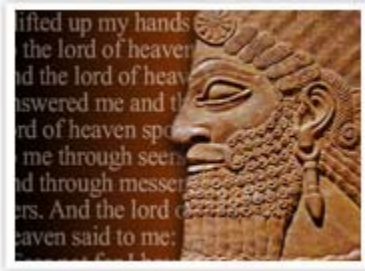


Perspective Digest



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Scripture reflects parallels with Ancient Near Eastern culture yet differs significantly in its representation of revelation and inspiration.

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Archaeological discoveries made in the Ancient Near East during the 19th and 20th centuries have revolutionized in many ways the study of the Scriptures and raised challenging new questions for interpreters. It is now impossible to study the Old Testament without taking into consideration such findings. Deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics and the ancient Sumerian, Akkadian, and Canaanite languages gives tools that make it possible to read texts written before Abram and in some cases texts composed during the lifetime of biblical writers. This wealth of material is very useful in providing historical and religious background for the interpretation of the Bible.

These discoveries, however, reveal that there seems to have been a very close relation between the Israelite religious practices and the religious milieu of the Ancient Near East. Consequently, the question of the uniqueness of the Israelite religion, as depicted in the Old Testament, has become an extremely important one. There are Ancient Near Eastern parallels for most of the Israelite social and religious institutions and for many of its religious ideas. Those similarities become of critical importance when the question of the revelation and inspiration of the biblical text is raised.

Types of Similarities

It should be expected to find many similarities between Israel and its neighbors. Linguistic similarities are unavoidable because the Hebrew language is closely related to other Northwest Semitic languages. For instance, it is well known that the 'el is used in the Canaanite literature as the proper name for the highest god, but in the Bible the Hebrew word 'el is often used as a title for the Israelite God. This does not mean that the God of Israel is to be equated with the Canaanite 'el.

More interesting is the use of similar phrases or their functions. In Israel, for instance, a prophet was at times called a "man of God" (1 Kings 17:18, 24).¹ An inscription on a Phoenician seal reads, "Belonging to Baal-yaton, the man of God, who depends on Melqart." Melqart was the Baal of Tyre, and this man was his prophet.² Naram-Sin, grandson of Sargon, consulted his god and introduced the answer he received by saying, "The shining Morning Star spoke from heaven thus, . . ."³ This same title is applied to Jesus in the New Testament (Rev. 22:16). The Canaanite statement, "You will be numbered among those who have descended into the earth," expresses the same concept found in Psalm 88:4: "I am counted among those who go down to the pit." This points to a

common poetic way of referring to the tomb.

The relation between the gods and humans, particularly the king, is in some cases very similar to that found in Israel. When the king was attacked by his powerful enemies, he said: "I lifted up my hands to the lord of h[earth] and the lord of heav[en] answered me [And] the lord of heaven [spoke] to me [through] seers and through messengers. [And] the lord of heaven said [to me]: 'Fear not for I have [made you] king, [and] I shall sta[nd] by you and I shall save you from all [these kings who] have set up siege against you!' [The lord of heaven] spoke thus to [me, and he put all these kings to flight(?)]."⁴

This sounds like a passage from the Old Testament, but it is not. It was written on a votive inscription by king Zakkur of Northern Syria and dated to 758 B.C. Notice how many of its ideas are also found in the Old Testament. One of the most important ones is that the god of Zakkur, like Yahweh, gives victory to the king over his enemies. It is not only that the Israelites and their neighbors share the idea of a warrior God; they also believe that God intervenes in history and fights on behalf of His king. Notice also that phrases like "to lift up the hands," "lord of heaven," and the title "seer" are common in the Old Testament. Very important is the use of the prophetic formula "fear not," which is also found in the Old Testament (Deut. 20:3, 4; Isa. 41:13, 14; 43:1, 2; Jer. 30:10, 11).

The need for the king to rely on his god for victory is found in a hymn of Assurbanipal. He says, "Neither [by] my [might] nor by the might of my bow, (But) by the st[rength] and by the] might of my goddesses, did I cause the lands [disob]edient to me to submit to the yoke of Assur."⁵ The Psalmist wrote, "I do not trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory; but you give us victory over our enemies, you put our adversaries to shame" (44:6, 7). The basic idea is the same in both texts.

According to the Old Testament, the *erem*, or wars of extermination, were ordered by God against some Canaanite cities. It is now known that pagan deities also ordered this type of war against the enemies of the king. It has been argued that this military practice integrated into the Israelite religion "because the *erem* helped meet its need to bring order and security to a hostile and chaotic environment."⁶

In the Ancient Near East, the gods were considered to act as judges. The idea that they sat on thrones to judge was a common one. In a prayer offered before performing a ritual of divination, the petitioner says, "O Shamash, lord of judgment . . . come down to me that you may dine, that you may sit on the throne and render judgment!"⁷ The tablet is dated to ca. 2000-1500 B.C.

The incomparability of Yahweh, the God of Israel, is emphasized very often in the Old Testament. Isaiah writes, "To whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared? . . . I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning" (Isa. 46:5, 9, 10). In the song of Moses and Miriam we read, "Who among the gods is like you, O Lord" (Ex. 15:11). In a hymn to Gula, goddess of healing, she says, "I am sublime in heaven, I am queen in the netherworld, among the gods I have

no peer, among the goddesses I have no equal."⁸ In the great Hymn to Marduk we read, "Whatever the gods of all the inhabited world may have done, they cannot be like you, Lord! of the depth of knowledge, where is your equal?"⁹ Once more there are conceptual and linguistic similarities.

God's providential care for the world is expressed in a hymn to the Egyptian god Re in language similar to that found in the Psalms: "[Re] who creates the herbs that give life to the cattle, and the fruit trees for mankind. Who makes that on which the fishes in the river may live, and the birds under the heaven."¹⁰ Psalm 104:14, 25, 27 states: "He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth. . . . There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number. . . . These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time." In the famous Egyptian hymn of Akhenaten to the god Aten, the king exclaims: "How manifold are your works! They are hidden from the face (of man)."¹¹ The Psalmist also exclaims, "How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all" (104:24). In spite of cultural differences, humans tend to think and talk to and about God in similar ways because we all seem to share some basic universal and general perception of the work and nature of God. Therefore those religious expressions belong to the common human experience of G/god.

There are also stylistic elements similar to those found in the Old Testament. For instance, the Old Testament formula of lament and penitential prayers is also found in an Akkadian prayer to Ishtar (dated to the middle of the second millennium B.C.):

"How long, O my Lady, are my enemies to look darkly upon me.
are they to plan evil things against me with lies and deception,
are my persecutors and those who envy me to rejoice over me?

How long, O my Lady?"¹²

Compare this with Psalm 13:1, 2:

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me? . . .
How long will my enemy triumph over me?"

Obviously, this was a common formula of lament used in the Ancient Near East to express an impatient request in the form of a prayer.

There are many more stylistic similarities between the Israelite literature and that of the Ancient Near East, but most are only formal, not substantive. In the wisdom literature there are similar forms as well as similar teachings. The Egyptian Teachings of Ani contains the following advice:

"Be on your guard against a woman from abroad,
whom no one knows in the city. . . .
She is a deep water, the extent of which no one knows.
A woman whose husband is far away, says daily to you:
'I am polished (=pretty)!' when she has no witnesses.
She waits and sets a trap. A great crime—and death, when it is known."¹³

Some significant similarities can be seen in Proverbs 7:19-27, but no one argues that Proverbs was copied from the Egyptian document. What is described in both texts is a common human experience.

Closer parallels with Proverbs are found in the teachings of Amenemope. For instance, "Better is poverty from the hand of God than riches in the storehouse; better is bread, when the heart is satisfied, than riches with sorrow."¹⁴

The content is very similar to that found in Proverbs 17:1; 15:17. Notice also that this particular type of proverb, called a "better proverb," is very common in the Bible (e.g., Eccl. 4). Israel and its neighbors seem to have used the same or similar literary forms to express their ideas.

Two social institutions deserve brief mention because both find parallels in the Ancient Near East, namely kingship and the covenant. Such parallels should be no surprise, because the Israelites requested a king "such as all the other nations have" (1 Sam. 8:5). Yet the Lord adapted and reformulated this institution on the basis of the covenant He made with Israel. The covenant was a common legal form in the Ancient Near East, though used by the Israelites in a singular way. Many of the parallels are impressive and indicate that the biblical writers used expressions, practices, and images that were common in the Ancient Near Eastern cultural context. It is therefore useful for the interpreter to become acquainted with those customs and practices, because they do help gain a better understanding of some biblical passages.

Approaches to the Problem of Similarities

Some consider the similarities between Israel and the Ancient Near East nations to be so serious that they find it difficult to speak of the uniqueness of Israel. Two main approaches have been developed to deal with the problem. There are those who search for concepts and behaviors unique to Israel; such as the biblical idea of monotheism and the relation of Israel to that one God. Others argue that Israel and its contemporaries shared the same pool of ideas and behaviors and that distinctiveness is to be found in the way the Israelites reconfigured or patterned those ideas and behaviors.

The role of revelation and inspiration is very seldom mentioned in these discussions. The discussions are attempts to explain the origin of the Israelite religion from the perspective of sociology and the development of social institutions. But for those who consider the Old Testament to be part of the biblical canon, it is impossible not to address the question of revelation in the context of the similarities between Israel and its neighbors.

The problem is one of developing a method that would allow dealing properly with similarities and differences and that would acknowledge at the same time the specific character of each religion. Some scholars have been attempting to develop such methodology. They feel that the comparative method is indeed one of the most difficult disciplines because of its natural tendency to

overemphasize similarities and its inherent danger of drawing conclusions unwarranted by the evidence. There are, however, a couple of things that the evidence indicates, and that should be kept in mind in dealing with similarities. First, we do know that Israel shared in many ways the Ancient Near Eastern culture, but we also know, second, that Israel appears in the history and culture of the Ancient Near East as an independent entity with its own character and identity.

The uniqueness of Israel in the context of the Ancient Near East is not something modern scholars are addressing for the first time in the history of the religion of the Old Testament. The Old Testament itself testifies to the singularity of the people of Israel in the ancient world. Peter Machinist lists 433 Old Testament passages in which the distinctiveness of Israel is mentioned.¹⁵ The diversity of the passages indicates, according to him, that the issue of distinctiveness “seems to have been an established and not unpopular preoccupation in Israel well before the advent of the canonical organizers in the sixth century B.C.E.”¹⁶ It was because of its uniqueness that God was to use Israel to bless the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:3). Therefore, the use of the comparative method should not ignore the biblical emphasis on the singularity of Israel.

Guidelines for the Study of Similarities

In an attempt to set limits on the comparative methods, scholars have suggested some principles for the study of similarities between Israel and the Ancient Near East. Some are particularly useful:

First, it has been considered of utmost importance to examine differences as well as similarities. Otherwise, similarities could be easily misinterpreted. In fact the question of the uniqueness of Israel would not arise if there were only similarities. It is because there are differences and a biblical claim to distinctiveness that the question of the nature of the similarities or parallels arises.

Second, study inter-biblical parallels before comparing the biblical text with extra-biblical materials. If the biblical text provides other passages similar to the one discussed, it is more important to examine that parallel than to ignore it and look for Ancient Near Eastern parallels to interpret the biblical text. For instance, the verb *kipper* (“to make atonement”) is often used in different ritual passages in the Old Testament. But its Akkadian cognate, *kuppuru* (“to wipe off, cleanse”) is also used in different ritual acts. To ascertain the meaning of the verb in the Hebrew Bible, it is necessary to examine its ritual usage in the Old Testament. Within that context, *kipper* means to perform rites for the removal of sin and impurity. Sin and impurity are understood as violations of God’s moral and religious laws and constitute a barrier between God and the sinner that needs to be removed. This is different from the ritual and usage found in the Akkadian literature.

Third, when dealing with social phenomena it is necessary to study the function of a particular phenomenon within Israel itself before engaging in comparisons with parallel phenomena in other societies. The nature and role of the king in Israelite society must be carefully analyzed before one decides to compare this social institution with Ancient Near Eastern practices. Such study will reveal

significant differences and will indicate that the Israelite system was in many ways unique, in spite of similarities with other systems.

Fourth, one must study the Ancient Near Eastern parallel in an attempt to determine what was the meaning of the idea, behavior, or institution within its own particular setting in life. Interpreting a piece of literature or a social and cultural practice in isolation from its immediate cultural context could result in a distortion of the evidence. Therefore, it is indispensable to consider all the evidence available on a particular phenomenon before comparing it with similar ones in any other culture.

For instance, terms like *freedom* and *liberty* were used during the Cold War in communist literature as well as in American literature. But to understand the meaning attached to those terms, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of communist and American ideologies. The terms are the same, but they differ significantly within each culture.

The use of the Akkadian verb *kuppuru* provides another example. When this verb is interpreted within the Babylonian understanding of ritual acts, one realizes that it is not a significant parallel to the biblical *kipper*. In that religion, what was wiped off or removed was not sin but evil in the form of disease produced by demonic powers. Through magic and incantations the individual sought to be free from his or her affliction. This is different from that found in the Old Testament, where God Himself, in an act of love, forgives sinners and removes their sin.

Fifth, comparisons should be made with religions with which Israel came into contact or that belonged to its general cultural and geographical context. They would probably provide the best and more reliable parallels for analysis and discussion.

Critical Cases and the Question of Revelation and Inspiration

These guidelines could provide proper parameters within which one could do comparative studies to avoid the "parallelomania" so common among scholars in the past century and that led many to conclude that the Israelite religion was heavily influenced by the Babylonian religion or the Ugaritic (Canaanite) religion. But the guidelines do not address the relation between similarities and the revelation/inspiration of the biblical text.

There are today a significant amount of legal materials from the Ancient Near East that could be used for comparative purpose and better to understand ancient legal practices. From the Sumerian culture there are the Laws of Ur-Nammu, the Laws of Lipit-Ishtar, fifth ruler of the first dynasty of the city of Isin, and several other small collections. From the Babylonians there are the Laws of Eshnunna, prepared by Dadusha, ruler of the kingdom of Eshnunna; the Laws of Hammurabi, prepared by Hammurabi, the sixth ruler of the first dynasty of Babylon; and a collection of 15 Neo-Babylonian Laws. From Assyria there are the Middle Assyrian Laws, and from the Hittite a collection of laws going back to the early Old Period, which includes laws from the Middle and New Hittite periods. There is a need for Adventist scholars to examine these laws and compare them with the biblical ones to deal with the issue of similarities and differences.

It must be acknowledged that the similarities between these legal materials and the biblical

ones are indisputable. In the structure of the collections, for instance, particularly that of the Law of Hammurabi, it has a prologue in which the background of the law is given, followed by the collection of laws, closing with an epilogue. The same structure has been identified in the case of the so-called Book of the Covenant in Exodus 20–23.¹⁷ Casuistic law (case laws; “if such and such happens, then . . .”) characterizes many of the collections, as is also the case in the biblical materials. The Bible includes laws addressed by God to the Israelites, and often phrased as imperatives, called apodictic laws. It was believed that such laws were uniquely Israelite, but laws phrased in the apodictic style have been found among Israelites’ neighbors.

In looking at some specific laws, there are a number of striking similarities:

- Deuteronomy 24:7: “If a man is caught kidnapping one of his brother Israelites and treats him as a slave or sells him, the kidnapper must die.”
- CH 14: “If a man should kidnap the young child of another man, he shall be killed.”
- Mid. Assyrian A30: “If the father who presented the bridal gift so pleases, he shall take his daughter-in-law (i.e., the wife of his deceased son) and give her in marriage to his (second) son.”
- Deuteronomy 25:5: “If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her.”
- Leviticus 18:7, 29: “Do not dishonor your father by having sexual relations with your mother. . . . Such persons must be cut off from their people.”
- Hammurabi 157: “If a man, after his father’s death, should lie with his mother, they shall burn them both.” (In Hittite law, it was not a sin for the son to have sex with her after the death of the father [HL 190].)

In the area of sexual prohibitions, there are many similarities between biblical legislation and Hittite, Babylonian, and Assyrian laws. Interestingly, the biblical text states that the Egyptians and the Canaanites did not practice similar laws (Lev. 18:3, 27–29), but does not say anything about Hittites, Babylonians, and Assyrians. Nevertheless, it is clear that “the Israelites were neither the first nor only people to honor such taboo.”¹⁸

One more example taken from Hammurabi 199: “If he destroys the eye of a citizen’s slave, or breaks the bone of a citizen’s slave, he shall pay half of the purchasing price.” Compare this with Exodus 21:26: “If a man hits a manservant or maidservant in the eye and destroys it, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the eye.”

W. J. Harrelson states: “The similarity between the Israelite and pagan laws is remarkable and unexpected. The language in which the respective laws were formulated is at times so close that questions have arisen as to the originality and independence of the Israelite legal traditions.”¹⁹

How then should one explain those similarities? What is uniquely Israelite in the biblical legal materials? A logical conclusion would be that the Israelites took over their body of legal materials from Ancient Near Eastern legal traditions. The problem scholars face with that suggested solution is that there is no way to determine how that happened. One of them has concluded that “at this stage

of knowledge . . . actual mechanisms of cultural contact and transmission still remain elusive.”²⁰

Other scholars have acknowledged the Ancient Near Eastern influence on the Israelite legal tradition but have sought to demonstrate that there are some fundamental conceptual differences that make the Israelite system unique. For instance, the laws dealing with slaves are much more humanitarian in the Bible than in any other Near Eastern law. “Ancient Near Eastern law collections deal mostly with the slaves in relation to an injuring third party, thus emphasizing the slaves’ status as chattel. However, most biblical legislation focuses upon the relationship of slaves to their own master, thus emphasizing the slaves’ humanity.”²¹ The clear tendency of the law of slavery in the Bible is to humanize the institution based on the belief that there is one Creator and that all human beings were made in the image and likeness of God. There was also the fact that Israel itself was in bondage in Egypt.

Specific characteristics of the Israelite law have been identified as pointing to its uniqueness.

First, it has been argued that, over against Ancient Near Eastern law, the Israelites view their law as originating in God Himself; He is considered the only legislator in Israel. In Mesopotamia, the law was the embodiment of cosmic truth, and Shamash was its custodian but not its originator. It was the function of the king to establish justice in his realm, and it was he who expressed the cosmic truth in the form of law. Among the Israelites, the law was conceived as coming directly from God.

Second, in Israel, it is suggested, the law was an expression of God’s will, and therefore all crimes were considered a sin against Him and could not be pardoned by a human agency. All aspects of life were directly related, through the law, to the will of God. No distinction is made in the biblical legal materials between the moral, civil, and religious spheres of life. They are all considered an expression of the will of God.

Third, since it was God who personally gave the law to His people, they were directly responsible to Him and not to any individual or legislative body. Every individual was now personally responsible to maintain justice in the land.

Fourth, biblical law is viewed as upholding the principle of the sacredness of human life and therefore as rejecting the death penalty for crimes against property. The basic principle was that human life is more valuable than property.

These principles are indeed useful in perceiving the uniqueness of the Israelite law within the Ancient Near East. But they do not provide an answer to the question of the historical origin of biblical law. They simply describe the way the Israelites conceived of their law and how it was different from other legal collections. When dealing with the issue of the origin of the biblical law, the only information we have is the one provided by the biblical text itself. The text emphasizes the fact that it was God Himself who gave those laws to the Israelites. In fact, He appeared to them on Mount Sinai, and they heard His voice as He gave them the Decalogue (Ex. 19:16-19; 20:1-19). The people suggested that Moses be their mediator, and the Lord said to him, “Stay here with me so that I may give you all the commands, decrees and laws you are to teach them to follow in the land I am giving them to possess” (Deut. 5:31).

To what extent should this information be taken at face value? Should the emphasis on God as the originator of the law be interpreted as a literary device whose purpose was to invest the law with authority? If it were a literary device, there is no precedent for it. First, in the Ancient Near East, the authority of the law was not grounded on its divine origin but on the authority of the king, who was also subject to it. Second, in the Bible, the law is located within and is part of a historical narrative. The text considers the giving of the law to Israel to be a historical narrative of an actual event that took place on Mount Sinai after the people left Egypt. The origin of the people of Israel, the moment at which the 12 tribes were constituted into a nation, and the giving of the law are inseparable. The historical moment is the same. Finally, the biblical text makes a special effort to establish the fact that it was God Himself who gave the law to His people. The Lord publicly proclaimed the Decalogue, and that event was witnessed by each Israelite. This is the only way the biblical text explains the origin of the law, and it should be taken very seriously.

For a community of faith that acknowledges the divine origin of the Bible, solutions that tend to downplay the plain meaning of the text become, to say the least, questionable. By assuming that perspective of faith with respect to the biblical text, the problem of the similarities between biblical law and Ancient Near Eastern law collections is accentuated. Archaeological evidence must be integrated as much as possible with the witness of the biblical text.

There are ways of dealing with the issue of similarities within the conceptual context of the Israelite law as a divine revelation. First, some of the similarities can possibly be explained by the simple fact that humans are social beings who seek to live in harmony in a context of social order. This requires a set of common social values expressed in norms and laws that will regulate the life of the social group. Social crimes do not vary much from culture to culture, and even the possible number of penalties to be inflicted are limited and therefore very similar. But since social values may vary, or at least the hierarchy of value may be different, there should be significant similarities as well as some differences. Of course, it could also be averred that God, as Creator, provided for the human race a basic set of values and principles to regulate human behavior and that some of them have been preserved in all cultures. That would certainly explain many of the similarities.

Second, biblical tradition concerning Abram should be considered. It is a logical deduction to conclude that when he left Ur, in Mesopotamia, Abram left with the legal tradition of that area. He had been a citizen of that city, was aware of the laws regulating the different aspects of that society, and he lived by those laws. He was probably well acquainted with at least the Babylonian civil laws. Traveling throughout Palestine, he became acquainted with the Canaanite and even the Egyptian legal traditions and possibly incorporated some of them into his own lifestyle.

Third, it should also be considered that according to the biblical text, God made a covenant with Abram and gave him specific legal instructions (Genesis 17). It is true that there is no record of that legal material, but it would have reflected values and principles compatible with the character of God that were to regulate the life of Abram and his descendants. Obviously, this new legal material did not totally reject every aspect of the legal traditions known by Abram. Otherwise, it would have been

almost impossible for Abram to interact with people outside his household.

Fourth, it must be acknowledged that the 12 tribes of Israel did not live in a legal vacuum before Sinai. The legal traditions of their forefathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—were part of their legal heritage. Besides, they were acquainted at least with the Canaanite and Egyptian law systems. While in Egypt the Lord gave them laws regulating the Passover (Ex. 12:1-30) and the consecration of the firstborn. Moses may have even initiated in Egypt a Sabbath reform (5:4-21). And after the Exodus, and before reaching Sinai, the Lord gave them some laws whose content is not stated in the text (15:25, 26).

Fifth, God did not uproot Israel from its cultural milieu by giving the people a legal system totally and radically different from that of the surrounding nations. In order for the Israelites to be effective as God's instrument in blessing the nations of the earth, it was necessary for them to be similar and yet different from those nations. Israel was a new nation brought into existence by the Lord in fulfillment of the promises He made to Abraham.

Finally, if the biblical witness is taken seriously, the Israelite laws were given to them by the Lord. It could be concluded that at Sinai, God gave Israel more than a peculiar legal frame of reference based on unique principles of social and religious values. He gave them also a legal system that incorporated some of their legal heritage from the Ancient Near East that was compatible with the covenant He made with them as well as new legal demands.

According to the biblical text, the Israelite legal system was given to the people by God Himself. It did not come into existence through a long historical process that reached its climax after the exile from Babylon. Some of the common legal traditions were modified by the Lord, making them more humane and adapting them to the spirit and intention of the covenant He made with the Israelites. The final product was indeed unique to Israel. That probably was what Moses had in mind when he said to the people: "See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me. . . . Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (Deut. 4:5-8).

Cultus: Sanctuary/Temple Services

It should be expected to find some similarities between the Israelite cultus and Ancient Near Eastern cultic practices. Belief in the existence of divine beings leads to worship, a worship place and system, and leaders or mediators of worship. Temples were very common in the ancient world, and readers of Scripture are familiar with sacrificial altars with four horns, like the one in the Israelite sanctuary. Evidence from Canaan shows that burnt sacrifices and peace offerings were offered to the deities. Those two sacrifices were very common in the Israelite sanctuary/temple services. This suggests that the two languages "draw on a common heritage of sacrificial terms which have

developed differently on each side.”²²

In fact, however, when the particular terminology is placed within the broad religious context of each religion, the differences are significant. The sacrificial system in the Ancient Near East seemed to have had the fundamental purpose of feeding the gods or providing for their needs, while in the Bible that particular motivation is absent and rejected (Psalm 50). Sacrifices were offered as an expression of devotion to God and to make atonement for the repentant sinner. Since sacrifice has basically been a universal religious practice of human beings, one could postulate a common origin for it and suggest that its real intent and meaning is preserved in the Scripture through divine revelation and inspiration.

In the Israelite cultus, humans are described as being in constant need of cleansing before approaching God, suggesting that humans are by nature unclean and sinners. A similar idea is found in an old Akkadian invocation addressed to an anonymous god: “Who is there who has not sinned against his god, who has constantly obeyed the commandments? Every man who lives is sinful.”²³ Genesis 8:21 says, “Every inclination of [man’s] heart is evil from childhood.” Apparently leprosy was viewed in both Israel and Assyria as something that prevented one from having access to the temple and from social interaction. A vassal-treaty, dated to ca. 680 B.C., during the time of Esahaddon, includes the following curse: “May Sin, the light of heaven and earth, cover you with leprosy and so prevent you going in to god and kings; [then] wander like a wild ass or gazelle through the fields!”²⁴

Hittite texts indicate that the concept of holiness was known to them. “It is used, for example, if something is to be described as belonging exclusively to a deity, primarily its divine nature, and then perhaps the territory of a hostile city which has been destroyed and dedicated to a god, and which is not to be built again (like Jericho). It is also used of temples, cultic utensils, priests, sacrifices, festivals.”²⁵ This is somewhat similar to conditions in the Old Testament, with the important difference that in the biblical cultus the concept of holiness plays a much more important role and is not just a cultic concept but carries a definite ethical content.

There are several parallels that deserve closer attention. The first one has to do with the building of the Israelite sanctuary. According to Exodus 25:8 and 9, God showed Moses the model to be used in the construction of the tabernacle. The earthly was to be patterned after the heavenly; that is to say, the earthly sanctuary is a symbol of a transcendental reality. This idea belongs to the phenomenology of temples in the Ancient Near East and in other parts of the world.

Gudea, ruler of Sumer, had a dream in which was revealed to him the plan, inscribed on a tablet, for the temple for Ningursu, a warrior and fertility god. The Babylonian creation account ascribes the construction of the temple of Marduk, the Esagila, in Babylon to the gods at the time of creation: “A likeness on earth of what he [Marduk] has wrought in heaven.”²⁶

In Egypt there was a similar idea in that historical temples were conceived as having had their mythological origin at the moment of creation. “That is to say, the actual physical sanctuary is conceived to be an extension and continuity of a mythical prototype. Not only this, but the gods may specify the actual ground area of the sacred precinct and furnish the dimensions of the temple and its

enclosure. For example, the temple of Re at Heliopolis was believed to have been planned by the god Thoth, the divine scribe and inventor of writing."

As pointed out already, this is found not only in the Ancient Near East but also in other places of the world. In the building of an ancient Japanese shrine to the sun goddess, Amaterasu, she herself "gave the oracle that determined the original wood structure, which has been regularly replaced as an exact replica."²⁷ Hindu temples are considered to be the visual expression of the cosmic force that creates innumerable forms; a Hindu temple "is a static model of the cosmos" or a manifestation of it.²⁸ In other words, the temple models or expresses a transcendental reality that belongs to the divine world. Even in Confucianism, in China, the temple is considered to be not just a building but is "symbolic of the perfect and rational order designed by Confucian morality."²⁹

The idea that specific instructions for the building of earthly temples were given by the gods to humans and that therefore the building itself was a reflection of a transcendental reality seems to belong to the human religious consciousness and transcends cultural and regional boundaries. From that perspective, it would be right to say that a temple is a part of our world that "shares most fully in the heavenly realm and must be fit for the god's presence. It is, as it were, a little piece of heaven on earth, or at least it corresponds to the heavenly original as an earthly replica, a mirror of its model or a microcosm of the cosmos as a whole."³⁰

Since the understanding of a temple as a manifestation of a transcendental heavenly reality appears to belong to those intuitive religious ideas that are part of the human religious consciousness, it should not be argued that Israel took the idea from the religions of the Ancient Near East. According to the biblical text, this idea was incorporated into the Israelite religion at a particular time and through a divine revelation. Hence, the basic correctness of the universal conviction is reaffirmed and at the same time divested from mythological associations and from any other conceptual aberration. In the process the biblical text establishes on solid ground the reality of a heavenly counterpart to the earthly dwelling of God and validates or legitimizes the significance of the earthly.

Another parallel that deserves attention is the ritual of the scapegoat in Leviticus 16. Once the cleansing of the sanctuary is finished, the sin and uncleanness of the Israelites are placed on the goat for Azazel and sent to the wilderness. Several ritual texts describing a similar rite have been found among the Hittites and Babylonians. This type of ritual is usually called an "elimination rite," whose purpose is to eliminate or remove from the community or the individual certain types of evil (impurity, pestilence, an infection, etc.). A few examples will illustrate the point.

The Hittite ritual of Pulisa prescribed a ritual to be performed when the king and his army, returning from war, were afflicted by a plague. The king was to select a man, a woman, a bull, and a ewe from the land of the enemy for the ritual. They were presented to the god or goddess who caused the plague. The king or his appointee, representing the army, transferred the plague to the victims, who were not only transporters of the evil but also substitutes for the king and his army. The king's prayer, "You, male God, be appeased with t[his de]corated man. But to the king, the [leaders],

the ar[my, and the] land of Hatti, tur[n yourself fa]ithfully. [] But let this prison b[ear] the plague and carry (it) ba[ck into the land of the enemy].”³¹

It was believed that one of the local deities sent the evil, and the purpose of the ritual was to return it to the land of the enemy, to the place it came from. The idea of the transfer of a collective evil to a place outside the camp is present in Leviticus 16, but not the idea of appeasing a deity. This is understandable because in the Israelite religion there is only one God. Azazel, as a demonic figure, does not need to be appeased but defeated. The goal for Azazel is not a substitute for the high priest precisely because the idea of appeasement is absent from the text. Yes, there are some similarities, but when the ritual is placed within the conceptual context of each religion, the differences are significant.

In another case, a person is sick, and to remove the “evil sickness” a bowstring is attached to the hand and foot of the individual, then removed from him and attached to a mouse. The person in charge of the rite says, “I have taken away from you evil and I have put it on the mouse. Let this mouse take it to the high mountains, to the deep valleys (and) the distant ways.’ She lets the mouse go (saying): ‘Alawaimi, drive this (mouse) forth, and I will give to you a goat to eat.’”³² The mouse is not a substitute but, like the biblical scapegoat, a means of transport used to remove the evil from the person by sending it away.

The best example from Babylon is found in the ritual for the purification of the temple. The officiating priest takes the carcass of a ram and “wipes the temple with carcass of the ram. He recites the incantation for exorcizing the temple. He purifies the whole cella including its surrounding areas and then takes down the censer. The *mashmashushu* takes up the carcass of that ram and goes to the river. He sets his face westward and throws the carcass of that ram into the river.”³³ As in Leviticus 16, the context deals with the purification of the temple/sanctuary. In the process of cleansing it, the evil is transferred to a dead animal, whose carcass is thrown into the river. So, the ideas recur of cleansing the temple and transfer and removal of evil from it. But the similarities are mainly superficial.

In the Babylonian religion what contaminated the temples was not the sin or impurity of the people but demons. These demons posited a threat to the deity, and it was necessary once a year to remove them from the temple. This was done through the carcass of the ram. The demons became attached to the flesh of the animal and were returned to the underworld from where they came. In Babylonian mythology, demons dwelt in the underworld and had access to the world of the living through rivers. By throwing the carcass into the river, they were sent back to their place of origin. In Israel the temple was cleansed from the sin and uncleanness of the people and not from the threatening presence of demons. However, in both cases, there is a removal of evil and its return to its place of origin.

It is obvious that God was employing a common ritual practice from the Ancient Near East to convey a truth that was not expressed through the performance of the ritual itself in any other religion. In other words, God selected a ritual practice and invested it with a particular meaning that

was foreign to it. God was mediating new knowledge using structures of knowledge already present. He condescended to use what was available to the Israelites to lead them beyond their cognitive limitations into a better understanding of His plan for them.

Conclusions

It is simply impossible to deny that there are significant parallels between the Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern social institutions and religious and cultic practices. Those similarities, however, do not lead to the conclusion that when the prophets were preserving the content of the Scriptures, they were simply reflections of their social and religious environment. The testimony of the Scripture itself is that God Himself was using that which was accessible to the prophets within their own cultural milieu to convey a special message to His people. Obviously, God did not remove the prophets from their own cultural context. He used common religious, cultic, and legal language but invested it with the meaning and message He wanted to communicate to His people. It is important, therefore, in the study of the language, to give priority to the biblical text itself and then explore possible parallels.

Some of the parallels between Israel and Ancient Near Eastern practices and beliefs suggest the possibility of a common origin. Each religion expressed what was originally one basic practice or belief in a distinctive way, introducing significant difference but preserving some similarities. In those cases, through divine revelation the practices or beliefs were divested of their pagan distortions to use them as a proper vehicle to communicate the divine message.

Study of Ancient Near Eastern practices and their possible relationship to the biblical text suggests that in the Old Testament, God, through His work of revelation and inspiration, dealt with ancient pagan practices in different ways, and used them for different purposes. God dealt with them in the following ways:

1. *Rejection and Condemnation of Pagan Ideas.* A large number of Ancient Near Eastern practices were rejected by God in the Old Testament. For instance, consulting the spirit of the dead was a common religious act, but in Israel God rejected it (Deut. 18:10, 11). The extent of the practice of child sacrifice in Canaan is uncertain, but the God of Israel opposed it as a most serious sin, an offense against Himself, resulting in the extermination of the individual (Lev. 20:1). The list could be longer, but that is not necessary. It is clear that the prophets and the people of Israel were to some extent informed by the religion of the surrounding nations, and God Himself rejected most of their religious convictions.

2. *Polemics Against Pagan Ideas.* At times it was not sufficient for the Lord to forbid His people to follow the practices of the Canaanites. He used the prophets to engage in a polemic attack against some of the religious practices and beliefs of the neighbors of the Israelites. God gave a specific command against the worship of images, but since the temptation was too strong, for His people. He showed in a polemic tone the absurdity of worshiping idols. Isaiah 46:6 and 7 provides a good example:

“Some pour out gold from their bags
 and weigh out silver on the scales;
 they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god,
 and they bow down and worship it.
 They lift it to their shoulders and carry it;
 they set it up in its place, and there it stands.
 From that spot it cannot move.
 Though one cries out to it, it does not answer;
 it cannot save him from his troubles.”

The same point can be illustrated by analyzing Hosea’s attack against the Canaanite fertility cult. God revealed Himself through His people. Israel is described as a woman who said, “I will go after my lovers, who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink.’ . . . She has not acknowledged that I was the one who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold—which they used for Baal” (Hosea 2:5, 8). Yahweh, and not Baal, is the One who out of His covenant love blesses the land, the animals, and His people. Therefore, there is no need for the people of Israel to practice fertility rituals.

3. *Adaptation of Social Practices:* It is apparent that God did not reject everything from the surrounding cultures. Sometimes He took a religious, cultic, or legal regulation or practice and redefined or re-configured it to communicate, in a reliable way, His will to His people, or in order simply to adapt it to a theocracy. One of the best examples is kingship in Israel. While in Egypt the king was divine and in most of the Ancient Near East he was placed very close to the divine or divinized after death, in Israel the king was the servant of the Lord, a vassal of Yahweh, the true king of Israel. The Ancient Near Eastern concept of the king was taken over, but it was redefined to make it compatible with the Israelite faith. In fact, with respect to Israel, it would be better to talk about a monarchical theocracy than about a monarchy. God never surrendered His claim and authority as King of Israel. In some other cases, God tolerated social evil practices but through legislation made them more humane (e.g., polygamy, divorce, slavery).

4. *Incorporation of Different Materials and Literary Techniques.* At times, God selected practices from the Ancient Near East that were compatible with the values and principles of the covenant relationship He established with Israel. In Proverbs is a collection of verses that may have been written by a non-Israelite, but the biblical writer, under the inspiration of the Spirit, incorporated them into the book (Prov. 30:1-33). Literary techniques and forms used in Canaanite literature were also used by the prophets to express the message the Lord gave them.

Careful study of each particular parallel can determine which one of the previous four reactions to Ancient Near Eastern practices is present in the biblical text. The meaning of a biblical text is, then, determined by its own biblical context because it is only there that can be seen the way God used the Ancient Near Eastern background. By acknowledging that God was directly involved in the process of rejecting, polemicizing, adapting, reformulating, and incorporating some of the cultural,

religious, cultic, and legal practices of the Ancient Near East, we can honor the divine nature of Scripture and justify the need to submit to its authority.

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God's Everlasting Covenant

The two covenants of Scripture are really one and the same.

Norman R. Gulley

In his book *Sabbath in Crisis* (2003), former Seventh-day Adventist minister Dale Ratzlaff rejects the seventh-day Sabbath because he alleges that: (1) it originated in the Sinai covenant for Israel; (2) it is not a part of the Abrahamic covenant, (3) it is obsolete in the new covenant for Christians, and (4) the new covenant does away with the Sinai covenant.¹ So, he concludes, "required Sabbath observance undermines the gospel."² Ratzlaff speculates a radical distinction between the new covenant (including Abrahamic covenant) and the Sinai covenant.

Is the Law Temporal?

Paul writes, "The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (Gal. 3:24, 25).³ Many commentators believe the law is merely temporal. A sampling of these commentators indicates that a historical interpretation is given to the passage, stating that the period before Christ had several disadvantages compared to the period after Christ. The period before Christ was a period under the law, and is considered inferior, and less free, for those under the law since Sinai needed to be emancipated from it when the period of Christ came. After the coming of Christ, there is no further need of the Law.

If Paul were presenting a sequential view of salvation-history, with (1) a disadvantage to those who lived before Christ, and a great advantage to those who live after Christ, and (2) submission to the law before Christ contrasting with freedom from the law after Christ, then there is a problem. This would mean that the Sinai covenant and the new covenant are different, the first a burden and the second freedom.

If God dealt so differently with people in different historical periods, this calls into question Scripture that says God does not change (Mal. 3:6) and that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). How can God give bondage to some people and freedom to others merely on the basis of when they were born? This seems like a new kind of predestination (salvation for some and reprobation for others). Both ideas call into question the justice and love of God, and are sufficient for Satan to make his case against God in the cosmic controversy. If this historical interpretation is pressed, then God cannot be seen to be just and loving, and hence the cosmic controversy charges against Him are shown to be valid, which means there will never be resolution to the cosmic controversy.

Furthermore, if the eternal gospel is available in both covenants, then God's grace is available

in both, which means He is a Savior in both. It doesn't make sense for a God of love to place people under bondage. Salvation and bondage are mutually exclusive. The fact of an everlasting covenant and an everlasting gospel is consistent with the fact that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

So the comparison between the Sinai and new covenants has nothing to do with God, but has everything to do with humans. Human response to the Sinai covenant was a self-centered attempt to earn salvation, which is bondage. The new covenant experience is entered into when humans cling to Christ alone for salvation and no longer try to save themselves, which is freedom. A historical comparison of the two covenants calls into question the character of God, but an experience comparison reveals the foundational difference between the two human responses to the covenants that are both given to humans by the unchanging God (Mal. 3:6).

It is the same unchanging God of love who loves humans, and relates to them in the everlasting covenant as it unfolds through Sinai and through Christ. Throughout the unfolding of the everlasting covenant, it is the same everlasting God, the same everlasting gospel, and the same everlasting law that are involved in calling humans into a saving relationship with their only Savior. Therefore, Paul was speaking about the experience of God's people. The law leads them to Christ, and then becomes a means to express their joy for salvation received from Christ. The law and the gospel are inseparable in the everlasting covenant experience. So in passages like this one in Paul's writings, the covenant experiences are more the focus; whereas, in the Book of Hebrews, the covenant historical periods are more the focus.

Keeping this distinction in mind saves one from reading too much into Pauline passages, because reading a historical difference into the text, when it should be an experience difference, calls into question the nature of the covenant, and the nature of the covenant God. If God is not fair to those in the Sinai covenant, then that would be sufficient for the enemy to claim that God is not loving and just, which the enemy seeks to accomplish in his cosmic controversy against God. So it is vital that we take note of this important distinction, which none of the commentators above have, nor has Ratzlaff.

When it is understood that Paul is saying that the proper function of the law was/is (1) to convince people of sin and their need for a Savior, and thus lead them to Christ (Gal. 3:24, 25), then this is compatible with John's statement that (2) law-keeping is a loving response to Christ for His salvation (John 14:15). Both are ongoing experiences at any moment in the unfolding of the everlasting covenant, in the sense that persons are advancing from the first to the second level, so that the same law and gospel are available to each person, irrespective of when he or she lives.

As G. Walter Hansen put it, the Mosaic law is "a permanent standard for all humanity."⁴ The law still functions as a standard of salvation, but was never intended to be a means of salvation. When Paul says, "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (Gal. 3:25), it needs to be kept in mind that those in covenant relationship with Christ in the old covenant historical era were persons of faith (Hebrews 1). To them the law was never a means of salvation.

Continuance of the Law

The new covenant speaks of writing the law in the minds and hearts (Jer. 31:31-34) of those in a saving relationship with God (Eze. 36:24-28; 37:23). It is important to analyze Jeremiah 31:31-34 and grasp God's intent.

The new covenant will be made with Israel and Judah.

The new covenant will be better than the covenant at Sinai

(a) not because it was different, for God was a husband to them (faithful to them)

(b) but because the Sinai covenant was broken by the people (unfaithful to God).

The new covenant is God writing the law in the heart.

The new covenant is God being their God and they being His people.

The same God who made a covenant with Israel at Sinai will make a new covenant with Israel and Judah. The problem with the covenant at Sinai was not with the covenant, but with the people's wrong response to the covenant (Heb. 8:9). Most people in Israel did not enter into a heart relationship with God, responding to His heart-relationship with them. So the law was merely external because God was merely external to them. There is no covenant without a reciprocal heart-response. God was like a faithful husband to them, but they were unfaithful to Him, as illustrated by Hosea and his unfaithful wife. So the new covenant was God's attempt to renew the covenant of Sinai with His people, with the hope that He could write the law in their hearts (8:7-13; 10:15-17).

This new covenant was not gospel without the law, but gospel with the law experienced as a reciprocal love response to the Lawgiver. This was what God longed for at Sinai (Deut. 5:29). Christ stated that the law will remain as long as heaven and earth remain (Matt. 5:18). It should be remembered, "God does not speak of a new law, but of a new covenant."⁵ In fact He states clearly, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (Jer. 31:33).

A number of commentators stress that the law in the Sinai covenant is the same law that is written on minds and hearts in the new covenant (vs. 31), so there is a continuance of the law, though they also believe that grace is greater in the new covenant).

- John Calvin wrote, "God does not say here, 'I will give you another Law,' but *I will write my Law*, that is, the same Law, which had formerly been delivered to the Fathers."⁶

- C. F. Keil says the "law of the Lord thus forms, in the old as well as in the new covenant, the kernel and essence of the relation between the Lord and His people."⁷

- Gerhard von Rad said, "This *Torah* is also to stand in the center of the new covenant which Jahweh is going to make with Israel 'in these days,' Thus, as far as the content of Jahweh's self revelation is concerned, the new covenant will make no change. Jeremiah neither says that the revelation given at Sinai is to be nullified in whole or in part, . . . nor does he in any sense suggest alteration or expansion of its content in the new covenant."⁸

The continuance of the law should serve as a caution to those who over-emphasize the new

covenant as grace (this even needs to be remembered by the three cited above), without allowing for the fact that grace was present in the Sinai covenant, for the same God of grace issued both covenants. Scholars should focus more on the continuity of the two covenants because they are given by the same God of love (1 John 4:8).

Is Sinai Different From the New Covenant?

Beyond the obvious difference of Sinai being in the time of promise, and the new covenant being in the time of fulfillment (see the Book of Hebrews), are there other essential differences between the two covenants? Many commentators think so, and give a negative evaluation of the Sinai covenant. Examples:

- K. Seybold says of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31: "The massive 'new thing' of this passage is the interiorization of religion."⁹

- John Calvin, with reference to the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34, made several comments: (1) God will manifest mercy toward Israel "in a new and unusual manner,"¹⁰ (2) "the ancient people were like children, and hence God kept them in the rudiments of knowledge: now, as we are grown up, he favours us with a fuller doctrine, and he comes, as it were, nearer to us."¹¹ (3) "God, under the Law, did not so perfectly teach his people as he does us at this day."¹² (4) "God would be propitious to his people in a different and more perfect way than he had been in former times,"¹³ and "God promised salvation to his ancient people, and also regenerated his chosen, and illuminated them by his Spirit. This he did not do so freely and extensively as now."¹⁴

- C. F. Keil notes that God's people broke the covenant, but blames the Sinai covenant for this: "It was a defect connected with the covenant made with Israel at Sinai, that it could be broken on their part. This defect is not to exist in the new covenant which God will make in after times. . . the difference between the two consists merely in this, that the will of God as expressed in the law under the old covenant was presented externally to the people, while under the new covenant it is to become an internal principle of life. . . . In the old covenant, the law with its requirements is the impelling force; in the new covenant, the grace shown in the forgiveness of sins in the aiding power by which man attains that common life with God which the law sets before him as the great problem of life. It is in this that the qualitative difference between the old and the new covenants consists. The object which both set before men for attainment is the same, but the means of attaining it are different in each. In the old covenant are found commandment and requirement; in the new grace and giving."¹⁵

As stated above, the distinction between the Sinai and new covenants is due to God, rather than due to humans. God is blamed for the Sinai covenant being defective, expecting what was impossible (perfect law keeping). This makes the God of Sinai different from the God of the new covenant. But how could this be so if God does not change (Mal. 4:6)? How is this possible when God is a God of love (1 John 4:8)? We must look beyond commentators of Scripture. We must look to Scripture itself. What does internal evidence in Scripture say about the God of Sinai? Is the God of

Scripture the same as the God of the New Covenant?

Sinai God Same as New Covenant God

The biblical record is clear that the God of Abraham is the same as the God at Sinai. Note what it says about God in relation to His people in captivity, and how Sinai is linked to the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, indicating continuity between the covenants. Scripture also reveals the same love of God with reference to Sinai as in the New Covenant.

1. With reference to His people in Egyptian slavery: "God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them" (Ex. 2:24, 25).

2. "The Lord said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians'" (Ex. 3:7, 8).

3. God said to Moses, " 'I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord I did not make myself known to them'" (Ex. 6:3). What does God mean by this, as His name *Yahweh* was not unknown to them? In the Creation Covenant God was referred to as *Elohiym Yahweh*; and referred to as *Yahweh* in the covenants with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But He was not introduced as *Yahweh* to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Isaac spoke to Jacob of the promised blessings from *Ēl shadday* (Gen. 28:3).

But now God (Heb. *Yahweh*) reveals that He hears the groaning of His people in Egypt (Ex. 3:7, 8; cf. 2:24 where *Elohiym* is used). He announces to them, "I am the Lord" (Heb. *Yahweh*; Ex. 6:6). "I will free you from being slaves" (Ex. 6:6); "I will redeem you" (vs. 6); "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God" (Heb., *Yahweh Elohiym*; vs. 7); "I will bring you to the land" and "give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord" (*Yahweh*; vs. 8). So in Exodus 6:6 to 8, God announces Himself as *Yahweh* three times, and reveals Himself as a caring, compassionate covenant partner who will fulfill the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So we read in Haggai: "Be strong, all you people of the land," declares the Lord (Heb. *Yahweh*) "and work. For I am with you," declares the Lord Almighty (Hebrew is not *Ēl shadday*, but *Yahweh* of hosts). "This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear" (Haggai 2:5).

I concur with Keil and Delitzsch: "It was in His attributes as *El Shaddai* that God had revealed His nature to the patriarchs; but now He was about to reveal Himself to Israel as *JEHOVAH*, as the absolute Being working with unbounded freedom in the performance of His promises. . . . Jehovah was now about to redeem Israel from its suffering and make it His own nation. This assurance, which God would carry out by the manifestation of His nature expressed in the name *Jehovah*, contained three distinct elements: (a) the deliverance of Israel from the bondage of Egypt . . . (b) the adoption of Israel as the nation of God; (c) the guidance of Israel into the land promised to the fathers."¹⁶

As Walter Kaiser put it, "The heat of God's response to Moses and the people was a fresh

revelation of God's character and nature."¹⁷ How appropriate that Yahweh's love as Redeemer is associated with the Exodus deliverance and the Ten Commandments. The first is His redemption in action and the second is a transcript of Him as Redeemer. The song of Moses' celebration of the Red Sea deliverance looks to the future (including God's Ten Commandments for Israel) and says, "In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed" (Ex. 15:13). Gerhard von Rad correctly stated, "When Israel became numerous in Egypt, God led the people through the wilderness with wonderful demonstration of grace; then after their lengthy wandering he gave them under Joshua the Promised Land."¹⁸

4. The gospel and law belong together. In their *Anchor Bible Dictionary* article on the covenant, George Mendenhall and Gary Herion refer to the Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties (as in ancient Hittite culture), which include a prologue stating what the Sovereign had done for a vassal, and the "reciprocity" of the vassal in grateful obedience to some stipulations. Then a little later they point out the following about the Ten Commandments: "The Ten Words are not commands, nor are they couched in command (i.e., imperative) language. They are simple future indicative verbs that indicate the future action that is the expected consequence of the preceding prologue: 'I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . . (and therefore) you will have no other gods before me.'"¹⁹

Sinai was not a contract but a covenant. It was not an external agreement but a relationship. Far from being a formal document (with potential to legalism), Sinai was a covenant of love (which is true of God's everlasting covenant in its unfolding through various covenants). We would expect this from a God of love (1 John 4:8). God invited His people, weary and worn from Egyptian slavery, to come to Him in just as warm and loving embrace as Christ's later invitation: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). He offered them the same relationship in the Sinai covenant as He offers in the gospel. For in both God longs to be their God (with all that brings) and for them to be His special, precious people "who love me and keep my commandments" (Ex. 20:6). To disconnect the law at Sinai from the deliverance in the Red Sea overlooks the introduction to the Ten Commandments, in which covenant God says He delivered them through the Red Sea (Ex. 20:1, 2).

The gospel was present in the Old Testament. That's why the great heroes of faith are recorded in Hebrews 11. They had a faith-heart relationship with Christ rather than a works orientation with the law. They had discernment, because "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for" (Heb. 11:1, 2). These persons of faith included all the prophets (vs. 32). This spiritual heart-relationship with God was available to Israel during its desert wandering.

5. God's act of deliverance (redemption) preceded His act of entering into a covenant with His people. Note the intimate love context: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Ex. 19:4). "Now if [note the condition] you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession"

(vs. 5).

The Red Sea deliverance and the Ten Commandments are two acts of redemption, one from physical slavery, the other from spiritual slavery. God's intent was for His people to realize their helplessness as much at Sinai as at the Red Sea, and depend solely on Him for spiritual redemption as they had for physical redemption. The tabernacle and later temple services and sacrifices were intended to point the people to Christ as their only Redeemer, so that they would no more look to their own law-keeping to save themselves than anything they did to be redeemed at the Red Sea. The essence of the Sinai covenant, like the other covenants, is relationship—not going it alone. The covenant calls for a dependent relationship of the redeemed upon the Redeemer.

6. God promises Israel: "I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and . . . redeem you with . . . mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God" (vss. 6, 7).

The emphasis is on what God will do, His promises to His people as their Redeemer. God's love is shown in setting Israel apart as a special "treasured possession" (19:5), saying, "You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6).

7. Such amazing love showered upon Israel should have resulted in a grateful response of willingly keeping His commandments, not because they were commanded, but because they loved their Redeemer who was also their Lawgiver. Yahweh (twice in verse 25) said to them, "If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord [Hebrew *Yahweh*] your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you" (15:26).

8. At Sinai God said, "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!" (Deut. 5:29). Moses said to Israel before they crossed over the Jordan to possess the Promised Land, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts" (6:4-6). God told His people that they would be scattered to the nations, and promised, "If from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul" (4:29). It was God's purpose that the law be written on their hearts even during the old covenant historical period, for that's what the covenant relationship is all about. "Christ is the end of the law [to earn salvation] so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4). "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified" (vs. 10).

Law keeping within a covenant relationship with Christ is a heart experience. This is why Paul said, "love is the fulfillment of the law" (13:10) or "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal. 5:14).

Christ said, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'" This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matt.

22:37-40). Note that Christ quoted twice from the Old Testament, and then said all the Old Testament (Law and Prophets) hang on these two commandments. Here Christ tells us that a heart relationship with God and humans summarizes the law, the Old Testament, and so is the very essence of the old covenant as God intended it to be. There is no difference between the heart-relationship of the Sinai covenant and the new heart-relationship of the new covenant.

9. At Sinai God is revealed as a caring, loving God, in the wilderness experience with His people: "The Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast desert. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything" (Deut. 2:7). In the desert "Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years" (8:4). "He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the desert" (8:15, 16). Note the intimacy of God's love for Israel. "In a desert land he found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions. The Lord alone led him; no foreign god was with him" (32:10-12).

10. At Sinai, atonement took place. In answer to the pleading of Moses after the golden calf sin, "God's response was one of covenant renewal, 'Behold, I make a covenant' (34:40), and thus Israel was once again God's people, with the covenant promise re-established: 'I will dwell among you.' Sinai had now become the place of atonement when estrangement had occurred."²⁰ Thus, Sinai not only had redemption preceding it, but atonement in its midst.

11. Laws (plural) were given at Sinai. They include the Decalogue, the holiness code, and the Deuteronomic code. The context for all of them is God's covenant. With reference to the Decalogue Daniel I. Block says: "Contrary to modern practice, the Scriptures never refer to the Decalogue as the 'Ten Commandments.' The genre of the document is identified in both contexts as 'all these words,' . . . that Yahweh 'spoke,' . . . than 'these commandments that Yahweh commanded.' In fact, wherever this document is identified by title, it is always referred to as 'the Ten Words,' . . . and never 'the Ten Commandments.' We would do well to follow the Septuagint in referring to this document as the Decalogue (literally 'Ten Words'). Or, since the Hebrew word . . . is capable of a broad range of meaning, the Ten Principles of covenant relationship."²¹

It is crucial that the Decalogue be understood within a covenant context, for the Decalogue stipulations were given to preserve the love relationship between God's people and the God who loved them enough to redeem them from Egyptian slavery, and have them build a sanctuary so that He could come and dwell with them. This is a revelation of what God is like, a manifestation of the gospel, and has nothing to do with legalism and bondage as so many Christians assume. We must not read back into the historical record more than is intended by the pre-incarnate Christ who gave the Ten Words, other laws, and sanctuary instructions to a people He loved so dearly.

The Old Testament revelation must be allowed to speak for itself, for God is speaking through

it, and He is well able to speak for Himself, and doesn't need our help, for He is well able to reveal the truth about His Ten Words. It doesn't matter if church tradition says there's a distinction between law and grace, for after all the heretic Marcion thought there was a difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, and at least that's a logical conclusion if there is a radical distinction between law and grace. To distinguish between law and grace is no different in kind from Marcion's distinction between the God of the Old and New Testaments, for any such distinction calls into question the love of God who does not change.

12. The Book of Hosea is in the Sinai covenant period. It presents both the love of God for wayward covenant breakers and the fact that the hardship of God's people was due to their being outside of a covenant relationship with God. It was not a case of the Sinai covenant being external, but the Sinai covenant people being external to the covenant, and therefore, external to a heart-relationship with their covenant-God. The non-forgiveness of deliberate sins in the Sinai Covenant (Num. 15:30) still exists in the new covenant (Heb. 6:4-6), so there is no distinction between the covenants over such sins, as claimed by some commentators.

God's Self-Description at Sinai

In the second giving of the Ten Commandments, God declared that He was the Lord: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished" (Ex. 34:6, 7).

This self-description of God gives us the context for understanding the Ten Commandments as compatible with the everlasting gospel, and the everlasting covenant of love. These commandments, with their love to God and love to others are compatible with the inner-Trinitarian relationship of God in their eternal covenant with each other.

The second commandment reveals God's love: He is a God "showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Ex. 20:6). To disconnect the law at Sinai from the deliverance at the Red Sea, overlooks the introduction to the Ten Commandments where the covenant God says He delivered them through the Red Sea (vss. 1, 2).

David's Sinai Covenant Experience

David was a believer under the Sinai covenant. His psalms reveal the reality of the Sinai covenant. Through them we can see a God of "unfailing love," and a "heart-relationship" that caused law keeping to be a "delight." All the love of the new covenant was available to true believers in the Sinai covenant. David's testimony refutes the exegetes who place an unnecessary distinction between the Sinai covenant and the new covenant.

Robert L. Dabney opposed the view that Old Testament religion was less free and tended to bondage. According to expositions of New Testament passages (Gal. 3, 4; 2 Cor. 3; Heb. 7-12), Dabney wrote: "I am persuaded that the strong representations which these writers . . . give of the

bondage, terror, literalness, and intolerable weight of the institutions under which Old Testament saints lives, will strike the attentive reader as incorrect. The experience, as recorded of those saints, does not answer to this theory; but shows them in the enjoyment of a dispensation free, spiritual, gracious, consoling. I ask emphatically: does not the New Testament Christian of all ages, go to the recorded experiences of those very Old Testament saints, for the most happy and glowing expressions in which to utter his hope, gratitude, spiritual joy?"²²

The psalms of David are perhaps the most read parts of the Old Testament for those seeking encouragement.

Implications of Sinai as a Works-Covenant

Apparently, most scholars consider the Sinai covenant as a covenant of works (no heart-relationship). The law was given to be obeyed, and so the sign of true covenant relationship was works or obedience, in contrast to the sign being faith in the Abrahamic and new covenants. In other words, God dealt differently with His people at Sinai than He did previously, and subsequently. But what are the implications of this view?

- God would be responsible for all the legalism of Israel-Judah. Yet Christ spoke His most scathing rebuke against the legalism of the teachers of the law, and cleansed the temple twice of their money-making human rules to merchandise the free gift of grace. There is an inconsistency here. It is logical to ask, as Gerhard and Michael Hasel did, "If the Sinai covenant is indeed one of works, then why would Jesus have condemned the Jews for legalism?"²³

- A charge of inconsistency would discount biblical revelation, for God said, "I the Lord do not change" (Mal. 3:6).

- A charge of inconsistency would be sufficient reason for Satan to claim that His accusation against God is legitimate, and would be sufficient to carry His case against God's love and justice, and hence the resolution of the cosmic controversy would be impossible.

God always takes the initiative to invite persons or a nation to enter into a covenant with Him. Relationship is the essence and purpose of the covenant invitation, and so any self-works to win the favor of God is totally misplaced, because He has already shown His favor by the invitation. In this covenant context God's law is not contrary to the gospel.

Law as Bondage: A Human Problem

Nothing was wrong with God's covenant at Sinai. It was not God's intent that the law be bondage to His people, for that is mutually exclusive to the covenant relationship that He had intended to have with them. John Oswalt is correct to state that "bondage" was "the result of their drift from one false lover to another."²⁴ The first commandment was to save them from such bondage: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). The preamble reminded them that God redeemed them through the Red Sea (vs. 2). With such a God, they didn't need other gods. The Law was to keep them from bondage, and not to enslave them. When Christ said, "Come to me, all

you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28), He uttered the covenant invitation to a relationship with Him. Those in relationship with God love to keep His law (John 14:15).

It was the human response to God’s covenant at Sinai that was wrong: “God found fault with the people and said: ‘The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant’” (Heb. 8:8, 9). God’s covenant was not at fault, but the human response to it was at fault.

From God’s perspective, the law at Sinai was preceded by a release of Israel from slavery and God’s leading of Israel “to Sinai as the redeemed and set-apart people of God.”²⁵ The law was given at Sinai after Israel had been saved from Egypt. So law keeping was not a condition for salvation at Sinai. Hence, legalism is not an issue at Sinai. Rayburn rightly says, “From the treaty parallels it is now beyond question that covenant and law belong together.”²⁶ Israel-Judah’s attempt to earn salvation by keeping the law totally reverses God’s intent at Sinai.

Sadly, Israel didn’t respond appropriately to God’s Sinai covenant. Moses said of Israel, “You have been rebellious against the Lord ever since I have known you” (Deut. 9:24). This “people abandoned the covenant of the Lord, the God of their fathers, the covenant he made with them when he brought them out of Egypt. They went off and worshiped other gods” (29:25, 26). The Sinai covenant is rightly described as God’s “covenant of love” (7:12). Yet, Israel rejected the covenant because they rejected the God of love.

The New Testament reflection on Sinai rejects the useless keeping of law to gain salvation (Rom. 3:20-28), but doesn’t reject the law as intended by God (6:15). Human response to the law and not God’s revelation of the law was in error. As Edward Heppenstall rightly argued: “It is incredible to believe that God could be held responsible for laying the groundwork at Sinai for what followed in Jewish history. It is equally monstrous to believe that God would stoop at Sinai to betray the people He had delivered from Egypt into a hopeless covenant of works, that He had freed from one bondage in Egypt only to lead them into another bondage of the spirit that finally deprived them of the last vestiges of freedom and brought about their destruction as a nation.”²⁷

The introduction to the Ten Commandments refers to God’s amazing deliverance at the Red Sea (Ex. 20:2). Only God could do that, and only God could help Israel keep His commandments. They should have realized this, but didn’t. Only in the covenant relationship can the law be kept. The essence of all covenants, including Sinai, is God’s invitation to enter a dependent relationship with Him their Redeemer, the only One who saves. This is the God who gave them His law at Sinai. No wonder it is called “the perfect law of liberty” (James 1:25, KJV), “the law that gives freedom” (2:12). Deliverance at the Red Sea was a type of the gospel, and is fully compatible with the Ten Commandments given by God on Mt. Sinai, which provide the parameters of the covenant relationship, so the covenant God, the Deliverer, can keep them in the freedom of the gospel. For

"where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).

One Plan of Salvation

"God so loved the world" (John 3:16) embraces all humans throughout history, so God's love is not superior in the new covenant over His love in the old covenant, nor is His relationship with believers in the old covenant less than His relationship with believers in the new covenant.

Foundation for God's Covenant

All covenants were an invitation to a relationship with the same God, and because God does not change (Mal. 3:6), and because "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8), we would expect all covenants to be compatible. God is more than one Person. Even the Old Testament *Shema* (God is one, Deut. 6:4), stressing the uniqueness of God (compared to polytheism), didn't use the word *one* as "unique" but *one* as "united," thereby indicating unity of persons. God is love, and this is only possible if God is more than one solitary Person, for there was an eternity before God began to create intelligent beings.

The three Persons of the Trinity are in an everlasting relationship of love. This means that the everlasting gospel and the everlasting covenant reveal the everlasting love that flows from the Trinity to humans. It was God's intent that the covenants between Himself and humans reflect the reciprocal love within the inner-Trinitarian Being of God. On God's part, love for humans has never changed, but humans have for the most part failed to respond to this love. It is only within the context of God's everlasting love manifest in His everlasting covenant that we can best understand the old and the new covenants (or see the compatibility between the Sinai and new covenants).

On the horizontal/historical level, the old and new covenants are two eras, one pointing to the coming Christ and the other proclaiming the Christ who came. On this level there is a type/antitype typology, which expresses the differences between anticipation (old covenant) and fulfillment (new covenant). On the vertical/historical level, the God of the covenants is the same God throughout the old and new covenant eras. "I the Lord do not change" (Mal. 3:6).

The unchanging God (in character and consistency) is not to be confused with the unchanging God of philosophy (immutable and impassible), rooted in the timeless god of philosophy. Gradually this unchanging, timeless God of Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, and later Neoplatonism, replaced the God of Scripture in Christian theology. He is an aloof God, removed from humans, unaffected by them, remaining confined within timelessness (no sequential experience of time, because all eternity, past and future, is eternally present to Him). Logically, such a God cannot enter into human time/history as a covenant God seeking a relationship with humans, which calls for a sequential experience (past, present, future), and hence temporality. Contemporary views of God (Process and Openness), attempting to correct the classical view of God, end up with other problems. Only the covenant understanding of God can provide the needed biblical perspective.

The unchanging God of Scripture is not only unchanging in nature and character, He is

unchanging in His salvation provided throughout covenant-history. Hence, the Old Testament prophet can say "The Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; it is he who will save us" (Isa. 33:22). God is the same covenant God throughout all covenant history, so He offers the same salvation to humans along the entire old to new covenant continuum, for the everlasting gospel and the everlasting covenant come from the everlasting God.

God's Everlasting Covenant: Law and Grace

Just as there is only *one God* of all covenants, and *one plan of salvation* for all humans, there is *one covenant* with many renewals, and *one relationship* including law and grace.

The relational Trinity created relational humans, with equality of husband and wife to image the equality among the Trinity. Husbands and wives are to be "one flesh" as the Trinity are "one God." The Genesis Creation record differentiates between God as *Elohiym* (transcendent, omnipotent), who creates by speaking things into existence, from the added name *Yahweh* (imminent, covenant) God who forms humans. *Yahweh Elohiym* is introduced in Genesis 2:4; He is always *Yahweh Elohiym* (11 times) in the rest of the Creation record. Here is God-up-close creating humans in a distinct way to His creation of all the rest of created reality, indicating a special covenant relationship purpose.

After receiving the gift of life, Adam and Eve were given a law to guide them in the maintenance of life (put positively: "Don't eat the forbidden fruit, and you won't die" [Gen. 2:16, 17]). They didn't need to eat the forbidden fruit, because they had the tree of life and many other trees for sustenance. Christ created all the beasts of the ground and all the birds of the air and brought them to Adam to name them (vs. 19), a great insight into a relationship already at work between the two. Christ "blessed the seventh day and made it holy" (vs. 3).

The *sola scriptura* hermeneutic, in which Scripture interprets Scripture, indicates that: (1) "the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God" (Ex. 20:10); for (2) "the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28), and (3) the "Sabbath was made for man" (for his benefit, Mark 2:27). Here the Creator Christ gives humans a Sabbath for their benefit. That Sabbath was their first full day of life, and one can assume that they spent the whole day with Christ their Creator in covenant communion. Sabbath was made holy by the Creator Christ as a time to celebrate a finished work of Christ. It is foundationally Christian.

The creation covenant (so named in Hosea 6:7) embraces pre-Fall and post-Fall reality for Adam and Eve. The covenant included blessings (Gen. 1:26-30) and curses (3:16-19). The blessings included clothing nakedness with skins from slain animals, representing salvation through Calvary. In this first covenant the everlasting gospel and the everlasting covenant reveal God's steadfast Love, His boundless love, and His unchanging commitment to humans.

The word *covenant* first appears in Scripture when God said to Noah, prior to the Flood, "I will establish my covenant with you" (Gen. 6:18). The Hebrew word for "covenant" means "establish" (Eze. 16:62), "fulfill" (Jer. 11:5), or "confirm" (Gen. 6:18, NLT), and is decided by the context.

Since there is a prior covenant at Creation, it seems that God is saying to Noah, "I will confirm

and renew my covenant with you” (Gen. 6:18). These words were spoken to Noah before the Flood. After the world was destroyed by the global flood, the world had a new beginning, as it had in Creation; and God’s covenant was renewed (9:8-17). The context for this covenant is Creation: (1) God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (vs. 1) just as God blessed (Adam and Eve) and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth” (1:28). (2) Reference to God making humankind in His image (9:6) is a clear verbal connection with the Creation record (1:26, 27).

Gordon McConville correctly finds in these verbal connections with the Creation story evidence for the covenant at Creation. Furthermore, Gordon McConville says Genesis 6:18 “suggests the reestablishment of something already in place, namely . . . ‘a divine relationship established by the fact of creation itself.’”²⁸ McConville goes on to speak of various covenant renewals. God entered into an everlasting covenant with humans at Creation, which was renewed with humans after the Flood.

As John Sailhamer points out, the building of Noah’s altar and Moses’ altar at Mount Sinai have verbal and thematic similarities; some of which are: (1) the altar building follows acts of salvation (from Egypt and from the Flood); (2) the altar and the offering establish a covenant, (3) in both covenants, God blesses covenant partners, (4) covenant gives protection from wild animals and enemies, (5) both covenants have stipulations for the people to be obedient.

Sailhamer then says: “What these observations suggest is that the author is intentionally drawing out the similarities between God’s covenant with Noah and the covenant at Sinai. Why? The answer that best fits with the author’s purposes is that he wants to show that God’s covenant at Sinai is not a new act of God. The covenant is rather a return to God’s original promises. Once again at Sinai, as he had done in the past, God is at work restoring his fellowship with man and bringing man back to himself. The covenant with Noah plays an important role in the author’s development of God’s restoration of blessing. It lies midway between God’s original blessing of all mankind ([Gen.] 1:28) and God’s promise to bless ‘all peoples on earth’ through Abraham (12:1-3).”²⁹

When God said to Noah, “I will establish my covenant with you” (Gen. 6:18), the Hebrew word translated “establish” can also mean “confirm.” Gordon Wenham compares “cutting a covenant” with “confirming a covenant.” He says, “Whereas, ‘to cut’ describes the point of entry to a covenant, ‘to confirm’ is used of ratifying pre-existing ‘words’ (Deut. 9:5), ‘promises’ (2 Sam. 7:25), ‘threats’ (Jer. 30:24), ‘oaths’ (Gen. 26:3), ‘vows’ (Num. 30:14), as well as ‘covenants.’” So he translates the word as confirming the covenant.³⁰

Likewise, Hans LaRondelle notes that “the Hebrew term for ‘establish’ . . . indicates the ‘maintaining’ of a commitment to which God had pledged Himself earlier, implying that God had previously made a covenant with human beings.”³¹ God speaks of a new covenant. “‘The time is coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah’” (Jer. 31:31).

When God stated that He would make a new covenant, He referred to renewing the covenant already in place, for He was the same God, the covenant partners were the same Israel and Judah,

and the intended heart-relationship was the same also. The relationship of God being their God, and they being His people was the same, and God speaks of the covenant with them (both times) as "my covenant" (Ex. 6:4; Jer. 31:32).

God said the reason for the renewal was that the covenant partners "broke my covenant" (Jer. 31:32). If God could have written the law in the hearts of His covenant partners at Sinai, a new covenant to do the same would have been unnecessary. It is only because Israel at Sinai failed to enter into a heart relationship with God that He had to renew this invitation later in their history. So the word *new* in the new covenant, with reference to experience, is to "renew" the heart-relationship invitation that He gave at Sinai. So one can speak of a *renewal* of the covenant and a *renewed* people of God.

Christ Kept the Sinai Covenant

Imagine Christ with His heart of infinite love having to deal with people who claimed to be His, yet were so unlike Him. Jesus came to speak to them about covenant blessings: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matt. 5:6, 7). These are conditional covenant promises, which most of His contemporaries never experienced. Christ's purpose in Matthew 5 was not to destroy the law, but to counteract the superficial law keeping of the religious leaders and penetrate to God's meaning, by opposing superficial legalism, and drawing out the ultimate meaning of the Law.

In His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) the Yahweh covenant-Maker and Law-Giver Christ penetrated to the covenant-heart-relationship level of law keeping. Murder is not merely an outward act but also heart anger (5:21-26), and adultery is not merely an outward act but a lusting of the heart (vss. 27-30), and one should love his or her enemies, and thus be like the Father, who lets the sun shine and the rain pour on the righteous and unrighteous (vss. 33-38). Christ demonstrated this on the cross when He said "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34).

Christ elevates law keeping to its place in covenant-relationship. For law keeping outside of a covenant relationship with the Lawgiver is legalism. Christ rejected legalism, but not the law. In other words, Christ rejected the wrong use of the law and not its proper use. It was the Rabbinic Sabbath keeping that turned a day of delight into a day of drudgery. Because Christ corrected wrong views of the Law, it might be expected that He would correct the day from the seventh to the first for Christians, but there isn't a word from Him, or from any biblical writer, concerning a change of His holy law. If God gave the Ten Commandments at Sinai with such an unforgettable public way, we would expect Him to do the same if He changed one of its precepts.

Christ was the very embodiment of the covenant. Within His incarnate being is the union of the divine and the human. These are not two persons as if the human Jesus were supported in His human life by the divine God within Him. No. He was God and humanity united together in such a way that He lived on earth as a human, not as God, and was therefore totally dependent upon His Father in heaven for the ability to live as a human in perfect covenant relationship with His Father. In

His human-dependent relationship with the Father and the Holy Ghost, He came to reveal what a covenant relationship is like.

Christ also came as the representative and Redeemer of humans and took their place in the covenant relationship of humans with God. It is on the basis of His lifelong perfect faithfulness in covenant relationship with the Father that He can be a substitute for all humans who respond to Him for salvation, no matter when they live. His perfect covenant-keeping life covers their unfaithful covenant-keeping lives if they repent and cling to Him as their only Savior. His covenant-keeping human life drew Him relentlessly to the Cross, where He willingly became the substitute for humans. He died to give them life. No wonder He said hours before that sacrifice, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20).

So where the seeds of Abraham (Israel) failed, the seed Christ succeeded. Their failed mission to bless the world was accomplished by Christ. In Christ's history He recapitulated the history of Israel. Indeed He was the new Israel (as the head of His body the church). He came out of Egypt and spent 40 days in the desert. Realizing the type/antitype correspondence, Christ three times quoted Scripture in answer to Satan's wilderness temptations, and all three quotations came from Deuteronomy and Israel's wilderness experience. His betrayal was typified by David's betrayal. His death and resurrection after three days was typified by Israel's restoration after three days. Christ is now on David's throne, from where He guides in the present building of the temple made up of Jew and Gentile Christians.

Implications for Ecclesiology

Christ, as Head of the church, is the Redeemer/Lawgiver. It was through Israel that He worked to bless the world, and in the new covenant it is through spiritual Israel, comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles, that He reaches out to bless the world. The church does not replace Israel, for believing Gentiles are grafted into the one Olive Tree, and also Jews who come to believe in Christ are also grafted into the one Olive Tree. The fact that there is only one Olive Tree represents the continuity between the old and new covenants.

Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to one another because they are reconciled to God through the death of Christ Jesus. This reconciliation is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph. 2:20-22). This language defines the essence of the church. As in the Old Testament sanctuary/temple, the church is the dwelling place of God, and thus a "holy temple in the Lord" (vs. 21). God reached out in covenant heart-relationship that was as fully evident in the Sinai covenant as in the New Covenant.

The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, not just on the apostles. The formation of the ancient church took place at Sinai ("assembly" at Sinai), and the formation of the Christian Church took place at Pentecost. Christ gave to the church the law at Sinai, and the Spirit at

Pentecost. Christ is the Cornerstone, that which holds the rest of the building in place, and that building includes ancient prophets as well as later apostles. In other words, Christ holds together the Sinai covenant and the new covenant. The foundation is one consistent relationship of God with humans, the everlasting covenant revealing the everlasting gospel, which is the one plan of salvation of the one everlasting God. There is no essential distinction between God's covenant love (Heb. *hesed*) in the Sinai covenant and His covenant love in the new covenant, because God does not change.

Conclusion

It was God's intent that the covenants between Himself and humans reflect the reciprocal love within the inner-Trinitarian Being of God. On God's part, love for humans has never changed, but humans have for the most part failed to respond to God's love. It is only within the context of God's everlasting covenant that we can best understand the old and the new covenants and see the compatibility between the Sinai and new covenants. On linguistic and theological grounds, subsequent covenants are a renewal of the original covenant of God with humans. The new covenant is a renewal of the Sinai covenant, which is itself a renewal of the covenant with Abraham, and all covenants are a renewal of the original creation covenant. Just as the creation covenant unites law and grace, so every renewal of that covenant does the same. It is the Creator/Redeemer/Lawgiver who invites His people into a covenant heart-relationship with Him.

The seventh-day Sabbath is a significant part of the law, and it reveals the essence of the gospel. It was made for the benefit of humans. The pre-incarnate Christ gave humans the Sabbath in Eden. This is why "the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28). In other words the Sabbath is Christian; it is compatible with Christ and His gospel. The Christ who made the Sabbath holy makes humans holy, and to be made holy is to be set apart, which is covenant language; set apart to be with God and God to be with them.

Yahweh calls the Sabbath a "lasting covenant" (Ex. 31:16). In other words, the Seventh-day Sabbath is an everlasting covenant—as enduring as the everlasting covenant (cf. Isa. 66:22, 23). The Sabbath is an invitation to rest in God. It is an invitation to a heart-relationship with Christ. It is a weekly reminder of Christ's words: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Ratzlaff and most evangelical scholars haven't penetrated to the true meaning of the Sabbath in the context of the covenants.

The word *church* comes from two Greek words meaning "to call" and "out." "Called out" people are those who respond to the everlasting covenant invitation to allow God to be their God, and they to be His people. The church is made up of those who have entered into a covenant relationship with God that is based upon the apostles and prophets. In other words, the church is built upon a foundation that includes the original covenant and every renewal of it throughout history. The church is made up of those who throughout human history have entered into a heart-relationship with God, love to keep His law, and reflect the reciprocal love of the Trinity.

Just as there is an unchanging reciprocal love relationship within the inner history of the Trinity, so there is a revelation of that love through covenant human history as God's everlasting covenant renews the invitation to enter into a reciprocal relationship of love with God. This is renewed each Sabbath as covenant partners enter into a special rest with God. Christ prays to His Father for the church, "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23). What a staggering thought! The Father has loved the Son for eternity, and He loves His church just as much. It is this awesome, all-encompassing love that was present at Sinai and is present in the New Covenant.

The radical distinction between the Sinai covenant and the new covenant, which rejects the seventh-day Sabbath of Sinai, is based on faulty hermeneutics imposed on Scripture, from a false view of God. Biblical commentators need to allow internal linguistic and contextual evidence to provide a corrective through biblical hermeneutics.

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The Remnant After the Exile

The theme of the remnant in post-exilic Judah provides some pointed applications for today's Adventism.

Tarsee Li

The simplest definition of the remnant may be: "What is left of a community after it undergoes a catastrophe."¹ A simple definition, however, fails to capture the full extent of its theological relevance.

Although there is no scholarly consensus on the origin of the remnant motif, the best explanation was offered by Gerhard Hasel, who traced the remnant motif in Ancient Near Eastern literature beginning with Sumerian times through the biblical text down to the time of Isaiah. According to Hasel, the origin of the remnant motif predated the writing of the Bible. The "common denominator" of all its usages is "the life-and-death problem, i.e., man's existential concern." Thus, it did not arise as part of a particular biblical context, and was "originally not eschatological."²

Its usage in extra-biblical and biblical materials indicates that it arose out of the human existential concern to secure life and existence. In the Hebrew Bible, it was from the start incorporated into salvation history and became gradually employed to express future expectations of Yahwistic faith. In Amos, it received for the first time a distinctly eschatological emphasis. Isaiah of Jerusalem solidified the eschatological usage. The eschatological or holy remnant, purified by a divine purging, was for Isaiah an object of faith and a future reality. This element of the Isaianic remnant motif proved to be of great importance for later prophecy and the further development of Israelite eschatology.

The remnant motif can be found throughout the Old Testament, either explicitly or implicitly, but is most prominent in the prophetic books. It has been argued that the entire book of Micah is structured around the theme of God's promises to the remnant.³ "Amos is the first Hebrew writer to connect the remnant motif with eschatology,"⁴ and this motif becomes even more prominent in Isaiah.

Meaning

The terminology of the Old Testament remnant motif is represented by six Hebrew roots. One word is more often used in a context of total destruction (Amos 4:1-3), but the others are more frequently used in a positive context, e.g., "the escape . . . from a mortal threat."⁵

The presence of one of these words does not automatically mean that the remnant motif is present. For example, in 1 Samuel 20:29, Jonathan does not quote David as requesting to save his

life (since the danger was not yet obvious), but only requesting a dismissal from court services. Conversely, the remnant motif can also be present implicitly, even where these words are not used (Gen. 4: 1-15).

Furthermore, the remnant motif may be used negatively. A passage may state the absence of a remnant, rather than its presence. For example:

“A fire consumes before it [the locust swarm]
 And a flame burns behind it.
 The land is like the garden of Eden before it,
 But a desolate wilderness behind it,
 Having not even a survivor” (Joel 2: 3).⁶

According to Hasel, the remnant motif is applied to three groups, which he named “historical,” “faithful,” and “eschatological.” The historical remnant consists of any group that escaped a catastrophe that threatened its survival. This aspect of the remnant motif is applicable regardless of their faith or commitment to God.

An example of the historical remnant occurs in the first implicit reference to a remnant in the Bible, in Genesis 4: 1-15, “which left only Cain as the progenitor of the human race.”⁷ Likewise, the remnant of the Canaanites who were not destroyed and later became a source of trouble for Israel (Judges 3: 1), are also a historical remnant. “If you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall be that those whom you let remain shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell” (Num. 33: 55).⁸

The second type of remnant, the faithful remnant, may be characterized as a community that exhibits genuine spirituality and a true faith relationship with God; this remnant is the carrier of all the divine election promises—though a faithful community may include members who are not faithful. An example of a faithful remnant can be found in the very first explicit reference to the remnant in the canon, Genesis 7: 23, in which “Noah and his family represented a righteous remnant.”⁹

“This is the genealogy of Noah. Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God” (Gen. 6: 9). “And God said to Noah, ‘The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth’” (vs. 13). “‘But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall go into the ark—you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you’” (vs. 18). “Thus Noah did; according to all that God commanded him, so he did” (vs. 22). “Then the Lord said to Noah, ‘Come into the ark, you and all your household, because I have seen that you are righteous before Me in this generation’” (7: 1). “Only Noah and those who were with him in the ark remained alive” (vs. 23).

The motif of the remnant can be applied either to individuals or to communities. However, when the faithful remnant motif is applied to a community, whether a family or a nation, it must be recognized that a faithful community may also include some unfaithful individuals. For it is only on the eschatological Day of the Lord that the remnant will consist of only the faithful (Mal. 3: 16–4: 3),

at which time it becomes the eschatological remnant.

"Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name. 'They shall be Mine,' says the Lord of hosts, 'On the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him. Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him'" (Mal. 3:16-18). "'For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,' says the Lord of hosts, 'that will leave them neither root nor branch. But to you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings; and you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves. You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this,' says the Lord of hosts" (4:1-3).

In the context of this passage, people were complaining that God treated the faithful and the unfaithful alike (3:13-15). God responds by promising that He will separate the two groups (visibly, vs. 18) on the day of the Lord, i.e., the "day when I act" (vs. 17, NLT), the day "burning like an oven" (4:1).

In the meanwhile, the instances of faithful remnant communities in the Old Testament often include members who are not completely faithful, nor are the faithful ones necessarily perfect. Although Noah and his family were a faithful remnant that survived the flood (Gen. 6:9; 7:23), Ham later uncovered Noah's "nakedness" (9:20-27). Also, in Genesis 19, Abraham's intercession for God to spare Sodom for the sake of the "righteous" and Lot's hospitality to the strangers indicate that Lot and his family were a faithful remnant that escaped Sodom. Yet Lot's wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt (vs. 26), and Lot's daughters gave birth to sons fathered by Lot (vss. 30-38).

Therefore, since a faithful remnant community may include some unfaithful members, one must go beyond the narrow context of the passage in which the words for remnant are used to the larger context of the book or even the entire canon, to determine whether a surviving community in the Bible is a faithful remnant or simply a historical remnant.

Although the preservation of Jacob's family in Egypt through Joseph is not ascribed to their faith or commitment (Gen. 45:7), the context of Genesis makes clear that they are the recipients of the divine promises made to faithful Abraham. That is, Abraham's descendants through Jacob constitute a faithful remnant, though the family members were not always faithful to God. As Hasel noted, the Joseph cycle demonstrates a "connection between the remnant motif and the election tradition."¹⁰

The third group, the eschatological remnant, consists of those of the faithful remnant who go through the cleansing judgments and apocalyptic woes of the end time and emerge victoriously after the Day of Yahweh as the recipients of the everlasting kingdom.

"The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the

great and awesome day of the Lord. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the remnant whom the Lord calls" (Joel 2:31, 32).

This threefold grouping of the remnant is useful, but "it must not be pressed too hard, for the distinction between the groups is sometimes blurred in the biblical portrayal."¹¹ For one thing, there is an overlap in the groupings. The faithful remnant is also a historical remnant, and the eschatological remnant is also a faithful remnant. In addition, the pre-exilic prophecies about the return from captivity sometimes blur the distinction between the faithful and the eschatological remnant. Even the terms *historical*, *faithful*, and *eschatological*, should not be understood as precise definitions, but only as approximate labels.

The Remnant Motif and the Postexilic Community

Kenneth Mulzac has argued that Jeremiah applies the term *remnant* not to the survivors who remained in the land of Judah, but to those who were taken captive, who would be the recipients of the new covenant and undergo the new Exodus.¹² Therefore, those who returned from the exile constitute the faithful remnant (Jer. 31:7-9), the recipients of the Lord's new covenant (vss. 31-34), the "carriers of the ancient covenant blessings."¹³

Nevertheless, as already mentioned, the pre-exilic prophets did not always clearly distinguish between the faithful remnant who would return from the captivity and the eschatological remnant. Isaiah's description of the return of the exiles in Isaiah 11, for example, occurs in the context of an eschatological restoration.

"The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:6-9, NRSV).

It is in the context of this promise that we find the promise of the return of the captives: "On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart, the hostility of Judah shall be cut off; Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah, and Judah shall not be hostile towards Ephraim" (vss. 10-13, NRSV).

Thus, in the prophecies of the pre-exilic prophets, it is sometimes hard to distinguish between the faithful remnant who would return from captivity and the eschatological remnant. Therefore, the

postexilic experience of the Jewish people helped to refine further this important Old Testament motif by more clearly highlighting the distinction between the faithful and eschatological remnants. Even though the post-exilic community consisted of a faithful remnant that emerged as a fulfillment of prophecy, it was also a community that did not claim to be the eschatological remnant.

After the time allotted for their captivity, the Jewish captives were told to escape from Babylon (Zech. 2:7), and the term *remnant* is applied to the post-exilic community that returned from Babylon (Ezra 1:4; 9:8, 13-15; Neh. 1:2). It is also clear from the context of these passages that the postexilic community is more than just a historical remnant, but is a faithful remnant.

“Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: . . . Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem; and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.’ The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites—everyone whose spirit God had stirred—got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:2–5, NRSV).

“Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of the prophet Haggai, as the Lord their God had sent him; and the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord’s message, saying, ‘I am with you, says the Lord’” (Haggai 1:12, 13, NRSV).

These returnees—only a remnant—are the ones who were moved by God’s Spirit to obedience to return and rebuild God’s temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5). In their work of rebuilding, they were encouraged by God’s prophets (5:1, 2), and received God’s blessing (Haggai 2:19). Moreover, the genealogical lists establish a linkage between God’s promises to Abraham and the post-exilic community. The fact that those whose priestly lineage could not be demonstrated were barred from serving as priests (Ezra 2:62) also shows their concern for maintaining spiritual purity.

In fact, the application of the faithful remnant motif to the post-exilic community is clear even from passages that do not use the word *remnant*: “Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand” (Neh. 1:8-10, NRSV).

In the above passage, Nehemiah cites God’s promise in Deuteronomy 3:1-4 to restore those who return to the Lord, and applies them to the post-exilic community. Thus, for Nehemiah, the post-exilic community is clearly a faithful, though not perfect, community.

Although the remnant motif is applied to the post-exilic community, however, the post-exilic prophets also made reference to a remnant still to come in the future, an eschatological remnant

(Zech. 8:6, 11, 12; 13:8; 14:2; Joel 2:32).

"In the whole land, says the Lord, two-thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one-third shall be left alive. And I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The Lord is our God'" (Zech. 13:8, 9, NRSV).

Zechariah also includes those who are left of the other nations among those who will worship the Lord (8:22, 23), a hint that the eschatological remnant will include individuals outside the nation of Israel: "It shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles" (14:16, NKJV)

Thus, although the post-exilic prophets saw their community as the historical and faithful remnant, they did not see themselves as the final eschatological remnant.

This future remnant expectation is present not only in the post-exilic prophets but also in the post-exilic historical writings. Though explicit references to eschatology are absent from Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles, this is probably due to their genre, which is primarily historical in nature rather than prophetic. One can also detect a distinction in perspective between Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, insofar as Ezra-Nehemiah presents a community whose very survival is at stake, whereas Chronicles portrays the past as a promulgation of a vision for the present and the future. McConville, arguing against those that denied the presence of eschatological expectation in these historical books, proposes that Ezra-Nehemiah "allow for a continuing hope that prophecy may be completely fulfilled, while deliberately avoiding the claim that this has already occurred."¹⁴

Among the evidences cited for dissatisfaction with their situation are the lamentation of the elders at the laying of the foundations of the temple (Ezra 3:11–13) and the re-emergence of the problem of mixed marriages placed at the end of both Ezra and Nehemiah, with its associated threat of national slavery (Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9), which McConville links with their bondage to Persia. Conversely, he finds allusions in Ezra to Jeremiah 31 and Isaiah, including Ezra's appropriation of the remnant motif in 9:13 (Isa. 10:10-12) and 9:14 (Jer. 31:7). McConville suggests that Ezra interprets the promises not as fully fulfilled, but in process of fulfillment.

Though McConville's assessment is certainly correct, it could be further refined by distinguishing the faithful remnant from the eschatological remnant. That is, although the post-exilic community did not see itself as the eschatological remnant, it certainly did see itself as the faithful remnant. Besides the temporal distinction between the two types of remnant, there is also a qualitative distinction between them. A faithful remnant community is composed of both faithful and unfaithful individuals, whereas the eschatological remnant will be composed of only faithful individuals.

"And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since you our God have punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us such deliverance as this, should we again break your commandments, and join in marriage with the people committing these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you had consumed us, so that there would be no

remnant or survivor?" (Ezra 9:13-14, NRSV).

In this passage, Ezra refers to the post-exilic community as a "remnant," whose persistent problem of intermarriage placed their remnant status in jeopardy and raised the threat of extinction. Then again, the need to struggle to maintain their faithfulness would be a moot issue if the community were not the "faithful remnant." Therefore, it is clear that Ezra considered his community the faithful remnant, but not the eschatological remnant.

As for Chronicles, current scholarship has turned away from the outdated view that Chronicles is anti-Samaritan. Those of the northern kingdom willing to return to the Lord and come to His sanctuary were welcomed (2 Chron. 30:7, 8), and individuals from Asher, Manasseh, and Zebulun did accept Hezekiah's invitation (vs. 11). In fact, James Newsome argues that this welcoming attitude was extended to all foreigners.¹⁵

Chronicles does not deny that there were others outside the direct lineage from Adam to postexilic Judah who were faithful to God, for example, faithful individuals among the northern Israelites (2 Chron. 34:9). But the lineage of the faithful remnant was not continued through them. Therefore, for Chronicles, the post-exilic community of Judah has both an exclusive and non-exclusive self-identity. They were exclusive in the sense that they saw themselves as the sole heirs of the long lineage of the faithful. On the other hand, they were also non-exclusive in two senses: First, the existence of spiritual forefathers meant that their status was not unique in world history; second, they were open to being joined by others who might choose to be faithful to God.

The remnant motif in the post-exilic writings appears in both prophetic (post-exilic prophets) and historical contexts (Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles). Individual writers differed on the emphasis given to the remnant motif and on whether it was more often applied to the then-current faithful remnant community or the still-to-come eschatological remnant. Nevertheless, both prophetic and historical post-exilic texts indicate that the postexilic community considered itself to be the faithful remnant that, with God's providential blessing, returned from Babylonian captivity and was in the process of rebuilding the nation, but did not consider itself to be the eschatological remnant.

And this distinction between the faithful remnant and the eschatological remnant is relevant in another sense. Whereas the eschatological remnant is of necessity exclusive in that it is not only composed solely of the faithful, but consists of all the faithful at the end of time, the faithful remnant, in contrast, feature a tension between exclusivism and non-exclusivism, a tension that is exhibited in the post-exilic community's remnant self-understanding. On the one hand, as the exclusive heirs of God's faithful heritage, they were struggling to retain their status by remaining faithful. On the other hand, they realized that other individuals might be willing to join them in obedience to God, and looked forward to an eschatological remnant that would even include others outside their nation.

Parallels Relevant for Adventist Ecclesiology

In many respects, the self-identity of the post-exilic community of Judah is similar to the Seventh-day Adventist self-identity. Both the post-exilic community and the Adventist movement see

themselves as remnant communities that came into existence in fulfillment of prophecy. Just as the post-exilic community consisted of the faithful remnant who returned from the Babylonian captivity, so Adventists see themselves as having come out of spiritual Babylon and as heirs of a long lineage of the faithful of all ages. Thus, they give God's final message to the world, which announces the fall of spiritual Babylon and the call to come out of it.

Nevertheless, just as the post-exilic community included individuals who were not fully faithful to God, so Adventists recognize that not all members of the Adventist Church are faithful. This recognition also indicates that though Adventists are the faithful remnant of the time of the end, they are not—at least not yet—the eschatological remnant. That is, just as the post-exilic Jewish community looked forward to the visible revelation of an eschatological remnant, which would include others who were not yet part of the community, so Adventists also look forward to the day when spiritual Babylon will be completely fallen, and the eschatological remnant will emerge.

Likewise, just as the post-exilic community was both exclusive and non-exclusive, so are Adventists. Adventism is exclusive in that, as the faithful remnant of the time of the end, it claims to be the visible heir of God's covenant promises to the faithful of all ages. It claims to be "the remnant church."

Nevertheless, as with the post-exilic community, there is also a sense in which Adventists are not exclusive. That is, we acknowledge that we have spiritual forebears, that there are other faithful individuals currently outside our church, and that such faithful individuals will one day join the faithful among us to form the eschatological remnant.

Hans LaRondelle aptly applied the term *remnant* to the faithful spiritual forebears of Adventism: "Throughout Christian history different groups have arisen, in a sense remnant groups, with a burden to draw Christians of their day back to a more scriptural faith. While some have insisted that their faith was not entirely new, they held the Bible as their prime authority and longed to call the believers back to it. Although Seventh-day Adventists differ from these groups in various respects regarding doctrine and practice, they have in common with them the image of the remnant in the sense of bringing their contemporaries to a faith closer to the Scriptures."¹⁶

All this is not to suggest that Seventh-day Adventists are like the post-exilic community of Judah in all respects—nor should we be. Besides, the New Testament brings to light aspects of the remnant motif that go beyond what is available in the Old Testament alone. That, however, is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the remnant self-identity of the post-exilic community sheds light on the delicate balance between our appropriation of the remnant motif and the alleged exclusivism of such a claim.

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Perspective Digest - a publication of the Adventist Theological Society

A Closer Look at the Emerging Church

The Emerging Church has originated and is evolving inside the walls of Evangelical denominations.

Fernando Canale

Because the changes facing Western culture affect the actual religious experience of all believers, including Evangelicals and Seventh-day Adventists, reaction to postmodernity and engagement with the Emerging Church movement has been unavoidable. "Different people react to such radical changes in different ways," writes Alan Stucky. "Some quickly adapt while others fight to keep their world the same at all costs. Some find themselves in the middle, cautiously seeking to understand their new world but weighing it against where they've been before. And just like people, different churches and denominations have different reactions to a world that seems to be changing around them incessantly."¹

Worship

Although the Emerging Church movement arguably revolves around worship, there has been surprisingly little critical theological evaluation of its views of worship and spirituality. Instead, there are some passing positive comments in the area of ecclesiology. A leading group of Evangelical scholars led by renowned theologian Millard Erickson basically agree with the Emerging Church movement on the issue of worship.

William Henard and Adam Greenway provide a critical but sympathetic evaluation of the Emerging Church movement.² But they distinguish between two streams within it: one hostile to Evangelical doctrines ("Emergent") and another friendly to Evangelical doctrines ("Emerging"). They find laudable the Emerging Church's openness to church tradition and its spiritual and liturgical forms. But little attention is focused on Emerging Church spirituality and worship styles.

Jim Shaddix does take issue with what he perceives to be a central weakness in the Emerging Church liturgical paradigm. He challenges its "blatant redefinition of preaching."³ And Roger Oakland asserts that Emerging Church preaching demonstrates a shift in emphasis from simply proclaiming and explaining the Word of God into a conversation in which Scripture is merely one of the participants.⁴ "As opposed to being the sole authority for faith and practice," he writes, "the Bible is merely one contributor sitting around the table—alongside experience and collective wisdom—as an authoritative member of the community."⁵ Yet, from solid biblical evidence he shows that "when it comes to the issue of discovering and communicating spiritual truth, preachers in the Bible saw their responsibility simply to teach propositionally what God had revealed and persuade their listeners to

act on it.”⁶

Further, Shaddix addresses the central tenet on which this theory in the Emerging Church stands: the notion that the essence of Christian spirituality does not involve knowledge and education. He challenges this position by showing “Scripture’s emphasis on the essential nature of knowledge and understanding for spiritual development.”⁷ On this basis he concludes that the primary task of ministers in preaching “is not to give opinions, indirect implications, extra-biblical principles, or even inspiration for mutual dialogue but instead reveal the Holy Spirit’s intended meaning in Scripture so that people’s minds are exposed to supernatural truth.”⁸

Finally, he exhorts Emerging Church and Evangelical pastors against the tendency of relying on methods of communication rather than on the supernatural message itself. Paul himself exemplified the principle according to which method should not rise above or overshadow the message. This usually takes place in Emerging Church and Evangelical worship because preachers are convinced they will reach postmodern audiences by using methods “like progressional dialogue, conversational speech, relational presentations, visual imagery, contemplative atmospheres, and other components that appeal to the postmodern mind.”⁹ Instead he claims, “Some methods of presentation can actually overshadow the message because of their emotional nature or other qualities that bypass understanding and appeal to other aspects of people’s flesh.”¹⁰ Instead, the sermon should make the message clear to the mind and heart of the believer.

Shaddix’s emphasis on preaching from Scripture to reach the mind of the believer directly contradicts the dynamics of mystic spirituality that the Emerging Church adopts from church tradition. This point is clear to many lay Evangelicals, who strongly oppose the new spirituality and worship advanced by the Emerging Church. The presence of these views may signal the existence of spirited opposition at the grass roots level of the Evangelical movement to both the spirituality of Christian tradition and the Emerging Church.

Postmodernity

There is no clear single conservative view of what postmodernity represents for Evangelicalism. Evangelical scholars are aware of the postmodern spirit of the times and favor engagement rather than isolation. Douglas Groothuis, however, describes the spirit of American postmodernism by correctly comparing it with the Sophists of old. Protagoras’ spirit, he asserts, “is reincarnated (with a few twists) in a host of postmodernist thinkers.”¹¹ Not surprisingly, then, conservative Evangelicals have a more critical and nuanced approach to postmodernity and reject the way of philosophical and theological accommodation favored by the Emerging Church movement.

Some scholars even challenge the Emerging Church’s accommodation to postmodern relativism by engaging it at a general philosophical level, thereby opening possible alternate ways to relate to postmodernity.

- The revelational alternative stands on the conviction that postmodern criticism of scientific metanarrative does not apply to religious narratives. Kwabena Donkor observes correctly that

Scripture makes universal claims to truth “not on the basis of some kind of universal reason, but on the basis of faith.”¹² Consequently, there is no need to shy away from claiming the divine revelation and inspiration of Scripture as the foundation of belief. If this view is correct, postmodernism may require an adjustment of Christian apologetics and ministerial methods but not a reinterpretation of Christian belief.

- The metaphysical alternative stands on the conviction that the way to overcome postmodern relativism and to affirm universal truth is not by way of divine revelation but by way of a “revitalized classical theological metaphysics.”¹³ John Bolt claims that metaphysics, rather than Scripture, will continue to provide the foundation for Evangelical universal claims to truth. In calling for a metaphysical foundation to overcome postmodernity, Bolt follows the Roman Catholic way to “overcome” postmodern thinking, and agrees with the turn toward tradition of the Emerging Church movement.

- The transmodern alternative stands on the possibility that postmodernism is being replaced by a “transmodern” synthesis of classical, modern, and postmodern ideas that include the objectivity and universality of truth. James Parker III writes, “Transmodernists affirm objective and normative truth without capitulating to a naturalistic scientism, and they affirm true moral values and virtues. They hold out beauty, harmony, and wisdom as real entities. Cynicism based in modernist naturalism and postmodern fictions are replaced by hope—a hope that is based on the very nature of things.”¹⁴ Parker concludes: “While one might hesitate to predict the future of this movement (if indeed it can be called a movement), developments on the horizon appear to indicate that a significant (or even monumental) cultural shift is in the offing.”¹⁵

If transmodernity replaces postmodernity, the Emerging Church movement in its constructive version will prove to be a fad. For the same reason, however, transmodernity would invigorate the vintage church restorationist theological models. Transmodernity and the Emerging Church movement fit well within Pope John Paul II’s vision to overcome the shortcomings of postmodernity.

Epistemology

A few Evangelical scholars challenge the Emerging Church’s accommodation of postmodern relativism and rejection of universal and propositional truth by engaging it at the epistemological level. They show that the Emerging Church epistemological criticisms and commitments have been hasty and superficial.

Paul Kjos Helseth shows that neo-Evangelical theology is not modernist but classical by assessing Old Princeton theology’s view of Scripture. Princeton Theological Seminary, founded in 1812, fostered what became known as Old Princeton theology, a tradition that lasted until the 1920s of conservative, Reformed, and Presbyterian theology.

The Old Princeton theologians’ embrace of modernity led them to distort the classical Evangelical doctrine of Scripture into an indefensible precisionism and inerrancy. Post-conservative theologians argue that while battling the Enlightenment, Old Princeton theologians embraced a high

standard of certainty that modernity demanded. As a result, the argument continues, they transformed Evangelicalism by formulating the inerrantist doctrine of Scripture and propositional theology.

Helseth challenges this opinion by arguing that Old Princeton theologians weren't rationalists. By studying their views in some detail, he concludes, "Despite what the consensus of critical opinion would have us believe, the Princetonians simply weren't rationalists."¹⁶ Rather, they "were committed Augustinians who conceived of reason in a moral rather than a merely rational sense."¹⁷ Old Princeton theologians did not use scientific but classical reason, which Helseth labels "right reason."¹⁸ If Helseth is correct in his assessment of their neo-Evangelical epistemology, including inerrancy and propositionalism, did not spring from modernity but from the classical tradition that the Emerging Church embraces.

D. A. Carson correctly points out the regional nature of the epistemological relativism used by the Emerging Church. Briefly put, relativistic epistemology is the American version of postmodernity. He adds the important fact that postmodern epistemology neither cancels the objectivity of knowledge nor argues for the complete socialization of knowledge. He recognizes that postmodernism properly affirms that all human knowledge "is necessarily within the bounds of some culture or other, and can thus truly be said to be a social construct. But to run from this fair observation to the insistence that it is improper to talk about objective truth, or about human knowledge of truth, is merely a reflection of being hoodwinked by that one unattainable antithesis [either we know absolutely and omnisciently or we know socially]."¹⁹

It seems that failure to recognize this simple philosophical distinction brings Grenz and Raschke, as they represent the Emerging Church, to build their cases on a faddish conception of postmodernity that ignores two main facts. First, postmodernity does not replace modernity but brings it to its fruition. Second, postmodernity does not embrace social construction denying objectivity. Instead, it argues for the need to reinterpret the nature of objectivity and subjectivity altogether on the basis of an epochal shift from Plato's timeless to Heidegger's temporal conception of being.

The End of Foundationalism?

So far, Evangelical theologians and philosophers have chosen neither to pursue the consequences of postmodern epistemology, nor the ontological shift from which they arise. Instead, they level their criticism of the Emerging Church movement by vindicating a soft version of foundationalism. The purpose in so doing is to affirm Scripture as providing a reliable foundation for Christian belief. In short, the epistemological debate between the Emerging Church and conservative Evangelicals is about authority: Should Christians settle questions of belief on the basis of their reading of Scripture or on the basis of their experience as a community?

Paul Helm argues persuasively that even in the postmodern communitarian turn there are foundational beliefs and objective truths.²⁰ J. P. Moreland and Garrett DeWeese correctly describe

the foundationalism implicit in the post-conservative version of nonfoundationalism by comparing it with Cartesian idealism. Instead of innate ideas in the mind being the foundation of knowledge, as Descartes thought, definitions of society are the foundations of knowledge for post-conservative theologians. The knower knows only what comes to the mind from society. Society is the foundation of knowledge.

Moreland and DeWeese express their disappointment at post-conservative writers who reject foundationalism superficially. Moreover, "the three theoretical commitments that can be discerned in their writings, which may undercut foundationalism, are either themselves highly suspect, or only do so in the case of extreme versions, as straw men that represent no contemporary foundationalists."²¹ They proceed to present a strong argument for a soft version of Foundationalism. In a technical but accessible way, they show that through sensory perception, we can access direct knowledge of reality that provides basic evidence. The "modest foundationalism" they propose accepts perceptual beliefs that could be annulled as properly basic in the foundation of knowledge. Appropriately, they make clear that epistemology assumes ontology. Epistemology assumes "the nature of the knowing subject and the ontology of the acts of perception."²²

The importance of this philosophical affirmation is to vindicate Scripture as a basic source of evidence. "So, beliefs formed on the basis of reading the Bible are properly basic in a way that is . . . parallel to the way beliefs formed on the basis of seeing a red apple are basic."²³ This argument validates the conservative Evangelical view that Christians should use Scripture as the basis of their beliefs, which is precisely what the Emerging Church wants to avoid.

Culture

Evangelical theologians recognize the challenges presented by contemporary cultural trends and the need to face them in the tasks of theology and ministry. They think the Emerging Church leaders are going too far, however, when they adapt not only the forms and styles of gospel ministry but also doctrinal contents and the theological methods to the whims of the times.

Ed Stetzer identifies some contributions that the Emerging Church makes to Evangelicalism and also expresses some concerns about it. He correctly believes that the call of the Emerging Church to authentic Christian life, emphasis on the kingdom of God, embrace of the missional turn, promotion of a holistic style of ministry, and rejection of theological reductionism are contributions that Evangelicals should welcome.²⁴ Some of his concerns are the Emerging Church's underdeveloped ecclesiology, over-contextualization leading to cultural syncretism, and the apparent fear of penal substitutionary atonement.

The Emerging Church movement embraces cultural diversity. This stems from doctrinal indifference and the strong influence of American culture. According to Phil Johnson, it springs from failure "to maintain focus on the truly essential doctrines of the Christian faith."²⁵ In this context, heresies are no longer experienced as something negative but as the unavoidable result of Christian diversity. Literally, doctrinally speaking, anything goes. Johnson concludes, that the Emerging

Church's "thoughtless celebration of unbounded diversity is a deadly trait"²⁶ that makes the movement impervious to self-correction and criticism. This is an example of the "cultural captivity" of the gospel.

Martin Downes argues that when cultural captivity of the gospel takes place, "the gospel becomes a lost message. It no longer sounds distinctive but resonates with the sound of the culture. This does not necessarily mean that people are kept from hearing about Jesus, the good news, the Bible, or the Cross. The words themselves may remain, but their content is altered by, and adapted to, the dominant cultural worldview."²⁷ This takes place in the Emerging Church because "the relationship between divine revelation, culture, and theology has been wrongly configured so that doctrine is no longer believed, taught, and confessed as it once was or now ought to be."²⁸ In the process, then, culture changes the gospel instead of the other way around. This change is of content and even of method.

The Eclipse of Scripture

Gary L. W. Johnson sees the Emerging Church movement as the modernization of Evangelicalism. Put simply, in the Emerging Church movement the modernity that the Old Princeton theologians, Fundamentalists, and neo-Evangelicals fought against has found finally a home in Evangelical quarters. The Emerging Church signals the capitulation of conservative Evangelicals to modernity. Johnson adds a qualification: "Because of the diversity within the emerging church, one must be careful not to overgeneralize. It is obvious, however, that a vocal segment of the emerging church, though claiming to be evangelical, has great affinity with theological liberalism. Non-conservatives are honored."²⁹

Johnson concludes, "Under the guise of our postmodern context, post-conservatives are moving in the same direction as Schleiermacher and Briggs. Despite their protest to the contrary, they have already begun to go down this same path."³⁰ This implies that the Emerging Church embraces the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation and the philosophical and theological assumptions from which it works.

A. B. Caneday notes that the Emerging Church's view of Scripture displaces the authority of the Bible from the text to the inaccessible work of the Spirit. In other words, the words of Scripture are not the words of God but the words of human beings and therefore of tradition. The word of God is the elusive work or action of the Holy Spirit that takes place beyond the realm of human words.

The displacement of Spirit and the rejection of actual meanings of the words and texts of Scripture are characteristic of modern theology. Through these characteristics, Post-conservatism is mobilizing against the "commitment to the reliability of Scripture, to Scripture as the source of theological construction, and to the nature of theological task being one of reflecting first on Scripture as the grounds for both theology and life."³¹

This view of Scripture is unacceptable for conservative Evangelicals. "The Reformers' so called 'Scripture principle' identified the Bible as God's words in human speech."³² Moreover, William G.

Travis reminds Evangelicals that belief in the inerrancy of Scripture was “fundamental for J. A. Bengel the most noteworthy Pietist Bible scholar of the eighteenth century; was present in the beginnings of the Wesleyan movement; was integral to the holiness movement and its denominational spin-offs; and was a given among the majority of the Pentecostals.”³³

Correctly recognizing that “Scripture is the most fundamental of all fundamental doctrines, since it is the fundamental on which all the other fundamentals rest,” Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe give a disapproving evaluation of the Emerging Church’s view of Scripture. According to them, “Grenz and McLaren are not only postmodern but they are also post-Christian. Their rejection of the classical orthodox view of Scripture is sweeping. It includes a rejection of the correspondence view of truth, a rejection of objective truth, propositional truth, and inerrant truth in Scripture.”³⁴

To the issues of biblical inspiration and authority, Douglas Blount adds the all-important issue of interpretation. Interpretation always involves presuppositions and assumptions, which, according to him, are based on personal or communal “taste.” On this basis, he faults Emerging Church theologians for defining their presuppositions based on the “taste” of postmodern culture instead of on the taste of the “apostolic faith.”³⁵ This choice determines biblical interpretation in the Emerging Church and further weakens the message and role of Scripture.

D. A. Carson summarizes well the Emerging Church view of Scripture by pointing out that “Grenz’s reformulation of the doctrine of Scripture is so domesticated by postmodern relativism that it stands well and truly outside of the evangelical camp (whether ‘evangelical’ is here understood theologically or socially/historically).”³⁶ By drifting away from Scripture and building on tradition, the Emerging Church seems to be the undoing of the Reformation.

Theology

The postmodern turn to the community that Grenz embraces means that the doctrines of the church are not true in an objective sense. Instead, community doctrines are “true”³⁷ for the community of faith that formulates them and agrees to use them as “rule of life.” Thus, doctrines have only “intrasystematic” “church community” status.³⁸ A. B. Caneday criticizes Grenz’s view of doctrines as describing the beliefs of the community for the community but not referring to truths in the real world. The theological approach of the Emerging Church, in good modernistic fashion, assumes that truth ultimately belongs to the domains of science and philosophy, not of religion or theology.³⁹

Regarding the general approach to theology, Ronald Gleason suggests that in the Emerging Church there is a theological paradigm shift “away from soteriology toward ecclesiology.”⁴⁰ This view moves closer to mysticism and union with Christ, and therefore closer to the church and away from forensic justification as central to the study of salvation. Simultaneously, however, Gleason argues that this shift fits the basic subjectivism of the modern approach to theology that places the individual and communities as sources of beliefs and understanding.

Arguing from the writings of Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck on theological method,

Gleason suggests that even though theologians properly draw materials from "Holy Scripture, Church's Confessions, and Christian Consciousness [the believer],"⁴¹ they should maintain a proper equilibrium among them. Theologians achieve this balance when they give precedence and pre-eminence in their method to the Holy Scripture. Precedence and pre-eminence mean that "the whole of Scripture must prove the whole (theological) system."⁴²

Not surprisingly, conservative Evangelicals have strong disagreements with the Emerging Church's theological and doctrinal views. Focusing on Brian McLaren's rejection of the doctrine of hell, Greg D. Gilbert concludes that McLaren "has misunderstood the gospel as a whole."⁴³ His reason for such a serious indictment is that McLaren has lost sight of "the meaning and centrality of the cross, he has all but ignored the eschatological and spiritual character of the kingdom of God, and he has done everything in his hermeneutical power to read the traditional doctrine of hell out of the Bible. All in all, there does not really seem to be much of the gospel there left to deny."⁴⁴

Adam W. Greenway summarizes "the most consistent criticism" leveled against the Emerging Church by the various authors of the volume *Evangelical Engaging Emergent* and elsewhere, as "the overarching lack of concern for doctrinal content and precision."⁴⁵ He correctly concludes that Emerging Church theology "resonates with twentieth-century neo-orthodoxy: dynamic views on Scripture's inspiration and avoidance of descriptors like 'inerrant' and 'infallible,' emphasis on Jesus' human nature and moral example rather than divine essence and redeeming sacrifice, strong commitment to social justice and ministry, discomfort with Reformational theology, ecumenism, center-left political values—the list goes on."⁴⁶

The crucial disagreement between the Emerging Church and Evangelicalism revolves around the interpretation of the gospel. Emerging Church leaders think that the problem with Evangelicalism is not only methodological but also theological: The message itself must "evolve" and "change." According to Greenway this is not acceptable to Evangelicals because Emerging Church leaders advance a message that "hardly resembles the evangelical gospel of grace."⁴⁷

Ecumenism

Evangelical reactions to the Emerging Church's ecumenical embrace of Roman Catholicism exhibit the fragmented and even contradictory ecclesiologies held by Evangelical denominations. Not surprisingly, both sympathetic and critical evaluations of the ecclesiology of the Emerging Church can be found.

Travis Barbour and Nicholas Toews agree with the Emerging Church's attempt to mediate between liberal and conservatives in the church but challenge the methodology of "revolution" embraced by Emergents and favor "evolution." In other words, they disagree with the method but not with the goal. In so doing, they implicitly accept the Emerging Church as part of the broad Evangelical ecclesiological experience. Following a similar approach, F. Leron Shults sees no danger in the fact that "at its core, the emerging movement is an attempt to fashion a new ecclesiology (doctrine of the church)."⁴⁸ On the contrary, he believes the Emerging Church's ecclesiological

experience sheds light in the ongoing reflection about how to make the Christian Church better. Consequently, he studies the Emerging Church phenomenon to enhance the Evangelical ecclesiological understanding. Ecumenism does not come into the picture of Shults's evaluation.

From an Anabaptist Mennonite perspective, Alan Stucky sees close similarities between the ecclesiological experience of Anabaptists and the Emerging Church movement. Consequently, he does not perceive the Emerging Church's implicit ecclesiology as a threat to Evangelicalism but rather as a kindred community from which to learn. According to Stucky, "The Emerging Church resembles sixteenth-century Anabaptism in striking ways."⁴⁹

Core similarities between Anabaptism and the Emergent Church are discipleship (following the way of Jesus) and living in community. But the most significant parallels revolve around the ecclesiological notions of decentralization of power, intentional involvement of the members of the church, "and the Kingdom of God for understanding the mission of the church."⁵⁰ While recognizing the significant differences between the two movements, Stucky concludes that "they seem to be two cars driving in the same direction on the highway of faith. They have enough affinity for each other that interaction between the two is important and will, hopefully, bear much fruit in the future."⁵¹ Stucky seems to assume and embrace an ecumenical approach to ecclesiology and therefore comes close to the Emerging Church's emphasis on ecumenism.

Mark Devine provides a positive evaluation of the Emerging Church movement by arguing that it includes two streams, one friendly to classical Evangelical doctrines and the other adverse to or wary of them. By disconnecting doctrines from ministry and mission, he welcomes the many positive points he believes the Emerging Church is advancing in attempting to be the Christian Church. The assumption is that different sets of theological and doctrinal understandings will aid in achieving the Emerging Church ecclesiological emphases on: (1) genuine community characterized by authentic relationships; (2) becoming aware of the meaning of the gospel and sharing it by way of cultural contextualization; (3) experiencing the gospel from within a missional mindset; and (4) recovering narrative, history, and mystery. Devine argues that Evangelicals should be open to engage Emerging Church pastors and theologians who affirm the doctrinal beliefs of conservative American Evangelicals with an irenic spirit.⁵² On the other hand, Devine's approach seems to advocate a much less open attitude toward emerging Evangelicals who challenge the traditional doctrines of Evangelicalism.

Paul Doerksen is less sympathetic to Emerging Church ecclesiology because he sees it adapting too readily to the surrounding culture. In his view, the appropriate Evangelical relation to culture is contextualization. According to him, this approach blurs the discontinuity that should exist between the church and the world. Nevertheless, although Doerksen is critical of the Emerging Church's ecclesiology, he seems comfortable with the ecumenical view of the church.⁵³

Larry D. Pettegrew warns against the obvious rapprochement of the Emerging Church with Roman Catholicism at the foundational levels of worship and spirituality: "The medieval church is not admirable. As a whole, the medieval church did not proclaim the gospel, or justification by faith, or

believers' baptism, or the imminent return of Christ, or separation of church and state, or freedom of conscience, or the autonomy of the local church, or proper view of the Lord's Supper. . . . The list could be lengthy. Some of the best literature from this period—the writings of the mystics, for example—shows people desperate to find a relationship with God, but hardly succeeding. And the worship style of the medieval church, regardless of how beautiful or reverent it might seem, was a poor substitute for genuine Christianity."⁵⁴ Implicitly, this evaluation warns against the ecumenical bend to Rome espoused by the Emerging Church leaders.

Gary Gilley points out that "the vintage church has been waylaid by medieval Catholicism, which we must remember may have experienced the spiritual through the senses, but nevertheless was an apostate religion. Simply providing unbelievers with a religious experience, which they might interpret as an encounter with God, may do them more harm than good. Just as the seeker-sensitive church saw felt-needs as the means of connecting with unbelievers, so the emerging church sees spiritual experience. The philosophy is basically the same, just the methods have changed."⁵⁵

Back to the Future

Millard Erickson believes that postmodernity and its effects on the Emerging Church have produced a lack of clarity that has brought further fragmentation into the already divided Evangelical coalition. He believes, however, that Evangelicals are beginning to emerge from this situation and proposes several characteristics that will enable them "to find the landmarks."⁵⁶

Erickson works on the conviction that postmodernity is beginning to be transcended and that the way ahead involves a going back "to values and ideas of an earlier period, although they will not simply be a repetition of an earlier form."⁵⁷ According to Erickson, to emerge from the fog of postmodernity, Evangelical theology should be global, objective, practical, accessible, postcommunal, metanarrative, dialogical, and futuristic.

- To be global, Evangelical theology should listen to theologians from around the world and be open to their insights.

- To be objective, Evangelical theology should use a correspondence theory of truth and metaphysical realism. Moreover, it should embrace a "neo," "soft," or "modest" foundationalism, as advanced by philosophers William Alston and Robert Audi, found in Reformed epistemologists like Plantinga and Wolterstorff, and embraced by Evangelicals like J. P. Moreland and Garrett DeWeese.

Additionally, Evangelical theology should build on a "post-new" historicism that leaves behind "old" and "new" historicisms. The old historicism attempted to determine historical facts and drew conclusions from them. The new historicism arrived at a conclusion and then justified it by creating historical data to fit it. Instead, the "post-new" historicism will seek what really happened in the past while accepting its own historical conditionedness, yet seeking to minimize it.

- To be practical and accessible, Evangelical theology should work in close connection with the practice of ministry. It should be a ministerial theology, addressing and embracing the whole church by relating to life and human predicaments.

- To be postcommunal, Evangelical theology should not be based on the community but on Scripture. Yet it should also “be thoroughly familiar with the culture into which one wishes to speak the Christian message, and to contextualize the message in such a way as to be better understood.”⁵⁸

- To be metanarrative, Evangelical theology should affirm the universality and exclusiveness of Christianity vis-à-vis all other religions and philosophies.

- To be dialogical, Evangelical theology should interact “with different theologies, considering thoughtfully their claims, and advancing its own with cogent argumentation.”⁵⁹

- To be futuristic, Evangelical theology should anticipate what is to come and prepare for it “so that its answers will not be merely to the questions that are then past.”⁶⁰

Summary

The Emerging Church responded to tradition and culture as a reform of neo-Evangelical American Protestantism. Unlike the Protestant Reformation that evolved outside of the walls of the Roman Catholic Church, the Emerging Church has originated and is evolving *inside* the walls of Evangelical denominations. As a sector within Evangelicalism, the Emerging Church is in the early stages of development. Its full theological and ministerial shape is still in the future. Having inherited five centuries of Protestant ecclesiological fragmentation, the Emerging Church is strongly motivated and focused to overcome it by engaging in ecumenical theology, ministry, and ecclesiology.

Not only Luther and Calvin but also Emerging Church theologians and ministers develop their theological systems using Roman Catholic ontological and metaphysical foundations. Although rarely recognized, studied, challenged, or interpreted, implicitly these principles provide the hermeneutical foundations for both Evangelical and Emerging Church theologies and ministries. They provide the real operative basis for theological and spiritual unity not only among them but also within the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches from which they inherited them by way of tradition.

After the two initial centuries when Protestantism gradually emerged from Scripture, challenges from science and culture confronted its unstable and underdeveloped theology for the next three centuries. During that time, Evangelicals responded to the challenges of modernity by way of apologetics, the inerrancy of Scripture, and intra-ecumenical Evangelical alliances, but failed to produce a grand theological and philosophical synthesis. Arguably due to this absence, during the 20th century, the ground of the Protestant Reformation began to shift progressively from Scripture to philosophy, culture, and tradition in the spiritual, theological, and ministerial experiences of Evangelicals. This might help to explain why early in the 21st century, the Emerging Church movement has turned for theological and spiritual guidance to theological, philosophical, and spiritual synthesis produced by liberal Protestantism and Christian tradition.

Thus, radically departing from the American Evangelical tradition, the Emerging Church does not react to the teachings of modern philosophy and science as serious challenges to its understanding of Scripture and the doctrines of Christianity in general and Protestantism in

particular. This may help to comprehend why, when facing the absence of simple answers to modern scientific and philosophical challenges to Scripture and Christian doctrines, Emerging Church leaders feel free to follow the example of Christian tradition and their liberal Evangelical predecessors who have progressively accommodated Bible interpretations and teachings to the dictates of philosophy, science, and popular culture in the areas of theology, doctrines, ministry, and worship. In short, failure to develop a grand philosophical and theological synthesis of Evangelical Christianity in the face of modern philosophy and science has brought an influential sector of young Evangelical leaders to adopt the well-developed classical and neo-Orthodox syntheses and their correspondent secularizing effects on Scripture, theology, doctrines, worship, music, and liturgy.

Because of its strong philosophical commitments, grass-roots engagement, and simultaneous origination, the Emerging Church movement does not seem to be a passing fad as some Evangelicals leaders think. Instead, it appears to be a new stage in the historical and theological development of American Evangelicalism.

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Work Station

TWO

Gary B. Swanson

Umpteenthman Rises Again

With the release this summer of the film *Man of Steel*, once again our culture returned to a story and a character that have sparked remarkable fascination since the 1930s. This latest, umpteenth treatment of the enduring Superman myth earned \$113 million at the box office in its opening weekend.

Created by two high school students in Cleveland, Ohio, who had an insatiable taste for comics and science fiction, the Superman character was sold in 1938 to what would later become DC Comics. And from that humble beginning, Superman has appeared in countless iterations in comic books and graphic novels (there is a difference), live-action and animation television shows, video games, and motion pictures. The “Man of Steel”—with the ever-present blue costume, red cape, and the letter “S” emblazoned on his muscular chest—has become a cultural icon.

Through the decades since the first appearance of Superman, as succeeding chapters have been added in the various media, this superhero’s backstory has emerged. He was born on an imaginary distant planet named Krypton and was sent to Earth by his scientist father, Jor-El, shortly before the destruction of Krypton. He landed on a farm in Kansas and was discovered by a farmer and his wife, who adopted, protected, and raised him to adulthood. Early in his childhood, however, he began to show signs of supernatural powers and a highly principled sense of justice, both of which increasingly provided his motivation to right the wrongs that he encountered all around him in society.

Whether Superman was the very first superhero has been the subject of some debate among fans and scholars. (And there are quite a few who would include themselves in both groups.) But he has certainly become the most widely recognizable and has pretty much set the standard for the genre.

The concept of superheroes has, in fact, become so popular that (try not to laugh here) there

are actually some real people who literally design and don garish costumes of their own and seek to go about redressing injustice in their communities. And others, who apparently prefer a less active role, have sought to contribute to the phenomenon by embellishing the myth through the creation of further details. One such, for example, has conjectured as to the religion of each of the superheroes—and identified two as Seventh-day Adventist.¹

In *Man of Steel*, however, this most current Superman incarnation, the issue of religion has attracted even more attention. This in itself is nothing new with regard to the Superman myth. Cultural critics have repeatedly pointed out religious themes in past accounts. They have identified and explored evidence of what many consider to be very concrete Christian motifs and images in the film itself.

In commenting on the very first full motion picture depicting this most popular of superheroes, *Superman: The Movie* (1978), Roy M. Anker observes that it is “a dead-on dramatization of the Christ story. It is the genius of the film that this plays out in such a way that while religious viewers enjoy it mightily for all the right reasons—what it is like to experience an incarnation and a supernatural ‘friend,’ as Superman responds to Lois Lane’s question, ‘Just who are you?’—they generally fail to recognize what stares them straight in the face for two hours and twenty minutes.”²

Similarly, media commentators, in print and online, have quickly called attention to a surprising number of details in *Man of Steel* that seem to refer to familiar Christian ideas.

“A father figure from another world,” writes Jonathan Merritt, of the Religious News Service, “sends his only begotten son to Earth who, at 33 years old, must sacrifice himself to save the human race. . . . The Superman reboot is filled with messianic parallels—from the caped hero stretching out his arms as he falls to earth only to rise again to a scene where [he] ponders whether to accept his destiny while he sits in a church in front of a stained-glass image of Jesus.”³

But the discussion of Christian qualities in *Man of Steel* has also focused outside the content of the film itself over the awareness that this particular film actually targeted Christian viewers. Warner Brothers, the studio that produced the film, hired the public relations firm Grace Hill Media to market it to people of faith. Previously Grace Hill had created for the same audience promotional resources for *The Blind Side* (2009), *The Book of Eli* (2010), and many others.

For *Man of Steel*, Grace Hill worked with author, theologian, and Pepperdine University professor Craig Detwiler to make available sermon outlines, film clips, and a nine-page downloadable briefing entitled “Jesus: The Original Superhero.” The approach seems to suggest that references in the pulpit to a motion picture will increase its theater attendance.

“‘We believe there’s an *underserved* audience in this country. Filmmakers rarely deal with faith even though Christians represent one of the largest segments of America,’ says Mark Burnett, who, with his wife, Roma Downey, produced ‘The Bible,’ the record-breaking miniseries on [TV’s] History [Channel].”⁴

The choice of words in such a comment may come as a surprise to some, who may have always assumed that Hollywood seeks to “target” rather than to “serve” their audiences. DeVon Franklin, a

Columbia Pictures vice president, describes the process from a slightly different angle: "As filmmakers we're always trying to identify which markets are growing."⁵ But whatever the motivation, motion picture production companies are recently recognizing the existence of a faith demographic that is calling for topics and treatments that resonate more directly with their beliefs.

So in what ways does the increase of films featuring superheroes relate to people of faith? The popularity of current media depicting Superman and other supernatural beings of his kind—Batman, Spider-Man, Wolverine, the Hulk—must first appeal in some elemental way to viewers. Screenwriter Brian Godawa offers at least one possible explanation for this interest: "The proliferation of comic books adapted into movies signals a contemporary hunger for hero worship, the desire for redemption through the salvific acts of deity."⁶

Nineteenth-century Scottish clergyman and author George MacDonald writes of "the soul's hunger, the vague sense of a need which nothing but the God of human faces, the God of the morning and of the starful night, the God of love and self-forgetfulness, can satisfy. . . . It is this formless idea of something at hand that keeps men and women striving to tear from the bosom of the world the secret of their own hopes. How little they know [that] what they look for in reality is their God!"⁷

That humanity is in need of a savior may be little recognized in the consciousness of today's culture. Yet the realization that we cannot save ourselves—much less the world—is the first step in a turn to God. And despite humanism's insistent emphasis on humankind as the only promise for a future, the way in which the heart clings to the need for heroes may be an opening for a message of hope that only God can fulfill.

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The Associate Editor's

DESK

Gerhard Pfandl

From Sect to Church

On July 16, 1915, Ellen G. White died. The prophetic voice was silenced. It was now no longer possible for church members and leaders to ask her for "advice from the Lord." Her voice and her pen were silenced. But what she had written would continue to exert a great influence on the life of the church.

At her death, there were 24 books in circulation that she had written, along with about 4,500 articles published in various church magazines. Already, during her lifetime, but especially after her death, the question of her inspiration and the relationship of her writings to the Scriptures arose.

In the more than 100,000 pages of her writings that Ellen White left behind, she often wrote about the same topic, but not always in the same way. Thus, sometimes contradictory interpretations arose, and the question of the role and interpretation of her writings became even more important.

Even though Ellen White had clearly explained that her writings were no substitute for the Bible, some Adventists believed that they were verbally inspired. Others believed that she had written all her visions without help from other books, with the exception of those books which she expressly mentioned.

At the Autumn Council of the General Conference in 1911, her son, W. C. White, had clearly and explicitly refuted both of these opinions: "Mother has never laid claim to verbal inspiration, and I do not find that my father, or Elder Bates, Andrews, Smith, or Waggoner, put forth this claim. If there were verbal inspiration in writing her manuscripts, why should there be on her part the work of addition or adaptation? It is a fact that Mother often takes one of her manuscripts, and goes over it thoughtfully, making additions that develop the thought still further."¹

He explained that she described in her own words what was shown her and that she often used other books because they offered a good summary of what she had seen, without citing them.

In 1919, about 50 administrators and editors, as well as Bible and history teachers came together in Takoma Park, Maryland, from June 1-21 to a Bible conference, followed by a three-week meeting of Bible and history teachers. The question of the inspiration of Ellen White as well as the relationship of her writings to the Bible were discussed at the meeting of the Bible and history teachers.

General Conference President A. G. Daniells spoke briefly on this topic and then invited those present to ask questions. In his answers, he repeatedly rejected the verbal inspiration of Ellen White's writings, but stressed the practical value of the Spirit of Prophecy in the development of the church, e.g., doctrines, mission, health, and education. These things convinced him of the authenticity of the gift. It was also repeatedly confirmed that, concerning historical facts, Ellen White was not considered to be an authority.

In conclusion, Daniells advised the participants to use their common sense when using the writings of Ellen White. He published a short report in the *Review and Herald* and hoped to be able to hold a further conference the following year. This did not occur, however, until 1952.

The transcript of the 1952 conference includes 2,400 pages. They were at first not published, but so well stored that they were only rediscovered by accident in 1974. The section dealing with the discussion about the Spirit of Prophecy was published in 1980 in *Spectrum*.²

In 1920 the church had 185,000 members; in 1950 there were 756,000. About half of this number lived in Europe and America. Most of the members of the developing world were found in Central America and South Africa.

On the theological front in the 1920s, the church was focused primarily on two major issues: righteousness by faith and the theory of evolution.

The discussion on justification focused primarily on the question of the victorious Christian life. Victory over sin was in the forefront. Eighteen Sabbath school quarterlies between 1921 and 1930 dealt with the topic of justification, and a series of books dealing with the same topic were published. The best known of them was the book *Christ Our Righteousness* by Arthur Daniells.

Prior to and after the First World War, there developed within Christianity a confrontation between Fundamentalists and Modernists (liberal Christians). Conservative Christians attempted to counteract the influence of Modernism with the publication of a series of 12 booklets ("The Fundamentals," 1910 to 1915), which contained the most important Christian teachings.

Seventh-day Adventists agreed with Fundamentalists on a number of doctrines, especially in regard to the theory of evolution and higher criticism. Seventh-day Adventists, like the Fundamentalists, stressed the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible. Together with the Fundamentalists, they also supported the prohibition of alcohol in the United States from 1919 to 1933. Seventh-day Adventists also had one of the leading anti-evolutionists, George McCready Price, in their ranks. Through his influence Fundamentalists accepted a worldwide flood and a six-day creation approximately 6,000 years ago.

The Great Depression of the 1930s and the Second World War caused the church financial

difficulties. Many mission fields were cut off from church administration because of the war. Missionaries had to return to their homelands, forcing the local members to take over the leadership of the church in their home countries. In spite of these difficulties, the membership grew from 314,000 in 1930, to 600,000 in 1946.

In order to revive and organize the worldwide work after the war, many conferences, youth congresses, seminars, and ministerial meetings were held; e.g., in 1951 a European youth congress was held in Paris in which 5,000 young people from all over Europe participated.

In September 1952, the first Bible conference since 1919 was held. For two weeks more than 500 participants studied and discussed the topics of salvation and the end-time doctrine. At the end of the two weeks, F. D. Nichol (editor of the *Review*) summed up the conference with these words, "It is an impressive fact that our theology has not changed. . . . Once again it is clear to us that Christ is the heart and center of our doctrine."³ The lectures of the conference were published a year later in two volumes entitled *Our Firm Foundation*.

Shortly after this Bible conference, the General Conference appointed the Committee on Biblical Study and Research, which in 1969 became the Biblical Research Institute Committee, to deal with challenges to the Adventist faith.

Between 1953 and 1957, the seven-volume *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* was published, followed a few years later by a *Bible Dictionary*, a *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, and in the year 2000, the *Handbook of Adventist Theology*. Thus the seven volumes were expanded to 12 volumes. The Bible commentary was important for the church, but not really suitable for introducing our theology to non-Adventists. Such a book appeared in 1957 as a result of a dialogue between evangelical and Adventist theologians.

In 1955, Walter Martin, a Baptist preacher, wrote a letter to the General Conference, asking for books about our doctrines and requesting an interview with church leaders. Martin was an associate editor of the Protestant paper *Eternity* and had already written books about Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Christian Scientists. In 1955, he was working on a book about Seventh-day Adventists and wanted to give a fair representation of the church.

After reading a number of our books, Martin met with a group of Adventist leaders over a period of approximately 18 months. Walter Martin was accompanied by his friend George Cannon, professor of New Testament at the St. Paul (Minnesota) Institute, and Donald Gray Barnhouse, the editor of the magazine *Eternity*.

The reason for these meetings in the offices of the General Conference, each lasting one to three days, was to give a clear picture of our doctrines. The results of this conference were a few articles in the paper *Eternity* and the publication of the books *Questions on Doctrine*⁴ and *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism*.⁵

In their publications, Martin and Barnhouse wrote that Adventists were converted Christians who taught salvation by faith and not salvation by works. Therefore, the Seventh-day Adventist Church should be accepted as a Christian church rather than a cult. In response, they received many

negative letters from their readers and the list of subscribers to the magazine *Eternity* became noticeably smaller.

Nevertheless, Martin and Barnhouse maintained their position and defended the Seventh-day Adventist Church against attacks by other Protestants who continued to describe Adventists as a cult. Since then, most Protestant churches have accepted Seventh-day Adventists as brothers and sisters in the Lord.

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The President's

DESK

Tom Shepherd

Judge Not

Some phrases from the Bible have become embedded in our culture as common idioms—"fight the good fight" (1 Tim. 6:12),¹ "a man after his own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14), "a law to themselves" (Rom. 2:14), "'an eye for an eye'" (Matt. 5:38), "see eye to eye" (Isa. 52:8, KJV), and many others. One of those phrases is "'Judge not, that you be not judged'" (Matt. 7:1). Unfortunately, it is one of the most misunderstood things that Jesus ever said.

In our postmodern society, this brief command of our Lord is taken in at least three ways. Someone will say, "Who am I to judge?" This position, at least in some contexts, can be described as *moral agnosticism*, the idea that I cannot know what is true, what is right and moral. Therefore I cannot judge or evaluate whether or not a plan of action or any behavior is right or wrong.

Someone else may say, "It's right for me, but I don't know if it's right for you." This view is rooted in postmodernism and could be called *moral relativism*—a position can be right and correct for me, and at the same time be incorrect or inapplicable to you.

Yet another person, being criticized by some other person may retort, "You don't understand me! You're not supposed to judge!" Heard perhaps more often in homes where a teenager feels misunderstood by his or her parents, this rather common take on Jesus' words suggests that my personal perspective and mode of action are not open to critique. It could be described as *moral individualism*. That is to say, those in a role of leadership over me, or to whom I owe respect, do not have the right to rebuke or criticize me because all such criticism is deemed judging, and I am a law unto myself.

What we want to know is if any or all of these three positions fairly represents what Jesus was trying to say. To investigate this, it's necessary to look at Jesus' command in its context in the

Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). The passage that contains these famous words is Matthew 7:1-5, which is toward the end of the sermon. In its entirety, the sermon is instruction on how disciples should live and act within the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 7:1-5 can be outlined as follows:

- A. The command to shun judging (vs. 1)
- B. An eschatological doublet of support for verse 1 (vs. 2)
- C. A funny illustration from the carpenter's shop on the absurdity of judging (vss. 3, 4)
- D. The final command to set things straight, then help (vs. 5)

The brief passage begins and ends with a command. The first command directs us to eschew judging. The last command guides us to correct the problem and then help the brother in need. These two poles of the passage are often not recognized, and they call for deeper investigation.

It would seem logical that the meaning of the words "judge not" in Matthew 7:1 should be consistent with the teaching of the entire passage, 7:1-5, and with the tenor of Jesus' teaching throughout Matthew. The challenge in regarding these words of Jesus is twofold. The Greek term for "to judge" means "to separate, distinguish, decide, judge, consider, look upon, condemn, find fault with."² Clearly, the semantic domain of the term is quite broad. It could possibly have any of these different definitions in this text. The other challenge is that the phrase "'judge not that you be not judged'" has been taken over by our culture as an idiom quite apart from the context of the words in Matthew, so that no matter what one says, someone may retort, "Yes, but you are not supposed to judge."

So to narrow the possibilities for how "to judge" is actually used in Matthew 7:1, it makes sense to look at the ways the term is used throughout the Book of Matthew. Besides Matthew 7:1-5, it is used in only two other places in the first Gospel: Matthew 5:40 and 19:28. In the first text, also in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes someone taken to court (the verb is represented by *sue* in the ESV and KJV). The Lord tells us not to resist this, but to give more than they ask. It is clear from this that Jesus does not call into question human legal proceedings or the court system. Hence, "judge not" in Matthew 7:1 is not a repudiation of all human legal proceedings.

In Matthew 19:28 Jesus indicates that at His coming, the 12 apostles will be involved in judging the 12 tribes of Israel. From this it is clear that "'judge not'" does not rule out God's judicial system that will include human beings. Indeed, Matthew 7:2 states, "For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you." The passive voice of the verbs here ("you will be judged, . . . it will be measured to you") point to God's action. This type of construction is so common in Scripture that it has been given the name *divine passive*. If you judge others, it is God who will judge you. And the standard of judgment that He will use is the same you used for others. It is the common and practical sense of biblical justice that is involved—eye for eye, tooth for tooth, blow for blow. What you give is what you receive in return.

Other uses of the "judge" word group in Matthew ("judging," "judgment," "judge") support these ideas as well. Matthew 5:25 refers to human court cases and assumes the validity of the system. Matthew 12:18 refers to justice as a virtue of action. And Matthew 12:36 makes reference to

the Day of Judgment by God in the future. Thus judgment or decision-making is not likely what is being rejected in Matthew 7:1-5.

It is Matthew 7:2 that helps explain what the passage is all about. As noted above, God holds us accountable when we *judge*. The type of judging must be something that God rejects, something that goes against His principles of action. James 4:11, 12 is helpful here: "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?"

Notice the emphasis on evil speaking. The parallel to Matthew 7 is striking.³ Thus, the type of judging Jesus rejected in Matthew 7:1 was likely of this sort, a hypercritical approach to another person.

So *moral relativism* cannot be what Jesus is supporting in Matthew 7, since God is the final Judge. There is a right and wrong, otherwise He could not judge. Nor can *moral agnosticism* be correct because Jesus and Matthew have a very clear sense of justice and how people should be treated.

But what about *moral individualism*? Perhaps this is what the text is all about. The illustration in verses 3 and 4 helps resolve this question. Jesus presents a simple example from the carpenter's shop. Someone has a speck of wood in their eye. We all know how painful and irritating that can be. The cornea of the eye is estimated to be 40 times as sensitive to pain as the inner pulp of a tooth (the part exposed when a filling falls out). That is really sensitive! The problem in Matthew 7:3 and 4 is not the willingness to help someone get something out of their eye. That is helpful since it is so hard to get something out of your eye by yourself, especially if you don't have a mirror handy. The problem Jesus presents in hyperbolic fashion is that the "helper" has a huge log or beam in his own eye! The term used here refers to a large plank or a joist supporting a roof. Imagine having such a thing in your eye—and worse yet, having that and still being concerned about the little speck in someone else's eye. It's ridiculous.

The conclusion of the hyperbolic example in the command of verse 5 addresses the question of *moral individualism*. Jesus says that if you get the beam out of your own eye, you will be able to see clearly to help the person with the speck in their eye. That is not hypercritical judging; that is helping someone out of his or her painful experience. *Moral individualism*, the position loved by our postmodern society, crashes to the ground on Matthew 7:5 (seeing clearly to help the brother) and on Matthew 18:15-18 (going to your brother yourself if he sins against you—to seek reconciliation).

Jesus did not say that morality is an individual matter that we each decide for ourselves. He did not say that morality is unknowable or does not exist. He did not say that others should never give a word of counsel or rebuke to someone making a fool of oneself. What Jesus did say is that I am not the final arbiter of others' lives, that I am not to hold a hypercritical outlook that never sees good in others but always nitpicks their personal faults. Instead, my life is to be focused on blessing and

uplifting others on a daily basis. Mostly that means words of appreciation and problem-solving, lots of listening, and much prayer. The occasional counsel when things are going wrong fits with this model of action. We must help each other up. The road is long, the way is straight, and you and I need each other in order to stay on the path.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this article are quoted from the *English Standard Version*. For a long list of such idioms, see <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/bible-phrases-sayings.html>. Accessed November 10, 2013.

2. R. T. France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), vol. 1, p. 274.

3. It is fascinating to compare the teaching of the Book of James with the Sermon on the Mount. Numerous parallels support the idea that James 4:11 and 12 has behind it the same teaching as that of Matthew 7:1-5.

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