

Perspective Digest



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Perspective Digest - a publication of the Adventist Theological Society

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It comes as no surprise that the Bible and the Koran create unique worldviews. Sacred writings generate worldviews in keeping with their respective meta-narrative, reasoning, and symbolism. The assertions that each worldview both presuppose and project about God, the world, and human beings profoundly affect the adherent's identity, spiritual experience, and ethics.

There are many similarities and differences between biblical and koranic thought about the being and character of God. On the one hand, the concept of God in the Koran is significantly similar to the concept of God in the Bible. Many of the same attributes of God are asserted in both. These include God as omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), omni-benevolent (all-good). Both recognize only one God. Both portray God as the self-existent sovereign Creator of heaven and earth. Both exalt God as merciful. Both proclaim that God will someday judge the world. Both emphasize the oneness of God. Both affirm that God has sent prophets and has given sacred scriptures. Both unfold a paradox of divine transcendence and divine immanence.

As a result, Muslims and Christians use similar words to describe God. So much so that for some, *Allah* is merely the personal name for God in Islam, the *Yahweh* of Moses and the *God* of Jesus: i.e., there should be no distinction between *Allah* and the English word *God*. Any difference between the biblical God and koranic Allah would be solely a matter of language. At the very least, the corresponding witness of God should provide a context for understanding, dialogue, and bridge-building. Surely there is much to affirm between the two regarding how good and how great God is—and worthy of worship, allegiance, and the submission of one's total self.

Despite such God-affirming similarities, the Bible and the Koran often construe God (as well as humans and the world as a whole) in noticeably different ways and perspectives that make for significant differences both in theology and practice. The divergence is profound. As a result, Muslims have a fundamentally different understanding of God from Christians. They stress different aspects of God than Christians do. And Muslim faith and experience are remarkably different from Christian faith and experience. The reality is that the use of the word *God* for Muslims does not create the same mental picture or produce the same response as it does for Christians. These are matters of worldview. This begs the question: Since the Koran and the Bible uphold a high view of God, are they the same God? The answer is both Yes and No!

At the heart of the search for an answer to this question is the nature of religious experience—the practical implications of one's vision of God in character, worship, and ethics. Clarity

here can help Adventists connect better on the experiential level with their Muslim friends. The Bible and the Koran both exalt and hold God in high esteem. Both communicate an experience with God. But what is the nature of their respective experience in relation to their given vision of the nature of God? The Bible and the Koran engender a different conception of life, which in turn leads to an entirely different approach to spiritual experience, daily tasks, and problems. It is an unavoidable fact that we become what we worship.

This suggests several questions: "What have Christians become?" "What have Muslims become?" "What can Seventh-day Adventists bring to the discussion of God that would make a difference in the life of their Muslim friends?" "What is there to learn from Muslims?" "What can Muslims learn from us?"

Christians read the Koran largely as a foreign text. They are unacquainted with its style, rhetoric, images, or nuances. Muslims likewise read Scripture as a foreign document, and to them, some aspects of its rhetoric and nuances are not only unacceptable, but also blasphemous. Furthermore, there is need to relate to inner spiritual matters of the soul longing for harmony with God and to touch the existential angst in both Christian and Muslim religious experience.

In fact, there is often a marked difference between the biblical witness of God and contemporary Christian witness of God. Much of the Christian view of God reflects exegetical, theological, and cultural interpretation or filtering of the Bible more than it does the Bible itself. Likewise there is often a marked difference between the koranic view of Allah and the Islamic witness of Allah. Much of the Islamic view of Allah reflects *Hadith* and *Tafsir* interpretation or cultural filtering of the Koran more than it does the Koran itself. What the Bible and the Koran say about God may not be the same as their respective readers/interpreters may imagine or articulate. It is hoped that the reader is encouraged toward a faithful reading of the respective texts rather than toward dependence on mere perceptions, experience, tradition, or culture in relation to those texts.

Ellen G. White writes that those who wait for Christ's soon return are to say to the people of the world, "Behold your God."¹ She adds: "The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love. The children of God are to manifest His glory. In their own life and character they are to reveal what the grace of God has done for them."² Biblical eschatology places the question of the character of God in the forefront of the Great Controversy. This is at the heart of Adventist eschatology. Surprisingly, the question of the character of God is at the heart of Islamic eschatology as well. The message of the Koran is for the most part eschatological in that it moves readers forward in time toward the Day of Judgment, at which Jesus will affirm who Allah really is.

The pulse of Seventh-day Adventists' eschatology springs from the three angels' messages, which are to go to every part of the world: "Fear God and give glory to Him . . . worship Him who made . . ." (Rev. 14:7).³ Fear God. Give Him glory. Worship Him alone. In essence, "Behold your God."

So would Islam say to the same peoples of our world. But it would do so with an entirely

different imagery and language and heart regarding God. Thus the questions: "What God?" "What vision of God is to be lifted up for the world to behold?" There is to be a revelation of God's character of love—in both impassioned word and empowered life. "God is love," the Bible declares (1 John 4:16). Those words comprise the opening sentence of *Patriarchs and Prophets* and the final words of *The Great Controversy*. The revelation of God's character of love is to be at the heart of Seventh-day Adventist personal life, witness, and mission in the world.

In this context, what is the biblical witness about God? What is the koranic witness about God? What is our Adventist end-time witness of the character of God? Are we saying, "Behold your God" or, "Behold our doctrine"?

The Nature of God in Scripture

We begin with what we (as readers of the Bible) understand, or should understand, both intellectually and experientially, in relation to the biblical witness of God—who God is in His being and in relation to His creation.

The Bible opens with a clear, concise vision of God: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). The simplicity of this opening statement belies its depth. It identifies the Creator. It explains the origin of the world. It ties the work of God in the past to the work of God in the future. The remainder of the Creation account is a praise of God's goodness and grace in view of His gift of land, which God graciously prepared as a place for human beings to dwell (1:2–2:3). "God is just there, with no biography or defining features, and God simply starts creating the world through sheer thought and speech."⁴ He is wholly other. He willfully acts. His speech is lifegiving. In addition, God speaks words of blessing to the creatures of the sea and sky and to humanity—even to time (1:22, 28; 2:1, 2). The animal world is created, blessed and addressed. Human beings are created, blessed, addressed. Time and history are blessed. There is witness of God moving dynamically into creation in a fully participatory way. The making of our world unfolds as an act of uprightness, trustworthiness, commitment and decisive faithfulness.

The two-chapter narrative affirms that God's existence is unquestionable. He is personal. He is good. He is transcendent and immanent. From this dramatic opening and onward, the creative work of God plays a prominent role in the biblical presentation of God and comprises some of the Bible's final images of His creative power and covenant faithfulness to His creation.

The Genesis creation narrative nuances the personal (and interpersonal) nature of God with the inclusion of God's personal name *Yhwh*. In chapter two the God who creates *ex nihilo* is *Yahweh Elohim*—the Lord God. In the biblical narrative, God has a name, which He assigns to Himself and by which He reveals Himself. In doing so, "God chooses to be described as the definable, the distinctive, the individual."⁵ The Creator then does not wish to be viewed as an abstract, unknowable being or a nameless force or concept, nor is He merely to be described—even in generic terms. The Creation narrative assures us that while the Lord God is a person who lives outside of us and independently of us, He is nevertheless a person who can be personally known, and who personally interacts with His

creation.

In the context of this self-disclosed name by which the Lord God wants human beings to both know and remember Him, a divine personality profile emerges from the ensuing biblical narrative. The name *Yahweh* is a revelation of His nature. *Yahweh* is the holy one, the majestic one, the God who speaks and then acts. The Shema, the most famous confession of faith in the Old Testament, presses the reality: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:4, 5). This is a confession of divine lordship: that *Yahweh*, the Lord, is not only the one and only true God, but also that He deserves all our love and allegiance. This worship and love is intensely personal because it responds to God who Himself is intensely personal. Such biblical vision (theology) both demands and invites a practical and experiential response of faith, love, worship, and allegiance.

Furthermore, the Lord God asserts, "I am holy" (Lev. 11:44, 45). The phrases "I am the Lord" and "I am holy" are used interchangeably. Scripture makes it clear that only God is holy (Lev. 19:2; 20:7, 8, 26). "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6:3). Though God is sovereign, He is described by His holiness, which stands at the very heart of His nature. Revelation 4 asserts these character realities of God. God alone is holy—as such, His redeeming acts can be considered righteous and true (Rev. 15:3, 4). God's transcendence is expressed by this notion of holiness. It points to God as wholly other, to *Yahweh's* metaphysical distinctiveness over humanity and all of creation. But the Lord's holiness is ethical as well as metaphysical. His holiness transcends human beings, not only as creatures, but also especially as sinners.

Nevertheless, the Bible unfolds God's holiness positively in relation to human beings: "I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44). God's holiness both penetrates human hearts and transforms them. God graciously extends His holiness toward fallen human beings as a way to restore in them His image—to bring holiness into their lives so they can reflect Him in the world. Holiness as a chief attribute of God includes God's *relationality* (His speaking and presence). It also includes His separateness from the world. (He is the transcendent source of all, i.e., Creator.) Holiness also relates to God's power (He is Deliverer), His moral nature (He is and demands righteousness, love, purity), His constancy (He is truthful and faithful), and His covenant relationships. Throughout, the biblical witness of God's holiness is wrapped in relational categories.

Furthermore, God's love reflects His holiness: "Who is like You, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like You, *glorious in holiness*, fearful in praises, doing wonders? You in Your mercy have led forth the people whom You have redeemed; You have guided them in Your strength to Your holy habitation" (Ex. 15:11, 13, italics supplied); "The Lord has appeared of old to me, saying: 'Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you'" (Jer. 31:3). The biblical witness points to the relational nature of holiness as comprising divine love. It highlights God's concern for human beings. This expression and evidence of God's love engenders

human response of a wholehearted love to God. Because of it, believers will do whatever is necessary to keep themselves within the sphere of God's love.

These themes must linger long in our imagination. They must haunt our every waking moment. The biblical witness unfolds a holy loving God. The Hebrew Scriptures assert: "The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation'" (Ex. 34:6, 7).

God's steadfast love is the basis of all hope and moral life (Ps. 33:5, 18, 22; 2 Cor. 13:14; Rev. 3:9). John's Gospel echoes God's heart for our world: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). "God is love," the Bible declares (1 John 4:16). John links God's love to our own love of Him as well as toward one another: "We love because he first loved us" (vs. 19, NIV). The New Testament is full of such statements. As the Bible's last witness to human beings, John's Apocalypse assures us of God's enduring love and care.

The biblical witness thus confronts us with an incredible paradox of divine transcendence and immanence: "Thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones. For I will not contend forever, Nor will I always be angry; for the spirit would fail before Me, and the souls which I have made'" (Isa. 57:15, 16); "O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, You know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it. Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?" (Ps. 139:1-7).

Such passages unfold the genuine experience of the "fear of the Lord," in which human hearts are haunted on the one hand with realities of God's transcendence and on the other hand, with realities of God's infinite closeness. One both trembles in self-awareness and keeps still in sweet assurance that is anchored beyond one's self.

Biblical Anthropomorphisms

Can we truly know the God to whom the Bible gives witness? Do we merely know about God from the Bible, or can we truly know God and personally experience Him in our lives? We want to know God personally. We want to know Him experientially. But on what level does the biblical witness to God actually reveal God to us?

Irrespective of the fact that our inner world of feelings and spiritual experience can never be separated from our world of thoughts and rationality, the human mind, heart, and soul need more

than facts and information. It will never be enough to have only the right terms about God or the right list of divine attributes and their meanings. Human beings need illustrations, analogies, stories, and personal practical experiences both to integrate information and to engender understanding and response on the deepest level. It is often literature, music, and the arts that provide such bridges. Genuine spiritual experience includes the right and left brain, concept and image, metaphor and proposition, heart and mind.

In keeping with these deeper levels of human knowing, the Bible reveals God to us by narrating God's actions, by describing Him in response to events taking place in our world, and by giving us a glimpse into His inner self rather than into His inner life. The entire biblical witness unfolds a narrative self-disclosure of God in which there is information, illustration, and artful application. The biblical witness provides illustration, analogy, simile, narrative, values, poetry, hymns, wisdom literature, etc. Though we can draw many conclusions about God from what we have already reviewed above, other complementary and enlightening dimensions of God unfold in the context of biblical narrative and anthropomorphic language. Story and anthropomorphism put a "face" on the divine attributes. Biblical narrative and anthropomorphic language enable us to more fully know and experience God.

Our discussions of God often reflect more philosophically oriented categories than what the biblical data provide. The biblical witness, however, spends more time revealing God's personal and moral attributes than it does His relative and absolute attributes. It gives witness of a personal being who can be known, loved, trusted, and obeyed. The Bible both begins and ends with images that would focus readers on God's personal and moral attributes. A basic principle here is to follow the biblically clear and primarily personal and moral attributes of God in interpreting the less clear relative and absolute attributes. In doing so then the attributes of divine omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence will not be seen as absolute power exercised per se, but power exercised by a personal self-giving God who relates to creation in love. By following the biblical witness in giving priority to the personal and moral attributes of God, the role of personal freedom, both divine and human, is elevated.

It is in this way that the biblical witness reveals how God has condescended to use human language to describe His own transcendent being. Working with terms from Creation and particularly personal relationships, God reveals what He is like. In other words, God uses words, experiences, and images that we are familiar with and that come from our world. God communicates transcendence via analogical language (i.e., terms that are like in some way but not all ways). In particular the Bible uses metaphoric analogy, in which one thing is compared to another. God uses an analogy between Himself and something in the created world that is based on the similarity of being, action, or relation. For instance, when Scripture calls God a rock, the focus is on how God is unchanging and provides a firm foundation for whatever we do.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the God of the Bible most often uses human categories to help people understand Him. These personal metaphors describe God's being, actions, and

relationships as similar in many respects to a human's being, and human actions and relationships. We call these *anthropomorphisms*, and they provide the greatest degree of correspondence between God and the symbolic world from which He draws truths about Himself. The God of the Bible is not afraid to be viewed from such anthropomorphic perspectives. He uses language of personal relations (Father, Husband, Teacher, Physician, Lawmaker, Lord of Hosts, Prophet, Bridegroom, Farmer, Friend, Builder, Potter, Creator, King, Priest, Judge, Redeemer, Shepherd). He uses relational language (fellowship, communication, truth, love, life, authority, grace, purity, care, home, marriage, intimacy, agriculture, faithfulness). God can woo like a lover, grieve like a husband, be concerned like a parent, and enter into covenant to assure faithfulness. These multiple images of God are necessary for a holistic picture of God. The varied metaphoric images bring understanding toward both God's transcendence and His immanence. Through them, we are enabled to understand both God's *being* and the way God works in relationship to others.

In the biblical witness, God does not hesitate to compare Himself in the way human persons act and relate to others. God is like these metaphoric analogies in some way, but not in every way. In the process the metaphors are reshaped by God's own being and then become the standard for a new understanding of human roles. While understanding is engendered, it is not God who becomes like humans, but rather humans who are lifted to become more like God in character and life. God uses multiple metaphors/roles because none is fully adequate in itself. The multiplicity of biblical images nuance both divine transcendence and immanence. It is in this way that the biblical witness holds together both the transcendence and the immanence of God.

The biblical witness consistently begins with character and relational aspects of God where God is seen at work concretely rather than being abstractly described. As we see God at work, images of His person and character emerge. This enables us to connect with God personally and to see Him as personal and engaged in our world. Through its narratives, metaphors, and anthropomorphisms, Scripture gives us the picture that the God who creates by the Word is self-giving, sacrificial love. God the Creator is outpouring and lifegiving. He is personal, engaged with His creation. He is good, and He is moral. God is involved and invested in our world and in our lives.

The Bible assures us that human beings can truly know God and not just God's will: "Let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight," says the Lord" (Jer. 9:24); "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3); "No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jer. 31:34). God's self-disclosure intends intimacy with human beings whom He loves and for whom He is at work to redeem.

Ultimately God's self-disclosure (and immanence) is most fully expressed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God's final and complete self-revelation: "God, who at various

times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds" (Heb. 1:1, 2); "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him" (John 1:18); "It is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

The transcendence/immanence paradox in the forgoing biblical texts is incredible. Christ's incarnation is the ultimate point of connection between God and humanity. It pushes God's self-revelation beyond anthropomorphisms to lived humanity itself. God provides a human face in the person of Jesus Christ. The unthinkable becomes reality—the transcendent wholly other God who has existed from eternity is seen by human eyes, heard with human ears, and touched with human hands: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:1-3). Through the biblical witness one can both love the unseen Christ (1 Peter 1:8) and experience genuine fellowship with God (1 John 1:3). There is eschatological promise that the face-to-face communion with God, which was both experienced and lost in Eden, will be experienced again in the earth made new (Rev. 22:1-5). The incarnate Word provides the fundamental criterion for a true understanding of God's character and ways in the world.

The Nature of God in the Koran

The Koran's first *sura* (chapter) is an organic and vibrant part of the Muslim's daily prayer experience (repeated five times during the day). Titled the "Fatiha" or "Opening," it reads: "In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy! Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy, Master of the Day of Judgment. It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help. Guide us to the straight path: the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray" (Q. 1:1-7).

Exegetically this first koranic witness asserts that Allah is the sole source and sustainer of life. Allah alone is worthy of worship and praise. Allah is Lord of the cosmic drama from the beginning of time at the act of creation to the end of time on the Day of Judgment. Allah is Lord of Creation, Lord of History, and Lord of Judgment. This opening *sura* is foundational in that it sets a tone echoed elsewhere in the Koran where it asserts that Allah is one, and unlike any created thing or being (Q. 112:1-4) and where it is asserted that Allah alone exists without the need for anything else. The Koran repeatedly asserts that Allah is the creator of everything that exists and that all is dependent on Allah (Q. 2:255; 36:81, 82; 54:50).

In keeping with this theme, Allah is elsewhere called the sustainer of the whole universe (Q.

11:6). He did not create the universe or our world and then cease to be involved. He sustains it. He remains connected. This is nuanced in other *suras*, where it is implied that nothing exists without being in a relationship with the Allah as Creator (Q. 2:255). In particular, *sura* 2.255 asserts: "Allah! There is no God save Him, the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtaketh Him. Unto Him belongeth whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth. Who is he that intercedeth with Him save by His leave? He knoweth that which is in front of them and that which is behind them, while they encompass nothing of His knowledge save what He will. His throne includeth the heavens and the earth, and He is never weary of preserving them. He is the Sublime, the Tremendous." These grand themes are very much in keeping with the biblical witness regarding God.

It should be noted that this first *sura* celebrates Allah's mercy in the context of His might and majesty. Allah is the "Lord of Mercy and the Giver of Mercy"—a twice-occurring phrase. Thus, Allah is the mighty, majestic, and merciful Creator. The text implies that giving mercy is inherent in Allah's name or being. In the Arabic language—the term for "mercy" or "compassion" is the plural form of the word *womb*. To feel and share in compassion is to be like a mother who bears, nurtures, and protects her unborn child. It is a picture of divine compassion that gently holds us in being. This is an incredible personal and intimate image of Allah in relation to the *sura's* assertions regarding Allah's transcendent being. In addition, the phrase "Merciful Lord of Mercy" *Al Fahman al-Rahim* means "By the means of the very essence of God." The implication is that whatever we do, each breath we take, every word we utter, is done because of and through the essence of the One. God's creation of nature and man, and nature for man, is His most primordial mercy. There is no one-sided transcendence suggested here, but rather equally Allah's being "with" His creation.

This formula—"In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy"—is present at the beginning of every *sura* (except in "The Opening" as per above). Such repetition extends mercy as a personal and intimate attribute of Allah throughout the Koran as a whole. In doing so, it sets the theological and worship context for each subsequent *sura*: Allah is Lord of Mercy and Giver of Mercy. Such repetition implies too that mercy is the very essence of Allah.

Though the apparent contradictory nature of the Koran makes it hard to pin down precisely the exact meaning(s) of Allah's grace and mercy, it is nevertheless present and pervasive. Some titles for Allah connote mercy, but in some respects it is a redefined mercy compared to what one finds in the Bible. Allah is merciful because He did not kill or leave anyone in peril. This is in contrast to Yahweh, who is caring, loving, and an intimately involved Father. At least this is how the Koran appears to the casual reader. Even so, a more compassionate side of mercy can be intuited and nuanced from the Koran and surely by grace-hungry hearts of Muslim readers.

The Koran's opening *sura* includes also the theologically rich phrase "Lord of the Worlds" (world of mankind, angels, animals, plants, this world, the next world, etc.). The idea of "Lord" has connotations of caring and nurturing in addition to lordship, and this should be borne in mind wherever the term occurs and is rendered "Lord." One translation renders the thought "Lord of the Worlds" as "The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds." The phrase "The Lord of the Worlds"

suggests that Allah knows of the existence of and controls all that goes on in the everyday world. "Lord of the Worlds" has to do with time and destiny in history. Though some might construe this as fatalistic, i.e., read as oppressive and identifying Allah's will with history where Allah's deeds and Allah's decree influence history without any mediating causation, this need not be the case. The phrase points rather to the simple yet profound reality of Allah over all. He is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. One need not read rigid predestination or matters of free will into the statement.

On the opposite end of the Koran one finds the most basic creedal statement of Islamic theology, and that represents the essential understanding of Allah, i.e., *sura* 112 (titled "The Unity"): "Say: He is Allah, the One! Allah, the eternally Besought of all! He begetteth not nor was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him."

This closing *sura* is short and to the point. Its simplicity and brevity defies the depth of meaning. It comprises Mohammed's definition of Allah and is held to be worth a third of the Koran and the seven heavens and the seven earths are founded on it. It points to the absolute unity and sovereignty of Allah. It asserts Allah's existence. Elsewhere, the Koran appeals to evidences of Allah's existence in the wonders of visible nature in the heavens and on earth, as well as the manifestations of life in plants and animals and especially in the realm of human life. The order of creation and the order of life both point to the existence of Allah. They are signs for those who believe (Q. 45:3, 4; cf. 51:20, 21; 41:53). They are signs for reason to grasp, for one to know, become convinced of, and believe. This is important to note, as the sensible and intellectual capacities of human beings are appealed to as starting points in one's knowledge of Allah. But here, like the biblical record, Allah's existence is affirmed as unquestionable. He is wholly other. He is transcendent.

One of Islam's answers to the question of "Who is God" is the celebration of Allah's "most beautiful names." The koranic basis for this is found in *sura* 59:22-24: "He is Allah, than Whom there is no other God, the Knower of the Invisible and the Visible. He is the Beneficent, Merciful. He is Allah, than Whom there is no other God, the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One, Peace, the Keeper of Faith, the Guardian, the Majestic, the Compeller, the Superb. Glorified be Allah from all that they ascribe as partner (unto Him). He is Allah, the Creator, the Shaper out of naught, the Fashioner. His are the most beautiful names. All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifieth Him, and He is the Mighty, the Wise."

One finds little in Islam on the subject of Allah's essence and character except the sense in which the 99 names for Allah are believed to reflect the character of Allah. In all the terms and titles of Allah, one does not encounter terms of intimacy. Allah's "beautiful names" by and large appear as either active participles or adjectives. They are not read as a proper name in Islam. Unlike how *Yahweh* in the Hebrew Scriptures is the personal name for God, *Allah* is not a proper name. In the Islamic religious formulation, God has no personal name.

Besides being Merciful, Allah's most oft-mentioned attributes include Compassionate and Forgiver, i.e., (Q. 40:3; 2:173, 182, 192, 199, 218, 225, 226, 235). Allah's attributes of

Compassionate and Forgiver often occur together: "Ask forgiveness of Allah. Lo! Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (Q. 2:199). For those who genuinely repent, God will change their evil deeds to good deeds (Q. 25:70). "He said: I smite with My punishment whom I will, and My mercy embraceth all things, therefore I shall ordain it for those who ward off [evil] and pay the poor-due, and those who believe Our revelations" (Q. 7:156). Existentially the reality of receiving mercy and experiencing forgiveness speak profoundly regarding possibilities of Allah's immanence and one's hope of personally experiencing such a divine reality. While the Koran may not provide concrete steps toward such an experience, or provide imagery for one to imagine it, it nevertheless nuances its possibility and the hope of experiencing it for oneself.

Nor is divine love missing from the koranic witness of the Allah's attributes as some would suppose. Allah is "loving: If ye love Allah, follow me [Mohammad]; Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (Q. 3:32); "Allah will bring a people whom He loveth and who love Him" (Q. 5:54). To be sure, such images are far and few between. More is said about what Allah does not love than what He does love. And more revolves around human love for Allah and/or human love toward other things than it does of Allah's love for them or their response of love to Allah's love.

Probably the strongest declaration in the Koran regarding Allah's immanence or nearness to the creaturely realm asserts: "We have indeed created man, and We know what his soul insinuates to him. We are to him closer than the jugular vein" (Q. 50:16). While the full meaning of this passage is yet to be understood, nevertheless on the surface at least, the *sura* affirms how Allah is nearer to each human being than his or her vital life-blood. This is remarkable! One could set this *sura* beside Psalm 139, which highlights *Yahweh's* utter transcendence in the context of the incredible intimacy of His presence and closeness. Any Muslim wrestling with the import of this *sura* would be encouraged with the sense of Allah's overwhelming presence, closeness, and connection. Unfortunately, and unlike Psalm 139, any personal and existential implications of this *sura* are left for the reader to imagine. Yet the implications are there begging to be tapped.

Muslim scholars assert that the Koran provides no discussion about Allah and His nature or existence. They posit rather that the Koran is only functional, i.e., to inform us that God is Creator, Sustainer, and Guide of the universe and humankind. As a result, there is little Muslim scholarship on the subject of Allah's essence and character. The bottom line of Muslim confession about Allah is that Allah is absolute oneness and sovereignty. For the most part, Allah is outside of time and space. This is true for Shiite tradition in particular, in which philosophically Allah is beyond space and time. There is no place where one can say, "Allah is there." Allah is beyond everything that is created. Allah is beyond understanding and the ability to speak accurately about God. In contrast, the Sufi tradition exhibits a dramatic exception to this emphasis upon utter divine transcendence in Islam in its focus on the possibilities of a more personal relationship with Allah. Overall, "the belief that God is one, singular, and separate from creation is central to the concept of Allah."⁶ Not only is Allah one, He is transcendent. Allah is distant from creation and from human beings.

"The practical implication of this priority toward divine transcendence is that Muslims believe

that in the Koran Allah did not reveal himself. Rather, he only revealed his will. As such Allah's will becomes limited to Islamic law. It is a metaphysical impossibility to be in a personal relationship with Allah. Allah is distant and removed from creation and creatures and relates to them through his will and law."⁷ As Braswell writes: "The concept of God is deep and complex in Islamic theology and philosophy. Muslims believe that God is one, sovereign, and ruler over all. He has no partners. God's many names do not describe his essence, only his will and law. God is independent of his creation. He revealed his will and law through the angel Gabriel to his prophet Muhammad as well as to other select prophets."⁸

Allah is the one supreme God who remains entirely transcendent to the world. Allah is nowhere immediate and present in creation, although the Koran hints at the opposite. Again, this does not necessarily mean that Allah is not involved with human beings, but the true nature and attributes of Allah are well beyond human comprehension.

Koranic Anthropomorphisms

This brings us to the question of the paucity of narrative and anthropomorphic language in the Koran in relation to the person and character of Allah. Story and narrative plot are less evident in the Koran than they are in the Bible. The Koran is assembled somewhat randomly with the longest *suras* at the beginning and the shortest ones toward the end. *Suras* from the Mecca and Medina periods are interspersed. There is little if any sustained, linear trajectory or sequential story-plot as one finds in the Bible, where salvation history moves broadly from Genesis through to Revelation and in which many books along the way (between Genesis and Revelation) reflect narrative content and purpose. The Koran, however, is an eschatological book with linear historical trajectory in that it directs readers toward the final judgment where Allah will be vindicated as God. Yet narrative and anthropomorphism in relation to the character of God are negligible.

Where biblical narratives are present in the Koran, it unfolds a dramatically divergent retelling of these stories and alternative interpretations of biblical figures and ideas. In the process, the Koran largely follows Jewish scriptural interpretation's attempts to de-anthropomorphize God. It appears that the Koran's paucity of narrative content and that of anthropomorphisms are related. Surprisingly, Islam is more akin to Judaism in conceptualizing God than it is to Christianity. This is important to note in Christian/Muslim dialogue regarding the being and character of God. Jewish interpreters were confronted with similar problems as their Muslim counterparts with the biblical depictions of God, which seemed to detract from God's absolute transcendence. Anthropomorphisms in the Hebrew Scriptures created interpretive problems for both Jewish and Islamic exegetes—as if God is a human being writ large. As a result, Rabbinic and koranic hermeneutics and commentary on the being and character of God agree more with each other than they do with that of Christian commentary.

After all, what kind of God molds man out of the dirt like a potter? Or strolls through the Garden of Eden searching for Adam and Eve and engaging them personally? What kind of God talks

to a serpent in a long and complicated interrogation? Or grieves and wonders if it were the right thing to have created humans in the first place? What kind of God eats food? What kind of God can be argued with toward changing His mind (as did Abraham pleading with God not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah)? In the Book of Genesis alone there is material sharing between God and humans, there is fellowship, and there is conversation—even pleading.

Expand such anthropomorphic imagery via narrative across the Old Testament (let alone the New Testament) and you have all kinds of seemingly God-demeaning images. For Islam, “God is seen as separate and independent of creation and has no associations with any human traits.”⁹ Allah has no emotions. Muslim theologians believe that it would be incorrect for God to have real emotions. For them, it would be demeaning to His greatness. In contrast, the Bible God unfolds as one who grieves, who rejoices, and who loves passionately, but not so in the Koran.

The Koran reflects the milieu in which it was received, written, and assembled. Lodahl asserts: “Several centuries worth of rabbinic commentary on the book of Genesis was collected and collated near the end of the fourth and into the early fifth centuries. . . . This material, called *Genesis Rabbah*, provides an authoritative Jewish sourcebook of readings of the Genesis text by and for the Jewish community not only of two millennia ago but even of today. Interestingly, what it demonstrates is that the differences between Genesis and the Koran are to some extent accounted for (or at least softened a bit) by the history of Jewish interpretation itself. In other words, . . . the koranic versions of biblical narratives often already imbibed the ambience of Jewish readings of the biblical text—readings intended, often, to de-anthropomorphize God.”¹⁰

In recounting the biblical stories, the Koran time and again keeps the story but changes characters (i.e., it is angels, not God who are in view). The biblical stories are edited such that God comes out looking very Godly: transcendent, almighty, omniscient—and often effectively outside the narrative picture. The Koran then essentially cleans up God’s image. God’s image is much cleaner, crisper, and Godlike. One Muslim writer notes how the Koran rescues humans from regarding God too anthropomorphically.¹¹

Naturally, the koranic version of any biblical story is assumed by Muslims to be the correct and even the infallible version of the story. If the Koran has details that the Bible does not have, then the Koran is assumed to be correcting (or at least complementing) the biblical version of the story—even if it turns out that many of the Koran’s extra details are found somewhere in the body of Jewish interpretive material that arose after the writing of the biblical text and prior to the time of Muhammad. The biblical Genesis narrative in particular is full of anthropomorphisms. Yet the Creation account, the fall of human beings, the Flood and Noah—God grieving, the surprise and sorrow attributed to God in Genesis 6:5-8—are simply not worthy of Allah. In the Koran’s record of Noah, not only does God not grieve, but He commands Noah not to grieve (Q. 11:36, 37).

Differences, then, between the biblical witness and the koranic witness regarding God and God’s relationship to the world and to oneself are reflected in a largely non-narrative backdrop with limited anthropomorphic language in the latter. Muslim tradition has avoided the language that man

was made in the image of God, because it could readily lead to the conclusion that God is a physical being and thus possesses an image that human beings could represent. This tradition both reflects the Koran and how it is subsequently interpreted. It inevitably nuances how one views Allah's being and character and subsequently the Islamic worldview.

The Koran however, does ascribe certain qualities to Allah that seem to soften somewhat its stance on the absolutely transcendent nature of Allah and possibly encourage perspectives of immanence and even anthropomorphisms. These images contrast with Allah's beautiful names. Allah derides (Q. 9:79). Allah forgets (Q. 9:67). Allah comes stealthily (Q. 7:182). Allah has a face (Q. 2:115, 272), eyes (Q. 11:37; 23:27), and hands (Q. 3:73; 5:64) and is sometimes seated on a throne (Q. 7:54; 10:3). Despite the possibilities that these anthropomorphisms might suggest, most Muslim scholars would assert that any resemblance between the attributes of a thing or person and some attributes of Allah is only apparent and superficial. The heavenly realm of Allah does not traffic in earthy things. (Not even the angels eat, let alone God.)

It is important to note that koranic anthropomorphisms (and traditional Muslim interpretations of them) revolve around physical characteristics of God in relation to humans and their implications rather than to personal matters of divine being and character. An example would be the Koran's reference to Allah as having a face. Muslims will avoid such implications as verging on blasphemy in that it crosses the barrier between the Creator and the creature. To give Allah a face is to bring Him down to the human. In contrast, *face* in the biblical witness is full of existential, personhood, and conscience realities (Gen. 3:9, 10; Ex. 3:6; Rev. 20:11). Thus, *face* in the Koran is seen in terms of mere external realities and any correspondence with human face is avoided. Koranic interpreters assert that the anthropomorphic verses are beyond human understanding and or verge on blasphemy/idolatry. Again, in contrast, the biblical anthropomorphisms are meant to engender deeper understanding. As mentioned earlier, nowhere does the Koran suggest that humanity was made in the "image of God" as per the biblical account (Gen. 1:27). As a result, anthropomorphic language is not considered appropriate with reference to Allah. The biblical witness, however, asserts that human beings are made in the "image of God" (vs. 27), thus opening the way for positive metaphoric analogy and anthropomorphism as a way of understanding God. Again, biblical anthropomorphisms are intended to engender understanding rather than misunderstanding or blasphemy. They bring humans upward to God rather than God downward to human beings. In the Bible, human qualities as per the image of God are in no way associated with inanimate images or idolatry. These are important distinctions that ultimately determine how one reads both the Bible and the Koran and what view of God he or she will come away with.

In this context it can be stated again that the Koran does not really reveal Allah, but rather only Allah's will for all creation. Allah's total transcendence in effect makes Him not only impersonal but also un-personal. Allah has no point of reference in human concept, thought, or experience. Allah becomes like a word without an idea.

Because anthropomorphic language in the Koran is either scant or sidestepped, Allah is often

described in Islam more by what He is not than by what He is. By limiting the characterization of Allah to primarily that which he is not, Muslim readers and interpreters of the Koran have unintentionally nullified Allah's practical existence for humankind. Allah is so absolutely singular, so totally separate, that He cannot even be imagined. He has no body, no spirit. He needs nothing, wants nothing, feels nothing, and possesses nothing. Allah is harder to imagine, know, experience.

The Koran is revered by Muslims as being God's final scripture and as such provides the fullest and final revelation of God. While espousing a very high view of God, however, in reality the Koran reflects only a partial (or one-sided view) of God: perhaps not by intent, but by literary content and paucity of metaphoric analogical language and narrative material that would lead the reader beyond the sheer absolute attributes of Allah to that of His being, heart, and character—where a response of love, trust, hope, and assurance would be awakened. The Koran's focus on Allah's transcendence could be seen as a much-needed corrective in the view of the polytheism and irreverence of Mohammad's day, not to mention the Jewish-Christian conflict regarding God and much of the milieu's confusing foci, Christology, and distortions of Christian theology. Nevertheless, the Koran offers little more than its Rabbinic counterpart with respect to a view of the being and character of God—except what one might glean in addition about Allah from the Koran's references to Jesus in relation of Allah and Allah's purposes through Jesus both in the present and in the final judgment.

While the Koran claims that Jesus was a mere human being, a prophet of God who was superseded by Muhammad, it nevertheless places Jesus in a role unlike that of any other of Allah's servants including Muhammad. Jesus seems to have unique status and is given honorific titles as Messiah, Word of God, and Spirit of God (Q. 4:169-71; cf. 3:4-46), Speech of Truth (Q. 19:34, 35), a "Sign unto men," and "Mercy from (Allah)" (Q. 19:21). Ultimately, Jesus is the One through whom Allah judges the world and brings the eschatological banquet (Q. 5:109-120). The Koran engenders deep respect and even reverence for Jesus where Muslims will invariably pronounce the benediction "Peace be upon Him" with every mention of His name. The Koran asserts that Jesus is one of Allah's instructive "signs" or "revelations": "We may make of Him [Jesus] a sign for mankind and a mercy from Us" (Q. 19:21, 91; cf. 23:50). Furthermore, Jesus is the Messiah, a word from Allah, one of those brought near to Allah, and righteous: "(And remember) when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a word from him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto Allah). He will speak unto mankind in his cradle and in his manhood, and he is of the righteous" (Q. 3:45, 46). And surprisingly, Jesus is "a faultless son" given to Mary and humankind (Q. 19:19).

These titles and activities of Jesus have much significance in Christian theology as they relate to the divine character of Christ. Many Christians have tried to read too much into them in their attempts to prove certain biblical doctrines from the text of the Koran. To the Muslim, however, they lack any content of Deity, and even the Koran states that at the eschatological judgment, Jesus will affirm that He did nothing to encourage the beliefs and behaviors of Christians that are inconsistent with Muslim teaching. If we want to do justice to the Koran, we need to let Islamic theology speak for

itself in determining the significance of these titles for Jesus.

Having said this, however, it is highly appropriate to wonder how this very human Jesus might be one of God's instructive signs, a mercy from God, the Word of Truth. How might these titles and activities of Jesus relate to our discussion about Allah's character and in particular the question of His immanence? This needs deeper study, but on the surface it implies that Jesus will speak forth Allah's communication as a prophet that will in some sense embody this communication. This is a remarkable possibility, and while it certainly cannot simply be equated with the Johannine notion of Jesus as God's-Word-become-flesh (John 1:14), it does suggest a singular greatness of Jesus' prophetic role and implications for nuancing Allah's immanence and close connection with human beings. Likewise in Islamic theology, the concept of the messiah means someone who is prominent in this world and in the next as well as someone who is near God. These are important perspectives for our understanding the transcendence/immanence debate in Islam.

One would wonder, too, whether the koranic images of "word" and "spirit" in relation to Jesus are bridge concepts, which refer to the activity of God in reaching out to bridge the gap between the realms of the transcendent and the mundane? Could *Word* imply Allah's bridging this gap by communicating with human beings—"speaking to" humankind, imparting a set of meanings by means of human language and interpretation, i.e., anthropomorphism that radically shifts one's view of Allah toward a real lived life? Could the word *spirit* suggest imparting life, vitality, and energy? Could *word* and *spirit* denote two inseparable modes of outreaching from Allah toward creation? If so, it would suggest that perhaps the anthropomorphisms in the Koran are not in essence wrong and that their implications should be teased out more fully. Again, one would not need to read matters of deity into either in order for this to be so.

One might further argue that the Koran itself as a book expresses God's immanence. The Koran became an earthly book when the "Mother of the Book" was recited to Muhammad and eventually was committed to the writing. The functional equivalent to the Koran for Christians is not so much the Bible as it is Jesus Christ. Muslims insist that Allah "has spoken" the full, final, and authoritative Word in the Koran, while Scripture asserts that God "has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb. 1:2). Though as it has been stated above that Allah Himself per se may not be revealed in the Koran—only His will—nevertheless the Koran itself bridges human beings to Allah. One would think so even more when it is related to not as a written text but as an internalized reality that is recited.

One naturally wonders at this point, *Is there a difference between the koranic view of God and the interpreters who have come afterward?* Absolutely! Though some would try to nuance or tease out personal spiritual aspects of God in relation to His being and character, most relegate such discussion to the level of the abstract and unknowable. It is hoped that this study will encourage the former, letting the Koran speak for itself.

Becoming What We Worship

There is overlap and divergence between the biblical and koranic witness with regard to the

person and character of God. The divergence between the two sacred texts largely revolves around the Koran's maintaining divine transcendence over that of immanence and protecting God from supposed demeaning (or blasphemous) anthropomorphisms. What are the moral and spiritual implications of this overlap and divergence for Christians and Muslims respectively? What kind of spiritual experience do these divergent views create? Which view of God and reality ultimately satisfies the longing of the human soul? Do both? How do these views of God affect everyday religious life?

That Christian and Muslim religious experience is dissimilar is a given. Psalm 115:8 asserts the moral/spiritual principle that we become what we worship. Our view and worship of Deity inevitably molds both moral and spiritual life. This contrast in religious experience is linked in part to the divergent biblical and koranic witness regarding God's being and nature.

There is more often than not a gap between the biblical and koranic witness about God and the religious experience of their respective readers. What we see in the Christian world does not usually reflect the biblical witness about God. Cultural influences and the influence of tradition rather than the biblical witness most often determine Christian religious life and experience. The same is true of Islam. What is expressed in the Koran about Allah is not always fully or truly reflected in the religious spiritual experience of the average Muslim. Islamic religious experience is markedly cultural and reflects Arabic tradition more than it does the koranic witness of Allah, and more noticeably so than in Christianity.

Islamic Devotion and Religious Experience

The liturgical and semi-liturgical influence of the Koran is evidenced in Islamic devotion and worship. It does so not so much as a written text that is read, but an internalized reality that worshipers recite, for when the Koran as a flawless communication from Allah is recited, it is truly Allah who speaks. Muslims are encouraged to know the Koran by heart (although in practice very few do, most know only bits and pieces and what they do know they usually acquire more through their Imam than in personal engagement with its text).

The core of Islamic devotion is the five obligatory daily prayers, whether performed alone or in a congregation. These prayers begin with worshipful koranic recitation. First, the worshiper recites the *Fatiha*. Second, he or she is to recite some further portion of the Koran. These koranic-threaded prayers are offered five times a day as a duty toward Allah and where Allah is directly or indirectly in view in the text read/recited. They serve to strengthen and enliven the belief in Allah and to inspire the worshiper to a higher morality. They are said to purify the heart and prevent temptation toward wrongdoing and evil. Preparation for these prayers includes ritual washings with a view toward personal absolution before Allah. Thus cleansing, prayer, and forgiveness are intertwined. Prayer includes standing, kneeling, and prostration. Various portions of the Koran are recited throughout. During the five stated prayers, individuals address Allah directly (but not necessarily personally) without an intercessor or mediator.

This cycle of prayer—based on the rhythms of the natural world—provides a framework for living and a foundation for those existential moments in life that lift the worshiper outside the human time/space continuum, and allow him or her to draw close to the Divine Being. But this prayer experience in effect tends to be not so much a personal conversation between a human and God but more rather an external practice saturated with formal procedures and required customs. It has been asserted that in the end, prayer in Islamic piety is an act of obedience more than it is personal petition. If prayer were not repeated five times daily, believers would soon forget about Allah and His greatness. The heart of the human predicament is one's tendency toward forgetfulness rather than that of a fallen nature.

Informal prayers (*Do'a*)—extemporaneous petitions, pleas, praises, and statements to God—however, express a more emotional and heartfelt side (and longing) of Islam often associated with Folk Islam. Sufism is a more mystical wing of Islam that attempts to overcome Allah's distance (transcendence) by emphasizing that Allah is closer than one's jugular vein. It talks of love and closeness and the presence of Allah. There is music and dancing that show an intense emotional side of religion and the desire for the nearness of God to the human condition. Folk and Sufi Islam tend to be more personal and spiritual, in light of Allah's perceived immanence and approachability. They highlight a soul hunger endemic in Islam (as well as a very human reality that seeks intimacy and assurance with God).

Outside of the ritual prayer, the recitation of the Koran can play a part in a wide variety of semi-liturgical activities (religious and social) as well as everyday life in ways that are not liturgical at all. Koranic phrases penetrate into everyday language: "If God wills" (Q. 2:70), "God knows best!" (Q. 3:167), "Praise be to God!" (Q. 1:2). Such koranic phrases in everyday language reflect how Allah is an ever-present reality in Muslim life and consciousness. But the question remains whether this is so experientially or culturally?

Prayer, however, is only one of the "Five Pillars" of Islamic faith, which give believers strict, concrete rules and practices to which they must adhere. These pillars are non-negotiable. They are not questioned but believed and practiced. There is the Testimony (*Shahada*): "There is no god but Allah. Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." There are the Five Daily Prayers (*Salat*): Almsgiving or Purification of Wealth (*Zakat*), Ramadan Fast (*Sawm*), which honors the arrival of the Koran, and Pilgrimage (*Jajj*) honoring Abraham. In addition to these five core religious practices, all Muslims are to work purposefully to spread their religion.

The essence of Islamic piety as expressed in the above spiritual disciplines is submission. The Arabic root *s/m* finds nuance in the words *Islam*, *Muslim*, and *Salam*. *Islam* means "submission to the will of Allah." The person who submits to Allah is called a Muslim. Such submission brings *Salam*—peace (both personal and communal). The Koran asserts that the only correct human response to God is total submission. For Islam, to be human is to be *muslim*—a human in submission to Allah: "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to God), never will it be accepted of Him" (Q. 3:85); "This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favor upon you,

and have chosen for you Islam as your religion" (Q. 5:3). The word *Islam* implies a state of harmony (peace) that exists between God and the whole of creation, and within creation itself, which is the way God created it. It contains, as well, the idea of submission, because this harmony can come about only when everything submits to the will of God and acts according to the plan of the Creator. The mosque as the place of Islamic worship literally means a place of prostration.

In the context of one's personal submission to Allah, Muslim moral life and ethics include issues of purity and cleanliness, clothing and adornment, diet, family, marriage and divorce, husband and wife and parent and child, status of women, economic life, and the conduct of business and political life.

Islam provides an all-embracing view and expression of life. It comprises a worldview complete with cultural expression and support. It is life under the rule and order of Allah as given in the Koran and through the prophet Muhammad's teaching and life. It answers fundamental questions of why one should be moral, and how one can be so. For Islam, a transcendent Allah knows human beings completely, and if Allah knows humans that well, then surely Allah knows what is good for them. Thus the Koran expresses the divine will. Human beings need only follow Allah's will. Understanding or dialogue regarding Allah's will is unnecessary (even irreverent or blasphemous), as submission is all that is required.

Islamic anthropology and Islamic ethics have the same essence: submission of self. Matters of personal will, choice, and freedom blur against the will of Allah, who remains transcendent and reveals His will rather than Himself. Moral agency unwittingly becomes moralistic, and any assurance of help beyond one's self wanes. "If Allah is merciful, then I will be saved—given there are enough good works on the scale." Love and grace as the spring and power of submission blur against a desire for sufficient works to counterbalance in the eschatological judgment. The question is how much in Islamic moral life is linked to Islam's view of Allah, who is transcendent (rather than holy and personal), and how much is cultural?

In Islam, every human being is born sinless: There is no original sin. Each person is responsible for his or her own acts, and no one bears the burden of others (Q. 6:164). The human condition, then, is more one of forgetfulness than sinfulness. Mercy, grace, and the need for atonement are interpreted from this perspective. One wonders whether there might be a significant difference in Muslim spiritual life regarding these matters if Allah's character (rather than transcendence) were more in view in their reading of the Koran?

One wonders, too, how much Islamic religious life is based on the character of Allah as found in the Koran in relation to the compelling influence of Islamic Arab culture? While the Koran casts the larger worldview context for these elements of Islamic religious experience, it appears they reflect Arabic culture and tradition more than they do the Koran itself. One's connection with Allah is not as important as staying connected to the community and doing what is right within the community and culture. Being connected to the community means being connected to Allah because this is Allah's community. The success of Islam appears to be the mosque, the expression of Islamic community,

more than the Koran itself. There appears to be a faithfulness and passion to the religion of Islam more than to Allah. One observes more reaction when Mohammed is criticized than when Allah is. More often Muslims will weep at the mention of Mohammed than they will Allah.

In addition questions of predestination (tacit fatalism) and the assurance of salvation lay heavily in a Muslim's thinking. So, too, is a correct understanding of the Koran. No one but Allah knows the interpretation of the Koran (Q. 3:7). The average Muslim does not understand the Koran for himself or herself but is dependent on the Imam. One does not get personal guidance from the Koran. Only the Imams who read Arabic can really know and interpret it—but even that is open to question. The practical question presses each worshiper: *Why study the Koran if people cannot read it for themselves and understand it unless they are an Imam?* Existential angst and soul hunger are common within Islam, and because of this, Islamic sects like Sufism seek to give primacy to the religion of the heart, to the love of God, and to values of contemplation and asceticism—even if in the process they directly contradict some of the most fundamental doctrines of orthodox Islam.

Nevertheless, the Koran as the expression of Allah's will holds a special place in the life of the believer, and Islamic piety tends to be reverent, respectful, dutiful, compliant, morally upright, and worshipful. Because of it, Allah dominates Muslim thought and life. Islamic piety provides a familiar context from which Muslims keep spiritual and physical life before Allah focused.

Biblical Devotion and Religious Experience

While there is a marked unity and similarity among Muslims in the essentials and practice of the major doctrines and religious experience as outlined above, it is not so with those who read the Bible. The contour of Christian piety and religious experience is not as homogeneous. Nor does it tend to be as reverent, dutiful, compliant, morally upright, and worshipful across the board as one finds in Islam. Many aspects of Christian doctrine and religious experience only remotely reflect the Bible and the spiritual/religious experience it portrays. There is no single set of assumptions with respect to the nature and character of God and what that means existentially, experientially, and practically. Some of this stems from disagreement over the nature of the Bible, its origin and authorial integrity, what it contains, what it reveals, how one should approach it (hermeneutics), and the role it plays as an authority in religious and spiritual experience in relation to tradition, culture, personal experience, and science. (Is the Bible an absolute authority or one authority among many? Does it provide only an authoritative witness, or is it ultimate authority through which one finds God, who alone is absolute authority?) Religious experience and practice stemming from disparate readings of the Bible and views of God runs the gamut from legalism to mysticism, from high church to unstructured cell-groups. What does the Bible intend our spiritual experience and religious practice to be?

The Bible reveals that God is love and that He has acted lovingly in Jesus Christ toward humanity (1 John 4:7-21; John 3:16; Titus 3:4-7). From these realities everything else springs. We love God because He loves us first, continually, and sacrificially (1 John 4:19; Rev. 1:5). Spiritual life

and religious practice spring from the haunting reality of God's self-giving love in the atoning death of Jesus Christ. Divine love both compels and propels, resulting in a new creation complete with altered priorities and transformed life (2 Cor. 5:14, 15). The God of Scripture would awaken a response of love, not mere submission. One can submit but not love—or have experienced being loved. But if one truly loves, there will be heartfelt submission (Eph. 5:21-26). Such submission is no mere compliance, obedience, or capitulation. It involves one's very self willingly and totally disposed to God (or another) in service and honor.

Biblically, the experience of grace and peace is the hallmark of one's personal encounter with this God who loves (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Rev. 1:4-6). Divine grace, peace, and love converge in the human heart, bringing oneness with God, communion with Him, hope and joy, moral excellence, and full assurance of redemption, despite the vicissitudes of life. Paul expresses these realities: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom. 5:1-5).

John highlights the profound intimacy one can experience with God: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:1-3).

Other passages give witness: that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ (Rom. 8:1); that there is confidence that God is always for us and never against us (vss. 31-34); that nothing can separate us from God's love (vss. 35-37); and that one can have confidence at His appearing (1 John 2:28). The Bible assures us that through His love, grace, and power, God is able to keep us from falling away and will bring us with great joy into His glorious presence without a single fault (Jude 21, 24).

The Bible gives more witness of God as love than it does of God as judge. But where judgment is nuanced, those who know God fear neither Him nor the judgment. Rather, they welcome God's judgment, for they know that in judging, God is at work in their behalf (Ps. 7:8; Dan. 7:22; Rev. 18:20). The Bible asserts that "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18). Biblical fear includes a loving response to God, who is our Holy Redeemer: "What does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut. 10:12).

These images raise important questions. How does it feel to be loved? What is it like to have love returned or spurned? God desires our love in return and goes out of His way through biblical narrative and anthropomorphic imagery to help us get in touch existentially with such personal and inner realities in relation to Himself (i.e., the books of Song of Songs, Hosea, Ezekiel, the story of the Prodigal Son, etc.). Biblical anthropomorphisms help one understand divine mercy and love. They seek to draw one experientially into the circle of divine love. Such an experience engenders joy, hope, and passionate surrender and commitment to God.

The Bible is not abstract thoughts or statements, but thoughts by God on life and lived by Christ (Heb. 1:1-3; John 1:1-14; 18). God is not an object that we are to deal with, but a Subject who speaks and addresses us personally. God is Personal. Words connect living beings—they are a revelation from one interior to another (1 Cor. 2:9-16). What is inside me can get inside you—the word does it. What is in the mind of God can get inside our mind—through words. Language is the bridge in biblical spirituality. The Bible is the text for genuine spirituality. God connects with us personally by means of the language of the Bible: “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39); “The words that I speak to you are spirit” Jesus asserts (6:63). Ultimately, the Bible brings us into contact with God Himself who measures our heart and life: “The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:12, 13).

Biblical spirituality is a return to “God said.” For not only is there God, there is God’s Word. On the surface this may sound similar to what Islam asserts in that the Koran reveals the will of God and believers are to submit to the will and rule of God. But the Bible goes beyond the will of God to God Himself, who expresses His will. When one responds to the Word of God, he or she responds to God—a person responding to a personal God. He or she does so in relation to Him. Furthermore the Bible presents God as a calling God, which implies freedom to say “Tomorrow” or “No” or “Yes!” (Rev. 22:17; Heb. 3:15; 4:7).

Two biblical characters model the kind of religious experience the Bible’s vision of God gives witness to—Daniel and Paul. The Prophet Daniel was a man whom God highly esteemed and loved (Dan. 9:23; 10:11). His life was one of incredibly personal spiritual and moral integrity as well as professional excellence (6:3-5). His spiritual discipline and religious practice informed his diet, thought world, prayer life, worship practice, obedience in relation to God’s will, fasting, confession, repentance, and the study of God’s Word (1:8; 2:17, 18; 6:10; 9:1-21; 10:2, 3). Daniel served God continuously (6:16, 20). He knew the joy of moral and spiritual innocence and excellence before all around him, before God, in full hope of eternity beyond the grave (6:22; 12:1-3, 13). Daniel’s experience brings insight into the divine transcendence and immanence paradox, which the Bible ever keeps in tension with respect to those who know and experience God. Upon seeing a vision of God, Daniel fell down with fear before the divine One and yet felt the hand and heard the voice of the

Divine affirming him as favored of heaven and bidding him, "Fear not!" (10:4-12).

The Apostle Paul likewise exemplifies the biblical divine transcendence/immanence tension and how this paradox impacts the spiritual moral experience of those who encounter God. His "Road to Damascus" experience brought Paul face-to-face with divine transcendence, which totally undid him, and yet divine immanence is evident in the verbal exchange in which the divine and human communicate and from which Paul understood the personal spiritual and missiological implications of his encounter with the risen Christ (Acts 9:1-20; 22:6-16).

This transcendence/immanence experience forever framed Paul's spiritual life, religious practice, and ministry. On the one hand Paul saw himself as chief of sinners and unworthy of any standing before the eternal, immortal, invisible God (1 Tim. 1:12-17). He would ever characterize himself as being in complete submission to God and to the will of God—"a bondservant of God" (Titus 1:1). His spiritual life and personal integrity would include spiritual disciplines (prayer, fasting, worship), his inner world of conscience and character, and an outwardly disciplined life of obedience to the will of and service to the world around (Acts 24:16; 1 Cor. 9:24-27; 2 Tim. 1:3). On the other hand, Paul knew the reality of God's love, grace, peace, and personal presence—realities of divine immanence that touched him deep within, bringing hope, assurance, courage, comfort, purpose, and moral/spiritual power (1 Cor. 15:10; Phil. 3:7-14). Thus Paul saw himself as a slave who was in personal interaction with God, whom He both loved and to whom he had submitted his life.

In light of these images, God's Word should mean everything to us because that's where we can see and touch the infinite, almighty One who alone can meet every one of our needs. God's Word is God Himself coming to us with His presence, His mind, His heart, His transforming power, hope, and purpose. It is God Himself strengthening us from inside out, building our core. In His Word, God meets human beings, changes them, and provides for them. God's Word is where we find God. In His Word, He keeps ever before us the balance of His transcendence and immanence.

Conclusion

The biblical and koranic worldviews are largely defined by a vision (and resulting set of assumptions) of God, which in turn profoundly affect each reader's identity, spiritual experience, religious practice, and moral life. Both the message of the Koran and the Bible bring something positive to the table with regard to the character of God in relation to the Great Controversy. They generate overlapping yet distinct views of God and thus reality.

An exploration of the biblical witness of the being and character of God in relation to that of the koranic witness of Allah finds wonderful and foundational truths about God in both. The Koran, however, exhibits a paucity of narrative and anthropomorphic material with regard to God in comparison to that of the Bible. This revolves largely around Islam's question of divine transcendence and the desire to maintain the believer's proper relation (distance) to Allah. The Bible, too, would raise caution with respect to divine distance. However, it presents divine transcendence and immanence as a paradox in balanced tension—which creates a sense of both distance from and

intimacy with God for those who encounter Him in relation to His Word.

Each text's presuppositions regarding the presence/absence of anthropomorphic language in relation to divine transcendence/immanence nuances its existential impact on the reader. It appears that the anthropomorphic language of the Bible enables the fullest picture of the revelation of God in relation to the human predicament and experience. Biblical anthropomorphisms help one understand divine mercy and love and seek to draw one experientially into the circle of divine love. This is so regardless of questions concerning the nature of Christ, but becomes even more pronounced when Christ as the divine-Word-become-flesh is seen as bringing the final and fullest expression of the person and will of God (John 1:14, 18; Heb. 1:1-3). Here anthropomorphic language is realized in a person who is seen, heard, and touched, and with whom and through whom one can fellowship with and love God (1 John 1:1-4). In Jesus Christ, God provides a face for human beings to see, know, and love (2 Cor. 4:6).

This brief comparison between the biblical and koranic witness of the character of God provides a larger context of understanding in which Seventh-day Adventist Christians may meaningfully engage Muslim friends for whom God is a spiritual and morally compelling reality. In doing so, the following considerations may be particularly helpful:

- **Remember that while the Bible and the Koran may have similar terms, themes, and imagery with regard to God (and other spiritual realities or truths) these terms, themes, and imagery may not mean the same thing.** We must interpret each document's material in light of its own text, presuppositions, and worldview. Adventist Christians need to be careful not to invest the Koran with their own understanding and meaning, but rather ask their Muslim counterpart about possible nuances where the Koran provides possibilities. This can help Muslim readers of the Koran to make a distinction perhaps between the Koran and its Islamic interpreters. It can also help them clarify their understanding of the koranic nuances and possibilities and open the way for clearer communication.

- **Keep dialogue open by the way in which the Koran is characterized in relation to the Bible.** Suggesting that the Bible is more correct or more precise than the Koran or that the Koran may be wrong in some area risks blocking dialogue and tearing down the very bridges one is seeking to build. Affirming biblical principles and truths where they can be rightly found or hinted at in the Koran is helpful. Where the Bible provides a fuller or more balanced picture of God, showing how the Koran possibly hints at such fuller aspects of God will encourage dialogue and invite further study. Suggesting how the Koran encourages the reading of the Bible—perhaps with such deeper nuances in mind—can open a Muslim's heart to the reading of the Bible as well.

- **Engage on a personal level.** Remember that while theologically speaking, the God of the Koran (or Islam) may not be personal, the people of Islam are personal. This is evident in a Muslim's attachment to the *Ummah* (community). Muslim wellness is linked with community and sense of belonging (in family and mosque). As such, Muslims have the same needs, desires, and struggles as well as the same spiritual and existential questions as Christians do. We must sense this deeper

personal need on their part and seek to connect with Muslims on that level. We need to do so personally (mirroring such in our own personal life and spiritual journey). Engaging with them on a personal level can help focus the existential issues and needs around which the divine transcendence/immanence dialogue revolves. It also lends authenticity to our own witness.

- **Let your heart verbally overflow in joy and passion with a cascade of “beautiful names” of our wonderful God—who is holy, righteous, merciful, just, compassionate, Creator, Redeemer, judge, eternal, love, etc.** Scripture is full of beautiful names of God and such language and images should inspire our imagination and fill our mouths with words about our wonderful God. This will demonstrate our own personal connection with those transcendent realities and with God Himself—both intellectually and experientially. We must understand how our own experience with God and what we say about God is crucial in the Adventist/Muslim dialogue. The biblical narratives and anthropomorphisms invite us to experience God for ourselves. They confront us with metaphors and stories, which speak to us on an existential and experiential level.

When Adventist Christians experience God's transcendence as per the biblical witness, it affects how and what they say to their Muslim counterparts about God. We should be able to speak more freely of God than even of Jesus Christ and in the process unfold how the person and work of Jesus reveal more and more about our great God. In the course of time, this can open the door toward discussions of the nature of Jesus as well. The questions must be constantly asked, “How freely and openly do I speak of God and affirm His character?” “How much am I blessed by a vision of His transcendence?” We need to experience God's transcendence. If we do, it will affect what we say about God. When we couple that with an experience of God's immanence, it can bring profound witness and influence as we engage our Muslim friends. Muslims need to see our spiritual experience and religious practice as reverent, dutiful, worshipful, genuine, full of love, and touching every aspect of our life.

- **Encourage deeper thinking on the evidences of divine immanence in the Koran.** What does Allah mean when He says that He is as close to human beings as the jugular? Would that be frightening or encouraging? How do they process repeated references in the Koran to Allah as merciful and the Lord of Mercy? What of Allah's mercy? Do they believe it? How have they experienced such? How can the biblical narratives and anthropomorphisms help? This provides an opportunity to discuss how anthropomorphic language need not be irreverent or blasphemous (as Imams or Muslim theologians might suggest), but rather how such language invites understanding and displays God's desire to communicate on a level at which human beings can understand Him and both know Him and love Him. We must be able to share from the Koran how God's connecting with human beings is certainly not only possible but also not demeaning to God in any way. This can prove helpful for Muslims as they begin reading the Bible for themselves and perhaps encounter the unfamiliar or shocking territory of anthropomorphic language.

- **Suggest how narrative and anthropomorphic language can affect both spiritual life and moral orientation.** Through these literary vehicles one can see God and be drawn to be like

Him in the world. Share how anthropomorphisms give a glimpse of how God acts and responds. How they give us divine examples and models that can motivate spiritually and morally. We can share how in the biblical witness, God does not hesitate to compare Himself in the way human persons act and relate to others. We can share, too, how in the process the metaphors in relation to God are reshaped by God's own being and become the standard for a new understanding of human roles. We can explain that through them God is not dragged down to a human level, but rather human beings are drawn upward to the divine and in the process God's transcendent attributes are actually affirmed. Such images are constitutive, bringing spiritual and moral formation. Through them, divine character is imprinted upon the human soul. This drawing upward to the divine values and being is in keeping with the many spiritual and moral values that Muslims already display and hold important in the varied human roles of their own life and culture.

- **Share how biblical narratives and anthropomorphisms—which unfold images of God (both transcendence and immanence)—have made a difference in your own life.** Share how they invite you into the divine narrative and help you experience it on an existential level. Relate those stories and their imagery in expressing your own understanding of and connection with God. Again, this brings authenticity and appeal to our witness.

- **Display God's character of self-sacrificing love, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness in your own life.** Seventh-day Adventist lifestyle recommends the Bible to Muslims because it shows through everyday life and lifestyle that the Bible is not corrupted. In addition, Adventists do not eat pork or drink alcohol. We are not Zionists, as many Christians tend to be. When Adventist Christians live as "practicing Christians" in submission to the will of God as revealed in the Bible, they surprise Muslims, whether their own lives are characterized by reverence, submission, worship, spiritual disciplines, etc., or they have drifted from faithful Islamic piety and life. Adventists who are living their faith stimulate Muslim's convictions regarding the Bible and Jesus Christ, i.e., either challenging them to read the Bible to prove it wrong, or because we model Jesus Christ so well, challenging them to read the Bible to find out more about Jesus.

- **Give witness of what it means to know God personally.** Because Islam teaches that Allah Himself is unknowable, and Muslims thus largely seek to worship a God whom they believe is unknowable, Adventist Christians have the privilege of modeling what it means to be called into relationship with a God whom they can know, reverence, and love.

- **Know what it means personally to be redeemed by the grace of God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ.** While there is an absence in Islam of a theology of humanity in need of a Savior, Adventist Christians can embody in their own lives and witness that very need and how the God of the Bible meets that angst and need through the death, resurrection, and priestly ministry of Jesus Christ. It can be a positive and inviting witness—especially where one models true peace, joy, assurance, hope, integrity, and excellence in spiritual life and religious practice in relation to God. The witness of a redeemed person leaves an incredible saving influence. This often leads Muslims to consider how they understand Mohammed and the Koran.

• **Pray for a revelation of the character of God**—His love, His faithfulness, His kindness, holiness, justice, mercy, grace and peace. Pray that you will have such a revelation in your own life so that you can speak of them with authenticity and power, joy and passion. In the end, Muslims must see your life in total submission (*islam*) to the God whom you have come to see.

Our desire is for Muslims to find true peace, joy, assurance, and hope in the promise of God's personal presence, love, grace, and mercy. This matter is at the heart of the Great Controversy and its closing message: "Those who wait for the Bridegroom's coming are to say to the people, '*Behold your God.*' The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love. The children of God are to manifest His glory. In their own life and character they are to reveal what the grace of God has done for them."¹²

What God do we behold? What God are we inviting our Muslim friends—and anyone else for that matter—to behold? What God do they see in our life? How we ourselves understand and experience the biblical witness of the character of God will determine our answer. When we grasp their need for a sense of God's person and presence in their life, we will know what we need to do to support them in their journey toward God.

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Perspective Digest - a publication of the Adventist Theological Society

Toward a Theology of Beauty

God intended that religion and art should be complementary expressions of His own character.

Jo Ann Davidson

The natural world exhibits God's artistic nature. Though God designed and appointed the great beauty of both the desert sanctuary and the Jerusalem temple, He insists that the exquisite lily from His own hand is still more beautiful than the greatest artistic manifestation from Solomon's time (Luke 12:27). Thus it is not surprising that both the Old and New Testaments include rejoicing over the beauty of the created world. The poetic Psalter, along with many biblical books, brim with praise for the Creator and His creation. Accordingly, we are instructed that the study of the natural world can aid in lifting our minds to our Creator, the Master Artist.

God Himself announces to Job:

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

Tell Me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements?

Surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

To what were its foundations fastened?

Or who laid its cornerstone,

When the morning stars sang together,

And all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4-7).¹

He then describes some vigorous members of the animal kingdom. Many have noted these amazing chapters, and the profound nature of the Creator's discussion:

"The teasing irony of God's speech," writes Vinoth Ramachandra, "expresses the childish pretentiousness of Job and his friends. They are not the centre of reality. And the doctrine of retribution, though it has a legitimate place in God's government of things, is not the key to understanding the universe. The free and gratuitous love of God is the hinge on which the universe turns. The world expresses the freedom and delight of God in creating. Utility is not the reason behind creation: not everything that exists was made to be useful to human beings, and therefore their meaning can never be fathomed within an anthropocentric world-view."²

In the New Testament, Paul also draws attention to nature's ability (even though fallen) to instruct about God: "Since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are

without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

Nature, though glorious, is never worshiped by biblical writers, however. The Creator and created beings are seen enjoying its beauty. This is in distinctive variance from some thinking (past and present), in which nature is almost—and sometimes actually is—deified, positing a "spirituality" without God. Modern human deification of nature, though unbiblical, does serve to underscore the profound beauty still found in an imperfect world, which even secular minds are constrained to extol.

God also refers to Himself as a potter, surely alluding to His "sculpting" Adam and Eve from earthen materials. Though now fallen, these human beings created originally by God's own hand, are still a marvel. So much so that human beings are often tempted to place themselves at the center of the universe, denying God's sovereignty. Yet God has never abandoned rebellious humanity. Scripture indicates that He still longs to restore in humankind, through the process of redemption, the *imago Dei*. He has forbidden any material representation of His own being. Thus it is all the more startling that His salvific purpose is for fallen human beings to reflect something of the divine.

Redemption was most costly to the Master Artist, for it involved God's condescension to become incarnated in human form. This astounding act not only makes possible the transformation of the human character but also enriches the human conception of God. Both Testaments are saturated with the exhibition of His renowned skills in the remolding of sinful human beings into "the beauty of holiness" (Ps. 96:9).

Even Christ's very incarnation into human flesh is a profound aesthetic statement. Generally within the doctrine of God, the Incarnation is readily included, yet rarely extolled for its beauty. As a few theologians have noted, however, not only Christ and His Incarnation, but also the Godhead itself is true, good, and also "beautiful." Karl Barth writes of the beauty of God. He identifies it as God's glory.³ Yet, reflecting the common attitude of denying aesthetic value equal weight with theological argument, he refrains from speaking of beauty as an attribute of God.

Early American theologian Jonathan Edwards also wrote of the beauty of God. Differing from Barth, Edwards acknowledges beauty as one of the pre-eminent attributes of God, setting forth "his view that God can be fully known only to the extent that he is genuinely enjoyed. When placed at the center of the conception of God, beauty has the peculiar merit of offering at once a way of conceiving of the nature of God in structural and ontological terms and of so conceiving of that divine object as to make it not only dogmatically but also philosophically clear that (and why) God can be fully known only if he is the direct object of enjoyment."⁴

Edwards appears to be a rare theological voice attributing ontological weight to beauty within the Godhead. Canonical evidence indicates that Edwards is correct. The ancient psalmist already was convinced:

"One thing I have desired of the Lord,
That will I seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
All the days of my life,

To behold the beauty of the Lord" (Ps. 27:4).

Because of the beauty of the natural world (Genesis 1, 2), God's aesthetic being should not be unexpected.

The weight of evidence is further documented with the different literary aspects of the canon. Parallel and narrative writing are convincing and valid tools within the biblical aesthetic. Biblical poetry and vocabulary are also significant; their aesthetic value is already widely acknowledged both within and without theological studies.

Aesthetic expression is an all-encompassing phenomenon within Scripture. The literary manifestation alone is pervasive. Even a cursory survey of the artful construction of simple sentences, a chapter, chapters, or entire books through parallel writing, finely crafted poetry, and narratives, is compelling. The very words and instruction spoken by God through His prophets are often expressed in poetry. Interpreters who want to read the text correctly would do well to determine the conventions that govern each literary practice.

The literary nature of the biblical materials substantiates its veracity: "In line with his self-effacing policy, the biblical narrator no more lays any explicit claim to inspiration than he makes other mentions of himself and his terms of reference. But the empirical evidence, historical and sociocultural as well as compositional, leaves no doubt about his inspired standing."⁵

God as Artist

The overwhelming impression gained from Scripture, the sole document on which the Christian faith is established, is that of the aesthetic nature of God flooding His revealed Word and created world. In fact, God expresses Himself more as the consummate artist than systematic theologian. Many have written on this phenomenon, both Protestant and Catholic. "For all this Scripture has its own language, which is largely that not of metaphysics but of poetry. . . . In the images of the Bible [God] takes as his media their linguistic equivalents—verbal icons—to communicate his gracious truth. This befits our nature and situation. It bestows dignity on the material realities in whose setting we live."⁶ The nature of God's revelation in either Testament is regularly revealed through artistic manifestation instead of analytical treatises and logical discourse.

Unfortunately, however, the church has sometimes rejected aesthetics as antagonistic to theology. This attitude was formed prior to the Christian era, gaining entrance into Western and Christian thought through the influence of Plato. His claims have often been echoed by Christian writers. One result is that aesthetics has often been viewed as a dangerous influence.

"It sometimes seems," writes T. R. Wright, "that there are two different ways of thinking: one that assumes literary forms, whether narrative, poetic, or dramatic, and another that argues 'systematically' in terms of concepts. Many theologians certainly have fallen into this second category but my thesis is that theology need not be confined to this; it is possible and even necessary to talk about God in the form of stories, poems, and plays. . . the Bible itself, the most obvious example of a text, or collection of texts, which relies on a variety of literary forms to express theological thought."⁷

Wright's concluding point above can hardly be denied. Yet, the question is sometimes asked: What significance is the biblical aesthetic to theology? Much modern thinking reflects the position that the canon is merely a collection of well-crafted but disparate materials. Does its aesthetic expression have a purpose beyond merely bringing literary pleasure or sating emotional needs? The truths of Scripture are expressed more through the aesthetic medium than systematic treatises. Is there reason for this? Several points may be argued:

- *Intensification*

Some suggest that for persons sensitive to artistic dimensions, aesthetic expression can intensify experience. Harold Hannum, for example, writes: "Aesthetic pleasure and a sensitiveness to beauty do not contradict religion, nor is it a frill or unnecessary adornment. A true appreciation of beauty is a deeper experience which will enhance all spiritual values."⁸

This aesthetic intensification could arguably be an important facet of the divine intent. Literary devices may even be the superior medium to express theological truth, enhancing biblical and theological understanding.

Paul Brand and Philip Yancey concur: "A writer employs metaphor to point to a truth, not to its opposite. Abraham Heschel, a Jewish theologian, concludes, 'The statements about pathos are not a compromise—ways of accommodating higher meanings to the lower level of human understanding. They are rather the accommodations of words to higher meanings.'"⁹

The extensive aesthetic expression of Scripture provides an intensification of experience and thinking. Each literary genre operates within a complex cognitive strategy that does more than merely convey information; it also organizes and processes it to increase perception.

"Art and religion," writes T. R. Martland, "do not so much express fundamental feelings common to mankind as determine these feelings; they do not so much provide explanations for phenomena which men cannot otherwise understand as provide those data which men have difficulty understanding. . . . Art and religion provide the patterns of meaning, the frames of perception, by which society interprets its experiences and from which it makes conclusions about the nature of its world. They tell us what is; they do not respond to what."¹⁰

- *Beauty and Truth*

The connection between beauty and truth has been struggling to reunite since Immanuel Kant, a most influential philosopher of the Enlightenment. In his famous *Critiques*, Kant argued that human reason and sensory experience are unavoidably severed. His discussion has been persuasive ever since, with the philosophical realms of truth, goodness, and beauty radically ruptured. The different properties of the human being are supposedly splintered into abstract, non-communicating faculties of reason, will, and emotion. Assuming that scientific reasoning delivers objective truth, the emotions thereby become the channel for aesthetic perception. Thus the world of actual "facts" is supposedly separated from that of "values." As a result, knowledge and facts have supposedly parted company from faith, and aesthetics becomes a matter of purely subjective judgment.

Kant's position has been pervasive and dominant ever since. Repercussions still reverberate

from this split: "The eighteenth-century 'Enlightenment,'" writes John Wilson, "was a period of intense philosophical and literary activity. Reason became the new god. As knowledge became more 'scientific' the very concept of a God who had to reveal Himself was considered to be against reason and unacceptable; to believe in such a God, or in miracles, was dismissed as unreasonable. Although many of the philosophers still used the concept of God it was no longer the God of the Bible, but the God of the philosophers, the unknown God of the Deists, or the 'Supreme Reason' of the intellectuals of the French revolution."¹¹

Since then, the Christian Church has seldom acknowledged the extensive aesthetic manifestation of God in Scripture. It has persistently ordered its theological thinking philosophically, usually relegating aesthetic value to the emotional needs of the believer. This, however, is in noticeable contrast to God's means of revelation in the canon and in Christ Himself. In fact, the aesthetic nature of the scriptural books has a decisive bearing on Christian theology. How and why is a critical issue: "A Christian theology without apocalyptic, or prophecy, or wisdom, not to mention narrative, would be unthinkable. . . . It is precisely the canonical forms that mediate to the reader the capacity to see, taste, and feel *biblically*."¹²

There are also various indicators in both Testaments that aesthetic expression can be evaluated and judged. For example, during the Exodus from Egypt, just as Moses was coming down from lengthy communion with God on Mt. Sinai, he and Joshua heard sounds from the encampment below the mountain. To Joshua, the soldier, the first thought was of an attack from enemies: "There is a noise of war in the camp" (Ex. 32:17). But Moses realized more truly the nature of the commotion: "It is not the noise of the shout of victory, nor the noise of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing I hear" (vs. 18).

As they drew near, they beheld the people shouting and dancing around the golden calf, probably in imitation of the idolatrous feasts of Egypt of which they had been so long exposed. Moses was furious. He had just come from the presence of God's glory, and had been warned there of what was taking place (vss. 7-9). Having been trained for 40 years in Egypt as the son of the king's daughter, he was well able to recognize the expression of Egyptian revelry, and immediately evaluated the situation correctly. Accordingly, we are instructed that music expression can be evaluated.

At a later time, but before Israel entered Canaan, the power of aesthetic expression is again found in the Pentateuch. Balak, king of Moab, sought the services of Balaam to curse the Israelites, for the country of Moab was concerned lest they fall to the same fate as the Amorites. Balaam was determined to curse the Israelites for Balak. Yet he was so controlled by divine power that he was constrained to utter, instead of the imprecations he intended, the richest promises through sublime poetry (Numbers 22-24). The Moabite king knew the difference.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul instructs that aesthetic expression can be evaluated and judged. Writing to the Philippian church, no doubt composed of a mixture of Hebrew and Gentile believers, he counseled: "Whatever things are true, whatever things are *noble*, whatever things are

just, whatever things are *pure*, whatever things are *lovely*, whatever things are of good report, if there is any *virtue* and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things” (Phil. 4:8, italics supplied).

Paul instructs believers from different cultures that it is important to evaluate and discriminate between worthy and less worthy aspects of aesthetic expression. A believer is not floundering in a miasma of personal choices and standards with no absolutes to guide. “The gospel is no cosmetic facelift,” writes Calvin Johansson, “but a matter of life-changing orientation running deep and swift in its cleansing, shaping, and loving power. It shows to man the fallacy of phoniness and of being concerned for the effect without concern for the cause. The gospel of Jesus Christ stands for the integrity, wholeness, and creativity. Genuine newness is the result of an inward dynamic at work—a creativity that breaks new ground with imagination and integrity. . . . The gospel requires the highest standard of living.”¹³

Concomitantly, though aesthetic value is ordained by God and given wide exposure in Scripture, there is never suggestion that any aesthetic expression is superior spiritually and/or meritorious. Nor are poets intrinsically more pleasing to God than factory workers and farmers. Human value comes from our glorious origin at the hands of God.

- *Misuse Possible*

God sometimes denounces aesthetically perfect worship—which He Himself commissioned—when it is not a transparent expression of a devout inner motivation. This is noticeably different from Greek and some modern thinking in which aesthetic beauty is perceived as salvific in itself.

God pointedly established an elaborate, lavish system of corporate worship in the Old Testament. Yet, over and over again He censured through His prophets the glorious worship that He Himself designed and implemented but that was now being used to disguise a degenerate life. The internal condition of the participant is critical: “Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream” (Amos 5:23, 24).

It was not enough that the golden ark and the glorious sanctuary were in the midst of Israel. It was not enough that the aesthetically attired priests offered sacrifices, and that the people were called the children of God. The Lord is not fooled by those who celebrate aesthetically perfect worship but cherish iniquity in the heart. It is written: “One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination” (Prov. 28:9).

Thus, many of the Old Testament prophetic messages condemned the worship of God, despite its great beauty. Though designed and commanded by God, He at times found it offensive. For example, Jeremiah proclaimed: “What purpose to Me comes frankincense from Sheba, and sweet cane from a far country? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices sweet to Me” (Jer. 6:20).

During the Babylonian captivity, God warns about aesthetic abuse: “As for the beauty of his

ornaments, He set it in majesty; but they made from it the images of their abominations—their detestable things; therefore I have made it like refuse to them” (Eze. 7:20).

God’s words through Ezekiel are passionate. The outer profession of a believer cannot camouflage a degenerate heart: “As for you, son of man, the children of your people are talking about you beside the walls and in the doors of the houses; and they speak to one another, everyone saying to his brother, “Please come and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord.” So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and *they hear your words, but they do not do them*; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain. Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has *a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument*; for they hear your words, but they do not do them. And when this comes to pass—surely it will come—then they will know that a prophet has been among them” (Eze. 33:30-33, italics supplied).

Thereby it is seen that though aesthetic values are extensive and prominent in God-ordained corporate worship and in Scripture, they are never salvific. Divine messengers protest an elegant worship that lacks transparent correspondence to the inner experience of the believer. God rejects aesthetic forms of worship if they disguise injustice and other moral evils. The very potency and influence of aesthetic expression can tend to promote an “easy religion.” The profound impact that aesthetic values have on the human being can supplant the religion it is supposed to convey.

Johansson is perceptive: “Idolatry, whether it be a homemade religion of positive thinking or a comfortable aestheticism, can thus offer a sort of domesticated spirituality. Our human need for transcendence, for meaning, for value, can be met to a degree, in for example a majestic symphony without the pain of repentance and the cost of discipleship, without what Flannery O’Connor has called ‘the sweat and stink of the cross.’ Properly, the sense of transcendence in a symphony, the sensation of being swept out of ourselves into something high and beautiful, can and should make us mindful of the transcendent realm of the infinite Lord. Yet it need not. Many people are satisfied with the ‘richness of life’ offered by aesthetic stimulation which by its nature can make few self-consuming demands.”¹⁴

This is an important point, for undeniably art and religion have often been linked with each other. Though some in the church have denigrated the importance of aesthetic function, religion and the arts have actually been closely entwined: “We tend to classify together our concepts of art and religion as twin institutions,” writes Harry Lee, “since they afford experiences to our inner life which resemble each other much more closely than either resembles our experience of any other social institution. . . . We attend to both as exercises of the spirit; they are alike in being experiences which are noble, passionate, and serene, and which absorb our interest most fully which we turn to them for solace and with a spirit of humility and devotion.”¹⁵

- *Biblical Aesthetic Wholism*

Contra Kant, God affirms the nature of each human creature wholistically as He communicates. Surely, the human mind is a critical aspect of human nature. However, God rarely limits His

communication to the human creature through abstract reasoning or systematic discourse as Scripture. Rather, He regularly utilizes aesthetic means, thus affirming wholistically the entire human being. God engages not only the mind but also the entire person.

“Biblical metaphors—*panting* after God, *tasting* God, *drinking* living water, *eating* bread from heaven—make it clear that finding God is not merely academic,” writes Larry Crabb. “We are to do more than understand truth about God; we are to encounter him, as a bride encounters her husband on their wedding night. Finding God is a sensual experience.”¹⁶

The aesthetic expression in Scripture mitigates against humanistic dualism. There is no emphasis, within either Testament, on the mental cognitive powers as sole receptor of truth. Indeed, the mind, heart, and body are all engaged. There is no gnostic urging anywhere in the canon to escape a “bodily prison” to allow a closer proximity to God. Rather, in both the Old and New Testaments, explicitly and implicitly, divine truth is conveyed to the person through the mind and the senses. The many biblical writers assume that each human being is capable of understanding and accepting that truth. Through the dominance of aesthetic expression in Scripture, it can be argued that the human body, rather than being a “prison,” is capable, indeed necessary, for the reception of divine truth. The biblical canon is a “communicative practice” conveying propositional content and also the “way of processing it (e.g., thinking, imagining, feeling).”¹⁷

- *Great Influence*

The influence of the Greek philosophers on the aesthetic discipline is extensive. Several centuries before Christ, this philosophy developed. The resultant focus on aesthetic matters has influenced all subsequent thinking within and without the church. Dorothy Sayers argues that Plato’s aesthetic “has influenced . . . the attitude of the Church more than the Church perhaps knows.”¹⁸

There is no debate on the impact of Greek philosophy on the study of aesthetics. Yet, in spite of Greek observations, some of their philosophical positions are in contrast to the indicators in Scripture: “The results of modern classical scholarship,” writes John Marshall, “have made it abundantly clear that Aristotle’s *Poetics* does not present us with an aesthetics, but with an analysis of poetic creation. There is a danger in constructing a theory of aesthetics from the *Poetics*, because the idea of imitation is not the source of Aristotle’s philosophy of beauty. Imitation is a method of artistic construction, but it is not the criterion of beauty.”¹⁹

Moreover, within Greek thinking, the body was deemed evil, dangerous, and a prison house for the soul, whereas the canonical perspective assumes the human body can be addressed and entrusted with the most sublime truths. Indeed, it can be argued that Greek philosophy is inconsistent on this point. If the human body is something evil and necessary to be escaped, how can aesthetic influences be effectual? And why should they? Should the senses of the body be engaged if they are to be escaped? Furthermore, the denigrating of the physical human body has at times led to asceticism that itself mitigates aesthetic value.

The Greek philosophers and biblical writers acknowledge that human nature needs conversion to better values. However, Scripture teaches a different means to how this can be achieved—only

through divine salvation. The ritual of the Old Testament sanctuary/temple symbolized this. For the Greeks, "salvation" was obtained through self-attempts of which the power of aesthetic influence was prominent.

However, the Greeks were astute in identifying the three fundamental values of truth, goodness, and beauty. They were also right that beauty is a powerful instrument. Beauty was valued for bringing salvation to the soul.

Scripture also lays great stress on aesthetic media. However, this is never presumed to have the salvific power that it does within Greek philosophy. As already noted, God Himself warns many times that aesthetic function can never take the place of the heart's conversion. Rather, He intends that aesthetic manifestation should instruct and make vivid the very expression of God's salvific power, and bring a yearning for it.

Aesthetic value is not a peripheral option in the canon. Nor is it disparaged in any way. The idea that theology and aesthetics are incompatible does not come from Scripture. Leland Ryken argues this point as it relates to literature: "When we turn to the example of the Bible as the basis for integrating literature and the Christian faith, one generalization that we can make at once is that there is no antithesis between Christianity *per se*. The tradition of opposing literature and religion is either pre-Christian (Platonic) or post-biblical (the patristic era and following). The Bible itself is emphatically not a part of any such tradition. There is no trace in the Bible of a negative attitude toward literature. It is worthy of note that Paul, writing in a context of Greek culture and consumed with a moral and spiritual vision much higher than paganism, does not share the Platonic antipathy to literature."²⁰

Biblical writers, however, were not pursuing acclaim for their literary skills. Nor were they merely seeking to soothe the emotional needs of human nature. Instead, their desire was to point to the Messiah and His glorious salvation. John Sailhamer argues that the very details each writer included (within the terse narrative style of the canon) are indicative of this. The New Testament writers' use of the Old Testament psalms hints at this.

Jesus Himself substantiates this point on at least two occasions, by placing Himself as the central focus of the Old Testament: "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me" (John 5:39). And, following His resurrection, to the two walking to Emmaus, He said: "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! . . . And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:25, 27). And, further: "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.' And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:44, 45).

Moreover, Jesus provided a way to celebrate His salvation gift after His ascension: the Lord's Supper. Through our senses of touch, taste, smell, and hearing, we are encouraged to rejoice in His atoning act.

Modern discussion of aesthetics sometimes mitigates against the full-orbed biblical aesthetic. Whereas values operating within Scripture are extensive, comprehensive, and many faceted, philosophical discussion of aesthetics is often reduced to a single theory. For example, within the Intuitive Theory, the recognition of beauty is considered to be a matter of "intuition." The various aesthetic values such as "beautiful," "good," or "ugly" are "intuited" because they refer to nonempirical qualities. Plato's theory of the beautiful is viewed as an initial version of "intuition."

Other philosophical theories argue that aesthetic values are a matter of "subjectivism," determined by the human being's personal likes and dislikes, or perhaps the consensus of a group of people. A third theory of "emotivism" infers that aesthetic determinations such as "good" or "beautiful" do not refer to anything concrete outside the human mind. Positivists propose the Emotive Theory, which maintains that metaphors are unverifiable and thus meaningless. These metaphors, though lacking cognitive content, still interest us because they possess emotive content, expressing personal experience or preference rather than stating truth.

"Instrumentalism," or "formalism," shifts the focus from the person to the object and whether or not the object produces in the observer an aesthetic experience. This theory locates beauty in certain qualities. It is assumed that a certain kind of experience can be identified as aesthetic and thus good. The "relational theory" locates beauty, as the name suggests, in the relationship of the objective qualities that are often identified as being inherent in the reality described as beautiful.

The biblical aesthetic is strikingly unique. It does not allow for an either/or bifurcation, but envelopes both the subjective and objective.

Another central idea regularly assumed in the modern aesthetic discipline is that of "disinterestedness." Kant was the first to describe the experience a work of art elicits as "disinterestedness." This posture has been enormously influential in aesthetics ever since.

Eddy Zemach vigorously tackled this longstanding maxim, and in doing so, moved much closer to the biblical perspective: "Trait 1 of the aesthetic attitude (heralded by contemporary Kantians such as Francis Coleman or Jerome Stolnitz), is entirely bogus; the argument for it is a clever sleight of hand. Saying that Smith does something without concern for her own interest, we mean that she is altruistic: she sacrifices her own gratification for the sake of others. But in watching a play or reading a novel, one does not sacrifice one's interests for the sake of others; to engage in these activities is to indulge one's own interests. The sleight of hand is to call every interest (economic, sexual, etc.) that motivates self-serving action, except the aesthetic interest, 'interested' and then 'discover' that the aesthetic interest alone is disinterested! Thus a new monster, disinterested interest, is born. The 'disinterestedness' of the aesthetic interest is based on mere verbal prestidigitation. To have culinary or sexual interests is to wish to engage in certain activities, suffer if one is denied them, be ready to give up other satisfactions in order to have them, and so on. The same is true of our aesthetic interests. Aesthetic needs are no different from needs for love, power, or food. Some people like to play music or read poetry even when they are not compensated for their effort. We often forgo satisfaction of other needs so as to satisfy aesthetic needs; we suffer when we cannot pursue our

aesthetic interests. It is entirely disingenuous to classify as self-serving all human interests except the aesthetic interest alone, which is glorified as 'disinterested.'

"If you listen to music for its own sake," Zemach continues, "that does not mean that you do not listen to it for your sake, for by listening to it you satisfy yourself, not the music! I may attend a concert for your sake, but not for the concert's sake, the concert gains nothing by my attending it. Therefore, to listen to music for its own sake is not to have a 'disinterested interest' in music (whatever that means); it is to have genuine interest in music. I do not listen to music in order to attain some other end, for example to please you, but listening to music itself satisfies me, just as eating, having sex, playing with my children, and meeting friends are activities that satisfy me in and of themselves. To engage in an activity for its own sake is to be genuinely interested in it, not the opposite, as Kant has it."²¹

Zemach suggests why "disinterested" aesthetics remained so dominant. Culture has become more secular: "The notion of the aesthetic disinterested interest is perhaps one aspect of the great romanticist attempt to secularize European culture, with art as a substitute for religion. Romanticism has tried to model art of religious institutions, and to a great extent it has succeeded; we dress for the opera as we would for church, assume an attitude of reverence toward art and artists as was traditionally accorded God and his ministers, treat art as lofty and spiritual, etc. Now religion teaches that it is wrong to worship God in order to serve one's own interests. God should be worshiped because he deserves to be worshiped; it is sacrilegious to treat worship as a profitable transaction. We are supposed to love God for what he is, and love is unselfish. Aspiring to replace religion, romanticism needed a new selfless interest that transcends mundane interest. Thence the 'disinterested interest.' But that is a hoax; art lovers engage in self-gratification, not in worship. Aesthetic enjoyment is no less mundane and self-serving than any other enjoyment."²²

Thus, Zemach argues, as does Scripture, for the wholistic nature of the human being. That the truth of God through Scripture comes clothed aesthetically says much about the nature of biblical truth and God Himself: His truth can be known, believed, felt, loved, and followed. Our whole person/being is involved.

Zemach also makes the audacious suggestion that it is aesthetic qualities that verify scientific theory, and not empirical data, as commonly assumed. Aesthetic function is foundational for establishing truth. In fact, it is the only way it can be done.

"If you subscribe," he says, "to any kind of realism, scientific or metaphysical, aesthetic features are a part of it. That is, if any predicates correctly describe objective reality, aesthetic predicates are among them. . . . Scientists and artists try to make sense of experience by weaving it into aesthetically good years; the aesthetic appeal of the story vindicates its way of formatting data."²³

He supports his argument by describing how "science aspires for two kinds of beauty, internal beauty, i.e., elegance, is having internal design that manifests a maximal unity in variety: a rich variety of theorems derivable for a few and simple axioms. The theory's external beauty is its

compatibility with other entrenched theories (including common sense and folk beliefs): this, too, is a unity in variety. Now unity in variety is, of course, how Plato (and scores of other classical and modern aestheticians) defined beauty."²⁴

John Wilson concurs with this fundamental principle: "Even apparently objective activities such as mathematics and scientific research are affected and influenced by aesthetic factors. In their writings scientists often refer to the harmony, simplicity, elegance and beauty that they find in their researches and theories. The norms of art are not absent from their considerations. Einstein said of Isaac Newton that he combined, in himself, the experimenter, the theorist, the mechanic and, 'not least, the artist.' Another scientist, Hinshelwood, once argued that chemistry was not only a mental discipline but an adventure and an 'aesthetic experience.'"²⁵

Accordingly, as Zemach and others insist, science itself "is a pursuit of beauty, not of truth. To borrow Kant's terminology, one may say that beauty serves us as a schema for truth, a postulated substitute for a reality which we cannot fathom."²⁶

Therefore, aesthetic value, though rightly studied extensively within philosophy, has wrongly been restricted and reduced to appeal only to human emotional needs, and unable to bear the weight of propositional truth. This was based on the assumption that such values are grounded on experiences located only in the affective side of human nature. However, in the perspective observed in Scripture, and further argued by Zemach and others, this is not adequate. The relationship of beauty to that of truth and goodness is foundational, not peripheral.

And if this is true, one can begin to understand why God employs, almost exclusively, aesthetic media to communicate His truth to human beings. For, as Zemach states above, "Beauty serves us as a schema for truth, a postulated substitute for a reality which we cannot fathom."²⁷ Aesthetic value, as observed in Scripture, is more correctly viewed as the foundational value to structure and substantiates truth itself, rather than merely a peripheral issue of the emotions. Perhaps the poet Keats was right after all: "Beauty is truth, truth, beauty:— that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."²⁸

The biblical aesthetic is a wholistic discipline, affirming the whole being. The senses, rather than being a peripheral aspect of human nature, are critical for grasping truth. The mind and human reason are not extolled as the primary avenue for receiving divine revelation. Kevin Vanhoozer rightly suggests that "propositionalism seems inadequate given the variety of biblical texts. . . . To speak merely in terms of 'informing' fails to do full justice to God's complex relation to Scripture. The Bible is more than divine data. . . . We do not have to choose between the Bible's truth and its affective power!"²⁹

In Scripture, divine revelation is diffused and filtered through aesthetic means, which thereby undergirds and substantiates the identification of truth within the human mind and heart, affirming the wholeness of the human person. Accordingly, of the three main values of truth, goodness, and beauty, in the biblical aesthetic, it can be argued, beauty, though not salvific and though susceptible to misuse, is a fundamentally critical value.

Does this matter? Will this make a difference in the life of a Christian?

With the extensive evidence of aesthetic aspects within Scripture, a person can learn to appreciate that God's involvement in His creation is not limited to the beauty of rosebuds, lilies of the field, and brilliant sunsets. It also extends to structure and content of His verbal revelation as well. It is impressive that secular scholars, who may not acknowledge a divine being or even a "primal force," are constrained to recognize the profound beauty in the literary expression of the biblical writers. This is true whether considering the verbal locution in poetry and narrative, or the literary structures.

The human mind, often extolled in theological studies as the paramount feature of human nature, is accorded an exalted position. However, the whole person also has supreme value. The physical aspects of being human are not expendable. Rather, both body and mind are inseparable in discerning and comprehending and experiencing the beauty of divine truth. A "full-orbed theology" is made possible through a "full-orbed humanity."

The biblical canon closes with the Book of Revelation and its vast visual panoramas, concluding with descriptions of the rich aesthetic blessings of heaven. The portrayals mirror the beautiful blessings of the first Eden with which the Bible opens. Parallel references to both heaven and earth suggest that heaven must also have literal space, as does the earth. Christ Himself states: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). The redeemed are invited to a meal to be shared with God (26:29). The New Jerusalem comes "down out of heaven" (Rev. 21:2). The details of this city are described with rich aesthetic language that echoes the data of the Old Testament sanctuaries and even the original Garden of Eden. Mention of precious metals and jewels, the Tree of Life, open fellowship with God, and more, is made.

Moreover, the Apocalypse links a literal new earth with the resurrection of the body. A literal creation implies a literal re-creation. Heaven is not just a state; it is a literal place. God has established His dealings with His children in a very tangible, physical manner through salvation history. The aesthetic descriptions in the Book of Revelation serve to remind us that this will not cease when we enter the heavenly realms. In fact, Stephen Webb presents a profound aesthetic claim regarding heaven: "Because all of our senses will be engaged by God's glory, our senses will no longer be fragmented and disconnected. And because God is infinite, our perception of God will also be an infinite process wherein our senses will not know exhaustion or limitation. Their merging together will set them free for forms of knowledge that we can only dream of now."³⁰

The Bible closes, as it opens, with no false antithesis between the physical and spiritual realms. Many aesthetic lines of evidence in Scripture reinforce this. Our understanding of history will be affected.

Throughout Scripture we hear God speaking in aesthetic language about what He is actually doing in our literal world. The account is consistently compelling, with a cosmic historic sweep. And Paul counsels the reader: "Whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4).

The aesthetic of Scripture instructs that we must not permit the analytical and logical sphere of cognitive processing to restrict our vision of reality. Instead, we are shown what it truly means to be human, and to be created in the image of God. And though our humanity is now fallen, its aesthetic nature is still capable of much joy and feasting in this earth, to be followed by genuine though presently unfathomable glory to come.

The biblical aesthetic restores human life to its exalted origins from the hand of God, and links it to a future restoration in the earth made new. And through multiple aesthetic means, the canon connects its interwoven tapestry of otherwise seemingly disparate materials, yielding a comprehensive interpretation, enhancing and enriching the gift of salvation itself.

The biblical aesthetic does not display the modernist tendency to put beauty on a quasi-religious pedestal where its formal properties alone are merely thought to enlighten and transform society. Nor is it a matter of the biblical writers merely attempting to write elegant and beautiful literature. The Bible exhibits literary qualities, but these qualities are not employed to parade the talents of the writers.

Though the Bible is a literary masterpiece, it is more than literature. It makes claims to absolute truth, which is pointedly expressed in a matter to allure and capture the senses and convince the mind. The biblical aesthetic affirms our human wholeness. It aligns us with our Creator, reveals that we are created in His very image. God employs the biblical aesthetic to aid us in comprehending Him and grasping divine truth, a reality which we would otherwise not be able to fathom.

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Perspective Digest - a publication of the Adventist Theological Society

The Trinity in the Old Testament

The Hebrew Scriptures offer some telling glimpses into the nature of God.

Jiří Moskala

The fundamental mystery of the Christian faith is belief in the Triune God. As Seventh-day Adventists, we confess that God is One but manifested in three distinct persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When we speak about God, we need to remember that we enter holy ground, and we need to do it with deep humility, knowing our limits. We are using imperfect human language to describe an infinite God. The transcendent God always surpasses even our finest categories of thinking and logic.

The best attitude in such a situation is a humbleness to which God invited Moses when he encountered God: “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand *is* holy ground” (Ex. 3:5).¹ We know God only because He has made Himself known to us. What we perceive about Him was revealed to us; we are totally dependent upon His self-revelation (Ex. 34:6, 7). Thus, our only correct response to His Word is to carefully listen, eagerly learn, and wholeheartedly obey.

The basic confession of faith from the Hebrew Bible, which a faithful Jew recites at least twice a day: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut. 6:4), clearly proclaims monotheism in a polytheistic society. This Shema announces God as being one in a fundamental and unequivocal statement. This oneness of God is stressed several times in the rest of the Old Testament, because He alone is the true God and besides Him there is none.

Does this Old Testament statement allow for a belief in the Trinity, or is it excluded by definition? It is important to note that the New Testament authors also proclaimed that God is one (Mark 12:29; 1 Cor. 8:5, 6), and thus they did not see this announcement as a contradiction to the Trinitarian thinking to which they adhered.

Some think that the Trinitarian teaching can be found only in the New Testament. But is the Old Testament’s view of the Godhead compatible with the Trinity?

First, however, it should be stated that no one should engage in a theological debate about the Trinity or the divinity of Jesus with those who oppose these truths unless they have an existential knowledge of Jesus Christ and have a personal relationship with Him. Only after a person accepts Jesus as his or her intimate Savior and Friend and falls in love with Him who forgives sins and helps in everyday struggles will that individual be open to accepting the divinity of Jesus *and* the biblical teaching on the Trinity.

Allusions to the Trinity in the Old Testament

In the Hebrew language, a general term used to designate God is *Elohim*, a plural form of *El/Eloah*. This plural form was often interpreted as an indication for the Trinity. To state, however, that the plural form of the word *Elohim* is evidence for the Triune God is incorrect for the simple reason that this term is used to designate the true living God as well as pagan gods; its meaning depends on the context. "The word *elohim* is unique in its 'flexibility'—it can be used both in the singular and the plural meaning, as a proper and a common name, as a designation of the God of Israel and of pagan gods."²

A good example of these two opposite meanings is encountered in Ruth 1:15, 16: "'Look [Ruth], your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods [*Elohim*]; return after your sister-in-law.' But Ruth said: 'Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God [*Elohim*] my God [*Elohim*]." Therefore, one cannot argue from the plural form of *Elohim* for the notion of the Trinity. The term *Elohim* does not refer to three persons or three gods. It is rather a neutral expression; only the context decides the precise meaning of the word.

What is highly significant is that the name *Elohim* is used with a verb in the singular (a grammatical contradiction). For example, "In the beginning God [plural] created [singular] the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). The same is true of the 10 expressions of *vayomer Elohim*, meaning "and God [plural] said [singular]" in the first Creation account (Genesis 1). The translation is thus not "gods," but "God," the one true living God. It is also crucial to note that pagan gods are never designated in the Bible by the name of the Lord (*Yahweh*). This name is used exclusively for the God who entered into a covenant relationship with His people.

The "We" of God

God usually speaks about Himself in the "I" formula (Ex. 20:2; Isa. 41:10, 13). However, in four biblical verses He refers to Himself in the category of "We":

- Genesis 1:26: "God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'"

- Genesis 3:22: "The Lord God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.'"

- Genesis 11:7: "'Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.'"

- Isaiah 6:8: "I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' Then I said, 'Here am I. Send me.'"

Three times these specific proclamations are stated in forms of exhortation, i.e., admonitions in the first person plural ("let Us make"; "let Us go down"; "[let Us] confuse") and twice with prepositions ("of Us"; "for Us"). How should these plural divine expressions be understood? Are

they in contradiction to biblical monotheism, or do such divine proclamations testify of the triune God? What does this plurality reveal about God of the Hebrew Bible?

Several attempts have been made to explain this divine plural usage, of which there are eight main theories.

Plural Interpretation Theories

1. *Mythological Reminiscence*. Some scholars argue that these plural expressions are reminiscent of a pagan origin, i.e., one god is addressing another god (or a pantheon of gods), because the first faith in a transcendent power was polytheistic, and this expression was used in the polytheistic society. So one god addresses another (or many) in planning to create humans.

Johann Gabler proposed the theory that Genesis 1:26 contains the "remnants of Semitic polytheism."³ And Hermann Gunkel is a proponent of such an interpretation: "God turns here to other elohim-beings and includes himself with them in the 'we'. . . . The concept originates in polytheism, but is no longer polytheistic per se since it regards the one God (Yahweh) as the Lord, the sole determiner, but the other elohim as greatly inferior, indeed his servants."⁴

It is true that in the mythological accounts of creation, gods talk among themselves when they create humans, as in *Enuma Elish* or in the *Atrahasis* creation epic. But the Bible and the Book of Genesis in particular contain strong anti-mythological elements. It would therefore be very difficult to imagine that there are traces here of mythological material. In addition, there is no room in biblical teaching for a progressive thinking from polytheism to monotheism.

2. *A Reference to Christ*. This view is attested to very early in the Christian Church—in the Epistle of Barnabas and in Justin Martyr. The First Council of Sirmium in A.D. 351 not only affirmed that the "'Let Us'" of Genesis 1:26 was addressed by the Father to the Son as a distinct person, but they also excommunicated those who denied it. Christians later traditionally embraced this interpretation, and thus divine plurals became references to the Trinity. This is not a tenable interpretation for the simple reason that the text itself does not state who spoke to whom. This theory imposes a specific view on the biblical text, putting the New Testament idea into the reading of this expression. Why limit God's conversation to only two divine persons?

3. *The Father's Communication With the Holy Spirit*. D. J. A. Clines argues that the context of Genesis 1 points to the fact that the Father speaks to the Holy Spirit.⁵ The explicit reference to the Spirit of God in Genesis 1:2 shows that the Spirit creates, which means that He is the Co-Creator with the Father (see also Psalm 104:30).

This is a very attractive explanation. One wonders, however, if we need to limit God's "We" only to the interaction between the Father and the Holy Spirit, because it is evident on the basis of intertextuality that Jesus Christ is the Creator, too (John 1:1-3 echoes Genesis 1:1-3).

4. *God Addressing Earthly Elements*. Some Jewish scholars in the past, such as Joseph Kimchi and Maimonides, suggested that God speaks to the earth. However, the serious question remains: Why would the earth be a partner to God in Creation? God creates Adam from the ground, using it,

but He did not elevate the earthly materials with the power to create.

5. *Plural of Majesty*. This interpretation is recent, and it is proposed in correspondence to the medieval speeches of European kings, because they spoke about themselves in plural forms: "We, the king of England," "We, the king of France," or the queen of England said: "We are not amused." According to this interpretation, God is speaking in a solemn way about Himself like a king in the plural form. Some scholars argue that the plural of majesty exists in the Bible, as in Ezra 4:18: "The letter that you [Rehum and Shimshai] sent to us [King Artaxerxes and his government] has been plainly read before me" (ESV).

In the biblical records, there is no evidence that any Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Judean, or other ancient ruler would speak in this way. In other words, this rhetorical interpretation cannot be imposed on these divine "We" texts, because there is no indication that such a rhetorical style was used in biblical times.

6. *God's Address to His Heavenly Court*. According to this theory, God speaks to His angels or officials in heaven and then He creates humans. This interpretation is very popular. John N. Oswalt argues that "it is possible, in the light of 1 Kings 22:19, that who will go for us [in Isa. 6:8] is an address to the heavenly host, either visibly present or implied."⁶ Nahum Sarna states that "the extraordinary use of the first person plural evokes the image of a heavenly court in which God is surrounded by His angelic host" and maintains that "this is the Israelite version of the polytheistic assemblies of the pantheon—monotheized and depaganized."⁷

It is true that sometimes God addresses His heavenly court (Job 1:6–9; 1 Kings 22:19–22; Dan. 4:14). It is highly improbable, however, that this would be the case in our texts under investigation (see the rhetorical question in Isaiah 40:41). Such an interpretation of Genesis 1:26 fails on two grounds:

A. Exegetical-syntactical argument: A close parallelism between Genesis 1:26 and Genesis 1:27 does not leave space for someone other than God Himself for creating humans in His image. In Genesis 1:26, God states His intention to create humans: "Let Us make man . . . ," and in Genesis 1:27, the result of His creation initiative is described: Humans were created in His image. They were not created in the image of God and other heavenly beings (i.e., His court). The biblical text is explicit: "God created man in His [not Their] own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:27). The parallelism of those verses states plainly that "His image" is "God's image uniquely." Humans were created solely in the image of God and not in the image of God and His angels/court. (See also Genesis 5:1–3.)

B. Theological argument: The biblical message consistently points to God as the only Creator. Besides Him there is no one in the entire Universe who could be designated as co-creator with Him. Thus, "let Us" does not refer to angels or His heavenly court as being His Co-creators. The biblical texts are unanimous and consistent: God alone is the Creator; only He created Adam and Eve in His image. The same truth about the God Creator is attested to in the New Testament (John 1:1–3; Col. 1:16).

7. *Plural of Self-Deliberation (Plural of Exhortation)*. According to this view, God speaks to Himself (understood as being one person), and He encourages Himself to perform as we sometimes encourage ourselves before a difficult task by saying: "Let's do it." Umberto Cassuto, for example, suggests that it is a plural of exhortation or self-encouragement.⁸

This interpretation is highly uncertain because of the lack of clear biblical parallels. It seems that this hypothesis creates God in our image, needing to encourage Himself as we humans need to exhort ourselves. According to scholars, the plural of self-deliberation is not found about God in the biblical material. D. J. A. Clines argues that "the rarity of parallelism gives us little confidence in the correctness of this view."⁹ God is not a solitary Being who speaks aloud to Himself in order to exhort Himself.

8. *Plural of Fullness—Plurality Within the Godhead*. In this interpretation, God speaks or communicates within the Godhead. He is in dialogue within the different Persons of the divinity. The term "plural of fullness" was coined by Derek Kidner,¹⁰ and many scholars have followed his lead. C. John Collins goes beyond this understanding and actually explains Genesis 1:26: "It is a 'we' of self-address (which can open the way for plurality of persons in the Godhead)."¹¹

The term "plural of fullness" is not very clear, even though the concept is substantial. It is obvious that the meaning of these plural divine expressions must be interpreted by the immediate context, and in this way to clarify their meaning, and also suggest a new terminology.

Determination of the "We" of God by the Context

What does the context provide for the understanding of the divine "Us"?

Genesis 1:26

God the Creator deliberately presents Himself as "We" and not as "I" when He creates humans. The divine "We" forms people in His image; it means that this divine "We" makes humans as "we" also (as husband and wife), that is, not as isolated individuals, but persons in relationship to Him and to one another. Thus, God creates humans into a close fellowship. God is plural, and when He creates humanity into His image, He makes them in plural—that is, He creates persons into fellowship.

From the very beginning, God wants to be known not by His "I" but by "We" in His relationship to humanity. This is why He also creates "we" (humans as male and female). Humans created into His image must also be a plurality as He is We. And as there is a unity within God Himself, so the two human persons, distinct and different, should become intimately one. Thus, the whole human being is "We" and not "I." This is only on condition that they live in close personal fellowship. To do so, they need to stay in relationship with the One who created them out of love. Thus, when God creates, He creates into fellowship, creates humans as "we." On the background of this immediate context of Genesis 1:26, the plural of the divine "We" is a plural of fellowship or plural of community within the Godhead. This conclusion is confirmed by three additional passages.

Genesis 3:22

The immediate context of Genesis 3:22 is the fall into sin, a reverse or de-creation of creation. The human "we" is broken by sin, degraded. When the "we" of humanity is depraved (not only with one individual but also corporately), then God again speaks in plural, and confronts "we."

Humans were created in dependency upon God, in fellowship with Him, and when this intimate relationship was broken, meaningful life disappeared. When "we" is dysfunctional, then fellowship and integrity are destroyed. The first couple wanted to be like God, to decide for themselves what was good and evil. By sinning, humans lost the capacity to discern what was good and evil. Only the grace of God's We could bring healing to humanity.

The literal translation of Genesis 3:22 is: "Behold, the man was [not "has become"] like one of us knowing good and evil." The meaning is "was like" and not necessarily "become like." The first couple wanted to be like God, which meant deciding for themselves what was good and evil. By sinning, humans lost the capacity to discern what was good and evil. Today we are totally dependent upon God's revelation to know what is good and evil.

Genesis 11:4-7

God's speech in Genesis 11:7, "'Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech,'" is a direct reaction to the arrogant speech and proud attitude of the humans' "let us." The Babylonians stated: "'Let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens'" (vs. 4).

When humans build their "we" against God, He reveals Himself to them in His We. God's "We" stands in contrast to humanity's rebellious "we." In this biblical text, as well as in Genesis 3:22, these plural forms of divine addresses point to "the fate of humanity."¹² Humans need to submit to We and live in close fellowship with Him in order to live an integral, harmonious, and happy life with one another.

Isaiah 6:8

In the vision of the holiness of God, Isaiah is convinced of his sinfulness. After divine cleansing, God asks: "'Whom shall I send?'" And Isaiah responds: "'Here I am, send me.'" The prophet is sent with a special divine commission of calling a sinful people to repentance. In verse 8, God speaks for the first time. Only after purification is Isaiah ready to meet directly with God and learn God's purpose for him. "Only when his sin, seen in all its massive and objective reality, is removed can Isaiah hear the voice of God."¹³

In this setting, the divine plural statement refers to God Himself because of the strength of the Hebrew parallelism in the verse: (A) "'Whom shall I send?'" (B) "'Who will go for us?'" The "I" in the first question corresponds to the "us" in the second. Thus the match leads to the apparent conclusion that it is God Himself who speaks here for Himself, and He is not doing it for Himself and additional heavenly beings, His court, His lords or advisers.

Isaiah will be on God's mission for His cause. The stress is on the divine commission. God sends and gives a message, and the prophet should go for Him. He is not a speaker for the heavenly court but for God Himself. He is accountable to Him. Isaiah is sent to people—to plurality. It is noteworthy that even though J. Alec Motyer argues in Isaiah 6:8 for a "plural of consultation," he adds that the New Testament "relates this passage both to the Lord Jesus (John 12:41) and to the Holy Spirit (Acts 28:25), finding here that which will accommodate the full revelation of the triune God."¹⁴

Close study of the divine plural expressions in these four passages leads to a surprising conclusion. God speaks about Himself as "We," and this expression points to a plural of fellowship or community within the Godhead. This plurality is a "plurality of Persons."¹⁵ God communicates within Himself; He is in a dialogue within the Godhead.

The "We" expressions of God do not contradict biblical monotheism, but point to the Trinitarian thinking rooted in the Old Testament even though they do not yet proclaim the Trinity plainly. It is crucial to observe that the New Testament is not presenting something entirely new or foreign to Hebrew thinking.

The Meaning of ("One") in Deuteronomy 6:5

Is the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:5 in contradiction to our conclusion so far? In the Hebrew language, there are two words for expressing the idea of one: *echad* and *yachid*. The term *echad* is used in the *Shema*. There are at least three nuances of meanings for the word *echad* in relationship to Deuteronomy 6:5.

The Lord is One means that:

- *The Lord is unique.* He is utterly holy; it means He is different from anyone else. One can speak about the otherness of God, because as a holy Being, He is the Other One. Thus, one is not a numerical value but a description of the quality.

- *The Lord is exclusive.* God alone is worthy of our praise, because He is faithful. He is the God of all gods. It does not mean a hierarchy within a pantheon of gods with the Lord as the Most High God as would be suggested by the historical background of polytheistic culture, but rather He is exclusive in His position because other gods are nothing—they have no life, they cannot hear, see, intervene, or act (Isa. 44:6-20). Our God, the Lord, is real. No one can be compared to Him (Deut. 4:39; Isa. 45:18).

- *The Lord is unity.* This means God is oneness. The word *echad* indicates also the invisible and indivisible unity of the Lord. It is interesting that in the *Shema*, the two names for God are used: *Elohim* and *Yahweh*. Both terms contain a different message in their meaning. *Elohim* points to a mighty, powerful God ('el = "powerful," "mighty"), universal, distant God, God of all humanity, God Creator, transcendent God who creates by His word.

In the first biblical Creation account this phrase is used 10 times: "And God said." *Yahweh*, on the other hand, is an imminent, near, intimate God, God of the covenant, God of His people who enter into a covenantal relationship with Him. *Yahweh* is a personal God who creates persons by His

personal, close involvement. These two names are an inner indicator for the different aspects of God's involvement with humans.

The term *echad* does not speak about the singularity or solicitude of God. He is one but not single or isolated. Here is the reference of plurality within the oneness of God. This term is better translated as *unity*. This can be observed from other texts that employ this word *echad*.

For example, in marriage there is a close unity of two individuals (husband and wife): "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one [*echad*] flesh" (Gen. 2:24). This oneness is not about numbers but about closeness of relationship, expressing a close unity. Other texts (e.g., Gen. 11:1, 6; Ex. 24:3; Ezra 2:64) speak about different people or nations becoming one, that is, united.

On the other hand, the term *yachid* ("only," "only one," "lonely," "solitary," "single," "precious life") occurs all together 12 times in the Old Testament and expresses the idea of one in the sense of singleness, solicitude, and exclusivity. Our God is not *yachid*, "one," in the sense of a solitary or lonely Being. There is a fellowship of love and unselfishness within the Godhead, a unity within a community of persons.

Allusions to the Plurality of Persons within the Godhead

There are Old Testament texts that attest to the plurality of persons in God Himself (multi-personal God). Internal indicators point to this reality. Two clusters of such Old Testament passages can be gathered: The first list refers to two divine persons, and the second points to three divine persons.

Texts that allude to two divine Persons:

- "Then the Lord [pre-incarnate Jesus who talked to Abraham] rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the Lord [the Heavenly Father] out of the heavens" (Gen. 19:24). It is possible (hints lie in the narrative itself) to interpret this verse as an allusion to two different divine persons called *YHWH*, the Lord—one being in heaven, and the second one dialoguing with Abraham. This conclusion can be reached on two premises: (1) Genesis 18–19 is seen as a literary unit dealing with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and (2) The Lord who visited Abraham together with two other angels (Genesis 18–19) and spoke with Abraham in chapter 18 is still down on earth in chapter 19. In this way the last part of Genesis 14:24 makes sense. God who is "down" sends fire from heaven, literally "from the Lord out of heaven." Thus, God's judgment upon the wicked of Sodom and Gomorrah comes as a result of close cooperation between the Lord on earth and the Lord in heaven.

- Projecting future events related to the Exodus and the conquering of the Promised Land, God proclaims: "My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will cut them off" (Ex. 23:23).

- "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your

kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions" (Ps. 45:6, 7). According to Hebrews 1:8, 9, the text is applied to Jesus Christ as the King who was anointed by the heavenly Father for a specific mission.

- David is speaking prophetically: "The Lord [*Yahweh*, the Heavenly Father] said to my [David's] Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool'" (Ps. 110:1). This royal Psalm is a direct Messianic poem taken as such by the early church, and is most frequently quoted in the New Testament in application to Jesus Christ (see Matthew 22:43-45; Acts 2:34-36; 7:55, 56; Hebrews 1:13; 5:6-10) who is presented as the King, Priest, and Judge.

- The personified/hypostatized Wisdom is rejoicing in creating activities with the Lord as Co-Creators: "Then I was beside Him as a master craftsman; and I was daily His delight, Rejoicing always before Him, rejoicing in His inhabited world, and my delight was with the sons of men" (Prov. 8:30, 31).

- After God is described as the Creator, the text then mentions a surprising, puzzling, and unexplainable question about His Son: "Who has ascended into heaven, or descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has bound the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name, and what is His Son's name, if you know" (Prov. 30:4).

- The Prophet Daniel in his vision of the heavenly pre-advent judgment mentions two separate heavenly divine beings—the "Ancient of Days" and the "Son of Man." The Ancient of Days, the Heavenly Father, presides over the judgment, but the prominence of the Son of Man is stressed by associating Him with the clouds as One "coming with the clouds of heaven," clouds being a symbol used in conjunction with the appearance of Deity; giving Him full authority and worshiping Him. Thus, two divine beings are presented in Daniel 7:13, 14: "'I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed.'" The most beloved title Jesus used for Himself and identified with was the Messianic title "Son of Man" taken from Daniel 7.

- The Lord, the Heavenly Father, promises to save His people by the Lord, Savior Jesus Christ who is their God: "'Yet I will have mercy on the house of Judah, will save them by the Lord their God, and will not save them by bow, nor by sword or battle, by horses or horsemen'" (Hosea 1:7).

- *Yahweh* is referring to *Yahweh*: "And the Lord [Jesus Christ] said to Satan, 'The Lord [the heavenly Father] rebuke you, Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! *Is* this not a brand plucked from the fire?'" The Lord Jesus Christ who speaks with Satan points to the Lord, the heavenly Father who will rebuke Satan, because he accuses Joshua, the high priest, for his sins. On the other hand, the Lord Jesus Christ forgives, cleanses, and provides clean garments for Joshua.

- "'I will strengthen them in the Lord, and they shall walk up and down in His name,'" says the

Lord” (Zech. 10:12. It might be that the Lord speaks about Himself strengthening His people in order to walk in His name. However, God’s statement can point to the future and thus refer to another Lord, namely, the Messiah—Jesus Christ.

- “Behold, I send My messenger [John the Baptist], and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant [the Messiah, Jesus Christ], in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,’ says the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 3:1).

Texts that suggest three divine Persons:

- In light of John 1:1-3, one can discover hints for the Trinity in Genesis 1:1-3. God (*Elohim*), the Spirit of God (*ruach Elohim*), and the Word of God (*vayomer Elohim*; “and God said”—this significant phrase occurs ten times in the first Creation account, thus pointing to God’s Word) appear together in the Genesis text. In the early verses of the Gospel According to John, Jesus Christ is directly named as the Word and the Creator. In this way, all three Persons of the Godhead are alluded to in the Genesis Creation account.

- This Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 11:1, 2 announces the coming of the Rod from the stem of Jesse, having in view the Davidic King Jesus Christ, then it mentions also the Spirit and the Lord. “There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord” (Isa. 11:1, 2).

- Isaiah 42:1 speaks about the Servant of the Lord (*ebed Yahweh*). On the basis of his role and mission as well as intertextuality, one can safely conclude that this figure is the Messiah. His task is enormous, which can be accomplish only by God, namely, He was appointed to be the Savior for the whole world. “Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One *in whom* My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles” (Isa. 42:1).

- One of the strongest and most explicit texts about the Trinity in the Hebrew Bible is “Come near to Me, hear this: I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; from the time that it was, I was there. And now the Lord GOD and His Spirit Have sent Me” (Isa. 48:16).

- “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn” (Isa. 61:1, 2 (NKJV). Jesus Christ used this text in His first sermon when He began His public ministry and stated that this prediction was now fulfilled (see Luke 4:16-21).

- Isaiah 63:8-10 brings all three Persons of the Trinity together. The text asserts the personality of the Holy Spirit who is “vexed” or “grieved” by disobedience (see also Psalm 106:33; Ephesians 4:30). This Hebrew verb is always used in conjunction with persons, never with power or inanimate things. “He [the Lord] said, ‘Surely they are My people, Children who will not lie.’ So He

became their Savior. In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bore them and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit” (Isa. 63:8-10).

- The Prophet Haggai in 520 B.C., while encouraging God’s people after their return from Babylonian exile to rebuild the new temple, predicted that the Desire of all nations, the Messiah would visit this sanctuary. The Lord Almighty, His Spirit, and the Desire of all nations are projected to be together in this second temple in Jerusalem. This will be a cosmic event: “‘I am with you,’ says the Lord of hosts. ‘According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remains among you; do not fear! For thus says the Lord of hosts: “Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory,” says the Lord of hosts”” (Haggai 2:4-7).

And there are many other hints and implications in the Old Testament in addition to those already discussed in this study (the “We” of God; and the textual allusions to two or three divine persons in the Godhead) that suggest to the careful reader the plurality of God’s nature. These other references are addressed more fully in an article in the *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* and argued from different angles: someone coming from God is designated as God (Isa. 7:14; 9:6); special appearances of the pre-incarnate Jesus (as in Genesis 18 and 19; 32:14-30; Joshua 5:13-15; Dan. 10:5, 6); and appearances of the specific figures (besides the Lord, the heavenly Father) like the Angel of the Lord (identified as God, for example, in Gen. 22:11-18; 31:11-13; Ex. 3:2-7; 23:20, 21; Judges 2:1; 6:11-24; 13:3-23; Zech. 3:1-8), Michael (Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 1:9; Rev. 12:7), the Servant of the Lord (Isa. 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12), the Son of God (Dan. 3:25), the wisdom of God (Prov. 8:1-14; and God’s presence (Ex. 33:12-15; Isa. 63:8, 9).¹⁶

The Unity and Complexity of God

Even though the Old Testament divine expressions of “We” do not testify directly about the Trinity, they hint to a unity and complexity within the being of God. This plurality within Deity is well attested and developed in the New Testament. The biblical monotheistic belief does not think about God in terms of His solitude or His singleness but presents Him as “We,” or in fellowship within the Godhead. God created humanity in His image; He made humans in fellowship with one another, particularly husband and wife in a close intimate relationship, because He is fellowship, He is in relationship within Himself. This divine plural of fellowship suggests plurality of persons and points to the unity in His nature.

This intra-divine fellowship of one God within plurality is a unique characteristic of our God. God is in communication within Himself and with His creation. We can build a personal relationship with this God of relationships and interactions.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not yet fully developed in the Old Testament, but there are impressive expressions pointing to Trinitarian thinking. The Old Testament uses a plethora of terms

for describing the second person of the Godhead. The biblical designation of God as "We" means believing in a personal, close, unselfish God of love, a God of relationships.

And there are many other hints and implications in the Old Testament in addition to those already discussed in this study (the "We" of God; and the textual allusions to two or three Divine Persons in the Godhead) that suggest to the careful reader the plurality of God's nature. These other references are explored more fully in "Toward the Trinitarian Thinking in the Hebrew Scriptures": Someone coming from God is designated as God (Isa. 7:14; 9:6); special appearances of the pre-incarnate Jesus (as in Genesis 18 and 19; Daniel 10:5, 6); and appearances of the specific figures (besides the Lord, the Heavenly Father) like the Angel of the Lord (identified as God, for example, in Genesis 22:11-18; Exodus 23:20, 21; Judges 13:3-23), Michael (Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Rev. 12:7), the Servant of the Lord (Isa. 42:1-9; 52:13-53:12), the Son of God (Dan. 3:25), the Wisdom of God (Prov. 8:22-31); and God's Presence (Ex. 33:12-15; Isa. 63:8, 9).¹⁷

The New Testament Trinitarian orientation is already rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Old Testament anticipates what is later plainly exposed in the New Testament teaching on this subject. The Old Testament presents implicitly, gradually, and progressively evidences for the existence of the Trinity.

The biblical paradox affirms that God simultaneously exists in singular and plural. It leads to the conclusion that He is one but in different persons. God is neither single nor married; He is in fellowship within Himself; He is community. The community of God is the source and basis of all other communities within His creation. The community of God's "We" leads to the "we" of humanity and to the togetherness of all creation, even in the cosmic sense. God's unity ties all of God's creation together to form a rich diversity.

The expression "'Let Us'" is not a statement that speaks directly about the Trinity, but it does not contradict the Trinitarian teaching. It is not a declaration about numbers, but about uniqueness, the quality of our God. Within the background of the Hebrew monotheism and divine plural speeches, it becomes clear that these expressions leave room for the doctrine of the Trinity, because *echad* not only affirms the oneness and uniqueness of God, but also points to the unity within a plurality of fellowship.

It is true that *Trinity* is not a biblical term, but this term very well expresses the important aspect of the biblical teaching about the Godhead. There are many other theological words that do not appear in the Bible, but we rightly use *incarnation*, *theophany*, *theocracy*, *eschatology*, *inspiration*, etc., because they capture well the biblical meaning of the point. The "plural of fellowship" in the light of its context leads to the recognition of different persons (not necessarily three) within the Godhead in interaction. However, this plural is an indirect witness about the "heavenly trio," an expression used by Ellen G. White.

The God *Yahweh* is plurality and always in relationship, first of all in relationship within the Godhead and in interaction with His creation. The love relationship within the Godhead is the basis for all other interactions and relationships. Our God longs for meaningful relationships with His

creatures; because of His love He created them in multiple relationships to His image after His pattern (Gen. 1:26, 27). As God is not a solitary person, so humans are not created for isolation but for social life in marriage and community.

We need to be careful, extremely careful, in attempts to explain God so as not to create Him in our image. Humans were created in His image, and not vice versa. In view of the uniqueness and otherness of our God, it becomes clear that we cannot grasp the full picture of our Lord, as He is above our comprehension of His nature. We are limited in our understanding and capacities. We can only stand in awe before Him and admire Him. We can only ask for a wonder, for a glimpse to see Him and to worship Him, and to serve our awesome God who surpasses our concepts of understanding and logic. He is always above all things and our expressions to grasp the reality of life.

Instead of trying to explain the details regarding Him, let us relate to Him personally who is One and plurality of fellowship at the same time. Our goal should be to gratefully and faithfully follow God and interact with others whom He has put beside us as part of His marvelous creation.

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Perspective Digest - a publication of the Adventist Theological Society

End Times and Salvation

Eschatology is the anticipation of Christ's multifaceted historical works of salvation from creation to new creation.

Fernando Canale

Although we cannot know the future, we certainly try. Knowing what the future holds fascinates us. Not surprisingly, prophecies about the end of the world captivate even postmodern minds. Simple curiosity attracts us to biblical prophecies. In our eagerness to anticipate future events, we often forget the strong connection that exists in Scripture between eschatology and soteriology. As a result, we may fail to understand both.

Eschatology (from the Greek) literally means "the doctrine of the last things." As a theological discipline, eschatology appears as the final section of the creeds and systematic theologies.

Soteriology (also from the Greek) means "the doctrine of salvation." As such, soteriology is "the section of Christian theology which treats of the saving work of Christ for the world."¹

Usually, Christian theologians see the relation of soteriology with eschatology from the side of soteriology. For them, eschatology is the consummation of the kingdom of God and Christ's work of salvation inaugurated at the Cross. In this view, the understanding of salvation is independent from, and a condition of, prophetic interpretation. Eschatology assumes soteriology.

Is the relation of eschatology to soteriology so simple? Should soteriology be understood from the side of eschatology instead? Can we properly understand Christ's work of salvation in isolation from prophetic interpretation? Could the study of biblical prophecies of end times provide the broad context from which Christians should understand Christ's work of salvation? More specifically, can our prophetic interpretation influence or condition our understanding of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ? Does salvation assume an end of the world?

Late Emergence of Eschatology

Early Christians did not develop systems of eschatological understanding probably because "when the end of the world did not come as expected in the early Church," Eschatology "became peripheral to most Christian theology."² However, dispensationalism and historicism as contemporary schools of prophetic interpretation find representatives in early Christian thinkers. Using the same neoplatonic ontological assumptions, Augustine produced a significant shift in prophetic interpretation of salvation and the end of the world. He claimed that prophecy refers to spiritual rather than historical realities. Consequently, for him the church is a symbol of the kingdom of God and the millennium a symbol of the Christian era.

As Protestant reformers slowly turned from tradition and philosophy to Scripture a millennium after Augustine, they used historicism as the method of prophetic interpretation. They did not, however, connect eschatology with soteriology, nor did they interpret the work of Christ from their historicist interpretation of prophecies. The Reformation stands on soteriological grounds.

In the early 19th century, there was a great revival of interest in Christ's imminent historical return of Christ in contrast with the then-dominant view that He would come only after a future millennium. Three centuries after the Protestant Reformation, study of biblical apocalyptic prophecy intensified around the world. Using the Lutheran version of justification by faith, evangelical theologians developed the dispensational model of eschatological interpretation. The dispensational model is based on the assumption of God's "divine ordering of the affairs of the world."³ Systematic dispensationalism seems to fit best the Protestant interpretation of salvation. In this system, evangelical thought moves from salvation to end times.

About the same time, and springing from the same worldwide interest in prophetic interpretation, Seventh-day Adventism was born. Adventism originates and stands on the historicist interpretation of biblical understanding of eschatology. Adventism came into existence as a result of the study of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation (1844–1850). A few years later, attention turned to salvation (1888). Historicism, then, permeated not only their eschatology but also their soteriology. Adventist thought moved from biblical historicist interpretation of the end times to salvation.

With the passing of time, however, later generations of Adventists forgot the eschatological approach to soteriology implicit in early formative Adventist thought. Consequently, in the 21st century, an increasing number of Adventists understand soteriology in disconnection from eschatology. Some even use soteriology as presupposition to interpret eschatology.

Dispensationalism

Dispensational interpretation of biblical prophecy claims to use a "literal" method of prophetic interpretation. "Literal" does not mean paying attention to the literal meaning of biblical prophetic texts but to the referent to which prophetic statements apply. Concretely, this means that unfulfilled Old Testament prophecies regarding Israel will find their future fulfillment in ethnic rather than spiritual Israel.

The literalistic hermeneutics of dispensationalism, then, assumes a dichotomy between the Old and New Testaments, Israel and the church. This ecclesiological assumption leads dispensationalists to turn away from historicism and embrace futurism. In practice, this means they assume that biblical prophecy speaks about future events rather than ongoing historical developments.

Moving from soteriology to eschatology, dispensationalism assumes a radical discontinuity in the history of salvation. Conversely, moving from eschatology to soteriology, historicism implies a radical continuity in the history of salvation.

Dispensationalists interpret "the Bible—and indeed all history—in terms of a series of God's

dispensations."⁴ By "dispensation," they mean a historical framework or pattern through which God chooses to administrate His salvation to a specific group of human beings. These patterns include "different revelations and conditions by which God will test humanity."⁵

Dispensationalists trace the various dispensations back to the biblical covenants (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Christ). Although the number of dispensations varies depending on the theologian, all "include the old dispensation under the law of Moses, the present under grace, and the future during the millennium."⁶

Why do dispensationalists understand biblical covenants as discontinuous? Probably because they believe God operates salvation in two different and discontinuous ways: The Old Testament way of the Law administered to Israel, and the New Testament way of grace administered to the church.

Yet why do they assume there is a discontinuity between law and grace? Because they believe, incorrectly, that the New Testament teaches that Christians should keep Christ's law of love and no longer expects them to keep the Ten Commandments.

We can see how soteriological and ecclesiological assumptions play a leading hermeneutical role in the dispensationalist interpretation of biblical prophecy. Moreover, prophecy relates to the realm of history, in which God's eternal plan for humanity unfolds with mathematical precision. Prophecy does not relate to the realm of the spirit, in which God operates the gospel for the salvation of human beings. According to this view, then, the interpretation of biblical prophecy cannot influence our understanding of the gospel or our experience of salvation.

Clearly and forcefully, Hans La Rondelle has shown how the ecclesiological and soteriological discontinuity between law and grace, Israel and the church, on which dispensationalist hermeneutics stands does not respond to biblical evidence. Instead, the New Testament teaches that the Church as spiritual Israel forms the New Testament people of God.⁷

Moreover, the hermeneutical centrality of God's salvation in both Old and New testaments strongly suggests the historical continuity between Old and New Testaments, Israel and the church. The historical nature of biblical thinking strongly backs the historicist method of prophetic interpretation.

Historicism is the school of prophetic interpretation "that conceives the fulfillment of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation as covering the historical period from the time of the prophet to the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth."⁸ Although the Reformers followed the historicist method of prophetic interpretation, they did not use their eschatological views as hermeneutical principle from which to understand the gospel. Very probably this was so because in their times the historicist understanding of prophecy was still in its infancy.

Eschatology and Hermeneutics

Moving beyond the advancements made by the Reformation, Adventists pioneers did apply their eschatological views as hermeneutical principles to discover new biblical truths.

C. Marvin Maxwell explains this historical and theological fact well: "Luther and some other

Reformers honored the historicist interpretation of prophecy, including the year-day principle; but Seventh-day Adventists pioneers, having arrived by the same route at the conviction that the second advent movement was a fulfillment of prophecy, used that fulfillment as a hermeneutical principle in the further development of their message. Once established as scriptural, the fulfillment of prophecy in the second advent movement became a hermeneutical tool for helping establish the Sabbath, sanctuary, spiritual gifts, true church, second advent doctrines, etc."⁹

The historicist interpretation of prophecy led Protestant believers to turn their eyes and hopes to Christ's eschatological consummation. As a result, they expected Christ to return on October 22, 1844. Yet, as it is widely known, their expectations resulted in great disappointment when Christ did not return.

The disappointment drove early Adventist pioneers to apply their eschatological knowledge as hermeneutical presupposition. Up to that point, their efforts concentrated in the study of the prophetic text. They had assumed the purification of the sanctuary referred to earth's cleansing by Jesus' second coming.

After the disappointment, early Adventists assumed as correct their eschatological understanding of the Book of Daniel. From that eschatological assumption, they searched for the referent of the purification of the sanctuary that Daniel 8:14 speaks about. Their conclusion was groundbreaking: Daniel speaks about Christ's work of atonement in heaven after His resurrection, ascension, coronation, and seating at the right hand of the Father in heaven. This conviction led them to recognize the organic interrelations that exist between apocalyptic prophecies and the sanctuary doctrine. Eschatology not only includes apocalyptic prophecies, but also God's historical actions in His sanctuary. Adventists have not yet unraveled all the consequences of this discovery.

Adventist Eschatological Hermeneutics

During the formative years that led to the establishment of Seventh-day Adventism (1844–1850), historicist interpretation of apocalyptic prophecies began to blend with the extensive biblical information about God's sanctuary and ritual in both Old and New Testaments. In the minds of early Adventists, these assumptions became hermeneutical presuppositions, launching a historicist reinterpretation of Christian theology that remains unfinished.

At the time, probably few understood the full implication of their hermeneutical assumptions. Ellen White was one of the few who realized that "The subject of the sanctuary was the key which unlocked the mystery of the disappointment of 1844. It opened to view a complete system of truth, connected and harmonious, showing that God's hand had directed the great advent movement and revealing present duty as it brought to light the position and work of His people."¹⁰

In this way, the integration of the historicist interpretation of biblical prophecy and the sanctuary doctrine became the hermeneutical perspective from which Adventists interpreted the entire building of Christian theology and discovered their own place and mission in the history of salvation.

Eschatology and the Atonement

Christian theology views salvation as atonement. Evangelical theologians usually understand the atonement as “man’s reconciliation with God through the sacrificial death of Christ.”¹¹ In their view, eschatology and salvation become essentially disconnected.

Yet in Scripture eschatology and salvation are essentially connected. On the side of eschatology, the broad reaching prophecies in the Book of Daniel include God’s central acts of salvation: the Cross (chap. 9), the investigative judgment (chap. 8), and the Second Coming (chap. 2). On the side of salvation, God operates salvation historically within the flow of created human time. Salvation embraces God’s redemptive acts from predestination to new creation.

Eschatology and salvation, then, belong together since Christ’s first promise of salvation to the human race after Adam’s and Eve’s fall (Gen. 3:15). Until the final restoration of creation, God’s history with human beings is redemptive history. Promise and fulfillment are always redemptive. Prophecy is not mere anticipation of historical facts disconnected from God’s works of salvation.

Biblical eschatology involves more than the consummation of Christ’s atonement (classical Christianity) or the anticipation of the last historical events on Planet Earth (dispensationalism). Eschatology predicts the continuation of Christ’s works of salvation in human and cosmic history. Consequently, we cannot separate eschatology from the salvation without distorting the meaning of both.

Eschatology anticipates the progressive execution and development of God’s atonement before and after Christ’s incarnation and death on the cross. By focusing on Christ’s high priestly, mediatorial work in the heavenly sanctuary, eschatology reveals that there is no discontinuity between God’s old and new covenants and provides the background for a proper understanding of Christ’s atonement.

Moreover, eschatology involves an ontological commitment. For centuries, Christians have recognized New Testament imagery about Christ as High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary present in the books of Hebrews and Revelation. Yet, Roman Catholic and Protestant ongoing commitment to non-biblical principles of reality (ontology) prevents them from accepting the existence of a spatial and temporal heaven.

For all practical and theological purposes, leading Christian theologians assume that after His resurrection, Christ became a spiritual divine being outside space and time. For them, the “history of salvation” does not take place from creation to new creation but from Christmas to Easter. Conversely, a careful listening to the historicist interpretation of apocalyptic prophecies opens to view the inner historical coherence that exists between eschatology and the Genesis history of creation in seven days. The harmonious flow of salvation history from creation (biblical redemptive history) to new creation (historicist interpretation of biblical apocalyptic prophecies), provides the proper ontological/historical context for Christians to understand the atonement and the gospel.

In Scripture, eschatology is not the consummation of the work of Christ from Christmas to

Easter, but the anticipation of Christ's multifaceted historical works of salvation from creation to new creation. Because eschatology provides a broader context for understanding Christ's work of salvation, we should study the doctrine of salvation from the perspective of prophetic interpretation and not the other way around.

Christians should use the historicist interpretation of biblical prophecy as hermeneutical presupposition to guide their understanding of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. Soteriology should assume and develop in the light of eschatology. The message of Seventh-day Adventism springs from this conviction. The success of the global eschatological mission of the remnant church depends on how faithfully and consistently Adventists would be in using the historicist interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy as the hermeneutical key to interpret the eternal gospel and preach it to the world.

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