” [Luke 18:8].)¹ The modern era has been one of ever-deepening loss of belief in the authority of Scripture and the church. Many now think humans are only “machines” alone in the universe. A sense of the ultimate meaninglessness of life is pervasive, the ultimate outlook grim. Everything seems to be destined for death with little hope for anything beyond this life. Belief in heaven and eternal life are dismissed as childish in this skeptical period in Western history.

Modern ideas have attempted to take the place of God: belief in progress, politics, and Enlightenment optimism—secular ideas of salvation that all problems can be solved, given enough time. Biblical writers suggest a different perspective, insisting that behind the shadows God is moving all things toward His promise to make all things new. The books of Isaiah, Daniel, and Revelation give assurance that the reign of the evil dragon will finally end and God's kingdom will be established. Biblical prophets dare give full weight to the radical gravity of sin because they know the remedy.

Understanding Eschatology

The way we understand the ultimate destiny of this world will affect our whole way of thinking, with repercussions in every area of life. For example, canonical writers describe a literal historical beginning of this world and a literal worldwide flood in Genesis 1 to 11. The Genesis 1 to 11 narratives are never considered myth. On that basis, they argue for a literal end of this world and the restoring of God's kingdom, involving gripping issues such as the final judgment and eternal life.

These are not unrelated, independent topics. Each event has a definite bearing upon the others. The doctrine of eschatology deals with God's final, definitive acts that lead right into the restoration of His kingdom.

Attention to "the last things" has always been a paramount Seventh-day Adventist concern, not merely a hypothesis of the future. Prophecy is no human fabrication. Nor is it a mysterious secret knowledge available to an elite few. The voice of God comes through the prophets as they nail down the certainty of a future with their oft-repeated, spine-tingling "thus says the Lord!" New Testament writers display the same conviction, persistently referring to the second coming of Jesus. "Nevertheless we, according to His promise," wrote Peter, "look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13, NKJV).

Human expectations and hopes are always tentative because we cannot control future events. The most ardent hopes are often disappointed. We are constantly faced with possibilities and probabilities, never certainties. The unfolding of history is complicated, involving a myriad of factors out of human control.

Bible writers even give pointed warnings against trying to penetrate the future. However, their warnings are always against the *source* of the information: "Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 19:31). God refers to the foolishness and futility of this kind of activity: "Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, and He who formed you from the womb: 'I am the Lord, who makes all things, Who stretches out the heavens all alone, Who spreads abroad the earth by Myself; Who frustrates the signs of the babblers, and drives diviners mad; Who turns wise men backward, and makes their knowledge foolishness; Who confirms the word of His servant, and performs the counsel of His messengers; Who says to Jerusalem, "You shall be inhabited," To the cities of Judah, "You shall be built," and I will raise up her waste places"' (Isa. 44:24–26, NKJV).

Any legitimate study of the future must be grounded in God's Word. Only of God can it be said that He "let none of his words fall to the ground" (1 Sam. 3:19). Contra "open theism," God insists that He knows the future, claiming that this is proof of His divinity: "'Present your case,' the Lord says. 'Bring forward your strong arguments,' the King of Jacob says. 'Let them bring forth and declare to us what is going to take place; as for the former events, declare what they were, that we may consider them, and know their outcome; or announce to us what is coming. Declare the things that are going to come afterward, that we may know that you are gods; indeed, do good or evil, that we may anxiously look about us and fear together. . . . "'Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning And from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, "My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure"; Calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it"' (Isa. 41:21–23; 46:9–11, NASB).

God's prediction of the future is not a counterpart of secular fortune telling. He is not seeking to satisfy our curiosity. Prophecy always penetrates to the core of our existence, compelling a confrontation with the King of kings. The promise of the future is inextricably linked with the coming of Christ. Christian expectation is not connected to various unrelated events in the future, but to Jesus Christ Himself. Prophecy doesn't deal with whom one should marry, how the rent will be paid, or who the next president will be. Nor is it a secret knowledge available only to a privileged few. It is grounded in Christ, who has come once as Savior and who will come again as King to save "those who are eagerly waiting for Him" (Heb. 9:28). This is the climax of human history, distinguishing it from secular futurism.

On that day we are promised that all things will be made right. Everything will be disrobed before God and before the Lamb. No longer will evil be called good and good evil; no longer will bitter be made sweet and sweet bitter. The end of all human deceptions will reveal life as it really is. There will be no more justification of terrible persecutions in the name of God, no more rationalization of racial prejudice. All excuses will be scrutinized, all motives known. And God will make everything right.

In light of this, we are called to live thoughtfully with regard to the future. The "last days" are not to produce nervousness or anxious preoccupation. We are counseled to "keep sane and sober" (1 Peter 4:7, RSV). According to Scripture, news of the future should lead to clarity of insight, rather than moments of anxiety and unrest, as Paul instructs the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 2:2). We are told to gird up our minds (1 Peter 1:13, RSV), and be prepared with lamps burning (Luke 12:35, RSV). Expectation requires an alert, untiring watchfulness, a sharp spiritual eye sensitive to the present and the future. Paul urges, perhaps recalling Christ's parable of the sleeping bridal party: "so

then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober” (1 Thess. 5:6, NASB). “Since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation” (vs. 8, NASB).

But we are still here. And our expectation is sometimes taunted because Jesus hasn’t come yet. The issue of “the delay” needs to be faced. After all Jesus *did* promise (2,000 years ago), “Behold, I come quickly” (Rev. 22:12, KJV).

Contemporary Interest in Eschatology

Since the 19th century, when acknowledging the millennia lapsing since Jesus made His promise to come soon, some Christians have argued that God’s kingdom must have already appeared, accomplished as human problems are solved. Through human genius, God’s kingdom is already being established. Eventually, it is assumed, with evolutionary optimism, all problems will be conquered (disease, poverty, with political cooperation halting all wars, etc.).

Other Christians have decided that the New Testament teaches that there would only be a short time between Christ’s resurrection and His second advent. Thus, so many centuries later, the New Testament must be completely outdated. The Second Advent must have occurred at Christ’s resurrection, when the earth shook, rocks were split, tombs were opened, and the dead rose (Matt. 27:51–53). This was the breakthrough of the kingdom of God. Since the cosmic event has not occurred, these gripping supernatural events at the Resurrection are interpreted as the “real end.”

Some Christians argue for a “timeless end time,” which sees the Second Coming as a symbol of the endless seriousness of every moment of life. There will be no dramatic end of history, no literal, cosmic coming of Christ; but rather a decisive moment for each person marked by some crisis in life when the actual gravity of the nearness of God is experienced individually.

Christ’s earlier promise to come again and restore God’s kingdom has obviously not happened; thus, Christ’s words need to be reinterpreted. These modern attempts consequently deny the Second Advent as a literal, cosmic future event. This is dangerous, however, for it blurs what Scripture has described so explicitly, robbing the gospel of its glory. Biblical writers consistently present a literal, worldwide second coming of Jesus, grounded on salvation acts that have already occurred. God promises a real climax of history. Perhaps, the faith of past believers was not threatened by the delay because they recalled the way God has acted in the past.

Delay in the Old and New Testaments

Fulfillment of divine promises involves waiting all through Scripture.

In the Old Testament:

- Enoch preached the coming of Christ and the final judgment, yet he still awaits the second coming of Christ in heaven (Jude 14, 15).

- Noah warned of a coming flood for 120 years,² having never seen rain. Once he was shut in the ark, he waited another seven days for the promised deluge to start.

- Abraham was divinely promised offspring as numerous as the stars in the heavens, yet he waited until he was 100 years old for only the first of his promised multitude of heirs. He died believing the promise (Heb. 11:12, 13).

- Israel, captive slaves in Egypt, yearned hundreds of years for deliverance: “the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out” (Ex. 2:23, NKJV). God told Abraham that the exodus was hundreds of years ahead because “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (Gen. 15:16).

- Joseph did not realize the fulfillment of his dreams until after his brothers had sold him into slavery and he had spent years in prison.

- Many of the hymns Israel sang in worship pleaded for God to act: “I will say unto God my rock, Why hast thou forgotten me? Why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?” (Ps. 42:9, KJV); “How long, O God, will the adversary revile, and the enemy spurn Your name forever? Why do You withdraw Your hand, even Your right hand? From within Your bosom, destroy them” (74:10, 11). “How long?” presupposes a painful continuity of time, a waiting period for the saving work of God.

- In the time of Isaiah, God’s people again were waiting and watching: “‘Watchman, what of the night?’ The

watchman says, 'Morning comes, and also the night'" (Isa. 21:11, 12, RSV). The question implies that Israel had to accept delay.

- During the time of Ezekiel, the promised deliverance from Babylonian captivity was critical (Jer. 25:12, 13). God Himself addressed the issue: "'Son of man, what is this proverb that you people have about the land of Israel, which says, 'The days are prolonged, and every vision fails'? Tell them therefore, 'Thus says the Lord God: 'I will lay this proverb to rest, and they shall no more use it as a proverb in Israel.' But say to them, 'The days are at hand, and the fulfillment of every vision'"'" (Eze. 12:22, 23, NKJV).

For Israel in captivity, things were not improving, leading to doubts that the promises of deliverance would come true. But the Lord declared: "'The days are at hand, and the fulfillment of every vision'" (Eze. 12:23, NKJV). There must be no more mention of delay (vs. 25). When the critics complain that fulfillment is uncertain, the Lord insists that "'None of My words will be delayed any longer'" (vs. 28, NKJV). The continuity of time does not disqualify the Lord nor the reliability of His words.

- After his dramatic visions of the future, Daniel was told he must wait: "'But you, go your way till the end; for you shall rest, and will arise to your inheritance at the end of the days'" (Dan. 12:13, NKJV).

- Habakkuk wondered: "O Lord, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear? Even cry out to You, 'Violence!' And You will not save. Why do You show me iniquity, and cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; there is strife, and contention arises. Therefore the law is powerless, and justice never goes forth" (Hab. 1:2–4, NKJV).

- God's response to Jonah provides an important clue for why God delays judgment: "'Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?'" (Jonah 4:11, ESV).

In the New Testament:

- Martha and Mary questioned Jesus' delay when their brother was deathly ill: "'If you had been here, my brother would not have died'" (John 11:21, 32).

- Jesus' parable of the wedding party sleeping as the bridegroom tarried suggests a delay the wedding attendants hadn't reckoned with (Matt. 25:5). Significantly, this parable follows immediately after Jesus' discussion of the signs of the end (Matthew 24).

- In the Book of Acts, written after Christ's ascension following His resurrection, Peter already speaks of what is "'far off,'" referring to future generations (Acts 2:39, NASB). The pouring out of the Holy Spirit does not mean that the promise of heaven is outdated. Luke's careful attention to the church in the first century does not hint at a delay causing any crisis. Nowhere does the book allude to anxiety because the restoration of God's kingdom had not yet occurred. The New Testament does not mention any disregard of Christ's promise.

- There are New Testament traces that indicate His coming had been expected soon. Undoubtedly, the fact that the Lord had not come is the basis for some of Paul's counsel to the Thessalonians—certain things must happen first (2 Thessalonians). But their hope was not shaken, nor did it hamper their expectation. Salvation was guaranteed through the death and resurrection of Christ—thereby, the prospects of the future were assured and glorious! A crisis would arise only if faith in God's promises were lost.

- The Book of Revelation suggests a time lag before the final climax of earth's history: "When he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled" (Rev. 6:9–11, KJV).

- The New Testament mentions scoffers who have come to incorrect conclusions about Christ's return: "'Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation'" (2 Peter 3:4). Jude also speaks of "mockers in the last time" (Jude 18, NKJV).

Some no longer believe in the promise of the Second Coming. Their attitude demonstrates a haughty certainty of their supposedly irrefutable arguments. But we are counseled to beware of such an attitude (2 Peter 3:1–3, 8, 14, 17), for the unchangeableness of scoffers comes from their secular philosophy of history. "Do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (vss. 8, 9, NASB).

This passage conspicuously denies any notion that God is stalling His return. Nor is the continuity of time evidence of false prophecy. Ellen White puts it this way: “Like the stars in the vast circuit of their appointed path, God's purposes know no haste and no delay.”³ This is an inspired perspective on the eternity of God. He doesn't measure time with our finite standards, viewing history differently than we do. Human beings experience life in the twinkling of an eye compared to God's eternity. We can't possibly calculate from His infinite perspective. God hints at this in nature with many ways to measure time found there. For example, a fly or mosquito, if escaping a swat, lives to the ripe old age of three weeks; 12 to 15 years is considered a full age for cats and dogs.

Perhaps God's design of the retina receiving an upside-down picture is to remind us that what we see is not the correct picture. That is why the apostle Peter addresses skeptics with their simplistic understanding of history. Behind his remarks is neither an irrational view of time, nor a concept of eternity that obscures attention to time. Rather, he rejects an illegitimate interpretation of history. The continuous duration of time must be understood in terms of the mercy of God. God promises that evil will never rise again (Nahum 1:9). He can do this because He will have allowed the issues and results of the Great Controversy to be fully worked out, so there will be no sympathy for sin anywhere in the universe again.

Jesus promises to come suddenly, but He will not be unexpected. This really gets to the heart of the matter, for Jesus said: “If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you” (Rev. 3:3). This suddenness will not pose a danger for those who have expected His return. As Paul encouraged the Thessalonians, “But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief” (1 Thess. 5:4).

This attitude calls for constant vigilance and preparation. The danger lies in being careless about or forgetful of the coming of the Lord. As Jesus said of people in the days of Noah, they “did not know until the flood came” (Matt. 24:39, NKJV).

As we await the restoration of God's kingdom, we can become pessimists. We can doubt the Word of God, or come up with false interpretations of prophecy or settle into a pattern of denial and bluster—joining the scoffers who see the world as a place of denial and illusion, with no hope of the future. However, the sentiment of Scripture is much different, giving a forward thrust in the announcement of the arriving God. The coming of Christ is certain as it heralds the future. As the electrifying promise of heaven sounds, we can rejoice that God is on the move toward us, and “of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:33).

Because God's kingdom is just ahead, we know that human cover-ups, false denials, lies, frauds, and false pretenses are part of the old world that is passing away. We will not be forever trapped in our mistakes and delusions. Even one break from our sinful habits will be a sign of Christ's coming, for Jesus has promised to enable us to do things we thought impossible: change our habits, confront our addictions, and forgive our enemies. The second coming of Christ is a major part of the gospel. And it will be worth the wait. Both Old Testament and New Testament writers dwell on the glorious descriptions of God's kingdom restored, promising that it will completely eclipse everything we have known on earth.

Ellen White, after a heavenly vision, describes her experience: “We tried to call up our greatest trials, but they looked so small compared with the far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory that surrounded us, that we could not speak them out, and we all cried out, ‘Alleluia! heaven is cheap enough!’ and we touched our glorious harps and made heaven's arches ring. After I came out of vision, everything seemed changed; a gloom was spread over all that I beheld. Oh, how dark this world looked to me! I wept when I found myself here, and felt homesick. I had seen a better world, and it had spoiled this for me.”⁴

Yes, it will be worth the wait. Even so, come, Lord Jesus, quickly come!

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The Old Testament teaching on the resurrection is consistent with what the New Testament teaches.

The claim has sometimes been made that the Old Testament has little or nothing to say about the resurrection from the dead. In particular, it has been posited that the teaching of bodily resurrection, so clearly proclaimed in the New Testament (1 Cor. 15:51–55; 1 Thess. 4:13–18), is absent from the Hebrew Bible, or that the teaching that dead corpses will be revived *in toto* appears rather late in the Old Testament era, after the destruction of the monarchy and the onset of the Babylonian exile.

For instance, Thomas Ridenour asserted, “There is no ‘uniform and certain doctrine of the afterlife’ offered in the Old Testament.”¹ To cite another example, “The Old Testament teaches virtually nothing about resurrection or life after death.”² The well-known scholar R. H. Pfeiffer was only slightly more positive, concluding that the doctrine of the resurrection was “a doctrine unknown in the Old Testament before the third century.”³

But a careful study of several Old Testament passages raises serious questions about the validity of these assertions, suggesting that they may be flawed in one or more ways, including operating with faulty presuppositions, overlooking important biblical evidence, and/or incorrectly interpreting some key verses pertaining to the topic.

It is worth mentioning that this article will not deal with Ezekiel 37:1 to 14, a passage that has sometimes been used to support bodily resurrection in the Old Testament. Most scholars hold that this passage does not speak primarily of a personal or individual resurrection but of the resurrection of Israel from exile, a national restoration. Having said this, however, it is interesting to note that the imagery of Ezekiel 37 appears on the wall of an ancient synagogue from Dura-Europas to illustrate the promise of a bodily resurrection from the grave. As Lamar Cooper aptly states: “While clearly the prophet had a national resurrection for Israel in mind, it also is but a small step from what he saw concerning Israel to the realization that the same God who could resurrect a dead nation also had the power to conquer humanity’s greatest enemy, death.”⁴

Before turning to a study of the specified Old Testament verses, other questions should be briefly considered: Why is this issue important? Does it really matter whether the Old Testament clearly teaches bodily resurrection, as long as it is taught in the New Testament? After all, as some believers energetically proclaim, “We are New

Testament Christians!”

There are several reasons that this study is of consequence: First, it has implications for the unity of the Bible. The following question is an important one: Does Scripture express a unified and consistent teaching on the doctrine of the afterlife? Or are there competing and contradictory perspectives put forward within the pages of the Bible, perspectives that are in conflict with one another and that jostle for supremacy within the inspired record? If the latter is the case, then perhaps the Old Testament maintains that death is the end of personal identity, with the grave being the final destination for humanity, leaving it to the New Testament to offer hope beyond the grave. However, if the Old Testament description of bodily resurrection is consistent with that of the New Testament, then it provides support for the position that Scripture presents an overarching unity on this and perhaps other subjects as well.

Second, it has implications for the coherence of the biblical teaching on the plan of salvation. In a nutshell, this plan involves God’s intention to restore humans to the state of perfection, glory, and immortality that existed prior to the fall of Adam and Eve, to grant them eternal life once again. The culmination of this plan is clearly described in the Bible’s last book, Revelation (see especially chapters 21 and 22), but it is sometimes asked whether this plan was known in Old Testament times. Is there any solid Old Testament support for God’s plan to restore humans to immortality in bodily form? Or is such evidence only discoverable in the New Testament? If support is also found in the Hebrew Bible, it buttresses the view that Scripture sets forth a coherent plan of salvation.

One might also consider this issue from the standpoint of godly Israelites who lived in the Old Testament era. As they inevitably aged and died, as they marched inexorably toward the grave and the ensuing separation from those whom they loved, was there any reason to hope for a reunion? Did the Lord grant His faithful followers prior to the first coming of Jesus any basis to hope that they would see their loved ones again? Or was their perspective on the afterlife full of bleakness and despair, and were they enshrouded in a fog of darkness that would not be lifted until the appearance of the Messiah and the writing of the New Testament? These questions would have mattered to believers in Old Testament times, and they should matter to us as well.

Job 19:25 to 27

It is appropriate to turn to Job 19:25 to 27 first because it is arguably the earliest of the three passages under consideration here. Certain details mentioned in the book, such as the priestly role that Job assumes within the family unit (Job 1:5) and the way that his wealth is measured in livestock rather than in precious metals (vs. 3), suggest a patriarchal setting for when the events of the book took place. Also, the connections between the vocabulary of Job and both Aramaic and Ugaritic can be used to support an early date for the composition of Job. It is worth noting that an early date is consistent with the tradition recorded in the Babylonian Talmud supporting Mosaic authorship. In any case, the points made here are not dependent on an early dating of the Book of Job.

“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!” (Job 19:25–27).⁵

This passage is thought by some to be “the high point of the book” of Job.⁶ While much of the book is permeated with an atmosphere of pessimism because of Job’s intense suffering and anguish, here a note of hope and optimism is struck. In fact, the hopeful note is all the more obvious because of the contrast it presents with its surroundings.

This jarring contrast has led some commentators to view it as a secondary interpolation from the hand of a later editor and to disregard it when interpreting the theology of Job. However, unless there is some manuscript support, it is better to avoid such forays into subjective speculation and consider the entirety of Job when setting forth the book’s message.

Several main points emerge from this passage: First, Job is convinced that he has a living Redeemer. “I know that my Redeemer lives,” he declares. In this statement Job is speaking with certainty, proclaiming his deepest conviction.

The word *Redeemer* is the participial form of a verb sometimes translated “kinsman-redeemer.” This participle is used in two major ways in the Old Testament. First, it is used to speak of a next of kin who works to help uphold and defend the rights of another person because of the latter’s inability to do so for some reason, such as poverty or

death. Additionally, it is used in a theological way to claim that the Lord is Redeemer. It is possible that both of these usages are brought together here.

In the context of Job 19, Job faces accusations from his so-called friends, and he is in danger of losing everything, including possessions, life, and posterity. His family line is at risk of being eliminated from the community. In light of the jeopardy in which Job finds himself, it is extremely important that he has a redeemer who lives. But just who is this redeemer?

A second important point that emerges from this passage is that Job's redeemer is none other than God Himself. It should be noted that neither all scholars nor all Bible translations agree with this view. Some Bible versions capitalize the word *redeemer*, showing that they consider the term a reference to God, while other versions, such as the KJV and the NEB, render the word in lower case. The latter position was supported by Sigmund Mowinckel, who opined, "The redeemer is an arbiter, one other than God, who will arise to defend Job before God."⁷

However, there are convincing reasons in favor of identifying this redeemer with God. First, a close reading of the passage itself supports this identification. The "Redeemer" of verse 25a is likely the same as the "God" of verse 26b, whom Job will see. As Francis Andersen states, "Verses 25–27 are so tightly knit that there should be no doubt that the *Redeemer* is *God*."⁸

Second, "the use of the adjective 'alive, living' . . . with 'redeemer' adds great weight to this identification of God as the kinsman-redeemer."⁹ Job states that even though he may die, his Redeemer, who is living, will come to his aid. This description calls to mind the references to God in Scripture as "the living God" (see, e.g., Deuteronomy 5:26; Joshua 3:10; and Jeremiah 10:10). God is the living God because He created life in the first place, sustains it in an ongoing way, and will work to restore it to all who are faithful to Him. "Therefore, the title 'living Redeemer' applies to none other than God."¹⁰

A third salient point that should be highlighted from this passage is Job's confidence that he will be revived from death in bodily form to have a personal encounter with God. As Job 19:26 proclaims, "After my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God." Though this point might seem self-evident, based on a close reading of the text, two significant aspects of it have been challenged:

Not all Bible scholars think that Job is speaking of something that will occur after his death. For example, evangelical commentator John Hartley takes the position that Job is expecting God to "intervene before Job's death and restore him to his former status."¹¹ However, the phrases "at the last" in verse 25 and "after my skin has been thus destroyed" in verse 26 provide strong evidence that there will be the passage of some undetermined amount of time and that Job will experience his own death before his redeemer stands up to do His work. In fact, the phrase "at the last" can properly denote an eschatological event. Moreover, Job's expressed hope that his words be permanently inscribed in stone (19:23, 24) presuppose his death. As Andersen states, "there would be no need for Job to deposit a written testimony, if he expects to be vindicated before he dies."¹²

A second aspect of the above point that has been challenged is whether Job will be revived in bodily form. Some early Jewish interpreters, as evinced by the Book of Jubilees (23:30, 31), took the position that Job as a bodiless spirit would witness his vindication by God before the local assembly.

However, this seems very unlikely. "The references to *skin*, *flesh*, and *eyes* make it clear that Job expects to have this experience as a man, not just as a disembodied shade, or in his mind's eye."¹³ How can Job be in a disembodied state, if, as he declares, "in my flesh I shall see God, whom . . . my eyes shall behold"? Furthermore, such a perspective would be out of keeping with the entirety of the Old Testament, which never presents the spirit or the soul as something capable of an independent existence apart from the body.

While this passage does not describe the resurrection of the righteous at the same level of specificity and detail as does the New Testament, Job does clearly seem to anticipate a "favourable meeting with God after death as a genuine human being."¹⁴

Isaiah 26:19

Though some have assigned Isaiah 26:19 to a time later than the prophet Isaiah because of its content, there is ample evidence to consider the book a unified composition coming from the time of the prophet in the eighth

century. The verse reads: “Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead.”

Much could be said about this significant declaration of the prophet Isaiah. First, simply stated, there is hope for the dead. This serves as a positive note that runs counter to some of what has come before in the so-called Little Apocalypse of Isaiah found in chapters 24 to 27. These chapters report that the earth is to be severely depopulated, due to divine judgment (24:1–6). The false gods that have been worshiped by the people of Israel are said to have died, never to be heard of again (26:13, 14). One might legitimately wonder, is this same future—namely, death leading to oblivion—in store for all people? No! In a bright statement of hope that contrasts strongly with the previous verse, the prophet declares, “Your dead shall live” (vs. 19).

Second, this hope is based on a bodily resurrection of a certain group of people. As the text proclaims without equivocation, “Their bodies shall rise” (vs. 19). In other words, Isaiah is not speaking of bodiless spirits or formless apparitions rising from the dead. It is “their bodies,” the portion of them that is “in the dust,” that shall arise. This is in keeping with the Hebrew anthropology set forth in the Book of Job.

Third, this resurrection is described as rousing the dead from a state of sleep. The command given to those who dwell in the dust is “Awake!” As will be noted, the raising of the dead being likened to awakening them from sleep is consistent with the rest of Scripture.

Two questions sometimes arise in connection with this verse. Is it referring to an individual resurrection or the resurrection of the nation, that is, the restoration of Israel from exile? And who is the group that shall be raised, the ones described as “your dead”? Are they only Israelites, or are others included as well?

Regarding the first query, though some renowned scholars have opined that the reference is to the restoration of the nation, this position is not borne out by the evidence. Unlike Ezekiel 37:1 to 14, there is nothing explicit in the context to indicate that the nation’s resurrection is being described. In fact, as Gary Smith notes in his recent commentary, “There is no reference in this section to leaving Babylon, going through the desert, returning to the land, the restoration of Davidic rule, rebuilding ruined cities or any of the other themes so commonly associated with the restoration of the nation in other passages.”¹⁵

Additional support for the position that Isaiah 26:19 is speaking of a literal resurrection of people from the dead comes from noting that it is expressing the fulfillment of a promise stated in the previous chapter: “He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken” (25:8). However, the assertion that Yahweh will eliminate the “covering” of death, as the prophet describes it (vs. 7), is stated without indicating how it will be done. This matter is left unresolved. Isaiah 26:19 resolves this by indicating that it will be accomplished by a resuscitation of bodies that sleep in the dust.

But who is this group that will be raised? The answer to this question is given in Isaiah 25. Death is depicted as both a “covering” and a “veil” (25:7), something enshrouding certain people and keeping them from experiencing the light of life. As for the identity of those enshrouded, they are said to be “all peoples” and “all nations” (vs. 7). Thus, this resurrection is not limited to Israel; rather, it is of universal dimensions. As Alec Motyer states: “In sum, therefore, the verse is a promise of life for the world, the fulfillment of 25:6–10a. . . . In this regard, the terms of the present verse go beyond the figurative to the literal and declare a full resurrection, including the resurrection of the body.”¹⁶ Such a wondrous reality should not be overlooked in understanding the message of the Old Testament regarding the afterlife.

Daniel 12:2

The passage in Daniel that speaks to the resurrection is a part of the prophet’s last and most detailed prophecy. Though it is near the beginning of a new chapter, “the chapter division should not be allowed to obscure the continuity of the text with what has gone before.”¹⁷

The verse reads: “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” As indicated above, this verse is considered by some scholars to be the clearest—or even the only clear—reference in the Old Testament to proclaim the resurrection of the dead. But what does the text actually say? There are several important points to note:

First, it declares the certainty of a future resurrection. Without equivocation, the prophet proclaims that those

who sleep, a favorite biblical metaphor for death, “shall awake.” Notwithstanding the fact that some scholars have taken the position that this verse is speaking of a national restoration for Israel in the same vein as Ezekiel, this is clearly not the case. Nearly everything about the text and its surrounding context indicates that a personal resurrection is in view.

When will this resurrection take place? Though an exact time is not specified in Daniel 12:2, the previous verse, which seems to precede it chronologically in the sequence of events, twice states that the event described will happen “at that time.” Also, Daniel 11:40 specifies that these climactic events of the prophecy will happen at “the time of the end.”

Second, the resurrection includes both the righteous and the wicked. Though one might expect that the resurrection would include only those faithful believers in God, the text is clear that two groups are raised to receive their different rewards.

There is some uncertainty about the meaning of the adjective *many*. Some have advocated the view that this is a reference to a limited resurrection. While this is one possibility, Joyce Baldwin has pointed out that this term is used several times in the Old Testament with an “inclusive significance,” in which it basically means “all.”¹⁸ For instance, in Isaiah 2:2 and 3, the phrase “all the nations” in verse 2 is equivalent to “many peoples” in verse 3. Another example of this usage is in Isaiah 53:11 and 12, in which the “many” that the Servant justifies and for whom He serves as sin-bearer include all of the saved. “In any case, resurrection at the end of time is presented as a clear reality.”¹⁹

A third salient point from Daniel 12:2 is that this resurrection is, at least for the righteous, of permanent duration. That is, they are raised to “everlasting life,” never to die again. While this may have been implied by the promise in Isaiah 25:8 that the Lord “will swallow up death forever,” this is the first clear statement that those who are raised become recipients of immortality. They are not raised simply to age and die again, as was the case with other instances of resuscitation. No, there is a climactic finality to the Lord’s action on their behalf.

Conclusion

Some prominent scholars have declared that there is no certain hope of the resurrection in the Old Testament or that the belief in the resurrection in this era was only hazy and vague. Such views are not based on a careful examination of the biblical text, but on a certain evolutionary perspective on the development of Old Testament thought. This perspective holds that the Old Testament progressed from a rather impoverished belief system early on to a much more advanced one during the intertestamental period, and that early Old Testament writings and persons exhibit neither belief nor interest in the afterlife.

But in the strong riposte of Alec Motyer: “How insubstantial this is! The Egyptians had an intricate and highly developed mythology of the dead and the life to come centuries before Isaiah. Even Canaanite religion, with all its brutishness, ascribed to its executive god an annual victory over death. We are expected, however, to accept that Israel’s ‘emphasis on Yahweh as the living God’ put the ‘shadowy realm of the dead . . . outside his jurisdiction’ (Herbert). In the name of all logic, how could this be so?”²⁰

It is worth remembering that when Abraham arrived in Egypt, the pyramids of Giza, constructed by a people who expended a great deal of effort providing resources for the departed Pharaoh’s existence in the next world, were already several hundred years old. Should we take the view that the Israelites were one of the only ancient people groups that did not have a belief in the afterlife?

Moreover, there is biblical evidence to dispute this perspective. For example, the Old Testament does tell of several people who are resuscitated from death (1 Kings 17:17–24; 2 Kings 4:18–37; 13:20, 21), as well as at least one who escaped death entirely (Gen. 5:24). Additionally, several psalms manifest the belief that death is not the ultimate end and proclaim deliverance from the grave. For instance, Psalm 49:15 declares, “God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.”

Though the Old Testament teaching on resurrection is not as explicit and detailed as in the New Testament, it is “theologically consistent with what the New Testament teaches. Human hope is not in the immortality of an internal portion of a human being, but rather in God’s wholistic restorative, re-creative power.”²¹

“The God of the [Old Testament] is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living: the God of Abraham,

Isaac, and Jacob (Exod. 6:3; cf. Luke 20:37, 38). The prospect of life after death in the [Old Testament] is not as fully developed as it is in the [New Testament], but there can be no doubt about the fact that [Old Testament] saints believed they would see God and enjoy his presence.”²²

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Gospel Hemi-neglect

When Eileen came out of the room that morning, her son Sam could not believe what he saw. His mother had always been very careful with her personal appearance. She would put on her makeup with extreme caution, she would meticulously polish her nails, and she would carefully comb her hair.

That morning, however, something was very wrong. The left side of Eileen's hair was a tangled mess with tufts like nests here and there, the left side of her face had no makeup, and the left side of her shawl dragged on the floor. Eileen, however, had emerged from the room after having spent half an hour applying her makeup, combing her hair, and dressing herself—on the right side of her body. The same thing happened at breakfast; Eileen completely ignored what was on the left side of her plate.

Eileen was not blind on her left side. She suffered from a common illness known as hemineglect, negligence of half her field of vision. The problem was not that she did not see her left half, but that she simply did not pay any attention to it. The doctor demonstrated this fact with a simple experiment. If he lifted a finger to the left of Eileen, right in front of her eyes, but didn't move the finger, she did not see it. If the doctor moved his finger, then she became aware of its presence. The system that governs those things we pay attention to is quite complex, and in large part full of mysteries for the scientific world. What things attract our attention, and why? What are the determining factors?¹

Adventists live in an increasingly polarized world. Socially, economically, and politically, the areas that lie at the center are becoming more and more deserted. Media and social networks have facilitated this phenomenon. You can read or see the news from outlets that think as you do and reinforce your cherished opinions. Facebook and other social media also make it very easy to restrict our group of friends to those who resemble us and bolster our views.

The General Conference Session in San Antonio this summer made evident that strong polarizing tendencies are in our midst as well. In both ends of the spectrum, there are Adventists deeply suspicious of fellow church members at the other end of the spectrum and will warn about the danger they pose to the church. Others are less vocal regarding their views but will simply tune out the other side and restrict their attention and conversation to those who think as they do. This is a problem of gospel hemi-neglect. If you cannot get rid of the other side, simply tune it out.

This is not a new phenomenon in the history of the church. The New Testament reports of deeply divisive issues in the early Christian Church. One was circumcision (Acts 15). This issue created deep suspicions (21:20, 21) and even confrontation (Gal. 2:1–16) among those with opposing views. What impresses, though, is the healthy balance in Scripture.

There are 21 epistles in the New Testament. Fourteen were written by Paul. These Pauline epistles were written to seven churches (Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica) and three individuals (Timothy, Titus, Philemon).² Seven epistles are known as the Catholic Epistles, which were written by four apostles: James, Peter, John, and Jude. If you pay attention, you will notice that these were the apostles identified in Galatians 2:9 as those who were missionaries to the circumcised (the Jews).³

Paul, on the other hand, was the missionary to the uncircumcised, the Gentiles (Eph. 3:1–10). Because of the ministry given to him, Paul emphasized that we are accepted into God's people by faith, not circumcision, and, therefore, the Gentiles have equal standing with the Jews before God.

James, Jude, and John, however, emphasized the importance of works as an evidence of a living faith. James emphasized the care for the poor and the actions that evidence true faith. First Peter emphasized the importance of appropriate conduct, even in the midst of persecution. Peter's second Epistle and the Book of Jude denounce the immorality of false teachers. And John emphasizes love. It is very clear that these epistles tried to provide balance to the teachings of Paul (2 Peter 3:15, 16; James 2:14–26).

Acts of the Apostles also provides a balanced introduction to the New Testament epistles. Peter is the hero in the first half of the book (Acts 1 to 12). Paul is the hero in the second half (Acts 13 to 28). Peter, the apostle to the circumcised (Galatians 2), is the one who brings the gospel for the first time to the uncircumcised (Acts 10) and defends the gospel preached to them (Acts 15:7–11). Paul, the apostle to the uncircumcised (Eph. 3:1–10), always begins his efforts in new cities by preaching in the local synagogue and yearns for the salvation of his Jewish brethren (Romans 9–11).

Acts records four evangelistic speeches by Paul and Peter. Each of them addressed one to a Jewish audience (Acts 3, 13) and one to a Gentile audience (10, 17). It is clear that God in His wisdom wanted the church to have a balanced view of the gospel, and this required the writings of more than one inspired individual.

One of the mistakes that we can make as Adventists is to tune out opposing viewpoints. When we encounter opposition, there are three things to keep in mind: First, the New Testament shows that more than one inspired author and one side of the issue is needed to provide a balanced perspective. Second, mission requires a diversity of emphases and communication. The place where we do mission and the needs we seek to address should not change the gospel we communicate but should affect the way we communicate that gospel and the emphases that we make. Third, even inspired authors need others to protect them from mistakes. Paul rebuked Peter when he wavered in his practice of the gospel toward the Gentiles (Galatians 2) and Peter and James addressed aspects of Paul's gospel that were difficult to understand and could be easily twisted toward immorality (James 2:14–26; 2 Peter 3:15, 16; Jude).

In the history of our own church there are clear examples of the need of balance, even for those who were in the right position. A. T. Jones, for example, who championed justification by faith in 1888, would later overreach and abandon the church.

Tuning the other side out is contrary to Christian love. The gospel requires that we care for each other. The case of Eileen above also teaches that tuning out the other side will not solve our problems.

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2. At this point, there is uncertainty among scholars as to authorship of the letter to the Hebrews.

3. Jude was the brother of James (Jude 1:1) and therefore probably also part of the ministry to those of the circumcision.

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Work Station

TWO

Gary B. Swanson

“The Truth of the Thing”

In August 1834, 19-year-old Richard Henry Dana, Jr., went to sea. Though he was of respected New England ancestry and had been a promising Harvard student, in response to poor health, he sought a change in his life. In Boston Harbor, he signed on as an ordinary seaman aboard the *Pilgrim* for a voyage that took him to the south Atlantic Ocean, around Cape Horn, and as far north in the Pacific as modern-day California.

Two years later, he arrived back in Boston, self-described as a “‘rough alley’ looking fellow, with duck trowsers and red shirt . . . [and] long hair.”¹ He returned to school, became a successful lawyer, defended the rights of sailors and fugitive slaves and those who had aided them, and later served as a U.S. attorney. In 1840, Dana published a memoir of his voyage, *Two Years Before the Mast*. With a meticulous attention to the detail of the seafaring experience and the peoples and places he encountered, it seized the imagination of readers and became a bestseller for its time.

This book was so influential, in fact, that while Herman Melville was writing his classic *Moby Dick*, the monumental story of the great white whale and the obsessive sea captain who pursued the mythic creature to his own destruction, the two authors corresponded about Melville’s project. Apparently responding to Dana’s encouragement to ground his book in a faithful account of the day-to-day realities in maritime life, Melville wrote in May 1850 that he intended a somewhat different tack: “I am half way in the work. . . . It will be a strange sort of a book, tho’, I fear; blubber is blubber you know; tho’ you may get oil out of it, the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree; . . . to cook the thing up, one must needs throw in a little fancy. . . . Yet I mean to give the truth of the thing, spite of this.”²

Though *Moby Dick*, published in 1851, was not particularly well received in Melville’s own lifetime, it has since come to be considered, in scholarship and in popular culture, a most significant piece of literature. “Call me Ishmael,” the narrator’s self-introduction, has become one of the most famous opening sentences in American literature. Melville’s sources have long been recognized to include his own seafaring experience, a range of nautical literature (including Dana’s *Two Years*), Shakespeare, and the Bible.

One of the biblical topics that would seem inevitable in such a subject would be the story of the Old Testament prophet Jonah, and it recurs in several places throughout the plot of Melville’s book. In addition to the occasional allusion, two of the 135 chapters, “The Sermon” (9) and “Jonah Historically Regarded” (83) address directly the biblical account of Jonah’s flight from God’s calling and his ultimate ministry to the people of Nineveh.

In the chapter entitled “The Sermon,” Ishmael is attending a worship service just before departing the port of New Bedford, Massachusetts, for the fateful voyage. While a storm is raging outside the chapel, Father Mapple, a former harpooner, is in the pulpit. Repeatedly addressing the congregation, men and women, as “shipmates,” he centers his message for the morning on the Book of Jonah, and it sets the tone throughout the rest of the book.

Except for a liberal sprinkling of seafaring terminology, it would resonate well as a 21st-century narrative sermon.³

“What is this lesson that the book of Jonah teaches?” asks Father Mapple as he introduces his topic. “Shipmates, it is a two-stranded lesson; a lesson to us all as sinful men, and a lesson to me as a pilot of the living God.”⁴ And then, before he proceeds through an imaginative retelling of the story of Jonah, which includes an entertaining scene in which a guilty-looking Jonah inquires about gaining passage to Tarshish and the captain and crew suspect him to be a fugitive from legal authorities, Father Mapple states the central point: “If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists.”⁵ What follows, right through to its thundering conclusion of the sermon, is an earnest—though sometimes whimsical—call to responsibility before God. Those in the pews must respond to God’s call in everyday life; Father Mapple, believing himself to have received a more specific call to ministry similar to that of Jonah, must forsake the sea for the proclamation of the gospel to the people of New Bedford and beyond.

Then, many chapters later, just after the narrator has referred to figures from various cultures—Perseus, St. George, Hercules—engaged in heroic struggles against whales or other outsized creatures, the book returns to the Old Testament story of the fugitive prophet in “Jonah Historically Regarded.” Here, through the depiction of a skeptical old whaleman called “Sag-Harbor,” Melville examines some of the reasons that “some Nantucketers rather distrust this historical story of Jonah and the whale.”⁶

These reasons include a pictorial representation of the story in some old Bibles that show a whale with two spouts in its head, the relatively small throat of most whales that would prevent the swallowing of an adult human, the effects of the gastric juices on any contents in the stomach of a whale, and the distance between where Jonah was spewed up anywhere in the Mediterranean being much greater than only three day’s journey from Nineveh.

The narrator of the book, Ishmael, answers all these objections at least to some degree of explanation based on scholarship of the time. He concludes consideration of any of the mythic stories of various cultures by saying that “doubting those traditions did not make those traditions one whit the less facts, for all that.”⁷ He concludes that Sag-Harbor’s particular skepticism of the biblical story of Jonah and the whale “only shows his foolish, impious pride, and abominable, devilish rebellion.”⁸

Whether the author, of course, was writing from his own heart or was representing through the narrator a worldview of others, belief in the miraculous recounted in Scripture has been a subject of skepticism or outright rejection particularly since the Enlightenment. Even though they may have been two uneducated seamen, Sag-Harbor’s doubt and Ishmael’s response represent a debate that has gone on also in the halls of learning. And, to be candid, it sometimes even besets the heart of the believer.

Seventeenth-century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal said: “There is enough light for those whose only desire is to see, and enough darkness for those of the opposite disposition.”⁹

And Scripture itself observes that “he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind” (James 1:6).¹⁰ This is an image that surely would have appealed to sailors. And the psalmist adds, “The word of the Lord is right, and all His work is done in truth” (Ps. 33:4).

And this is surely “the truth of the thing.”

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2. <http://people.virginia.edu/~sfr/enam3150/melvilleletters.html>.
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4. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or The Whale* (Franklin Center, Pa.: The Franklin Library, 1979), p. 53.
5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., p. 343.

7. Ibid., p. 344.

8. Ibid., p. 345.

9. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), No. 274, p. 81.

10. Scripture references in this column are quoted from the *New King James Version* of the Bible.

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The Associate Editor's

DESK

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The Old Testament Canon

The Greek word *canon* comes from the Hebrew *qaneh*, which means “reed.” Since reeds were used as measuring rods, the word *canon* came to mean “rule” or “standard,” by which other things are measured. The word *canon* occurs in Galatians 6:16 and 2 Corinthians 10:13–16, translated “rule” in the KJV. It is first used in regard to the books of the Bible, in a technical sense of a standard collection of sacred writings, by the Church Fathers of the fourth century.

How the Old Testament canon came into existence may never be known in detail. What is known is that God on occasion told His prophets not only to deliver His messages orally, but also to write them down (Ex. 17:14; Isa. 30:8; Jer. 30:2; Eze. 43:11; Hab. 2:2) as a witness (Deut. 31:24–26) for future generations (Isa. 30:8). And early in Israel’s history certain writings were recognized as having divine authority and serving as a written rule in the life of Israel. This can be seen from the people’s response to the reading of the “book of the covenant” in Exodus 24:7, “All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient.”¹ Similarly, when the “book of the law” was found in the temple and read before the king and the people in the time of Josiah (2 Chron. 34:14–31) or when Ezra read it to the people (Neh. 8:5–10), it was accepted as having divine authority.

In time, the same happened with all other books contained in the Old Testament today. They were acknowledged as having canonical authority because their authors were recognized as God’s spokespersons. F. F. Bruce wrote: “The words of the prophets were divinely authoritative from the moment of utterance, and the documents in which they were recorded were canonical in principle, if not in a technical sense, from the first.”²

The Pentateuch (Torah) was the earliest part to acquire canonical status. The “book of the law,” placed beside the ark of the covenant to indicate its importance (Deut. 31:26), was also called “the book of Moses” (Neh. 13:1). It was the divine rule for faith and life, and people were continually urged to obey its precepts (Joshua 1:8). It is repeatedly referred to in the Old Testament (Joshua 8:31; 2 Kings 22:8; Neh. 8:1), and still today forms the basis for Orthodox Judaism.

The second major section, according to the Talmud, is the collection of the “Prophets.” It is divided into two parts: (1) the former prophets or historical books—Joshua, Judges, Samuel (one book) and Kings (one book), and (2) the latter prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve. The Minor Prophets were counted as one book because prior to the appearance of the codex in the first century A.D., they were all written on one scroll. Undoubtedly, the writings of the prophets were collected and treasured as soon as they were written. For the devout Israelite the writings of a prophet were divinely inspired and, therefore, obligatory for faith and practice.

The third section, called the “Writings,” contains 11 books: the poetical books Psalms, Job, and Proverbs, the

five scrolls (Megilloth) Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther; and the historical books Daniel, Ezra/Nehemiah (one book), and Chronicles (one book). Altogether, the Hebrew canon according to the Talmud contains 24 books.

Many of the books in the second and third section seem to have achieved canonical status by the time of Nehemiah. In 2 Maccabees 2:13, we are told that Nehemiah “founded a library and collected the books about the kings and prophets and the writings of David and the letters of kings about votive offerings” (RSV). The “letters of kings about votive offerings” may be those reproduced in Ezra 6:3 to 7:26.

The earliest reference to a threefold division of the Old Testament comes from about 130 B.C. At that time, the grandson of the author of the book *Ecclesiasticus* or *The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach* wrote a prologue to his grandfather’s book, in which he refers to “the law, the prophets, and the other books of our fathers.”³ Though this does not say which books were included, it does indicate that some kind of formal canon had been established by the second century B.C.

Prior to the use of codices, biblical books were written on separate scrolls and had no specific order. Once they were bound together in codices, however, a certain sequence or order had to be established. In the early Christian centuries, when codices were expensive and relatively rare, not only were biblical books bound together, but other books used in worship, or books recommended to be read, were bound with them. Thus, the three important Septuagint codices (Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, and Alexandrinus) contain not only the 39 books of the Old Testament but also some of the Apocrypha and additions to biblical books as well. Some scholars, therefore, speak of a wider, or Alexandrian canon. However, there is no evidence that the Jews in Alexandria had a different canon from the Jews in Palestine. “Indeed,” says F. F. Bruce, “there is no evidence that the Alexandrian Jews ever promulgated a canon of scripture.”⁴

The Witness of Josephus

The Jewish historian Josephus, writing at the end of the first century A.D., compared the sacred Jewish writings with those of the Greeks and said: “We have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another (as the Greeks have), but only twenty-two books which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death. This interval of time was little short of three thousand years; but as to the time from the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life. It is true our history has been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but has not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers because there has not been an exact succession of prophets since that time.”⁵

This statement contains a number of important points concerning the Old Testament canon: (1) The writings in this canon were believed to be divine, i.e., to have been composed by inspired men, and they cover history from the creation to the time of Artaxerxes; (2) books describing the history after Artaxerxes were not considered to be inspired, since the succession of the prophets ended in the Persian period; (3) the contents of the books are consistent and without discrepancies; (4) Josephus refers to only 22 books, and the number of the books in his three divisions are different from the Talmudic canon (e.g., Daniel is included with the prophets). However, he, like Jerome in the fourth century A.D., refers to the same 24 books as the Talmud, Ruth being counted as an appendix to Judges and Lamentations to Jeremiah.

Jamnia

After the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai moved the Sanhedrin to Jamnia (Yavne) close to the Mediterranean coast. It soon became an established center of scriptural study. About the same time as Josephus wrote his work *Against Apion*, discussions took place in Jamnia relating to the canonicity of certain Old Testament books. From the recorded discussions in the Talmud we know that the books concerned were Ezekiel, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. However, the question was not whether these books should be included in the canon, but whether they should be excluded from it. Some of the reasons given were: (1) Ezekiel’s temple and its services could not be harmonized with the Pentateuch; (2) neither Esther nor the Song of

Songs refers to the name of God; (3) Ecclesiastes contained too much Epicurean thought, and (4) Proverbs seemed to contradict itself in two adjacent verses (Prov. 26:4, 5). In the end, no changes were made, and the books that had already been accorded canonical status in popular esteem were confirmed.

All Protestant Bibles contain the Hebrew canon; they do not recognize the apocrypha as inspired writings, in contrast to Catholic and Orthodox Bibles.

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