The issue of suffering has been a subject of human thought from the beginning of time, and all religions and philosophies have had to come to terms with it.

In the question of suffering, atheism shares certain common ground with most world religions. Holocaustic misery being prerequisite to evolution, directed or otherwise, pain is evidently not a problem to the authentic evolutionist.

C. S. Lewis shares this cynical view of life, reflective of his pre-Christian mindset: “What is [life] like while it lasts? It is so arranged that all the forms of it can live only by preying upon one another. In the lower forms this process entails only death, but in the higher there appears a new quality called consciousness which enables it to be attended with pain. The creatures cause pain by being born, and live by inflicting pain, and in pain they mostly die.”

Other world religions respond hardly any differently to the inescapability of pain. Dukka, the first of the four noble truths that undergird the non-theistic religion of Buddhism, posits “that life inevitably involves suffering.” Similarly,

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pain is close to the heart of Hinduism’s vedic worship. Vedic sacrifices are calculated to keep the world in “proper order” by mirroring “the original personal sacrifice by which the universe was created, namely the dismemberment of the Purusha, the primal Being, by the gods.”

In a context that holds pain to be so normal, there exists only limited justification for describing it as evil or problematic. How could that be wrong or evil which is deemed so essential to life’s processes? Indeed, James Stewart observes that “there is no real problem of evil for the man who has never accepted the Christian revelation.” Stewart may be referring here to the biblical position that God is nothing if not love (1 John 4:8). Outside of such faith, moral and ethical perplexity remain essentially alien notions, given the presupposed chaos and accident of the naturalistic view of existence, the irrelevant God of deism, and the brutal deity of theistic evolution.

Thus, it is ironic that unbelief should contribute any arguments on the problem of suffering. Yet, humanity’s collective inadequacy before great tragedy has expressed itself, upon occasion, as conviction against Deity. If God exists, then He must be in some sense incompetent. More probably, He is neither competent nor incompetent. He simply is not. Stewart radically disagrees: “I, as a believer in God, have to face—as the unbeliever does not—the mystery of the existence of evil. I admit that. But here is the other side of it: the unbeliever has to face—as I, who believe in God, do not—the mystery of the existence of good. And his problem is definitely more insoluble than mine.”

Stewart is one of more than half a dozen Christian apologists whose responses to the issue of suffering provide a focus for reflection and discussion.

Eight Other Christian Answers

Stewart’s treatment of the issue of suffering appears in a series of four sermons entitled “God and the Fact of Suffering,” which address several popular explanations of suffering. He begins by offering three negations. He denies: (1) that all suffering is traceable to God; (2) that all suffering is traceable to sin; and (3) that all suffering is explainable as an illusion.

At the same time he affirms: (1) that suffering derives from the beneficence of inexorable law—we could not reasonably play any game if the rules kept changing or if the boundary line kept shifting; (2) that suffering is a function of our mutual dependence—we miss one another when separated only because we belong to each other; (3) that it is the evidence of the impartiality of God—all sense of morality would disappear if certain behaviors were consistently rewarded; (4) that it arises from the need for the awaken-
ing of humanity’s conscience, upon which depends the development of character—suffering contributes to the moral development of its victim; (5) that [because of the Cross] God shares the sufferer’s pain; and (6) that by the same token, “you are in it with God, sharing His redemptive activity and His victory.”

Stewart’s views on character development attract further comment: He holds, in common with most, that the greater a given misery, the more meaningful the Christian’s service in the midst of that need, and the clearer the revelation of Christ’s character. It is but a restatement of the claim that suffering betters personal morality. Stewart also finds it true, however, that multiplied problems provide better satisfaction for the human hunger for danger. As he states, “It takes a world with trouble in it to satisfy man’s demand for a dangerous universe.” In his thinking, any question of the logic of suffering must be answered in context of a dangerous universe. In his thinking, any question of the logic of suffering must be answered in context of a dangerous universe.

For him, the ethical dilemma of an inherently perilous universe finds no resolution. On the contrary, the problem is simply aggravated. Stewart seems to overlook the fact that a universe divinely designed as fundamentally dangerous offers less than comfort to minds in search of a satisfactory answer to the question of suffering, whether it be of trilobites, of dinosaurs, or of human beings. The Christian obligation must then be to believe in a God whose purpose cannot exclude pain.

Often enough, Christians must discharge this obligation even as they struggle to relate to a context of pervasive pain. In the words of Nathan A. Scott: “Of the myriad issues of life which the Christian pulpit is required to handle there is none so pressing, so inescapable, and so burdensome for the preacher as the problem of suffering, the mystery of iniquity, the strange and brutal haphazardness with which, as seems at times, acute misfortune is distributed amongst men.”

Scott’s sense of the burdensomeness and prominence of this issue nevertheless allows him to warn the Christian preacher: “The great mistake, of course, that is made by the pulpit when it risks any sort of rational account of evil is that of permitting itself a view of things sub specie aeternitatis. For this is precisely where the preacher never stands, under the aspect of eternity: his view of the world, like that of everybody else, is always sub specie temporalitatis. And thus what is perhaps always the wisest course for him is that of carefully foreseeing any and all attempts at explaining why tribulation and suffering overtake us, or how they are ultimately to be fitted into the total economy of an ‘engodded’ world. For the gospel is found to be good news not because it explains how we come to be in what popular existentialism used to call ‘the human predicament’ but rather because it proves itself to be an effective way of practically coping with that predicament.”

So whereas for Stewart, peril is a universal given, even a satisfaction for excitement-hungry humanity, for Scott, the question “why” is better not raised. Scott’s gospel constitutes not a cosmic clarification of the mystery of iniquity and an absolute deliverance from all its consequences, but a coping mechanism for those inescapably damned to be part of the predicament of existence: “So a great reticence needs to be practiced about the issues of ‘cosmology,’ about how the fact of evil requires to be reconciled with a faith in the sovereignty over the world of a gracious and providential Presence.”

The concept of a gracious and providential Presence proves particularly troublesome to Christian thinkers who desire to absolve the Deity while being unable to dispense with the eternity of pain. George W. Truett, a Christian theologian considered one of the greatest preachers of his time, suggests a biblical answer for those who would lay the guilt of sin upon the Christian sufferer:

“The Word of God is not that cruel. The Word of God does not teach that doctrine. That doctrine is as false as it is cruel, and as cruel as it is false. When you turn to the Word of God, it is perfectly clear.” Whereupon, he quotes Hebrews 12:6–9 and the words of Jesus in Revelation 3:19. The difficulty is that both these passages describe God as “chastening” and “scourging.” Truett thus succeeds in reiterating the refrain about pain as the producer of betterment, but his effort to deliver the Deity from blame cannot be considered very successful.

George Morrison’s affirmation of the profit of pain goes even further than those already considered when he places pain at the root of life and growth. This optimistic statement of pain’s virtue potentially credits it with the production of all progress and includes at least three remarkable submissions:
The spiritual alternatives of brute and arbitrary fate or the callous caprice of gods who need give no account, condemn humanity to the curse of senseless existence. Should Christianity’s consolations offer no more than a continued sense of earnest trust and mysterious ignorance in a universe of immortal pain, then its optimistic rhetoric upon the hope of heaven still competes with the escapist’s dream.

1. The human capacity for pain is deeper than that for joy. “We are so fashioned by the infinite, that the undertone of life is one of sorrow.”

2. Self-flagellation and self-abuse give evidence that pain is either pleasing, or at least acceptable, to God, offering “some hope of fellowship with heaven. You may despise the hermit, and you may flout the saint when the weals are red upon his back but an instinct which is universal [practiced by Romans, Indians, Christians, and savages] is something you do well not to despise.”

3. “Though the fact of death troubled [Jesus’] soul, there is no trace that the dark fact of pain did so—and yet was there ever one on earth so sensitive to pain as Jesus Christ? Here was a man who saw pain at its bitterest, yet not for an instant did he doubt His Father.”

It is not altogether surprising that, absent a perception of any divine capacity to banish pain, Jesus Christ Himself should be characterized as accepting it by faith. Indeed, the Christian answer harmonizes with that of Habakkuk: “The just shall live by his faith” (2:4, NKJV).

A Comparison With Heathen Responses

A review of the proposals considered thus far yields the following Christian responses to the issue of suffering, all encompassed by Cecil Wayne Cone’s invocation of the refrain of Habakkuk, “the just shall live by his faith.” Despite the satisfaction that these positions might provide, a single objection exposes their unacceptability: Their disturbing similarity to that ancient heathen thinking from which Christianity is generally expected to deliver the believer.

In the first instance, they impose severe limitations on Christianity’s moral authority. If the Bible offers no explanation for the mystery of misery, then Christianity is hard pressed to prove itself a better religion, and indeed owns small right, if any, to existence as a distinct religion.

In the second instance, the answers thus far considered offer no advance over the concepts of Israel’s neighbors of the second and first millennia before Christ. W. C. Gwaltney’s analysis of ancient Babylonian laments exposes a popular or cultic mindset of equivalent despair. Human tragedy was accompanied by an overall helplessness before the power of the gods. Again, in terms of causality, “ultimate causation lies in the largely unseen world of the gods . . . The emphasis of the laments is upon the power of the divine, not upon the rightness of the decision.”

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Looking Elsewhere for Answers

William M. Clow’s attempts at an answer to the question of suffering focus directly on Jesus. Like Morrison, he believes that though keenly wounded by the world’s agony, Christ accepted pain: “To see Jesus moving in the midst of a world of pain, keenly conscious of it and yet forbearing to heal, is, at first sight, both a marvel and a mystery. There were many widows in Israel who mourned for their children, but the Son of man did not regard Himself as sent to them. There were many lepers who prayed for cleansing, but Christ did not heal them. There were more sisters than Martha and Mary who wept beside their brother’s grave, but Christ had no word for them. There were lame and crippled and blind in every village through which Jesus passed, but they were lame and crippled and blind to the last chapter of their lives.”

Clow’s is an astonishing, eloquent, and quite awkward conviction, as is Morrison’s. It is difficult to know how these interpreters read Christ’s personal mission statement as outlined in Luke 4:16–19, 21. In this passage, Christ expresses His own self-understanding through the deliberate selection of a clearly messianic passage as His manifesto and raison d’être. According to Luke’s report, Christ receives the scroll from the hands of the chazzan, unrolls it almost completely, and
proceeds to read a portion near the end of it which, in all likelihood, He has Himself selected. The passage lists tasks which His messianic ministry will accomplish:

1. Preach good news to the poor (Isa. 61:1), those who crouch and cringe, like beggars.
2. Proclaim deliverance to captives (vs. 1), liberation from captivity.
3. Liberate the oppressed (58:6), freeing those who are shattered and crushed by cruel oppression.
4. Proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (61:2), announcement of the year of the Lord, the jubilee.

Closing the scroll, Christ announces to His synagogue audience: “‘Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’ (Luke 4:21, NKJV). Through the sermon that follows, He proceeds to represent Himself as the healing, liberating power predicted in Isaiah. Though Luke does not report the full text of this sermon, it is apparent, from Christ’s use of Isaiah shows Him to be both aware of their pain and concerned for their well-being. Moreover, He explicitly offers Himself to all life’s victims as the agent and source of liberation from all exploitation, whether spiritual victimization, physical oppression, or social injustice, to which they may be subject.

Nor does His ministry fail to confirm the truthfulness of this claim. Physically, He touches and heals lepers, Jewish and Samaritan (Matt. 8:1–3; Luke 17:12–19), and raises little children and grown men from the dead (Matt. 9:18–25; Luke 7:11–15; John 11:1–44); socially He calls on and feasts with publicans (Matt. 9:9–11; Luke 15:1:2; 19:2–7), gives to and receives affection from those known as sinners (Luke 7:37–50), recognizes and elevates local and foreign women (John 4; Mark 7:25–30); spiritually, He crushes the head of the serpent whose venom of sin once brought us death (Gen. 3:15). At the cost of His own life, He purchases authority over death and hell (Rev. 1:18) and gives those who believe in Him new right to more abundant life (John 10:10, NKJV) in a land where all things will be new (John 3:16; Rev. 21:1–5). Christ’s ministry exhibits neither unconcern with pain nor acceptance of suffering. His life opposed all manifestations of sin, of which pain is surely a conspicuous consequence.

If pain is fundamental to growth and progress, and death troubled Christ while pain did not, then though Christ’s death would disarm the devil, the master of death (Heb. 2:15), it would, equally, guarantee for those redeemed from death a life of perpetual pain, the fruit of continuous growth and development of our moral personality. Such reasoning would link the human life to pain more permanently than does Hinduism’s karma-run wheel of reincarnations. For while Hinduism’s upward-striving incarnations may result in moksha, or liberation from life’s miseries, human progress, barring some concept of imperfectible perfection, rests upon the dubious foundation of unending pain.

Fortunately, the Christian interpretation need not immortalize pain. The observation that Jesus forsook to heal every single individual need not be explained on the basis of His acceptance of suffering. He is described as going through “all the cities and villages, . . . healing every sickness and every disease among the people” (Matt. 9:35, NKJV) as He proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom. Given His crusade against pain, some further reason must be proposed for the existence of suffering. The notion of God’s original sympathy to pain is unacceptable.

An option that hews more consistently to the Bible’s foundational thesis that God is love appears in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24–30). When conscientious servants discover that in the midst of their good seed a crop of tares is emerging, the master explains, “an enemy has done this” (vs. 28, NKJV). Later, in private clarification, Jesus tells the disciples, “the enemy . . . is the devil” (vs. 39, NKJV). Jesus’ answer and explanation appear to suggest that the devil may be properly identified as the architect of contradiction not simply of Christ’s gospel preaching, but generally of programs of good such as God has set in place in the universe.

The Devil [Satan] as an Answer

Taken together, 1 Peter 5:8 and Revelation 12:9 indicate that the devil, the adversary, the ancient serpent, Satan, and the dragon are all names that may be applied to the same being who, defeated by Michael and His angels, “was thrown down to the earth” (Rev. 12:9, NKJV), where he is now said to get the whole world in trouble. This view is not necessarily uncontested. Elaine Pagels considers Satan to be a fairly recent invention. Pagels asserts that “Satan, along
with diabolical colleagues like Belial and Mastema (whose Hebrew name means ‘hatred’), did not materialize out of the air. Instead, . . . such figures emerged from the turmoil of first-century Palestine, the setting in which the Christian movement began to grow.”

Pagels explores a variety of Jewish apocryphal stories that propose demons as being produced when angels mate with women, or Satan as becoming the adversary after spurning divine orders to bow to the newly created Adam, then continues: “At first glance these stories of Satan may seem to have little in common. Yet they all agree on one thing: that this greatest and most dangerous enemy did not originate, as one might assume, as a result of human actions. Satan is not the distant, detached, diabolical being imagined in popular iconography. He is, as she detects, the intimate who resides within.”

Pagels’ admirable insights into the nature of Satan contrast with her explanation as to his origins. He is, as she detects, the intimate who becomes the enemy, the one next to God, who becomes His archival. As to origins, however, he surely antedates Jewish first-century apocalyptic visions, emerging as a negative personal force in the service of the state.

The Book of Job, perhaps the best-known Old Testament case of satanic activity, offers effective testimony to the reality of his operations. The devastation of Job’s herds and flocks, donkeys, servants, camels, and children, may be blamed on Sabeans or Chaldeans, desert wind, or fire from God, but never on Satan (Job 1:13–19). Interpretation of the book’s message has frequently been made to depend upon cooperation rather than hostility between God and Satan.

The former is held to be in God’s employ, as the prosecuting attorney functions in the service of the state. Divine acceptance of ultimate responsibility (Isa. 45:5–7) and the adversary’s skill in preserving his hiddenness combine to promote the categorical position that “The OT does not see the satanic aspect as forming part of its theodicy. A ‘satan’ is not portrayed as the origin or cause of evil.” Rather, he is held to emerge as a negative personal force only as a result of Israel’s six-century contact with the Persians, under the influence of Zoroastrian dualism. The towering monotheism of Isaiah 45:5–7 allegedly contravenes any possibility of a prevailing challenge to divine sovereignty during most of the Old Testament pre-exilic period. As D. E. Hiebert acknowledges, “It is a remarkable feature of the theology of the OT that so little mention is made of Satan as...
the great Adversary of God and His people.”23 The argument for a sixth-century satanic materialization is principally supported by reference to 1 Chronicles 21:1, as compared with its parallel account in 2 Samuel 24:1. The first of these, a post-exilic passage, describes an action that the pre-exilic book of 2 Samuel attributes to God. In Chronicles, Satan tempts David to do that which, in Samuel, God moves him to do. The comparison is intended to show that before the exile, Israel knows of no conflict between Yahweh and a personal archenemy called Satan. The divine monopoly over both good and evil (2 Sam. 24:1; Isa. 45:5–7) betrays this unawareness of distinctly evil agencies. Once Persian influence has contributed the notion of essentially separate and malevolent powers, so it is argued, this comes to be reflected in the Hebrew Scriptures in such a passage as 1 Chronicles 21:1.

Nevertheless, the theory falters upon the ground that those Old Testament books most expected to reflect such Persian religion do not do so. Apart from 1 Chronicles 21:1, post-exilic works of history (Nehemiah, Ezra, Esther), as of prophecy (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi), are equally devoid of dualistic sentiment. Further, the intertestamental Qumran texts, famous for their depictions of a confrontation between sons of light and darkness, between the Prince of Light and the Angel of Darkness, refer only three times to any kind of satan, and never as a personal name.

Beyond this, the post-exilic location of Satan’s personal emergence disregards the antiquity of the Zoroastrian texts, which may date as early as the end of the 13th century B.C. In addition, a study of this being’s actions, when he is specifically exposed, permits sufficient character identification. He is sometimes explicitly identified as “the Adversary.” Such is the case in the Book of Job where he personally contributes at least three explanatory points on the issue of suffering in the world. Finally, the rarity of similar mention among ancient Semitic languages underlines in yet another way the distinction between the Hebrew Bible and other religious documents of its time. Satan may be more explicitly delineated in the New Testament, but it would be misleading to speak of him as unknown in or absent from either pre- or post-exilic Old Testament Scriptures.

Lewis’ reflection on the doctrine of Satan is instructive: “The doctrine of Satan’s existence and fall is not among the things we know to be untrue: it contradicts not the facts discovered by scientists but the mere, vague ‘climate of opinion’ that we happen to be living in. . . . It seems to me, therefore, a reasonable supposition, that some mighty created power had already been at work for ill on the material universe, or the solar system, or, at least, the planet Earth, before ever man came on the scene: and that when man fell, someone had, indeed, tempted him.”24

Scripture teaches that all Earth’s material and spiritual decay is a consequence of human failure (Gen. 3:14–21). Lewis’ subscription to theistic evolutionary cosmology, however, allows for the working of decay before the fall of humankind. Notwithstanding, he is accurate in his insight into the presence of some mighty power for evil as influencing humanity’s rebellion against God (vss. 1–6).

The origins of that mighty power and the story of his own initial rebellion are recounted in Isaiah 14:12–14 and Ezekiel 28:12–19. The first of these, with its reference to the light bearer, son of the morning, has often been linked to a Ugaritic epic that relates the birth of twins to the supreme Canaanite deity. An examination of Isaiah 14:12–21 shows it to be much more significant than is the epic, encompassing far more than the birth of a child to a Canaanite god, or an ancient accounting for the existence of the morning star. As John Oswalt states, “Despite . . . vigorous investigation there is no single mythical story which can be said to be the prototype for Isa 14:12–15.”25

Isaiah’s subject matter is readily recognizable as being significantly more awesome and terrible. The breadth of the prophet’s narrative encompasses the unbridgeable chasm between native creaturality and the heights of autodeification. His subject is a being of such splendor and exaltation that its predicted destruction will rivet both the gaze and the mind of those who behold (Isa. 14:16). And the prophet’s subject matter is a scheme, hidden within the heart of this great one (vs. 13), to seize the very throne of God. This is the astonishing rebellion by one next...
to the throne whose intrigue evokes Pagels’ remarks on the intimate who becomes the enemy. It is small wonder that this passage has long been recognized as a cryptic description of the ambition and fall of the originator of evil. New Testament passages such as 1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 12:9; 20:2 leave little doubt as to either this creature’s identity or his current and future activity. He is the devil and Satan, both author and prime agent of all earth’s misery.

Unlike the escapism that denies the existence of pain and the pagan acceptance that seeks God through human sacrifice, the Bible admits the reality of suffering and rejects it as incompatible with the character of God. Pain, in proper biblical understanding, is not eternal. It originated with the adversary. Danger and adversarial relationships are not inherent to the universe. They originated when one created perfect, designed for the flawlessness of God-ordered eternity, undertook to dispute known concepts of perfection. When this day star, son of the morning, the anointed covering of God-ordered eternity, undertook to dispute the son of the Most High. The pain and suffering that pervade the animate creation result from the contamination of sin, the biblical name for Satan’s rebellion and the state of things it produces. Sin’s current impact is capricious, uncontrollable, and global, except by specific divine interruption, and its ultimate consequence is death. As God is eternal, as God is life and truth, and the source of life and all good, so His adversary is death and the cause of death and all evil.

**Briefly; God’s Answer to Suffering**

Far from being the cause of suffering in the world, God has undertaken to guarantee that its presence will not be permanent. The horror of the means He has devised gives insight into the offense that sin and suffering are to Him and also the value He places upon the safety and happiness of His creation. Jesus Christ, who at His first advent considered himself the Healer of all human maladies, has, by His own awful sacrifice, exchanged humanity’s doom for heaven’s original bliss. Those who believe in Him are neither doomed to a blighted and abbreviated existence of pain, nor to suffering in perpetuity for the sake of or in the name of self-improvement. Instead, they may participate in an eternity of joy in a land where there shall be no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain, because, through Christ, the former state has passed away. By bearing, in Christ His Son, all the misery He Himself so abhors, God has restored the universe to the bliss in which He created all. In Christ’s suffering is our healing. The suffering of the perfect One has neutralized sin’s sting, destroyed the destroyer, and swallowed up death in victory. God has done this for the sake of His creation, because sin cannot stop God from being love.

**REFERENCES**

3. Ibid., pp. 76, 75.
5. Ibid., p. 68.
6. Ibid., p. 105.
7. Ibid., p. 90.

9. Ibid., p. 11.
10. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 149.
15. Ibid.
20. Ibid., p. 49.
23. Lewis, op cit., pp. 122, 123.
A close reading of the Song of Songs brings a fulfilling appreciation for God’s intended plan for sexual intimacy.

Many commentators on the Song of Songs find no reference to God or the sound of God’s voice in the book. Against the background of pagan fertility cults, when the very air was charged with the divinization of sex, it is understandable that the divine presence/voice would have to be muted in the context of sexuality. Nonetheless, God is clearly present in the Song—and He is not silent!

The Echo of God’s Name

A veiled but striking allusion to God appears in Shalumit’s solemn, thrice-repeated appeal: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, that you will not arouse or awaken my love, until she pleases” (2:7; 3:5; 8:4, NASB). In the first two occurrences of this refrain, Shulamit asks the women to bind themselves by the oath “by the gazelles or by the does of the field.” Scholars have widely recognized the play on words between this phrase and the names for God: “by Elohe Shabaoth, the God of hosts” and “by El Shaddai, the Mighty God.” The inspired poet has substituted similar-sounding names of animals (symbolic of love) for the customary divine names used in oaths.

Contrary to a secularization of the Song, this strongly affirms God’s presence in it. Though His name is muted, to be sure, as a safeguard against any attempts to divinize sex after the order of the fertility-cults, it is actually heard even more distinctly through the animals of love that echo the divine names. The poet surely would not have even included the oath formula that throughout Scripture employs the divine name if he did not intend to allude intertextually to the divine presence behind the Song. And he would certainly have not used verbal echoes of the divine names if he were seeking to remove any reference to God in the Song. By substituting for the divine name similar-sounding names of animals symbolizing love and then incorporating these into a divine oath formula, the refrain inextricably links Love (personified in the oath) with the divine presence without thereby divinizing sex.

George M. Schwab has accurately captured the use of circumlocutions for the divine name in this verse: “In the Bible, there is no case where one swears by zoological specimens. . . . The girl desires the daughters of Jerusalem—and the author desires the reader—to swear by God not to stir up love until it pleases. . . . The girl wants the young women to take an oath by the gazelle and doe. These terms serve as circumlocutions for God Almighty, the Lord of Hosts. But they are also used as symbols throughout the Song for sexual endowment, appeal, comeliness, and fervor. The words, then, exist with three referents: animals in a symbolic forest, the divine warrior God Almighty and his Hosts, and ardent affection. . . . Thus the terms combine the concept of God with the concept of love and its power. The girl desires the daughters of Jerusalem to swear by sexuality and God—and these two concepts are fused into a single image. The Song should then be read as if love were conceived as a divine attribute of God. . . . Love is not simply a matter of feelings, social contracts, or trysts in the wood.”

The Voice of God

Moving from the dominant recurring refrain of the Song to its
twin apexes, there is wide agreement that the two high points of Canticles are 4:16–5:1 and 8:5–7. One is the structural/symmetrical center of the Song; the other is the thematic peak. Francis Landy refers to these passages as “the two central foci: the centre and the conclusion.” Ernst Wendland calls them the “middle climax” and “final peak” of the Song respectively, and amasses a persuasive display of literary evidence to support the choice of these passages as the Song’s twin summits.

Many recognize that Song 4:16–5:1 comes at the very center of the symmetrical literary structure of the Song. It is probably the voice of God Himself that resounds in the climactic last line of this central apex to the Song, giving His divine benediction upon the marriage and its consummation: “Eat, O friends, and drink; drink your fill, O lovers!” (5:1, NIV). Many suggest that it is the groom extending an invitation to the guests to join in the wedding banquet. This is improbable, however, since the two terms friend and lovers used are the words used elsewhere in the Song for the couple, not for the companions/guests. If the terms in 5:1 refer to the couple, they could not be spoken by either bride or groom. The omniscient narrator/poet at this high point in the Song seems to have a ring of divine authority and power—to be able to bestow a blessing upon the consummation of the marriage of the bride and groom. It is most likely that the voice of 5:1 is that of Yahweh Himself, adding His divine blessing to the marriage, as He did at the first garden wedding in Eden.

In the wedding service, only He has the ultimate authority to pronounce them husband and wife. On the wedding night, only He is the unseen Guest able to express consent for their uniting into one flesh. God’s voice is central and omniscient. His authoritative voice here at the climax to the Song is reminiscent of that in Eden, to another divine blessing upon the sexual union He already had proclaimed “very good” in the beginning. By speaking here at the focal point of the Song, and speaking to both lovers, He underscores that sexual fulfillment is in the center of the divine will for both partners.

The Covenant Name of God: Yahweh

The echo of God’s names resonates in the dominant recurring refrain of the Song (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), and the actual voice of God resounds from the Song’s central summit (5:1). But when one moves to Canticles’ thematic climax and conclusion, the great paean to love (8:6), the actual name of Yahweh makes its single explicit appearance in the book, and his flaming presence encapsulates the entire message of the Song: “Love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame” (vs. 6, NIV).

Wendland demonstrates that “A host of Hebrew literary devices converge here [Cant. 8:6] to mark this as the main peak of the entire message. . . . In this verse we have the fullest, most sustained attempt to describe (or is it evoke?) the supreme subject of the Song, namely ‘love.’” He also incisively points out that the Hebrew word selected by the inspired poet to occupy the “ultimate, climactic position” of this verse—and thus of the final peak of the Song—is “the flame of Yah[weh].”

Some have suggested that this Hebrew word be excised from the text as a gloss, but no manuscript evidence exists for such revision, and the word fits the context precisely. “Some commentators have questioned the integrity of the text,” writes Roland E. Murphy, “but without substantial support from the ancient versions.”

God’s voice is central and omniscient. His authoritative voice here at the climax to the Song is reminiscent of that in Eden, to another divine blessing upon the sexual union He already had proclaimed “very good” in the beginning. By speaking here at the focal point of the Song, and speaking to both lovers, He underscores that sexual fulfillment is in the center of the divine will for both partners.

Yah(weh) as an Indication of the Superlative?

Although it is generally conceded that the name of Yah(weh) appears in this passage, many insist that this is simply another instance of the Hebrew idiom for expressing the superlative, e.g., “A most vehement flame.” This is a theoretical possibility, although valid examples of using a divine name to express the superlative in the Hebrew Bible are not nearly as common as has been claimed, and any instance of the covenant name ever being used as a superlative has been questioned. “While the generic term for god does function as a semantic device for superlatives, this [Song 8:6] verse would be the sole case where the proper name of Yahweh does. And it would be a surprising use, really. Considerable care was taken around the divine name in the Bible, illustrated by the Third Commandment, which prohibited the wrongful use of the divine name (Exod. 20:7). . . . The reverence
If the blaze of love—ardent love—such as between a man and woman, is indeed the Flame of Yahweh, then this human love is explicitly described as originating in God, “a spark off the Holy Flame.” It is, therefore, a holy love. Such a conclusion has profound significance for the whole reading of the Song of Songs.

The Flame of Yahweh

A number of crucial considerations lead to the conclusion of dozens of commentaries and translations that the expression shalhebetya in this context moves beyond the superlative to describe “the very flame of Yahweh.”

Multi-dimensional evidence supporting the acceptance of shalhebetya as an integral part of the text and constituting an explicit mention of Yahweh refutes various arguments against this position. Landy cogently summarizes the main points of opposition and diffuses them by going to the root causes for such resistance to the presence of the divine name in this passage. To those who wish to emend the text, he chides: “the postulation of glosses seems to me questionable, since it is uncomfortably like an excuse for eliminating anything inconvenient. Numerous and ungainly are the emendations proposed for ‘shalhebetya.’” To those who do textual surgery as well as to those who attenuate the divine name into hyperbole, he cuts to their unstated (and perhaps unconscious) motivation: “misguided prurience.” To those who argue that this would be Yahweh’s sole entry in the book and therefore it cannot refer to Him, he replies that this “is no argument . . . it is equally as valid to say that its uniqueness reinforces its solemnity.” To those who maintain that sexuality is inconsistent with sanctity, he says: “References and comparisons to divinity are found in the love-literature of all ages. . . . It is a remarkable irony that just those commentators who populate the Song with concealed deities refuse to recognize his presence there when he comes to the surface!”

Significance and Implications

Landy has rightly assessed the importance of shalhebetya in the wisdom credo of Song 8:6, 7, and of the entire book. He states dramatically: “The flame of God is the apex of the credo, and of the Song.” LaCocque concurs: “A flame of Yah[weh]! . . . The whole of the Canticle is encapsulated in this phrase.” Wendland summaries: “YHWH is the Source not only of love in all its power and passion, but also of the paired, male-female (= marriage) relationship in which love is most completely and intimately experienced.”

If the blaze of love—ardent love—such as between a man and woman, is indeed the Flame of Yahweh, then this human love is explicitly described as originating in God, “a spark off the Holy Flame.” It is, therefore, a holy love. Such a conclusion has profound significance for the whole reading of the Song of Songs—and for the quality and motivation of human sexual love. Song 8:6 makes explicit what was already implicit in the woman’s adjurations of her companions not to awaken love until it is ready (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). As already hinted in these verses by the play on words with the names of God, love is not ready capriciously or randomly, but according to the will of Him from whom this holy love originated.

Song 8:6 also makes explicit what was implicit in the divine approbation of the lovers’ consummation of their marriage on their wedding night (5:1). The love between husband and wife is not just animal passion, or evolved natural attraction, but a love approved—yes, even ignited—by Yahweh Himself! The love relationship within the context of marriage is not only beautiful, wholesome, and good, but also holy. Lovers then will treat each other with godly self-giving because they are animated by a holy, self-giving Love.

To put it another way, if human love is the very Flame of Yahweh, then this human love at its best—as described in the Song—points beyond itself to the Lord of love. The human “spark off the Eternal Flame” reveals the character of that Divine Flame. The love relationship of male and female, made in the image of God, reflects the I-Thou love relation inherent in the very nature of the triune God. The various characteristics and qualities of holy human love that emerge from the Song of Songs—mutuality, reciprocality, egalitarianism, wholeness, joy-of-presence, pain-of-absence, exclusivity (yet inclusiveness), permanence, intimacy, oneness, disinterestedness, wholesomeness, beauty, goodness, etc.—all reflect the divine love within the very nature of God’s being. By holding the love relationship within the Song, and within contemporary godly marriages reflecting the relationship depicted in the Song, one may catch a glimpse of the divine holy love. These marriages preach to us of the awesome love of God!
Christian history has understood the devil in various ways. Our understanding of evil is a developing process, yet the way we have looked at the devil in history can tell us something distinctive about ourselves. In this sense, our understanding of the devil is a mirror reflecting how we interpret our experience.

The twin character traits of the devil in history as “the Possessor of Souls” and “the Tempter” reflect our own self-understanding as persons who are paradoxically held in bondage by something external to us, yet simultaneously choosing to sin of our own accord. Until our Christian theological response to evil, in this case the devil, addresses this paradox of bondage and responsibility, we are destined to have only partial success in our battles with the prince of darkness.

A biography is a written account of another person’s life from a third-person perspective. Utilizing this method creates certain unavoidable problems. One is attributing personality to evil by calling it “the devil” when in fact evil is sub-human. We tend to grant a certain status to evil when we refer to “it” as a “he” or “the devil.” We also face the danger of focusing on the stories of personified evil while overlooking the structural components of evil all around us, such as those found in our own institutional life.

In studying the life of the devil, we may come to know more about ourselves.

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THE HEAVENLY BOOK OF HUMAN DEEDS

In a way, a list is being put together in heaven of the times when we’ve been “naughty or nice.”

Besides the book of life, the Bible refers to other heavenly “books” in which are recorded the deeds of human beings. Daniel mentions books opened during the end-time judgment (7:10), and Revelation refers to them as well (20:12). Though Scripture offers little regarding the nature of these books, what is available suggests their significance and function.

Social Background of the Books of Deeds

Probably the best parallel for the heavenly books of good and bad deeds is found in the ancient practice of keeping a record of the chronicles of the kings of Israel and Judah. For instance, a book called the “book of the acts of Solomon” (1 Kings 11:41), contained “the acts of Solomon, all that he did, and his wisdom” (NKJV). This book may have been used in the biblical Book of Kings to gather information about the king. There are also numerous references to the “book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel” (e.g., 1 Kings 14:19; 22:39; 2 Kings 1:18; 10:34, et al.), and the “book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah” (e.g., 1 Kings 14:19, 29; 15:7; 14:18). These books contained information similar to that found in the biblical books of Kings. They probably were a record of the chronicles of the kings of Israel and Judah, or the royal annals. The biblical books of Chronicles mention several books of the deeds of the kings of Judah, but the most common one is the “book of the kings of Judah and Israel” (e.g., 2 Chron. 25:26; 28:26). Those royal annals contained the good and bad deeds of the kings of Israel and Judah.

The practice of preserving the activities of the kings in chronological records was very common throughout the ancient Near East. The Book of Ezra refers to “book of the records” of the fathers of Artaxerxes (4:15, NKJV), and the Book of Esther alludes to “the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia” (10:2, NKJV). That book appears to have contained information concerning the activities of individuals who had come into contact with the king (6:1).

The Heavenly Books of Deeds

The belief in heavenly records of human deeds was common throughout the ancient Near East. Several texts already cited express this belief. Other ancient texts mention “the tablets of his misdeeds, errors, crimes, oaths” and also “the tablets of his good deeds.” It is difficult, however, for us to know the exact nature of the books in the ancient world and their purpose.

Content of the Books

In Scripture, the heavenly books of human deeds are simply designated “books” (Dan. 7:10; Rev. 20:12) or “book” (Ps. 56:8). In only one passage there appears to be a specific name for it, “a book of remembrance” (Mal. 3:16, NKJV). Some cases provide some information with respect to what is written in the books. For instance, they contain the painful experiences of God’s servants (Ps. 56:8), the acts of love performed on behalf of others (Neh. 13:14), the conversations of those who fear the Lord (Mal. 3:16), and the evil acts of the wicked (Isa. 65:6).

It is difficult to establish whether there are two different records, one for evil deeds and another for good deeds, or one record of all human deeds. The plural “books” suggests the possibility of at least two books, or several volumes. The fact that the book of remembrance “contains the names and an ongoing account of the words and deeds of the God fearers” suggests that only good deeds are recorded there. Jewish traditions distinguish between a book recording the deeds of the righteous and a second one recording the deeds of...
the wicked. A similar distinction is made by Ellen G. White.

Function of the Books

The primary function of those records is to preserve evidence that will be used in the divine tribunal to determine the commitment of the individual to the Lord. This is not clearly present in all the passages dealing with the books of human deeds, but it is clear enough in most of the passages to suggest it was of central importance. Besides, the book of deeds of the kings of Israel and Judah were unambiguously used by the biblical writers to judge the commitment or lack of commitment of the kings to the Lord.

Usually, when a king is introduced in the books of Kings, a judgment formula is employed, giving a verdict with respect to his relationship with the Lord. For example, Abijam “reigned three years in Jerusalem. . . . He walked in all the sins of his father, . . . [and] his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David” (1 Kings 15:2, 3, NKJV). In another case, “Jehoash became king, and . . . [he] did what was right in the sight of the Lord” (2 Kings 12:1, 2, NKJV). This judicial pronouncement was followed by supporting evidence taken from the chronicles of the kingdom, the record of the good and bad deeds performed by the king. Clearly, “the reign of each king is evaluated in terms of whether he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (e.g., 1 Kings 15:11) or whether he did evil in the eyes of the Lord (e.g., 2 Kings 13:2).” This is judgment by works. The concluding formula, “the rest of the acts of . . . , are written in the book of the chronicles of Israel/Judah,” alerts the reader to the fact that more evidence is available, if needed, to support the judgment passed on the king. In other words, the biblical writer is arguing that enough objective evidence is recorded in the books of the deeds of the king to demonstrate beyond any doubt that the verdict for or against the particular king is legally justifiable. A similar phenomenon is to some extent found in 1 and 2 Chronicles.

The use of the heavenly records of human deeds in the divine judicial proceedings is already present in Isaiah 65:6: “Behold, it is written before Me: I will not keep silence, but will repay—even repay into their bosom” (NKJV). There is some ambiguity concerning the meaning of the expression “it is written before Me.” It could refer to the record of the sins of the people, or it could designate a written decree of judgment that is immutable. The context suggests that the reference is to the heavenly record of the sins of the people which God, at the moment of making a legal decision, has in front of Him. After examining it, He determines not to keep silence, that is to say, not to appear to be indifferent, but to act against sin. Verse 7 indicates that what provokes this divine legal reaction is the sin of God’s people, implying that what is written before the Lord is exactly that sin.

The books of good and evil deeds are opened particularly during the eschatological judgment, before the kingdom of God is established on Earth. The scene of judgment in Daniel 7:9, 10 describes the divine tribunal in session and the use of books during the proceedings. Revelation 20:12 describes a similar scene, during the judgment of the wicked. It is explicitly stated that the final and immutable verdict is based on what has been written in the books. All are judged according to their deeds, as recorded in the heavenly books.

Nehemiah 13:14 suggests an intriguing idea about the books of deeds. Nehemiah requests that his loyal deeds not be blotted out from the heavenly records. The possibility of deleting good deeds from those records suggests that evil deeds could be also blotted out. . . . In Scripture, misdeeds are eliminated or blotted out from the heavenly registers not through incantations, but through repentance and divine grace.

Blotting Out Recorded Deeds From the Books

Nehemiah 13:14 suggests an intriguing idea about the books of deeds. Nehemiah requests that his loyal deeds not be blotted out from the heavenly records. The possibility of deleting good deeds from those records suggests that evil deeds could be also blotted out. That idea is found in one ancient Near Eastern text: “May his sin be shed today, may it be wiped off him, averted from him. May the record of his misdeeds, his errors, his crimes, his oaths, [all] that is sworn, be thrown into the water.” In Scripture, misdeeds are eliminated or blotted out from the heavenly registers not through incantations, but through repentance and divine grace (Ps. 51:1; Isa. 43:25; 44:22; Acts 3:19). Sins that are not blotted out of the heavenly books are unforgiven sins (Ps. 109:14).

Perhaps Nehemiah’s statement implies that during the final judgment, the few good deeds performed by the wicked, or by those who turned from righteousness to wickedness, will not make any difference with respect to their final destiny. Their evil deeds will reveal that they
An omniscient God does not need to keep records of the life of human beings, but they could be very useful to all intelligent creatures, including human beings. Heavenly creatures seem to be involved in the procedures of the final judgment. Since the Bible does not discuss the nature of those records, they remain shrouded in mystery. However, for us those records are highly significant.

did not remain in a permanent covenant relationship with the Lord. The idea is well expressed in the Book of Ezekiel: “When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done will not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die” (18:24, NKJV). Instead of the verb “blot out,” we have here the verb “remember,” preceded by a negation (“will not be remembered”). Not to remember deeds is the equivalent of blotting them out from the heavenly books. This is explicitly stated in Isaiah 43:23: “I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins” (NKJV). Guilt or virtue can under certain circumstances be removed from the divine registers.

Significance of the Books of Human Deeds

An omniscient God does not need to keep records of the life of human beings, but they could be very useful to all intelligent creatures, including human beings. Heavenly creatures seem to be involved in the procedures of the final judgment. Since the Bible does not discuss the nature of those records, they remain shrouded in mystery. However, for us those records are highly significant.

First, they indicate that God is interested in every one of us as an individual. In the Old Testament, the books of chronicles were mainly a record of the activities of the kings and the impact of their actions on other persons. They were the most important leaders among the people of God, and their actions were preserved in the records for future generations. In the heavenly records no distinction is made among human beings. We are all equally important before the Lord; what we do, say, and experience is recorded there. Each of us plays a significant role in the conflict between good and evil, and our actions reveal that particular function. We were not born to exist for a short period of time and then return to eternal oblivion without leaving traces of our presence on this planet. God created us and allowed us to become what we are through our experiences, decisions, and actions. The history of our lives is preserved by God in the heavenly records as a witness to the fact that He considers our presence here of significant value.

Second, the record is not only about our actions, but about God’s involvement in the lives of humans. Humans may at times feel that they are facing life by themselves without the supporting and guiding presence of God. But the heavenly records will reveal that God was always present with them leading, guiding, and trying to influence their lives. The record of our lives is at the same time a record of the involvement of the King of the universe in every facet of our experiences in a world of sin. In other words, the books of human deeds are in fact the books of the Chronicles of God in which are recorded His activities on behalf of every sinner on this rebellious planet. Every one of our actions is recorded there because He was always present in every one of them seeking us out, extending to us His loving hand of salvation. In the records are preserved God’s providential care and guidance as we were confronted by challenges and choices that forced us to make decisions for or against Him.

Third, the fact that human deeds are recorded in heaven in some form implies that they are accessible to others for objective analysis. Those records play a valuable role during the final judgment in the heavenly realm in that they testify concerning God’s impartial judgment. He has established that the faith-commitment of every individual to Him and to His Son is revealed through human actions, and that becomes a defining concept during the judgment. The examination of those records will once and for all unveil the justice of God’s judicial decisions and will lead to the extermination of sin and sinners from God’s creation. The examination of the books of deeds will close with a universal doxology in which God and the Lamb will be praised by all creation for their love and justice in all their actions (e.g., Rev. 19:1, 2).

A consideration of the heavenly books suggests that heavenly things, in this case the heavenly records, are being patterned after earthly practices. That is to say, the social practice of keeping records of people in the form of birth-lists, genealogies, and chronicles appears to be projected into the operations of the
heavenly realm. The question is whether the earthly practices are being used in the Bible as metaphors to help us understand theological concepts and ideas but are not intended to describe similar procedures in heaven. It is difficult to provide an answer to this question.

It is clear that the biblical writers were persuaded of the reality of the heavenly books. Hence, should we feel free to dispose of their convictions in order to appropriate only abstract ideas from the language and images they used? This may not be necessarily wrong. However, this question would have never occurred to an Israelite. Hebrew thinking does not seem to allow for the argument that earthly patterns are being used simply to convey heavenly concepts for which there is not at some level a concrete correspondence in heaven itself. This does not necessarily mean that the heavenly things have to correspond in every respect to the earthly ones. The biblical writers are clearly using human language and images to allude to a heavenly reality that cannot be fully contained in the language or in the social practices they employed to communicate their message.

The phenomenon described here is similar to the biblical tendency to pattern human things on Earth after heavenly ones. For instance, the earthly sanctuary was patterned after the heavenly. Evidently that should not be interpreted to mean that the earthly is an exact replica of the heavenly. The biblical writers were aware of the superiority of the heavenly temple in contrast to the earthly. Another example comes from the sphere of human behavior. In the Old Testament, the religious and social behavior of the Israelites was to be patterned after the heavenly one. Israelite society was expected to reflect the heavenly model: “‘Be holy; for I am holy’” (Lev. 11:44, NKJV). But the holiness of the people was a pallid reflection of the unique and magnificent holiness of God; in fact, it was a limited participation in the holiness of God.

One should not press the discontinuity between the earthly and the heavenly or the heavenly and the earthly to the point of denying the reality of the heavenly. The specific nature of the heavenly is not accessible to us, but inaccessibility should not be equated with nonexistence. □

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Jesus’ command of Scripture suggests that He took memorization very seriously.

One of the many things that captured the interest of Christ’s disciples was His fervent and consistent devotional life. The Gospels, especially Luke, illuminate the importance of prayer for Jesus. His followers were inspired by the spiritual power they had come to associate with His words and works. While His life in the Spirit stemmed from several sources, it also included His intent to store Scripture in memory. This ingredient in Christ’s spiritual life is not as explicitly described as His life of prayer, but is evident in the record of His earthly ministry.

It has been observed that the Gospels (particularly Matthew) describe Christ as the perfect representative of the people of Israel, who repeats the history of the Old Testament covenant people. God called both Israel and Christ—as the embodiment of Israel—His “servant” (Isaiah 42–53). Both similarly received the designation of God’s “Son” (Ex. 4:22; Matt. 3:17). Like Israel of old, Jesus found refuge in Egypt for His own survival. The first chapters of Matthew’s Gospel repre-
heavenly realm. The question is whether the earthly practices are being used in the Bible as metaphors to help us understand theological concepts and ideas but are not intended to describe similar procedures in heaven. It is difficult to provide an answer to this question.

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BY ROBERT H. BANKS *

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that He had committed to memory. Once, through years of careful application and study, fortified His memory in preparation for this intense battle with the adversary.

The Scriptures sustained Jesus during the trying ordeal at the closing hours of His life. Of the “seven last words” of Jesus on the cross, passages quoted by Jesus during the closing hours of His betrayal and crucifixion were Psalm 22:1 (Matt. 27:46); and Psalm 31:5 (Luke 23:46). Another statement, “I thirst” (John 19:28), though not a direct quote, is contextually parallel with events described in Psalm 22:15 and 69:21. In the midst of His terrible suffering, under the weight of the sins of the world, He quoted (in Aramaic) Psalm 22:1: ““My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”” (Matt. 27:46, NKJV). Even the last spoken words of Jesus before He died, ““It is finished,”” were words of Scripture that He had committed to memory. As He understood, from His med-

The closing days of Jesus’ betrayal, trial, and passion are thematically parallel to the betrayal, deception, and hardship that the Gospels prophesy will come upon the final remnant (Matt. 10:16–18, 22–25, 40; 24:9, 10). Ellen White declares: “Today men are choosing Barabbas, and saying, Crucify Christ. They will do this in the person of His saints. They will go over the same ground as the Jewish priests and rulers did in their treatment of Christ” (“Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers,” p. 131).

In the same manner, the people of God, before the day of the Lord, will be “like David” (Zech. 12:8). Like the Davidic Messiah, they will draw upon the storehouse of Scripture during Earth’s final conflict. The end-time generation will face a similar trial and will use the same means to overcome through the Word of God.
The Gospels do not indicate when Christ was born. That the shepherds were watching their flocks in the fields at night (Luke 2:8), eliminates December. Because of cold weather and chilling rains at that time, sheep would not be unsheltered in the open at night.

The date, December 25, goes back to Roman festivities in connection with renewal of the Sun at the winter solstice. The feast of Saturnalia in honor of Saturn, the god of sowing or seed, was held from December 17-24. It was a time of merrymaking and celebration. Work was suspended so people could feast, gamble, dance, exchange gifts, and generally enjoy themselves to the fullest. Connected with this festival were hopes for themselves to the fullest. Connected with this festival were hopes for

Various Christmas customs come from different sources. The exchange of gifts goes back to the feast of Saturnalia, the greenery and lights come from the Roman New Year, and Santa Claus derives his name from Sinter Klaas, the Dutch form of Saint Nicholas, a Christian bishop in Asia in the fourth century, who supposedly gave away all the money he had inherited from his wealthy parents.

The name Christmas comes from the Roman Catholic medieval custom of celebrating a midnight mass on the eve of Christ’s birth. In the course of time, Christmas, as the day on which Christ’s birth was celebrated, became the most important Christian festival, and its pagan origins became lost in history.

Despite its pagan origin, however, Ellen White did not reject the celebration of Christmas. Her balanced counsel on how Seventh-day Adventists can incorporate Christmas into their lives is found in the book Adventist Home.

“As the twenty-fifth of December is observed to commemorate the birth of Christ, as the children have been instructed by precept and example that this was indeed a day of gladness and rejoicing, you will find it a difficult matter to pass over this period without giving it some attention. It can be made to serve a very good purpose.

“The youth should be treated very carefully. They should not be left on Christmas to find their own amusement in vanity and pleasure seeking, in amusements which will be detrimental to their spirituality. Parents can control this matter by turning the minds and the offerings of their children to God and His cause and the salvation of souls.

“The desire for amusement, instead of being quenched and arbitrarily ruled down, should be controlled and directed by painstaking effort upon the part of the parents. Their desire to make gifts may be turned into pure and holy channels and made to result in good to our fellow men by supplying the treasury in the great, grand work for which Christ came into our world. . . .

“It is right to bestow upon one another tokens of love and remembrance if we do not in this forget God, our best friend. We should make our gifts such as will prove a real benefit to the receiver. I would recommend such books as will be an aid in understanding the word of God or that will increase our love for its precepts. Provide something to be read during these long winter evenings.”

Though sacred and even lighted trees were found in some ancient religions, the Christmas tree as we know it today is historically attested only from the 16th century onward. From the Beckschen Chronicle (c. 1600) we learn that Christmas trees were decorated with apples and consecrated wafers. Toward the end of the 17th century, Christmas trees in addition to fruits and wafers were also decorated with candles, although candles as such were part of any Christmas celebration since the days of the early church. From Germany, the Christmas tree conquered the world, primarily during the 19th century.

When Ellen White was asked about the use of the Christmas tree,
Lisa Ezquierdo, a stunning, promising child who fell through the cracks of the U.S. child welfare system, was murdered in December 1995 stirs outrage. There was no part of the 6-year-old’s body that was not cut or bruised.¹

How could one little girl who was doted on by her father, Gustavo, and guaranteed educational support through 12 grades of Montessori school by her sponsor, Prince Michael of Greece, bring out such joy and affection and yet such cruelty and hatred?

This is a question we can ask, too, about another child in another time: the Christ-child. The words of Simeon strike a different note from the nice little Christmas story we’re usually accustomed to thinking about.

After the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:14, NKJV), Simeon stated that the Christ-child would bring both trouble and joy: “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel. And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to

Elisa Ezquierdo, a stunning, promising child who fell through the cracks of the U.S. child welfare system, was murdered by her mother.

Elisa was doted upon by her father, Gustavo, and guaranteed educational support through 12 grades of Montessori school by her sponsor, Prince Michael of Greece. Yet she was hated and systematically abused by her mother.

Elisa’s father took parenting classes and enrolled her in a Montessori school. She was his life. He called Elisa his princess. Every morning he ironed her dress and put her beautiful hair into braids and pigtails. She was a favorite in school. Beautiful, radiant.

Greece’s Prince Michael says she was a “lively, charming, beautiful girl.” He brought her stuffed animals and clothes.

But her mother responded differently. She used Elisa’s head to mop the floor. She smashed Elisa’s head against a cement wall. Made her eat her own feces. Elisa’s tragic, shameful death in December 1995 stirs outrage. There was no part of the 6-year-old’s body that was not cut or bruised.¹

How could one little girl bring out such joy and affection and yet such cruelty and hatred?

This is a question we can ask, too, about another child in another time: the Christ-child. The words of Simeon strike a different note from the nice little Christmas story we’re usually accustomed to thinking about.

After the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:14, NKJV), Simeon stated that the Christ-child would bring both trouble and joy: “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel. And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to

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¹ The Adventist Home, pp. 477, 478.
² Ibid., p. 482.
³ November 18, 1971.
⁴ The Adventist Home, p. 483.
she responded by saying, “God would be well pleased if on Christmas each church would have a Christmas tree on which shall be hung offerings, great and small, for these houses of worship. Letters of inquiry have come to us asking, Shall we have a Christmas tree? Will it not be like the world? We answer, You can make it like the world if you have a disposition to do so, or you can make it as unlike the world as possible. There is no particular sin in selecting a fragrant evergreen and placing it in our churches, but the sin lies in the motive which prompts to action and the use which is made of the gifts placed upon the tree.”

The inspired counsel can be summarized as follows: Christmas can be observed to serve a good purpose; minds can be directed heavenward to Christ’s sacrifice for sinful humanity; and offerings should be given to the Lord’s work. In other words, Christmas can be made a blessing for Seventh-day Adventist families and churches.

In a Review and Herald editorial, Kenneth H. Wood made two practical suggestions as to how Seventh-day Adventists can celebrate Christmas Christian-style: First, he suggested giving priority to others over self. Visit the old and the lonely. Invite someone who cannot repay you your hospitality for a meal, or take a Christmas basket to someone in need. Second, he suggested selecting a project in the church such as Investment, Adventist World Radio, Voice of Prophecy, It Is Written, ADRA, evangelism, etc. Then cut back on something this season (fewer cards, fewer gifts, no tree, etc.) and contribute that amount to the selected project.

This is in harmony with Ellen White’s counsel when she says, “Let there be recorded in the heavenly books such a Christmas as has never yet been seen because of the donations which shall be given for the sustaining of the work of God and the upbuilding of His kingdom.”

Christmas should be celebrated in harmony with Christian principles. In providing for the poor and lonely, and by giving gifts to God’s work at Christmas, we honor Christ. Above all we should take care not to lose sight of the fact that Christmas calls attention to Christ’s first advent. A daily study of His life and work here on Earth during the Christmas season would be particularly appropriate. Children can be taught that, although the date of Christ’s birth is unknown, we can celebrate the event intelligently and in proper taste.

REFERENCES

1 The Adventist Home, pp. 477, 478.
2 Ibid., p. 482.
3 November 18, 1971.
4 The Adventist Home, p. 483.

E lisa Ezquierdo, a stunning, promising child who fell through the cracks of the U.S. child welfare system, was murdered by her mother.

Elisa was doted over by her father, Gustavo, and guaranteed educational support through 12 grades of Montessori school by her sponsor, Prince Michael of Greece. Yet she was hated and systematically abused by her mother.

Elisa’s father took parenting classes and enrolled her in a Montessori school. She was his life. He called Elisa his princess. Every morning he ironed her dress and put her beautiful hair into braids and pigtails. She was a favorite in school. Beautiful, radiant. Greece’s Prince Michael says she was a “lively, charming, beautiful girl.” He brought her stuffed animals and clothes.

But her mother responded differently. She used Elisa’s head to mop the floor. She smashed Elisa’s head against a cement wall. Made her eat her own feces. Elisa’s tragic, shameful death in December 1995 stirs outrage. There was no part of the 6-year-old’s body that was not cut or bruised.1

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Mary His mother, ‘Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed’” (vss. 29-35, NKJV).

The Christ-child would be a sign to be disputed. Spoken against. Someone argued over. People would take different sides. This child would elicit opposing responses.

Here’s a child who would bring out the best or the worst in people. This would be true not only for Christ’s own immediate family, but also for the human family as a whole. Jesus would be the great moral and spiritual divider. A point of spiritual moral convergence and pressure. It is never comfortable to face the real implications of Christ.

We witness this divergence in the contrast between the shepherds and the priests, the wise men and Herod. We see it in Christ’s ministry and among His disciples. Some loved Him with a passion. Others hated Him with a passion. There’s no difference today. Jesus still brings the best or the worst out of people.

Simeon informed us all that God’s purpose in sending Jesus is to test our thoughts and purposes. So “that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” he says (Luke 2:35, NKJV). The realm of thoughts includes our values, our attitudes, our motives, our outlook—what we really want and are deep down inside. This includes our thoughts about God. Our thoughts about our need of salvation, how it works, whether we need it, want it. Our thoughts about everyday things like money, power, sex, relationships, marriage, the authority of God’s Word—every sphere and aspect of life.

Jesus comes to us, not with a child’s appeal, but with the everlasting man’s authority: to force us to difficult decisions, to compel us to review and reshape the values of our living, to renounce pride or greed or lust of power, and to accept instead the imperatives of both His character and law of service.

We are compelled to take a stand. We cannot meet Jesus and ever be the same again—either way, for good or for bad.

We glimpse what Simeon had in mind in John’s record of a particularly low and pivotal point in Christ’s preaching ministry: “Many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, ’This is a hard saying; who can understand it?’ When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, ’Does this offend you?’” (John 6:60, 61, NKJV).

A lot of people, offended, turned their backs on Jesus that day. The Greek word for “hard saying” does not mean hard to understand. It means hard to tolerate. Hard to accept. Hard to stomach. Hard sayings of doctrine, of moral values, of lifestyle matters. Hard sayings about interpersonal relationships, about ethics, about authority, about one’s need of salvation and where it is found.

From that time, many of His disciples walked no more with Him.

As long as Jesus said nice, comfortable things, people hung around. They were quick to leave, though, when what they heard was so radical that they would not accept it.

Brain researchers identify four quadrants of the brain and suggest their implications for choice and change: frontal left, lower left, frontal right, lower right. They believe that most of us are born with an innate biochemical preference for processing information in one or two of these quadrants. But we don’t have to be stuck for life with that preference. We can choose differently if we decide to.

Scripture implies that every one of us has a heart preference that tends us toward important moral and spiritual inclinations, values, choices, being. “This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God” (John 3:19-21, NKJV).

The person and teachings of Jesus uncover our heart preference, which way we’re truly leaning, morally, spiritually, with reference to Him. What we’re really like inside. The good news is that we’re never stuck with this if there is need for change. We can choose differently! That is why Jesus was born—to press every one of us on this important level.

Simeon’s words about Christ go beyond the mere revealing of the thoughts of our heart. They imply that Jesus will ultimately bring moral and spiritual decision one way or another. Some to the point of collapse and others to what in the Greek text refers to as “resurrection.”

Elisa brought loving responsibility out of her father Gustavo and hateful dysfunction from her mother Awilda. So with Jesus. Some will come, and some leave. He will bring out the best in some and the worst in others. Jesus will ever press us to choose Him over everything and anything else.

Heaven unearthing peace! Jesus has come to bring peace on Earth—but only after He has upset our equilibrium and pressed us with the reality of Himself and His claims on us through His Word.

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WHAT’S NEW IN ARCHAEOLOGY

Walking in the footsteps of Solomon and Ahab is one thing, but to uncover one of their ancient cities adds a new perspective to the expression “to reach out and touch the past.” For the past three years, Southern Adventist University has been a consortium member of the Hazor excavations sponsored by the Israel Exploration Society and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

The ancient site of Hazor served as “the head of all those kingdoms,” according to the account in Joshua 11:10 that relates the destruction of the city and its king Jabin (vs. 10). But what is the historical background of this biblically attested event? In recent years, a cuneiform tablet written in ancient Akkadian was found that names the king of the city as a certain ‘Ibni-Adu. The first part of the name is the Akkadian equivalent of the Hebrew yabin, or Jabin.

The biblical description of “head of all those kingdoms” fits the huge 200-acre site of the Canaanite period that was strategically part of a vast international trade network spanning to Mari and across to ancient Babylon. An account found at ancient Babylon recounts a dream in which a man journeys to the end of the Earth. In that dream, the last city he encounters is Hazor. This is only one item confirming that Hazor was the end of the vast trade network of major city-states of that period.

The size of the city in comparison with others in Canaan is also telling. “The city of Hazor is 10 to 20 times the size of any other contemporary city in Canaan and was by far the most important city of the second millennium BCE in Israel,” according to Amnon Ben-Tor the director of Hazor excavations. In the past several years, staff and archaeology students have uncovered enormous mud brick walls spanning 4 to 5 meters across and the remains of a palace. The Canaanite palace was occupied in the Late Bronze Age during the time of Joshua. Was this the palace of Jabin, king of Hazor?

Joshua 11:10-13 states, “Joshua turned back at that time and took Hazor, and struck its king with the sword; for Hazor was formerly the head of all those kingdoms. And they struck all the people who were in it with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying them. There was none left breathing. Then he burned Hazor with fire. So all the cities of those kings, and all their kings, Joshua took and struck with the edge of the sword. He utterly destroyed them, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded. But as for the cities that stood on their mounds, Israel burned none of them, except Hazor only, which Joshua burned” (NKJV). Two points are clarified with this statement. First, Joshua killed Jabin the king of Hazor. Second, he burned Hazor with fire, unlike the other sites in the area of northern Canaan. In fact, the Bible specifies that only three sites were burned during the conquest: Jericho, Ai, and Hazor.

The Canaanite palace was built of mud brick, had a beautiful wood floor throughout the palace, and contained a central courtyard with surrounding rooms. The size and architectural design of the palace clearly points to connections with northern Canaan and Mesopotamia. It was completely destroyed in a conflagration reaching 1,300 degrees Celsius. We can know the temperature of the fire because mud bricks and pottery were found melted. Laboratory tests indicate that a minimum temperature of 1,300 degrees Celsius is required for the melting of pottery and mud brick.

In previous seasons, several statues were found within the palace with heads and hands removed, reminiscent of practices at other sites where gods were “disabled” after the defeat of a city. How did the palace get this hot? Fragments of large storage jars were found that may have contained olive oil, and the palace itself stood at a high point on the site. Afternoon winds could have whipped up the blaze. If this was indeed the fire destruction described in Joshua, then it left very little of the palace. Today, a large roof structure stands over the palace to protect the mud brick from erosion and rains. Busloads of visitors walk on the reconstructed wood floor of the palace and wonder at the significance of its destruction.

For years, archaeologists excavating Hazor have been searching for the library of the city. Such libraries or archives have been found at similar sites dating to the same time period. At Ugarit in Syria more than 15,000 tablets were found in the 1960s. In the 1970s, the palace at Ebla produced more than 20,000 texts written in a previously unknown language. Alalakh, a site with a palace of similar design to the one uncovered at Hazor, contained two...
Firefly, a television show now in syndication, an odd assortment of characters (TV people call this an "ensemble cast"), have been thrown together because of their various but mutual "misunderstandings" with an oppressive interstellar state. In one respect or another, they are all outlaws.

Among this group are an elderly man called "the shepherd," because he is a religious person who frequently expresses uncommon spiritual wisdom, and a teenage girl named River, who has been freed by her brother from a facility where she has undergone unknown but sinister experiments by the state to develop her unusually high intelligence into weapons. Everyone aboard the spacecraft is unsettled by River's mercurial behavior. At one moment she may be serene; at the next she may erupt into astonishing violence and power.

Yet River and the shepherd have developed a kind of close, father-daughter relationship. In one scene, the shepherd enters a room with some food for River. He lays the tray on a table, without looking up, unaware of what she is doing. River is browsing through a Bible, tearing out pages here and there, and the following exchange ensues:

"What are we up to, Sweetheart?" the shepherd asks kindly.

"Fixing your Bible," River announces, as she continues to rip pages out of the book.

"I, uh—What?" the shepherd responds in alarm.


"No," the shepherd protests, "no, you can't..."

"So we'll integrate non-progressive evolution theory with God's creation," River says, unfazed. "Eleven inherent metaphoric parallels are already there. Eleven. Important number. . . . Noah's ark is a problem."

"Really?!"

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rooms filled with hundreds of written records. It is believed that Hazor might contain two such important libraries, and the significance of such a discovery for the history of the region cannot be overestimated. It is like finding a needle in a haystack, but it is what keeps archaeologists returning year after year.

The city of Hazor was also inhabited and expanded during the reigns of Solomon and Ahab. The massive six-entry way gate dating to Solomon was found in the earlier excavations of the 1950s. The city was subsequently expanded under King Ahab.

During the past several years, efforts have been made to clear away the Iron Age remains and continue to expand the exposure of a huge building or fortification system. Chris Chadwick, a senior archaeology major, worked last year for the full six-week season trying to get to the floor of the huge mud brick wall structure. He could not contain his excitement. “Finally we reached the floor where the important pottery would reveal the date of the building,” he reported. “Currently it would seem that the date of the building was Middle Bronze [period of Joseph], but we will have to wait until next season to be sure.” Two of the highlighted small finds of the season was a jar stopper with two Egyptian seal impressions and a seal from Mesopotamia that had never before been attested in Israel.

As one of our graduate students was excavating a wall from Ahab’s city one day, she suddenly noticed a strange figurine. The head was missing, and the arms were gone. But it was immediately recognizable as one of the hundreds of pillared female figurines found in Israel. A number of scholars believe she was the representation of Asherah, consort of Baal. And where was she discovered? In the city of Ahab. The Bible tells us that “four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, [ate] at Jezebel’s table” (1 Kings 18:19, NKJV).

As cities like Hazor continue to reveal their secrets, our understanding of the Bible and its world will increase exponentially. It often takes only one find to overturn the most eloquent theory about the past or increase our knowledge of the present. In 2007, Southern Adventist University will again be in the field excavating the “head of all those kingdoms.” If you are interested in a life-changing experience, you may contact the Institute of Archaeology at http://archaeology.southern.edu.

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way to fit 5,000 species of mammals in the same boat.”

The shepherd reaches for the book. “Give me that. River, you don’t fix the Bible.”

“It’s broken,” River says. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“It’s not about making sense,” the shepherd sighs. “It’s about believing in something. And letting that belief be real enough to change your life. It’s about faith. You don’t fix faith, River. It fixes you.”

Like River, the character in Firefly, our culture is trying to “fix” the Bible, to bring it into conformity with what it considers to be a higher authority: science. A few individuals and groups are, like River, literally going through the Scriptures and methodically removing content that they consider to be unsupported by human research.

This kind of project has been attempted before. Thomas Jefferson, for example, the author of America’s Declaration of Independence, methodically edited out any mention of the miraculous in the four Gospels, producing what we know of today as the Jefferson Bible. In Jefferson’s view, Jesus Christ was undeniably one of the great teachers of humankind, but this divinity thing just wouldn’t do. And there have been many other such attempts to envelop Christ among the other major contributors to the great human curriculum: Moses, Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, Mohammed.

But today scientists, educators, the media—even many Christian theologians—are also making every effort to change the way they have previously interpreted the Bible. In this way there’s no apparent need to delete anything in Scripture; all you have to do is change the way you read it. Very neat—very convenient!

Because of this change of view toward the authority of Scripture, until very recently the media have presented a very unsympathetic portrayal of religion—especially of Christianity. More than a decade ago, media critic Michael Medved, a voice crying in the wilderness, complained that “every time you see a member of the clergy or a religious figure [in the entertainment media], he’ll be portrayed as crazy or crooked or both. Hollywood, “said Medved, “sees traditionally religious people as some kind of an enemy.”

And, for some time, this is a depiction that people of faith have had to endure. Being the butt of so much ridicule is no fun, but Jesus did say that we would be reviled and persecuted. This, presumably, could include attacks on the spirit as well as the more extreme attacks on the physical. Persecution can come in more subtle ways than pogroms or physical torture.

And this is why the exchange between River and the shepherd is so refreshing. Throughout popular culture—in TV shows and motion pictures, in the lyrics of popular music, in the thought of writers of books and magazine articles—we are unexpectedly beginning to encounter an ever-growing rejection of the divine status that the Enlightenment has ascribed to human reason and a much more sympathetic depiction of spiritual issues and people of faith. The creative community, at least, has become increasingly willing to return to the frequent depiction and discussion of the transcendent.

U2, four Irish musicians considered to be probably the most popular rock group in the world, sends up a prayer in “Yahweh,” the penultimate song on its live album recorded in Chicago:

Take this city
A city should be shining on a hill
Take this city
If it be your will
What no man can own, no man can take
Take this heart
Take this heart