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What the Sabbath Meant to First-Century Christians

BY HEROLD WEISS

A COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE Judaism of Jesus' time is that it was an integrated, unified religion where rabbis commanded the respect of all Jews. In reality, the Jews of that time were diverse in their religious views. There were several rabbinic traditions with distinctive views just within Pharisaism. Other groups also had differing views, such as Sadducees, Essenes, Nazarenes, Covenanters, Therapeutai, disciples of John the Baptist, Zealots, Samaritans, and so on.

These groups had many distinguishing characteristics, and antagonisms about the Sabbath and its observance were prominent among their differences. Some held that one was to be completely inactive on the Sabbath, sitting quietly at home. Others disagreed and were eager to establish which activities the commandment allowed. Still others understood the Sabbath as a symbol of God's activity and were unconcerned about human activities.

The Two Sabbath Commandments

The Pentateuch contains two versions of the Sabbath commandment, which gave rise to differences of opinion about its substance.

One version exhorts us to "remember" the Sabbath and bases its import upon God's rest on the seventh day of creation week (Exodus 20), while the other asks that we "observe" the Sabbath and bases its significance on the Israelites' deliverance from the slavery of Egypt (Deuteronomy 5).¹

Naturally, this occasioned debates about whether the Sabbath was the repetition of a divine act or the celebration of freedom from slavery. Some said that since God has been at rest since the completion of creation, the Sabbath is a foretaste of the joys of the Age to Come and, therefore, the Sabbath might not apply to the Present Evil Age at all.

At the same time, according to the Jewish understanding of the cosmos, God could not be completely inactive on the Sabbath, for if he ceased keeping the heavenly bodies in their orbits on the seventh day, the whole creation would revert to chaos. So God does work on the Sabbath! The question is: what *kind* of work does he do?

Since the commandment asks humans to "sanctify" it, some felt that the directive seeks an impossibility: humans cannot sanctify anything; only God can.

Another view was that because the Sabbath was a special gift to Israel, God's bride on this Earth, only Jews could observe it. Gentiles who pretended to observe it were interlopers in the bridal chamber, which God shares only with Israel.

Permissible Sabbath Activities

Participants in the Jesus movement emerged from this multifaceted Judaism, and thus they brought with them many different understandings of the Sabbath. The New Testament and other early Christian literature show evidence of debates about it among Christians.

The stories about Jesus' Sabbath

healings had an immediate role to play in the oral traditions that preserved them. The stories explicitly addressed permissible Sabbath activities, which was a lively issue among early Christians. Believers were concerned with the proper observance of the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, and did not think that the commandment required total inactivity. Establishing what can be done, or what *kind* of work is allowed, was of paramount importance. Early Christians preserved these stories as a guide for their Sabbath conduct.

The Gospel of Matthew makes two significant additions to the Sabbath healing miracles. One is Jesus' advice to pray that they would not need to escape the forthcoming fall of Jerusalem on a Sabbath (Matt. 24:20). Of course, this was written *after* it was known that it had not happened on a Sabbath, thus making the saying even more of a testimony to the Sabbath concerns of this Christian community.

The other addendum is in the story of the crucifixion and entombment of Jesus (Matt. 27:62-66). On the Sabbath, "the chief priests and the Pharisees" went to Pontius Pilate (verse 62) and asked that the tomb be guarded. Having secured approval from the Roman governor, "they went and made the sepulchre secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard" (verse 66). Meanwhile, pious women who followed Christ waited until Sunday to anoint the Lord's body. The point is that the followers of Jesus (later called "Christians") were better Sabbath observers than the leaders of the Jews, who acted in overt violation of its sanctity.

An Eschatologized Sabbath

In the Gospel of John, the healing miracles do not become controversies about what

is allowed on the Sabbath, but they raise questions about Jesus' identity. In chapter 5 Jesus claims a divine prerogative, based on the fact that God is always at work, even on the Sabbath. In chapter 9 this line of argument is expanded to point out that cessation from labor happens at night, that day is when work is to be done, and that wherever Jesus is, it is day. Such reinterpretation of the Sabbath takes the day out of the weekly cycle and places it in the primordial light in which both God and the Logos dwell eternally.

The eschatologizing of the Sabbath is evident in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. Saying 27b in Thomas reads, "If you do not sabbatize the Sabbath, you shall not see the Father." This rather cryptic saying is built on the double meaning of the word Sabbath in Hebrew, Greek, and Coptic, the three languages used by the oral traditions that found their way into this book.

The only other known usage of the verb "to sabbatize" is by Ignatius of Antioch in his Letter to the Magnesians. There it is used in a negative sense to say that Christians are living "according to Judaism" (8:1), "judaizing" (10:3) and "sabbatizing" (9:1). The three expressions are used in synonym and, as in Thomas, they describe a way of life that Ignatius finds reprehensible.

The Gospel of Thomas, however, uses the verb "sabbatize" in a positive sense. In Thomas, to sabbatize is to live in the light that shone "in the beginning," during the first three days of creation week, before the creation of the sun, the moon, and the stars. This primordial light, according to Jewish sources, is the light that shines on Sabbaths and gives Jews a "Sabbath countenance." Of course, God lives in the realm where that light shines, and Christians who sabbatize also live "in the beginning"—that is, in eschatological time. For Christians, then, the whole week is Sabbath.

Every Day a Sabbath

Paul also refers to an eschatological understanding of the Sabbath as encompassing all the days of the week, in reference to a dispute among the Christians in Rome. He reports that while some judge "one day as better than another," others judge "all days alike" (Rom. 14:5). He says that those who distinguish one day "pass judgment" on those who view all days together, and the latter "despise" the former (verse 10).

The clue for arriving at an understanding is found in verse 6, where Paul clarifies that all of them are observing "the day" and that they are doing it "in honor of the Lord." Those who judge all days together are not desacralizing one day but, rather, are sacralizing all seven days of the week.

The Romans were also having a dispute between those who ate only vegetables and those who ate anything available (verse 2). Concerning that dispute, Paul points out that both those who eat anything available and those who do not are making their choices "in honor of the Lord" (verse 6). The apostle distinguishes those who eat from those who do not eat, but he lumps together all who were observing "the day," even if they observed it differently.

When Is Sabbath in Rome?

Given that all were observing the day for the Lord, it is quite reasonable to think that the issue in Rome was when to observe the Sabbath. The dispute was between those who observed the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week and those who considered all days Sabbath, as did the community that preserved the Gospel of Thomas. This debate concerned the question of whether Christianity was a Jewish sect among others, or a new creation of the Holy Spirit.

Paul understood that Christians, at baptism, are crucified to the world and the world is crucified to them (Gal. 6:14). From the baptismal waters, believers enter life in the new creation of the risen Christ. This is life in the Spirit and guided by the

Spirit. As such, Christians no longer live "under" the law (Rom. 6:14; 1 Cor. 9:20; Gal. 3:23; 4:5, 21; 5:18). For Paul, sin is not defined by the law, but by the guidance of the Spirit: "for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). Faith, of course, requires that "every one be fully convinced in his own mind" (verse 5) that his actions are being done "in honor of the Lord" (verse 6). Under the guidance of the Spirit, who has metamorphosed the mind, the Christian is able to "prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2).

On account of the new creation in which Christians live, Paul gives the following beatitude: "Happy is he who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves" (Rom. 14:22). So while recognizing the difference in their Sabbath observance, Paul's advice to the Romans who condemned or despised a brother in Christ is: "welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions" (verse 1).

Living in Freedom

Paul held that the gospel is power to live faithfully in freedom (Rom. 1:16; Gal. 5:1). He berated the Galatians for being "foolish" because, after having received the power of the Spirit, they were contemplating becoming circumcised Jews (Gal. 3:1). This would, according to Paul, make them live in slavery "under the law," a situation no different from their previous slavery in paganism. In his argument, Paul makes an important distinction between their past and current circumstances. Previously, the Jews lived under the law while the Gentiles lived worshipping beings who are not gods. Now, both Jews and Gentiles live in the new creation, enjoying the freedom that we all have in Christ (Gal. 5:1; 6:12). As a first step in their efforts to become heirs of the promise God made to Abraham, the Galatians were already following their new teachers by observing "days, and months, and seasons, and years" (Gal. 4:10), and Paul could not understand how this could be happening after they had believed the

gospel. He feared that his work on their behalf had been in vain (verse 11).

The calendric string Paul uses is not the one used by the prophets to remind the Israelites of their need to observe the Sabbath and the monthly and yearly feasts. Its most likely referent is the function assigned to “the lights in the firmament” in the Genesis story of creation. It is said that they were placed there to “be for signs and for seasons and for days and years” (Gen. 1:14). If that is the case, those driving the Galatians away from the gospel were giving to the observance of days, months, seasons, and years some kind of cosmological significance as agents for the maintenance of the cosmos.

This view is likewise suggested by Paul’s accusation that they are becoming slaves to “weak and beggarly elemental spirits” (Gal. 4:9). The word *stoixeia* refers to the elements that serve as the constitutive parts of a system (i.e., notes are the elements of music, letters are the elements of writing, and days are the elements of time). The Galatians were making feasts “elements” of the cosmos. Whether or not the Sabbath was an element in the cosmological teaching of those who were causing the Galatians to abandon the gospel is not possible to determine with certainty. It is reasonable, however, to imagine that it played a role in the religion of those who thought that Christianity was a form of Judaism, something that Paul strenuously denied. While conscious of his Jewish roots, Paul did not consider that Judaism was any longer God’s way of fulfilling the promise to Abraham. He made this quite clear by equating Judaism and paganism as forms of slavery to “elemental spirits” (verses 3, 8-9).

A Christian Rationale for the Sabbath

Among the New Testament letters, Colossians is the only one that makes an explicit reference to the Sabbath. While Paul considered the Galatians’ observance of “days, and months, and seasons, and

years” to be an abhorrent behavior as part of a Judaism with Gnostic-type cosmological speculations, the author of Colossians defends Jewish practices involving dietary rules and the observance of “a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” (Col. 2:16).

Unlike the calendric string used by Paul, this one is used frequently by the prophets of Israel to encourage observance of the religious calendar. The believers of Colossae were being condemned by Christian preachers who wished to separate Christianity from Judaism. Those preachers taught a “philosophy” (verse 8) making Christianity an otherworldly affair that seeks “worship of angels” and “visions” (verse 18) and uses its own ascetic rules to promote the achievement of these out-of-body experiences. The author of Colossians sarcastically ridicules these rules as “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (verse 21).

On the other hand, Colossians gives a Christian rather than a Jewish rationale to the observance of dietary and calendric rules, explicitly including the Sabbath. Christians observe these things neither because God commanded them in the past, nor because they are embedded in creation, but because they are “a shadow of what is to come” (verse 17).


This letter emphasizes that Christ is the source of hope and states that when Christ appears, believers will also appear with him in glory (Col. 3:4). The author begins the letter by reminding his audience of the “hope laid up for you in heaven” (Col. 1:5). He cautions against “shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard” (verse 23) and sums up the gospel as “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (verse 27).

In view of the importance Colossians gives to the future, when their hope will become reality, it is not surprising that its author gives the Sabbath eschatological significance. To think that the Sabbath provides a foretaste of what is in store in heaven for those who live in Christ is, as

already noted, a well-documented Sabbath view. In its strong endorsement of Sabbath observance, as well as in other details, Colossians reflects an understanding similar to that represented in the Gospel of Matthew.

The Sabbath in Hebrews

Finally, I will note that the Epistle to the Hebrews begins by exhorting the believers to keep going so as to be able to enter God’s rest (4:1, 10-11). This will happen when God shakes this current world and replaces it with the hypostatic world of perpetual Sabbath celebrations (12:26-28), in which God dwells and has been enjoying a Sabbatical celebration (*sabbatismos*) ever since he finished the work of creation (4:9). This understanding of the Sabbath has significant affinities with the view expressed in the Epistle of Barnabas, a second-century document among the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. According to Barnabas, it is not necessary—in fact, it is impossible—to observe the Sabbath in the Present Age. Its observance will be possible in the eschatological seventh millennium after the sixth millennium of earthly life ends, according to a chiliastic allegory of the creation week (Barnabas 15:1-8).

The evidence for the different ways in which early Christians viewed the Sabbath, and the disputes they caused, is impressive and worth deeper consideration.² Those who canonize one Old Testament view of the Sabbath overlook the evidence of how Christians of the first century reflected on and disputed about the Sabbath. 

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations in this article are from the Revised Standard Version.

² For a more detailed analysis of the evidence, see Herold Weiss, *A Day of Gladness: The Sabbath Among Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).

SAMOA'S SABBATH WARS



BY BJORN KARLMAN

A DECISION BY TWO TINY COUNTRIES TO MOVE ACROSS THE International Date Line (IDL)¹ at the end of 2011 started a theological war within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Pacific.

As December 29 of that year ended, the countries of Samoa and Tokelau jumped westward across the IDL, skipping one entire calendar day. In doing so, they omitted Friday, Dec. 30, 2011, from their year and leapt straight from Thursday into Saturday, December 31. Intended to boost trade and tourism, this shift meant that the island nations were no longer 18 to 23 hours behind New Zealand and Australia, their main trading partners.

For Adventists, however, the decision proved anything but convenient. The change of the IDL, and the resulting “lost day” plunged local church members into the dilemma of whether to continue worshiping on the seventh day of the week, now called Sunday, or to worship on the day their country calls Saturday—even though, in terms of the previous weekly sequence, it was now the sixth day of the week.

Practical Realities for Adventist Samoans

Afamasaga Toleafoa, who self-identifies as “one of those Seventh-day Adventist Sundaykeeping Pacific Islanders,” said in *Adventist Review* this summer: “Like the vast majority of Adventists in Samoa, I had no trouble changing from keeping the Sabbath on Saturday to keeping it on Sunday when our government changed [the International Date Line]. ... The movement of the earth in

relation to the sun remained the same as always except Saturday got a name change to Sunday in our country.”²

While the majority of Adventist Samoans share Toleafoa’s outlook, the reality of keeping Sunday as the seventh-day Sabbath in Samoa has created situations that seem very strange to believers in other parts of the world. Lemamea Teleia’i Dr. T Puni, a nonpracticing physician in Samoa who insists on keeping as Sabbath the day that the Samoan culture calls Saturday, admitted to *Adventist Today* that some Adventist young people are excelling in sports now that they can participate on Saturdays. He also said that loyal church members who previously attended church on Saturday now run thriving wholesale and retailing businesses on that day.

“It’s probably a plus for tithing,” he said.

Some have splintered from the denomination over their support of worshiping on the new Saturday rather than Sunday. A few have found the conflict so confusing and upsetting that they’ve chosen to just stay at home.³

In 2013, a group of about 300 continued to worship on the new Saturday but did not leave the church. According to an *Adventist Today* online article, they believed it was “indefensible to worship on Sundays despite the shift in the calendar.”⁴ The same article alleged that the majority of Samoan Adventists abroad supported this group and that a retired president of the denomination’s Samoan Mission led out at their gatherings.

History of Samoa's Sabbath Predicament

The Samoa-Tokelau Mission includes 35 Adventist churches and 6,530 members, the vast majority of whom live in Samoa. In addition the mission runs Samoa Adventist College, a secondary school in Lalovaea on the Samoan island of Upolu, which enrolls hundreds of students.

Forced to make a difficult decision about the jump across the International Date Line, the Adventist denomination's Trans Pacific Union had in advance asked the Biblical Research Committee (BRC) of the South Pacific Division to study the principles and practices of Sabbathkeeping in the Pacific.

The BRC consulted theologians inside and outside the division as well as administrators and members in the region. They published the following statement: "The Executive Committee of the Samoa Tokelau Mission (STM) has taken an action at the recommendation of the South Pacific Division (SPD) that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Samoa will not recognize the new reckoning of days after the IDL shift with regards to the seventh day, and will instead continue to follow the sequence and reckoning of days on the Eastern side of the IDL. This means that while Christian Churches in Samoa will recognize the first day of the week in the new weekly cycle as Sunday (their day of worship), Adventists will treat the same day as the Sabbath."⁵

In explaining the statement, church officials pointed to the history books. They said that early Adventist pioneers to the region also worshiped on Sunday when, prior to 1892, Samoa was on the same side of the IDL as it is now. "Adventists in Samoa have been worshiping on the seventh day of the week ... for over 120 years as a part of their Adventist identity," read the statement. "Why would we change now and break the weekly cycle just because the name of the day has changed?"⁶

Church leaders urged members to consider the implications of their decisions for American Samoa, a part of the Samoa-Tokelau Mission that did not hop the IDL along with Samoa and Tokelau: "It is inconceivable that two countries and people so closely located geographically and under the same daytime should be worshipping on different days without a setting of the sun between them!"⁷

The Samoa-Tokelau Mission leaders also argued from a theological standpoint that God had allowed the IDL challenge to come about to allow the Seventh-day Adventist Church to demonstrate its faithfulness to the Bible.

Despite the statement, the Saturday/Sunday debate rages. Frustrated by a lack of order, regional church officials have attempted to force compliance, including a proposed ban on overseas Samoan pastors traveling to Samoa to preach against the South Pacific Division's position.⁸

The division organized meetings with overseas Samoan pastors

in New Zealand and Australia with the goal of getting written statements of support for the position. The effort failed. Most pastors refused to sign and instead supported the Adventists in Samoa who wished to worship on the Saturday Sabbath.⁹

Dissension Among Church Members

"SDA Sundaykeeping in Samoa has split up many families, including mine," Lemamea Teleia'i Dr. T Puni told *Adventist Today*. "It is now going to be six years since the *Seventh-day* Adventist Church in Samoa started keeping *Sunday*, the day our church has consistently claimed to be the Mark of the Beast. The issue has created distrust among friends and raised questions. They wonder, 'Is the Saturday Sabbath still a core doctrine of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?'"

Probably the most thorough response to the official statement of the SPD came from Pastor Neone Okesene, a senior regional pastor in Auckland, New Zealand. In *The Sabbath in Samoa*, a paper he submitted to the Biblical Research Committee of the South Pacific Division, Okesene challenged the mission's decision to celebrate the Sabbath on what is now Sunday.

Okesene's central argument was that keeping Sunday after the 2011 Samoan IDL change negated the Adventist doctrine of the Sabbath and "cast(s) serious doubt on the trustworthiness of Ellen G. White's inspiration and writings."¹⁰ Okesene said that Adventist literature and White's statements continuously stress that Saturday, not Sunday, is the biblical Sabbath. He argued that Adventist theology mandates that Sabbath must be kept on what in Samoa is now called Saturday (previously Friday).

Okesene emphasized that, in keeping with Adventist eschatological thought and Ellen White's writings on the issue, Sabbath must be seen as distinct from Sunday. White, "more than any other Adventist writer, has insisted consistently in her writings that the Lord's Sabbath is distinct from Sunday and that Sunday worship or Sunday sacredness is a satanic deception."¹¹

One example of White's condemnation of Sunday as the "false" Sabbath is the following statement: "This time when there is such an effort made to enforce the observance of Sunday is the very opportunity to present to the world the true Sabbath in contrast to the false."¹²

The Official Local Position

The South Pacific Division's BRC made the following response to Okesene: "Adventists have made a point of saying that although dates changed in the move from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian, the sequence of days and the seventh-day cycle never changed. If the Church is so particular about maintaining the

unbroken cycle of days down through history, why should it not be just as careful in the counting of days in Samoa?”¹³

The BRC’s statement continues: “The Church has no argument with the change of day names in order to accommodate the re-positioned IDL for Samoa but it insists on maintaining the correct seven-day cycle. This means that for this part of the Pacific, Monday is now the true first day of the week, and Sunday is the true seventh day. Saturday is now the Preparation day, and we are still Seventh-day Adventists, not Saturday Adventists, or sixth-day Adventists.”¹⁴

As for Ellen White’s views on the Sabbath, the BRC paper pointed out that whenever White warns about the end-time and Sunday sacredness, she compares Sunday to the biblical Sabbath.

The reality of keeping Sunday as the seventh-day Sabbath in Samoa has created situations that seem very strange to believers in other parts of the world.

“Sunday is considered the false Sabbath when it contradicts the biblical Sabbath,” said the BRC, summarizing White’s position.¹⁵

Writing about the mark of distinction that is the biblical Sabbath, the prophetess said: “Those who would have the seal of God in their foreheads must keep the Sabbath of the fourth commandment. This is what distinguishes them from the disloyal, who have accepted a man-made institution in the place of the true Sabbath. The observance of God’s rest day is the mark of distinction between him that serveth God and him that serveth Him not.”¹⁶

A similar vein of thought emerges in White’s writings about Protestant churches that “have accepted the spurious Sabbath, the child of the Papacy, and have exalted it above God’s holy sanctified day. It is our work to make plain to our children that the first day of the week is not the true Sabbath, and that its observance, after light has come to us as to what is the true Sabbath, is a plain contradiction of the law of God.”¹⁷

Despite White’s condemnation of Sunday observance,

however, keeping Sabbath on Sunday in Samoa is not seen as a contradiction by the BRC, since what is called “Sunday” is really the seventh day.

Reinforcing its point, the BRC statement says: “A careful study of all EGW references to ‘Sunday Law’ and ‘Sunday sacredness’ will show that they are in the setting of the Sunday Law being imposed by a secular/religious entity at the end of time in opposition to the sacredness of God’s Sabbath. ... Clearly this is not the current context in the Pacific.”

One wonders if Samoan Adventists would be in a uniquely protected position if Sunday laws were to be imposed in the future. Would they escape the persecution that Adventists worshipping elsewhere on Saturday would face?

An Opposing View

Two Adventist laypersons from New Zealand have been heavily involved in promoting the Saturday Sabbath as the correct path forward in Samoa. John Wallace and Robert Vincent recently visited Samoa and found the Adventist churches to be “deeply divided” on the question of the Sabbath.

In an email to *Adventist Today*, Wallace and Vincent wrote: “From January 2012, each new generation of Adventist members in Samoa has to be sold the lie that the government changed the calendar and renamed the days of the week.”

They argue that when Paul and Peter wrote, “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities” (Rom. 13:1, NIV) and “honor the emperor” (1 Pet. 2:17, NIV), this required obedience extended to authority over local timekeeping. In that case, the local calendar should be honored, which means that Saturday would still be the seventh day of the week.

“It is disingenuous to identify the ‘beast’ as the one who changed times and laws while we direct our own membership to keep Sunday without identifying ourselves with the image to the beast,” said Wallace and Vincent. “We originated in America, the Church’s seat of authority is in America, and noncompliant members are being killed spiritually.”

The two also claim that the Whangarei Church Board in North New Zealand sent a submission for an amendment to the Church’s doctrinal statement and Church Manual, “clarifying the time for Sabbath as being from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday, local time, everywhere in the world.” The suggested amendment was supported by the North New Zealand Conference but blocked by the New Zealand Pacific Union Conference.

Other Points to Consider

In an online *Adventist Today* article, Adventist scholar Milton Hook pointed out the “strange anomaly”¹⁸ of South Pacific

Division administrators who recommended the Sunday Sabbath in order to maintain a seven-day cycle but did not follow a personal seven-day cycle when they crossed the IDL to visit the United States. He said that just as these officials follow the local calendar when they visit other countries, keeping the Sabbath on Saturday according to the local calendar worldwide is a policy that “guarantees harmony.”¹⁹

Others claim that the Adventist insistence on keeping the seventh-day Sabbath is ironic because, they claim, the Gregorian solar-based calendar we currently use does not respect the sequence of days established in the Jewish lunar calendar. They insist that the modern seventh day is not the same Sabbath day the Jews celebrated in biblical times.²⁰ As noted earlier in this article, the Adventist Church vigorously disputes this view, claiming that there has been an unbroken seven-day week cycle since Bible times.

It isn't just Adventists who feel conflicted about how to think about the Sabbath in Samoa. The Jews seem to be just as confused. On Dec. 30, 2011, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency ran a story titled “With Samoa calendar change, question for the Jews: When is Shabbat?”

Rabbi Dovid Heber, a lecturer on Jewish religious law and astronomy at Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore, Maryland, and an adviser to Baltimore's Star-K kosher certification agency, recommended that Jews who care about the Sabbath should steer clear of the two problematic islands. Also, if Sabbathkeeping Jews need to travel to New Zealand, Japan, or other parts of the Pacific over a weekend, Heber said they should talk the trip over with their local rabbis.²¹

“In Samoa it is ‘safek Shabbos’ [questionable as to when Shabbos begins] every week,” Heber said. “Shabbos would begin every Thursday night at sunset and end when it gets dark on Saturday night—or 49 hours of Shabbos.” So for Jewish travelers crossing the IDL, he advises observance of a 49-hour Shabbos that would start Friday at sunset and end Sunday night.²²

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Goldstein, a Chabad (Hasidic) emissary in New Zealand, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that there was “basically no Jewish community of any kind” in Samoa.²³

Awkward Places for Sabbathkeepers

In 1900, Ellen White touched on the subject of Sabbathkeeping around the world in a personal letter to a George A. Irwin, who was then president of the General Conference. She wrote, “God made His Sabbath for a round world; and when the seventh day comes to us in that round world, controlled by the sun that rules the day, it is the time, in all countries and lands, to observe the Sabbath.”²⁴

She went on to say that in “countries where there is no sunset for months, and again no sunrise for months, the periods of time will be calculated by records kept.” Presumably, the “records kept” refer to sunset times during other parts of the year. Fascinatingly, she then expressed a similar opinion to that of Rabbi Heber about the need for the faithful to avoid problematic areas: “God has a world large enough and proper and right for the human beings He has created to inhabit it, without finding homes in those lands so objectionable in very many, many ways.”

In *The Lord's Day on a Round World*, Adventist editor Robert Leo Odom tackled the issue of Sabbathkeeping in parts of the world where geography causes difficulties for Adventists.²⁵ Perhaps the most complicated of these inconvenient regions is the Far North.

In my native Sweden, for example, part of the country lies above the Arctic Circle, where it is impossible to keep the

Any way one looks at it, a day was lost for the island, and Saturday there became the sixth day.

Sabbath day from sunset to sunset because the sun never sets during the summer! In my late teens, I volunteered as an assistant to the pastor at Slussfors Adventkyrka, the northernmost Adventist church in Sweden. I remember being surprised to discover that within the same congregation, some members kept Sabbath from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown while others kept it from 6 p.m. Friday to 6 p.m. Saturday (or 7 p.m. to 7 p.m. after the clock moved forward in the spring).

Britt-Inger Lillbäck, a longtime member of the Slussfors Adventist church, explained the thinking of Nordic Adventists like herself who keep the Sabbath for a full 24-hour day. She said that in making their decisions, they first looked at both the content and structure of the Creation story. In the Genesis account, morning and evening are mentioned even before God created the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth day. They felt that this showed an underlying rhythm to each day that was put in place for human perception and calculation of time even before the existence of the sun. That natural rhythm, she said, dictates our rising at the start of the day and subsequent rest at the end of the day.

The fact that God gave our first parents the sunrise and sunset to mark the passing of days was entirely justified, Lillbäck said, given that Adam and Eve were in a geographic location where these natural markers were reliable indications of day and night. But in northern regions of the world, where the sun goes down as early as 2 p.m. during winter, people do not consider sundown the beginning of night.

Lillbäck and many other Adventists in Nordic countries feel that structuring Sabbathkeeping according to a more natural rhythm is the only theory that makes sense where the sun never sets during some months. She believes that God would not force his people to follow sunsets in contexts where doing so is problematic. The true test of devotion to the Sabbath, says Lillbäck, is the willingness to keep a full 24 hours holy, regardless of the behavior of the sun.

Writing in *The Lord's Day on a Round World*, Odom was adamant that “the observance of God’s holy day was never thought by the Lord to be something impossible for man to do as the human family should spread over the face of the Earth.” When treating the question of the Far North, he confidently declared that “Neither Sundaykeepers nor Sabbathkeepers have any difficulty knowing when to begin their religious rest days in the Far North.” Odom reported that at the time of his writing, Sabbath was kept from Friday noon to Saturday noon because “that hour corresponds to the sunset time, as is proved by the last visible sunset taking place at the closing of the season.” Correspondingly, during the summer Sabbath was kept from midnight Friday to midnight Saturday because the Sun is “at its sunset point ... as is proved by the last visible sunset occurring at the beginning of the period, and by the first visible sunset taking place at the close of the season.”

Odom’s treatment of the topic may appear somewhat dated, but the fact that it brings a scientific view to a theological question—and is the only Adventist book to tackle the challenges of Sabbathkeeping around the world—is significant.

No Simple Solution

With no tidy way to reach a consensus, Samoa’s Sabbath wars are unlikely to end anytime soon. The official stance of the division, which stresses the importance of maintaining the seven-day sequence, may make sense on paper, but it can be difficult to explain in everyday life. Many devout, lifelong Adventists find that going to work or school on Saturday and then heading to church on Sunday along with all of the other Christians is a tough pill to swallow, no matter how tight the reasoning from church authorities. These earnest church members believe that Saturday must be kept no matter what—even with the peculiar IDL-hopping context in Samoa—because Sunday is the day

condemned by Ellen White as a false day of worship.

The fact remains, however, that we are called Seventh-day Adventists because we keep the seventh day of the week holy. As the BRC response to Okesene stated, we are not “Saturday” Adventists. There is nothing holy about the word Saturday. To be true to our name and to God’s command, Adventists need to worship on the seventh day, which in Samoa is Sunday.

An optimist might point out that each of the warring factions believes in the immense importance of the Sabbath in the Adventist faith. In light of this agreement, it would be flippant and inaccurate to decide that the Sabbath is impossible to keep in Samoa. There could well be light at the end of this tunnel.

Prayer, study, good faith, and time—lots of time—may begin to heal some of the divides in Samoa’s Adventist community as Sabbath observance plays out over the long term. In the meantime, while the IDL-hopping context of Samoa’s controversy might be unique, Adventists the world over face serious challenges to Sabbathkeeping. Rather than allowing these obstacles to weaken our belief in the seventh-day Sabbath, we have an opportunity to delve deeper into the timeless truths behind the day of rest. ☩

¹ The International Date Line is an imaginary line running from the North Pole to the South Pole that follows the 180-degree line of longitude, zigzagging to accommodate certain territories and islands. The IDL marks the change from one calendar day to the next. If you cross it traveling from east to west, you instantly gain a day. Head the other direction, and you lose one.

² *Adventist Review*, July 4, 2017, p. 7

³ Milton Hook, “Conflict over Calendar Change Splits the Adventist Church in Samoa,” *Adventist Today* post at atoday.org, Oct. 15, 2013.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Andrew Hanson, “Samoa, the International Dateline Shift, and the Seventh-day Sabbath,” *Adventist Today* post at atoday.org, January 2014.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Hook, Oct. 15, 2013.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Neone Okesene, “The Sabbath in Samoa,” paper written in 2013.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² White, Manuscript 16, 1890, par. 70.

¹³ Biblical Research Committee, “The Sabbath in Samoa: A Response Paper, March 2015.”

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ White, Manuscript 27, 1899, *SDA Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1957), p. 970.

¹⁷ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 6 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press), p. 193.

¹⁸ Hook, Oct. 15, 2013.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Hanson, January 2014.

²¹ Adam Soclof, “With Samoa Calendar Change, Question for Jews: When Is Shabbat?” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Dec. 30, 2011.

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Ellen G. White, Letter 167 to G. A. Irwin, March 23, 1900.

²⁵ Robert Leo Odom, *The Lord's Day on a Round World* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assoc., 1970).

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS, CONDITIONAL PROPHECY, *and* FREE WILL

BY RICHARD W. COFFEN

DURING THE 1950s, REVIEW AND HERALD Publishing Association undertook two trailblazing projects. One was Arthur Maxwell's lavishly illustrated 10-volume series, *The Bible Story*, which has since sold enough copies to feed generations of literature evangelist families. The other was the seven-volume *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* set, which has provided exegetical insights to members.

Names of contributors were not attached to specific parts of the commentaries, due to extensive editing that omitted certain salient insights and added other points not agreed upon by the original authors. During the preparation of the commentary series, editors Raymond Cottrell and Don Neufeld convinced editor-in-chief Francis Nichol (who worked on the project after his day job as editor of *Review and Herald* magazine) that all biblical prophecy was conditional. Fearful that truth and consequences would produce cognitive dissonance among laity, Nichol banned this idea from the commentary. He did, however, permit Cottrell to discuss the topic in an introductory essay.

Although these three influential thinkers didn't invent the concept of conditional prophecy, they arguably popularized it in our denomination.

The Provisional Nature of Predictions

There is scriptural evidence for conditional prophecy. For example, God informed Ezekiel that Nebuchadnezzar's 13-year invasion of Tyre would result in the razing and inundation of the city (Eze. 26:3-21). Sixteen years later (29:17), God

acknowledged the invalidation of his prediction. As a result, he'd give Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar (29:18-20) as a consolation prize. The forecasted military campaign ensued (568/567 BCE), but Ahmose II routed Nebuchadnezzar's army and not vice versa. The prophecy failed! Five years later (582 BCE), the Babylonians interred the loser.

Tyre remains. It's the fourth-largest city in Lebanon, home to more than 100,000 citizens. A World Heritage Site, Tyre has remained in continuous existence for over four millennia.

Ezekiel's other prophecies also failed. In the Anchor Bible, Moshe Greenberg opined: "In twenty-two years of prophesying, Ezekiel had only one realized prophecy to his credit: the fall of Jerusalem. ... As the years went by ... none of his predictions materialized."¹

Extrabiblical ancient Near Eastern prophecies reveal that such predictions were contingent upon behavior. Matthijs de Jong has shown that non-Hebrew ancient "prophets warned the people about the disasters planned by the gods, with the express purpose of averting them."²

Failed predictions pose a problem, especially for Christians who study the Scofield Reference Bible or adhere to Dispensationalism. Their use of historical-grammatical methodology compels them to find fulfillments for all biblical prophecies.³ As a result, many Christians anticipate an eschatological role for the present-day nation of Israel, a resurgence of the Jewish religion, and the continuation of the national state

as the necessary fulfillment of biblical predictions that have thus far failed. Ask the Palestinians to elaborate on the downside of such a perspective!

Consequences of Prophetic Conditionalism

If we attend to the empirical data that biblical prophecies were contingent, at least five significant conclusions logically ensue.

1. *Free Will Can and Does Make a Difference*

When humans exercise free will, they can modify the future and even surprise God. This logical consequence poses a hurdle for many, but it is a logical corollary of conditional prophecy.

Biblical evidence? Jonah's prediction that Nineveh would suffer destruction after 40 days (Jon. 3:4) failed. Ninevites repented en masse. Subsequently, God broke his word about impending dire consequences. Yet God's message of doom contained no explicit contingencies. The debacle embarrassed the prophet, whose prognostic batting average plummeted, and the chagrined clairvoyant prayed that because the Ninevites hadn't died, he wanted to die instead (4:3).

The Ninevites demonstrated that when humans exercise free will, they can invalidate prophecy.

Not surprisingly, lovers of Scripture have arrayed proof texts for either conditionalism or determinism. Adventists find scriptural evidence in support of free will weightier than that against it. "Choose you this day ..." (Josh. 24:15, KJV). We who espouse libertarian free will do not deny that choices can be

and are influenced by a variety of factors, such as genetics, epigenetics, cultures, habits, sensitivities, upbringings, etc. But we continue to affirm that beings with free will can, under optimal conditions, freely choose among available options.

2. *Divine Purpose in Making Predictions*

If the concept of conditional prophecy is theologically valid, we can logically infer that God utters prophetic predictions not to stymie thinking, but to kickstart it. “Suppose I [God] tell some wicked people that they will surely die, but then they turn from their sins and do what is just and right. ... If they do this, then they will surely live and not die. None of their past sins will be brought up again, ... and they will surely live” (Eze. 33:14-16, NLT).

Amazingly, God breathes a sigh of relief when we take seriously his threats. He can then renege! “As surely as I live, says the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of wicked people. I only want them to turn from their wicked ways so they can live” (verse 11, NLT). “The Lord ... does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent” (2 Pet. 3:9, NLT).

Christopher Hays has observed, “It is perhaps ... a ministry of activation, ... for the purpose of motivating them to a course of action which might confirm or avert ... prophecy.”⁴ God considers our “making him a liar” desirable! C. A. Strine referred to prophets “who predicted doom with the hope of being wrong.”⁵ So much for that bumper sticker: “God said it. I believe it. That settles it!” God expects us to use our kingly power of reason (Isa. 1:18).

3. *Omniscience vs. Conditionalism*

Those who recoil at the thought of conditional prophecy worry that such a perspective subverts the doctrines of divine sovereignty and omniscience. For them, contingent prophecies provide insight into divine omniscience.

Sometime between 1265 and 1273, Thomas Aquinas addressed divine

omnipotence in his magisterial *Summa Theologica*. He reasoned that God’s omnipotence ensures he can do everything, which is an object of power. “God is capable of all possible things and that is why He is called omnipotent. ... Whatever does not imply a contradiction is included among those possible things with respect to which God is called omnipotent. But those things that do imply a contradiction are not contained under God’s omnipotence, since they cannot have the nature of something possible.”⁶ Accordingly, God cannot create a rock so massive that he cannot move it. Such hypothetical behavior is self-contradictory and, therefore, isn’t an object of power. Likewise, God cannot create evil, because that’s contrary to his perfect character.

Biblical examples? Here’s a theological chestnut: God, despite omnipotence, couldn’t cope with iron chariots. “And the LORD ... drove out the inhabitants of the mountain; but could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron” (Judg. 1:19, KJV). Also, “God ... cannot lie” (Titus 1:2, KJV), because he personifies truth.

The same rationale can clarify divine omniscience. God knows everything that’s an object of knowledge. However, that which is self-contradictory remains outside the possibility of knowing. God doesn’t know that 2 + 5 = 87, because it’s not an object of knowledge.

Scriptural evidence? God can’t remember sins that he has forgiven and forgotten. “As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us” (Psa. 103:12, KJV). “Their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more” (Heb. 8:12, KJV).

Despite divine omniscience, it’s possible to conclude that human choices are not an object of knowledge. Hence we read in Scripture about occasions when God has regrets. “It repenteth me that I have made them [humans and other creatures]” (Gen.

6:7, KJV). Centuries later, God bemoaned: “It repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king” (1 Sam. 15:11, KJV). God showed sorrow when situations turned out contrary to his expectations.

4. *Conditional Prophecy Logically Buttresses Open Theology*

If all prophecy is conditional, “openness of God” theology⁷ has logical validity. This is, perhaps, the most controversial of these rational consequences.⁸ Nevertheless, a growing number of theologians, non-Adventist as well as Adventist, argue for it.

According to openness of God theology, humans can and do make a difference, not only for themselves but even for God. Moses, for instance, talked God out of obliterating the Israelites (Ex. 32:9-14). God in his omniscience may know exhaustively all options from which someone can choose, but according to open theology, humans can and do make choices that surprise God.

We have examples in Scripture where God expresses amazement, admitting that he hadn’t foreseen specific behaviors. “What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? ... [God] looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry” (Isa. 5:4, 7, KJV). “They have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind” (Jer. 19:5, KJV).

God tested people to discover how they’d behave. To Abraham atop Mt. Moriah, he said, “Now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me” (Gen. 22:12, KJV). Similarly, God provided manna when he wanted to learn how the recently freed Israelites would behave. “I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove

them, whether they will walk in my law, or no” (Ex. 16:4, KJV). “God left [King Hezekiah], to try him, that [God] might know all that was in his [Hezekiah’s] heart” (2 Chron. 32:31, KJV).

Those who oppose open theology must perform mental gymnastics rather than accept the plain reading of those and other biblical passages.

5. *Ellen G. White and Conditionalism*

What about the prophecies of Ellen White? If God bestowed upon her the prophetic gift, as we believe, were her predictions conditional—as were those uttered by biblical prophets?

In May of 1856, Ellen White had a vision that she related to the group gathered for a General Conference in Michigan. She’d been “shown the company present at the conference. Said the angel, ‘Some food for worms, some subjects of the seven last plagues, some will be alive and remain upon the earth to be translated at the coming of Jesus.’”⁹ This prophecy encouraged those present (as well as those who later heard or read the testimony) to “watch” and “be ready” (Matt. 24:42-44, KJV).

Some Adventists, including the prophet’s son Willie, later drew up a list of the 1856 General Conference attendees: a total of 54. As each person on the list died, his or her name was crossed through. The first funeral was for Clarissa Bonfoey, who died a mere three days after White’s vision. The last on the list to die was Willie White, who had been a toddler in 1856; he died in 1937.

D. W. Reavis, a husband of one of the attendees, reasoned that Ellen White’s predictions were conditional, like those of the biblical prophets. The Ellen G. White Estate maintains the same position and can add more examples of her failed predictions.

The Implications of Cottrell’s Essay

As noted previously, Francis Nichol put the kibosh on asserting in the *Seventh-day*

Adventist Bible Commentary that all biblical prophecy is conditional. Cottrell, team player that he was, acceded to Nichol’s wishes. However, the two came to an agreement that Cottrell had a modicum of freedom to pursue the concept in volume 4 of the commentary. Cottrell wrote, with Nichol’s blessing, an introductory essay titled “The Role of Israel in Old Testament Prophecy.”

The title makes no reference to either prophecy or conditionalism, and indeed it is a softened version of conditionalism. Cottrell used replacement theology (a.k.a. supersessionism)¹⁰ to explain the abortive predictions about Israel’s future glory and to argue for the concept of conditional prophecy.

For instance: “The promises and predictions given through the Old Testament prophets originally applied to literal Israel and were to have been fulfilled to them on the condition that they obey God and remain loyal to Him.”¹¹ Note Cottrell’s careful wording in his explanation of this line of reasoning: “God’s promises to Israel were all conditional.”¹² Subtle but noteworthy! Here the word “promises” stands in for prophecy and predictions, and the adjective “conditional” is hiding at the end of the sentence rather than directly preceding “promises.”

His explanation for conditionality à la supersessionism followed: “The plan itself never changes, because God never changes. But the manner in which it is carried out may change because man may change. The fickle, human will is the weak, unstable factor in conditional prophecy.”¹³ He cinched his argument by citing Ellen White: “The promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional”¹⁴

Cottrell, whose name never accompanied the material, urged interpreters of prophecy to “observe the conditional aspects of the prediction and ascertain whether or not, or to what extent, the conditions were met.”¹⁵

The Results of Free Will

Whether we like it or not, truth has consequences. Assuming the reality of human free will, resulting from divine intent at Creation, various correlatives logically follow. We’ve examined some. It behooves the honest in heart to accept the logical consequences of the existence of human free will. ☒

¹ Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries, Vol. 22A (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press 1995), p. 617.

² Matthijs J. de Jong, “Biblical Prophecy—A Scribal Enterprise: The Old Testament Prophecy of Unconditional Judgment Considered as a Literary Phenomenon,” *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 61, No. 1, 2011, pp. 39-70.

³ The historical-grammatical hermeneutic along with an emphasis on progressive revelation, which underpins Dispensationalism, has also become a Shibboleth among Adventists, thanks largely to the late Gerhard Hasel.

⁴ Christopher M. Hays, et. al., *When the Son of Man Didn’t Come* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016), p. 20.

⁵ C. A. Strine, “Reconceiving Prophecy: Activation, Not Prognostication,” in Hays, *When the Son of Man Didn’t Come*, p. 44.

⁶ Alfred J. Freddoso, New English Translation of St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*, Question 25, Article 3 “Is God omnipotent?” Objection 4 under “I respond:” (updated May 14, 2016).

⁷ A term coined by systematic theologian T. Richard Rice of Loma Linda University.

⁸ The objection that “openness of God” theology is in reality process theology under a different name is specious. That’s like arguing that Protestant communion is the same as Mass. In both instances, there may be similarities but there are also substantial differences, and the two must not be confused with each other. (See <http://reknew.org/2014/03/process-theology-open-theism-whats-the-difference/>)

⁹ The prediction was first published in *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 2 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1856). It is also found in *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 4 (1864), p. 18 (second pagination) and referred to in *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 2 (1860), p. 208. Currently the prediction appears in *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1 (1868), p. 131.

¹⁰ Supersessionism is the long-held concept that Christianity is the fulfillment of biblical Judaism. As proposed by Cottrell, unfulfilled material blessings for literal Israel may now be fulfilled for spiritual Israel. In recent years, many theologians have abandoned supersessionism, thinking that there are better ways to interpret the scriptural evidence.

¹¹ *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol. 4 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1955), p. 2821.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 2829.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 2834.

BIG ISSUES OVER A SMALL CUP

BY JACK HOEHN



How exactly does God provide scientific information? Do Adventists believe that all truth comes from one holy book and one inspired prophetess? Are Seventh-day Adventists thoughtful truth seekers or gullible faddists? What are the health risks of caffeinated beverages? If we realize we have been wrong about an issue, can we change our position?

That's quite a list of questions! And believe it or not, they all relate to one little cup of bitter brown liquid, which is either extracted from the processed berries of a tropical tree or brewed from some stage of the leaves of a camellia bush. Many Christians find it surprising that the type of tea leaves or coffee berries a person uses (or abstains from) could be a religious issue. Yet for some Seventh-day Adventists, the decision whether or not to consume these brewed beverages has become a line drawn in the sand regarding their spiritual, physical, and mental health.

For over 100 years, Seventh-day Adventists were known as the people who don't use alcohol or tobacco, don't eat meat, and don't drink coffee or tea. I once heard a doctor apologize to non-Adventist physicians for the absence of the usual coffee break, explaining that their meetings were being held in "a hotbed of virtue"!

For the first 65 years of my life, I never regularly consumed colas, coffees, or black teas and was able to survive physician's night call and intermittent loss of sleep without them. Instead, I drank Postum, Roma, and Rooibos or herbal teas. It felt virtuous to not be "addicted" to caffeine-containing beverages. But many Adventists today have no such scruple.

The coffee issue was reportedly important enough for the Ted Wilson administration to pay convention-hall coffee vendors near \$100,000 to close down during the 2010 Atlanta General Conference Session.¹ If even the elite delegates of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church have difficulty abstaining from coffee without their General Conference paying to remove the temptation, then coffee usage is clearly not yet a settled issue for Adventists.

The cup is small, but the issues are larger than health alone, for they also tie closely to what Adventists believe about inspiration, progressive revelation, and science versus parascience—including the so-called alternative or wholistic medicine, whose health claims and propositions are supported more by enthusiasm than by evidence.

Health and Coffee

Let's start our examination of the facts with a reminder that coffee and tea are non-nutritive beverages. They are not foods; no one *must* drink them. Plain coffee or tea contains no vitamins,

carbohydrates, protein, or fats. Of course, there is no nutrition in water, in air, in exercise, or in sex, either. So the fact that coffee and tea are non-nutritive beverages does not tell us whether or not they are good for us.

One thing that complicates the issue is that people often add to these beverages cream or milk as well as sugar or synthetic sweeteners and other artificial flavorings. We all know that those additions should be either limited to small amounts or avoided altogether. The basic question, as I see it, is whether the chemical effects of coffee and tea are dangerous and “sinful” or safe and helpful.

Coffee beans, like all of God’s plant creation, are very complex biochemicals. A brewed cup of coffee contains over 1,000 aroma chemicals alone.² Twelve percent of the chemicals in coffee can be called antioxidants, which are plant-based substances believed to be beneficial for their ability to counteract the damaging effects of oxidation. Since the roasting process changes the amounts of these chemicals in each bean, the temperature, time, and color of the roast all affect the coffee’s chemistry.

Recent careful studies show that regular coffee drinkers have a lower risk of diabetes,³ fewer strokes and heart problems,⁴ and lower rates of colon cancers. In addition, caffeine is one of the few drugs available that helps prevent Alzheimer’s dementia. One study of adults over age 65, who had mild memory impairment, prompted a neurologist to say: “These intriguing results suggest that older adults with mild memory impairment who drink moderate levels of coffee—about three cups a day—will not convert to Alzheimer’s disease or at least will experience a substantial delay before converting to Alzheimer’s.”⁵

That sounds pretty good. Moreover, healthy people who reported drinking three cups of regular or decaf coffee a day lived longer than those who drank less.⁶ This was studied in over half a million people of different countries and ethnicities, who had different ways of preparing coffee. The benefit was not large (7 percent to 12 percent lower risk of early death), but it does suggest that coffee drinking poses no long-term harm.

So what exactly are the health risks of caffeine, the stimulant that is present in fairly large amounts of brewed coffee and in lesser amounts of espresso and cold-drip coffee drinks?⁷ Perhaps most noteworthy is that caffeine can trigger a rapid or irregular heartbeat. When cardiac specialists studying irregular heartbeats find the heart is not skipping, they can force it to do so by injecting caffeine. In addition, since caffeine produces a mild stimulating effect on the brain,⁸ individuals who suffer from panic attacks or anxiety or are having trouble sleeping should avoid caffeinated beverages (at least within six or eight hours of

bedtime). Some people find that caffeine triggers their migraine headaches, but others use it as a headache remedy (many migraine medications—such as Excedrin, the most popular over-the-counter headache medicine in America—contain caffeine). So whether caffeine is a headache trigger or inhibitor would be an individual response. Last but not least, the caffeine and high acidity inherent in coffee can aggravate acid reflux, or heartburn.

In summary, scientific research says that while coffee is not a nutritious beverage, it may benefit healthy adults who do not suffer from cardiac irregularities, heartburn, or insomnia. It is generally safe in moderate doses.⁹

Inspiration and Coffee

Before we discuss Ellen White’s advice against caffeinated beverages, let us review again what the Bible says about coffee and tea: nothing!

Let’s also ask ourselves what genuine scientific discoveries were given us by God through the Bible or other inspired writers. Planetary mechanics? Chemistry? Physics? Mathematics? Electricity? Bacteria? Internal combustion engines? Toothpaste? Toothbrushes? Plumbing? Aspirin? Antibiotics? Geography? Geology? Smart Phones? Computers?

I think it should be clear that God’s chosen method for revealing scientific information is not special revelation (dreams, visions, or miracles). God has given humans the ability to think and to do, to reason and experiment, to discover and work out the secrets of nature. Scientific discovery is our job.

Keeping this principle in mind, we can look at an example of prophetic health advice in a letter written by Ellen G. White in 1899 to a private individual: “God has written His law upon every nerve and muscle, every fiber and function of the human body. The indulgence of unnatural appetite, whether for tea, coffee, tobacco, or liquor, is intemperance, and is at war with the laws of life and health. By using these forbidden articles a condition of things is created in the system which the Creator never designed. This indulgence in any of the members of the human family is sin.”¹⁰

This letter was written to someone, but not to everyone. Perhaps that person struggled with an addiction (“unnatural appetite”). In that case, the warning against indulgence that “is at war with the laws of life and health” would be quite appropriate, but it does not necessarily apply to all who drink coffee or tea.

More importantly, a larger issue is at stake. Since God does not provide scientific information by revelation, should we expect Ellen White’s writings to be 100-percent scientifically accurate? Can we accept that not necessarily all of her health advice is known to be true into the 21st century?¹¹ Is it possible that Mrs.

White was misinformed or simply wrong about the dangers of coffee and tea?

The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia, which was published by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, explains that “In advocating health principles she utilized the writings of contemporary reformers and physicians.”¹² The book then provides several examples, from her own lifetime, of the then-available scientific information she used in her published writings.

We have at our disposal this prudent reminder from the prophetess herself: “Human knowledge of both material and spiritual things is partial and imperfect.”¹³

Ellen White also wrote: “We have many lessons to learn, and

The basic question, as I see it, is whether the chemical effects of coffee and tea are dangerous and “sinful” or safe and helpful.

many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed.”¹⁴

Those who demand that a prophet be 100-percent accurate should heed this quote: “In regard to infallibility, I never claimed it; God alone is infallible.”¹⁵

Without a doubt, Ellen White’s spiritualization of good health habits as a Christian duty has been a tremendous blessing to the Adventist church. Her practical advice regarding a plant-based diet, exercise, and the dangers of tobacco and alcohol helped make Seventh-day Adventists the longest-living people group in the United States.¹⁶ But we need to learn how to decide practical questions on diet and health based on the facts of sound, up-to-date science.¹⁷

Doubts, Fads, and Fears

The tendency of some Adventists to harbor distrust toward science may be due largely to the inadequate and shallow scientific methods that were prevalent in the early days of our denomination. In the 1860s, the existence of bacteria (the “germ theory”) was just being confirmed and the medical community did not yet realize that mosquitoes carry malaria. Doctors were trained by apprenticeships, drugs were administered dangerously and foolishly, and pasteurization was not yet used for milk or cheese.¹⁸ Consequently, Ellen White wrote a lot of statements against physicians, drugs, milk, and cheese as part of her overall counsel regarding health.¹⁹

This history has sadly spawned an “anti-professional” and “anti-science” attitude in some church members. It seems that many Adventists are drawn to supplement fads and “miracle cures” due to our history of avoiding “poisonous drugs” and relying on natural remedies and hydrotherapy at a time when surgery was not safe and anesthesia and antibiotics had not been invented.

Too often Adventists appear more concerned about whether or not a treatment is “natural” than if it is safe or effective. They also tend to fear side effects more than they fear actual diseases. If diagnosed with cancer, some Adventists refuse useful surgery, safe chemotherapy, or targeted radiation and instead opt for special diets, herbal remedies, and prayers. Strategies that are vital for cancer prevention (i.e., healthy diet, exercise, rest, and water) are NOT adequate after they fail to prevent the cancer. Enemas, herbs, antioxidants, and supplements have little benefit in treating cancers unless used as minor adjuncts to proper scientific medicine. Believers must be willing to change from a strategy that is good for prevention to one focused on destruction of the disease.

Adventist medical schools were prophetically directed to allopathy, not naturopathy, homeopathy, herbalism, or chiropractic. This means that Adventist health professionals are trained in scientific ways and taught to look for scientific facts to influence their care. Adventists need to find good medical and osteopathic physicians who are up-to-date with their science and to listen carefully to their advice.

When NOT Drinking Coffee Could Be a Sin

Years ago I cared for a woman who was married to a General Conference vice president, and she admitted to me with chagrin that she had to drink coffee before every Sabbath service, or else she would fall asleep during church. She is not alone in this. Could coffee or tea be a useful, safe drug for drowsy Adventists that offers

possible moral and spiritual benefits as well as health benefits?

If, in fact, coffee or tea is harmful to us, then drinking either would surely be an error—and perhaps even a sin against our bodies (see 1 Cor. 6:18-20) and an insult to our Creator. But if science correctly shows that those drinks are usually benign and sometimes helpful, could it be time to remove these beverages from our Adventist list of sins against the body? After all, it could be argued that for individuals with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or early memory loss, it might be a greater sin against the body to NOT drink coffee or tea!

The moral decision then becomes: *Am I healthier, happier, more productive, and longer-lived by drinking coffee or tea? Or am I irritable, nervous, and not sleeping well, with heartburn or irregular pulse?*

To ask such questions is to base our individual decisions not on rote obedience to the opinion of the prophet, but on thoughtful evaluation of the best scientific evidence confirmed by personal experience. The moral thing to do, as Ellen White clearly taught, is whatever keeps us healthy, happy, and productive and whatever enables us to live better and perhaps a little longer.

The Sin of Meddling

There is, of course, a sin regarding the drinking of coffee and tea. It is to be judgmental and critical of the choices of others. This sin would deny fellow believers and visiting public the freedom to openly and freely drink the beverage they find helpful. This sin would claim more holiness, more Adventism, and more perfection for those who don't drink coffee. This sin would forbid caffeine from church-related social functions, instead of letting each person decide whether to drink coffee, tea, green tea, herbal tea, decaf, or Roma.

The sin is trying to control the behaviors of others to meet your own standards—to have people bow to your interpretation and habits, and to use our prophethood as your weapon. If you need to hear this from the Bible, here are some supporting texts (ESV):

- 1 Timothy 5:13 condemns “gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not”;
- 1 Peter 4:15 lists a “meddler” along with those who commit more serious crimes;
- Romans 14:1-10 forbids *judging* fellow church members on dietary questions;
- Proverbs 11:12 warns against “belittling” a neighbor.

The use of coffee and tea should become as uncontroversial in our church as the use of aspirin, acetaminophen, antihistamines or birth control pills—something we all decide based on good science, our own needs, and personal experience without

anyone else ever mentioning it. All of us, including church administrators, just need to stop fussing about adult consumption of coffee and tea. And some of us need to start drinking it.²⁰ 🇺🇸

¹ Jared Wright, “Closed! Adventists Shut Down Starbucks at GC,” *Spectrum*, July 2, 2010.

² Emma Davies, “Chemistry in Every Cup,” *Chemistry World*, April 28, 2011.

³ Alexandra Sifferlin, “Why Coffee May Protect Against Type 2 Diabetes,” *TIME* Magazine, Dec. 2, 2015.

⁴ Alice Park, “Moderate Coffee Consumption Lowers Heart Failure Risk,” *TIME* Magazine, June 27, 2012.

⁵ Alissa Sauer, “4 Surprising Benefits of Coffee,” www.alzheimers.net, Jan. 4, 2017.

⁶ “Is Coffee Consumption Associated With Lower Risk for Death?” *Annals of Internal Medicine*, Aug. 15, 2017.

⁷ For a comprehensive chart of caffeine in different foods, see Center for Science in the Public Interest at <https://cspinet.org/eating-healthy/ingredients-of-concern/caffeine-chart>. Adventists concerned about caffeine in chocolate should note that chocolate contains theobromine but very little caffeine (i.e., a Hershey’s bar has 9 mg, a scant amount compared to a cup of Starbucks Blonde Roast brewed coffee, which contains between 180 mg and 475 mg of caffeine, depending on the serving size).

⁸ Individuals with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), who instead find that caffeinated beverages slow them down and produce a calming effect, are the exception to this rule.

⁹ Up to 400 milligrams of caffeine a day appears to be safe for most healthy adults, according to the Mayo Clinic.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, Letter 123, 1899, quoted in *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), p. 265.

¹¹ An Adventist book by a retired physician in Australia suggests that 70 percent of what Ellen White promoted as healthful living has strong support from modern health science, while the other 30 percent is in the category of possible or debatable or not supported. See Don S. McMahon, *Acquired or Inspired: Exploring the Origins of the Adventist Lifestyle* (Signs Publishing Company, Australia, 2005).

¹² Jerry Moon and Denis Fortin, *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2014), p. 216.

¹³ White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), p. 522.

¹⁴ White, “Search the Scriptures,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Vol. 69, No. 30, July 26, 1892.

¹⁵ White, Letter 10, 1895, published in *Selected Messages*, Book 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), p. 37.

¹⁶ In 2014, research from the Blue Zones Project revealed that Adventists live an average of 10 years longer than the typical American life expectancy of about 79 years.

¹⁷ We could footnote controversial health advice in Ellen White’s books as follows: “*Ellen White’s practical health advice was based on the best available evidence at the time she wrote. Most things she suggested have proven over time to be sound. A few of her suggestions are no longer considered necessary or even accurate based on subsequent advances in public health and better scientific information. The spiritual principle of doing whatever is proven by good science to be safe and beneficial as a religious duty to our Creator remains as true today as ever.*”

¹⁸ In 1864 scientist Louis Pasteur stumbled upon this process, which applies heat to destroy pathogens in foods, to prevent spoilage in wine and beer; however, it was not used in dairy products until after Ellen White’s death.

¹⁹ John B. Hoehn, “The Adventist Drug Problem: Must All Remedies Be ‘Natural?’” *Adventist Review*, April 25, 2002, pp. 8-11.

²⁰ Dr. Hoehn avoided coffee, tea, and colas till he became 65 years of age and felt the scientific evidence suggested it could be good for him. He now tries to drink from one to three cups of coffee a day (usually cold brewed, sometimes French Press), and if drinking tea, he prefers green or silver-tip teas.

A Brief History of the Great Controversy Motif

By Aage Rendalen

WHEN I JOINED THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH IN 1971, what I found so fascinating about Ellen White's story of *The Great Controversy* was its *cosmic* aspect. To believe her—and I was only too happy to do so—the Earth was the Waterloo of a vast universe. In itself it was no more significant than the Belgian village where Napoleon met his final defeat, but because our planet was where the cosmic battle between good and evil would be decided, it would determine the fate of the universe. And I had the privilege of enlisting in that conflict on the side of God.

It was a war that had been raging for several thousand years, from the day when God's three-star general had rebelled against the Almighty and his four-star son, the future Jesus of Nazareth.¹ In the spirit of a disgruntled polytheistic deity, Lucifer rounded up his supporters and went to war against his Creator.

In the ancient world, deities could lose their immortality and their life. They could be dethroned and banished to the Earth and even the netherworld. Lucifer, also known as Satan, apparently had not caught on to the fact that times had changed and that, with the rise of monotheism, God Almighty could not easily be dislodged from power. Not only could the all-knowing One read the minds of the rebels and monitor their conspiratorial meetings, but had he wanted to, he could have fried them with a lightning bolt before they got out of bed on the day of the revolt. Since God by definition was now omnipotent, there was no way he could be dethroned. But Lucifer, for all his brightness, was not smart enough to understand that. Nor was his angelic cohort—“theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die.”²

Not surprisingly, therefore, the *coup d'état* against the Almighty failed. The rebels were thrown down to Earth and, as in the

framing story of Job, implicitly told by God to go ahead and do their worst to a hapless humanity. Eventually, God would catch up with them and hold them accountable.

Dependence on Hastings and Milton

The Great Controversy motif was already familiar when Ellen G. White introduced her readers to it in her 1858 book *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 1. Joseph Smith, for instance, had already incorporated it into the worldview of the *Book of Mormon*, and Thomas Paine had railed against it in *The Age of Reason*, published in 1794. Then there was the Rochester Millerite H. L. Hastings, whose book *Of the Great Controversy Between God and Man* was published in January of 1858 and featured in the *Review and Herald* two months later.³

Most people of the day no doubt owed their knowledge of the story to John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, published in 1667, but Milton had only reworked a myth that went back to the early Christian church. Milton's contribution was primarily that of providing Satan with a tragic personality, as if he were a Shakespearean character. God and his pre-existing Son play key roles in this drama, but they lack the color of character that Milton's Satan possesses.

Ellen White lifted minor narrative details from Milton's drama (i.e., the heavenly council's approval of Project Earth; Satan's initial remorse; angels tutoring Adam and Eve), but unlike Milton, she placed the story in an apocalyptic setting and bent it to fit Adventist theological concerns, including Sunday worship, attacks on the law of God, spiritualism, and religious persecution of God's end-time remnant.

If you read *Paradise Lost*, you can recognize details that overlap

with White's version, but you will also quickly realize that they are two different stories based on the same basic motif—much like Robin Hood movies all share the same cast of characters while taking the narrative in widely divergent directions. The same goes for Hastings' *Of the Great Controversy Between God and Man*.

The Lucifer Myth

The basic story of Lucifer's fall and subsequent war on God and humanity was well known in the early Christian church. The Alexandrian Christian theologian Origen (184-252 CE) treated the story of Satan's extrabiblical exploits with commendable caution, but he conceded that most Christians believed in it: "Regarding the devil, his angels, and the opposing forces, the teaching of the church is that these beings do indeed exist. However, the church has not explained with sufficient clarity what they are, or how they exist. Most Christians, however, hold this opinion: that the devil was an angel and that, having become an apostate, he induced as many of the angels as possible to fall away with him."⁴

Origen's older contemporary, Tertullian (c. 155-c. 240 CE), put it this way: "From where did this malice of lying and deceit towards man—and slandering of God—originate? Most certainly not from God! For He made the Angel good after the fashion of His good works. Indeed, before he became the devil, he stood forth as the wisest of creatures. And wisdom is no evil. If you turn to the prophecy of Ezekiel [Ch. 28], you will at once realize that this angel was good by creation. It was by choice that he became corrupt. For in the person of the prince of Tyre, it says things in reference to the devil."⁵

Tertullian and Origen belonged to those who associated the prehistory of Satan with Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28. In these two chapters, the prophets taunt the kings of Tyre and Babylon for their hubris in terms that bring to mind Tom Wolfe's mocking reference to the tycoons of Wall Street as "Masters of the Universe" in *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987).⁶

"How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High" (Isa. 14:12-14, KJV).⁷

"Son of man, take up a lamentation upon the king of Tyrus, and say unto him, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Thou sealest up the sum, full of wisdom, and perfect in beauty. Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius, topaz, and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx, and the

jasper, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle, and gold: the workmanship of thy tabrets and of thy pipes was prepared in thee in the day that thou wast created. Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth; and I have set thee so: thou wast upon the holy mountain of God; thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire. Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee" (Eze. 28:12-15, KJV).

The Canaanite Connection

When you read these verses in context, it is clear that they refer to earthly kings, but the taunts—for that is what they are—are partially couched in the language of myth. In an age where kings saw themselves as the earthly incarnation of deities, that made sense. Scholars have long assumed that the two Jewish prophets drew upon well-known Canaanite and Mesopotamian myths in their colorful indictment of the two kings who hailed from these cultures.

The Great Controversy motif with which Adventists are familiar is an enhanced version of a story that was popular with the early church fathers.

In a 2014 book titled *Adam, Eve, and the Devil*, two Dutch scholars argue that there is reason to believe that "Lucifer" (*Helel* in Hebrew) refers to a Canaanite myth uncovered in Ugarit, in which Horanu (the blazing one) rebels against the supreme god El and is cast out of the divine paradise onto the slopes of Mt. Ararat.⁸ Assuming the shape of a serpent, he mortally wounds Adam, the deity sent by El to counter Horanu's activities. Horanu, like the New Testament devil, was the father of serpents and living in the desert.⁹ Korpel and de Moor submit, on the basis of Canaanite mythology, that the serpent in the garden of Eden clearly was a reference to *the adversary* of God, the one later called Satan. They maintain that pressure from Jewish monotheism kept him out of the Hebrew scriptures, with a few exceptions.¹⁰

I leave it to the peers of Korpel and de Moor to validate or reject their conclusions. They write that no matter how one chooses to interpret Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, the reality that underlies all narratives of deities rebelling against the supreme God is rather banal: “In polytheism rebellion against the highest deity of the moment was as common as attempts to overthrow the sitting ruler in human societies. Only the time scale and the proportions of the antagonists were macroscopic.”¹¹

The Divine-Human Amalgamation Myth

Korpel and de Moor point out that ancient scribes realized that their religious myths might not be the whole truth and that they often included in their canons competing myths. In the opening two chapters of Genesis, for instance, we have two very different

Myth is the human experience processed through narrative, a type of story that becomes absurd if read as a scientific or historical account.

creation accounts back-to-back. Similarly, in early Christian times, the story of Lucifer’s rebellion existed in tension with another story of the origin of evil. This second version was based on the contested Book of Enoch, which prominent church fathers such as Tertullian and Origen viewed as inspired.

Two epistles in the Christian scriptures refer to this myth. Verse 6 of Jude states: “And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day” (NIV). In 2 Peter 2:4, we read: “God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness.”

According to the Book of Enoch, chapters 7-11, twenty angels—no mention here of Satan’s rebellion—were sent on a mission to Earth, but they messed up badly by falling in love with women and having sex with them.

These fallen angels are called watchers in the Book of Enoch, and their hybrid children were the giants referred to in Genesis 6:1-4. Being a mile high, the rowdy offspring ravaged

the resources of the Earth and created such havoc with God’s creation that he decided to drown them and everybody else in a worldwide flood and start over again. It is not by accident that the reference to these extrabiblical Nephilim introduces the Flood story in Genesis.

The idea that these fallen angels are now kept under lock and key “for judgment on the great Day” (Jude 6) is not easily reconciled with the Lucifer story, but that did not seem to worry the Christians of antiquity. The church fathers, by and large, appear to have accepted both of the fallen-angel stories.

Athenagoras (c. 175 CE) wrote: “But some [angels] outraged both the constitution of their nature and the oversight entrusted to them.... These angels fell into impure love of virgins and were subjugated by the flesh.... Those who are called giants were begotten from these lovers of virgins.”¹²

According to Bardesanes (c. 222 CE): “The angels are likewise possessed of personal freedom. For we can be sure that if the angels had not possessed personal freedom, they would not have consorted with the daughters of men, thereby falling from their places.”¹³

Ellen White made reference to a 19th-century race version of this myth in her famous amalgamation passages. Instead of angels interbreeding with humans, in this version humans had provoked God to drown the world because of bestiality. She wrote: “But if there was one sin above another which called for the destruction of the race by the flood, it was the base crime of amalgamation of man and beast which defaced the image of God, and caused confusion everywhere. God purposed to destroy by a flood that powerful, long-lived race that had corrupted their ways before him.”¹⁴ She continued: “Every species of animal which God had created were preserved in the ark. The confused species which God did not create, which were the result of amalgamation, were destroyed by the flood. Since the flood there has been amalgamation of man and beast, as may be seen in the almost endless varieties of species of animals, and in certain races of men.”¹⁵

A Biblical Explanation for Satan?

In summary, the Great Controversy motif with which Adventists are familiar is an enhanced version of a story that was popular with the early church fathers. The story was based on poetic taunts directed at two Middle Eastern kings, and they included references to what were probably Canaanite myths about deities described as “fallen.”

In context, the charge that Isaiah and Ezekiel level against the monarchs of Tyre and Babylon is that of hubris, of acting as if they were God himself. Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 both communicate a well-known prophetic warning: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18,

RSV). It was essentially the same message that Jonah was told to deliver to the people of Nineveh.

It is also clear that the intent of these two chapters is not to provide readers with insights into the origin of sin. It is hard to imagine that two Jewish prophets would have wanted to validate a Canaanite myth.¹⁶ It seems fairly obvious, at least to me, that the reason why the early church did validate these myths is that the Bible would otherwise leave its readers in the dark about the origin of evil.¹⁷

The early church fathers, embedded as they were in a rational Greco-Roman world, no doubt felt the need to come up with an explanation. “I don’t know” was not a currency recognized on Areopagus or by critics such as Celsus, and while the story of an angel rebelling against an almighty God didn’t meet rational criteria for credibility, at least it worked as myth, and the Greeks, for all their vaunted rationalism, were not prejudiced against myths.

Myth Fragments in the Bible

Exegetically, the biblical texts used to construct (or reconstruct) these two stories—Lucifer’s rebellion and that of the lusty angels who brought on the Flood by their interspecies fornication—resemble the scene after an airplane crash in which bits and pieces of wings and fuselage are attached to a frame that models the original shape of the aircraft.

Textually, the problem is that that the Bible contains only fragments of two stories whose original shapes are not entirely known. That is where the Federal Aviation Administration has an advantage. But let us consider, for the sake of argument, where we would be if we could establish that these two stories are endorsed in the Bible—or, better still, if the Bible had included them in the first part of Genesis with all the detail of the two creation accounts.

In such a case, we would face the quandary of two stories giving two different accounts of the origin of evil. And, as in the case of the two creation accounts in the two first chapters of Genesis, we would have no objective reason to prefer one to the other. Furthermore, we’d be faced with two stories that, like the first 11 chapters of Genesis, work only if read as myth.

Myth is the human experience processed through narrative, a type of story that becomes absurd if read as a scientific or historical account. Take the myth of Icarus who, of all things, attached his wings with *wax*. Science can only laugh at that, but the narrative required wax in order for the sun to put an end to his hubris. It is about the life we live, not history or science. It requires suspension of disbelief, in the same way a Shakespeare play does.

The reason why George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton, J. R. R. Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis loved fairy tales and myths was that they

delighted in the moral wisdom they conveyed. This wisdom isn’t conveyed if you subject myths to rational analysis. And if you do subject them to rational analysis, you cannot learn rational facts from them. Myth is what we resort to when don’t have rational answers. 🏠

¹ It is significant that Tertullian, Origen, Milton, and the early Ellen White accounts placed Jesus and Satan (like Darth Vader and Obi-Wan Kenobi) on the same ontological pedestals. They were as blood brothers who fell out because Lucifer thought that God favored one Son over the other. None of these writers were traditional Trinitarians. For the first 50 years, Adventist writers railed against the Trinity and viewed Jesus very much the way their cousins, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, still do: as divine but created. The premise of sibling rivalry makes sense only in a non-Trinitarian setting.

² From the poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

³ Historian Don McAdams, on page 21 of his 1974 manuscript, *Ellen G. White and the Protestant Historians*, noted the similarities between Hastings’ and Ellen White’s Great Controversy books, but concludes: “The books are very similar, but a careful comparison does not support the idea that Ellen White’s book is based on Hastings. The book may have stimulated her thinking, and suggested many ideas, but she did not have it open before when she wrote her volume; she emphasizes some points he ignores and presents detail not found in his book.” A review of Hastings’ book was published under “Book Notice” in the March 18, 1858, issue of *Review and Herald*.

⁴ Origen in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, p. 240, quoted by David W. Bercot [ed.], *A Dictionary of Early Christians Beliefs*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), p. 593.

⁵ Tertullian in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, p. 193, quoted by Bercot, p. 593.

⁶ The term originally referred to toymaker Mattel’s *Masters of the Universe* franchise, which focused on He-man, She-ra, and Skeletor. A Hollywood movie with Dolph Lundgren playing He-man was released in 1987, the same year Tom Wolfe wrote *Bonfire of the Vanities*. If future scholars were to pursue Wolfe’s “Masters of the Universe” as an indication that Wall Street had been taken over by aliens in the 1980s, they would fall into the same trap of reading a taunt as a description.

⁷ The Canaanites apparently believed that the supreme god El and his council of gods were physically located in the “vineyard of the gods” on the slopes of Mt. Ararat to the northeast. This was a fertile area in a volcanic region at the four headwaters of the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers. El-Shadday, or “El, the mountain dweller,” is one of the names given God in the Old Testament. See Marjo C.A. Korpel and Johannes C. de Moor, *Adam, Eve, and the Devil* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), p. 255.

⁸ Korpel and de Moor admit that this is based on circumstantial evidence and that their conclusions are tentative. “Let it be clear from the outset that we do not at all imagine to have presented the kind of fast and easy solution that is considered ‘cool’ nowadays. We go the difficult road of trying to disentangle the often conflicting evidence we found in literature and iconography from times long gone by.” *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30, 255-257.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹² Athenagoras in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2, p. 142, quoted by Bercot, p. 15.

¹³ Bardesanes in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 8, p. 725, quoted by Bercot, p. 15.

¹⁴ Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 3 (Battle Creek, MI: SDA Publishing Assoc., 1864), p. 64.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁶ On the other hand, the serpent, the Leviathan, was the Canaanite manifestation of Satan, and it appears in Genesis 3 without explanation, an apparent cultural loan from the neighbors.

¹⁷ Inside the Garden of Eden is an adversary of God in the shape of a serpent, but neither the origin of the serpent nor Satan nor the demonic spirits that possess people and livestock in the New Testament are explained anywhere in the Jewish or Christian canon. That was left to the authors of the so-called apocryphal writings to explain. In the New Testament, Satan and his minions are just part of the religious inventory, the “ontology” of the early Christian church.

Isaiah 58:13-14

BY OLIVE J. HEMMINGS

“If you keep your feet from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD’s holy day honorable; and if you honor it by not going your own ways and seeking your own pleasure or speaking merely idle words, then you will take delight in the LORD, and he will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; and he will make you feast on the inheritance of your ancestor Jacob, your father. Yes! The mouth of the LORD has spoken” (Isa. 58:13-14, ISV).

Many believe that prophecy in Scripture is concerned primarily with prediction, but that’s not true. Biblical prophecy is almost always speaking God’s word on behalf of the oppressed. The prophetic task is often one of calling out corruption and injustice.¹

This is the context of Isaiah 58:13-14. We Seventh-day Adventists often use this passage as a proof text for proper seventh-day Sabbathkeeping. But read in context, it’s actually a prophetic oracle about how to treat others, not a dogmatic assertion on how to spend your Sabbath afternoons. The prophet Isaiah speaks out against the authoritarian abuse of Sabbath and calls Israel to see that the Sabbath’s spiritual significance is justice.

Isaiah 58 begins with the dismissal of religious rituals—new moons and Sabbath observances—as he calls for justice for the oppressed, the orphan, and the widow and then ends with this passage about the Sabbath.

Read in context, it’s actually a prophetic oracle about how to treat others, not a dogmatic assertion on how to spend your Sabbath afternoons.

This prophecy is not to nullify Sabbath observance, but to make the point that mere worship ritual and abstinence from certain activities does not fully express the spirit of Sabbath. The spirit of Sabbath embraces how we act toward others, not just how we amuse ourselves—or refuse to—on that day.

Shabbat Is More Than a Day

We Seventh-day Adventists have generally taken this passage to refer specifically to the seventh day of the week. It may include the Saturday Sabbath, but that is not all it addresses. None of the references to Sabbath in Isaiah carry the definite article “the;” Isaiah speaks of *Shabbat*, not *the Sabbath*.

In the Hebrew Bible, Shabbat transcends the ritualistic observance of a day in favor of an all-encompassing *principle of justice* that defines the prophetic ideal. This is true in both the Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 versions of this commandment: the seventh day is a principle, not just an event.

Shabbat refers to more than just the seventh day in Scripture, as well. The word is also used for other events, such as every seventh (sabbatical) year and the seven-times-seventh Jubilee Year. After six years of planting, the land must rest. After six years of service, the slave must be emancipated and given enough provisions to start over. Jubilee comes at the end of seven cycles of sabbatical years, falling on the fiftieth year. According to Leviticus 25:10, the fiftieth year is sacred; it is a time of freedom and of celebration, when everyone receives back foreclosed property, slaves return home to their families, and the land rests.

A close reading of the fourth commandment in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 indicates that Sabbath is about solidarity in community. Everyone must rest, including the livestock and the slaves. Exodus 20:8-11 reminds Israel that all creation—even servants and animals—comes from one God. Deuteronomy 5:12-15 reminds Israel that as slaves in Egypt, they were once outcasts on the margins of society.

In summary, the fourth commandment is a comprehensive call for solidarity to do to others as you would have them do to you.

Shabbat Is Justice²

Observance of the seventh day is emblematic of the entire message of justice and liberation that characterizes the story of salvation. Isaiah 61:2 describes Jubilee (the seven-times-seventh Shabbat *year*) as the “year of the LORD’s favor” (NIV, ISV) or “the acceptable year of the LORD” (KJV). It is the ultimate Shabbat because it is emblematic of the practice of justice, which is the focal theme of Hebrew prophecy.

This is demonstrated in Isaiah 61, where the prophet describes his mission as the proclamation of Shabbat as expressed in the Jubilee Year: “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in

Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair” (verses 1-3, NIV).

In Luke, Jesus read from this very passage on his first seventh-day Sabbath in the synagogue after his baptism when, filled with the Spirit, he returned to Galilee to begin his ministry (Luke 4:16-20). After reading it, Jesus handed back the Isaiah scroll to the synagogue attendant and declared: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (verse 21, NRSV). Luke portrays Jesus as resurrecting Shabbat from where it was buried underneath the quagmire of Judaic dogmatic self-indulgence, instead making it “good news to the poor” (verse 18).

What Are Your Interests?

When we Adventists read Isaiah 58:13-14, we focus almost exclusively on the part about doing “as you please” (NIV) or pursuing “your own interests” (NRSV, ISV) on Sabbath. What exactly does Isaiah mean when he speaks of “your own interests”? He tells us a few verses earlier: “Look! On your fast day you serve your own interest and oppress all your workers. Look! You fast only for quarreling, and for fighting, and for hitting with wicked fists. ... Isn’t this the fast that I have been choosing: to loose the bonds of injustice, and to untie the cords of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Isn’t it to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him with clothing?” (verses 3-7, ISV).

In light of the context, and the meaning of Shabbat, this is how Isaiah 58:13-14 might actually read: If you cease abusing the Sabbath principle—that is, if you attend to justice and refrain from all kinds of oppression; if you make the practice of just principles your delight, not imposing your own will, or serving your selfish interests—then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth.

The church that observes the spirit of Sabbath will not countenance any form of power abuse. Human communities flourish in peace and security when we practice justice—a reflection of Sabbath rest and peacefulness. This is the gospel of liberation that Isaiah preaches, which Jesus of Nazareth resurrected by reading his manifesto from Isaiah 61. Sabbath is good news to the poor, release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed, the stigmatized, and profiled. If we attend only to the ritual part of Sabbathkeeping, as many of us Seventh-day Adventists do, we rob it of its deepest meaning as surely as the Pharisees did. 🚫

¹ This is true even in the case of apocalyptic books such as Daniel and Revelation. The 2,300-days prophecy in Daniel addressed the Syrian oppression of Jews and the desecration of the Hebrew temple. The apocalyptic visions of Revelation addressed the oppression of the early church by the Roman Empire. Even the Scriptures that many rely on for prediction are really messages of hope and assurance as well as calls to persevere in righteousness, in spite of oppression.

² The words translated “righteous” in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament actually mean “justice.”

Ahmoose

BY MAYLAN SCHURCH

It was the time of day my wife calls “golden light.” The sun was maybe four sun-widths from setting, and I knew that she and the children—who had been across town at her sister’s for the afternoon—were bathing in its glow as they made their way home for Sabbath.

I was on the north side of the house, pruning one of our fig trees. Hearing a scuffling sound, I glanced up to see a man striding toward me. He seemed to be about my age, a little over 30, and his haircut and trim beard showed that he was Egyptian.

“Hello,” he said in a tradesman-Hebrew accent.

“Peace be upon you,” I replied.

He bowed. “Friend, I am desperately in need of help.”

“How may I be of assistance?”

Suddenly he abandoned his formal manner. “Please help me. The guy who’s boarding my camel gave me no help at all.” He glanced desperately at the sun, and I saw harsh worry lines on either side of his mouth. “I know things are going to come to a halt for you people when the sun disappears, but you’ve got to help me.”

I glanced at his expensive sandals and clothes—and at what looked like a well-filled coin purse in his fist. “It doesn’t look like you need money.”

“No, no. No problem there. I just need you to point the way to the shrines of your harvest god, your rain god, your war god. And”—he lowered his voice and his eyes—“your fertility goddess. I need to offer my sacrifices.”

I was just opening my mouth to respond when he continued.

“The camel keeper was absolutely no help. The guy must be a half-wit. He babbled about how there’s only one god, or some such nonsense. So please.” He rattled his coin purse, and I heard the dull *chink* of gold. “Just get me to the shrines or tree-groves or whatever they are in this country, then point me to somebody who sells sacrificial animals, and I’ll do the rest.”

“Do you know what you *really* need?”

He glared. “I just *told* you what I need. Shrines. Groves. Sorry, my Hebrew must not be as good as I thought it was.”

“You don’t need shrines. We don’t have shrines. We don’t have groves. And the only altar is the one over in Shiloh, where the tabernacle is.”

He filled his cheeks with air and let it out in a puff. “You’re no help either. What is wrong with you people? Don’t you have respect for all of your deities?”

“You know what you need?”

His shoulders sagged. “All right. Enlighten me. What do I need?”

“You need some big, fat, luscious, juicy figs. Sit down on the ground, right there. My wife picked some yesterday.”

He gave a desperate yelp, and as I went into the house I heard him repeating what were probably Egyptian profanities. I brought out the figs in a large woven basket. He reached for one, bit off its end, and sank his teeth into it. Having gulped it down, he grabbed for another.

“When’s the last time you ate?” I asked.

“I’ve got food in the camel bags,” he said. “Nuts and things. But I’m in a rush. I’ve got to get up to the Hittites before my competitors do. My dad owns a big myrrh operation near the Nile, and his product is top-quality. He sent me up to try to corner the market before anybody else does. *So*,” he said as he lunged to his feet in sudden panic. “I’ve got to go. Thank you for the figs. How much do I owe you?”

“Hey, sit down,” I said. “Just leave the myrrh market to Yahweh. He’ll watch out for you.”

He had to sit down to reach for another fig. “These are good, by the way. Are they from your own tree? And who is Yahweh?”

“Yahweh is our God.”

“I haven’t seen any statues to him.”

“You won’t.”
“No statues? Why not?”
“He told us not to,” I said. “What’s your name, by the way?”
“Ahmose. I was named after one of the pharaohs. What’s yours?”
“Zerah. My tribe is Simeon. I was about 2 years old when mom carried

He filled his cheeks with air and let it out in a puff. “You’re no help either. What is wrong with you people?”

me across the Jordan toward Jericho.”

Ahmose reached for another fig. “So what was she doing out beyond Jordan?”

I stared at him. “Nobody told you? All twelve of our tribes traveled here from Egypt. About 30 years back. Nobody told you about that? I mean, your entire army drowned in the Red Sea. Your Pharaoh, too. Seems to me it would have been big news.”

Ahmose spat out a fig-end he’d forgotten to bite off. “This is weird,” he murmured. “I’d call you a liar, except that my dad’s old myrrh-harvesters whispered stories about that in my ear. I thought they were crazy, or drunk. They talked about the Red Sea going dry for a few hours. I mean, that kind of thing just doesn’t happen.”

“Not normally,” I agreed. “But it did. It’s weird nobody talked about it.”

“Not weird at all,” he countered. “Pharaoh and his court decide what’s history and what isn’t. Their version of history gets carved into hieroglyphs in the tombs and the temples. The rest gets forgotten.”

He suddenly gathered his feet under him and stood up. “But I’ve got to go. If you’re right when you say you have only one god, and that his altar is too far away for me to get to, I’ve just got to keep traveling north. Otherwise the other merchants will get to the Hittites before I do.”

He began his formal farewells. “May the peace of Isis and Osiris be upon your house. May they show favor to you in return for your hospitality. May they bless the fruit of your womb—”

“Ahmose.”

“What?”

“Stay with us tonight. Look, my wife is approaching with our children. She will fix you warmer food than figs. If you continue north, you will be traveling through a land where Sabbath has come. It is time to rest.”

Was that a tear I saw in the corner of Ahmose’s left eye? “Rest is a beautiful thought,” he said. “But my father’s competitors are not resting. They are hurrying to the Hittite land.”

“Ahmose. Do you know what you need?”

“Figs,” he said. “And you gave me figs, Zerah. Thank you.”

“You need more than figs. And you need more than the warm, delicious food my wife will serve you. You need stories.”

“Stories?”

I gripped him by the shoulder. “You need the stories your myrrh-harvesters whispered to you. I will repeat those stories for you and tell you more than the harvesters could ever know. Because Yahweh wants us to tell these stories to each other. I have told them to my children, and they know them well. They will help me tell them to you.”

He swallowed and said in a trembling voice, “And what about my myrrh trade?”

“Ahmose,” I said. “You are safe. You are a stranger within my gates. And my stories will tell you about a God who provides.” 🙏



The Sabbath and Your Neighbor

By Alden Thompson

When asked about the greatest commandment in the law, Jesus named two: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:37-40¹).

Surprisingly, in Jesus’ more succinct summary of his message, he focused on the second command, ignoring the first: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12). Paul does the same: “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:14). In a world where the human (secular) and the divine (sacred) are so easily separated, Jesus begins to show us how to bring the two together. In the parable of the sheep and goats (Matt. 25:31-46), for example, even the saintly sheep are surprised when the king links their fate to kindly actions done for human beings, not to service done directly for God.

In 1898, Ellen White makes the unifying model even more explicit: “Love to man is the earthward manifestation of the love of God. It was to implant this love, to make us children of one family, that the King of glory became one with us. And when His parting words are fulfilled, ‘Love one another, as I have loved you’ (John 15:12); when we love the world as He has loved it, then for us His mission is accomplished. We are fitted for heaven; for we have heaven in our hearts.”²

Remarkably, in her early years, Ellen White saw the secular and the sacred as separate and competing forces. That the transition was complete by 1898 is indicated by her two versions of Jesus’ cryptic response to his mother at the wedding at Cana, when he said, “O woman, what have you to do with me?” (John 2:4, RSV):

1877: “In rebuking his mother, Jesus also rebuked

a large class who have an idolatrous love for their family, and allow the ties of relationship to draw them from the service of God. Human love is a sacred attribute; but should not be allowed to mar our religious experience, or draw our hearts from God.”³

1898: “This answer, abrupt as it seems to us, expressed no coldness or discourtesy. The Saviour’s form of address to His mother was in accordance with Oriental custom. It was used toward persons to whom it was desired to show respect.”⁴

Are both statements “inspired”? Partial answers come from Ellen White herself. First, she affirmed that God’s messengers were inspired, not their words: “The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers.

“It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired.”⁵

Second, she said that the Bible writers “differed widely in rank and occupation, and in mental and spiritual endowments”⁶—yes, even in “spiritual endowments”! Even Paul was puzzled by the differing needs at Corinth. “What would you prefer?” he asked. “Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (1 Cor. 4:21).

All of that is prelude to the topic of this column: how to share the Sabbath with our neighbors. But wait: Is the Sabbath a gift or a test? Should we blaze a path with a “stick” or “with love in a spirit of gentleness”? Let’s look at several partial answers.

From a Stick to the Spirit of Gentleness: Some Patterns. Though I often puzzle over the many ways that Scripture and daily life illustrate the tension between the stick and gentle love, several overarching patterns seem clear:

1. *From fallen Adam to perfect Jesus.* Scripture suggests that the entry of sin thoroughly twisted human understanding of authority. From a gentle God walking in the garden to a bloodthirsty ogre demanding the firstborn son is an astonishing change. But God does not leave it at that. He daringly meets sinners on their own ground, risking all manner of misunderstandings to lead them back to him. It is a pilgrimage from the fear of God's power to joy in his reassuring love. But it takes time.

2. *From the terrors of Sinai, and a dangerous God who kills, to the splendors of Golgotha and a still-dangerous God who dies.* This pattern is a subset of the first, but it illustrates more specifically how God will use fear as a steppingstone to a life without fear. God so terrified Israel that the people begged Moses for relief: "If we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, we shall die" (Deut. 5:28). But God was pleased with their fear, telling Moses: "They are right in all that they have spoken. If only they had such a mind as this, to fear me and to keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and with their children forever!" (verses 28-29). A law written on the heart? Not yet. But it was a first step. Reaching the goal would take time.

3. *From 2-year-old defiance to adult confidence.* Human growth and development reaches the ideal when the good is fully internalized, becoming as natural as walking, swimming, or riding a bike. But it takes time. And parents, like God, will use a stick as well as gentle love—and everything in between—to make it happen.

4. *From fear and sectarian belligerence to gentle love.* If you are afraid of God, you will share that fear when you share your faith. In Ellen White's early years, she had feared that God could not govern the world without the threat of an eternal hell. Later she wrote about the day when her mother began studying the possibility that the soul was mortal: "Why, mother!" cried I, in astonishment, "this is strange talk for

you! If you believe this strange theory, do not let any one know of it; for I fear that sinners would gather security from this belief, and never desire to seek the Lord."⁷

When I first read that statement, I was startled because I was already familiar with her comments on hell in *The Great Controversy*: "The errors of popular theology have driven many a soul to skepticism who might otherwise have been a believer in the Scriptures. It is impossible for him to accept doctrines

Human growth and development reaches the ideal when the good is fully internalized, becoming as natural as walking, swimming, or riding a bike. But it takes time.

which outrage his sense of justice, mercy, and benevolence; and since these are represented as the teaching of the Bible, he refuses to receive it as the word of God."⁸

Over time, God gradually led Ellen White to complete the 180-degree turn, from fearing that God could not be God without hell to seeing hell as one of Satan's most deadly weapons. The fact that Ellen White's Adventism was a confrontational countercultural movement—sociologists call it a sect—no doubt helped shape her life experience. From countercultural roots, sectarian movements often become culture-accepting, sometimes losing their original fiery identity completely. Because that possibility often frightens devout conservatives, they

shy away from “change” and “diversity.”

We need to make peace with both change and diversity so that we can grasp the Sabbath as a gift we share with joy, rather than a test that comes with threats and warnings.

The Sabbath: From Strident Warning to Gentle Gift. Recognizing the biblical pattern that moves from fear to joy can help us make peace with a similar pattern in the writings and experience of Ellen White. With specific reference to the Sabbath, here are two of her quotations, a strident one from 1861 and a gentle one from 1887:

We need to make peace with both change and diversity so that we can grasp the Sabbath as a gift we share with joy, rather than a test that comes with threats and warnings.

1861: “The name Seventh-day Adventist is a standing rebuke to the Protestant world. Here is the line of distinction between the worshipers of God and those who worship the beast and receive his mark. The great conflict is between the commandments of God and the requirements of the beast. It is because the saints are keeping all ten of the commandments that the dragon makes war upon them. ...

“The name Seventh-day Adventist carries the true features of our faith in front, and will convict the inquiring mind. Like an arrow from the Lord’s quiver, it will wound the transgressor of God’s law, and will lead to repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁹

1887: “In laboring in a new field, do not think it your duty to say at once to the people, We are

Seventh-day Adventists; we believe that the seventh day is the Sabbath; we believe in the non-immortality of the soul. This would often erect a formidable barrier between you and those you wish to reach. Speak to them, as you have opportunity, upon points of doctrine on which you can agree. Dwell on the necessity of practical godliness. Give them evidence that you are a Christian, desiring peace, and that you love their souls. Let them see that you are conscientious. Thus you will gain their confidence; and there will be time enough for doctrines. Let the heart be won, the soil prepared, and then sow the seed, presenting in love the truth as it is in Jesus.”¹⁰

While I cringe at some of the methods that have been (and at times still are) used for sharing the Sabbath, I pray that the Lord will bless those methods to his glory and continue to lead us toward the nonconfrontational ideal. I take comfort in the fact that the Bible is full of examples where God used rigorous methods to nudge his people. Paul said, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22).

In the light of God’s revelation in Christ, we can see that in a healthy marriage relationship, words like “test,” “requirement,” “command,” and “demand” never come to mind. That’s the goal for our relationship with God, too. Jeremiah’s description of the new covenant says it all: “No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:34).

Still, sin has so distorted our thinking that these “testing” words easily slip in where they don’t really belong. Originally it was not so. Ellen White describes how “law” was a foreign concept in heaven until Lucifer rebelled: “In heaven, service is not rendered in the spirit of legality. When Satan rebelled against the law of Jehovah, the thought that there was a law came to the angels almost as an awakening to something unthought of.”¹¹

Is the Sabbath a test? Of course—just as every aspect of every relationship in life is a “test.” But we can be oblivious to the test. “Demand,” “command,” and “test” all vanish when our lives are shaped by

the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). And when Paul adds, “There is no law against such things,” we could be seriously playful and remind him that there is no law *in favor* of such things, either, for law has become “something unthought of,” to borrow Ellen White’s phrase. Our keeping and sharing of the Sabbath could thrive in such a world.

If Adventism is seen to be embodied by those strident defenders of an attack-oriented community, then the experience of buoyant, non-Adventist Christians can look very attractive indeed. In 1891 Ellen White referred to those who are “denunciatory, resentful, exacting” in their treatment of others as being called of God to be “more kind, more loving and lovable, less critical and suspicious.”¹² She had become convinced that the “strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian.”¹³

I suspect that many former Adventists, longing for the assurance of God’s love, have abandoned the beautiful gift of the Sabbath because it felt like a test rather than a gift. Compassion, love, and assurance are all at risk in the face of constant testing. So let’s

make the transition that Ellen White herself made and share the Sabbath with our neighbors as a gift from God. By his grace, the idea of “test” will never even come to mind. 🏠

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations in this article are from the New Revised Standard Version.

² Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), p. 641. According to the EGW Writings database, only two of her later compilations cite these striking lines: *God’s Amazing Grace* (1973) and *Our Father Cares* (1991).

³ White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 2 (Battle Creek, MI: SDA Pub. Assoc., 1877), p. 101.

⁴ White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 146.

⁵ White, Manuscript 24, 1886, *Selected Messages*, Book 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), p. 21.

⁶ White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), p. vi.

⁷ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1968), p. 39. The first edition of the *Testimonies* to include Ellen White’s autobiography was published in 1885, but the memory of her conversation with her mother first appeared in *The Signs of the Times*, March 9, 1876.

⁸ White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 525.

⁹ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1, pp. 223-224.

¹⁰ White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1915), p. 119.

¹¹ White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1896), p. 109.

¹² White, “The Spirit of a Christian,” *Review and Herald*, Feb. 24, 1891.

¹³ White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), p. 470.

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EDITORIAL PHILOSOPHY

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor or the editorial board. One of the purposes of this magazine is to encourage dialogue between those of differing viewpoints within the Adventist Church. Thus, we will publish articles ranging throughout the conservative-liberal continuum.

NEWS BRIEFS



Parents Say Southern Gets “F” in Matrimony

Mark and Suzie Robertson, parents of two recent Southern Adventist University graduates, are demanding a full tuition refund from the university after both children graduated without getting married.

“What has Adventist education come to when academics, chapel, and athletics take the place of focused courtship?” asked an exasperated Suzie.

“As soon as we get our refund, we are putting the money right back into Seth and Bethany’s marriage prospects. Neither of them were pre-med majors, but that doesn’t mean they can’t study something at Loma Linda,” said Mark. “Maybe each can even score a doctor, if they hang around long enough.”

Associate Pastor Plots Coup Against His Boss

An Adventist associate pastor has found a creative way to kill time during his senior pastor’s sermons. Scribbling furiously, Joe Climer gives the impression of taking detailed notes of his boss’s sermons while, in reality, he is putting the finishing touches on what he is confident will be a bloodless coup d’eglise. Every time his superior reworks his very limited list of favored illustrations and jokes, Climer visualizes his own meteoric rise, which he is convinced will start the very minute his boss goes on his upcoming sabbatical.

Adventists Insist Carob Can’t Replace Chocolate

Adventists worldwide have been given 24 hours to sign a 14-page compliance document professing agape love for carob. Thousands of church members have said that they can’t sign the document in good conscience, since they absolutely hate all things carob.

“You guys can’t just spring these kinds of requirements upon us,” said Emi Nemm, a Danish Union representative at the GC-based Annual Crisis meetings, where the document was released. “The chocolate in my part of the world is too amazing for anyone to ever want to bake with carob.”

Lightning Strikes Man Vacuuming on Sabbath

Last Friday a sudden bolt of lightning tore a hole in the roof of a house belonging to a deacon in the Adventist church. The lightning strike occurred minutes after sunset, as Waden en Agua was rushing to finish vacuuming his living room. Agua said he was grateful to be alive and expressed relief that he had not been soaking in his Sabbath bath when the lightning struck.

Man Asks Why God Gave Noah a “Gay Rainbow”

A particularly outspoken Adventist has complained publicly to the Biblical Research Institute about the “gay rainbow” that God gave to Noah as a sign of the covenant.

“Why does the sky have to light up like a gay pride parade after every rain shower?” grumbled Homer Foab. In his complaint he demanded that children’s Sabbath School rainbow felts be reprinted in black and white to avoid the appearance of evil.

BarelyAdventist (barelyadventist.com) is a satire and humor blog on Adventist culture and issues. It is written by committed Adventists who have no interest in tearing down the church but don’t mind laughing at our idiosyncrasies.

Trust & Verify

From an early age, your personality has been to explore new ideas and question the status quo.

In school, when your teacher presents new topics as if they are indisputable facts, you trust them as far as you can verify the veracity of their claims. Your inquiring mind compels you to speak up in class asking searching questions, and prompts you to write papers that challenge commonly held information.

When your employer gives you data to do your work, you appreciate your paycheck and do everything you can to keep getting paid, but you also double-check what you're given to make sure it is accurate, fair, ethical, and truthful.

And when you go to church, you think your pastor is a good person who has compassionately supported you and your family through some difficult life events, but you're not going to take his or her theological pronouncements as gospel. You're going to study them for yourself and draw your own conclusions on any topic of faith.

Adventist Today is Independent

We think our print and online resources are uniquely tailored to you. Our mission includes a respect for the Adventist community, but we are willing to investigate anything and bring it to light if we need to:

- Just because a fundamental belief has been held for centuries, we will seek for present truth and share it with you so that you can come to your own conclusions
- When a leader at any level is unsafe and bullies, abuses or assaults children, or women, or men, we will call it out and bring pressure to bear to resolve those situations
- When leaders insist on uniformity and demand compliance with loyalty oaths, we will inform you on how to resist these power plays wherever they are found
- When financial spending by the denomination is presented as good for its members, we'll verify their claims and let you know if your trust is being well placed.

We're Worth Supporting

It's easy to think someone else will financially support independent journalism and that your money is not needed. It's easy to think there must be an institution or family foundation that is underwriting Adventist Today. It's easy to think that everything on the Internet is free, so why are they asking for money. But as a reader-supported non-profit organization, we need your continuous support to sustain us.

Independent journalism is needed now more than ever. The issues we need to verify in the Adventist community are increasing every day. And you're counting on Adventist Today to be at their best, and get the story right. That's why we are asking you to become a member.



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In recent weeks Adventist Today has received gifts of stock, donations from member IRAs, or distributions from estates. In addition to memberships and cash donations, we can also help you make a gift to Adventist Today that will sustain us in a meaningful way. Please call us and we will have someone confidentially visit with you about your wishes.

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