

Good Word Schedule
“Seek the Lord and Live!’ Major Lessons from Minor Prophets”
April, May, June 2013

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Introduction to the Study of the Minor Prophets

The twelve small books at the end of our English Bibles are known as the “minor” prophets simply because they are so much smaller than the “major” ones (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel). Several of them contain almost no indications of historical context and thus are like parts of the book of Isaiah (e.g. 40 - 66). Some are more like the book of Jeremiah, the best model for providing historical context. Right up front (Jer. 1:1-3) the book tells us that Jeremiah ministered during the reigns of Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah, continuing right up to the exile. Elsewhere Jeremiah tells us that he continued his ministry after Jerusalem was taken into exile.

Also, the book of Jeremiah itself clearly marks the last chapter (Jer. 52) as being separate from the rest of the book for Jeremiah 51 closes with these words: “The words of Jeremiah end here.” The last chapter is almost a carbon copy of the last chapter of 2 Kings 25 where the fall of Jerusalem is recorded. Since Jeremiah’s ministry was consistently resisted by the Jerusalem authorities, the editors of the “Jeremiah Estate” decided that the extra chapter was needed to confirm that Jeremiah, the rejected prophet, actually got it right.

Some of the minor prophets give us specific information just as Jeremiah did. Hosea, Amos, and Micah come closest to the Jeremiah model, clearly dating their ministries to the last years of the northern kingdom of Israel before the Assyrians overran the land in 722.

Similarly, Zephaniah is explicitly dated to the last days of the southern king of Judah that was destroyed by Babylon in 586. Finally, Zechariah and Haggai are dated with exactness to the 2nd year of the reign of Darius the Great who commanded that the Jerusalem temple be rebuilt in 522, a task that was finally completed in 515.

Other books, like Joel, Habakkuk, and Malachi, require us to read between the lines to discover when they were written, though the indirect markers are often quite clear.

In general, we can cluster the minor prophets around three major events in the history of God’s people: the fall of Samaria and the Northern Kingdom in 722, the fall of Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom in 586, and the completion of the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem in 515. Here is a chronological list of all twelve with a general indication of their time of ministry. A general historical outline of major Old Testament events follows, then a clustering of the prophets according to the major events in their ministry and the available sources for filling out the rest of the picture.

Prophet	Time of ministry	Place of ministry
Jonah	790?	Israel, Ninevah
Amos	767 – 753	Israel, time of Jeroboam II (Israel), Uzziah (Judah)
Hosea	755 – 725	Israel, a contemporary of Amos
Micah	740 – 700	Judah and Israel (a contemporary of Isaiah)
Nahum	660 – 612	Judah
Habakkuk	630	Judah
Joel	635?	In Judah, late monarchy or early post-exilic period
Zephaniah	640 – 612	Judah, reign of Josiah
Obadiah	after 586?	Judah, probably after destruction of Jerusalem (586)
Haggai	520	Judah, among the returned exiles in Jerusalem
Zechariah	520	Judah, among the returned exiles in Jerusalem
Malachi	425?	Judah, probably after Nehemiah’s second return

Key Old Testament Events

1875 BCE **Call of Abraham**

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob
Slavery in Egypt

1445 BCE **Exodus from Egypt**
[1290]

Forty Years of Wilderness Wandering
Invasion of Canaan (1405 BCE)
Joshua and the Judges

1050 BCE **United Monarchy Established**

Saul, David, Solomon

931 BCE **Division of the Kingdom**

Kingdom of **Judah** in the South: Rehoboam and Successors
Kingdom of **Israel** in the North: Jeroboam and Successors

722 BCE **Fall of Northern Kingdom (Samaria/Israel)**

Selective Deportation of the Ten Tribes by **Assyria**
Sennacherib's Attack on Jerusalem

621 BCE **Josiah's Reform and Discovery of the Law**

586 [587] BCE **Fall of Southern Kingdom (Jerusalem/Judah)**

Exile and Deportation by **Babylon**
Babylon Falls to **Medes and Persians** (538 BCE)

536 BCE **Return from Exile in Babylon**

Cyrus' Decree Sends First Captives Back under Zerubbabel
Temple Rebuilt under Darius the Great (520-515 BCE)

457 BCE **Ezra Arrives in Jerusalem**

444 BCE **Walls of Jerusalem Rebuilt (Nehemiah)**

Biblical Material relating to the Minor Prophets: (Dates from SDABC)

Prophets to Israel, prior to the fall of Samaria and the North in 722

Jonah: (cf. 2 Kings 14:25, reign of Jeroboam II): (790?)

Amos: (1:1): Uzziah and Jeroboam II (767-753)

Hosea: (1:1): Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah; Jeroboam II (755 – 725)

Micah: (1:1): Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (740-700)

Kings of Judah:

Uzziah/Amaziah (790-739)

Jotham (750-731)

Ahaz (735-715)

Hezekiah (729-686)

Kings of Israel:

Jeroboam II (793-753)

Zachariah (753-52)

Shallum (752)

Menahem (752-742)

Pekahiah (742-740)

Pekah (740-732? – see SDABC)

Hoshea (732-722)

History:

1 Kings 14:21 – 20:21

2 Chron. 26 :1– 32:33

Isaiah 36:1 – 39:8

Prophets to Judah in Connection with the Fall of Jerusalem in 586

Nahum: (cf. 3:8-10, after the fall of Thebes in Egypt in 663)

Habakkuk: (cf. 1:5-11, warning of the on-coming Babylonians)

Joel:– no precise historical information in the book, apparently during the last days of Jerusalem

Zephaniah: (1:1): Josiah, but before fall of Ninevah (cf. 2:13)

Obadiah: possibly after Jerusalem fell in 586; 2:10-14 (cf. Ps. 137:7-9)

Kings of Judah:

Josiah (639-608)

Jehoahaz (608)

Jehoiakim (608-598)

Jehoiachin (598-597)

Zedekiah (597-586)

History: from Josiah to the Exile: (639 – 586)

2 Kings 22:1 – 25:30

Jeremiah 39:1-10; 52:1– 34; 40:5 – 41:3

2 Chronicles 34:1 – 36:23

Prophets of the Exile and Restoration

Haggai: (1:1) second year of Darius (520)

Zechariah: (1:1) second year of Darius (520)

Malachi: no precise dating, but the sins were those faced by Nehemiah after his return (ca. 425?)

Leaders and Governors:

Cyrus (Persian)

Zerubbabel

Joshua

Darius (Persian)

Artaxerxes (Persian)

Ezra

Nehemiah

History and theology of Exilic and Post-exilic period (586 – ca. 400)

Ezra

Nehemiah

1 and 2 Chronicles (for the theology of the late post-exilic period)

Theme: Love and Judgment: God’s dilemma

Leading Question: How do we know when to use the heavy hand instead of the gentle hand with dealing with God’s people?

1. The sharp contrasts between the threat of judgment and the promise of undeserving grace are everywhere present in the prophets. Does the text of Scripture give us any help on knowing when to use one or the other?
2. What are the most vivid examples and metaphors of judgment in Hosea?
3. What are the most vivid examples of grace?
4. How can Matthew 2:9 say that Jesus’ going to Egypt with his parents “fulfilled” the words of the prophet, “out of Egypt have I called my son?”

Note: “Fulfill” can best be seen as “filling [the prophet’s words] full of new meaning.” It is not a prediction that has been fulfilled with precision. Chapter 7 of *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* comments on the whole question of messianic prediction and is an important consideration when the New Testament writers apply OT words to Jesus. That chapter is excerpted here.

Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God? Chapter 7
(Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version)

The Best Story in the Old Testament: the Messiah

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light ...
For to us a child is born, to us a son is given... (Isaiah 9:2, 6)

My choice of best story in the Old Testament is not a specific episode like the worst story, but rather a great theme which springs from deep roots in the Old Testament and finally bursts into bloom in the New. Certainly one of the most insistent and obvious claims of the New Testament is that Jesus of Nazareth came as the fulfillment of the Old Testament messianic hope, John has recorded how Jesus chided his Jewish hearers: “If you believed Moses, you would

believe me, for he wrote of me” (John 5:46). And after the resurrection, Jesus expounded to the disciples on the Emmaus road the *real* meaning of the Old Testament: “And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Not too long afterwards he appeared to the eleven disciples and said: “These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (Luke 24:44-45).

So the claim of the New Testament seems to be clear enough, but having said that, a couple of interesting and potentially distressing observations must not be over-looked. First, the Jewish Community as a whole has not accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of the Old Testament hope. From the Jewish point of view, Christianity is a breakaway movement which has pinned its hopes on a messianic pretender. Never mind the fact that the Christian movement has been reasonably popular and successful; the point is that Judaism has rejected the claim of the New Testament that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament messianic hope.

The second observation that we must not neglect is that Jesus own disciples so radically misunderstood his mission. The synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, in particular, highlight the contrast between Jesus’ grasp of his mission and that of his disciples. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in Matthew 16 where Peter openly proclaims to Jesus: “You are the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). Jesus was pleased with Simon’s confession, though he warned the disciples that the time was not yet ripe to share this conviction (Matt. 16:20). Then he opened to them the real nature of his mission: “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Matt. 16:21). Peter’s response? “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” To which Jesus replied: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men” (Matt. 16:23).

Now one might think that conversations like that should have been clear enough, yet apparently the disciples either could not or would not believe. Returning to Luke’s description of the Emmaus Road conversation, we learn that the followers of Jesus were stunned and disheartened by Jesus’ death: “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). To be sure, after Jesus had appeared several times to the disciples following the resurrection, they caught a fresh vision of their risen Lord, a vision both in the physical and spiritual sense, and the book of Acts records the powerful impact of that post-resurrection experience. So the disciples finally did believe, no question about that, but the point I want to make is, that during Jesus’ ministry they did not believe aright nor did they understand. Regardless of what later Christians may accept or believe, all the evidence suggests that even Jesus’ closest associates apparently did not grasp the true meaning of the messianic prophecies or the real meaning of the sacrificial system. In the light of this New Testament evidence, it is likely that even John the Baptist did not really understand what he was saying when he said of Jesus: “Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29, 36). Later, John himself, languishing in prison and deeply torn by doubt, gives utterance to his uncertainty in a pathetic appeal to Jesus: “Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another?” (Matt. 11:3).

This agonizing question put by John is one which every Christian should seek to answer for himself, and not simply in a superficial way. Should Jesus’ messianic claims, rejected by the

Jews and so thoroughly misunderstood during the years of Jesus' earthly ministry, be so glibly and lightheartedly accepted by those of us who come many years later in the Christian tradition? Should we not also participate in the searching agony of our forefathers as we attempt to make that Christian message our very own?

Speaking now from my own experience, I can say that a little agonizing over Jesus' messianic claims can result in a real blessing, to say nothing of solving a number of problems of interpretation along the way. But I must share with you the route of my pilgrimage so that you can better understand why this best story turns out the way it does.

“MESSIANIC” PROPHECIES

As a young Christian in a conservative Christian environment I was exposed to a fair amount of traditional Christian material. I suspect that anyone who has been an active participant in a conservative Christian community is well aware of the manner in which messianic prophecies have been handled. I will not cite any specific sources, but will simply summarize the general impression that had become part of my own outlook. First, I learned of the hundreds of amazing prophecies which pointed forward to the true Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. The chances of anyone other than Jesus of Nazareth fulfilling these prophecies was said to be one in millions. Second, the Jewish people had every opportunity to accept Jesus. Not only were the prophecies explicit, leaving them without excuse, but also the sacrificial system pointed them directly to their promised Savior. Still, they rejected him.

The residual effect of that two-fold emphasis led imperceptibly to the conclusion that the first century Jews were simply stubborn and the disciples were at least blind, if not stupid. But the other side of the coin is even more dangerous from a spiritual point of view, for my suspicions about the Jews and disciples implied that “we Christians” were not stubborn like they were, and since we clearly understood the prophecies, we were certainly much brighter than the disciples. Now please pardon this rather too-vivid picture. I have probably over-stated the case, but I do think that something like the above scenario does lurk rather ominously in the background of those of us who have grown up with traditional Christianity.

When I first began to look seriously at these Christian claims, I had considerable difficulty in suppressing my uneasiness, for as I began looking at some of the New Testament “prophecies” I found them less than convincing. The thought crossed my mind more than once: “If this is what the Christian claim is based on, Christianity is in deep trouble.” Some of the “proofs” cited in support of Jesus' claims seemed to be so very convincing to the New Testament writers, yet, quite frankly, they made very little sense to me. How could that be? Was Christianity built on a foundation of wood, hay, and stubble, after all? As I recall, I was enjoying a good Christian experience at the time, so there was no immediate danger of my world falling apart, yet I found it very uncomfortable to think that this good experience might possibly be built on sinking sand instead of on solid rock. I thought of the hundreds of years of Christian tradition and of the many noble and helpful Christians that I had known personally. But I also thought of those who had rejected the Christian tradition in favor of a skeptical or even atheistic position. All these thoughts went tumbling through my head.

But before we look at the solution which I have since found so helpful, let me give you a more specific glimpse of the kinds of difficulties that began to gnaw at my certainties. For sake

of convenience, we may note several “prophecies” from the Gospel of John, all of which are cited from Psalm 69.

1. “Zeal for thy house will consume me” (John 2:17). This statement is one that the disciples “remembered” after they had watched Jesus’ cleansing the temple. The original reference is found in Ps. 69:9.
2. “They hated me without a cause” (John 15:25). Jesus applied this statement from Ps. 69:4 to himself as he described the hatred which the world has against him and his Father. The quotation from the psalm is prefaced with the following words: “It is to fulfill the word that is written in their law.” The relationship of this word “fulfill” to our word “prophecy” is one that we will discuss later in the chapter; it can be the source of considerable difficulty.
3. Jesus is given vinegar “to fulfill the scripture” (John 19:28). This comment by the gospel writer that the vinegar offered to Jesus was to “fulfill” scripture, seems to be a direct reference to Psalm 69:21. In contrast to the previous two examples, the Old Testament passage is not actually quoted, yet the inference is clear enough.

Now if you want to experience the same kind of difficulty that I did, go directly to Psalm 69, read it through in its entirety, noting how each of these quotations or allusions is used in the original psalm. Incidentally, you may have noted that the three quotations I have cited are of three slightly different types: the first is attributed to the disciples, the second directly to Jesus, while the third is a comment supplied by the gospel writer himself. Similar examples could be noted almost at random from throughout the New Testament, though it is in the Gospels and Acts where one finds the most interest in the “fulfillment” of prophecy.

Looking specifically at Psalm 69, we must ask what the likely conclusion of the Old Testament readers would have been if they were hearing or reading this psalm in the Old Testament context. Would they have seen this psalm and these phrases as “prophecies,” that is “predictions” of Jesus’ mission? Frankly, I do not see how they could possibly have done so. The psalm is simply a lament by an individual, who is not named in the psalm, although the title does identify it as a “Psalm of David.” That phrase could easily imply Davidic authorship (the traditional interpretation), but the original, Hebrew could just as easily mean a psalm “to” David, “for” David, “about” David, or “in honor of” David. Many scholars who would not hold to Davidic authorship in the strict sense do think that the speaker was at least one of Israel’s kings in the Davidic line.

For the purposes of our discussion, let us assume that this is a psalm written by David himself. Would the Old Testament reader have seen the true Messiah in this psalm? The New Testament writers obviously did, and we shall return to that in a moment. But for Old Testament readers, the matter would not have been at all clear. In the first instance, the psalm is written by someone who considered himself to be a sinner: “O God, thou knowest my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from thee” (Ps. 69:5). The New Testament claim for Jesus is that he was without sin (cf. Heb. 4:15), so on that point alone we have a definite cleavage between the Old Testament passage and the New Testament fulfillment; at least that is what it appears to be at

first glance.

What is even more striking as we compare the content of this psalm with Jesus' experience, is the remarkable contrast in attitudes towards one's enemies. Certainly the Christian would accept the attitude of Jesus on the cross as the Christian ideal: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). But if you want to singe your polite Christian ears, read Psalm 69:22-28. Such venomous words are hard to imagine on the lips of our Lord. We shall approach the problem of violent language more directly in our next chapter. But for our purposes here, it is sufficient to note that there is a great gulf between the experience described in the psalm and that of our Lord. When the psalmist was given vinegar to drink (Ps. 69:21), he erupted into violent curses; when Jesus was given vinegar to drink, he prayed for his tormentors.

So there is the problem: the Old Testament psalm was written by a sinner who was still struggling with vengeful feelings towards his enemies. Furthermore, the psalm itself gives no clue that it was pointing forward to a future Messiah. Is this the kind of foundation on which Jesus' messianic claim was based? It was at this point that I began a serious search to see if perhaps there might be other prophecies which were more worthy of the name. Of course, there is also the matter of the integrity of Jesus and the New Testament writers. When Jesus himself makes statements that I have difficulty in accepting, that is indeed a question I must face if I take my Christian experience seriously.

Rather than let the solution to the above problems emerge gradually in the course of the chapter, I think it would be helpful to outline briefly my suggested solution. Then we can look at the various parts in greater detail. In short, I believe God's people have appealed to different reasons at different times to establish the same belief in the Messiah. Thus the "prophecies" of the Messiah can be divided into four basic categories:

1. Those prophecies that were evident to the reader of the Old Testament as pointing toward to one who was to come. These could be recognized as messianic prophecies by any honest reader.
2. Those prophecies which Jesus applied to himself and his mission as a result of his own self-understanding and from his own study of Scripture. According to the evidence we have, application of these prophecies to the Messiah in the way that Jesus understood them was something fresh and original or, at least, his emphasis was different from that of known Jewish teachings about the Messiah.
3. "Prophecies" which were discovered and applied as the events themselves took place or shortly thereafter, a type of "prophecy" which was exceptionally popular in the New Testament era and is frequently found in the New Testament itself.
4. "Prophecies" that were applied to Jesus' mission in later Christian centuries.

Before we look at each of these categories, it would be well to remind ourselves that, in the course of human experience, finding new reasons for old beliefs and practices is nothing unusual. To cite a rather mundane example, note all the various reasons one could give in support of vegetarianism: ascetic (meat tastes good, therefore should be avoided); health (a vegetable diet

leads to better health); humanitarian (be kind to animals); ecological (it is wasteful to feed grain to animals and then eat the animals); religious (animals are sacred so should not be killed, much less eaten). It is unlikely that anyone would hold all those arguments at the same time, or with equal intensity. Furthermore, quite different emphases will be found at different eras in history and in different parts of the world. Applying this observation to the interpretation of Scripture, a similar process can be seen at work as God's people find new reasons for supporting old beliefs. I think there is no place where that is more evident than in the promises and prophecies of the Messiah. This point will become clearer as we look at examples for each of the four categories.

1. Messianic Prophecies understandable to Old Testament believers

This category is the most basic one, for without a substantial foundation at this level, no one would have expected a Messiah at all. With our twentieth century orientation, we are inclined to think that if a prophecy is really a prophecy, it should be seen as such in advance of the event or person it foretells. That is so obvious to us that even to make the point seems unnecessary. Yet that is precisely the cause of the difficulty, for the New Testament uses the language of prophecy, foretelling, and foreseeing with reference to persons and events that can really be recognized only by hindsight. We shall return to that point below, but here we must look at some of those prophecies which, in Old Testament times, had the potential to kindle the messianic fires in the hearts of God's people.

Just a comment first, however, on the more technical usage of the terms "Messiah" and "messianic." In our discussion in the last chapter, we noted that the Hebrew word *mashiah* simply means "anointed one." In the course of time, however, Israel applied it more specifically to the king as *the* anointed one. Finally, the people began to look to the future and the *ideal* anointed one. So, technically speaking, "messianic" refers to those prophecies which pointed to a coming royal figure, a descendant in the Davidic line. In traditional Christian interpretation, however, the word has taken on a much broader meaning so that almost anything in the Old Testament can fall under the heading "messianic" if it points forward in any way to the coming Redeemer. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the Norwegian scholar, Sigmund Mowinckel chose a neutral title for his basic scholarly study of the "messianic" prophecies of the Old Testament: *He That Cometh*. Thus he could legitimately discuss not just the "messianic" prophecies, but the full spectrum of Old Testament types which point forward to Christ: king, prophet, servant, and son of man. His title is simply the echo of John the Baptist's searching question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to look for another?" (Matt. 11:3). The more technical meaning for "Messiah" and "messianic" will explain why I have sometimes used quotation marks to set off these terms: I am simply attempting to get the best of both worlds, the traditional and the technical.

Turning now to specific prophecies, we look first to the initial section of the Hebrew canon: the law of Moses, the Pentateuch. Here, Genesis 49:10 and Numbers 24:17 stand out as the most important verses pointing forward to one who is to come. Both are rather cryptic and their broader implications are not at all clear to us, but Jewish interpreters clearly accepted these as "messianic" even though they did not accept Jesus as the Messiah.

Genesis 49:10. The classic King James Version of Jacob's blessing on his son Judah is quite familiar to Christian ears: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from

between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be.” From Judah, someone was to come who would be the focal point of the people’s hope. The passage says very little more than that, but it is enough.

Numbers 24:17. In Balaam’s prophecy about Israel the KJV phraseology is again familiar: “I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob I and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth.” Here was someone who would one day smash Israel’s enemies. Although the term “Messiah” does not appear, this passage was “messianic” for the Jews, and is part of the reason why the Jews and Jesus’ own disciples were looking for a heavy-handed Messiah who would smash the enemies of the nation.

In connection with the evidence from the Pentateuch, we should touch on the question of the sacrificial system. Was not this a clear picture of the person and work of the Messiah? A picture, yes, but apparently not a clear one. Where in the Old Testament can you find an *explicit* interpretation of the sacrificial system as applying to the person of the Messiah? Nowhere. Our interpretations of the sacrificial system are from the New Testament. The book of Hebrews is, of course, a powerful exposition of the meaning of the sacrificial system in terms of the mission of Jesus the Messiah. But significantly, the book of Hebrews was written after the death of Jesus, not before. Likewise, the imagery of Jesus as our high priest is primarily the result of inspired reflection on the completed work of Jesus in the light of the sacrificial system. The idea of a royal priest is suggested by Psalm 110:4, but the development of that idea takes place after the cross.

As I have reflected on the way that conservative Christians have dealt with the sacrificial system, I have concluded that we have perhaps confused the type and the antitype, the shadow and the reality (cf. Heb. 10:1). I mean that we have treated the Old Testament sacrificial system almost as though it were clearer than the real event in Jesus Christ. No wonder that we are quite mystified by the Jewish rejection and the dullness of the disciples. If we assume that the sacrificial system was crystal clear, then it loses its value as shadow and becomes the real thing. That is most unfortunate, for the blood of goats and bulls can never be as meaningful as the death of our Lord on the cross.

As for my own view, I do believe the Old Testament believer could gain many of the essential principles of God’s plan of salvation from a study of the sacrificial system. Some of the great men of God may even have caught glimpses in the sacrifices of the death of the one who was to come. Yet interestingly enough, not even one of the Old Testament writers has seen fit to pass along those insights to us; our book of Hebrews is in the New Testament, not in the Old.

I think you will already begin to see the significance of this conclusion for the interpretation of the experience of the disciples and the Jews: they had not yet linked the “royal” prophecies with the “suffering” ones. That was something that God in the flesh must do in their presence. Even then it was very difficult to give up old cherished ideas. But is that not precisely the great danger that faces us every day? We all too easily fall into merely traditional ways of thinking and fail to agonize for the fresh and invigorating vision of truth which comes from a total commitment to our God.

The Pentateuch contains one more “messianic” prophecy that we should note, namely, the promise in *Deuteronomy 18:15-19* of a great prophet like Moses who would come some day in the future. The promise was given by Moses to the people as he prepared them for his own

departure. The passage does not say when or how such a prophet would come. The Lord had simply promised the people that the prophet would be like Moses and would come from among their brethren (Deut. 18:18).

It is instructive to note how the New Testament deals with this promise of the prophet. According to the record in the Gospel of John, the people did not necessarily identify “the prophet” with the “Christ” (Messiah), for they asked John the Baptist first if he were “the Christ,” then if he were “Elijah” and then if he were “the prophet” (John 1:21, 25). In other words, they had three distinct figures in mind. Yet John's Gospel also suggests that when Jesus had fed the five thousand, the people were ready to accept him as “the prophet” while also being ready to proclaim him king (John 6:13-14). After the death of Christ, there is also at least a hint in Stephen’s speech that this prophecy of a prophet was applied to Jesus, though the identification is not explicit (Acts 7:37). But in any event, the promise of a prophet was clearly part of the fuel that kindled the people’s hopes for the future.

Turning to the prophetic books, we now find messianic prophecies in the precise sense of the word. The prophets were writing in the days of the kings, at a time when the people as well as the prophets had begun to realize that none of their kings had lived up to God’s great ideal. Through the prophets, God began to direct the hopes of the people to that ideal future king from the house of David. Here, then, are the true promises of the Messiah, the anointed one who would redeem his people. Let us note a sample of some of the more notable passages.

Isaiah 9:2-7. This prophecy speaks clearly of the throne of David (vs. 7), thus indicating its proper messianic character. But from the standpoint of the New Testament and its claims for Jesus, the most fascinating part of this prophecy is the list of titles given in verse 6: “For to us a child is born ... Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” The Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day had great difficulty in accepting Jesus’ claims to divinity. They were thinking of a great leader in the Davidic succession, but tended to regard him as a *human* figure who would introduce the Kingdom of Yahweh. When Jesus claimed to be *both* this human *Messiah* and *God*, they were startled. Yet here in Isaiah is a key reference suggesting that the child who was to come would indeed be the mighty God.

Isaiah 11:1-9. This prophecy describes how the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” would introduce the great and peaceful kingdom of the future. The Spirit of God would be upon him (vs. 2) and he would judge the poor in righteousness (vs. 4). The climax? The earth would be full of the knowledge of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea (vs. 9). With a prophecy like that, who wouldn’t long for the coming of the Messiah?

Jeremiah 23:5-6. Jeremiah lived through the tragic demise of the southern kingdom of Judah and saw the last kings of Judah killed or deported to Babylon. He had every reason to be disheartened. Nevertheless, this man of God pointed to a great future king from the line of David; Yahweh will raise up for David a righteous Branch (vs. 5) and this is the name by which he will be called, “Yahweh is our righteousness.” The idea of a human king taking the name of Yahweh to himself must have been a troublesome thought for traditional Jews. Yet this passage is part of the evidence which lay behind Jesus’ claim that he and his Father were one (John 10:30). Or to paraphrase another famous saying: “If you have seen me, you have seen Yahweh” (John 14:9).

The emphasis on the royal figure who was to come, the proper messianic figure, may at least partially explain why the royal psalms (i.e. psalms which speak of the king) were such fertile ground for other “messianic” prophecies. The psalms repeatedly speak of the king as the

anointed one, and often bring the anointed one into very close relationship with Yahweh himself (cf. Ps. 2:7). Psalm 110, a very popular New Testament “messianic” psalm, though apparently, not one that was so viewed by the Jews, also makes that famous declaration: “You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek” (Ps. 110:4). The Old Testament itself does not develop this idea of a priest-king, but the suggestion is there and was destined to be developed in great detail in the light of the cross of Christ.

From the third section of the Hebrew Bible, the Writings, one other passage should be mentioned in connection with the Old Testament “messianic” evidence, namely, *Daniel 7:13*. Here, the other-worldly figure of the “son of man” appears. “Son of man” was a title that the New Testament writers often used for Jesus. In fact, it was one of Jesus’ favorite titles for himself. The precise meaning of “son of man” in the New Testament has been much discussed and we shall not even touch on that discussion here, but we should note that the “son of man” in *Daniel 7:13* is a celestial being who comes from heaven. Hence the imagery of *Daniel 7* helps to prepare the way for the claims of Jesus that he was indeed of heavenly origin.

Now after this brief survey of Old Testament evidence, it should be clear enough that the messianic hope at the time of Christ rested on a solid basis. Indeed, the evidence from the New Testament itself testifies that everyone was looking for the Messiah. So in the first century AD, the question most certainly was not *whether* a Messiah was coming or not. That was a foregone conclusion; the Messiah *was* coming. Rather, it was quite a different question that Jesus brought to the attention of his listeners: “What *kind* of Messiah are you expecting?” The Gospel of John describes how the people were ready to take Jesus and make him king after he had fed the five thousand (*John 6:14-15*). But when Jesus revealed the spiritual nature of his kingdom, they turned away in droves (*John 6:6*).

A superficial reading of the “messianic” prophecies could indeed suggest the popular conception that the Messiah was to be a conquering king who would smash Israel’s enemies. But such a conclusion could come only from a superficial reading of Scripture. When we make a total commitment to righteousness, to truth, to God, the Scriptures come alive with a mysterious glory which quite eludes the casual reader. And that is precisely what happened in Jesus’ experience. As he grew in his knowledge of God, the radical nature of his mission was dawning ever more clearly upon him. At the age of twelve the depth of his understanding was already a cause of amazement to the learned rabbis (*Luke 2:47*). But the time was not yet right; Jesus returned to his home and was subject to his parents (*Luke 2:51*).

In that home in Nazareth many things must have happened which helped prepare Jesus for his mission. The biblical record is mysteriously silent about these years in Nazareth, but knowing what we do about men of spiritual power, we can be sure that Jesus was deeply immersed in a growing relationship with his heavenly father. The quality of his prayer life and the depth of his study must have been incredible, for when he finally stepped to the threshold of the world to announce his mission to the universe, the crowds “were astonished at his teaching for he taught them as one who had authority” (*Matt. 7:29*). What gave his words that ring of authority? His relationship to his Father, to be sure, but our question must now be not just *how* he taught, but *what* he taught, and that is the matter to which we now turn, for Jesus brought fresh insight and a new emphasis to the messianic prophecies which the disciples simply could not accept, even though they did believe that Jesus was the Messiah. It is this unbelievable aspect of Jesus’ ministry that we find developed in the second category of “messianic” prophecies, namely,

those that Jesus himself brought to the attention of the people.

2. Messianic prophecies which became clear as a result of the teaching of Jesus

The outstanding example in this category of “messianic” prophecies is none other than Isaiah 53, the prophecy of the suffering servant. For those of us who have been steeped in the New Testament understanding of Jesus’ life and message, one of the most obvious and significant aspects of his experience is his suffering and death. Yet before his death this was just the point that virtually everyone around Jesus refused to accept, including those who accepted him as the promised redeemer.

In my own study of the “messianic” prophecies, it came as a real shock to realize that it was Jesus himself who brought the ministry of the suffering servant into focus as one of the “messianic” prophecies. Yet after the shock had worn away, I began to realize that this was the only logical conclusion that I could draw from the New Testament evidence. The Jews were inclined to reject Jesus completely; the disciples and the crowds (at least for a while) wanted to make him king; but no one wanted to accept him as the suffering servant.

Jesus must have realized the immense challenge that faced him in the form of the popular concept of the Messiah. To help the people realize that the Messiah must first suffer before he could rule was no easy task. In this connection it is fascinating to note how Jesus dealt with some of the biblical data touching on his mission. In particular, his treatment of Isaiah 61 during the synagogue service of Nazareth is remarkable. As he read the familiar words of the prophet, the anticipation of the people must have been building towards the expected climax: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19). But then came a real surprise, for the assembled congregation must have been waiting for the next line: “The day of vengeance of our God” (Is. 61:2). That was what they all longed to see and hear. Instead, Jesus sat down, saying: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). The congregation’s reaction was at first favorable to his “gracious words” (cf. vs. 21), but then the true implications began to emerge and this congregation turned into a ferocious mob, intent on murder (vs. 29). Going against established tradition is hard work, and dangerous. But Jesus knew all about that and he carried on.

Before we move beyond Jesus’ mission and his own self-understanding, a further word about Isaiah 53 might be helpful. In the first instance, the passage itself nowhere links the servant with the royal “Messiah.” The servant is obviously close to Yahweh, but he is not identified as a royal figure. For this reason, scholars have debated endlessly as to the original intent of the prophecy. Again, we cannot go into detail here; for our purposes, it is simply important to know that Jesus himself was apparently the first to link publicly this famous passage with the role of the Messiah. But in this connection something remarkable emerges from Jewish sources, for there is clear evidence that the Jewish community did, in fact, interpret Isaiah 53 messianically, but their messianic interpretation bears almost no relationship to the biblical passage. In fact, they have taken this marvelous passage telling of the servant’s lamb-like willingness to suffer on behalf of his people, and have turned it completely on its head, rephrasing it so that it becomes a hymn praising a warrior Messiah who makes the other nations suffer. That was just the messianic

view in Jesus' day, When the community of God's people could take the very passage which should have opened their eyes to a spiritual kingdom, transforming it to serve their own preconceived ideas, we can appreciate the tremendous challenge facing Jesus as he sought to break through to their hearts and share the good news of a Messiah who gently cares for the suffering sinner. The people wanted no part in such a Messiah, so they destroyed him as a threat to their established tradition. But in so doing, they unwittingly brought to fulfillment those very prophecies which Jesus had brought to light and which have become so central to the Christian understanding of the Messiah.

The fuller meaning of Jesus' self-sacrifice began to emerge among Jesus' followers after the resurrection. As the Christian community reflected on Jesus' earthly experience, they began to see the Old Testament in a radically new light. They began to interpret the Old Testament with renewed enthusiasm. That is why our study of the post-resurrection development of the messianic theme is so crucial. For us the word "prophecy" always implies foresight, but the kinds of messianic prophecies I have included in the third category seem to involve a generous portion of hindsight. It is to these "prophecies" that we now turn.

3. Prophecies discovered and applied in light of the events themselves

This category of messianic prophecies is undoubtedly the most prominent and most popular with the New Testament writers, but it is probably the most difficult one for the modern reader to comprehend. In my own study of messianic prophecies I struggled to make sense out of this type of "prophecy" and to maintain the integrity of the New Testament writers. In the course of my education, even in connection with the Bible, perhaps especially in connection with the Bible, it had been deeply drilled into my head that I must read according to the author's intent. I learned that I must never cite an author as proving the point that I am attempting to make if he himself obviously has something quite different in mind. My problem threatened to become acute when I tried to apply this rule to the New Testament writers and discovered that when they cited the Old Testament authors, they often departed far from the obvious meaning of the Old Testament passage. So I was faced with two alternatives, equally unattractive. First, I could force myself to believe that the Old Testament authors actually said what the New Testament writers claimed for them. In other words, the New Testament writers were always right and their interpretation would take precedence over what I thought the Old Testament writers originally meant. The other alternative seemed to be to admit that the New Testament writers were wrong in citing the Old Testament in the way they did. In such a case I seemed to be admitting that the New Testament writers were unreliable, and therefore the point that they were arguing, namely, that Jesus was the promised Messiah, was open to question.

As I have suggested earlier, it was at this point that I began to look for more substantial prophecies. The more important of these I have already noted in category one. That, at least, helped to buy a little time as I continued to struggle with the New Testament authors. I was so long in solving the problem for myself and yet the solution now seems so very simple, that I am sometimes perplexed as to how I can best share the good news. But the news is so good that I must at least attempt to share it.

The solution to this third category lies in two parts. First, in an understanding of how God has worked through his inspired writers, and second, in an understanding of some of the popular

forms of argument employed by Jewish writers in and around the first century AD. Both of these aspects merit further discussion.

In the first instance, I discovered that I had fallen victim way of thinking about God and his word that had contributed to my difficulty. My thinking went something like this: God is perfect, the Bible is God's word, therefore the Bible is perfect. Now I would hasten to add that the Bible is perfect for the purpose for which God intended it, but that is a far cry from being perfect in the same sense that God is perfect. God's word must be compared with the incarnation: the perfection of divinity clothed with the imperfection and weakness of human flesh. I had tended to think that the logic and rhetoric of the human writers was in fact God's logic and rhetoric. It is not. Scripture reflects the logic and rhetoric of human beings who are speaking God's message under the guidance of his Spirit, but they are also very much under the influence of their own limitations of language, character, knowledge and ability. The Spirit controls the process to the extent that from the writings of these inspired men the sincere seeker for truth can indeed learn what he needs to know about God, but the bits and pieces, especially when taken in isolation and apart from God's intention to communicate the truth, can be very misleading. If an inspired writer is a highly educated individual and has a good grasp of language, he will write accordingly. If, by contrast, a writer comes from an unsophisticated background, he will reveal this background by his homely language, his earthy illustrations and his rough logic. The Spirit does not obliterate these human elements.

How does this apply to our understanding of "messianic" prophecies? In just this way, that the New Testament writers were men of the first century, and since God chose to reveal his will in the first century, he inspired men to give his message in the accepted thought forms of the first century. Here is where the second part of the solution comes in, for when I began to realize the kind of thinking and the kind of logic that was prominent in Jewish sources of the early Christian era, I began to recognize something terribly familiar, namely, precisely those problem arguments that I had found in the New Testament. In short, the New Testament writers were using standard and accepted Jewish methods of treating Scripture when they seemingly departed into such flights of fancy. Remarkably, there is no evidence in the New Testament that the Jewish opponents of the Christian community argued against their methodology; they were quite accustomed to that. They argued, rather, with the Christian conclusion. They were not prepared to accept the suffering servant as their Messiah, even if the Christians used all the right methods in proving their point. But we need to illustrate this conclusion from the New Testament and from Jewish sources, something that I think we can do fairly quickly and briefly.

The one feature of Jewish methodology that is particularly pertinent for us is the tendency to read later events back into earlier narratives. Without the knowledge of these later events, no one would have dreamed of them on the basis of the earlier narratives. But once the events became known, Jewish rabbis loved to "discover" them in the earlier passages. In the rabbinic discussions, then, it became customary for the rabbis to debate among themselves just which events were "foretold" in which narratives. To illustrate this way of treating Scripture, we could turn almost at random to any of the ancient Jewish commentaries on Scripture, a type of commentary known as Midrash. Many of these commentaries are available in English translation and provide a fascinating insight into Jewish methods of interpreting Scripture.

For our purposes, a glimpse at the Midrash on Genesis 15:17-18 should serve quite well. [See Midrash Rabbah on Genesis, XLIV, 21-22 (English translation published by the Soncino

Press, London)]. In interpreting the phrase, “Behold a smoking furnace and a flaming torch,” Simeon Ben Abba said in the name of a yet more famous rabbi, Rabbi Johanan, that in this vision God had revealed four things to Abraham: Gehenna (hell), the kingdoms that would oppress Israel (Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Media, Rome), Revelation, and the Temple. The Midrash then records the rabbinical discussions about the fuller implication of the suggested interpretation. Now if we look at the original Genesis context, none of these four things is at all explicit. The verses immediately preceding (Gen. 15:13-16) do speak of subjugation to a nation which turned out to be Egypt. But in the light of later Jewish history and theology, the rabbis went far beyond the biblical narrative, expanding on the “smoking furnace” to include the negative elements of hell and oppression, while interpreting a “flaming torch” as referring to the positive aspects of Revelation and the Temple. All of this was by way of hindsight, yet the rabbis commented on the passage in such a way as to suggest that Abraham could see this complete picture.

From this same section of the Midrash, a fascinating variation on this Jewish methodology can be illustrated, namely, the use of an individual word occurring in one passage to expand the content of another verse where the same word appears. For example, Rabbi Joshua claimed that this experience of Abraham indicates that God had revealed the dividing of the Red Sea to Abraham. How did he arrive at that remarkable interpretation? The key lies in the Hebrew word for “pieces” (*gezarim*) which appears in the phrase: ‘and a flaming torch passed between these *pieces*’ (Gen. 15:17). This is the same Hebrew word which appears in Ps. 136:13. The KJV translates it as “parts” (*gezarim*) in the phrase: (O give thanks) . . . “to him which divided the Red Sea into *parts*.” Rabbi Joshua assumed that the content of the verse in Psalm 136 (dividing of the Red Sea) must have been included in the earlier experience of Abraham since the biblical narrative uses the same word (*gezarim*) in both passages. He concluded, therefore, that God had revealed the dividing of the Red Sea to Abraham. Remarkable!

These examples are quite typical of rabbinical interpretation of Scripture. And since the New Testament writers were thoroughly immersed in this first-century Jewish culture, they could use these methods without hesitation. Whenever I read through early Jewish sources, I think I detect a certain excitement as the rabbis make fresh “discoveries” in what, to us, almost seems like a sacred game with words. But they were quite serious. So were the New Testament writers.

Given this Jewish background, I can now appreciate the way in which some early Christians excitedly mined the Old Testament for fresh “prophecies” of this Messiah whom they had already accepted on quite other grounds. These “prophecies” were not the foundation of Jesus’ messianic mission; they were simply later confirmations of something his followers already believed. To be sure, the apostles used these methods in their evangelism, for they were working largely with Jews. Now if we can understand this early Judeo-Christian environment, we no longer need to fault the integrity of the New Testament writers, nor will we fault God for using men who employed such strange methods. God has always used men within their own environment to speak to their contemporaries. It is our responsibility to understand them so that we can understand God’s message to them and through them, a message which he has intended for us also.

When we recognize that the “messianic” prophecies of categories 1 and 2 formed the basis for the disciples’ convictions, then perhaps we can more readily grant them the privilege of using the category 3 prophecies, prophecies which carried a fair bit of weight in their own day, but which seem so strange from the standpoint of our way of reasoning. But let us look now at

how the New Testament actually uses this Jewish methodology to establish the messianic claims of Jesus.

Peter's speech on the day of Pentecost provides us with a good example of the apostolic method of dealing with the Old Testament messianic "prophecies." In Acts 2:23 Peter refers to "the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" that the Jews would deliver up Jesus to be crucified. Then he refers to a Davidic psalm, Psalm 16, saying that David was speaking "of him," that is, of Jesus (Acts 2:25). Turning back to Psalm 16, I find nothing at all that would indicate to Old Testament readers that this psalm was pointing forward to the Messiah. It appears simply to be a psalm of thanksgiving for the fact that God has preserved his own. True, the psalm is royal and Davidic, thus linking it loosely with the messianic tradition, but for us to accept that the psalmist wanted his readers to think of *the* Messiah is hardly a conclusion that we can draw on the basis of the Old Testament. Yet Peter makes the statement: "David says concerning him" – and by "him," Peter clearly means Jesus the Messiah. Now judged by our way of thinking we might be inclined to say that Peter was wrong. But such a conclusion does not take in to account the accepted methods of Peter's day. Peter was not wrong; he was simply, making use of the Jewish methodology described above which allows the inclusion of later events in earlier passages. Peter can actually go on to say that David was a prophet (Acts 2:30), and that he "foresaw" and "spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, and that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption" (Acts 2:31). He uses all the language of prophecy. And that can cause us great difficulty if we do not realize how earlier passages can be made to "prophecy" in the light of later events simply by the use of good Jewish methodology. In other words, it is essential that we recognize how the word "prophecy" could be very much expanded in the first century after Christ so that it could refer, not just to foresight, but to hindsight as well. Such an understanding of "prophecy" provides the clue for understanding the great number of messianic citations in the New Testament which simply do not seem to be predictions in their original Old Testament setting. I would include here the citations out of Psalm 69 in the Gospel of John which we noted earlier. The original passages were not predictions, but the first century methodology made it possible to turn them into such. New Testament writers "found" many such "prophecies" and obviously did not hesitate to use them for the New Testament is full of them.

In this connection it would be well to note how conservative Christians have often reacted against the conclusions of modern scholars who initially may have had nothing more sinister in mind than simply to call attention to the fact that the Old Testament passages do not say to us what the New Testament writers understood them to say to them. A modern scholar might say: "Psalm 16:10 does not really predict the resurrection of Christ." To which the conservative response has often been: "Yet it must, for the New Testament says it does." Without an understanding of the Jewish methods behind the New Testament quotations, the choice would appear to be between scholarship and piety: if we accept the scholarly point of view, we must reject the New Testament; to accept the New Testament point of view, we must reject the scholarly position. Such a stark dichotomy can be avoided if we understand, first, how God has worked in Scripture, and second, how first century Jews interpreted the Old Testament.

I should further emphasize that a belief in the resurrection of Christ does not at all depend on the use of a particular Old Testament text. The resurrection stands on the basis of the New Testament narrative just as we noted earlier that the Virgin Birth is established on the basis of Matthew, not Isaiah. To be sure, the New Testament writers constantly bring these additional

passages into use, but they must be seen as additional proofs for a Jewish audience, not as primary evidence for twentieth century readers. We need not sacrifice a single cardinal point of faith; we simply need to be careful that we use the reasons that are most likely to be cogent for our day when we seek to establish those teachings that are important for the Christian faith. As noted earlier, at different times and in different places, different arguments have carried more weight. We must still recognize that these different arguments have been used by men of God, men who were under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Yet if we are truly guided by the Spirit today, we will not force someone to accept an argument as primary evidence when that argument could be effective only in a quite different culture. When I finally came to understand that point, I made my peace with the writers of the New Testament. They have been good friends of mine ever since.

Before we turn to the fourth and last category of prophecies, we should note how the understanding of a particular word in the New Testament can provide a more specific explanation for a number of passages that have been called “prophecies” by Christian interpreters. The key word is “fulfill,” one that is particularly prominent in the Gospels. We have already noted the use of this word in several contexts, most notably in connection with the Virgin Birth and Isaiah 7:14//Matt 1:2-23. But for purposes of illustrating the use of this word, I would like to suggest a comparison between Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2:15.

The verse in Matthew describes the flight of Jesus and his parents into Egypt. The passage concludes with the following statement: “This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt have I called my son’” (Matt. 2:15). At first glance the modern reader might suspect that Matthew is referring to an Old Testament prophecy of the first type, namely, one that clearly predicts the coming of the Messiah to the Old Testament reader. But when we turn to Hosea 11:1, we discover something quite different, for there the passage is clearly referring to the departure of Israel from Egypt at the time of the Exodus. How could that experience predict the coming of Christ to the reader? In the first instance, we must recognize that, at least in part, Matthew is again using typical Jewish methodology in reading later events back into earlier passages. Note, however, that in this instance Matthew does not use the term “prophecy,” though many later Christian interpreters have not hesitated to do so, contributing to the confusion that we have already discussed. But even though the background of Jewish methodology can be helpful in understanding Matthew’s general approach, the really significant clue to understanding this type of “prophecy” is found in the word “fulfill.” Behind this word lies a Greek word *pleroo* which means “to fill full” as well as “to fulfill.” Selecting the first meaning of the word instead of the second, we could roughly paraphrase what Matthew is saying as follows: “Those ancient words of the prophet describing how God brought his son out of Egypt have now been filled full of fresh new meaning in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.” Thus, instead of a prediction which is brought to pass and so “fulfilled,” this way of understanding Matthew sees rather an old stories whose words are filled full of fresh new meaning, meaning which, quite literally, had never been thought of before.

This usage of the word “fulfill” can be illustrated also from Matt. 5:17 where Jesus says that he has not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. He then proceeds to show just how he has come to fill the law full of meaning. The law says, for example, “You shall not kill.” But when we fill the law full of its true meaning we learn that we should not even hate (Matt. 5:21-22). By understanding the word “fulfill” in this way, we can view many of the Old Testament passages,

not as predictions which were fulfilled, but as words that have been filled full of a new and even quite different meaning in the new situation in Jesus Christ.

Briefly summarizing the implications of our discussion of this third category of messianic “prophecies,” we note the following points. First, we must recognize that God works with human beings within their own environment; his inspired spokespersons reflect their human background and training. Having recognized this, we can then move on to the second point, our understanding of the environment of the first century after Christ. It should be clear from our discussion that rabbinical interpretation of Scripture was often based on methods which seem quite foreign to us. This is particularly noticeable in the tendency to read later events back into earlier narratives. This Jewish background is the explanation for the remarkable “proofs” sometimes cited by New Testament writers. A third and more specific point, is the usage of the term “fulfill.” Against the general background of Jewish methodology, the New Testament writers often spoke of later experiences filling old words full of new meaning. Thus “fulfill” does not really refer to a prediction coming to pass, but to an old narrative coming to life in a new way.

With this look at the New Testament era, we are now prepared to move further afield and note the even later “discoveries” of additional messianic “prophecies.”

4. Prophecies understood as messianic in later Christian centuries

In this last category of “messianic” prophecies we will simply note a couple of “prophecies” that have been much used through several centuries of Christian interpretation. One such prophecy is the so-called *Protevangelium* (first gospel) of Genesis 3:15: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, between thy seed and her seed. It shall bruise thy head, but thou shalt bruise his heel.” This classic KJV rendering is very familiar to Christian ears. In the light of the New Testament imagery of the “seed” (Christ) and the serpent (Satan), this passage has been taken as intimating the great cosmic struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, the conflict between Christ and Satan. The hints are there in the passage, but neither the Old Testament nor the New picked up this passage and applied it to Christ; the application was to come after the close of the canon to Scripture.

One other later discovery of significance is the prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27. Modern scholarship has tended to deny that Daniel was written in the sixth century, preferring a date close to the time of the Maccabean revolt (c. 165 BC). Such an approach tends to see Daniel not as genuine prophecy, but as history written as prophecy. Conservative Christians, however, have insisted that the book is indeed prophecy, though even so their interpretations have varied considerably. The arguments need not detain us here for our primary purpose is to look at the history of interpretation of Daniel. In this connection, we note that the prophecy of Daniel 9 came to be seen by many Christians as the most important of all messianic prophecies, a prophecy not just of the coming of the Messiah, but of the time of his coming as well. Sir Isaac Newton, for example, in his commentary on Daniel declared that this prophecy was the “cornerstone” of the Christian faith.

The basis for this interpretation and the considerable variation in dates adopted by different interpreters provide fertile ground for research, but for our purposes it is sufficient to note that the key phrase is found in Daniel 9:27, rendered by the KJV as follows: “And in the

midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease.” When applied to Jesus Christ, this passage is taken to refer to the death of Christ on the cross and the end of the sacrificial system.

Now even though Christians have claimed that this prophecy is a chief “cornerstone” of the faith, the history of interpretation indicates that it only *gradually* took its place as a cornerstone, for certainly there is little evidence in Scripture or in the early Jewish writings to suggest that this prophecy was used to predict the time or the mission of Jesus. About two hundred years after the birth of Christ, Clement of Alexandria (d. 220) and Tertullian (d. 240), two fathers of the Christian church, did apply the prophecy to the incarnation and death of Christ, but these early interpreters tended to see the prophecy ending at or around AD 70, the time of Jerusalem's destruction by the Romans. The history of the interpretation of Daniel 9:24-27 is a fascinating one, but for our purposes we simply need to emphasize the fact that here is a prophecy which the Christian community “discovered” many years after Jesus’ earthly ministry. Nevertheless, it has brought a great deal of comfort and encouragement to God’s people.

So at the end of our survey, we can affirm that the messianic hope is one that has remained constant through the ages, first in the Old Testament as God’s people looked forward with increasing eagerness to the one who was to come. Then, in the person of Jesus Christ, at least some of the Jewish community recognized the One who had come as their Redeemer. Many rejected this gentle man who said that he had come to die for their sins. But many found in him the source of life. These have carried the good news throughout the world, and the word is still being spread abroad today. We may not find equally convincing all the reasons that have been used through the ages to establish the conviction that Jesus of Nazareth was the embodiment of the Old Testament hope. But we should be able to see how God has used many and varied ways to build faith in the hearts of his people.

Recognizing that God has indeed used a great variety of ways in working with man has made it possible for me to build my house of faith on more solid rock. Now when the winds blow, I don’t have to be afraid. That has not only been a great relief, but a cause for great joy. Perhaps that is also one of the reasons why I like to think of the hope of the Messiah as the best story in the Old Testament as well as in the New, and indeed anywhere else you might care to look. It is good news that is worth sharing.

Theme: “A Holy and Just God”

Leading Question: What do natural disasters tell us about the God we serve?

Note on the book of Joel: The book of Joel offers several “special” themes that are worth pursuing in a Sabbath School study:

1. Theology. What is God’s role in the appearance of natural disasters?

Note: Three basic positions are possible: A) They are simply “natural” with no direct intervention by God; B) they are demonic with God choosing not to intervene; C) they are punishments from God on those who disobey him. Those who are inclined toward the third option would be advised to remember the book of Job. Job’s friends were convinced that misfortune was a judgment from God. But the message of the book is clear that a personal disaster does not indicate that the one involved has departed from God’s way.

2. Eschatology: Day of the Lord. In this series of lessons, the “Day of the Lord” is a recurring theme. In this study guide, the fuller picture will be discussed in connection with the study of Zephaniah. A succinct summary would be that in the Old Testament, the “day of the Lord” could refer to any day of judgment. The local judgments then serve as a type or a harbinger of the final Day when Jesus returns.

3. Eschatology: Multiple Applications. The imagery of the dark day and the signs in the heavens are images that appear frequently in the prophetic books of the Old Testament. Indeed, they are almost “standard” equipment whenever the “day of the Lord” is mentioned. This being the case, how can we understand the “dark day” and the falling of the stars that caused such a stir in the 18th and 19th centuries? In Adventist prophetic interpretation, the three great signs of the advent are given specific dates: earthquake (Lisbon, 1755), dark day (New England, 1780), falling stars (New England, 1833).

Such an approach is vulnerable to the “secularist” who points out that there have been numerous dark days and numerous meteorite showers through history. Why should believers single out the 18th and 19th century events as if they were unique?

The discussion of the “last days” and the events connected with it is one of the most contentious topics among Christians. The study of Joel should be informed by the four basic approaches to “last days” discussions in our era. Here is a brief synopsis of each:

Eschatology : Four Perspectives

- A. **“All-time Road Map”:** **HISTORICISM: The single road-map through history leading up to the end-time events.** The traditional Adventist perspective, rooted in Daniel 2 and 7 and shaped by the teaching of the great reformers.
- B. **“Yesterday”:** **PRETERISM: Predicted “end-time” events were in the author's own day.** In its pure form, held by “liberals” who deny any predictive element in prophecy or any “real” end of time.
- C. **“Tomorrow”:** **FUTURISM: “End-time” events yet to come.** In its pure form, futurism denies conditional prophecy. It is the most popular view of eschatology among conservative Christians today (cf. “Left Behind” [movie]). Unfulfilled events in the Bible (especially from the OT) are predicted to take place at some future point to a literal and restored Israel (the temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem at the present site of the Moslem mosque, Dome of the Rock. The best-known modern form of futurism is **Dispensationalism**. Note the seven-fold division of history (fully developed in the Scofield Bible notes):
1. Innocence: Before the fall
 2. Conscience: Before the flood
 3. Human government: Before Abraham
 4. Promise: Before Sinai
 5. Law: Before the Cross
 6. Grace: Before Second Advent
 7. Kingdom: 7 years and millennium.

Note: The seven year period falls between the secret coming of Christ (“rapture” [*parousia*]) and the public coming [*epiphaneia*]; the saints spend the next 1000 years on earth, during which there will be birth, death, and animal sacrifice.

- D. **“Today, Today, Today!”:** **APPLIED HISTORICISM (“Idealism”): Multiple applications for “end-time” events.** This perspective suggests that there were several points in history when Christ could have come. It builds on the idea of “conditional” prophecy. See summary of God's “original” plan for Israel, based on SDABC 4:25-38:
1. **On-site Evangelism.** The world would be attracted to God by Israel's witness and prosperity. Many would ask to become part of Israel.
 2. **Salvation through the Messiah.** God's anointed one (the messiah) would have come, died, and risen again, but would have been accepted by his own people.
 3. **Jerusalem as Missionary Headquarters.** The present city of Jerusalem would have become a center for outreach into the whole world.
 4. **Final Confrontation but the Gradual Elimination of Evil.** A confrontation would finally take place between good and evil; God's rule would be established; but the marks of evil would gradually disappear.

Comment on the four perspectives. Historicism, the classic reformation approach to last things, has been the traditional Adventist “home” when it comes to eschatology. But the “delay” has encouraged many thoughtful Adventists to re-think the “signs of the end,” especially since the dominant “signs” in Joel (darkening of sun and moon, falling of the stars) appear again in Acts 2 at the Day of Pentecost. Those same signs appear yet again in connection with the Second Coming as depicted under the “sixth” seal in Revelation 6:12-17. Does all this lay down a convincing pattern that would allow for the re-application of biblical material to different settings? The dark day in Joel is clearly a grasshopper plague in Joel’s own day. This “day of the Lord” then became a type that later writers could pick up and reuse in their own writings.

Discussion Questions

1. Is the grasshopper plague in Joel seen as a divine judgment against sin or a gracious wake-up call from the Lord?
2. How widely can Joel be used to make the case for multiple applications? Joel is quoted and applied by Peter in Acts 2 and the imagery appears again in Revelation 6:12-17. Two questions are worth exploring:
 - A. Can a pattern of re-application be integrated into classic Historicism so that a both/and approach results?
 - B. What are the practical advantages and disadvantages in the use of multiple applications?

These two questions can be evaluated on the basis of a chapter from Alden Thompson’s *Beyond Common Ground: Why Liberals and Conservatives Need Each Other* (PPPA, 2009). In chapter 18, Thompson suggests the phrase “applied historicism” as a way of preserving the best of historicism while integrating the idea of re-application of prophetic imagery.

“Greatest Hope, Blessed Hope: Into the Kitchen, Even the Garden,”
Chapter 18 from Alden Thompson, *Beyond Common
Ground: Why Liberals and Conservatives Need Each Other*
(PPPA 2009), pp. 194-220.

Crucial Question: When God predicts the future? Does he always get it just right?

Answer: Always – But God’s response is always linked to the response of the people.

Illustration: Jonah. When the people repent, God repents.

The Bible says: “And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.” – Jonah 3:10, KJV

Illustration: King Saul. If people don't repent or repent after it is too late, God repents.

The Bible says: "The Lord repented that he had made Saul king over Israel. And the Lord said unto Samuel, How long wilt thou mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel? fill thine horn with oil, and go, I will send thee to Jesse the Beth-lehemite: for I have provided me a king among his sons." – 1 Samuel 15:35 - 16:1, KJV

In the last chapter we had the good stuff, Dinner and Dessert. It was the Blessed Hope, something near and dear to the heart of Adventists. But in a few places, you might have sensed some unusual and subtle flavors. How did the cook do it and why?

So let's head for the Kitchen, and yes, even venture into the Garden, to find out what really happened for Dinner and Dessert.

We'll start with a touch of honesty: when it comes to religion, almost nothing divides the human family so quickly as discussions of last things, "eschatology," to use the technical word. It also has the potential for dividing liberals and conservatives among Adventists, too.

But before we panic, let's remind ourselves of two things as many times as necessary, reminders that we must take seriously if we are going to live and hope together as liberals and conservatives in Adventism.

Two Reminders.

1. Anyone who believes that Jesus is coming again is a conservative Christian, very conservative. In the world outside of Adventism, "liberals" either believe that this world is all there is (when we die we return to the food chain), or that our immortal souls go to their reward immediately at death. In short, "out there," liberals don't think they need a Second Coming; even Roman Catholics and many other "orthodox" Christians who don't merit the label "liberal," also place very little emphasis on the Second Coming. For many of them, belief in the immortal soul dramatically diminishes the importance of the Second Coming.

2. A potentially complex topic is based on a very simple truth: Jesus promised to come again and take us with him to his kingdom. In the upper room Jesus gave a promise: "I'm going to prepare a place for you," he said to his disciples. "And I will come again and take you home with me, so that wherever I am, you can be there too." [John 14:1-3, personal paraphrase.] The angelic visitors who stood by the disciples at Jesus' ascension reminded them of the promise: "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." [Acts 1:11] Our conviction as believers is that Jesus will come again and take us to a better world. That idea of a future restored world is what separated Old Testament believers from their Canaanite neighbors: For Israel, history was not just an endless natural cycle that repeats itself year after year. It has a goal. That is still the major divide that separates us from those who think this world is all there is. We're not stuck on this brutal world. Then, as now, God's people believe in restoration. Simple. And we will need to remember that simplicity as we turn to some complexities in the world of "conservative" believers.

Specific Questions that Divide Adventists

A conviction that is deeply rooted in the souls of devout conservatives is that when God speaks, he gets it right! I believe Adventists need to say with greater clarity that in the ultimate sense God does indeed get it right. He will come again. But before he actually comes, we need state more clearly that the events preceding the coming may not follow our timetable and some of the events on our list may not end up on God's list! The two Old Testament stories cited at the beginning of this chapter, the stories of Jonah and King Saul, couldn't be clearer: The Lord can declare a position and then "change his mind" – "repent," to use KJV language. Ninevah was marked for destruction – but then was saved because the people repented. Saul had been appointed king at God's direction, but then lost the kingdom. The Lord took it away from him because Saul did not repent, or perhaps we could say more accurately, because he did not repent until it was too late.

Can we expect that kind of change in our understanding of events that lead up to the end? The "Disappointment" experience, when linked with the stories in the Bible, should enable us to say yes, even if it is not an easy "yes." But before we go further, let's spell out some of the questions that Adventists debate when talking about the end:

- 1. Sabbath/Sunday.** How will the Sabbath/Sunday conflict play out at the end of time?
- 2. Rome.** What will be the role of the church of Rome in final events?
- 3. Protestantism.** What role will "apostate Protestantism" play in final events?
- 4. United States.** What will be the role of the United States in final events?
- 5. Islam.** What role does Islam play in final events?

In what follows, I will argue that preserving the traditional Adventist understanding of the end time, including specifics relating to the questions noted above, is crucial for preserving our understanding of the issues involved in the great conflict. In that sense I am with the conservatives. But I also argue that the "Disappointment" experience opens the way for us to stay current in addressing these issues by allowing us to see other events and other players as current illustrations in the great battle between good and evil. Thus we can always speak clearly to our age, to our contemporaries, as history moves towards its final climax. I suggest the phrase "applied historicism" as a convenient label for an approach that preserves a both/and approach to final events, a way of preserving a "landmark" perspective and a "present truth" perspective, to use Adventist jargon.

Liberals are more inclined to recognize the validity of alternate applications simply because the current situation is more visible to our eyes. Conservatives are more likely to defend the tradition. If we force an either/or choice, everyone loses. If we can develop a both/and approach, everyone wins. In short, we need to find ways of preserving both perspectives if we are to be an effective community. In what follows, I hope to show how we can do that.

The Delicate Task of Proving Our Position

Before we proceed, I want to speak a caution about the use of "proofs" for faith. The critics "out there" have often appealed to science, archeology, and even to the contradictions in

Scripture, to “prove” that the Bible could not be the word of God. In response, we who are conservatives have often developed our own “proofs” from science and archeology and have sought to “explain” (or “explain away”) the contradictions in Scripture. I would like to suggest that in important ways both sides are off base.

Speaking as a believer, I want to affirm that my hope is a simple hope. But because it is a “hope,” it cannot be proven formally – or disproved formally! Naturally, I am grateful for every piece of evidence that supports my faith, but both in terms of my relationship to God and my relationships with people, the really important things in life cannot be “proven” formally. That includes faith, hope, and love. Because faith, hope, and love spring from a relationship to a person, they are even more precious to me. “For in hope we were saved,” says the Apostle Paul, thus reminding us that formal “proof” is not an issue. “Hope that is seen is not hope,” he declares, “For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” [Rom. 8:24-25]

For those of a more rationalist bent, who may find it difficult to believe in the supernatural – perhaps because they have been steeped in a modern scientific world – a line from Kathleen Norris might be helpful. Norris is a literary person who has moved back to faith from a more secular perspective; her husband David, somewhat hesitantly, has come to faith with her. She quotes him in a chapter entitled “Truth,” in her book, *Amazing Grace*. Describing him as “an amateur mathematician and part-time computer programmer, passionately committed to that which can be proven by means of reason,” she then records his response to a journalist who was pressing him to define his religious beliefs. “He drew himself up,” she says, “until he looked a great deal like Lord Tennyson, and declared, ‘I am a scientific rationalist who believes in ghosts.’” [Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998), 375]

It is important to recognize that even very important truths cannot be “proven” in the formal sense. If that feels uneasy, we can remind ourselves that those things that cannot be proven are not easily disproved! I cannot “prove” my wife’s commitment to me, but I know about that commitment in ways that would make it very difficult for anyone or anything to draw us away from each other. Our commitment to each other is one of the most precious things in the world to me. And that is also a model for how I understand my relationship to God.

But now we need to look more specifically at some matters of history, matters that are more important to conservatives than to liberals, though how we deal with them could be crucial in determining whether or not liberals can come on board with the conservatives.

Second Coming: Then and Now

In contrast with the liberals “out there” for whom the Second Coming would be mostly a puzzle, conservative evangelicals fervently believe in the Second Coming (and in hell!) and they think they know exactly what is going to happen at the end of time. That fact that no two of them can readily agree on the details, however, should be an important cautionary note.

But the landscape doesn’t look at all like it did in 1844. A huge shift in beliefs about the Second Coming has swept through Protestantism since then. When William Miller began preaching that Jesus was coming, he became part of a growing (premillennial) movement that was reacting against the popular (post-millennial) view that the world was getting better and better and that Jesus would return to this “improved” world at the end of 1000 years. Miller

opposed that optimistic view of history and we would say he was right. So, even though our 1844 fathers and mothers were wrong about setting a date, we believe they were reading their Bibles correctly when they announced to the world that things were getting worse and that the world would soon go up in flames at the Second Coming, an event that would take place at the beginning of the 1000 years.

The convictions of our Adventist pioneers were rooted in their understanding of the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation. “Historicism,” the technical term for the way Adventists (as well as the Reformers) interpreted these books, recognized that each line of prophecy in the book of Daniel, for example, ended with the second coming and restoration. In a simple chart form, this is what it looks like:

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| Daniel 2 | Nebuchadnezzar’s vision of the great image: One kingdom follows another until a great stone (the kingdom of God) destroys the human kingdoms represented by the image. The stone grows until it fills the whole earth. |
| Daniel 7 | Four beasts represent four successive kingdoms, but the last one is finally destroyed and the Son of Man receives the kingdom. In the interpretation of the vision, however, the Son of Man has become the “Saints of the Most High,” an Old Testament pointer to the church as the body of Christ. |
| Daniel 8-9 | A ram and goat battle each other, the Sanctuary is polluted, but is finally cleansed and restored at the end of time. |
| Daniel 10-12 | A great battle in heaven and struggles on earth continue until the end of time when Michael stands up. Then God’s people are delivered. The dead are raised, some to eternal life, some to eternal judgment. |

In short, each vision takes us through history until God’s kingdom is fully established. In all, four panoramic views of history pass before us, each ending in the dramatic restoration of God’s kingdom. This approach is called “historicism” because it portrays a grand march through history to the kingdom of God.

But after the Great Disappointment of 1844, the story takes a novel twist. Daniel and Revelation both contain several prophetic time periods. [In Daniel, for example: one time, two times, and half (7:25; 12:7); 2300 days (8:14); 1290 days (12:11); 1335 days (12:12). In Revelation: 42 months (11:2; 13:5); 1260 (11:3;12:6); time, times, and half a time (12:14).] These have been subject to a wide variety of interpretations through the years. [For a history of the interpretation of Daniel, see SDABC 4:39-78 (1955); for a history of the interpretation of Revelation (“the Apocalypse”), see SDABC 7:103-32 (1957).] But when the longest one, the 2300 days, came to an end – on October 22, 1844, according to the Adventist understanding – historicism no longer carried the “predictive” punch it once did. Indeed, all serious Christians who believed in a personal God had to take a long look at their convictions about prophecies of the end time. Those Adventists who believed that God was at work in the 1844 movement took steps toward conditional historicism, a position that enables believers to focus less on quantity (charts) and more on the quality of our Christian life and witness and our

relationship with Jesus. Those who rejected 1844 moved toward dispensational futurism, a position that continues to call for charts of events, but all in the future. Those two options did not come clear immediately, but the die was cast and much of the common ground disappeared. Let's look more closely at the differences.

Two Choices: Conditional Historicism or Dispensational Futurism

According to Whitney Cross, a well-known non-Adventist scholar, "All Protestants expected some grand event about 1843, and no critic from the orthodox side took any serious issue on basic principles with Miller's calculations." [Whitney R Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 321. Cited by Rolf Pöhler, *Continuity and Change in Adventist Teaching* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), 23.] But all that was before the Disappointment. Understanding what has happened since then is crucial if we are going to be effective in taking the Good News of Jesus' return to the world in our day. One of our greatest challenges is that a huge gulf now exists between Adventists and most other conservative Christians who believe in the Second Coming.

While Adventists continue to hold to conditional historicism, dispensational futurism – the "Left Behind" movement – has swept the field as the most popular view of the end times. [Popularized through a phenomenally successful series of "Left Behind" novels (Tyndale) and a movie by the same name.] Like Adventists, these futurists are "pre-millennialists," believing that Jesus will come at the beginning of the 1000 years of Revelation 20. But as far as last day events are concerned, these futurists differ dramatically from Adventists (and traditional Protestantism) in many respects, driven by the futurist conviction that any prophecies and promises to God's people in the Old Testament that were not fulfilled in the Old Testament era, will be fulfilled at the end of time. In short, futurists completely reject the idea of "conditional" prophecy, that is, prophecy that was not fulfilled because the conditions were not met. As a result of rejecting the concept of "conditional" prophecy, dispensational futurists differ dramatically from Adventists in a host of ways, summarized below under three headings:

A. Secret Coming of Jesus (Rapture). Jesus comes secretly (rapture) seven years before he comes publically.

B. Restored Jerusalem Temple. During the seven years between the secret and public comings of Jesus (the 70th week of Daniel 9), a Roman prince ("the little horn" of Daniel 7 and 8) will arise as antichrist, bringing to an end the sacrifices that are again being offered in a restored Jerusalem temple, built on the site of the Moslem mosque, Dome of the Rock.

C. Old Testament Practices Are Resumed During a Millennium on This Earth. When Jesus comes publically at the end of the seven years, he ushers in the 1000 years on earth during which all the unfulfilled Old Testament prophecies will be literally fulfilled. Drawing heavily on Isaiah 65 and 66 and Zechariah 14, dispensational futurists believe that during this 1000 years there will be childbirth, death, animal sacrifices; evil will gradually disappear. The New Jerusalem comes to earth at the end of the 1000 years. At

that point all evil will be destroyed.

By contrast, Adventists have maintained the traditional Protestant understanding of a public Second Coming at the beginning of the 1000 years, just one *public* Second Coming, not a secret one followed by a public one seven years later. But Adventists have taken the almost unique position that the 1000 years are spent in heaven. During that time the earth itself is empty and desolate. At the end of the 1000 years, Jesus, God's people, and the New Jerusalem all come to earth for the final judgment and the elimination of evil.

Now a crucial question: If Adventists and dispensational futurists both claim the Bible as God's Word, how can we differ so widely in our understanding of the book? We're not talking here about differences between "supernaturalist" conservatives who affirm God's personal presence and miraculous activity in the world, and the "naturalist" liberals who want to overlook the supernatural aspects of Scripture or explain them away. We're talking about two groups of rock-ribbed "supernaturalist" conservatives, if you please. How did we get so far apart on last day events?

The crucial issue is whether or not one can actually "see" the conditionalist elements in Scripture. The ability to see conditionalism has been a gift that God has given us through the Disappointment experience. Let's look at it more closely.

Conditionalism: The Adventist Difference

The clue to the great gulf between futurist dispensationalists and Adventist historicists, lies in the qualifying word that Adventists (cautiously!) began to add to the word "historicism" when Jesus did not return soon after the Great Disappointment: *conditional* historicism. Adventists concluded that Jesus did not return immediately because his people did not fulfill the "conditions" necessary for his return. In short, God "delayed" his return, an idea suggested by a line in the parable of the ten virgins: "The bridegroom was delayed." [Matt. 25:5] Adventists believe that human beings play a key role in the unfolding events of the great cosmic conflict between God and Satan. Put bluntly: we make a difference for good or for evil in the great conflict. From such a perspective, even "predictions" by inspired prophets can be postponed or actually fail because humans do not make the right choices. That is how Adventists explain the shift from literal Israel to spiritual Israel: God's chosen people rejected their Messiah, opening the door to a new people, those who follow Jesus, a kingdom based on choice, not pedigree.

The fact that "predictions" can turn out otherwise than predicted is already confirmed by the stories of Jonah's preaching to Ninevah and King Saul's loss of the kingdom to David. But those applications are not made by dispensational futurists. And that's where we part company with them, for they reject the idea of conditionalism with reference to God's people Israel. They believe that if God gives promises to his people, those promises must be fulfilled precisely as found in Scripture. God can be trusted not only to know and predict the future but also to bring it to pass. Thus, as far as the Old Testament is concerned, if God gave promises and predictions about Israel that have not been fulfilled – and all readers of every shape and flavor, both conservatives and liberals, agree on that conclusion – then those promises and predictions must be fulfilled in the future (hence the label, "futurism").

Perhaps the most startling aspect of that kind of futurism is that it "predicts" a return to

animal sacrifices in a restored Jerusalem temple. These are devout Christians who believe in the finality of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Yet because of their rejection of conditionalism, they are forced to bring everything from the Old Testament into an earthly kingdom after the Second Coming of Jesus. On this view, instead of moving us toward a perfect world, the Second Coming takes us back to a world that includes animal sacrifices, political conflict, childbirth, and death. All of that lasts for 1000 years. Then the world will be made new.

But all of this begins to point to a very important question: Who shapes history: God or human beings? We take up that question next.

Does God Shape History Or Do We?

To be perfectly honest, I know my church well enough to know that even if we might agree in our rejection of the futurist approach, not all of us would be enthusiastic about the way I have described the Adventist position above, at least certain features of it. Even though I have tried to be honest and even-handed in describing where the church stands "officially," questions of how the human will relates to the divine will defy easy answers. The crucial issue is: Does God shape history or do we? Adventists would love to answer that question simply with a resounding Yes! – thus affirming both sides of a paradox that resists a tidy solution. In fact, saying Yes! to both sides is basically what we have done. After all, if Scripture affirms both positions, why shouldn't we? It's a simple solution, but a practical one rather than a strictly logical or rational one. It may be as close to the truth as we are able to get. And it is indeed "rational" to note that Scripture affirms both sides of the question without telling us just how to put them together.

Can we talk further about that? Let's try and I'll start with a story.

In 1985, at the Springville campmeeting in Utah – a beautiful garden of Eden out in the middle of nowhere – I was giving a series of studies on Jeremiah, a book pulsating with conditional elements. I vividly remember the setting at the beginning of day two. It was a gorgeous day; a gentle breeze was rustling the leaves, the sides of the tent were up; we could hear the birds singing.

"I'd like to start with a summary of what we discussed yesterday," I said. "The first point is that in some sense God knows the future."

Immediately a voice rang out from the back of the tent. "What do you mean, *"in some sense God knows the future"*? God knows the future!"

I started to respond by referring to passages in Jeremiah that we had discussed the day before, but I was interrupted by the same voice again: "I don't care what the Bible says," he said with conviction and a grin, "God knows the future!"

Surprise! I had come face to face with a good Adventist Calvinist!

But now I want to address the two sides of the question from a perspective that I believe will help us understand each other better, indeed, bring us onto common ground. This is only a quick a snapshot; it deserves a whole lot more.

"Let me do it!" (Human Will) Or "Carry me, Daddy!" (Divine Will)

Human will or divine will? That's the crucial question and the great divide. Many

Christians, even very devout ones, would simply shrug and say, “Both, of course. What’s the problem?” The problem is that not everyone is able to say “both,” at least not with any enthusiasm. Some would argue tenaciously for the priority of the human, others just as tenaciously for the divine. The tussle between the two perspectives has been a huge source of tension throughout history. We’ll look at just a small slice of history here so that we can focus on the differences between Adventists and dispensational futurists.

Those who emphasize the human side of the story, talk about free-will, human freedom, holiness, human responsibility. In Protestant Christianity, this free-will tradition traces its roots to the Dutch theologian Arminius (1560-1609) and the Anglican clergyman, John Wesley (1703–1791), founder of Methodism. “Arminian” and “Wesleyan” are the labels used to describe this kind of theology. Among Protestants, its primary supporters would be found among the Methodists and Nazarenes. That’s Adventism’s natural home too.

By contrast, those who emphasize the divine side of the story, talk about divine election, divine sovereignty, divine grace. Total depravity and original sin are also prominent in their vocabulary, ideas that simply go missing in the free-will tradition. Among Protestants, this tradition goes back to Luther (1483-1546) and even more to Calvin (1509-1564). But the great Roman Catholic churchman, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), is generally considered the true father of this “grace” tradition. And in Augustine’s mind, free-will and grace simply did not fit together: “In trying to solve this question,” he said, “I made strenuous efforts on behalf of the preservation of the free choice of the human will, but the grace of God defeated me.” [Cited by Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford, 1986), 117, quoting *Retractationes* ii.1 (addressed to Simplicianus of Milan).]

Interestingly enough, though Augustine is highly revered by Roman Catholics, the Catholic tradition, in general, moved in the direction of free-will and human responsibility, so much so that it triggered Martin Luther’s “by faith alone” rebellion, the Protestant Reformation. Among Protestants, Presbyterians and members of the Christian Reformed Churches identify with this Augustinian tradition. Indeed “Reformed” is the label that distinguishes this emphasis from the Arminian/Wesleyan free-will tradition. In America, at least, the term “Evangelical” generally carries a strong Reformed flavor. The popular Christian journal *Christianity Today* is much more Reformed than Arminian.

It must be noted, however, that the free-will tradition can also emphasize grace. John Wesley’s theology is a good example. But Wesley emphasized the human role so strongly that he and one of his early compatriots, George Whitefield (1714-1770), actually had to part company. Both continued with very effective ministries, but with each going his separate way, Wesley emphasizing the human will, Whitefield the divine.

To give a more earthy flavor to the discussion, I use two quite different phrases that I heard from our two girls when they were growing up. The labels don’t fit any more now that the girls are grown, but at one point, one was much more inclined to say to her father, “Let me do it!” the other one, “Carry me, Daddy.” Would you believe that those differences are reflected in the world of worship and theology? They are indeed.

Courage, Hope, or Just Plain Confusion?

As I was discussing the tension between the two positions with a good friend, I commented that I took courage and hope from the fact that the labels did not appear to be

permanent. They could be moved, remodeled and changed! I'll comment further on that below.

But his response was one of puzzlement: "Why should that give courage and hope?" He asked. "It just sounds like confusion to me!"

So why do I take courage and hope instead of simply seeing confusion? Because it means that we have a clear mandate to seek ways of shaping the church so that both perspectives can remain strong. The fact that there is a certain fluidity means that many have not yet settled into their natural "home" where they can love God wholeheartedly. Helping people find their "home" is the crucial task facing every parent, teacher, pastor, and indeed every believer. Recognizing the diversity in Scripture and in experience means that we dare not zero in on just one answer and try to force everyone into that mold.

In that connection I must say that based on my own observations, Methodist parents tend to give birth to Calvinist children and Calvinist parents tend to give birth to Methodist children. But families can also be divided and communities tend to drift back and forth, too. In Moscow, Idaho, for example, a prominent family of ministers has divided along the human-will/divine-will fault line. As a result, two of the brothers are Reformed ministers while the father and one son have remained free-will. Feelings are so strong, in fact, that one of the Reformed brothers forbid the members of his church to even talk with the members of his brother's free-will church.

The Reformed brother who decreed the separation between the two churches, has written a book that forcefully presents Reformed theology. The first edition closes with a poem that reveals the deep sense of horror that rushes into a Reformed believer's soul when free-will people start to question God. Questions that seem quite innocent to free-will people easily sound blasphemous to the conscientious Reformed believer. The last two lines of the poem are revealing:

So hold your peace, rebellious pot,
The Lord is God – and you are not.

[Douglas Wilson, *Easy Chairs, Hard Words: Conversations on the Liberty of God* (Oakcross Publications, 1991), 189. The poem is omitted from a second edition that carries the same 1991 copyright date, but is published by Canon Press, P. O. Box 8741, Moscow, Idaho 83848].

The fluidity of the two traditions, however, is revealed in more subtle ways. At major conventions, for example, I have heard mutterings from professors on both sides of the divide complaining about the drift from Reformed to Arminian theology, on the one hand, or from Arminian to Reformed theology, on the other. And several years ago at a seminar I was holding at a United Methodist Church in Florida, I asked for a show of hands in response to my question: "How many of you have family, friends, or acquaintances who at one time were in the free-will tradition but who have moved to the Reformed tradition?" In that group of some 45 believers virtually every hand went up.

When I discuss the subject, I make a serious effort to use neutral language as much as possible. That makes it easier for us to fill in the spectrum between the two extremes. On the divine side, for example, "predestinarian Calvinist" is too narrow a term. It's too easy for free-will people (the starting point for most Adventists) to dismiss "predestination" out of hand and not even think about it anymore. It's just too troubling for them, even though the Bible,

especially the Apostle Paul, uses that language without hesitation. [E.g. Rom. 8:29-30; most of Romans 9 to 11 reflects Paul's struggles to bring the ideas of free choice and God's election into some kind of harmony.] One devout Adventist, for example, obviously a free-will supporter, even went into print with the line, "The Satanic God of Calvinism." [Ralph Larson, *The Hellish Torch*, published privately (1998). Larson, a conservative Adventist perfectionist, declares "that Calvinism sees God as "arbitrary, cruel, unforgiving, tyrannical" (p. 6).] That's strong language to use for a Reformer who merited several pages of laudatory comments in Ellen White's *The Great Controversy!* [GC, the chapter entitled "The French Reformation," especially pp. 219-221, 233-236.]

If we explore the full spectrum of beliefs on the issue, we will discover that some will emphasize the sovereignty of God and divine foreknowledge while avoiding or even rejecting the idea of predestination. But as one moves deeper into free-will territory, the idea of divine foreknowledge comes under fire. The "openness of God" theology is an attempt to address that issue by claiming that God knows everything that can be known, but chooses not to know our moral decisions lest such knowledge compromise our freedom to choose. [Richard Rice is an Adventist author who has contributed significantly to the debate. See his *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Washington, D.C: Review and Herald, 1980); reissued as: *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985). See also, Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).] That's a departure from the more traditional position that God knows everything.

Even with qualifications, however, "openness" theology is likely to horrify true believers in Reformed theology. They quite rightly sense that if one keeps moving far enough toward the free-will side, God simply disappears, leaving only the human. The so-called "slippery slope" will do its deadly work and belief in God disappears. The result is pure secularism.

One last comment about the labels before we focus again on eschatology: churches (like their seminaries) can shift their theologies. Several years ago when I was teaching a class in Modern Denominations, the Presbyterian pastor who visited the class sounded almost like an Adventist, even though he was from the Reformed tradition. He certainly was much closer to Adventism than the pastor from the United Methodist Church who told the class that "God is not a person and heaven is not a place." The students were so startled they hardly knew where to begin with their questions.

Finally one of them asked, "Then where is God?"

"We swim in God," said the pastor, a reply that would have astonished John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, fully as much as it did us. Clearly the free-will tradition had led this particular pastor far afield.

Now what is so tantalizing in this whole discussion is that the Bible gives us wonderful fodder to support both sides. Not surprisingly, however, one side grabs the texts supporting free-will, while the other side grabs the texts supporting the priority of the divine will. And both sides find it easy to ignore or re-interpret the other set of passages. So the arguments continue to boil with neither side actually hearing the other and neither side taking seriously *all* of Scripture.

What I find to be even more intriguing and challenging are the implications of the generational shift that I noted above: the switch from Methodist to Calvinist and back to Methodist. Those who love their church *and* their children are eager for their children to share their deepest hopes and fears. But in an individualist culture like our own, if a church cannot satisfy the spiritual needs of the children, they will be tempted to go in search of one that does.

To spell that out, if children of a free-will bent find themselves in a church that doesn't give enough emphasis to human freedom, the children could easily be tempted to find a church that stresses the importance of human initiative and freedom.

Similarly, if children who are longing for a clearer sense of divine direction find themselves in a church that stresses human initiative and freedom, the children could easily be tempted to find a church that emphasizes divine sovereignty.

I believe Adventism has a wonderful opportunity to meet the needs of both sides. But because the love of human freedom is so deeply rooted in the Adventist soul, we don't always do a very good job of meeting the needs of those who long for a stronger sense of divine direction in their lives. And I am convinced that such an impulse lurks in the hearts of millions of Adventists. I think we can do better.

But now we must turn to some aspects of Adventist history that may help us understand ourselves as well as our futurist friends, and ultimately help us take *all* the Bible seriously, not just the texts we happen to like.

The Fruit-Basket-Upset Principle

The crucial factor that ultimately opened the eyes of Adventists to the possibility of conditionalism was the Great Disappointment. It was a "Fruit-Basket-Upset" experience, as a friend pointed out, one that forced us to look more closely at each piece of fruit as we put it back into our basket.

Initially, the Great Disappointment felt like a horrible disgrace and a disaster. But with the passage of time, it became clear that several blessings had come from the experience, a confirmation of Romans 8:28 that God is at work in all things. In particular, I am referring to the intriguing role of what sociologists call "social support," the powerful effect that the people around us have in helping us believe or disbelieve. And it is indeed a two-edged sword that can cut either way, reinforcing truth or reinforcing error. One sociologist noted rather wryly: "Much of what we consider reasonable is largely the consensus of the people around us." As uncomfortable as that may sound and feel, there is evidence that seems to point in that direction.

In that connection, I like C. S. Lewis' candid admission of vulnerability. Arguing that difficulties with faith may have little to do with intellect and reason, Lewis asks: "How many of the freshmen who come up to Oxford from religious homes and lose their Christianity in the first year have been honestly *argued* out of it? How many of our own sudden temporary losses of faith have a rational basis which would stand examination for a moment?" He goes on to admit that "mere change of scene" tends to "decrease" his faith, at least at first. "God is less credible when I pray in a hotel bedroom than when I am in College. The society of unbelievers makes Faith harder even when they are people whose opinions, on any other subject, are known to be worthless." [C. S. Lewis, "Religion: Reality or Substitute?" in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 42.]

Does that same process work on the positive side? Of course, and here we have the testimony of Scripture. The Epistle to the Hebrews admonishes us to "hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful." But hope doesn't just depend on God, argues the inspired author. We have a work to do for each other: "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of

some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” [Heb. 10:23-25]

Precisely in connection with the Second Coming, I heard a fascinating illustration of how “social support” made it possible to believe a doctrine that otherwise had seemed impossible. In November of 1991, I heard Eta Linnemann tell the powerful story of how she emerged from the thorough-going rationalism of her German university experience into a living personal faith. The key turning point was coming to the conviction that Jesus was not simply a wandering Palestinian prophet, but was, in fact, her Lord and Savior. Every week she was meeting with a community of devout Christians who had surrounded her in love and were helping her to grow in faith. [Eta Linnemann told her story at the November 1991 meetings of the Adventist Theological Society in Kansas City, Missouri.]

When former students heard of her conversion, one of their first questions was: “And do you believe he is coming again?” “Not yet,” she had to tell them. She then told us, her audience, that it took several more weeks of meeting with the believers before the doctrine of the Second Coming actually became believable for her. [Relevant observations on Linnemann’s experience are found in the early pages of her *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology. Reflections of a Bultmannian turned evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 7-20.]

Often a “fruit-basket-upset” experience can clear the way for new insights. When we are securely and comfortably rooted in a “traditional” environment, the Spirit can not so easily impress us with anything new and dramatic. But when someone or something upsets our fruit basket, we can see all kinds of things we didn’t even know existed before.

In Eta Linnemann’s case the “fruit-basket-upset” was triggered by a personal crisis. New converts to any community are most likely to come from people who are in transition or who have been in turmoil. In the early years of Adventism, the “fruit-basket-upset” experience of the Disappointment led to the establishing of the “landmarks” that are so essential to Adventist identity. The “little flock” who came through the experience still believing that God had been at work were cut off from non-believing family members; they were mocked and derided by their detractors. It was no fun at all. But what that painful experience did was open a window of opportunity for them so that they could take a fresh look at every aspect of their faith. As they grew and discovered things together, they reinforced each other’s faith along the way.

Thus, during those difficult months following the Disappointment, our pioneers met together for prayer and serious Bible study. In the late 1840s, these “Sabbath Conferences,” as they came to be known, brought the believers together in homes, barns, and upper rooms, as our pioneers hammered out our essential beliefs. That’s when they came to clarity on the non-immortality of the soul, the seventh-day Sabbath, and the heavenly sanctuary, beliefs that were quite different from anything they had grown up with. The chaos of the Disappointment had opened their minds to new beliefs. They saw Scripture with new eyes, eyes that could now begin to see the implications of conditionalism as it related to the end of time.

A Fresh Look at Prophecy: Moving Toward “Applied” Historicism

The next step in this process involved the Adventist understanding of prophecy. How could they explain the delay when the prophecies seemed so very clear? Had God let them down? The most pointed explanation came from the pen of Ellen White in 1883 when she decided to

respond to critics who were mocking Adventists for their continuing faith and hope: “The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short,” wrote Ellen White. “Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the Word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional.” [Ms. 4, 1883 (1SM 73; *Evangelism*, 695).]

And so it was that the idea of “conditionality” began to make its way into Adventist thinking. The book of Jonah illustrates this phenomenon in God’s gracious response to the repentant sinners of Ninevah. The KJV bluntly describes the events like this: “God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he said that he would do unto them; and he did not do it.” [Jon. 3:10, KJV] Instead of “repented,” the NRSV says God “changed his mind.”

How does that square with God’s response to Samuel when Saul disobeyed God’s command to destroy the Amalekites? Again, from the KJV: “The Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent.” [1 Sam. 15:29, KJV] The key phrase is “he is not a man.” In other words, God does not repent like a man because a man repents because he finally admits that he has done wrong. Interestingly enough, just a few short lines after the declaration that the Strength of Israel does not repent, Scripture records the statement noted at the beginning of this chapter, that “the Lord repented that he had made Saul king over Israel.” [1 Sam. 15:35, KJV]

A solution to the puzzle of divine repentance can perhaps be glimpsed in the fact that throughout Scripture God consistently responds graciously to repentant sinners. Thus he “repents,” if we use the language of Jonah. Indeed, Jonah admits that the reason he ran away in the first place was because he “knew” God would forgive if the people repented. Though he doesn’t say so directly, Jonah seems to have been worried about his prophetic reputation. Apparently he didn’t realize that from God’s perspective, a failed prediction could mean a successful prophecy!

In any event, Jonah did his job well. And he seems to have been the only one to worry about possible negative fallout from his effective preaching. At least the Bible itself records no complaints or mockery from the people of Ninevah.

But the story of Jonah is troubling for predestinarians. Indeed, they have a hard time with all those passages in the Old Testament that speak of God’s “repentance.” And it doesn’t help when modern translations (like the NRSV) say God “changed his mind.” Seven times the Old Testament affirms that God does *not* repent. [Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29 (2x); Ps. 110:4; Jer. 4:28; 20:16; Ezek. 24:14.] Yet God still repents! In fact, if we simply look at the word “repent” and its close cognates in the Old Testament, based on usage in the KJV, God “repents” three times more often than all the other “repenters” put together. The actual score is 28 to 9! [According to *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*, the word “repent” or one of its cognates and derivatives appears a total of 44 times in the Old Testament. Only nine of those speak of human repentance, all the rest refer to God. Of the 35 times that it refers to God, seven are instances in which God does not repent, generally said with emphasis. That still leaves 28 passages in which God does repent.]

In the New Testament, not only is repentance much more popular – “repent” or a related word appears 64 times – but the people also do far more repenting than God. Only once does the New Testament say that God repents, and that is a quotation from the Old Testament. [Psalm 110.4, one of the OT passages affirming that God does not repent.] Thus in the contest over repentance, God wins

in the Old Testament by a score of 28 to 9. In the New Testament, the people win by a score of 63 to 1. We're just playing with words, of course. Modern translations have found other ways of communicating the idea, especially with reference to God, but also with reference to human beings.

But is there common ground between us and our futurist friends? Most likely we could all agree that God forgives sinners who repent. That's what both Testaments affirm. And that is really the bottom line in the book of Jonah. The challenge for predestinarians is to see how God (apparently) tries every possible method to lead sinners to repentance. How could the Great God of the universe "experiment"? Doesn't he know what will work?

Scripture would answer with a resounding yes! Of course God knows what will work. But at the same time, it reveals a God who tries every possible method to draw sinners back to him, to repentance and salvation. For Adventists, the great fruit-basket-upset of the Disappointment pushed us in the direction of accepting the principle of conditionality. And we gradually began to realize that divine foreknowledge does not mean a fixed plan. Thus we are able to look at Old Testament passages and recognize that some of the features of the end time may not happen in just the way the prophets described them.

Scripture affirms that God knows our hearts: "You discern my thoughts from far away," declares the psalmist. "You are acquainted with all my ways." Even before a word is on his tongue, exclaims the psalmist, "O Lord, you know it completely." [Ps. 139:2-4.] But Scripture also affirms that God will try every possible method "as if" he did not know what would work. Amos 4, for example, ticks off a long list of methods (most of them disasters) by which God tried – unsuccessfully, we could note – to win the hearts of his people.

Jeremiah is another Old Testament book that paradoxically throbs with examples of conditionality, yet opens with the affirmation that God knew Jeremiah while he was still in the womb. [Jer. 1:5.]

But now let's put the shoe on the other foot for a moment. We may chide our dispensationalist friends for not looking seriously at the texts that teach the Sabbath and the non-immortality of the soul. We may even chide them for avoiding those passages in which God is said to repent. But let me be blunt: dispensational futurists have dealt much more seriously with some Old Testament eschatological passages than we have. Chapter 17 refers to Isaiah 65-66, Old Testament passages that point to a new world where people die. But only old people die in that new world, not the young. Zechariah 14 is another important chapter, one that suggests a gradual elimination of evil rather than a clean break. An excellent article in volume 4 of the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* takes those passages very seriously. But I find that very few Adventists have paid much attention to it, either among the pastors or the laity. ["The Role of Israel in Old Testament Prophecy," SDABC 4:25-38 (1955).] It's time to look more closely at the principles laid down in that article. Perhaps the idea of "applied historicism" can help bring the pieces together.

Applied Historicism

If we take *all* the Bible seriously, it will point us to the kinds of answers we need in order to be faithful to our heritage, to Scripture, and to our mission. I do not believe that we should abandon historicism, even if virtually everyone else has. Historicism is too clearly taught in the

book of Daniel for us to choose any other alternative. But if we can add the word “applied” to “historicism,” we come very close to a simple approach already used in the Bible. Indeed, it is everywhere present in the book of Revelation. Instead of crying, Rome! the Bible says, Babylon! The application works because everyone knew the beastly characteristics that had made Babylon the symbol for everything evil. Thus believers could say “Babylon” but know that it meant “Rome”!

In “applied” historicism, then, the key players in the “historicist” drama become symbols for similar behavior elsewhere. With such an approach we can ask a question that vexes many Adventists these days: Where is Islam in biblical prophecy?

Nowhere and everywhere. Scripture appears to be silent about Islam. But wasn’t it also silent about ancient Rome? Are we then left speechless? Not at all. If any kingdom, any power, any church, even any believer, behaves like the beast, we can apply the principles which are so clearly illustrated in Scripture by the historical entities to which the Books of Daniel and Revelation point.

But in making the application, we should be very careful not to simply label a particular institution, nation, or church as evil and beastly as if it were evil in some kind of pure sense. We may be thoroughly opposed to the principles on which a particular system functions, but that does not mean that everyone within the system shares the evil characteristics of the system itself. That is true of Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, even Secularism. There are precious people in each of those “isms.”

When James and John, for example, asked Jesus for the two highest positions in his kingdom, they obviously assumed that Jesus operated on hierarchical principles. Not so, said Jesus. The Gentiles use authority in that way. But in my kingdom serving is the key idea, not ruling. That is clearly demonstrated in the fact that “the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.” [Matt. 20:28.] Jesus’ response strikes right at the heart of hierarchical forms of church governance. That is our fundamental objection to Roman Catholicism. But within the Catholic community are many beautiful Christians. Within every community there are beautiful people. We must not attack their institutions, their nations, their religions in such a way as to drive them away from the truth. In the words of Ellen White, we should not accost others in “a very abrupt manner” and make the truth “repulsive” to them. [4T 68 (1876)]

Jesus had strong words for the leaders of his day, yet Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were part of the group that he criticized so strongly. Jesus chose twelve disciples, yet Judas was among them. It may very well be that when we set out to hunt down the beast, we should play closer attention to Jesus’ parable of the wheat and the tares. At some points it is very difficult to tell them apart. But even when the tares are fully evident, pulling them out could destroy the wheat, too. “Let both of them grow together until the harvest,” Jesus said.

While we are waiting for the harvest, we should bend every effort to present a positive message, even when we are dealing with unhappy themes and evil people. Ellen White’s counsel to A. T. Jones is worth remembering, indeed worth memorizing: “The Lord wants His people to follow other methods than that of condemning wrong,” she wrote, “even though the condemnation be just. He wants us to do something more than to hurl charges at our adversaries that only drive them further from the truth.” [6T 121 (1901)]

Applied Historicism: Bringing Liberals and Conservatives Together

Let's be extraordinarily honest now, as to how "applied" historicism could bring Adventists together on eschatology.

The conservatives "know" their last day events. Everything is spelled out in *The Great Controversy*. But they worry that Islam doesn't seem to be present in biblical prophecy; they worry about Sunday legislation in two ways. First, in the sense that a "time of trouble" will, in fact, be a time of high stress. None of us would choose voluntarily to go through difficult times. But second, they worry that at the practical level, almost no one pays any attention to Sunday anymore. It has simply become a day for work, shopping, and recreation. After dark the haunting worry might be that if the Sunday law doesn't come as predicted, then prophecy gets a black eye and God's reputation suffers. What can we trust anymore if we can't trust Bible prophecy?

Understanding "conditional" prophecy is the best way to address those worries. There is a little bit of Jonah in us all. We want things to stay put. We want prophecies to be fulfilled to the letter. We need to recognize, however, that reading the Bible from the perspective of conditionalism won't make much sense unless you immerse yourself in the Bible *after* you have become convinced of the *possibility* of conditionalism. There is an unhappy little proverb that all of us need to hear: "If I hadn't believed it, I never would have seen it with my own eyes." Ouch. True. But ouch.

While speaking of conservatives, let me add a worry of my own, namely, that Adventist conservatives may not be worrying enough about the "beastly" attitudes reflected in conservative Protestantism. Southern Baptists, for example, our former allies in the battle for religious liberty, have jumped ship and now want to legislate religion and morality in America. They intend to use the ballot box to gain the majority and then force the country to be holy and to be good. We are with these devout people on many aspects of morality. But we should whole-heartedly oppose their view of how authority should be used in the name of God.

"Applied historicism" works wonderfully here. Sunday legislation may not be obvious on the horizon. It could return, of course, but whether or not it does, the "beastly" attitudes toward "authority" that Adventists have said would move us toward an enforced Sunday law are everywhere to be seen. We have reason to be concerned and to be vocal about our concern!

Now let's talk about the liberals. Their great danger is that they shrug too easily. They are more in touch with the "world" than conservatives and will be more deeply affected by secularist impulses. In many cases, they are almost biblically illiterate, never having learned how to build bridges from an ancient sacred text, the Bible, to a modern world. Conservatives read their Bibles. They may be highly selective in the way they read, but they do read their Bibles. But the hidden fundamentalism among the liberals is revealed in their tendency to ignore the Bible once it is shown to be adapted rather than absolute. Liberals, both "out there" and within, are most likely to be excited about the Bible when reading it as literature. That's not wrong. But it is not the same as reading the Bible as God's Word.

Liberals need to be aware that the tendency to keep the traditional pieces in place has great value. None of us can read the future. Yet we know from Scripture and history that attitudes toward force and authority tend to be cyclical. Just how those will manifest themselves in the future no one knows. But keeping all the pieces of the puzzle together will ensure that we preserve what is most important. Conservatives help do that for us. Our dispensational futurist

friends keep all the pieces in a way that is very troubling. But they do keep the pieces, including some that we need to look at more carefully from the standpoint of conditionalism. We don't want to throw out the book of Zechariah any more than we want to throw away *The Great Controversy*. All the details in both sources can give us a clearer understanding of how God has dealt with human beings in the past. That is very important as we seek to understand how he will deal with us today.

I have one more concern that may be the most crucial one of all, and that involves evangelism. The vast majority of people in our world assume that when God speaks, that word applies to all people at all times. On such a view, if God predicted something, it must come to pass. And that is where "conditionalism" is potentially dangerous. While it is thoroughly biblical and very practical in the end, it can lead to the collapse of faith if not handled with a great deal of care. That's why I believe it is so important for us to keep the solid foundation of historicism in place. Historicism has been a marvelous gift of God to his people. We are on the threshold of the kingdom and don't know when or how the final moments will take place. But holding firm to our historicist heritage can keep us pointed in the right direction. What we have said about Rome, Protestantism, and the United States in prophecy may or may not take place in exactly the way that we have envisioned it. But the story of those great powers illustrate the forces that are at work in the great conflict between good and evil. Understanding those forces is very important for us today.

From a practical point of view, however, knowing exactly what is going to happen should make no difference in our daily lives. Indeed, we should listen more carefully to the words of the angels to the disciples when they expressed their curiosity about the end of time: "It is not for you," they said, "to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." [Acts 1:7]

Similarly, Paul had good words of counsel to the Thessalonian believers, words that we need to hear today. In his first letter, after describing the events connected with the Second Coming at the end of chapter 4, he gives this practical counsel: "I don't need to write you about the time or date when all this will happen. You surely know that the Lord's return will be as a thief coming at night. People will think they are safe and secure. But destruction will suddenly strike them like the pains of a woman about to give birth. And they won't escape." [1 Thess. 5:1-3, CEV]

As helpful as historicism is to God's people, it does tempt us to forget that most important teaching of the New Testament, namely, that the Second Coming will be a surprise. It will be a surprise for everyone, for those who are ready and those who are not. If we are right with the Lord it will be a happy surprise. If we are not, it will be the kind of surprise that is no fun at all. Our goal must always be to make sure that as many of God's children as possible will be ready for a happy surprise when the Lord comes.

Finally, let me emphasize the clarity with which Scripture speaks about the end of time. Even in the Old Testament where the idea of full restoration does not seem to have been fully present, the idea of a future restored world is still very clear. And that unerring focus on future restoration is the crucial difference between the religion of Israel and that of her Canaanite neighbors. Theirs was a fertility religion that wasn't going anywhere. Israel looked forward to a new heaven and a new earth. They did not see with the same clarity that we can see in the light of the New Testament. But they still lived in hope.

Today the contrast is equally sharp. Adventists accept the clear biblical teaching that Jesus is coming again to usher in a new age. His return is the goal of history, the “Blessed Hope” for which we have so earnestly longed.

It would be wonderful if Adventists could get serious about Bible study again, liberals and conservatives together, using their respective strengths to shore up each others’ weaknesses. It would help us discover those things that really matter and it would bond us together just as our pioneers were bonded to each other in the Sabbath conferences of the 1840s. That would be good. Very good.

Theme: Lord of All Nations (Amos, 1 of 2)

Leading Question: What happens when God’s people hear that they are no better in God’s eyes than the more obvious “sinners” in the world?

Discussion Issues:

1. Startling Comparisons: Israel and her neighbors. The book of Amos opens with a string of judgments against Israel’s neighbors, a subtle introduction to the prophet’s primary message: warnings and judgments against the northern kingdom of Israel. The prophet Amos was actually a farmer from the southern kingdom of Judah who responded to God’s call to minister up north. But before dropping his bombshell on the prosperous regime of Jeroboam II, he tantalized his primary audience with his sharp criticisms of seven of Israel’s neighbors. The first three were traditional enemies: Syria to the northeast, Philistia to the southwest, and Tyre to the northeast. Then he inches closer with pronouncements against three of Israel closer relatives: Edom, the descendants of Esau, Jacob’s brother; then Ammon and Moab, the descendants of Lot through his two daughters. Finally, he strikes out against Judah, Israel’s immediate neighbor to the south, the other kingdom whose national deity was the same as Israel’s: Yahweh.

Of all the recipients of Amos’s wrath, however, Judah is the only one whose judgment was strictly religious: Judah has “rejected the law of Yahweh” (Amos 2:4, NRSV). In other words, Judah had broken her covenant with her God. The same charge could have been laid against Israel, but for all the other enemies and also for Israel herself the judgment focused, not on religious sins, but on sins against humanity. Two questions emerge from this sequence of judgments:

A. Which is the more damning judgment, the religious one of breaking the covenant with Yahweh (Judah), or the more secular one, of sinning against one’s fellow creatures (all the other neighbors and Israel herself? Later in his book, Amos will utter scathing rebukes against Israel for practicing religious rituals while abusing the poor and the needy, but his opening salvo calls Israel to account for selling the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals; for trampling the heads of the poor into the dust, and for pushing the afflicted out of the way (Amos 2:6-7). For the church today, which would be the more damning charge: sins against God, or sins against humanity?

B. What would have been the psychological effect on Israel of hearing the judgments against her neighbors first, then watching them come ever closer to home, with the last one against Judah, then finally on Israel herself? Would the judgment on Israel have come as a surprise, or as an ominous last word?

2. The Remnant: An Unhappy Label. In the history of God’s people, the idea of being called a “remnant” is a loaded concept. There are at least three potential applications, all of them with unhappy overtones:

A. **The Blessed and Superior Remnant.** While the prophets constantly told their listeners that God had called them for responsibility rather than for privilege, the natural temptation for a religious remnant is to see themselves as superior to the non-remnant around them. This idea of a privileged remnant was exploded by Amos’s carefully crafted sequence of judgments in Amos 1-2. As the last word, Israel is finally confronted with judgment for committing the same sins against humanity as her neighbors had.

B. **The Tragic Remnant.** The idea of tragic remnant is expressed in Amos 3:12: a shepherd finds only “two legs or a piece of an ear” after a lion has attacked and the homeowner returns to his destroyed property and finds only “the corner of a couch and part of a bed.” It would be like Joseph’s brothers bringing a blood-soaked garment as the only “remnant” of their lost brother.

C. **The Restored Remnant.** While there is a tragic backdrop to this view of the remnant, it still reflects the idea of hope, surfacing even in the book of Amos. In 5:15, for example, the prophet declares that if Israel will “hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate,” then “it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.” And at the end of the book, Amos declares that God will “destroy” the “sinful kingdom” from the face of the earth – but follows with this hopeful note: “except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob, says the LORD.”

Discussion question: Adventists believe that God has called them to be a remnant. How does the book of Amos inform our understanding of our calling to be a remnant today?

3. The Lion King. In his “Bible Amplifier” volume on the minor prophets (*Hosea-Micah*, Pacific Press, 1996), Jon Dybdahl notes that Amos’s picture of God is a strong one, typified by the image of a lion. Dybdahl notes that one British commentator (Motyer) actually entitled his book on Amos, *The Day of the Lion*, echoing Amos 1:2: “The LORD roars from Zion” (NRSV). In 3:7 Amos declares, “The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?” (NRSV). In short, the lion spurred Amos into action who then used that powerful image with the people of Israel. Dybdahl’s comment is one worth noting:

Yahweh, the Lion, is a problem for many believers today. We prefer Yahweh, the compassionate Parent and solicitous Shepherd. We can deal with a loving, merciful God, but the Lion who roars and enacts curses troubles us. We live in an age when many desire to domesticate God. We want to turn the Lion of Amos into a purring pet. We must remember that it is sin on the part of Israel and the righteousness and holiness of a covenant-keeping God that creates the lion. Sin today is just as dangerous and just as capable of creating the Lion. Amos will have performed a great service if he helps us remember that. – Dybdahl, *Hosea -Micah*, p. 112

4. Once Cursed Always Cursed? Included in this lesson is a quick glimpse at the book of Obadiah the shortest book in the Old Testament – only 21 verses. The judgment against Edom was particularly harsh because of the Edomite scorn against Judah when it had fallen on hard times. “You should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune,” declares the prophet Obadiah (vs. 12, NRSV). Amos includes a similar indictment: Edom will be judged “because he pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity” (Amos 1:11, NRSV). The harsh words of Psalm 137 are part of the same story. Obadiah declares that because of this hatred against his brother, Edom would be “cut off forever” (vs. 10, NRSV).

And yet for all this strong language, the Old Testament frequently portrays God as “changing his mind,” “relenting,” or “repenting” (depending on the translation) with reference to threatened judgments. This is true in Amos (cf. Amos 7:3, 6); Jonah illustrates the same point, for when the people of Ninevah repented, God also repented (Jonah 3:10)! Perhaps the most powerful illustration of all is provided by Ruth the Moabite. Even though Deuteronomy 23:3 explicitly closes the door to the Ammonites and Moabites as participants in the “assembly of Yahweh,” the book of Ruth shows that this mandate was not universal. Ruth became part of the royal genealogy, one of the progenitors of King David. And through that line she stands in Jesus’ genealogy as well, a point emphasized in Matthew’s list of Jesus’ ancestors in his opening chapter (Matt. 1:5).

Discussion question: Is it possible for us to hear the gracious possibilities lurking in the shadows of even the most vivid judgments in Scripture?

husbands, “Bring something to drink.” In Amos 6:1-7, the contrast between rich and poor is less vivid, though the party-goers are described in some detail. They “lie on beds of ivory,” “eat lambs from the flock,” “sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,” “drink wine from bowls,” “anoint themselves with the finest oils.” Then the zinger – “but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.” Clearly these are people who are reveling in all kinds of creature comforts while their brothers and sisters are languishing in genuine poverty.

Discussion Question: How can conscientious Christians enjoy any creature comforts at all when there is so much want and poverty in the world? Is Jesus’ visit to the wedding at Cana (John 2) any help? Or is our appeal to that example likely to lull us into the very experience condemned by Amos?

4. Sinful Religion: Amos does not content himself with contrasting party goers who live at ease in the midst of poverty-stricken people. These party-goers are apparently also deeply religious, at least in the external sense. In one passage, Amos allows himself to slip into sarcasm and scorn. “Come to Bethel – and transgress; to Gilgal – and multiply transgression,” he exclaims (Amos 4:4). Bring sacrifices, tithes, and offerings. Announce your gifts to the world (Amos 4:4-5)! But his more sober counsel is *not* to go to Bethel or Gilgal at all. Instead “Seek me and live” (Amos 5:4-5). But then he really explodes against their religious practices: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the voice of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:21-24, NRSV).

Discussion Question: As long as there is serious injustice in the world, can God’s people afford to revel and rejoice in religious services? Or should we simply “sigh and groan over all the abominations” in (Ezek. 9:4, NRSV)? How do we find a balance? Or is even the attempt to find a “balance” already a sinful compromise?

5. The Power of Intercession. Although Amos’s presence in the northern kingdom was not at all welcomed by the authorities – Amaziah, the priest at Bethel, told him pointedly to go back home to Judah (Amos 7:10-13) – Amos himself still reported that his intercession on Israel’s behalf had convinced the LORD to back away from some of the threatened judgments against the land. In the series of judgments described in Amos 7 to 9, the first two – locusts and a devouring fire – are withdrawn by the Lord. In both cases, the Lord “repented,” to use the KJV word, and he did so in response to poignant prayers from Amos: “O Lord GOD, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small” (Amos 7:2). And again, “O Lord GOD, cease, I beg you....” After these two successful interventions, the judgments could no longer be restrained.

Discussion Question: Today, is it possible that some of the more unpopular and somber ministries on the fringes of the church may actually be preserving the church from judgments? Or should such a heavy-handed mission be restricted to messengers who have been especially called

by the Lord? That latter approach seems to be the point of this counsel from Ellen White to those who attempted to follow her example, ill-advisably, according to Ellen White:

God has not given my brethren the work that He has given me. It has been urged that my manner of giving reproof in public has led others to be sharp and critical and severe. If so, they must settle that matter with the Lord. If others take a responsibility which God has not laid upon them; if they disregard the instructions He has given them again and again through the humble instrument of His choice, to be kind, patient, and forbearing, they alone must answer for the results. With a sorrow-burdened heart, I have performed my unpleasant duty to my dearest friends, not daring to please myself by withholding reproof, even from my husband; and I shall not be less faithful in warning others, whether they will hear or forbear. When I am speaking to the people I say much that I have not premeditated. The Spirit of the Lord frequently comes upon me. I seem to be carried out of, and away from, myself; the life and character of different persons are clearly presented before my mind. I see their errors and dangers, and feel compelled to speak of what is thus brought before me. I dare not resist the Spirit of God. – 5T 20 [1881]

3. Absolute or Conditional Message: The Prophet's Choice. According to the book of Jonah, Jonah's successful prophecy was spoken as an absolute rather than as a conditional prophecy. In other words, Jonah gave the people no "if" in his message. And yet it worked. The people repented. Is there any indication in Scripture as to whether God always directs the prophet to use one approach or the other? In this case, Jonah preached an absolute message: "In forty days, Ninevah will be destroyed" – no ifs, ands, or buts. But it turned out to be conditional. Might he have been less successful if he had actually preached the "if" as Jeremiah did in Jeremiah 26? Jeremiah barely escaped with his life when he preached the "if." Here is the story:

"Who Can Change the Mind of God?"

By Alden Thompson

Signs of the Times, Feb. 1992, 25-27

God is in the business of changing people's minds, especially the minds of sinners. That's not surprising. But it is worth a raised eyebrow or two to hear God ask sinners to help *Him* change His *own* mind.

You heard right. God asks sinners to help Him change His mind. Jeremiah 26 tells the story, shedding important light on the purpose of God's prophetic messages in the Old Testament.

In the chapter, the spotlight is on Jeremiah himself, a prophet in misery, prophesying in a miserable time. The Lord has sent him a bad news/good news message to pass on to the people of Judah. The bad news is God's threat to destroy the temple and the city of Jerusalem. The good news shines through in the word IF: *IF* the message is blunt enough, suggests God, maybe "they will listen, all of them, and will turn from their evil way, that I may change my mind about the disaster that I intend to bring on them because of their evil ways" (Jer. 26:13 NRSV). It's an earlier version of Peter's "patient" God who wants everyone to repent and no one to burn (2 Pet. 3:9).

In this instance, Jeremiah lays down a definite IF, an approach well-attested in Scripture. Moses' last speech to Israel is perhaps the most notable example: Blessings IF you obey (Deut. 28:1-14), curses IF you don't (Deut. 28:15-68).

Jeremiah 26 tells us more about God's use of the IF clause. But before we take a closer look, we should note that God does not limit himself to this one approach. In many instances He seems to drop all conditions, speaking of both doom and salvation *as if* they were iron-clad and sealed, no ifs, ands, or buts.

Prophecies of doom in this mode are easy to spot in the prophets. Micah, for example, on Jerusalem: "It's all over. Zion will be a plowed field, Jerusalem a heap of ruins" (Mic. 3:12). Or Jonah to Ninevah: "In forty days Ninevah will be destroyed" (Jonah 3:4).

On the positive side, unconditional promises of salvation are also ready to hand. God takes the initiative. Jeremiah's new covenant promise is a good example: "*I* will write my law on your heart. Your life depends on *my* certain promises, not your broken ones" (Jeremiah 31:31-34). The same is true of Ezekiel's promise of a new heart: "*I* will give you a new heart. And *my* Spirit will make you keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Since promises and threats appear in both modes in Scripture, that is, with the IF and without, it is interesting to note how Christians bring the two patterns together – or keep them apart.

Mostly they have kept them apart. Those who stress Divine sovereignty (e.g. the Presbyterian and Reformed [Calvinist] tradition) focus on the unconditional promises and threats, minimizing the human response. But those who stress the importance of the human will (e.g. the Methodist [Arminian] tradition) have less to say about Divine sovereignty, focusing instead on the IF clauses.

Pushed to their logical extremes, the two approaches seem contradictory, at least at the theoretical level. One world is determined by God's decision, the other by human effort. If, however, we look at both approaches for their practical, motivational value, they complement each other, covering the full range of human needs, for as perceptive parents, teachers, and pastors know all too well, what turns one person on, turns another off, and vice versa.

Some crave freedom, others security. Some love a challenge, responding best when they have a hand on the reins. Others are most productive when assured that their destiny lies secure in God's hands.

In our modern world, it is the difference between those who thrive on the uncertain excitement of working on commission and those who need a steady salary: the hard-driving salesman in the showroom, and the faithful accountant in the back room. In a religious setting, it is the difference between the fast-paced world of the evangelist and the more settled parish environment of the pastor.

Remarkably, because of sin, either approach can result in discouragement or carelessness. Those who love a challenge too easily slip into neutral in a secure world. Those needing security become just as ineffective in the face of a challenge.

So God does what every wise parent, teacher, and pastor has to do: He mixes, matches and blends His methods, becoming all things to all people in order to save some.

But now let's return to Jeremiah 26 and look more closely at God's attempt to motivate His people. When Jeremiah first pled with them to change God's mind by changing their behavior, they treated Jeremiah as a traitor. Jeremiah 7 records his attack on their secure world. You can't just say: "The Temple! The Temple! The Temple!" as though it were some magic charm, he warned. You can't kill, steal, and commit adultery while claiming the temple as security. Reform, says God, or I will destroy this temple as I did the one at Shiloh (Jer. 7:1-15).

Jeremiah 26 records the people's reaction. "Treason," they cried. "You shall die!" (Jer. 26:8-9). They liked their safe, secure world, one unthreatened by wicked behavior. Amazingly, they viewed Jeremiah's *conditional* threat as a treasonous certainty, even though he plainly said God was begging them to change His mind (Jer. 26:3). "If you repent," Jeremiah promised again, "God *will* change His mind" (Jer. 26:13).

Suddenly, someone remembered a piece of history, just enough to rescue Jeremiah from the mob. "Wait!" came the cry. "In the days of King Hezekiah [some 100 years earlier] didn't the prophet Micah prophesy that Jerusalem would become a heap of ruins? Yet King Hezekiah didn't put Micah to death. Instead, he turned to the Lord and the Lord changed His mind" (Jer. 26:17-19). Jeremiah 26:18 includes the actual quote from Micah 3:12, a threat of destruction, unconditional and unequivocal. Yet Micah's audience heard the unspoken IF and repented. And the Lord changed his mind.

The same thing happened when Jonah preached against Ninevah. Although he announced unconditional destruction, the people heard God's IF, repented, and saved their city. The NRSV simply says: "God changed his mind" (Jonah 3:10). Jonah, however, was angry. He wanted

smoke, even though, as he himself admitted, he knew all along that God would relent if the people did (Jonah 4:1-2).

In the end, a remarkable two-fold conclusion emerges from the prophets: 1. When people are sensitive to the Spirit of God, they hear His IF, even when it is not stated. 2. When they resist, they don't hear the IF even though it is shouted in their ears. Isn't it curious, that those hearing Micah and Jonah responded positively to the unconditional threat, while Jeremiah's listeners resisted the IF? Only when they remembered Micah's unconditional threat did they finally hear the IF and respond.

It seems safe to conclude, then, that as far as God's threats are concerned, all are conditional, even when no IF is included. But what about promises of salvation and restoration? That's a more volatile question, for while all evangelical Christians agree that restoration is certain, the when and how is much debated.

A sizeable number of modern Christians have adopted so-called "dispensationalism," a perspective emphasizing God's sovereignty to the virtual exclusion of conditionality: God's prophecies will be fulfilled, period. Consistent with that position, every unfulfilled prophecy from the Old Testament is expected to be fulfilled *in detail* at the end of time or during the millennium to follow. Even human death and animal sacrifices are said to continue after the second coming of Christ.

If we take the position, however, that the purpose of prophecy is to reform not simply to inform, then we can see every prophetic "restoration" picture as establishing the principle of restoration. The details will differ according the differing needs of each audience. The great restoration pictures of Scripture, Ezekiel 40-48, Isaiah 65-66, Zechariah 14, Revelation 21-22, all confirm the hope of restoration, yet the details differ, sometimes dramatically. Recognizing the principle of conditionality explains why some were not fulfilled in the Old Testament. Yet we don't have to toss them out as contradictory or struggle to integrate every detail into one grand master plan. They simply are God's way of being all things to all people that He might save some. Saving is always God's consistent purpose. That never changes, even when threats of doom seem to overwhelm the promise of restoration.

Finally, I must admit, that Jeremiah 26 has helped me see the glimmer of hope even in the most emphatic pronouncement of doom, for when Jeremiah says that "the Lord will change his mind about the disaster that he has pronounced against you" (Jer. 26:13 NRSV), he picks loose a thread of hope that apparently was bound fast when King Josiah, just a few years before, discovered the law book in the temple and learned to his horror that the nation was doomed. As told in 2 Kings 22, the prophetess Huldah informed Josiah that Judah's sin was too great. Disaster was certain. But the Lord would postpone destruction until after Josiah's reign because the king had humbled himself before the Lord (2 Kings 22:15-20).

Could the evil day have been postponed permanently by continued repentance? I think so, for Jeremiah promised the people: "The Lord will change His mind." If rattling the saber will wake the people up, the Lord will do it. "Change my mind," He says. "I want to save, not destroy."

4. Conditionality: A Bitter Pill for Some. The story of Daniel in the lion's den gives us a hint of the great challenge in presenting the idea of "conditionality." According to Daniel 6, King Darius had appointed 120 satraps to rule his empire. Over these 120 he appointed three

presidents, one of whom was Daniel. Daniel, however, soon “distinguished himself above all the other presidents and satraps.” As a result, “the king planned to appoint him over the whole kingdom” (Dan. 6:3, NRSV).

The other presidents and satraps were so resentful that they schemed to take Daniel out of the picture entirely. They brought a document for the king to sign declaring that for thirty days everyone must pray only to King Darius. The lions’ den awaited anyone who prayed to anyone else, human or divine. The Persian schemers urged Darius to sign it, “so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked” (Daniel 6:8, NRSV). The implication is that if human laws cannot be changed, how much less divine laws.

At a superficial level, Malachi 6:3 would seem to confirm just such a position: “I am the LORD, I change not.” But Scripture makes it abundantly clear that a crucial principle in the kingdom of this changeless God is that those who repent and turn from their evil ways – as the people of Ninevah did – should be granted grace and not be destroyed. Even angry Jonah admitted as much. When the Lord confronted him over his anger, he bluntly shared his feelings and his convictions. In the quaint words of the KJV, we hear his complaint and his conviction all rolled into one: “I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.”

Our challenge: In America alone, there are some 30 million devout believers – the “Left Behind” dispensationalist futurists – who have not heard Jonah’s complaint and conviction. Instead, they readily line up behind Darius’s 120 satraps and his 2 presidents and declare that laws cannot be changed or revoked. Somehow we need to bring Jonah back to life so that they can hear the truth.

5. Conditionality: An Adventist Perspective. A key, but subtle, element in the Adventist understanding of prophecy came in the aftermath of the Great Disappointment in 1844. Firmly gripped by the historicist perspective, Adventist pioneers never dreamed of seeing their experience in terms of conditional prophecy. But as the years passed, the gap between their early expectation and the reality became more evident, at least to some observers.

Adventism’s classic statement on conditional prophecy came from the pen of Ellen White in 1883 when she was troubled by an inquiry from a non-Adventist critic who suggested that the Adventists had a faulty understanding of prophecy. She wrote a rather lengthy response, but apparently never sent it. It is simply an orphan in the Ellen White files.

There is also no evidence that she used any part of this “defense” during the rest of her life. No part of it was published until 1946 when five paragraphs from the manuscript appeared in the book *Evangelism*, including this crucial one:

The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional. – Ev. 695 = 1SM 67

The tantalizing question is: Did Ellen White decide not to publish the article, and perhaps not even to respond to the critic, because she knew how volatile the issue “prophecy” could be? The Ms was discovered in the White Estate vault during the 1930s, excerpted in *Evangelism* in 1946, then published for all the world to see in 1958 in *Selected Messages*, Bk. 1, pp. 59-73. It carries the tag, Ms 4 1883. This Ms undoubtedly played a key role in the preparation and publication of a seminal article entitled “The Role of Israel in Old Testament Prophecy” published in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (4:25-38), an article that is scarcely known among Adventists today, even though it caused quite a stir when it was first published in the SDABC (1955). Given everything that is happening in our changing world, maybe the time has come for Adventists to take that quotation seriously – and to renew our study of the Minor Prophets, especially Joel, Jonah, and Zechariah.

Theme: God’s Special People

Leading Question: What kind of messiah would one expect if one only had the book of Micah?

Introductory note: Micah’s ministry spanned some four eventful decades, years that witnessed the end of the Samaria and the northern kingdom of Israel and Sennacherib’s failed attack against Jerusalem. Micah and Isaiah were contemporaries, ministering in the southern kingdom of Judah. But Micah addressed some of his messages to Samaria and the people of the north:

Discussion questions:

1. Sins against God or against humanity? Read through the book of Micah and note the primary accusations against the people. Was Micah more concerned about sins against God or sins against humanity? In our day, is it still possible to be religious while violating our fellow human beings? In our day, is it possible for people to minister to the needs of people without being consciously committed to God? The OT prophets don’t seem to address this issue directly, but it is an issue suggested in the New Testament by the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. In Ellen White’s commentary on this parable in *The Desire of Ages*, chapter 70, are these two striking quotations:

Christ on the Mount of Olives pictured to His disciples the scene of the great judgment day. And He represented its decision as turning upon **one point**. When the nations are gathered before Him, there will be but two classes, and their eternal destiny will be determined by **what they have done or have neglected to do for Him in the person of the poor and suffering**. (*Desire of Ages*, 637)

Those whom Christ commends in the judgment may have **known little of theology, but they have cherished His principles**. Through the influence of the divine Spirit they have been a blessing to those about them. Even among the heathen are those who have **cherished the spirit of kindness**; before the words of life had fallen upon their ears, they have befriended the missionaries, even ministering to them at the peril of their own lives. **Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish**. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God. (*Desire of Ages*, 638)

2. A Messianic hope: Micah 5:2. Four verses in Micah 5, speak of the coming Deliverer (5:2-6). The most memorable verse for Christians is 5:2 for it mentions the birthplace of the Messiah as Bethlehem in Judah. In Matthew 2, it is the Jewish priests and teachers who quoted this

passage to Herod when he asked where the new king would be born. One could read the Micah passage as promising deliverance from earthly enemies, and Christ would eventually do that. Yet the keynote for Christ's own ministry would be the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. In other words, if one wants to know the true nature of the Messiah, one may have to look past some of the more traditional "deliverance" passages to the deeper spiritual mission which Christ came to fulfill. It is worth noting that when Jesus said that he would suffer and die, no one believed him – until after the resurrection.

3. An important conditional prophecy: Micah 3:12. "Jerusalem shall be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets" (NIV11). This verse was actually instrumental in saving Jeremiah's life, for when Jeremiah said that Jerusalem would be destroyed if the people would not repent (Jeremiah 26:4-6), the people accused him of treason for preaching against the city and state. Yet Jeremiah was not speaking an absolute message, but a conditional one! Finally, as the debate over Jeremiah continued, some of the leaders remembered Micah 3:12, an "absolute" prophecy against Jerusalem which turned out to be "conditional." The dialogue in Jeremiah 26:17-19 is revealing. In the end, the memory of Micah's prophecy won a reprieve for Jeremiah and he was not killed. Is this another biblical illustration of Ellen White's statement that "the promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional?" (Ms 4, 1883; =1SM 67) See the commentary on Jonah (Lesson #6) for further discussion of the issue of conditionality.

4. Paying for our sins: Micah 6:6-8. One of the most famous verses in the prophets is found in Micah 6:8: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (NIV11). But that verse takes on a larger significance when it is seen in its context. And perhaps for somewhat different reasons is very important for modern believers, too.

Chapter 6 opens with God's court case against Israel, a method often used by the prophets to call Israel to account. "For the LORD has a case against his people; he is lodging a charge against Israel. "My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me." – Micah 6:2 – 3. After reminding the people of the many good acts of the LORD, the court case shifts to the response of the people, given here in the words of the Good News Bible:

6 What shall I bring to the Lord, the God of heaven, when I come to worship him? Shall I bring the best calves to burn as offerings to him? 7 Will the Lord be pleased if I bring him thousands of sheep or endless streams of olive oil? Shall I offer him my first-born child to pay for my sins? 8 No, the Lord has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.

In the Old Testament context, this is a resounding rejection of anything that would savor of salvation by works. The respondent in Micah goes a step higher with each phrase: Will calves suffice? Thousands of sheep? Endless streams of olive oil? Or even one's first-born child? The GNB inserts an emphatic "no." And then the famous verse 6 follows. In short: humans cannot

buy their way into the kingdom with any kind of offering.

The modern application for Christians sheds an important light on the psychology of sacrifice and the Christian understanding of the sacrifice of Christ. Some of the more strident versions of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement portray God as demanding a price for sin, a price which God himself pays through the gift of his son. But Micah 6:6-8 gives reason for grounding the sacrifice of Christ in the human perception of what salvation might demand. It is the twisted human mind that thinks a price must be paid for sin. Fully recognizing that human impulse, God came in human flesh to forever answer that question. If anyone thinks that a price must be paid for sin, it is God himself who paid the price once for all and believers are forever free to revel in God's grace. Thus the substitutionary atonement is a necessity grounded in human need. It is not an absolute necessity demanded by God, but a psychological and governmental necessity required by the catastrophic effects of sin on the human mind.

17 Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.

In sum, maybe it is alright not to find all the answers, even though we have the freedom to ask our questions. Not all will be happy with that solution. But for those with questions it should be a comfort and relief.

2. Creative recycling of inspired words. The NRSV translates Habakkuk 2:4 as follows: “The righteous person will live by his faithfulness,” clearly referring to the faithful life of the righteous person. In the New Testament, especially in Romans 1:16-17 and Galatians 3:17, Paul quotes this passage, but seems to be shifting the emphasis away from human faithfulness to trust in divine faithfulness. Is it appropriate to be “creative” in citing biblical passages? Must the words of Scripture always be “according to context”? And should the New Testament make the final decision, if the Old Testament context seems to give a different emphasis?

In addressing that question, it would seem preferable to work toward a “both/and” solution rather than to try to force both the New Testament and Old Testament uses of a passage to say precisely the same thing. Two articles follow – the first perhaps more simple and straightforward than the second – which seek to establish that “both/and” approach.

Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?

Paternoster Press (1988), Zondervan (1989), Pacesetters (2000, 2003) Energion (2011)

By Alden Thompson

Chapter One

Don’t let your New Testament get in the way of your Old Testament

“In many and various ways God spoke of old. . .
in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.” – Hebrews 1:1-2

Some day I am going to write a book about all the unchristian sayings in the New Testament! Thus, in a tone at least partially serious, a well known Old Testament scholar revealed his unhappiness with the sometimes less-than-subtle claim of his New Testament colleagues that theirs was the superior Testament. According to the common generalization, the New Testament is the source of all that is good, kind and loving, embodied most of all in the person of Jesus Christ who reveals the friendly face of God. As the story goes, however, the Old Testament is at best a mixed bag. The occasional flash of brilliance may lighten the path of the

believer, but on the whole, the angry, the vindictive, the bloodthirsty, is far more prominent.

Now I suspect that there is at least a grain of truth in this common view of the two parts of our Christian Bible. At least I have never heard a Christian contrast the beauty and attractiveness of the Old Testament with the horrors of the New. No, Christians have always found refuge in the New Testament when the problems of the Old Testament have threatened to engulf them. In fact, some Christians even go so far as to claim with emphasis that they are *New Testament* Christians for whom the Old Testament is no longer authoritative.

Even if the problems with the Old Testament should stem from some monumental misunderstanding, the fact that such a misunderstanding is so common is something we must reckon with. But perhaps at the outset I should remind you of some of the likely candidates for my friend's book on the so-called unchristian aspects of the New Testament. Wasn't it Jesus who suggested that certain people deserved to have a millstone fastened round their necks and to be drowned in the depths of the sea (Matt. 18:6)? And didn't he openly call some people blind hypocrites, comparing them to an old burial ground, full of dead men's bones (Matt. 23:27-28)? And then there was Peter. For all practical purposes he told Ananias and Sapphira to drop dead (Acts 5:1-11). To add to the stories, Paul told the church at Corinth to deliver one of their brothers to Satan for the destruction of the flesh (1 Cor. 5:5), and to drive out the wicked person from among them (1 Cor. 5:13). Finally, we must not forget the book of Revelation: blood, dragons, pits of fire, and even a god who spews people out of his mouth (Rev. 3:16).

You could rightly accuse me of greatly distorting the faith by bringing that particular collection of sayings and events together without regard for context or the author's apparent intention. But that is precisely what happens to the Old Testament. Having grown up in the Christian community, I know the basic Old Testament 'list' quite well. Pride of place goes to poor Uzzah who was only trying to be helpful when stumbling oxen endangered the ark of God. Yet God struck him dead (2 Sam. 6:6-9); two angry bears mauled forty-two 'innocent' children who were disrespectful to their elders (2 Kings 2:23-25). If you are so bold as to complain about the way God is doing things, he will send serpents to bite you (Num. 21:4-9) or he will command the earth to swallow you alive (Num. 16:21-35). If you wish, you may add to the list the Genesis flood and the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah, for these, too, have often been cited as part of the evidence for a heavy-handed Old Testament God who flies into a destructive rage the moment someone crosses his will or breaks one of his commands.

Now I hope that you will pardon the way in which I have listed the above horror stories. If it is not already too late, I should perhaps even make a special plea right here for you *not* to toss aside such an irreverent book as this. I have several good friends who think it highly inappropriate ever to say anything that even hints at the lightest deficiency in God's style of leadership (perhaps taking their cue from Romans 9:20), and they are quick to caution me about the dangers of doubt. I am sensitive to those who feel that way, for I, too, am deeply concerned about the damage that doubt can cause. In this world, none of us is ever 'safe' from doubt. But as I put these words on paper, I must say that my convictions about the goodness of God are deeper and stronger because I have looked squarely at my 'small doubts' and have found answers which have brought genuine blessings.

When I say 'small' doubts, I am alluding to the fact that my experience has always been within the Christian community. I am the product of a careful and devout Christian home – a home for which I am immensely thankful. At the same time, the Old Testament stories (and the New Testament ones) of the type listed above can leave scars when mishandled and applied wrongly, even by well-meaning Christians. I know that I am not alone in having had at least

‘small’ doubts as a result of biblical material misunderstood and misapplied. Small doubts can easily mushroom into large ones and become extremely destructive. Indeed, even small doubts are no fun. But what is perhaps most significant for this book is that the very material which previously had been the cause of doubt has now become the source of great blessing.

So I intend to speak quite frankly about some of the ‘problems’ of the Old Testament. I really hope that those who have struggled with these same problems will also be able to transform their doubts into cornerstones of faith. From my own experience, I am convinced that once we have found faith, we must resist the attempt to command it in others. My doubts have seldom if ever yielded to mere commands, least of all to commands not to doubt! I must take my problems seriously. To be able to believe is a precious possession, one that I covet for all of God’s children. And though I am sure that no two of us ever find precisely the same path to faith, I am going to approach the problems directly, assuming that those insights that have been a great help to me can also be of help to someone else.

A “BETTER” REVELATION?

Right at the beginning of this chapter I noted the sharp contrast that is often drawn between the Old Testament and the New. That contrast is very important and we must not simply deny that it exists, for the very fact that God has chosen such different ways of revealing himself is part of the truth that he wants us to understand. We need no better authority than the book of Hebrews to remind us, that, in some ways, at least, the New Testament revelation of God is in fact better. The theme of the entire book is that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is “better.” The very first verse reminds us that in times past God used other methods of revealing his will. But now he has spoken through his Son (Heb. 1:1-2). But in chapter twelve the contrast is even more explicit: you have not come to a mountain of smoke, fire, and fear, but to Mt. Zion and to Jesus (Heb. 12:18-24). When I finally realized what those verses were saying, I was startled, for I had grown up in a Christian community which stressed the significance of the Sinai revelation. So in the light of a “better” revelation (the clear thrust of the book of Hebrews), what are we to do with the older revelation, the one which centers on Sinai?

For a start, the word “better” can express two rather different emphases. First, “better” is often simply in contrast with “worse”: yesterday your cold was “worse” – running eyes, a frightful cough, a hoarse voice – but today it and you are “better.” If that is the sort of contrast intended in Hebrews between the “better” Jesus Christ and the “worse” Mount Sinai, then the God of Sinai is indeed in trouble – as well as anyone who attempts to proclaim that both revelations are part of the Christian faith.

The second way of looking at “better” is to see it simply as the comparative of “good”: the revelation at Mount Sinai was good, and the revelation in Jesus Christ was “better.” Maybe we could even add the superlative: personal reunion with God in his kingdom will be “best.” If we can take such an approach to the two historical revelations of God, then there is no need to reject the first revelation. Rather, we may see it as a major step in God’s plan for restoring humanity and it is a good step at that. In fact, the Sinai revelation was precisely what God’s people needed at that time.

One illustration that has helped me to visualize the relationship between “better” and “good” has to do with my boyhood experience with the family cars. It fell to my lot to keep the “buggy,” as we affectionately dubbed it, clean and polished. Over the weeks and months I became quite good friends with the car. I knew each scratch and chip and did my best to touch

them up or to polish them out. This personal friendship with the car became a problem only when it finally became evident that a new and better car was needed. I well remember when we sold our beloved little 1950 Chevrolet. It had been a good car, even though we had moved on to something better – a 1956 Ford. Thereafter I would occasionally catch a glimpse of the Chev, now under the care of its new owners. A peculiar sensation of excitement and disappointment would strike me: “There’s our old car! Oh, but it’s not ours any more!” Perhaps those feelings explain why that next car, the ’56 Ford, is still in the family. Its finely polished, deep metallic green is still a sight to warm the heart. Newer and better cars have come and gone, but that old one is still “good.” It doesn’t have air conditioning, something very helpful in the desert regions of the West, and we probably wouldn’t take it on a long trip, but it was and is a good car. When we first bought it, it was just what the family needed and even now is a source of warm memories – as well as quite an adequate vehicle for short journeys.

I look on the relationship between Mount Sinai and Jesus Christ in a very similar way. I find the revelation of God in Christ a clearer and better revelation, but I certainly need not deny the marvelous experience that God gave to his people at Mount Sinai. It was just what they needed and it was good. Even today I can relive that experience and be blessed. The fullness of the revelation in Jesus can be joyfully received as Part Two of God’s great drama without detracting in the slightest from the marvels of Part One as described in the Old Testament. With any good book it is possible to hasten ahead and read the conclusion without ever bothering with what precedes. If we do that with our Bibles, however, we are missing a real treat and we are letting the New Testament get in the way of the Old. Yes, the New Testament revelation of God is clearer and therefore in some ways better. But if we neglect the Old in favor of the New, we shall never really experience that peculiar kind of joy that comes from experiencing the movement of God’s great plan from “good” to “better – and to “best.”

TWO APPROACHES TO THE OLD TESTAMENT: THE HIGH ROAD AND THE LOW ROAD

Another way in which the New Testament often gets in the way of the Old is also illustrated by the book of Hebrews. In particular, I am thinking of the famous “faith” chapter, Hebrews 11. If you read that chapter carefully and compare the stories there with the first accounts told in the Old Testament, you will notice a fascinating tendency in Hebrews to tell the stories in such a way that God’s people of ages past are all seen to be great people of faith. Perhaps it would not be too far amiss to compare what is happening in that list of stories to what often takes place at a funeral. Regardless of what kind of life a person has lived, the official memorial service remembers only the good. The deceased may have been a real villain, but you couldn’t guess that from what is said in public! Hebrews 11 doesn’t contain anything quite that extreme, but certainly the highlights of faith tend to exclude those less than complimentary features of the original Old Testament stories. Let’s note just a few examples.

The Genesis picture of Abraham is a man of faith – but one whose convictions often wavered when put to the test. His half-truths to Pharaoh about Sarah showed not only his lack of faith in God, but also his selfishness and lack of genuine respect for his wife (Gen. 12:1-20). Likewise, when he decided that Hagar could bear the child of promise (Gen, 16), he betrayed an uncertain faith. To be sure, these lapses of faith can actually be encouraging to us, for here is a man with serious difficulties yet who was adjudged to be faithful (Heb. 11:8-19). The point that I want to make, however, is that the *original* Old Testament story is essential if one is to reap

maximum benefit from the story in Hebrews. Hebrews 11 taken by itself is a fine story, but taken alongside the Old Testament story it becomes superb.

The mention of Sarah and of Moses in Hebrews 11 provides further examples of a partial telling of the Old Testament story. Hebrews 11:11 says that “by faith” Sarah conceived. Would you have guessed that she actually had laughed when God first made the promise to her – unless, of course, you had read the Old Testament story (Gen, 18:9-15)? And the contrast in Moses’ case is even sharper, for the Exodus story of the killing of the Egyptian and Moses’ flight from Pharaoh makes it quite clear that Moses fled because he was afraid (Ex. 2:14). But Hebrews 11:27 says that “by faith” he left Egypt, “not (!) being afraid” of the anger of the king. The *apparent* contradiction between the two stories is resolved by a clearer understanding of what “by faith” means in Hebrews 11, namely, that faith can work wonders even when the human agent does not really appear to be faithful. Yet that particular understanding of faith is possible only when one carefully compares the original Old Testament story with the interpretation of that story in Hebrews 11. Now I happen to believe that both the Old Testament and the New Testament stories have an independent value of their own and should be appreciated for their own sake, but linking the two together enhances our ability to understand God’s activities. I shall return to this point later, but now I want to note what has happened to the general interpretation of the Old Testament in view of the treatment that it receives in Hebrews 11.

Just as Hebrews 11 tends to focus on the highlights of Old Testament characters, emphasizing their faithfulness, their godliness, their commitment, so subsequent Christian interpretation has tended to glorify this “royal line” of God-fearing people. Such an emphasis is valuable. In an age when heroes are hard to come by, it is important to understand what a real hero is. Nevertheless, I remember my surprise when I actually got around to reading the Old Testament stories themselves after having heard only *Christian interpretations* of these stories. Some of the realistic and seamier aspects of the biblical characters came as real surprises. The horrors of polygamy didn’t really snap clear until I read the biblical edition of the story of Jacob’s family. The book of Esther is even more surprising. I had pictured her as a virtuous young lady without any taint – the feminine counterpart of Daniel. But when I actually read the biblical account, I began to realize that her standards of morality were quite different from mine. Not only was she willing to keep quiet about her convictions (Esther 2:10), but she was willing simply to be one of the girls, a part of the Persian king’s harem (Esther 2:12-18)! Daniel stood firmly for his convictions and his standards of morality line up rather well with what a modern Christian would consider appropriate. But Esther. . .!

I began to realize that Christians have often taken a “high road” approach to the Old Testament, which, in my case at least, had left me quite unprepared for the reading of the Bible itself. Subconsciously I had formed an image of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as classic saints who could quite easily slip into twentieth century dress and, if called upon, could easily assume positions of leadership in the Christian community. I suspect that this glorified conception of Old Testament saints is at least part of the reason why many Christians tend to read interpretations and adaptations of the Old Testament instead of actually reading the Old Testament itself. The emphasis on the good qualities of biblical characters is very necessary, especially in the training of younger children. But I feel keenly about the need to prepare Christians for the actual reading of the Old Testament, and to prepare them for coming to grips with the real Old Testament stories, even though many of them are not pretty when viewed strictly from an aesthetic point of view.

I sometimes use the term “low road” to describe an approach to the Old Testament which

takes account of the failings of the biblical characters and their strange, even barbaric, customs. The implications of this “low road” approach will be pursued further in chapter 2. But the point I wish to make here is that the “high road” approach (cf. Hebrews 11), when not accompanied by the “low road,” leaves one quite unprepared for the reading of the Old Testament itself. Thus, when a sensitive person comes upon a story which depicts how far the people had fallen, rather than how far they had grown, the natural reaction is to shy away from the Old Testament and resort to safer reading in the Gospels. In a sense, then, the New Testament has gotten in the way of the Old.

This predominance of the “high road” approach in dealing with the Old Testament came rather forcibly to my attention one day in my elementary Hebrew class. The class was composed of upper division ministerial students who were, in most cases, not more than a few months away from entering the ministry. The exercises in our grammar book had been modeled on biblical phrases so as to prepare the students for the reading of the biblical passages, and it was one of these exercises that caused an interesting problem for several members of the class. Correctly translated, one particular exercise should have read: “And Samuel cut off the head of the king.” Since the Hebrew was not difficult even for first-year students, I asked why this particular sentence had been a problem. Most revealing was the reply volunteered by one of my students: “We thought that was what the sentence said, but we didn’t think Samuel would do such a thing!” I suggested we take our Bibles and read (in English) the story of Agag in 1 Samuel 15. To one thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament, the story of Agag might raise certain questions, but the particulars would not be surprising. Yet it was a subdued group of ministerial students who listened in some astonishment to the following words: “And Samuel said, ‘As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.’ And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal” (1 Sam. 15:33).

In the discussion that followed, it became evident that they had been deeply impressed with the “high road” picture of the innocent and obedient boy Samuel in the temple, saying: “Speak, for thy servant hears” (1 Sam. 3:10). How could that little boy take a sword and hew a man in pieces – even if it was before the Lord? Such a strange act for such a good lad! To come down to our own age, it would seem even stranger for my pastor to take a sword and to hew a wicked elder or deacon to pieces before the Lord. But that is part of the Old Testament picture which we must seek to understand and one to which we must return later,

NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATIONS OF THE OLD

There remains yet one more major way in which the New Testament has tended to get in the way of the Old, and that has to do with the way that Christian interpreters have tended to take later usage or interpretation of a passage as the correct and only possible one. In actual practice, this approach has meant that when a New Testament writer refers to an Old Testament passage this later interpretation becomes authoritative in a way that subtly implies that the study of the original passage is really no longer necessary. Such an attitude has tended to limit greatly the study of the Old Testament, for when someone studies an original Old Testament passage he may find that the Old Testament writer has given a different emphasis from that in the New. To illustrate, we could simply refer to the interpretation of Moses’ killing of the Egyptian in Hebrews as compared with the original thrust of the story in Exodus. Inspired writers are often legitimately creative in their use of other inspired material, but to appeal to Hebrews, for example, as the source for the *original* as well as the final meaning of the Exodus passage is

quite inappropriate. Yet Christian interpreters are strongly tempted to do just that type of thing.

Perhaps the classic example of a New Testament interpretation getting in the way of an Old Testament passage is Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14 as a proof text for the Virgin Birth in Matthew 1:22, 23. Conservative Christians have always appealed to Matthew 1 as one of the passages that establishes the Virgin Birth. And the meaning in Matthew is clear: Jesus was born of a virgin. But the interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 is quite a different matter. If we try to read Isaiah 7 as an Old Testament person of Isaiah's day might have understood it, we are hard pressed to see how such a person could see in Isaiah's words a clear prophecy of the birth of Jesus Christ. The context of Isaiah 7 would, in fact, suggest that the child Immanuel was to be a sign in Isaiah's own day to the then reigning monarch, King Ahaz. When Matthew cites that passage he is giving a second meaning of the prophecy, one which "fulfills" the original meaning, or, in other words, fills the original prophecy full of new meaning. Matthew's use of the term "fulfil" is a matter to which I shall return later (see chapter 7). But the point we need to make here is that to find out what Matthew meant we must read Matthew; to find out what Isaiah meant we must read Isaiah.

That conservative Christians have often opposed this principal either consciously or unconsciously, is illustrated by the fact that when the Revised Standard Version of the old Testament was first published, considerable opposition arose in connection with its treatment of Isaiah 7:14. The King James Version had used the term "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14 as well as in Matthew 1:23; thus the language of the "prophecy" and "fulfillment" matched up quite nicely. But the RSV translators rightly retained "virgin" in Matthew while choosing to use "young woman" in Isaiah, a term which more accurately reflects the Hebrew original. In fact, there is a beautiful ambiguity about the Hebrew word *almah*, which allows both the original application in Isaiah's day and the secondary and more complete application to Mary the mother of Jesus. Yet the RSV translators were accused of tampering with the doctrine of the Virgin Birth by their translation of Isaiah.irate Christians staged Bible burning parties in protest, evidence enough that feelings were strong.

This is not the place for an extensive study of the way in which the New Testament treats the Old Testament. But the examples we have cited illustrate the freedom which generally characterizes the style of the New Testament writers. I do not want to deny the biblical writers this freedom in interpreting and applying other biblical material, but I am concerned lest that freedom, originally a result of the Spirit's movement, should become an excuse for evading our responsibility to come to God's word, seeking a fresh knowledge of his will under the guidance of his Spirit. When we allow all the writers to speak for themselves, we have taken a significant step towards relieving some of the problems that arise out of the differences between the Old Testament and the New. Scripture is much more like the full rich harmony of an orchestra than the single monotone blast from a trumpet. The many instruments, the different tones and harmonics, can symbolize the great variety of methods that God has used to work with humanity. As circumstances change, as people grow or degenerate, God molds his message to the needs of the hour. For a people long enslaved in a pagan culture, the Sinai revelation was just what was needed – a little thunder and smoke to catch their attention. But as time went on, a fresh revelation became necessary to correct certain misconceptions about God and to shed fresh light on the path of his people. The beauty of that fresh revelation of God in Jesus Christ is something very precious to everyone who calls himself a Christian. But if we should be tempted to look *only* to this new revelation, we must then remind ourselves that Jesus himself made the startling claim that his Father was the God of the Old Testament, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And

that was not all, for the Gospel of John suggests that Jesus himself was so bold as to claim that he was the great I Am, the God of Abraham (John 8:58). Thus there is no question that the two Testaments do belong together. But having said that, we must recognize that there are still two Testaments, each with its own particular message for us. So why should we allow the one to obscure the beauty and the truth of the other?

Is Exegesis the Enemy? The Case for Context-free Interpretation

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In this paper, I wish to address two key but embattled principles that are dear to the hearts of modern biblical exegetes, but which fly in the face of human nature. One involves literary context, the principle that any interpretation must be faithful to the original author's intent; the other involves historical context, the principle that time and place must be considered in the interpretation and application of Scripture. I argue for nearly a truce on the issue of literary context; but call for redoubled efforts, against sobering odds, to affirm the importance of historical context.

First, a synopsis of four different kinds of contexts, closely linked, but still distinct:

1. Devotional and mystical context. Here the text ushers the believer into God's presence, unhindered by critical issues of literature, history, or science. What happens in the worshiper's experience is analogous to the effect of music and art as described by Albert Camus:

Truly fertile Music, the only kind that will move us, that we truly appreciate, will be a Music conducive to Dream, which banishes all reason and analysis. One must not wish first to understand and then to feel. Art does not tolerate Reason. [Albert Camus, "Essay on Music" (1932), from "Music" [#9] in Robert Andrews, ed., *Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 611.]

2. Ethical and practical context. For those who accept the Bible as normative, as God's Word and a guide to life, every passage of Scripture triggers a crucial question: How does this text apply to me and to believers in our day? The haunting fear of the devout, however, is that human reason might undermine the sense of duty to which the divine text calls the believer. From such a perspective, the text may be elevated to an absolute norm because human reason may not know where to draw the line between that which applies and that which does not.

The assumption that God gives absolute – rather than adapted – information is illustrated by S. I. McMillen's little classic, *None of These Diseases*. The cover blurb on the original 1963 edition announces: "Science – 4000 years behind times! Sacred writings predate modern medicine." From the chapter entitled "Eel Eyes and Goose Guts" in the 2000 edition, which, like the first edition, details some startling health remedies from the Egyptian *Papyrus Ebers*, "a medical book from 1500 BC," this rationale is given:

Would Moses have enough faith to record the divine innovations, even if they contradicted his royal post-graduate university training? If Moses had yielded to his natural tendency to add even a little of his 'higher education,' the Bible would contain

such prescriptions as ‘urine of a faithful wife’ or ‘blood of a worm’.... But the record is clear: Moses recorded hundreds of health regulations but not a single current medical misconception. [S. I. McMillen, *None of These Diseases* (Revell, 1963, 1967); McMillen and David Stern (Revell, 2000); citing 2000 edition, 11.]

Would McMillen and Stern affirm the continuing and absolute value of the test for an unfaithful wife in Numbers 5, a test involving holy water mixed with dust from the floor of the sanctuary? Most likely not, but I could not find that example mentioned in their book

3. Historical context. Rolf Pöhler quotes Alan Richardson as saying that “the historical revolution is of greater significance for human self-understanding than the scientific revolution itself.” [Alan Richardson, “History, Problem of,” *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 156; cited by Rolf Pöhler, in *Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), 31.] If the same logic reigns as noted under the ethical context above, exploring the historical context can be deadly for faith. Recently, as I was attempting exegesis on an Old Testament passage, for example, that is, interpreting it within its original time and place, a devout student exclaimed, “The size of our preachable Bible gets smaller and smaller!” The assumption behind that exclamation is that all “preachable” truths should be absolute and self-evident everywhere in Scripture.”

4. Literary context. Attention to literary context may be the area where we are most affected by modern rationalistic methods of interpreting the Bible. Generations of seminarians have been haunted by Bruce Metzger’s definition of *eisegesis* in his *Lexical Aids for Students of New Testament Greek*, a little book first published in 1946: “*Eisegesis*: faulty interpretation of a text by reading into it one’s own ideas.” [Bruce M. Metzger, *Lexical Aids for Students of New Testament Greek* (Published by author; distributed by Theological Book Agency, Princeton, New Jersey, 1970 [1946, 1954]; new edition, Baker, 2001), 8.]

Here, in connection with literary context, I want to call for something that very nearly approaches a truce. Indeed, I argue that one cannot do good exegesis unless one knows how to do good *eisegesis*. Recognizing the value and place of both enables us to be more faithful in our understanding and application of Scripture.

Our challenge is that in a biblical world where Jewish Midrash reigned, a method that reads later truths back into earlier contexts, the rules of modern exegesis do not yield happy results. By arguing that we must be faithful to the original context, we constantly fly in the face of what the New Testament writers actually do and thereby set up significant tensions for our students when they see Bible writers doing what they have been forbidden to do.

To illustrate, note the use of the Old Testament in Hebrews 13:5-6, translated by the NRSV as:

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you” [Deut. 31:6]. So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?” [Ps. 118.6-7, LXX]

The context in Hebrews is greed, but both of the Old Testament quotations in this passage –

Deut. 31:6, 8 and Ps. 118.6, cited from the Greek Old Testament – are taken from warfare contexts. This type of re-application of Old Testament language is so popular among New Testament writers that those immersed in biblical studies scarcely raise an eyebrow. This creative citing of the OT passages in Hebrews 13:5-6 does not even merit a comment in the relevant section of the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*. [SDABC 7:491 (1957).] But for the uninitiated, Metzger’s definition of *eisegesis*, raises a haunting possibility: “faulty interpretation of the text.” The Bible writer has been judged wanting, biblical authority has been undermined, and the interpreter struggles with guilt for having uncovered the evidence.

The traditional explanation for such “out-of-context” usage is reflected in a very useful little book published by the General Conference in 1954, *Problems in Bible Translation*. In the chapter on “Principles of Biblical Interpretation,” the editors identify three ways in which the New Testament writers cite the Old Testament: 1) “direct comment and exegesis”; 2) “analogy”; and 3) “borrowing phraseology to state a new truth.” [“Committee on Problems in Bible Translation,” *Problems in Bible Translation* (Washington, D.C., General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1954), 108.]

The follow-up comment reveals the tension between modern rules of exegesis and what the New Testament writers actually do. When dealing with analogy and borrowed phraseology, say the editors, “care should be taken not to make of the quotation or allusion an interpretation of the original statement.” But then this qualifier is given: “Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit later Bible writers at times read into earlier statements of Inspiration meaning which would not otherwise be apparent, and of which the original writers themselves may have been unaware. Seeming discrepancy between two inspired statements is usually due to the misinterpretation of either or both.” [Ibid.]

In Adventism, the role of Ellen White as prophetic messenger and as interpreter has forced us to think more carefully about how to test prophetic voices, and we have consistently argued that any prophetic voice must be tested by the Scripture. The KJV of Isaiah 8:20 has been used to express this basic Protestant principle: “To the law and the testimony, if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” The fact that most modern translations take quite a different approach to that particular verse does not negate the basic soundness of the Protestant norm.

But the question naturally arises: If we are to judge inspired writers by that which we already claim to be inspired, how can we allow the Spirit to overturn or reverse what we have understood the standard to mean? In short, which is the norm, the earliest voice or the latest?

Modern handbooks on biblical interpretation, even those from an explicitly evangelical orientation, such as Fee and Stuart’s *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, often make matters worse by their ringing emphasis on original context. “The only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found in the original intent of the biblical text.” And again, “A text cannot mean what it never meant.” [Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 29, 30.]

I can appreciate the concerns that drive Fee and Stuart to give that emphasis, but the author of the book of Hebrews would not likely be convinced.

My proposal is: Let’s simply be brave and admit that the midrashic method of dealing with Scripture is nearly identical with the way all of us use words, phrases, and aphorisms. Some rather playful illustrations can help make my point.

My students know, for example, that when the lecture hour is nearly over, I am likely to glance at the clock and say, “The Philistines are upon us” (cf. Judges 16:9, 12, 14, 20). Am I

being faithful to the original context of the Samson story? Not at all. Is my meaning clear? Very much so.

A math colleague of mine grew up hearing echoes of the Goliath story whenever his dad wanted to play chess with him: “Come to me, and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the field” (1 Sam. 17:44). Was he being faithful to the original context of the story? Hardly. Was his meaning clear. Of course.

At one step removed from Scripture, I must admit that when I am on the racquetball court and muff a beautiful set-up shot, a line from a well-known hymn immediately flashes to mind, “Yield not to temptation!” Faithful to original context? No. Meaning clear? Yes.

The New Testament usage of the Old Testament is a lot like that, a serious playfulness by devout people who were steeped in the words of Scripture. In short, I want to argue that we should come clean, make peace with *eisegesis*, allowing the Bible writers to treat their texts any way they wish. We can still hear the *point* each writer is making, both in the original context and in the secondary one. In fact, following the rules of exegesis is what enables me to realize that Hebrews is, in fact, being free with the context.

I will cite just one modern example by way of illustration. The phrase *carpe Diem*, “seize the day,” has been popularized in modern culture in the film, “The Dead Poets’ Society,” at least that is where my students say they have heard the phrase.

But it has also been conscripted by Christians. Tony Compolo, the evangelical sociologist, published a thoroughly Christian book in 1994 entitled *Carpe Diem: Seize the Day* (Word). The last sentence in the first chapter confirms the Christian perspective: “*This book is about the new life in Christ!*” (p. 19).

The *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* attributes the phrase to the Roman poet Horace (65-8 BC), giving two quotations, one right after the other, that define what Horace originally meant by the phrase: [“Horace,” in *Oxford Dictionary Quotations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 349.9, 348.6.]

“While we're talking envious time is fleeing:
seize the day, put no trust in the future.” – Odes, bk 1, #11.1.7

“Believe each day that has dawned is your last. Some hour to which you have not been looking forward will prove lovely. As for me, if you want a good laugh, you will come and find me fat and sleek, in excellent condition, one of Epicurus’s herd of pigs.” – Epistles, bk 1, #4.1.13

As I was writing this paper, I discovered something quite intriguing about how my own mind plays tricks with words. I started to type, “Clearly the closest biblical equivalent to ‘seize the day’ would be ‘Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die.’” I stopped right there and headed for Matthew 24 to find the reference to merrymaking before the flood and its parallel with the second coming.

But my wording wasn’t there. A lively chase finally led me to the closest biblical equivalent in Isaiah 12:13, but without “be merry”: “Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.”

My memory had garbled many things. Had I switched “merry” and “marry” in Matthew 24? Perhaps. I’m quite sure that I am being faithful to the original context of Horace’s “carpe diem” and to its application in Matthew 24. It’s also clear that Campolo’s use of the phrase

ignores Horace's context. Campolo's usage is closer to the "Today" of Hebrews 4, but "carpe diem" has a nice ring to it and we will use it.

Similarly, Isaiah 8:20 – "To the law and to the testimony" – probably doesn't refer to the testing of prophets. We use the words because they sound so "biblical." The principle is true, but the context is not. Yet the traditional wording is so deeply rooted that it's probably with us to stay.

More volatile and more urgent, however, is the way we have mistaken Matthew's references to "fulfill" as if they had to do with prediction rather than amplification. In Matthew 5, Jesus' comparisons, "You have heard, but I say," clearly illustrate when he meant when he said "I have not come to destroy, but to fulfill." Jesus came to amplify the law, filling it "full" of new and deeper meaning: the law says no murder, Jesus fills those words full of deeper meaning and applies them to murderous thoughts.

But elsewhere in Matthew, his "fulfilled" prophecy passages are essentially midrashic in nature. And that is where we get into difficulty. Marjorie Lewis Lloyd, for example, in an article in *Signs of the Times*, lists a string of "fulfilled" prophecies, exclaiming: "Twenty-seven Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in twenty-four hours!" This same article cites Peter Stoner, in *Science Speaks*, who took just eight prophecies and declared that "coincidence is ruled out by the science of probability." [Marjorie Lewis Lloyd, "That Different Book," *Signs of the Times*, August 1976, 16-17.] Yet a check of the Old Testament literary context reveals that each of these so-called "proofs" has nothing to do with prediction. Each one involves midrashic amplification. But getting that message across *safely* to impressionable minds is not an easy matter.

To sum up my concerns about literary context, I hope my ambivalence is obvious. Good exegetical skills are essential. But I do want us to make peace with *eisegesis*. Rarely is it simply "faulty" interpretation of the text as Metzger told us. More frequently it is simply a playful interpretation of Scripture, a holy playfulness which gave the rabbis and their New Testament contemporaries great joy.

But as crucial as the literary context is for understanding the biblical text, it is the ethical and practical arena that has opened my eyes to the challenge of interpreting Scripture "in time and place." For reasons which I only faintly surmise, the first two context categories noted above, namely, the devotional and the mystical, and the ethical and practical, conspire together to undermine all our hard work to do good exegesis. And here I simply want to emphasize the nature of the sobering challenge we face.

The idea that God gave laws to Israel that were increasingly specific, based on need, is one that Ellen White develops magnificently in *Patriarchs and Prophets*. [See especially PP 303-314 (chapter 27), 363-373 (chapter 32).] Working from Deuteronomy 4:13-14, and the shift in vocabulary between "covenant" and "commandments" in 4:13 to "statutes" and "ordinances" in 4:14, I have argued that the One great principle of Love, Jesus' Two great commands, and the Ten commands represent an enduring law pyramid that never changes. Everything else in Scripture illustrates and applies that law pyramid in more specific times and places.

My students regularly tell me that this idea of the stable law pyramid is one of the most helpful things they take from my classes. But among my students I have discovered a subtle perception that illustrates why formal exegesis can so easily undermine faith.

When I began to sense the nature of the challenge, I started tracking more closely the student responses to some carefully crafted examination questions. The first red flag was in the summer of 2002 when I was teaching History of Adventism to a wonderful group of highly-

motivated upper division students and teachers returning to work on certification. The students were eager, devout, bright. That's why I was stunned by their responses on the first examination to this "loaded" question:

Question: Select the one answer most likely to represent your instructor's position on the applicability of Ellen White's messages:

- A. Ellen White's general counsels were inspired and universally applicable; by contrast, her specific counsels to individuals were simply practical counsel given by a godly woman and should not be considered inspired.
- B. Because of the principle of "once true, always true," all of Ellen White's writings are universally applicable, rising above the normal limits of time and place.
- C. Even Ellen White's most specific counsels are inspired and illustrate larger principles which others find useful.

The answer I thought would be thoroughly self-evident was "C": specific counsels illustrate larger principles. To my horror and amazement, eleven of the fifteen marked "A": only the general counsels are inspired, the specifics are not.

Since then I have continued to experiment in virtually every class, trying to find a more effective way of making my position clear. Whether I am dealing with Ellen White or the Bible the issue is the same: Are the more narrowly focused specifics inspired? In my Old Testament classes I want my students to recognize the One-Two-Ten as a rock-solid nucleus that never changes; but I also was them to see the more specific laws as "inspired" applications of those enduring principles.

I began reading the question to the students ahead of time, several days before the exam, identifying my position with great emphasis, telling them that the same question with those very same options would be on the examination. The order of the options might vary, but not the wording. The wording would be exactly the same as I gave it to them in advance.

What happens? In spite of my forceful words before the test, anywhere from ten to thirty percent still mark the same "wrong" answer. In the Winter term of 2007, for example, thirteen of thirty-three students marked the position that said I did not hold the specific counsels as being "inspired."

Finally, in the Winter of 2008, I tried a new wrinkle. I actually printed out the question on the "official" review sheet so that the students could see it with their very own eyes. But before giving them the review sheet, I passed out blank slips of paper, asking them to answer the question anonymously. From their unsigned slips, this was the result:

- | | |
|--|-------------|
| A. Only the general principles are inspired | 10 students |
| B. Universal applicability | 1 student |
| C. Inspired specifics illustrate larger principles | 8 students |

We then went over the question in its printed form as it would appear on the test (with the options scrambled). I spoke with emphasis and passion. Still, on the examination itself, four of twenty-seven students chose A, only the general principles are inspired.

Finally, in the Spring of 2008, after telling the story of what had happened the previous quarter, I “bullied” the entire class into marking the correct answer. Finally. Finally.

What intrigues me is that rarely will a student explicitly opt for universal applicability. But the actual process of interpretation seems to result in the “feeling” at a deep level that the more narrowly focused specifics really aren’t “inspired” by God precisely because they are not universally applicable.

As I have grappled with and puzzled over this issue, I have decided that there must be a deeply embedded impulse in human thinking, the inclination to believe that when God sends a message with his stamp of approval on it, then surely that message must be absolute and eternal, applying to all people at all times, in all places, and in all circumstances.

Is that kind of thinking linked in some mysterious way to Isaac’s reaction to the blessing that he had just pronounced on Jacob, the son who had so cruelly duped his aged father in order to steal the blessing, with his mother’s less-than-subtle approval, no less? In our (secularized) day, any son who would deceive his parent to steal a blessing would likely be stripped of any and all blessings. Yet, when Isaac learned that he had been cruelly deceived, he blurted out to Esau, the defrauded brother: “I have blessed him and blessed he shall be.” [Gen 27, especially vss 30-40.]

Does the story of Daniel in the lion’s den reveal the same kind of universalizing logic? “The laws of the Medes and Persians cannot be changed,” declared the king. The logic held even when King Darius discovered that he had been deceived. If human laws and the decrees of the king “cannot be revoked,” surely the word of the “gods” must be even more enduring.

I really don’t know if the illustration I give my students actually solves the problem completely, but I do ask them to join me in imagining a classroom scenario to illustrate how more narrowly focused laws and applications can be as “inspired” as universal ones:

Imagine a sleepy student, I suggest, who has been having difficulty waking up in the morning and getting to class on time. In an effort to motivate the student to get up and get going, I suggest the following to him: “Do you want me to come to your room at 7:45 in the morning with a class of cold water to dump on you so that you will be awake and ready for class on time?”

That personalized threat would be just as much from the teacher as the course outline, but only the course outline applies to the whole class.

In the same way, all of Scripture is inspired of God. But not all of it is universally applicable, however perverse that may feel in the depths of human experience. There is not a person on the face of the earth who is capable to doing all that God says should be done, not because they are rebellious, but because God has adapted his specific counsel to opposite needs. If one person is always too early and another too late, they will get opposite messages. Some students write too much, some not enough. To the extent that the Bible can help us in our daily living, it must be full of many “contradictory” examples.

In short, I have sensed a powerful impulse to believe that anything that comes from God really should apply with equal force to all people everywhere. If Adventists are going to preserve the Bible as a document from which we can seek guidance for our day by first interpreting what the text meant in the author’s day, we have a monumental task ahead of us.

it also refer to the end of the world when Jesus returns?

Note: The answer to that question arises from a knowledge of how “Day of the Lord” is used throughout the prophetic books of the Old Testament. In short, it always refers to a local event in the very near future. And the heavenly signs that were so prominent in the book of Joel are almost always part of that “Day of the Lord” with an immediate local application.

Conclusion: These local events (judgments) prefigure a larger final judgment, but a judgment that is rarely glimpsed in the books of the Old Testament.

A Survey of the “Day of the Lord” in the Prophetic Books and in the New Testament

Key biblical passages: “Day of the Lord” (and related terms)

Isaiah	2:12; 13:6, 9
Jeremiah	46:10
Ezekiel	30:3, 18
Joel	1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14
Amos	5:18-20
Obadiah	15
Zephaniah	1:7, 14-15
Zechariah	14:1
Malachi	4:5

Key biblical passages involving celestial signs (sun, moon, stars, darkness):

Isaiah	13:10	(Babylon)
	24:23	(earth)
Jeremiah	15:9	(Jerusalem)
Ezekiel	32:7	(Egypt)
Joel	2:10, 31	(Zion)
	3:15	(all nations)
Amos	8:9-10	(Israel)
Habakkuk	3:10-11	(earth)
Matthew	24:29-30	(Jerusalem/Advent)
Mark	13:24	(Jerusalem/Advent)
Luke	21:25-28	(Jerusalem/Advent)
Acts	2:20	(Pentecost)
Rev.	6:12	(Advent)

3. The view from the New Testament: In Matthew 24-25, Jesus warns us not to be focused too much on events because the coming will be a surprise. Do the passages in Zephaniah (and elsewhere in the prophets) make it sound like the “Day of the Lord” is some distant event, or is it very near?

4. The view from Adventist history. In the context of Adventist history, the Great Disappointment of 1844 taught Adventists the great danger of predicting the time of the Advent.

In 1883, nearly forty years after the Disappointment, Ellen White, penned these striking words for those who thought the long wait was a problem:

“The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the Word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional.” – MS 4, 1883, 1SM 73 [*Evangelism*, 695]

C. S. Lewis, with reference to the Advent hope in the New Testament sounds a similar warning about the dangers of trying to predict just when the advent might be:

“We must never speak to simple, excitable people about ‘the day’ without emphasizing again and again the utter impossibility of prediction. We must try to show them that the impossibility is an essential part of the doctrine. If you do not believe our Lord’s words, why do you believe in his return at all? And if you do believe them must you not put away from you, utterly and forever, any hope of dating that return? His teaching on the subject quite clearly consisted of three propositions. (1) That he will certainly return. (2) That we cannot possibly find out when. (3) And that therefore we must always be ready for him.” – “The World’s Last Night” in *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays*, 107

In the same essay, Lewis also has something to say about the role of fear in our waiting:

“Perfect love, we know casteth out fear. But so do several others things – ignorance, alcohol, passion, presumption, and stupidity. It is very desirable that we should all advance to that perfection of love in which we shall fear no longer; but it is very undesirable, until we have reached that stage, that we should allow any inferior agent to cast out our fear.” – WLN, 109

5. The role of “fear” motivation in our day. So what role should fear play in our preparation for the return of Jesus?

The Student. At the close of this lesson I will include an autobiographical narrative of how I made the stunning discovery that in the Old Testament, the figure of Satan as a supernatural opponent of Yahweh only appears in three books in Jesus' Bible – the Hebrew Bible – all written or canonized toward the end of the Old Testament; Job 1 and 2 – in the third and final section of Hebrew canon; 1 Chronicles 21 – the very last book of the Hebrew canon; and Zechariah 3, a post-exilic prophet. A more thorough account of the biblical data, minus the autobiographical elements, can be found in chapter 3 – “Whatever happened to Satan in the Old Testament?” – of my book, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* (Paternoster, 1988; Zondervan, 1989; Pacesetters, 2000, 2003; Energion, 2011).

The short version of this story is that God assumed full responsibility for evil in order to prevent Israel from worshiping Satan as another deity. Satan still haunts the Old Testament story but is simply not identified until it was “safe” for the people to see the real truth. Amazingly, in Genesis 3:1, for example, the serpent is simply “more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made” (NRSV). The first passage anywhere in Scripture to identify the serpent as Satan is Revelation 12:9, in the very last book of the Bible. Yet what was safe for Israel is potentially deadly for us since in most of the Old Testament all evil is said to come directly from God.

The Christian. The narrative of Zechariah 3 teaches quite clearly that Satan, not God, is the accuser. That was a truth emphasized by one of my seminary professors, Edward Heppenstall. The biblical text may be perfectly clear, but if you have grown up believing that God is the accuser, you will need lots of help to reverse the story. As one sociologist quipped, “If I hadn't believed it, I never would have seen it with my own eyes.”

Another truth from Heppenstall that struck home for me is this one: “Satan doesn't have to tell any lies about us; all he has to tell is the truth.” But the truth of our sin doesn't really matter because Yahweh commands that our filthy clothes – like Joshua's – be taken away and that we be clothed in clean white garments. The doctrine of grace couldn't be any clearer.

The Adventist. In the setting of the great struggle between Christ and Satan, one of the terrors that can haunt those who believe in free will is the call to perfection, a perfection that would enable us to stand before a holy God in our own righteousness. In that connection, studying Ellen White's experience helped me to understand that I don't need to stand in judgment as the accused, but as a witness for what God has done. Here the story of Zechariah 3 played a two-step role in Ellen White's experience. First, in 1880, she blurted out her feelings of helplessness to God, and an angel pointed her to Zechariah 3, a passage that she had never quoted in any of her writings before that date. She wrote up the story in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, 467-476 (1885). But the revision in *Prophets and Kings* (1915/1917) in the chapter entitled “Joshua and the Angel” (582-592) is the real masterpiece, for there she fine-tunes the account to perfection, deleting a problematic passage from the earlier version: “No sin can be tolerated in those who shall walk with Christ in white” (5T 472); and adding these key lines, omitted from the earlier version: “After claiming His people as His own, the Lord declares: ‘They may have imperfections of character; they may have failed in their endeavors; but they have repented, and I have forgiven and accepted them’” (PK 589).

In short, the reluctant God has vanished. The believer can now stand complete and secure in Christ in spite of a flawed character. The second attachment to this lesson includes a copy of the story of how the transformation took place in Ellen White's experience – and then in mine.

Alden Thompson, *Escape from the Flames: How Ellen White grew from fear to joy and helped me do it too* (PPPA, 2005)

Chapter 7

Violent God? – More Help from the University

In several different ways I have already pointed to a key principle in my understanding of Scripture and Ellen White, namely, that a good and gentle God, the one we see most clearly in Jesus, the one who wants to win our hearts, is willing to be violent and appeal to fear in order to win over violent people. Indeed, God *must* use violence if He is going to reach such people at all.

But that conclusion might make more sense in the light of an event that happened at the University of Edinburgh while we were in Scotland. It looms large over everything else that happened during our Scottish sojourn as the key to my understanding of the God of the Old Testament. Simply put, it is the story about Satan in the Old Testament.

A more complete discussion of the biblical passages – minus personal autobiographical details – is found in chapter three of my book, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* ["Whatever Happened to Satan in the Old Testament?"] But here I want to tell briefly how the pieces of the puzzle first came together for me.

The Crucial Lecture

The focus of my PhD dissertation was on the "responsibility for evil" in IV Ezra, a Jewish book in the Protestant Apocrypha, dating from about AD100. The book consists of a running debate over the fate of Israel, with the complaining scribe Ezra on one side and the dogmatic angel Uriel on the other. For purposes of my doctoral work, my task was to determine whether the author's view was represented by the complaining Ezra or by the dogmatic Uriel (Ezra wins, I decided.) In the process, I was also exploring the various approaches to evil in the Old Testament and in Jewish intertestamental sources, documents written during the time between the Old and New Testaments.

One day my professor called to alert me to a lecture he would be giving to the divinity students: "The Demonic Element in Yahweh." He thought it would be helpful to me in my research. He was right – but he didn't know that it would also play a key role in my personal perspectives on Scripture and in my own religious experience. But, somehow, as a result of that lecture, the pieces came together for me in a way which has enabled me to see how a good God could allow Himself to be portrayed as doing evil things in the Old Testament.

I didn't – and still don't – put the pieces together in the same way the professor did. In fact, our major assumptions remain quite different. For him, the Old Testament is strictly a human production; God is nowhere in sight. For me, God is lurking everywhere, working hand-in-hand with the human – the "incarnational" approach suggested by Ellen White. [GC vi: "But the Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human.

Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that ‘the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.’ John 1:14.”]

The point of his lecture was that the God of the Old Testament was a combination of a desert demon and a good God. To make that clear, he ticked off the key Old Testament stories which portray a “violent” God. I was familiar with most of them: The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (e.g. Exod. 4:21; 7:3; 14:4); the destruction of the first born in Egypt (Exod. 11-12); the evil spirit which rushed upon King Saul (Sam. 18:10); Uzzah and the “electric” ark – as the professor put it (2 Sam. 6); the two she-bears that mauled the 42 boys (2 Kings 2).

But he also came up with some surprises, passages which I had somehow overlooked. The most startling ones for me were the Lord’s threat to kill Moses on the road back to Egypt (Exod. 4:24) and God’s claim to have masterminded child sacrifice in order to horrify Israel (Ezek. 20:25-26).

Also surprising (and very helpful) was the insight that only three passages in all the Old Testament actually come right out and identify Satan as a supernatural being opposed to God. And all three were either written or canonized (became fully authoritative), toward the end of the Old Testament: Job 1-2 (Job’s tormenter); Zechariah 3 (the accuser of Joshua the high priest); and 1 Chronicles 21:1 (the instigator of David’s census). Furthermore, some of the traditional passages which I had thought were perfectly clear, only tantalizingly point toward the presence of Satan, never mentioning him by name. According to Genesis 3:1, for example, the serpent was simply “more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made” (RSV). Not until Revelation 12:9 is the serpent explicitly identified as Satan.

But it is the story of David’s census in 1 Chronicles 21 which is perhaps most significant, for it is the “later” re-telling – Chronicles is the last book in the Hebrew Bible – of the “earlier” story found in 2 Samuel 24, but with notable differences, the most dramatic being the shift from God to Satan as the one who triggered the census (2 Sam. 24:1//1 Chron. 21:1).

“Present Truth” to the Rescue

That note about the two versions of David’s census ties in with a key idea in Adventist history, one well-known among early Adventists and given specific emphasis by Ellen White, namely, the idea of “present truth.” For our Adventist pioneers, the words “present truth” referred to the cutting-edge truth for the present hour, standing in tension with the “landmarks,” the enduring truths from the past. Ellen White’s most forceful use of the phrase was in connection with the “new” emphasis on righteousness by faith in 1888. In her view, Adventists had become so wrapped up in the law that they couldn’t see Jesus. “Let the law take care of itself,” she exclaimed in 1890. “We have been at work on the law until we get as dry as the hills of Gilboa, without dew or rain. Let us trust in the merits of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” (Ms 10, 1890, *EGW1888* 2:557).

That’s why she spoke so forcefully about “present truth” at the 1888 General Conference. Referring to the fresh emphasis on Christ’s righteousness as presented by A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner, she said, “That which God gives His servants to speak today would not perhaps have been present truth twenty years ago, but it is God’s message for this time” (MS 8a 1888, address to ministers on October 21, 1888, cited in A. V. Olson, *Thirteen Crisis Years* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1981], 282).

As applied to the professor’s lecture, the principle of “present truth” allowed me to see

the following picture: The catastrophic results of sin meant that the truth about God was becoming increasingly garbled. Pagan nations were developing polytheistic religions (religions with more than one God) to explain their world. In polytheism, evil deities typically are responsible for evil. And since evil deities are the ones who could hurt you, believers did everything they could to manipulate and control them through elaborate magic rituals.

When the true God stepped more actively into history again with Abraham, He chose to take full responsibility for evil, thus preventing the possible worship of Satan as a competing (evil) deity. And when this true God led Israel out of Egypt, one of His first tasks was to establish the conviction in the hearts of His people that their God was the only one worthy of the name and powerful enough to rule the universe.

But given Israel's immersion in a polytheistic culture, it would have been virtually impossible to bring the people to the one-God-over-all conviction all at once. God must first establish Israel's loyalty to Him. Let the other nations worship their gods, but Israel must worship Yahweh, Yahweh alone (Yahweh = the LORD). Note how carefully the first of the ten commandments is stated: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). There may be other gods out there, but not in Israel. Israel was to worship only Yahweh.

Recognizing this half-way house in the people's understanding about God sheds fascinating light on several Old Testament stories. On Mt. Carmel, for example, Elijah confronted Israel over the worship of the foreign god Baal, whom Jezebel brought into Israel from Tyre when she became Ahab's wife. The prophets in Israel could almost shrug when the people of Tyre worshiped Baal; but they were horrified when he was worshiped in Israel. Elijah responded accordingly (1 Kings 17-19). [The idea that other gods were assigned to other nations is reflected in Deut. 32:8 in many modern translations: "When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the people according to the number of the gods." See chapter 3 in *Who's Afraid?* "Whatever happened to Satan in the Old Testament?"]

The story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5 illustrates the same truth from another angle: A Syrian commander, Naaman, had to travel to Israel if he wanted Israel's God to heal him of his leprosy. Naaman's confession after he was healed is stunning: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15). He even asked for two mule-loads of Israel's dirt to take back with him. Why? "For your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD" (2 Kings 5:17). If you want to worship Israel's God in Syria, you must stand or kneel on some of Israel's dirt!

But Naaman wasn't finished yet: "May the LORD pardon your servant on one count," he continued: "When my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant on this one count" (2 Kings 5:18). Elisha's answer was probably too much for Uncle Arthur, for he never mentions it in *The Bible Story* (he also misses the two mule-loads of earth.). But let this soak in: Naaman, the new enthusiastic convert to the truth of Israel's God is asking for permission to go into the temple of Rimmon, the Syrian national god, and to bow down there on the arm of his master. What does the prophet say? "Go in peace" (2 Kings 5:19). Yes, this is the great prophet Elisha, granting Naaman permission to bow down before the god Rimmon. Naaman is not budging an inch from his new conviction that there is "No God in all the earth except in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15). But he is concerned about how to deal with his master back home for his master has not yet seen the light.

I am stressing this point for three reasons. First, it was probably as shocking for me to

“discover” the conclusion to the Naaman story as it was for M. L. Andreasen to discover Ellen White’s statement in *The Desire of Ages* (noted in the last chapter) that “in Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived” (DA 530 [1898]). [See George Knight, *A Search for Identity* (RH, 2000), 116-117; “revolutionary,” Andreasen called it; “We could hardly believe it.”] I discovered the rest of the Naaman story one day in Scotland during family worship when we were reading “A Ladybird Book,” a children’s Bible story, to our two girls [Lucy Diamond, *Naaman and the Little Maid*. A Ladybird Book (Loughborough, England: Wills and Hepworth, 1959)]. I think (I hope?) I veiled my surprise from Karin and Krista (they were 3 and 5 at the time, as I recall). But as soon as worship was over, I went straight to my Bible to check it out. The “Ladybird Book” was right. There it was, staring at me from 2 Kings 5. When I got back to my own library in the US, I checked out Uncle Arthur and Sister White: Not there. And now, whenever anyone mentions this part of the Naaman story, I ask them when and how they discovered it. The response is often fascinating.

As I have watched this phenomenon now for many years, I am convinced that the Lord opens eyes and ears and closes them. Thus we don’t see or hear things until the time is right. I’ve seen it in my own life; I see it in the lives of my students. Who knows how many more surprises there may be in the Bible, surprises that I have read over many times, but have never “heard”?

My second reason for highlighting this story is to emphasize again how patient God is in opening new truths to His children. Naaman was no backslidden Jew moving away from the worship of Yahweh. He was a brand new convert, hanging on for dear life. And Elisha, God’s messenger, was led by the Spirit to address Naaman’s need.

The third reason is remarkably similar to the other two, but has to do specifically with Ellen White: If God was patient with Naaman (and with Alden Thompson), isn’t He also likely to be patient with Ellen White? Just because well-intentioned and frightened people – perhaps along with some evil-minded and manipulating people – have abused her writings, should we not try to understand her as one of God’s struggling saints, too? He wants all of us to grow as fast as we possibly can. But “we must go no faster than we can take those with us whose consciences and intellects are convinced of the truths we advocate. We must meet the people where they are” (3T 20 [187]).

Returning to Sinai, we see God taking the necessary steps to nudge Israel toward the one-God conviction: Not only did he assume full responsibility for everything – and I mean everything – but He also reinforced the idea of His lordship by forbidding Israel to have anything to do with magic (cf. Lev. 19:31; Isa. 8:19). Practicing magic would imply that Israel’s God was volatile and unreliable, a God you could manipulate. That would deny the very essence of His character. Yahweh, Israel’s God, was reliable and true. He could always be trusted to do the right and the good.

All that made good sense for Israel – but does make the Old Testament more difficult for us to read, for the Old Testament writers portray the “evil” which we would typically attribute to Satan as coming directly from the hand of God. Still, within the framework of the great controversy between good and evil, the absence of Satan in the Old Testament can make very good sense to us if we understand the issues facing God and Israel at that time. Indeed, knowing about the absence of Satan in the Old Testament explains much in the Bible that we would otherwise consider puzzling if not horrifying.

As I sat listening to the conclusion of the lecture that day, the pieces of the puzzle suddenly fell into place. I almost had to hold on to my chair to keep from standing up and preaching the good news in a sermon! The professor’s lecture had concluded with the line: “So

there you have it: the God of the Old Testament is a combination of a good deity and a desert demon.”

That was it, a benediction (so to speak), but hardly good news to take into the pulpit.

The Pieces Fall Together

By contrast, the alternative perspective which snapped clear for me that day can be summarized as follows: A gracious God assumed full responsibility for evil until Israel could learn that there was only one God worthy of the name. When the one-God conviction finally took root, God could then reveal more clearly the great struggle between good and evil and the nature of God’s great opponent.

The battle comes clearest in the Gospels, and then in the rest of the New Testament. But the signs of transition are there in the Old Testament itself, in particular, the comparison between the early and late versions of the story of David’s census noted above: the earlier one says God did it (2 Sam. 24), the later credits Satan (1 Chron. 21).

The short version of all this is that the violent God of the Old Testament is really the same gracious God who reveals himself more fully in Jesus. Maybe we could even say that God was graciously violent with the Old Testament people in order to meet their expectations of violence. That was His way of starting them on the path away from violence. Ultimately, God’s people would understand that God didn’t just come to threaten sinners with death, but to die for them. Making that truth believable would be incredibly difficult. But when the pieces fall together, it is very good news indeed.

With that model in place in my thinking, a model which sees God leading His people from fear to joy, from an emphasis on His power to an emphasis on His goodness, it would not be many months before that model would help me make sense of Ellen White’s experience, for God led her, too, from fear to joy and to a more buoyant experience in the Lord.

Why So Long?

I want to return once more to that crucial question which our stay in Scotland helped me to answer, a question which can be asked in several ways: Why didn’t God just tell “the truth” in the first place? Why the seemingly endless violence and mayhem? Why didn’t Jesus just come right at the beginning and tell it like it really is? For most of us, the longer we survive in this troubled world, the more urgent such questions can become.

As noted in the last chapter, “time” is the short answer – time, with freedom to choose. At the heart of the Great Controversy story lies the conviction that the essence of God’s goodness is His love of freedom and His desire that His creatures *choose* to love Him, won by His goodness, not frightened by His power. Such a freedom-loving God is willing to – one could even say must – allow rebels a chance to show their stuff, to demonstrate to the universe what the world would be like if they had their way. As the story unfolds in Scripture, the choice begins to come clear: love or selfishness? The climactic event which presents that choice to the universe comes at the cross. As Ellen White put it: “At the cross of Calvary, love and selfishness stood face to face. Here was their crowning manifestation” (DA 57).

Put bluntly, we could say that Satan went so far in his rebellion that he was even willing to kill God; God went so far in seeking to win back the rebels, that He was even willing to die.

A Long Ways Down, a Slow Road Back

But the cross is the climax. In drama, there is a build up to the climax. And that's where the rest of the Old Testament comes into play in what may seem to us to be a long, drawn-out drama. The story begins with God's good world. But soon the news turns bad. The steep downhill road is described in Genesis 3-11: Adam and Eve fall for the serpent's lies; Cain murders his brother Abel; a wicked world is washed clean by a flood; yet another wicked world is dispersed at the Tower of Babel.

After all that deadly mayhem, Genesis 12 tells how God steps more actively into human history again at the time of Abraham). But the fall had been so catastrophic that even Abraham's own family "served other gods" (Josh. 24:2). That's how bad things were. Whatever was told to our first parents in the Garden had been thoroughly mangled and distorted by the time it got to Abraham. God has His work cut out for Him.

But if, for the sake of love's victory in the end, God was willing to allow enough time to let things get that bad, He was also willing to take enough time to patiently win His people back. A freedom-loving God will not push His creatures faster than they are able to grow. They must be *won* over; they must be able to see and to *choose* the next step toward the good.

And that's where living in Scotland opened my eyes. I had come from the American West where change is a regular feature of life and fixed traditions are rare. I found myself unprepared for the resistance to change we found in Scotland. "We don't do it that way here," was almost a standard response to anything new and different. We were guests in that fine land, and in no position to "force" change. Even small attempts at change could easily reinforce the "ugly American" image.

Suddenly it dawned on me: If I wanted to convince the Scots to change anything at all, I had to be very patient, meeting them on common ground and inching my way forward from there. Then I began applying that same principle to the Old Testament: Shouldn't a freedom-loving God be as patient with the Old Testament saints as He was with the Scots? In short, living in Scotland opened my mind to the idea of "radical divine accommodation." Another word might work better for you: "condescension," "adaptation," or "contextualization." But they all mean roughly the same: God meets people where they are. He's urgent with the good news, but must be patient if He's going to win people's hearts.

Living in Scotland convinced me that the God of the Old Testament was a very patient God, indeed, the same God we see in Jesus. He took great risks in order to reach the people where they were. But a God of love is willing to take such risks. That was good news for them and it's good news for us.

And Now for Ellen White

To sum up with reference to Ellen White, the story about Satan's seeming absence from the Old Testament is significant for two reasons. The first one I have emphasized again and again: God's patience. However misused and abused her writings may have been – and there has been plenty of that – we will certainly fall short of the truth if we can't make room for God to be patient with Ellen White, too. I hope that does not sound condescending, and it may, especially for those who have experienced her as an absolute authority in Adventism. But if we seek to understand the Bible in its day, shouldn't we do the same for the writings of Ellen White and

look at them from the perspective of her day? If, as she said in 1888, there can be a turn-round in “present truth” in just twenty years (Ms 8a 1888, M. E. Olson, *Thirteen Crisis Years*, 282), shouldn’t we be willing to take a fresh look at her experience and her writings some ninety years after her death? I think so.

Second, and this point is at least as crucial for understanding Ellen White’s writings and experience: Without an awareness of Satan’s *apparent* absence from the Old Testament, the God of the Old Testament would appear to be anything but patient. Violent, brutal, quick with the trigger, insensitive to animal and human life – that’s the picture of the God of the Old Testament if you just read it straight off the page without seeing the larger picture. Now I happen to believe, with tenacity even, that Satan was fully as alive and well in the Old Testament as he is today. But for *pastoral* reasons, God chose to keep Satan under wraps, assuming full responsibility for everything lest the people worship Satan as another deity. Yes, God was willing to be seen as violent, brutal, quick with the trigger, insensitive to animal and human life, because that was what the people had come to expect from their gods. And that was where God had to start.

But if you can believe that gentle Jesus is God in the flesh, “the same yesterday and today and forever,” Heb.13:8), and if you can believe that He was and is the God of the Old Testament (cf. John 8:58) – and all that is perfectly clear in the New Testament – then we must go back to the Old Testament and look again. With careful reading, we can begin to see why God would be willing to portray Himself as the violent one and to keep Satan under cover until it was safe for the people to know more about the “Great Controversy” between Christ and Satan.

But Ellen White was not part of a community that believed Jesus was God in the flesh. For early Adventists, Jesus may have been kind, sweet, and gentle, but He was not God. Even with the knowledge that Jesus was and is God, the Old Testament is still heavy weather for gentle people. We can scarcely believe that God was willing to do what He did, even if it was for good *pastoral* reasons.

In short, young Ellen was a conscientious, devout, and obedient Christian. But she had grown up with the terrors of an eternally burning hell etched into her soul. And reading the Old Testament straight from the page would make it easy to believe that the God of the Old Testament would not hesitate to be in charge of such a hell. Then, as she became a young adult, though the eternal hell had disappeared, she still belonged to a community which had not yet seen the truth about the divinity of Jesus Christ.

So when we read some of her early writings, it will not be hard to recognize when she has been reading the Old Testament straight from the page – without the saving knowledge that the God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ had veiled His gentle nature in order to reach violent people.

The laws of change – especially the necessity of gradual change if one wants change to be stable – apply to all people everywhere. We can see those laws at work in the Bible. Then we can apply them to our own experience. And we can apply them to Ellen White’s experience. It may seem scary at times, but it will also be reassuring. If we’re not afraid to let Jesus help us, He will guide us into all truth. He has promised.

In the next chapter, I’ll give you some glimpses of the other side of our life in Scotland. I was awakening to issues of change in the Bible and observing how hard it was for the Scots to change. But on the home front, we were tussling mightily with change, too. Wanda and I had both been imprinted by our conservative Adventist upbringing with a life-style very much shaped by the writings of Ellen White. All that made pretty good sense in a largely Adventist community

in the American west. But we were in for a cold shower when we took some of our Adventist habits to Scotland and tried to live them out there. That's all part of this story, too, as you will see.

“Even the Investigative Judgment Can Be Good News”

By Alden Thompson, *Westwind*, pp. 4-7, 11, Winter 1982

“From Sinai to Golgotha,” Part 6

(cf. *Adventist Review*, December 3, 10, 17, 24, 31, 1981; July 1, 1982)

Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version

In a world of sin, the specter of judgment raises both our hopes and our fears. Scripture portrays the human family as playing several roles within the framework of the judgment concept: the role of the plaintiff, who cries out against oppression, injustice, and the suffering of innocent people; the role of the accused, who stands before the divine tribunal as one guilty of contributing to the agony and pain in the world; and the role of the witness, who has experienced salvation and speaks on behalf of the goodness of God and His law. An adequate doctrine of judgment should account for all three elements.

In the Adventist community, recent discussion has centered on the concept of the investigative judgment – its biblical foundation and its impact on Christian experience. A complicating factor is the variety of ways in which the imagery of the heavenly courtroom can be interpreted. Some interpret the symbols very literally, while others tend to think in more abstract terms. The result is a certain tension that the Adventist community simply must learn to live with.

As is the case with many Christian doctrines, the biblical foundation of the Adventist doctrine of judgment is not found complete in a single context, but requires a synthesis of biblical data in the light of the Adventist experience. Furthermore, the community's understanding of the doctrine has been a growing one, revealing shifts in emphasis and the integration of new elements. Leviticus 16, Daniel 7 to 9, Zechariah 3, and Revelation 14 are key passages. The book of Job also contributes to the larger picture, providing the cosmic setting highlighting the motives of the adversary.

But of paramount importance in Adventism is the way in which the believer has experienced judgment. If God is seen as both distant and reluctant, we may feel overwhelmed by the sense of our own unworthiness. The gulf between God and the sinner may seem too deep to bridge and God may be viewed as throwing down impossible demands.

If we find ourselves trembling and shaking before a reluctant God, we are hardly in a position to witness joyfully and confidently to His goodness. Yet, that is the ultimate goal of the judgment. In the words of Ellen White, “Ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord, that I am God” (Isaiah 43:12) – “witnesses that He is good and that goodness is supreme” (*Education*, 154).

The only time that I could conceive of going to court gladly would be to witness for a good friend, one that I know and trust. In the context of the investigative judgment, that friend is God. To see the investigative judgment culminating in such a witness does not detract from the seriousness of the judgment for human beings, but rather enables us to look through the process of judgment to its goal and to sing the praises of the God who has redeemed us.

But, is it really possible to envision a joyful conclusion within the framework of the investigative judgment? If we take seriously Ellen White's growing experience, we can indeed.

In the course of her experience, she traveled the road from fear to love, from command to invitation, from Sinai to Golgotha. Such a shift in emphasis in no way lessens the ethical demands of God's law. A response out of love actually intensifies our sense of responsibility because it flows from within.

This article describes the shift in emphasis in the concept of the investigative judgment that is reflected in the writings of Ellen White, a shift which enables the believer to live in the assurance that God is both willing and able to save those who come to him.

Perhaps a quick synopsis of the two different emphases would provide a simple comparison between the Sinai and Golgotha views of the investigative judgment.

From a Sinai perspective, the judgment accentuates the gulf between a holy God and a sinful people. The thought of standing in the presence of a holy God without a mediator brings terror just as it did for ancient Israel (cf. Exodus 20:18, 19).

By contrast, a Golgotha perspective emphasizes the union between God and the believer. The believer has fully recognized his own status as a sinner, but has also fully accepted the sacrifice of Christ on his behalf. As a result, the believer no longer sees God simply as Judge, but as Father; he no longer trembles in God's presence as the accused, for he stands acquitted in Christ Jesus. The fear of judgment is gone. God has claimed him as His own.

No longer preoccupied with his own survival, the believer now recognizes that judgment has a much greater purpose, namely the vindication of God and His law against the attacks of Satan. Confidently, the believer now stands in court as a witness to the goodness of God and His law.

In Ellen White's experience, the roots of that more positive view of judgment go back to a vision of 1880. Its fruit appeared in mature form in *Prophets and Kings* (1915/17). We shall look at the details shortly, but the 35 years between point to a significant question, namely, why was the "better" explanation so long in coming? My own conviction is that the early Adventists would never have believed it. I would use a similar argument in explaining the long "delay" before God sent His Son. Among the ex-slaves at Sinai, the gentle man from Nazareth would have been trampled in the dust. Sinai had to come before Golgotha; the impact of sin made it necessary.

But a shift in emphasis in the understanding of the investigative judgment also requires a willingness to see God in a particular way, as a God who is not afraid to allow the universe to put His law and His government to the test. Now for some reason, I have had no great difficulty accepting the idea of God putting His law and government on trial before the universe. Yet, I have occasionally wondered why some Adventists, and very loyal ones at that, simply did not get very excited about the idea. I caught a clearer glimpse into that kind of thinking in connection with the Sabbath School lessons on Job a few quarters ago. Some of the believers were very uncomfortable with the way Satan talked with God (cf. Job 1:9-12; 2:3-6). Such talk was inappropriate and ought not to have been allowed! They firmly believed in the Bible but they did not know what to do with the book of Job.

Behind that kind of thinking lie two significant convictions that play a powerful role, especially in the lives of religious people: First, that sinners cannot exist in the presence of a holy God, and second, that created beings dare not question God. Both statements are terribly true, terribly dangerous, and very easily misunderstood.

The first statement has biblical support (e.g., Exodus 33:21-23; Deuteronomy 4:24; I Timothy 6:16; cf. Revelation 6:17) and expresses the fundamental truth that sin and holiness are

ultimately incompatible. The second statement likewise has biblical support (esp. Romans 9:9-23; cf. Isaiah 45:9-11) and expresses the fundamental truth that God is the ultimate authority.

Why then are such statements so dangerous? Because a guilty conscience can distort them, imagining horrible things about God, things which the mind can come to believe as truth. Thus, the incompatibility of holiness and sin can be exaggerated to the point where God is seen as angry and disgusted with this race of rebels, annoyed that He has to have any contact with sinners at all, and demanding that every sin be fully punished.

As for God's ultimate authority, an over-emphasis can lead to the total exclusion of human freedom. Thus God becomes, at best, a benevolent dictator, at worse, a cruel despot.

The natural results of sin tend to encourage both exaggerations. That is precisely why sin is so sinister and devastating. We see the first clear example in the experience of Adam and Eve where their own sense of guilt drove them to hide from God and even to blame Him for their failure, though there had been no display of "divine wrath" (cf. Genesis 3:8-13). Even fully repentant sinners have difficulty believing that God wishes full restoration as the cry of the prodigal son poignantly reveals: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants" (Luke 15:19). Most assuredly, sonship does not depend on worthiness, yet the adversary plays on the guilt feelings which naturally follow sin, tempting us to believe that God has turned His back on us in anger.

Thus, there is a fierce struggle within as we long to be with God and yet fear His presence. We are torn between the cry of Jacob: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me" (Genesis 32:26), and the cry of Peter: "Depart from me for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8). Only a new world and a new heart will still that battle forever. In the meantime, God seeks to convince us that sin is indeed a dangerous enemy, but that He loves us even when we sin.

In Scripture, we find interesting traces of that tension between the human longing to be reunited with God and the human horror of coming into His presence at all. Some passages suggest that seeing God is not possible (cf. Genesis 3:8-13), while others clearly demonstrate that not only is it possible, but that it has already happened, though the human participants were amazed that they had survived. Jacob exclaimed: "I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved" (Genesis 32:30). A similar reflection appears in that fascinating passage describing the meeting between God and the elders of Israel: "They saw the God of Israel... and He did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank" (Exodus 24:10, 11). The biblical passage hints that by all rights He should have laid hands on them. But no, "they beheld God, and ate and drank."

One way of resolving the tension between these two feelings is to emphasize the role of the mediator as our protection against the wrath of God. In Jesus Christ we find peace with God, for He paid the price of our sin. The wrath of God which we deserve has been poured out on our substitute. Thus, we keep our distance from God the Father, but find in Jesus Christ the friendly face of God. Such a view emphasizes the sovereignty and authority of God and is often attractive to those who keenly sense the gulf between God and man.

The emphasis on the sovereignty of God finds its most thorough development in John Calvin's doctrine of predestination, a teaching which Adventists clearly reject. We believe it is our privilege to serve God out of love and by our own free choice.

A typical Calvinist would not be very enthusiastic about the "Great Controversy" story, at least not in the way Ellen White told it in her later years, for God is much too approachable and much too willing to put Himself and his law on trial before the universe. Interestingly enough,

early Adventists would have sided very easily with the Calvinists when it came to their view of God. God, as they saw Him, would never open Himself to scrutiny; He is to be obeyed, not questioned.

But I am convinced that God was preparing Adventists to reach quite another audience than the Calvinists, namely modern skeptics who cannot believe that a good God has willed all the strife and trouble in this world. Adventists have been called to stand in that noble tradition of believing skeptics who are concerned about God's reputation and are not afraid to say so, even to God Himself. Like Abraham, for example: "You can't do that. You are the judge of all the earth!" (Genesis 18:25). Or like Moses: "If you do that what will the Egyptians say?" (Exodus 32:12). To be able to talk with God like that, however, one has to be on very good terms with Him. God must be known to be friendly, fair and open. But that is exactly what our forefathers had difficulty believing. It would take time before they could see the friendly face of God and even then, the possibility for confusion would not entirely disappear.

And that brings us to our modern problem as we attempt to resolve the tension between a reluctant God and a friendly one. In my own experience, the tension focused on the first chapter in *Steps to Christ* and the one on the investigative judgment in *The Great Controversy* (pp. 479-90). In *Steps to Christ* I learned that the view of God as a "severe judge" was a deception of satanic origin. It was Satan who "pictured the Creator as a being who is watching with jealous eye to discern the errors and mistakes of men" (SC 10-11).

But when I turned to *The Great Controversy* and read about the investigative judgment, I was in trouble again, for I was tempted to believe that God was, after all, looking for a way to keep me out of His kingdom, rather than trying to get me in: every word and deed is recorded with "terrible exactness" (GC, 481); every case is closely investigated and when any are found with a sin unrepented of, "their names are blotted out of the book of life" (GC, 483); even things that we have forgotten "will bear their testimony to justify or condemn" (GC, 487). The impression one can get from these passages is that even diligent effort in seeking forgiveness can all be for nought if we happen to "forget" a sin that we have committed at some point in our life. Now I know that the passages cited do not actually say that, but they do give that impression. I now recognize that these passages refer to cherished sins, an emphasis that puts quite a different complexion on the whole matter. But even then, whenever we think of the investigative judgment as the last hurdle before we can be saved, uncertainty can still haunt us.

An important first step for resolving the difficulty in my own experience came while I was a seminary student at Andrews University. I decided I must settle in my own mind the matter of the mediator: Why did I need one if God loved me? The answer came from John 14-17 where I discovered that the purpose of the mediator was to introduce us to a friendly God, not to protect us from a reluctant one. As Jesus put it: "If you have seen me you have seen the Father" (John 14:9). But perhaps even more significant in the Adventist context is John 16:26-27, where I found a fresh possibility for interpreting Ellen White's statement that "we must stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator" (GC, 425): "In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say that I shall pray the Father for you; for the Father himself loves you." In the context of Ellen White's original statement I still detect a trace of fear, but on the basis of John's Gospel I would say that fear is unnecessary. As long as we are afraid, the mediator is there, for God knows the powerful impact of sin and guilt. But the goal of Christian experience is to live once again in God's presence without fear. That is a promise, not a threat.

The next step in my search for a solution to the experiential difficulties connected with

the investigative judgment came in the spring of 1980. After preparing a study document on the development of Ellen White's theology, I commented to a colleague: "The only missing piece in the Golgotha picture is eschatology. That is one place where fear still lurks. Wouldn't it be interesting if we could see how Ellen White would re-write *The Great Controversy* again if she had the chance?"

Of the five books in the Conflict series, *The Great Controversy* was the only one that was not written or totally re-written after 1888. The standard edition today (1911) differs only slightly from the 1888 edition, i.e., some historical quotations were changed and references were added. (See Arthur White, *Ellen G. White, Messenger to the Remnant*, Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1954, p. 58.) I suspected how Ellen White would have told the story, but was concerned how far we could go without prophetic authority.

And then I found it – with the aid of a student who wrongly quoted a passage from *Prophets and Kings*. In checking his quotation I suddenly realized that here was an entire chapter dealing with the investigative judgment: "Joshua and the Angel" (pp. 582-592). With great eagerness I read it through, looking for traces of the reluctant God. I found none. The whole chapter is the story of the investigative judgment written from the perspective of a loving God who wants to save sinners. Further research revealed some fascinating background.

The seed that was to bear such rich fruit was apparently sown in 1880. As told in *Life Sketches*, Ellen White inquired in vision, "Where is the security for the people of God in these days of peril?" In response, God referred her to Zechariah 3:1-2 and declared that Jesus was our security against Satan: "Jesus will lead all who are willing to be led" (*Life Sketches*, 324). Prior to this vision Ellen White apparently had not realized the significance of Zechariah 3:1-2 for the Great Controversy story. [The printed Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White lists no occurrences of the text before 1880.] But now God had sown the seed; it would be only a matter of time until it would germinate and bear fruit.

The *Index to the Writings of E. G. White* lists four passages where Ellen White comments significantly on Zechariah 3:1, 2; *Testimonies*, vol. 5, 467-476 (1885), *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, 116, 117 (1896), *Christ's Object Lessons*, 166-170 (1900), and *Prophets and Kings*, 582-592 (1917). All four of the contexts discuss the text in the setting of the "Great Controversy." *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (p. 117) states that Satan accuses us, not in some obscure courtroom, but "before the universe." *Christ's Object Lessons* (p.168) indicates that, not only is Satan accusing the believers, but God himself. Furthermore, when Christ speaks for his people, he confesses them, not before a reluctant Father, but "before the universe" (*Christ's Object Lessons*, 170). Clearly the Father and the Son are united in their love for man and in their desire to rebuke the adversary.

But what I find most fascinating about Ellen White's use of Zechariah 3:1-2 is the way she takes the article in the *Testimonies* and further refines it 30 years later for use in *Prophets and Kings*. In effect, she softens those aspects that could discourage and expands on those that encourage. The result is a masterful integration of the investigative judgment into the picture of a loving God. And it happens in her very last book.

When compared with the *Testimonies* article, the account in *Prophets and Kings* reveals one addition and one deletion that are particularly significant. The addition is found in *Prophets and Kings* (p. 589) as part of the Lord's rebuke of the adversary. After claiming His people as His own, the Lord declares: "They may have imperfections of character; they may have failed in their endeavors; but they have repented, and I have forgiven and accepted them." What an

encouragement! We may slip and fall, but if we have given our hearts to God, He will rebuke the adversary. No reluctance here to save those who are still suffering growing pains; their hearts are with God and He claims them as His.

The significant deletion is a more delicate matter, for it is terribly true – but if seen from the viewpoint of Mt. Sinai it could so easily be misunderstood. *Prophets and Kings* omits two paragraphs from pages 471-72 of *Testimonies*, vol. 5. Both paragraphs admonish the Christian to strive to overcome every defect. That, of course, should be the goal of every Christian. But the one sentence that could cause problems runs as follows: “No sin can be tolerated in those who shall walk with Christ in white” (p. 472). If that statement is seen as describing the Christian’s deep desire to obey Christ, then all is well. But if it is linked with a view of God which sees Him looking for excuses to catch sinners, then the Christian who slips and falls will flee in terror. So even though the statement is certainly true, no doubt Ellen White’s heightened concern for struggling sinners led her to delete it when she was preparing the material for *Prophets and Kings*.

Once we recognize that God has justified us in Christ, then we can joyfully go into judgment prepared to witness for God and His law. That joy, I have found, is the strongest motivation possible for obedience, for now I want to obey *because* He has saved me. It is no longer a matter of earning salvation or of simply avoiding punishment. Obedience is the fruit of salvation.

Now whenever I find someone struggling with the investigative judgment, I recommend without hesitation the chapter on “Joshua and the Angel” in *Prophets and Kings*. The “Great Controversy” story has come a long way since it was first published in 1858, but what a testimony it is to God’s care for His people. He was preparing the way for His people, not only to find acceptance in Him, but also to demonstrate the goodness of God and His law to a skeptical world. God would have liked to have given the full message right at the beginning, but the beams of truth had to come gradually or His people would have turned away from light.

Because of the fallen human condition God has been willing to use both commands and invitations, fear and love; but there is no question as to which He prefers. He has shown us His love “that we may have confidence in the day of judgment” (1 John 4:17). “Perfect love casts out fear” (verse 18). In the sunshine of that love, even the investigative judgment is good news, for we stand no longer accused, but acquitted in Christ Jesus. Before the universe we are witnesses to the goodness of God.

Eschatology : Four Perspectives

- A. **“All-time Road Map”:** **HISTORICISM: The single road-map through history leading up to the end-time events.** The traditional Adventist perspective, rooted in Daniel 2 and 7 and shaped by the teaching of the great reformers.
- B. **“Yesterday”:** **PRETERISM: Predicted “end-time” events were in the author's own day.** In its pure form, held by “liberals” who deny any predictive element in prophecy or any “real” end of time.
- C. **“Tomorrow”:** **FUTURISM: “End-time” events yet to come.** In its pure form, futurism denies conditional prophecy. It is the most popular view of eschatology among conservative Christians today (cf. “Left Behind” [movie]). Unfulfilled events in the Bible (especially from the OT) are predicted to take place at some future point to a literal and restored Israel (the temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem at the present site of the Moslem mosque, Dome of the Rock. The best-known modern form of futurism is **Dispensationalism**. Note the seven-fold division of history (fully developed in the Scofield Bible notes):
1. Innocence: Before the fall
 2. Conscience: Before the flood
 3. Human government: Before Abraham
 4. Promise: Before Sinai
 5. Law: Before the Cross
 6. Grace: Before Second Advent
 7. Kingdom: 7 years and millennium.

Note: The seven year period falls between the secret coming of Christ (“rapture” [*parousia*]) and the public coming [*epiphaneia*]; the saints spend the next 1000 years on earth, during which there will be birth, death, and animal sacrifice.

- D. **“Today, Today, Today!”:** **APPLIED HISTORICISM (“Idealism”): Multiple applications for “end-time” events.** This perspective suggests that there were several points in history when Christ could have come. It builds on the idea of “conditional” prophecy. See summary of God's “original” plan for Israel, based on SDABC 4:25-38:
1. **On-site Evangelism.** The world would be attracted to God by Israel’s witness and prosperity. Many would ask to become part of Israel.
 2. **Salvation through the Messiah.** God’s anointed one (the messiah) would have come, died, and risen again, but would have been accepted by his own people.
 3. **Jerusalem as Missionary Headquarters.** The present city of Jerusalem would have become a center for outreach into the whole world.
 4. **Final Confrontation but the Gradual Elimination of Evil.** A confrontation would finally take place between good and evil; God’s rule would be established; but the marks of evil would gradually disappear.

A Study Suggestion: Read through Isaiah 65 – 66 and Zechariah 14 to see the various ways that these chapters illustrate key elements noted in the fourth perspective outlined above.

In Adventism, the idea of conditional prophecy was articulated most clearly by Ellen White in Ms 4 1883:

The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional. – Ms 4, 1883 [Ev. 695 (1946); 1SM 67 (1958)]

A fascinating story lurks behind this quotation, one that was discussed briefly in Lesson #6 on Jonah. In short, the idea of conditionality flies in the face of a strict historicist interpretation of world history. If the hopefuls in 1844 had believed in conditionality, there would have been no Disappointment. Firmly gripped by the historicist perspective, Adventist pioneers never dreamed of seeing their experience in terms of conditional prophecy. But as the years passed, the gap between their early expectation and the reality became more evident, at least to some observers.

In 1883 Ellen White wrote a lengthy response to a critic who was accusing Adventists of maintaining a faulty view of prophecy. But she apparently never sent her response to the critic or to anyone else. Ms 4, 1883 is simply an orphan in the Ellen White files. Furthermore, there is no evidence that she used any part of this “defense” during the rest of her life. No part of it was published until 1946 when five paragraphs from the manuscript appeared in the book *Evangelism*. Then the full manuscript was published in 1958 in *Selected Messages*, Bk 1, 59-73. The tantalizing question is: Did Ellen White decide not to publish the article and perhaps not even to respond to the critic because she knew how volatile the issue of “prophecy” could be? Ms 4, 1883 was discovered in the White Estate vault during the 1930s, excerpted in *Evangelism* in 1946, then published for all the world to see in 1958 in *Selected Messages*, Bk. 1. It undoubtedly played a key role in the preparation and publication of the seminal article entitled “The Role of Israel in Old Testament Prophecy” published in 1955 in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (4:25-38), an article that is scarcely known among Adventists today, even though it caused quite a stir when it was first published. Given everything that is happening in our changing world, maybe the time has come for Adventists to take that quotation and that article seriously – and to renew our study of the Minor Prophets, especially Joel, Jonah, and Zechariah.

That article from the fourth volume of the SDABC follows here. The story behind it, indeed behind the writing of the whole SDA Bible Commentary, was told by Raymond Cottrell, associate editor of the SDABC and published in *Spectrum* as “The Untold Story of the Bible Commentary,” *Spectrum*, August 1985 (16:3).

The published edition of the original article from SDABC4 (“The Role of Israel in Old Testament Prophecy”) includes a parenthetical sentence at the end of the first “rule” for interpreting the Old Testament. The parenthesis effectively neutralizes much of what went before it.

Note the rule and then the parenthetical comment that follows:

1. Examine the prophecy in its entirety. Note by whom it was spoken, to whom it was addressed, and the circumstances that called it forth. Remember that – generally speaking – it was originally given with respect to the historical circumstances that called it forth. It was ordained of God to meet the needs of His people at the time it was given and to remind them of the glorious destiny that awaited them as a nation, of the coming of the Messiah, and of the establishment of His eternal kingdom. Discover what the message meant to the people of that time. – SDABC 4:38

The parenthetical comment: (This rule does not apply to those portions of the book of Daniel that the prophet was bidden to “shut up” and “seal,” or to other passages whose application Inspiration may have limited exclusively to our own time.)

Cottrell explains that the parenthetical comment came from the editor, F. D. Nichol, placed there because of his “overriding pastoral concern.” – Cottrell, *Spectrum* 16.3, 42. It is highly probable that Nichols’ action mirrored Ellen White’s original concerns for not distributing Ms 4, 1883 after she had written it.

But now the church has to face the question: Is this the time to explore something like “applied historicism” so that we can address the rapidly changing events in our world? One can cite strong passages from EGW on both sides of the issue. Here are two samples, one urging caution – the context is health reform; the other urging more open discussion – the context is the traumatic 1888 debate over righteousness by faith:

Don’t Go Too Fast. We must go no faster than we can take those with us whose consciences and intellects are convinced of the truths we advocate. We must meet the people where they are. Some of us have been many years in arriving at our present position in health reform. It is slow work to obtain a reform in diet. We have powerful appetites to meet; for the world is given to gluttony. If we should allow the people as much time as we have required to come up to the present advanced state in reform, we would be very patient with them, and allow them to advance [20/21] step by step, as we have done, until their feet are firmly established upon the health reform platform. But we should be very cautious not to advance too fast, lest we be obliged to retrace our steps. In reforms we would better come one step short of the mark than to go one step beyond it. And if there is error at all, let it be on the side next to the people. (*Testimonies* 3:20-21 [1872])

Dangers of Conservatism. Peter exhorts his brethren to “grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” [2 Pet. 3:18]. Whenever the people of God are growing in grace, they will be constantly obtaining a clearer understanding of His word. They will discern new light and beauty in its sacred truths. This has been true in the history of the church in all ages, and thus it will continue to the end. But as real spiritual

life declines, it has ever been the tendency to cease to advance in the knowledge of the truth. Men rest satisfied with the light already received from God's word and discourage any further investigation of the Scriptures. They become conservative and seek to avoid discussion.

The fact that there is no controversy or agitation among God's people should not be regarded as conclusive evidence that they are holding fast to sound doctrine. There is reason to fear that they may not be clearly discriminating between truth and error. When no new questions are started by investigation of the Scriptures, when no difference of opinion arises which will set men to searching the Bible for themselves to make sure that they have the truth, there will be many now, as in ancient times, who will hold to tradition and worship they know not what. (*Testimonies* 5:706-707 [1889]; also GW 297-98 and CWE 38-39)

In the article that follows, Nichol's parenthetical comment is in *italics* type and Cottrell's interpretation of its origin is briefly noted.

The Role of Israel in Old Testament Prophecy

Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol. 4 (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1955, 1978. 2002), pp. 25-38.

I. Introduction

THIS article surveys the fundamental problem of the interpretation of the prophetic portions of the Old Testament in terms of their message to Israel of old and to the church today. Consideration is given to the role of literal Israel as God's chosen people, to the way His plan for them was to have been accomplished, to the way in which it actually did work out, and to the eventual transfer of the privileges and responsibilities of literal Israel to spiritual Israel, that is, to the Christian church. A clear understanding of these aspects of the problem is essential to the formulation of a valid procedure for interpreting the messages of the Old Testament prophets. Any interpretation that fails to give these matters due consideration does violence to the Scriptures.

Few passages of Scripture are more commonly misunderstood and variously interpreted than those containing the divine promises made to ancient Israel through the prophets. It is an undeniable historical fact that, to this day, the majority of these predictions have not been fulfilled. In the endeavor to account for this seeming enigma, Bible expositors have set forth various explanations:

1. The modernist school of interpretation denies the predictive element in prophecy altogether, arguing either that the "predictions" were written down after the events thus "foretold" took place or that such "predictions" reflected nothing more than the prophet's hopes for the future, or those of his people.

2. The futurist school of interpretation contends that the many promises of restoration and world leadership made to ancient Israel are yet to be fulfilled in connection with the establishment of the modern state of Israel in Palestine.

3. The British-Israel movement teaches that the Anglo-Saxon peoples are the literal descendants of the ten so-called “lost tribes” of the northern kingdom and that the promises will, in large measure, be fulfilled to their modern posterity.

4. A less-well-defined school of interpretation bases its approach to the prophetic portions of the Old Testament on the theory that the prophet, while bearing messages to the people of his day, also took occasional excursions into the distant future, with the result that many of his forecasts did not apply to literal Israel at all, but were intended exclusively for “Israel after the spirit,” that is, for the church today. Following this line of interpretation, some have gone to the extreme of proposing a Christian migration to Palestine.

5. Seventh-day Adventists believe that, generally speaking, 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. But the Scriptures record the fact that they disobeyed God and proved disloyal to Him instead. Accordingly, what He purposed to do for the world through Israel of old He will finally accomplish [25/26] through His church on earth today, and many of the promises originally made to literal Israel will be fulfilled to His remnant people at the close of time.

The modernist school of interpretation bases its position on the a priori assumption that any knowledge of the future is impossible, and ignores all evidence to the contrary. The futurist school ignores both the conditional element pervading predictive prophecy, clearly and emphatically proclaimed by the prophets themselves, and the specific statements of the New Testament that affirm that the privileges and responsibilities of ancient Israel have, in Christ, been transferred to the church. The exposition of Scripture attempted by proponents of the British-Israel theory consists of an admixture of selected Bible passages with legend, folk tales, and speculation. The fourth school of interpretation may, at times, arrive at a valid application of the predictive portions of Old Testament prophecy to the church today and to its future experience, but neglects the primary application of these messages to their historical setting, and proceeds, quite arbitrarily, to determine that certain selected passages were written more or less exclusively for the church today. In one way or another each of these attempts at interpreting the messages of the Old Testament prophets neglects significant teachings of Scripture, evades fundamental principles of exegesis, and provides a distorted picture of the predictive sections of prophecy. The following discussion sets forth the principles of interpretation described under “5,” and followed by this commentary, together with the scriptural basis on which these principles rest.

II. Israel as God’s Chosen People

With the call of Abraham, God set in operation a definite plan for bringing the Messiah into the world and for presenting the gospel invitation to all men ([Gen. 12:1–3](#); PP 125; PK 368). In Abraham God found a man ready to yield unqualified obedience to the divine will ([Gen. 26:5](#); [Heb. 11:8](#)) and to cultivate a similar spirit in his posterity ([Gen. 18:19](#)). Accordingly, Abraham became in a special sense the “Friend of God” ([James 2:23](#)) and “the father of all them that believe” ([Rom. 4:11](#)). God entered into solemn covenant relationship with him ([Gen. 15:18](#);

17:2–7), and his posterity, Israel, inherited the sacred trust of being God’s chosen representatives on earth (Heb. 11:9; PP 125) for the salvation of the entire human race. Salvation was to be “of the Jews,” in that the Messiah would be a Jew (John 4:22), and by the Jews, as messengers of salvation to all men (Gen. 12:2, 3; 22:18; Isa. 42:1, 6; 43:10; Gal. 3:8, 16, 18; COL 286).

At Mt. Sinai God entered into covenant relation with Israel as a nation (Ex. 19:1–8; 24:3–8; Deut. 7:6–14; PP 303; DA 76, 77) upon the same basic conditions and with the same ultimate objectives as the Abrahamic covenant. They voluntarily accepted God as their sovereign, and this constituted the nation a theocracy (PP 379, 603). The sanctuary became God’s dwelling place among them (see Ex. 25:8), its priests were ordained to minister before Him (Heb. 5:1; 8:3), its services provided an object lesson of the plan of salvation and prefigured the coming of the Messiah (1 Cor. 5:7; Col. 2:16, 17; Heb. 9:1–10; 10:1–12). The people might approach God personally and through the ministry of a mediating priesthood, their representatives before Him; He would direct the nation through the ministry of prophets, His appointed representatives to them. From generation to generation these “holy men of God” (2 Peter 1:21) called Israel to repentance and righteousness and kept alive the Messianic hope. By divine [26/27] appointment the sacred writings were preserved, century after century, and Israel became their custodian (Amos 3:7; Rom. 3:1, 2; PP 126).

The establishment of the Hebrew monarchy did not affect the basic principles of the theocracy (Deut. 17:14–20; 1 Sam. 8:7; PP 603). The state was still to be administered in the name, and by the authority, of God. Even during the Captivity, and later under foreign tutelage, Israel remained a theocracy in theory if not fully in practice. Only when its leaders formally rejected the Messiah and declared before Pilate their allegiance to “no king but Caesar” (John 19:15) did Israel as a nation irrevocably withdraw from the covenant relationship and the theocracy (DA 737, 738).

Through Israel of old, God planned to provide the nations of earth with a living revelation of His own holy character (COL 286; PK 368) and an exhibit of the glorious heights to which man can attain by cooperating with His infinite purposes. At the same time, He permitted the heathen nations to “walk in their own ways” (Acts 14:16), to furnish an example of what man can accomplish apart from Him. Thus, for more than 1,500 years, a great experiment designed to test the relative merits of good and evil was conducted before the world (PP 314). Finally, “it was demonstrated before the universe that, apart from God, humanity could not be uplifted,” and that “a new element of life and power must be imparted by Him who made the world” (DA 37).

III. The Ideal: How the Plan Was to Operate

God placed His people in Palestine, the crossroads of the ancient world, and provided them with every facility for becoming the greatest nation on the face of the earth (COL 288). It was His purpose to set them “on high above all nations of the earth” (Deut. 28:1; PK 368, 369), with the result that “all people of the earth” would recognize their superiority and call them “blessed” (Mal. 3:10, 12). Unparalleled prosperity, both temporal and spiritual, was promised them as the reward for putting into practice the righteous and wise principles of heaven (Deut. 4:6–9; 7:12–15; 28:1–14; PK 368, 369, 704). It was to be the result of wholehearted cooperation with the will of God as revealed through the prophets, and of divine blessing added to human efforts

(see DA 811, 827; cf. PP 214).

The success of Israel was to be based on and to include:

1. Holiness of character (Lev. 19:2; see on Matt. 5:48). Without this, the people of Israel would not qualify to receive the material blessings God designed to bestow upon them.

Without this, the many advantages would only result in harm to themselves and to others.

Their own characters were to be progressively ennobled and elevated, and to reflect more and more perfectly the attributes of the perfect character of God (Deut. 4:9; 28:1, 13, 14; 30:9, 10; see COL 288, 289). Spiritual prosperity was to prepare the way for material prosperity.

2. The blessings of health. Feebleness and disease were to disappear entirely from Israel as the result of strict adherence to healthful principles (see Ex. 15:26; Deut. 7:13, 15; etc.; PP 378, 379; COL 288).

3. Superior intellect. Cooperation with the natural laws of body and mind would result in ever-increasing mental strength, and the people of Israel would be blessed with vigor of intellect, keen discrimination, and sound judgment. They were to be far in advance of other nations in wisdom and understanding (PK 368). They were to become a nation of intellectual geniuses, and feebleness of mind would eventually have been unknown among them [27/28] (see PP 378; cf. DA 827; COL 288).

4. Skill in agriculture and animal husbandry. As the people cooperated with the directions God gave them in regard to the culture of the soil, the land would gradually be restored to Edenic fertility and beauty (Isa. 51:3). It would become an object lesson of the results of acting in harmony with moral, as with natural, law. Pests and diseases, flood and drought, crop failure – all these would eventually disappear. See Deut. 7:13; 28:2–8; Mal. 3:8–11; COL 289.

5. Superior craftsmanship. The Hebrew people were to acquire wisdom and skill in all “cunning work,” that is, a high degree of inventive genius and ability as artisans, for the manufacture of all kinds of utensils and mechanical devices. Technical know-how would render products “made in Israel” superior to all others. See Ex. 31:2–6; 35:33, 35; COL 288.

6. Unparalleled prosperity. “Obedience to the law of God would make them marvels of prosperity before the nations of the world,” living witnesses to the greatness and majesty of God (Deut. 8:17, 18; 28:11–13; COL 288; DA 577).

7. National greatness. As individuals and as a nation God proposed to furnish the people of Israel “with every facility for becoming the greatest nation on the earth” (COL 288; see Deut 4:6–8; 7:6, 14; 28:1; Jer. 33:9; Mal. 3:12; PP 273, 314; Ed 40; DA 577). He purposed to make them an honor to His name and a blessing to the nations about them (Ed 40; COL 286).

As the nations of antiquity should behold Israel’s unprecedented progress, their attention and interest would be aroused. “Even the heathen would recognize the superiority of those who served and worshiped the living God” (COL 289). Desiring the same blessings for themselves, they would make inquiry as to how they too might acquire these obvious material advantages. Israel would reply, “Accept our God as your God, love and serve Him as we do, and He will do the same for you.” “The blessings thus assured Israel” were, “on the same conditions and in the same degree, assured to every nation and to every individual under the broad heavens” (PK 500, 501; see Acts 10:34, 35; 15:7–9; Rom. 10:12, 13; etc.). All nations of earth were to share in the

blessings so generously bestowed upon Israel (PK 370).

This concept of the role of Israel is reiterated again and again throughout the Old Testament. God was to be glorified in Israel (Isa. 49:3) and its people were to be His witnesses (43:10; 44:8), to reveal to men the principles of His kingdom (COL 285). They were to show forth His praise (43:21), to declare His glory among the heathen (66:19), to be “a light to the Gentiles” (49:6; 42:6, 7). All men would recognize that Israel stood in a special relationship to the God of heaven (Deut. 7:6–14; 28:10; Jer. 16:20, 21). Beholding Israel’s “righteousness” (Isa. 62:1, 2), “the Gentiles” would “acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the Lord hath blessed” (Isa. 61:9, 10; cf. Mal. 3:12), and their God the only true God (Isa. 45:14; PP 314). To their own question, “What nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them?” the Gentiles would answer, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people” (Deut. 4:7, 6). Hearing of all the advantages with which the God of Israel had blessed His people and “all the prosperity” He had procured for them (Jer. 33:9), the pagan nations would admit that their own fathers had “inherited lies” (ch. 16:19). [28/29]

The material advantages that Israel enjoyed were designed to arrest the attention and catch the interest of the heathen, for whom the less obvious spiritual advantages had no natural attraction. They would “gather themselves together” and “come from far” (Isa. 49:18, 12, 6, 8, 9, 22; Ps. 102:22). “from the ends of the earth” (Jer. 16:19), to the light of truth shining forth from the “mountain of the Lord” (Isa. 2:3; 60:3; 56:7; cf. ch. 11:9, 10). Nations that had known nothing of the true God would “run” to Jerusalem because of the manifest evidence of divine blessing that attended Israel (ch. 55:5). Ambassadors from one foreign country after another would come to discover, if they might, the great secret of Israel’s success as a nation, and its leaders would have the opportunity of directing the minds of their visitors to the Source of all good things. From the visible their minds were to be directed to the invisible, from the seen to the unseen, from the material to the spiritual, from the temporal to the eternal. For a graphic picture of how one nation would have responded to the irresistible appeal radiating from an Israel faithful to God, see Isa. 19:18–22; cf. Ps. 68:31.

Returning to their homelands, the Gentile ambassadors would counsel their fellow countrymen, “Let us go speedily to pray before the Lord, and to seek the Lord” (Zech. 8:21, 22; cf. 1 Kings 8:41–43). They would send messengers to Israel with the declaration, “We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you” (Zech. 8:23). Nation after nation would “come over” (Isa. 45:14), that is, “be joined with” and “cleave to the house of Jacob” (ch. 14:1). The house of God in Jerusalem would eventually “be called an house of prayer for all people” (ch. 56:7), and “many people and strong nations” would “come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before” Him “in that day” and be His people (Zech. 8:22; 2:11). The “sons of the stranger [or Gentile, 1 Kings 8:41; see on Ex. 12:19, 43]” would “join themselves to the Lord, to serve him, and to love the name of the Lord” (Isa. 56:6; Zech. 2:11). The gates of Jerusalem would be “open continually” to receive the “wealth” contributed to Israel for the conversion of still other nations and peoples (Isa. 60:1–11, RSV [1952]; Ps. 72:10; Isa. 45:14; Haggai 2:7, RSV). Eventually, “all the nations” would “call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord” and “be gathered unto it,” not to “walk any more after the imagination of their evil heart” (Jer. 3:17). “All who ... turned from idolatry to the worship of the true God, were to unite themselves with His chosen people. As the numbers of Israel increased, they were to enlarge their borders,

until their kingdom should embrace the world” (COL 290; cf., [Dan. 2:35](#)). Thus Israel was to “blossom and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit” ([Isa. 27:6](#)).

These promises of prosperity and a successful mission were to have “met fulfillment in large measure during the centuries following the return of the Israelites from the lands of their captivity. It was God’s design that the whole earth be prepared for the first advent of Christ, even as to-day the way is preparing for His second coming” (PK 703, 704). In spite of Israel’s ultimate failure, a limited knowledge of the true God and of the Messianic hope was widespread when the Saviour was born (see on >Matt. 2:1). If the nation had been faithful to its trust and had appreciated the high destiny reserved for it by God, the whole earth would have awaited the coming of the Messiah with eager expectancy. He would have come, He would have died, and would have risen again. Jerusalem would have become a great missionary center (COL 232), [29/30] and the earth would have been set ablaze with the light of truth in one grand, final appeal to those who had not as yet accepted the invitation of divine mercy. God’s call to the nations would have been, “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth” ([Isa. 45:22](#)). See on [Zech. 1:8](#).

Had Jerusalem known what it was her privilege to know, and heeded the light that Heaven sent her, she would have stood forth in magnificent prosperity, “the queen of kingdoms,” “the mighty metropolis of the earth” (DA 577), and would, like a noble vine, have filled “the face of the world with fruit” ([Isa. 27:6](#)). “Had Israel as a nation preserved her allegiance to Heaven, Jerusalem would have stood forever, the elect of God” (GC 19; cf. PK 46; [Jer. 7:7](#); [17:25](#)).

After the great final call to the world to acknowledge the true God, those who persisted in refusing allegiance to Him would unite together with the “evil thought” of laying siege to the city of Jerusalem and taking it by force of arms, in order to appropriate to themselves the material advantages with which God had blessed His people ([Eze. 38:8–12](#); [Jer. 25:32](#); [Joel 3:1, 12](#); [Zech. 12:2–9](#); [14:2](#); cf. [Rev. 17:13, 14, 17](#)). During the siege, reprobate Israelites would be slain by their foes ([Zech. 13:8](#); [14:2](#)). In the prophetic picture God is represented as gathering the nations to Jerusalem ([Joel 3:1, 2](#); [Zeph. 3:6–8](#); cf. [Eze. 38:16, 18–23](#); [39:1–7](#)). He has a controversy with them because they have rebelled against His authority ([Jer. 25:31–33](#)), and He will judge ([Joel 3:9–17](#)) and destroy them there ([Isa. 34:1–8](#); [63:1–6](#); [66:15–18](#)). Any “nation and kingdom” that would “not serve” Israel was to “perish” ([ch. 60:12](#)). “Those nations that rejected the worship and service of the true God, were to be dispossessed” (COL 290), and Israel would “inherit the Gentiles” ([ch. 54:3](#)).

The earth would thus be rid of those who opposed God ([Zech. 14:12, 13](#)). He would be “king over all the earth” (vss. [3, 8, 9](#)), and His dominion “from sea even to sea,” even to “the ends of the earth” ([ch. 9:9, 10](#)). In that day “every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts” ([Zech. 14:16](#); cf. [ch. 9:7](#); [Isa. 66:23](#)).

IV. Israel’s Failure to Carry Out God’s Plan

God provided Israel with “every facility for becoming the greatest nation on the earth” (COL 288). When they “brought forth wild grapes” instead of the mature fruit of character, He inquired, “What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?” ([Isa.](#)

5:1–7). There was nothing God could have done for them that He did not do, yet they failed. It was “their unwillingness to submit to the restrictions and requirements of God” that “prevented them, to a great extent, from reaching the high standard which He desired them to attain, and from receiving the blessings which He was ready to bestow upon them” (PP 378).

Those in Israel who put forth their best efforts to cooperate with the revealed will of God realized, personally, a measure of the benefits He had promised. Thus it had been with Enoch ([Gen. 5:24](#)), Abraham (ch. [26:5](#)), and Joseph (ch. [39:2–6](#); PP 214). Thus it was with Moses, of whom, to the very day of his death, it could be said that “his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated” ([Deut. 34:7](#)). Thus it was with Daniel, “a bright example of what man may become, even in this life, if he will make God his strength and wisely improve the opportunities and privileges within his reach” (4T 569; see [Dan. 1:8–20](#); PK [30/31]490; cf. DA 827). Thus it was also with Samuel (PP 573, 574), Elijah (COL 301), John the Baptist (see on Matt. 3:4), John the Beloved (see on Mark 3:17), and many others. The life of Christ is a perfect example of the character of God would have His people develop (see on Luke 2:52). “Higher than the highest human thought can reach is God’s ideal for His children. Godliness – godlikeness – is the goal to be reached” (Ed 18).

The glorious era of David and Solomon marked what might have been the beginning of Israel’s golden age (see PK 32, 33). One royal visitor to Jerusalem exclaimed, “The half was not told me!” ([1 Kings 10:1–9](#)). The glory that distinguished the early part of the reign of Solomon was due in part to his own faithfulness during that time, and in part to the fact that his father David had seemed to appreciate fully Israel’s exalted privileges and responsibilities (see [Ps. 51:10, 11](#); [Isa. 55:3](#); cf. [Acts 13:22](#)).

Before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, God warned them not to forget that the blessings they were to enjoy there if they cooperated with Him would come as divine gifts (see [Deut. 8:7–14](#)), not primarily as the result of their own wisdom and skill (vss. [17–19](#)). Solomon made his great mistake when he failed to realize the secret of Israel’s prosperity (see Introduction to Ecclesiastes), and with a few noteworthy exceptions, leaders and people sank lower and lower from generation to generation until apostasy was complete ([Isa. 3:12](#); [9:16](#); [Jer. 5:1–5](#); [8:10](#); [Eze. 22:23–31](#); [Micah 3](#)).

The kingdom was divided following Solomon’s death (see [1 Kings 11:33–38](#)). This division, though tragic, served to insulate, for a time, the southern kingdom, Judah, from the tide of idolatry that soon engulfed the northern kingdom, Israel (see [Hosea 4:17](#)). In spite of the bold and zealous efforts of such prophets as Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea, the northern kingdom rapidly deteriorated and was eventually carried into Assyrian captivity. Its people were given “no promise of complete restoration to their former power in Palestine” (PK 298).

Had Judah remained loyal to God its captivity would not have been necessary (PK 564). Again and again He had warned His people that captivity would be the result of disobedience (see [Deut. 4:9](#); [8:9](#); [28:1, 2, 14, 18](#); [Jer. 18:7–10](#); [26:2–16](#); [Zech. 6:15](#); etc.). He had told them that He would progressively diminish their strength and honor as a nation until they should all be carried away into captivity ([Deut. 28:15–68](#); [2 Chron. 36:16, 17](#)). God designed that Israel’s experience should prove to be a warning to Judah (see [Hosea 1:7](#); [4:15–17](#); [11:12](#); [Jer. 3:3–12](#); etc.). But Judah failed to learn the lesson, and a little more than a century later her apostasy, also, was complete (see [Jer. 22:6, 8, 9](#); [Eze. 16:37](#); [7:2–15](#); [12:3–28](#); [36:18–23](#)). The kingdom was

overturned (Eze. 21:25–32) and the people removed from the land, which had been theirs only by virtue of the covenant relationship (Hosea 9:3, 15, Micah 2:10; cf. Hosea 2:6–13). Deported to Babylon, they were to learn in adversity the lessons they had failed to learn during times of prosperity (Jer. 25:5–7; 29:18, 19; 30:11–14; 46:28; Eze. 20:25–38; Micah 4:10–12; DA 28), and to impart to the heathen Babylonians a knowledge of the true God (PK 292, 371, 372). For the prophetic guidance during the Captivity see SDABC 4, p. 569.

God did not forsake His people, even during the Captivity. He would renew His covenant with them (Jer. 31:10–38; Eze. 36:21–38; Zech. 1:12, 17; 2:12), including its accompanying blessings (Jer. 33:3, 6–26; Eze. 36:8–15). All that had been promised might yet come to pass if they would only love and serve [31/32] Him (Zech. 6:15; cf. Isa. 54:7; Eze. 36:11; 43:10, 11; Micah 6:8; Zech. 10:6). According to His beneficent purpose, the covenant promises were to have “met fulfillment in large measure during the centuries following the return of the Israelites from the lands of their captivity. It was God’s design that the whole earth be prepared for the first advent of Christ, even as to-day the way is preparing for His second coming” (PK 703, 704).

It is important to note that all the Old Testament promises looking forward to a time of restoration for the Jews were given in anticipation of their return from captivity (see Isa. 10:24–34; 14:1–7; 27:12, 13; 40:2; 61:4–10; Jer. 16:14–16; 23:3–8; 25:11; 29:10–13; 30:3–12; 32:7–27, 37–44; Eze. 34:11–15; 37; Amos 9:10–15; Micah 2:12, 13; etc.). Daniel himself so understood these promises (Dan. 9:1–8). Captivity, he said, had “confirmed” the “curse” that came because of disobedience (vss. 11, 12) and Jerusalem lay desolate (vss. 16–19). Then Gabriel came to reassure him of the restoration of his people and the eventual coming of the Messiah (vss. 24, 25). But, said the angel, Messiah would be rejected and “cut off,” because of the abominations of Israel, and Jerusalem and the Temple would once more life waste (vss. 26, 27). Between the return from Babylon and the rejection of the Messiah, Israel was to have its second and final opportunity as a nation to cooperate with the divine plan (see Jer. 12:14–17). “Seventy weeks” – 490 years of literal time – were “determined” upon the Jews, “to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness” (Dan. 9:24).

Eventually, however, it became apparent that the Jews would never measure up to the standard God required of them, as Malachi makes evident (chs. 1:6, 12; 2:2, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17; 3:7, 13, 14; PK 705). Formal worship took the place of sincere religion (DA 29; cf. John 4:23, 24; 2 Tim. 3:5). Human traditions came to be honored in place of the revealed will of God (see on Mark 7:6–9). Far from becoming the light of the world, the Jews “shut themselves away from the world as a safeguard against being seduced into idolatry” (PK 708; see Deut. 11:26, 27; cf. Mark 7:9). In their meticulous attention to the letter of the law they lost sight of its spirit. They forgot that God abhors a multiplication of the forms of religion (Isa. 1:11–18; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:7; Mal. 2:13), and asks of man nothing “but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly” with his God (Micah 6:8; cf. Matt. 19:16, 17; 22:36–40). Yet in mercy, God still bore with His people, and in due time Messiah came (Mal. 3:1–3; DA 37). To the very last, “Christ would have averted the doom of the Jewish nation if the people had received Him” (PK 712). When the probationary period of 490 years ended, the nation was still obdurate and impenitent, and as a result forfeited its privileged role as His representative on earth.

V. Why Israel Failed

Israel's "unwillingness to submit to the restrictions and requirements of God, prevented them, to a great extent, from reaching the high standard He desired them to attain, and from receiving the blessings He was ready to bestow upon them" (PP 378). They cherished the idea that they were favorites of Heaven (COL 294), and were ungrateful for the opportunities so graciously afforded them (COL 302; cf. 391). They forfeited God's blessing because of failure to fulfill His purpose in making them His chosen people, and thus brought ruin upon themselves (COL 284, 290; PK 705). [32/33]

When Messiah came, His own people, the Jews, "received him not" ([John 1:11](#)). They blindly "overlooked those scriptures that point to the humiliation of Christ's first advent, and misapplied those that speak of the glory of His second coming. Pride obscured their vision [see [Luke 19:42](#)]. They interpreted prophecy in accordance with their selfish desires" (DA 30; cf. 212, 257), because their ambitious hopes were fixed on worldly greatness (DA 28). They looked for Messiah to reign as a temporal prince (DA 415; cf. [Acts 1:6](#)), to appear as a liberator and conqueror, and to exalt Israel to dominion over all nations (PK 709; see on [Luke 4:19](#)). They would have no part in all that Christ stood for (see on [Matt. 3:2, 3](#); [Mark 3:14](#); DA 243, 391). They eagerly sought the power of His kingdom, but were unwilling to be guided by its principles. They grasped at the material blessings so generously offered them, but refused the spiritual graces that would have transformed their lives and fitted them to be His representatives. They brought forth "wild grapes" rather than the mature fruit of a Godlike character ([Isa. 5:1-7](#); cf. [Gal. 5:19-23](#)), and because of this failure to bear the fruit expected of them, forfeited their role in the divine plan (see [Rom. 11:20](#)).

Having declined, thus, to surrender themselves to God as His agents for the salvation of the human race, the Jews, as a nation, became "agents of Satan" for the destruction of the race (DA 36). Instead of becoming light bearers to the world they absorbed its darkness and reflected that darkness instead. They were doing no positive good; therefore they were doing incalculable harm, and their influence became a savor of death (COL 304). "In view of the light they had received from God, they were even worse than the heathen, to whom they felt so much superior" (DA 106; COL 293). "They rejected the Light of the world, and henceforth their lives were surrounded with darkness as the darkness of midnight" (PK 712, 713).

In these tragic events the words of Moses met their final and complete fulfillment: "As the Lord rejoiced over you to do you good, and to multiply you; so the Lord will rejoice over you to destroy you, and to bring you to nought; and ye shall be plucked from off the land whither thou goes to possess it. And the Lord shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other" ([Deut. 28:63, 64](#)). The completeness and finality of this rejection is evident from [ch. 8:19, 20](#): "As the nations which the Lord destroyeth before your face, so shall ye perish; because ye would not be obedient unto the voice of the Lord your God." The rejection of Jesus by the leaders of Israel (cf. [Isa. 3:12](#); [9:16](#)) meant the permanent, irrevocable cancellation of their special standing before God as a nation (COL 305; cf. [Jer. 12:14-16](#)).

At the time of the Babylonian captivity God had specifically announced that that experience was not to mark "a full end" of Israel as God's people ([Jer. 4:27](#); [5:18](#); [46:28](#)). But when the

Jews rejected Christ there was no such assurance of reinstatement. The present-day return of the Jews to Palestine and the establishment of the modern state of Israel do not imply reinstatement as God's people, present or future. Whatever the Jews, as a nation, may do, now or in time to come, is in no way related to the former promises made to them. With the crucifixion of Christ they forever forfeited their special position as God's chosen people. Any idea that the return of the Jews to their ancestral home, that is, to the new state of Israel, may in any way be related to Bible prophecy is without valid scriptural foundation. It ignores the plain statements of the Old Testament that God's promises to Israel were all conditional. (See p. 34.) [33/34]

VI. The Nature and Purpose of Conditional Prophecy

God's word is sure (Isa. 40:8; 55:11; Rom. 11:29), and His plan for the salvation of man will ultimately prevail (Isa. 46:10). With Him there is "no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17). He is "the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (Heb. 13:8). His word "endureth for ever" (1 Peter 1:25). Eventually God's purposes will prevail and the plan of salvation will succeed, irrespective of the failure of any person or group (PK 705, 706). 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. God may reject one nation or group of people in favor of another if those first summoned persistently refuse to cooperate with Him (see Jer. 18:6–10; cf. Dan. 5:25–28; Matt. 21:40–43; 22:3–10; Luke 14:24). For illustrations of the reversal of threatened judgment, see Jonah 3:3–10; cf. 2 Kings 20:1–5; and of promised blessing, see Ex. 6:2–8; cf. Num. 14:26–34. The covenant with literal Israel proved faulty, not because God failed to carry out His part of the covenant, but rather because Israel's fair promises proved evanescent as the morning dew (Hosea 6:4; 13:3; Heb. 8:6, 7). It should be remembered that God does not force the human will, and that Israel's cooperation was essential to the success of His plan for the nation.

God's promises are made conditional upon man's cooperation and obedience. "The promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional" (EGW MS 4, 1883, in, F. M. Wilcox, *The Testimony of Jesus*, 2nd edition [(1934) 1944], p. 99 [= *Selected Messages*, Bk 1 (1958), p. 67]). Again and again God warned Israel that blessing goes hand in hand with obedience and that a curse accompanies disobedience (see Deut. 4:9; 8:19; 28:1, 2, 13, 14; Jer. 18:6–10; 26:2–6; Zech. 6:15; etc.). Continued obedience was necessary to the continuance of divine favor, whereas persistent disobedience must inevitably culminate in the rejection of the Jewish nation as God's chosen instrument for carrying out the divine plan (Deut. 28:15–68). Owing to the failure of the Jews as God's chosen people, many of the prophecies of the Old Testament, such as those affirming the worldwide mission of Israel and the ingathering of the Gentiles (see Gen. 12:3; Deut. 4:6–8; Isa. 2:2–5; 42:6; 49:6; 52:10; 56:6, 7; 60:1–3; 61:9; 62:2; Zech. 2:11; 8:22, 23; etc.), those pointing forward to the eternal rest in Canaan (Isa. 11:6–9; 35; 65:17–25; 66:20–23; Jer. 17:25; Eze. 37; 40–48; Zech. 2:6–12; 14:4–11), and those promising deliverance from her enemies (Isa. 2:10–21; 24–26; Eze. 38; 39; Joel 3; Zeph. 1; 2; Zech. 9:9–17; 10–14; etc.), have never been and can never be fulfilled to them as a nation.

Had Israel measured up to the noble ideal, all of the promises contingent upon obedience would long since have been fulfilled. Predictions of national disgrace, rejection, and woe that

were to result from apostasy would never have been realized. But because of apostasy it was the predictions of national honor and glory that could not be fulfilled. Yet, since God's purposes are immutable (Ps. 33:11; Prov. 19:21; Isa. 46:10; Acts 5:39; Heb. 6:17; etc.), success must and will come – through Israel after the spirit. Though, on the whole, literal Israel failed to realize her exalted destiny, the chosen race did make a worth-while, though imperfect, contribution to the preparation of the world for the first advent of the Messiah (see on Matt. 2:1). Furthermore, it should be remembered that the Messiah, after the flesh, was a Jew, that the charter members of the Christian church were all Jews, and that Christianity grew out of Judaism.

VII. Spiritual Israel Replaces Literal Israel

The formal rejection of Jesus by the Jews, as a nation, marked the close of their last opportunity as the special agents of God for the salvation of the world. It was “last of all” that God “sent unto them his son,” according to Christ's own words (Matt. 21:37), but they “caught him” and “slew him” (vs. 39). Thereafter, God “let out his vineyard [see Isa. 5:1–7] unto other husbandmen” who would “render him the fruits in their seasons” (see on Matt. 21:41). Upon His final departure from the sacred precincts of the Temple, Jesus said, “Your house is left unto you desolate” (Matt. 23:38). The day, before, He had called it “my house” (ch. 21:13), but henceforth He no longer owned it as His. Jesus' own verdict was, “The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Matt. 21:43; cf. 1 Peter 2:9, 10).

The transition from literal Israel to spiritual Israel, or the Christian church, is the subject of Rom. 9–11. Here Paul affirms that the rejection of the Jews did not mean that the promises of God had “taken none effect” (Rom. 9:6), and explains immediately that they are to become effective through spiritual Israel. He quotes Hosea 2:23. “I will call them my people, which were not my people” (Rom. 9:25, 26). Spiritual Israel includes both Jews and Gentiles (v. 24). Peter concurs, saying, “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons,” for “in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him” (Acts 10:34, 35; cf. ch. 11:18). Many years later, in writing to the “strangers,” or Gentiles (1 Peter 1:1; see on Ex. 12:19, 43), as the “elect” of God (1 Peter 1:2), Peter refers to them as the “chosen” ones of God, a “holy nation, a peculiar people” (ch. 2:9), formerly “not a people,” but “now the people of God” (vs. 10). Paul states the same truth in Rom. 9:30, 31, where he makes it plain that the Christian church has replaced the Hebrew nation in the divine plan. Henceforth, he says, there is no difference between “Jew” and “Greek” (ch. 10:12, 13).

Paul emphasizes the fact that the rejection of literal Israel as God's chosen instrument for the salvation of the world does not mean that individual Jews can no longer be saved (chs. 9:6; 11:1, 2, 11, 15), for he is a Jew himself (chs. 9:3; 10:1; 11:1, 2). But they are to be saved as Christians and not as Jews. It is true, he says, that national Israel “stumbled” at the “stumblingstone,” Jesus Christ (Rom. 9:32, 33; 11:11; cf. 1 Peter 2:6–8; 1 Cor. 1:23) but this need not mean that they are to fall – “God forbid,” he exclaims (Rom. 11:1, 22). Literal Jews may still find salvation by being grafted into spiritual Israel, in precisely the same way that Gentiles are to be grafted in (vss. 23, 24). “All Israel” consists of both Jews and Gentiles, thus “all Israel shall be saved” (Rom. 11:25, 26; PK 367). Paul makes it clear beyond argument that when he speaks of “Israel” as the chosen people of God he means it in this sense. He says specifically that by “Jew” he does not mean a

literal Jew but one converted at heart, whether he be Jew or Gentile (ch. 2:28, 29). All who have faith in Christ are one in Him, and, as the spiritual “seed” of Abraham, are “heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:9, 28, 29).

“That which God purposed to do for the world through Israel, the chosen nation, He will finally accomplish through His church on earth to-day” (PK 713, 714). The glorious promises originally made to literal Israel are meeting their fulfillment today in the proclamation of the gospel to all men (PK 374, 375; GC 451; Rev. 14:6, 7). “The blessings thus assured to Israel are, on the [35/36] same conditions and in the same degree, assured to every nation and to every individual under the broad heavens” (PK 500, 501; cf. 298). “The church in this generation has been endowed by God with great privileges and blessings, and He expects corresponding returns. . . . In the lives of God’s people the truths of His word are to reveal their glory and excellence. Through His people Christ is to manifest His character and the principles of His kingdom” (COL 296). Now it is spiritual Israel, in the past “not a people” but “now the people of God,” that are to “shew forth the praises” of the One who has called them “out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9, 10).

We should never forget that “whatsoever things were written aforetime were written” for the “learning” of future generations to the end of time, to inspire patience, comfort, and hope (Rom. 15:4). They were “written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come” (1 Cor. 10:11).

The prophets did not always clearly understand messages they themselves had borne pointing forward to the distant future, to the coming of the Messiah (1 Peter 1:10, 11). These repeated Messianic predictions were designed to lift the eyes of the people from the transitory events of their own time to the coming of Messiah and the establishment of His eternal kingdom, in order to afford them a view of the things of time in the light of eternity. However, these messages pertaining to the then-distant future were intended, not only to inspire patience, comfort, and hope in the day they were first given, but also to provide men of Christ’s day with confirming evidence of His Messiahship. The profound conviction that the messages of the prophets had been fulfilled led many to believe in Christ as the Son of God (DA 775, 799). The prophets thus provided a firm foundation for the faith of the apostolic church and made a direct and vital contribution to the Christian faith.

It was therefore not alone “unto themselves” and to their contemporaries that the prophets ministered, but also to all sincere men and women of later generations (1 Peter 1:12). It is ever the privilege of those who witness the fulfillment of prophecy to “remember” and “believe” (John 13:19; 14:29; John 16:4). Prophecies that Inspiration clearly applies to our day were designed of God to inspire us with patience, comfort, and the hope that all things foretold by these holy men of old will soon meet their final and complete fulfillment.

VIII. Conclusion: Principles of Interpretation

In general, Old Testament promises and predictions were addressed to literal Israel and were to have been fulfilled to them, conditional on obedience. Partial compliance on their part with the will of God made possible a partial fulfillment of the covenant promises on God’s part. Yet many of the promises, particularly those concerning the giving of the gospel to the nations and the

establishment of the Messianic kingdom, could not be fulfilled to them because of their unfaithfulness, but would be fulfilled to the church on earth preparatory to Christ's return, particularly to God's remnant people, and in the new earth.

When the Jews rejected Christ as the Messiah, God in turn rejected them and commissioned the Christian church as His chosen instrument for the salvation of the world ([Matt. 28:19, 20](#); [2 Cor. 5:18–20](#); [1 Peter 2:9, 10](#); etc.). Accordingly, the covenant promises and privileges were all permanently transferred from literal to spiritual Israel ([Rom. 9:4](#); cf. [Gal. 3:27–29](#); see on [Deut. 18:15](#)). Promises not already fulfilled to literal Israel either would never be fulfilled at all or would be fulfilled to the Christian church as spiritual Israel. Prophecies that fall into the latter classification are to be fulfilled *in principle* but not necessarily in every detail, owing to the fact that many details of prophecy were concerned with Israel as a literal nation situated in the land of Palestine. The Christian church is a spiritual "nation" scattered all over the world, and such details obviously could not apply to it in a literal sense. Prophecies of the former classification cannot now be fulfilled because they were strictly conditional in nature and limited in scope, by their very nature, to literal Israel.

The fundamental principle by which we can tell unerringly when any particular promise or prediction of the Old Testament made originally to literal Israel is to meet its fulfillment with respect to spiritual Israel is – *when a later inspired writer makes such an application of it*. For instance, the prophecy of the battle of Gog and Magog in [Ezekiel 38, 39](#) was never fulfilled to literal Israel; but John the revelator assures us that in principle, though not necessarily in all details (such as those of [Eze. 39:9–15](#)), this battle will occur at the close of the millennium ([Rev. 20:7–9](#)). But to go beyond that which is clearly set forth by Inspiration – in the immediate context of the passage concerned, in the New Testament, or in the Spirit of prophecy – is to substitute personal opinion for a plain "Thus saith the Lord." Where Inspiration has not thus clearly spoken it is our privilege to compare scripture with scripture in an endeavor to understand more perfectly the mind of the Spirit. But here, as in all exposition of Scripture, we should avoid affirming as the explicit teachings of the Bible that which is our private, finite view, however plausible it may appear to be. Furthermore, Old Testament prophecy must first be examined in terms of its historical application to literal Israel before the validity of a derived application to spiritual Israel may be undertaken.

One of the main objectives of the Bible commentator is to reconstruct the historical setting in which the declarations of the prophets were originally made. Christianity is a historical religion, and its inspired messages are anchored to the hills and valleys, the deserts and rivers, of the ancient world, and to literal men and women who once walked the earth. There is no surer protection against the speculative vagaries of religious visionaries than a clear knowledge of the historical context of Scripture.

Though the prophet looked at events about him, he also could see far beyond his own day. In a mysterious way known only to God the prophet's words were sometimes intended to meet their fulfillment in the then far-distant future. At times they had an import, not only for the age in which the prophet lived, but also for a day far future; in other words, they had a dual application. Similarly, the ways in which God dealt with men in crises of the past are often cited as examples of the manner in which He will deal with all the world in the last day (see on [Deut. 18:15](#)). For example, the judgment that came upon Sodom and Gomorrah, literal cities of the ancient past, is

used by Bible writers as descriptive of the judgment God will eventually bring upon all the world.

The student of the Bible who hopes to secure from it the greatest help will first proceed to reconstruct the historical context of each passage. He will listen to the prophet speaking to Israel of old and endeavor to understand what his words meant to the people who originally heard them. But he will listen also for the further import the prophet's words may have for later times, particularly, our time. Indeed, this secondary application is for us today the more significant. [37-38] But it is only against the background of the original historical context of the message that its meaning and value for us can be established with certainty.

A study of the Old Testament prophets that consists primarily of lifting selected passages here and there out of their historical context and arbitrarily applying them to our day – as if the prophet spoke exclusively for our benefit – is fraught with grave danger. In fact, this procedure is responsible more than anything else for the fanciful interpretations that distinguish the teachings of certain religious groups.

In an age when every wind of doctrine is blowing it is well to make certain that our understanding of Bible prophecy rests upon a positive “Thus saith the Lord” (see [Deut. 29:29](#); [Isa. 50:11](#); [Jer. 2:13](#); [Matt. 7:24–28](#); [1 Cor. 2:4, 5, 12, 13](#); [Eph. 4:14](#); [Col. 2:2–4, 8](#); [2 Peter 1:16](#); [Rev. 22:18](#)). In so doing we shall be secure against the fanciful explanations sometimes given certain Old Testament prophecies. We shall be protected against the grossly literal explanation of some expositors concerning the return of literal Israel to literal Palestine to rule the world for a thousand years prior to the close of human probation, and also against other equally unscriptural interpretations that propose to apply allegorically to the church all the details of the promises originally made to literal Israel. Both of these extreme methods wrest the obvious intent of the Scriptures and render a sound understanding of the messages of the prophets for the church today unattainable.

The following simple rules are suggested as a safe approach to the study of each prophetic passage of the Old Testament:

1. Examine the prophecy in its entirety. Note by whom it was spoken, to whom it was addressed, and the circumstances that called it forth. Remember that – generally speaking – it was originally given with respect to the historical circumstances that called it forth. It was ordained of God to meet the needs of His people at the time it was given and to remind them of the glorious destiny that awaited them as a nation, of the coming of the Messiah, and of the establishment of His eternal kingdom. Discover what the message meant to the people of that time. (*This rule does not apply to those portions of the book of Daniel that the prophet was bidden to “shut up” and “seal,” or to other passages whose application Inspiration may have limited exclusively to our own time.*) – [Text in italics was added by general editor F. D. Nichol. See Raymond F. Cottrell, “The Untold Story of the Bible Commentary,” *Spectrum*, August 1985 (16:3), p. 42: “Elder Nichol’s overriding pastoral concern, however, led him to insert the parenthetical caveat on page 38.”]
2. Observe the conditional aspects of the prediction and ascertain whether or not, or to what extent, the conditions were met.
3. Discover what application later inspired writers make of the prophecy, and on this basis determine its possible significance for God’s people in this time.

4. Remember that the record of God's dealings with His people in ages past has been recorded for the benefit of all later generations to the end of time. Our study of messages originally proclaimed by holy men of old to the people of their day is not to become an end in itself, but a means of discovering the will of God for all who would render Him truehearted service now, at the climax of the ages. The voice of God through the prophets distinctly speaks to us today.

If these rules are consistently followed the resulting interpretation can be accepted with confidence. In the inspired utterances of the prophets of old the sincere seeker for truth will thus find messages of inspiration, comfort, and guidance for today.

Theme: Lest we forget

Leading Question: What does Malachi tell us that we need to know today?

Note: Three issues/passages stand out as particularly significant for believers today: the predestinarian perspective on Jacob and Esau (1:2-3), tithing (3:10), Elijah the prophet (4:5-6).

1. “I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated” (1:2-3). Paul tussles with this quote in Romans 9:10-21. Those favoring a free-will perspective find his rhetoric amusing; those favoring a predestinarian perspective do not. Is there any way to resolve this tension? In the opinion of the author of this study guide (Thompson), there is not. The resolution to the difficulty seems to be that the differing perspectives must balance out each other in the church in the persons of people holding the differing views.

What is perhaps most remarkable in our individualistic age is that free-will parents tend to give birth to Calvinist children and Calvinist parents tend to give birth to free will children. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, in their *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (3rd ed., 2003, p. 20), note rather wryly, “Both ‘eternal security’ and the possibility of ‘losing one’s salvation’ are preached in the church, but never by the same person!” When addressing the tension between the free-will and Calvinist perspectives and the texts supporting each position, these same authors observe: “Our experience as teachers is that students from these traditions seldom ask what these texts mean; they want to know “how to get around” these texts!”

An article at the end of this lesson suggests, somewhat playfully, another way of obtaining balance. In short, a free-will person can “choose” to be a Calvinist on alternate days!

2. Tithing: Does the formula work? (3:10). Tithing is highly recommended by many churches. Almost from the beginning the practice has been urged by Adventists. But it is still not a “test of fellowship.” Jesus’ statement in Matthew 23:23 supports tithing in a rather unique way. He criticizes the Pharisees for their strict tithing practices while neglecting “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.” But then he adds: “These you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.”

In class discussion, it could be profitable to share tithing stories. We can inspire others to step out by faith and do what the Lord says in Malachi 3:10: “Put me to the test.”

3. Elijah the Prophet (4:5-6). Malachi specifically states that God “will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes” (NIV). This led some in Jesus’ day to think that John the Baptist might have been Elijah (Luke 9:8; John 1:21). Others thought that Jesus himself might have been Elijah (Luke 9:19). The SDABC, in the light of Luke 1:17, suggests that the passage may not refer to a particular person, but to the “spirit and power” which accompanied Elijah’s ministry. Such an approach would likely reduce speculation about the

appearance of an extraordinary messenger of the Lord at the end of time.

“A Calvinist on Monday, Wednesday, Friday”
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Is my title wishful thinking, conviction, or playfulness? Yes! But I’d choose “conviction” if I could. I’d love to enter the soul of a real Calvinist, not to wreak havoc, but to understand, and not like a doctor understands a patient, but from the patient’s own perspective. It would be like sharing a beautiful sunset as two people are drawn together in awe and wonder. Or the sharing of a luscious fresh peach. Knowing glances and happy noises reveal a common joy.

But if sunsets and peaches bond us naturally, theology requires miracles. In the words of Thoreau, “Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?” Yes, theological unity needs miracles.

And I’ll be honest: I want a miracle. Why not? Miracles are biblical.

But do I need a miracle to become a Calvinist? Didn’t Calvin earn his Adventist spurs with a chapter in Ellen White’s *The Great Controversy*? Not exactly. At least one devout Adventist has gone into print with the line: “The Satanic God of Calvin.” Strong feelings those!

And thus looms the great question that keeps dividing believers: Is our future in God’s hands or ours? Does God choose us or do we choose God?

Now if you simply answer Yes! and wonder what the problem is, you’re in good company. As C. S. Lewis has noted, Paul, without explanation, puts the two perspectives back-to-back in Philippians 2:12-13: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” – “for it is God who is at work in you.”

Our trouble is the temptation to choose one or the other instead of keeping them together. Indeed, even though Paul puts both together in Philippians 2, elsewhere he comes down so hard on the divine side of the equation (e.g. Rom 9-11) that he is often seen as virtually the opponent of freedom-loving James. Historically the two sides have clashed again and again: Augustine (400s), Calvin (1500s), and Whitefield (1700s), arguing for divine sovereignty; Pelagius, Arminius, and Wesley, defending human freedom.

Adventists typically are free-will people, more at home with Methodists than Presbyterians or Lutherans. But as I see it, our free-will roots have kept us from really hearing Paul – hence my conviction that I should be a Calvinist three days a week.

It happened as I was reading devotionally in the Gospel of John and was surprised by two familiar verses. I’d read them many times before but hadn’t heard them. In John 12:27, Jesus wonders about asking the Father to “save” him. “No,” he says. “That’s why I came.” Suddenly I heard the other prayer in the Garden, “Let this cup pass from me” (found in the synoptics but not in John). In John 15:16 I was startled again: “You did not choose me, but I chose you.”

I had always “heard” the human side of those experiences: Jesus’ human desire to escape death, and my freedom to “choose” God. It’s time for me to hear the divine call, not just the human will. Maybe it can happen on MWF. That’s a curious kind of Calvinism, to be sure. But by God’s grace, miracles can happen.

It may be, however, that in this case I’m expecting too much. Instead of being like a shared sunset or luscious peach, my love for Calvinism could be like my appreciation for my wife’s love of high mountain peaks that plunge into deep, dark chasms below. She revels in the heights; they terrify me. But because I love her, I love to see her exhilaration – as long as I don’t have to go to the edge myself. We’ll see. In the meantime, I am going to be a MWF Calvinist.