Students of Scripture have sometimes disagreed on the subject of God’s immutability.

Jeremiah 18:1-10 presents a compelling illustration of God as potter and Judah as clay. This image is a topic of various interpretations according to differing viewpoints on the nature of God. The potter metaphor is sometimes utilized as evidence for a transcendent, simple, immutable, and impassive God.

On the other hand, some, especially recently, have seen God as completely immanent, even to the extent of being the same as or one with the world. How does Jeremiah 18 relate to such a conception of God? Is God transcendent, immutable, or something in between?

God’s plan and condition for His people also has important implications. For instance, is God as the potter the sole determiner of history? Does the covenant relationship affect God? What about the mar in the clay (Jer. 18:4, KJV)?

Of great significance is the presentation of God as “relenting” (vss. 8, 10, NKJV). Does this threaten the immutability of God? Moreover, does it mean that God does not know the future? This passage illuminates the biblical perspective on these and related issues.

The way one views God and human history is of paramount importance to Christian theology. It is vital, therefore, to ascertain what this passage expresses about the relationship between God and the world in the metaphor of the potter and the clay and subsequent urging from God.

In the metaphor of the potter and the clay, the sovereignty and transcendence of God are clearly emphasized. God introduces this paradigm by instructing Jeremiah to observe the work of a potter shaping clay as a sign-act (vss. 2, 3). As Jeremiah observes the potter at his wheel, the clay becomes marred, and the potter then reacts and forms a different creation (vs. 4). There is no indication of the cause of the mar, a puzzle to which we shall return.

As a potter is superior and powerful over the inferior clay, so God is sovereign over Judah and free to shape what He wills. This nation, as God’s chosen people, might not always remain the chosen. Just as the potter can cast away the clay, so God can reject the formerly elect nation. Further, just as the potter forms the clay, so God molded all creation. This imagery of the potter, in accordance with the rest of the Bible, points clearly to God’s interaction with and omnipotence over the whole universe.

Theologians sometimes present God as utterly immutable, transcendent, timeless, simple, and impassive. In other words, He is conceived as having no reciprocal relationship to the world, as absolutely immutable, and as incapable of being affected by the actions of human beings in history.

Millard J. Erickson acknowledges problems with the historical views of immutability because they “have actually drawn heavily on the Greek idea of immobility and sterility. This makes God inactive.” Bruce Ware has also seen difficulty with some classical definitions of immutability, saying that if by “divine immutability it is meant that God is distant, unfeeling, uncaring, static, and in every way unchanged and unaffected by the human condition, then it is highly doubtful that this conception of God is useful for one’s religious experience.” Nevertheless, throughout the history of theology, there have been many who have held such a view. As we shall see, God as presented in Jeremiah 18 does not seem to fit such a conception.

God is not only the transcendent potter but also the immanent shaper of the clay. It is important to recognize that verse 5 and onward present the very words of YHWH Himself.

God is personally communicating through Jeremiah to His people,
Judah. This denotes God as a personal being who is intimately involved with His creatures, a God who cares for His people.

Thus, God is not presented as disconnected or static. Rather, God is continually active in relationship to the world. Accordingly throughout the Old Testament, God is depicted as gracious, loving, longsuffering, merciful, and compassionate (Ex. 34:6; 7; Isa. 63:7-14; Jer. 31:3; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).

The metaphor of potter also denotes immanence analogous to an earthly potter who shapes the clay intimately with his hands, carefully crafting a work of art. “If the clay did not achieve the desired shape, he did not throw it away. Instead, he patiently reworked it until it became the vessel he wanted it to be.”

One can picture the image of the potter leaning forward over the wheel of two stones, turning the wheel by foot and shaping the rotating clay into the desired work. In this way God is portrayed as a patient and longsuffering potter, working with His people in the context of an intimate relationship. The God of Jeremiah is thus intimately connected with the history of His creation, here specifically, the history of Judah.

Despite the biblical claim about God, His sovereignty and transcendence have been questioned and denied by some theological and philosophical systems. Pantheism, for one, holds that everything is God.

A view that arose more recently that impacts contemporary theology is that of process theology, a kind of panentheism, which means literally “all in God.” Process theology holds that reality is constantly in flux, as the name would suggest. For process theology, “to be real is to be in process.”

Though it is a helpful critique of the static God of the Greeks, process theology strays far from the Bible to the other extreme of an absolutely immanent God. In this model, not only is the world in process, but God Himself is also in process.

Moreover, as the world progresses, so does God. He and the world experience growth throughout eternity. This is problematic, as it denies the sovereignty and transcendence of the Creator God, specifically ruling out creation ex nihilo, among other things.

Erickson clarifies the problem: “Dependence on the processes of the world compromises quite seriously the absolute or unqualified dimensions of God.” In this panentheistic view, the whole world is in God, though God is more than the world. Norman Gulley points out that process theology’s focus on “God’s consequent (immanent, or dependent on the world for bodily existence) nature” really denotes “one who is less than God.” From a biblical standpoint, clearly in Jeremiah 18, God cannot rightly be viewed as dependent upon the world. Rather, as the Creator, God is different from the world and transcends His own creation while being intimately active.

Jeremiah 18 depicts God as sovereign, transcendent, and immanent. Specifically important is the fact that there is a clear difference between God and the world in this passage. The potter is God, and the clay is His creation. Specifically, the clay refers to Judah in the analogy, yet the metaphor of God as potter refers on a broader level to God as Creator (Isa. 29:16; 64:8). Judah is a part of the world God has created and governs and seems to function as a microcosm of the God-world relationship. Implications regarding the God-Judah relationship are thus applicable regarding the wider God-world relationship.

God is not the clay, and the clay is not God. Neither is the clay in the potter. Moreover, the potter does not mold Himself as He molds the clay but creates something outside of Himself. Although one cannot build a whole theology on this single passage, it clearly does not lend itself to the view of pantheism or panentheism. Rather, it points to the theistic God who is different from the world He created.

The message of God is that He is the potter and clearly has the power to form His will in the world. God is rightly considered sovereign and omnipotent with the full right to exercise His will. Isaiah 45:9 makes God’s sovereignty clear: “Woe to him who strives with His Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth! Shall the clay say, ‘He has no hands?’” (Isa. 45:9, NKJV).

For Jeremiah, it is an absurd notion to suppose that the clay is greater than or equal to the potter. Despite the lucid account of God’s power, however, God’s omnipotence should not be considered exclusive
Calvin held that God as potter represents the hidden purpose of God that determines all events in history. Referring to the possibility that this passage promotes free will, Calvin claimed that these verses are merely accommodating language, whereas in reality God has already unalterably decreed both human actions and His own.

to His relationship with humanity. Rather, God enters into relationship with His people and, simultaneously, remains the sovereign God. This dynamic between God and His people and the interrelationship of their actions is presented especially in Jeremiah 18:7-10.

The Divine and Human Will

Thus far, the metaphor is clear that Judah is like clay in the forming hand of God. The power of God is compared to the inconsequential power of the nation of Judah. God is sovereign and has the complete right to deal with the world as He sees fit. Nevertheless, God goes out of His way to save this people and to forgive them, even though they are clearly stiff-necked. In the midst of the overpowering sovereignty of God, grace shines throughout in the patience and forbearance of God and a call to repentance, as we shall see in Jeremiah 18:7-10. The Bible Reader’s Companion says, “The message God intended to communicate through this illustration from ancient life was not, as some have thought, one of divine sovereignty. It was a message of grace. Judah had resisted the divine potter. Yet even now God was willing to begin anew and reshape His people into that good vessel He had had in mind from the beginning.”

This call to repentance illuminates the interaction of God’s will with that of His people in Jeremiah 18:7-10. Based on the sinfulness of Judah, God declares His plan to “pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it” (vs. 7, NKJV). The verb nāṭāš, meaning to root out or pluck, is judgment language, used frequently with reference to the Lord’s work of destroying evil nations: of Israel (Deut. 29:28; 2 Chron. 7:20) and of her neighbors (Jer. 12:14, 15, 17). Specifically of interest is the relationship to the covenant blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 29. This passage places the warning of God’s sovereign judgment in the context of the covenant relationship.

Some theologians have held that this sovereignty of God negates human freedom. John Calvin held that God as potter represents the hidden purpose of God that determines all events in history. Referring to the possibility that this passage promotes free will, Calvin claimed that these verses are merely accommodating language, whereas in reality God has already unalterably decreed both human actions and His own. Does the text itself, however, imply a determinism that negates free will, or does it allow for the conditionality in the nature of history? Notice the sequence of condition and response in God’s own words to Judah.

Jeremiah 18, verses 7 to 10 form block parallelism consisting of a correlation between verses 7 and 9 and verses 8 and 10, respectively. Notice the parallels between verses 7 and 9: “At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it,” (vs. 7, NRSV, italics supplied). “And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it” (vs. 9, NRSV, italics supplied).

Verse 9 contrasts with verse 7 in that God speaks in an instant for construction and proposes to “build and plant.” This language emphasizes the power and authority of God as the agent of both judgment and salvation. Notice that to “pluck up” is the opposite of to “plant” and to “pull down” and to “destroy” is the opposite of to “build.” Both verses 7 and 9 refer to God’s intentions regarding two opposite situations; those of a disobedient and obedient nation, respectively. However, God announces along with this plan a condition and the possibility of change. Verses 8 and 10 are also parallel: “If that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned” (vs. 8, NIV, italics supplied). “If it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it” (vs. 10, NKJV, italics supplied).

Notice that in verse 8 the conditional clause is the nation’s turn from its evil; whereas in verse 10 the nation continues in evil. In both cases, God will “relent” accordingly. In the main clause of verse 8, God will “relent” from the evil; in verse 10, from the good. Both correspond directly to the decision of the nation.

In this parallelism God describes His covenant relationship with His people. The condition is explicit. If the people will turn and repent, God will respect their choice and change His plan. Likewise, if they pursue evil, He will respond accordingly. Thus, the passage makes clear that “a full and effective human response to the divine will can open up a wholly changed prospect for the future.”
God’s sovereignty is here asserted in a “dynamic way, identifying an aspect of that sovereignty that is sometimes missed or ignored: the possibility of not simply destroying the people but remolding them.” The call of God serves as a divine warning and a real opportunity for the people to turn and be spared the consequences of rebellion. Thus, the potter-clay metaphor includes a degree of freedom in human action. Accordingly, Jeremiah 18 asserts that “God’s mind can change in regard to dealing out catastrophe or good, depending on the way a nation acts.”

A concrete biblical example of this conditional nature of God’s actions is the narrative of Jonah. In Jonah 3:4, the prophet declares that Nineveh will be destroyed in 40 days. Yet the people of Nineveh repent and are spared (vv. 9, 10). Thus, we can see that in the Bible there is no theological conundrum regarding God’s actions relating directly to the actions of human agents. God’s relationship with humans transcends any metaphysical straitjacket of utter immutability.

The consistency in the parallel between the nation that turns from evil and the nation that turns toward it relates to the character of humankind. The character of God, however, is unchanging in the parallel texts. The key is, if a nation does evil, then God will “relent” of His purpose for good. If that nation does good, God will “relent” of a purpose for evil. The focal point in the parallelism is the difference in the respective choices of the nation.

The relents from doing the evil to them because they turn, or repent, from their evil.

The idea of God relenting troubles many a theologian and is important to analyze. The word translated “relent” has a range of meaning including comfort, sorrow and grief, and regret or repentance. Here it signifies a conditional relenting by God.
God never changes in His goodness, and His promises are sure. For the Christian, this brings great confidence in salvation through Jesus Christ. Erickson views immutability as “constancy.” This, in accordance with the Bible, means that God is “active and dynamic, but in a way that is stable and consistent with his nature.” God is, then, “dependable.”

This raises two important and quite different issues. The first relates to God’s immutability. Does God really relent? Does He change His mind? Is the relenting of God a proof that He changes, that He is not immutable? Second, based on this passage, questions have been raised about the foreknowledge of God. Does He receive new information? Does He not know the future? These questions must be considered.

Is the relenting of God merely an anthropomorphism, as has often been asserted throughout the history of theology? The primary biblical passages that assert that God does not change include Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29, and Malachi 3:6. These passages depict an unchanging God.

But what does this changelessness of God entail? As we have seen, Jeremiah 18 presents a God who is active in relationship with His people, engaging them with His own words to repent. We have also seen, however, that some hold that God is utterly immutable in such a manner as to be incapable of relationship. It is claimed by some that “the classic understanding is that God speaks about himself anthropomorphically or analogically all the way through Scripture—not just in a few places. In every noun, verb, and adjective God has used to present Himself, certain notions of limitation and moral inadequacy apply to the human world that must be deleted when we apply it to God.”

Just how are we to relate, then, to God’s self-revelation in Jeremiah 18 and throughout Scripture? It is affirmed that God descends to speak at a human level and that He cannot be fully understood by the human mind. Nevertheless, it also seems apparent that God depicts Himself as accurately as is possible. Thus, the universal anthropomorphic nature of Scripture should not and cannot dismiss the direct statements of God about Himself.

In Jeremiah 18 it is clear that God responds to the actions of the nation of Judah. Thus, the passage contends that the actions of humans affect the actions of God. Fretheim speaks of the repentance of God as a “controlling metaphor” based on the attributes of love and mercy that were foundational to Hebrew thought (Ex. 34:6, 7; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). He states, “God is revealed not as someone who is unbending or unyielding, as a focus on immutability suggests.” Rather, God is presented as the sovereign and transcendent potter and as immanent and affected God, active within His creation.

Affected in this context means that God interacts and relates to human choice and the world, not that God changes in His being or becomes something more or something else. Based on this passage, as well as others, God has real relationship with the world. It is thus permissible to speak of a pathos of God that also includes the love of God which is fundamental to the Christian understanding of salvation history. It seems that rejection of any pathos of God negates the relationship of God to humanity, the very relationship that Jesus Christ died to reconcile. Thus God is the sovereign potter; He is not impassive.

Does this mean God is not immutable, that He is not constant? Certainly not! The changelessness of God need not entail the Greek conception of simplicity and immutability. Rather, the God of the Bible is living, dynamic, and changeless. He is dynamic as an active agent in the history of the world. His changelessness does not refer to stasis. Rather, it refers to the unchanging constancy of God’s character, as dialectically expressed in this passage.

Most importantly, God never changes in His goodness, and His promises are sure. For the Christian, this brings great confidence in salvation through Jesus Christ. Erickson views immutability as “constancy.” This, in accordance with the Bible, means that God is “active and dynamic, but in a way that is stable and consistent with his nature.” God is, then, “dependable.” Thus, God can relent in this way with no negative implications regarding His constancy.

The second problem of God’s “reenting” relates to the foreknowledge of God. Some say that God actually changes His mind, meaning He receives totally new information because of the choice of a free agent. In other words, it is asserted that because God is said to “repent,” He must not have known the outcome of a free agent’s choice. The question is asked, Would God state His action as conditional even though He has foreknowledge?

In answer to this question, it seems there is an important distinction between God determining to do something and planning to do something. A plan may be condi-
Would humans have a real opportunity to repent because He is gracious and responsive to the free choices of individuals. Therefore, God could know what nation will or will not repent, but still give them the opportunity to do so in actual history. “The point is that a prophecy of doom is not absolute. Prophetic warnings of judgment are actually designed to elicit repentance.”

Abraham Heschel says on this, “Events are not like rocks on the shore shaped by wind and water. Choice, design, is what determines the shape of events.”

God offers the call to repentance because He is gracious, and He really wants to spare His creation from condemnation.

Why does God give a call for repentance when He already knows the outcome? It seems that He acts this way throughout the Bible for congruity and fairness. How else would humans have a real opportunity to repent? It is unlikely that a kingdom would turn from its evil ways without a warning from God. Therefore, God is surpassingly good to reach out to nations and kingdoms. An unmerciful God would not even bother.

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There are also many examples of God “relenting” of a good purpose, for instance, taking Israel back into the wilderness when He had brought them within sight of Canaan. Here and in Jeremiah 18, God’s changeless character is not called into question, nor does this posit a change or growth in God’s character, but rather action in relation to human free choices.

An implicit testimony in Jeremiah 18:8 that God is not receiving new information and not changing in His character might be found in the difference in the words used to describe when a nation “turns from its evil” and God’s “relenting.” “Turns from its evil” means to physically turn or change course and here connotes the meaning of repentance. It thus signifies a change in direction, a change of heart. We would expect the word for God’s relenting, if meant to be the same as human repentance, to be the same word. The difference in word usage may imply the difference of meaning. This is not to suggest that one word denotes human repentance and the other divine repentance semantically. Rather, there is semantic overlap in other passages. The point being made here regards the selection of different words and the potential contrast implied thereby. Seemingly, the words are chosen to illumine the vast difference between the repenting and change of a human and the relenting and grace of God.

Interestingly, Young’s Literal Translation translates this word to relent as “have relented,” in the past tense (Jer. 18:8, 10). Is this translation warranted? It seems that the form here should be interpreted to mean “completeness and factuality” of a future event. God’s promise is as good as completed. Accordingly, God is not receiving new information; His foreknowledge is affirmed.

Therefore, this passage should not be understood as a new thought on God’s part to preserve Judah; rather, this is part of His plan to give Judah a chance to repent as He did for Jonah. Naturally, the consequences of not heeding God’s command would come. However, here God is telling the people that He will forgive them if only they will repent. This is akin to the plan of salvation put into effect after the fall of humanity. That plan was “from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8, KJV), yet clearly in response to a future problem of sinful humanity.

God’s relenting is not a weakness, but part of His merciful character. It is a promise that, “If you repent, I will reciprocate.” This is not a change in the essence of God, but in accordance with God’s essence as just, merciful, and loving.

Henry C. Thiessen comments, “God’s immutability is not like that of the stone that does not respond to changes about it, but like that of the column of mercury which rises and falls according as the temperature changes.”

Why does God give a call for repentance when He already knows the outcome? It seems that He acts this way throughout the Bible for congruity and fairness. How else would humans have a real opportunity to repent? It is unlikely that a kingdom would turn from its evil ways without a warning from God. Therefore, God is surpassingly good to reach out to nations and kingdoms. An unmerciful God would not even bother.
God is omnipotent, sovereign, and almighty over all creation. There is no other like Him. God as the potter is the unchangeable One, yet this need not preclude His relationship with the world. Rather, the metaphor presents God as not only sovereign and transcendent, but also immanent and interactive with the world at a personal level. The tension between the transcendence and immanence of the Almighty is not problematic for Jeremiah.

changes. His immutability consists in His always doing the right and in adapting the treatment of His creatures to the variations in their character and conduct.” Therefore, Jeremiah 18:7-10 is all about the constancy of God, not His change. The fact is, if a nation will repent, God will relent from punishing them. Nevertheless, He is not necessarily receiving new information about the nation, but He is willing to act in accordance with their historical decisions.

A sound theology of the doctrine of God can never be based on the implications of any one passage without proper consideration of the total biblical picture. This passage alone does not substitute for a fully developed doctrine of God, nor is it assumed that the deep and complicated debates over the nature of God are to be settled in this example. Nevertheless, Jeremiah 18 expresses important information about the nature and character of God and His relationship with the world.

God is omnipotent, sovereign, and almighty over all creation. There is no other like Him. God as the potter is the unchangeable One, yet this need not preclude His relationship with the world. Rather, the metaphor presents God as not only sovereign and transcendent, but also immanent and interactive with the world at a personal level. The tension between the transcendence and immanence of the Almighty is not problematic for Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 18 affirms that God is both sovereign and not impulsive. He is not the god of pantheism or panentheism, nor is He the absolutely simple and impassible god of classical Greek philosophy. He is the unchanging “I AM” (Ex. 3:14, KJV), capable of dynamic interaction with the world. It must be understood that God as an engaged potter does not mean that God changes in His being or that He is in any way progressing toward a different state. He was, is, and always will be the same God, perfect and almighty and unchanging.

Nevertheless, God’s real relationship with the world allows humanity power to choose their course. His action may change accordingly.

The sign-act of God as potter precludes the implication that He lacks power. Rather, He freely chooses to allow a measure of freedom. This metaphor thus points toward a view of God as the biblical God of sovereignty, love and justice, held in union, not in exclusivity, one God of intimate relationship and transcendent omnipotence.

REFERENCES
4 Erickson, op cit.
5 Ibid., p. 306.
10 Ibid., p. 715.
12 Ibid., p. 88.
15 Erickson, op cit., p. 305.
God employed in orienting the new humans to a totally fresh existence. The Sabbath was a part of it.

Mention of the Sabbath does not occur in the Flood narrative or the Abraham/Isaac/Jacob/Joseph reports, even though it must have been an element in God’s revealed plan. Abraham kept God’s charge, commandments, statutes, and laws (Gen. 26:5). Just how God’s people fared under circumstances unfavorable to Sabbath observance, such as Joseph in Potiphar’s service, is not included in the scriptural account.

With the story of the Exodus, the Sabbath comes to the forefront. Manna is given every day with exception of the Sabbath, with explicit instructions about how to relate to it (Ex. 16). The law with its Sabbath commandment is given at Sinai, with additional incidents and laws relating to the Sabbath. Its origin is explicitly tied to the Creation. Deuteronomy traces the reintroduction of the Sabbath back to the Exodus experience.

Of course, there are additional Old Testament references to the Sabbath, but long gaps in Hebrew history pass without serious reference to it. It is clear, however, that the Sabbath remained a feature of the covenant walk with God, designed as a blessing, not only for the Hebrews, but to non-Hebrews as well. The fourth commandment itself includes the “stranger within thy gates.” Even more detailed is the Lord’s gracious call in Isaiah 56 where God holds out His covenant blessing to Gentile believers who accept Him and keep His Sabbath (Isa. 56:1-8). Later, in Nehemiah’s reform, Sabbath observance is again underscored (Neh. 13:15-22). Despite these occasions, at times Sabbath observance was reduced to ritual formality, treated as a hindrance to ambitious plans compelled to wait until sunset to be resumed (Amos 8:5).

The New Testament includes frequent references to the Sabbath because the way in which it is to be observed became a matter of controversy. At times, Jesus seemed to cooperate with the prevailing patterns governing Sabbath observance. At other times, He deliberately provoked controversy to teach a new understanding of its purpose.

Cases of these two are easily seen. Sabbath passages occur especially in the Gospels and Acts, much less so in the Pauline and general epistles. The reference to the Lord’s day in Revelation (1:10), although debated, should best be interpreted in light of previous clear usage of the term, where it refers to the Sabbath, rather than the later application to Sunday found in the church fathers.

Hostility between Jews and early Christians reported in the New Testament appears to stem from religious leaders, not the common people. The Gospel of John outlines this most clearly, although its frequent reference to “the Jews” is interpreted

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by some as bias against all Jewish people. This idea appears to be read into the context, however, for John cites no cases of hostility by the ordinary populace. The clashes arise from rabbinic and priestly leaders.

As a historical report of the early church, the Book of Acts reports numerous clashes (13:50; 14:5; 19; 17:5, 13; 18:12, 13; 19:9; 20:3; 23:12; 24:1-9). There is increasing exclusion of Christians from the synagogues, also noted in Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 2:14-16).

The record suggests that many Christians, particularly those of Jewish ancestry, continued to attend Sabbath worship in synagogues. The Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15) was called to meet certain issues raised by this group, and Paul addressed them directly in his epistles to the Galatians and Romans.

Relations between Jewish-Christians and the Jewish community continued to deteriorate, following a sporadic pattern. Recently here has been a revival of scholarly interest in how the two groups, Jews and Christians, arrived at final division. Current opinion identifies both doctrinal and social factors: doctrinal in the role of the Messiah, social in the fact that Jewish identity and covenant were at stake. Who is a Jew, and who is not one? Could the Jew who accepted Jesus as the center of God’s outreach to humanity continue to be treated as a full brother or sister, or something less?

With the advance of Christian faith into the Gentile world, it seems clear that by A.D. 50 the numerical balance began to tip away from Jewish to non-Jewish Christians. Jewish-Christians, increasingly in the minority, are identified by early church historians as Ebionites, they themselves divided into mediating and rigorous parties.

The Book of Acts clearly presents the Jerusalem church as the mother congregation, with even Paul returning from his journeys to bring reports to the Jerusalem congregation. This practice must have served to maintain the standing of the Jerusalem church as membership increased elsewhere.

Two significant events early drove new wedges between the Jewish leadership and the developing church. One was royal persecution of the apostles, especially Herod Agrippa I’s execution of James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John in A.D. 44, only months prior to Herod’s own ghastly death recorded in Acts 12:20-23. The second came when in A.D. 68 the Christian community in Jerusalem fled the besieged city in response to the earlier warning of Jesus (Matt. 24:15-22). This could only have been interpreted by the city’s defenders as abandonment at the time of urgent need. The damage of relationships was irreparable.

Although Jerusalem was rebuilt, it was a much weaker city, stripped of temple, Sanhedrin, and most of its former religious and political structures. Whether any kind of sacrifices were restored in the rebuilt city remains a matter of scholarly debate, but there is little evidence of immediate return by substantial numbers of Christians.

Considerable attention has been given the Jamnia council’s inclusion of an anathema in the daily prayer, Shemoneh Esreh. Added around A.D. 90, it pronounced a curse upon Nazarenes and Mimin. Probably its purpose was to draw strong distinction between Jews and Christians. If so, it was successful, being cited by Justin, Epiphanius, and later Jerome, who complains, “Three times daily in all the synagogues under the name of Nazarenes you curse the name of the Christians.”

It seems clear that in the Jerusalem church, and Judea in general, the fate of Christians was bound up with wider Jewish fate, for a strong Jewish affinity continued among Christians. Christian historians report a period of relative toleration by Jewish leaders between A.D. 70 and the end of the century. After A.D. 120, however, there are reports of tension and a developing anti-Christian persecution as extremists gained ground in the Jewish community. Bar Kochba’s messianic
Jewish separateness and different customs, their religious inflexibility, an often contentious nature, and economic success attracted special attention. Their trademark characteristics were circumcision and Sabbath observance. Resentment developed early in Rome. The sometimes-gossipy historian, Suetonius, reports that in A.D. 49, Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. In Corinth Paul encounters two of these displaced Jews, Aquila and Priscilla.

claims, supported by the respected Rabbi Akiba, and the revolt of A.D. 131-135, would end in disaster and termination of the Jewish nation. To the degree that Christians identified with Judaism, they too suffered.

By the first century A.D., Jews comprised an important minority segment of the empire, not so much by reason of numbers as from the Diaspora network that planted a Jewish community in virtually every major city, particularly in the East. Their adeptness brought them influence beyond their actual numbers, at the same time engendering envy and resentment. Among these Jewish communities Paul and other Christian workers often began their work.

Jewish separateness and different customs, their religious inflexibility, an often contentious nature, and economic success attracted special attention. Their trademark characteristics were circumcision and Sabbath observance. Resentment developed early in Rome. The sometimes-gossipy historian, Suetonius, reports that in A.D. 49, Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. In Corinth, Paul encounters two of these displaced Jews, Aquila and Priscilla. The reason cited for the expulsion was Jewish rioting over a certain Crestus, a name tantalizingly similar to Christ. The Roman historian Dio Cassius adds that Jews also were prohibited from following their customs. Doubtless at this early date the Romans recognized little or no distinction between Jews and Christians. No such distinction is made by Gallio, brother of Seneca, before whom Paul was brought in Corinth. For him it is but another dispute among Jews on matters of “your own law” (Acts 18:15, NKJV), in which he refuses to become involved.

In a few years, however, Roman officers acknowledged a separation, although the Jewish origins of Christianity remained clear. Possibly the insight came to Nero through his wife, Poppea, who reportedly was a proselyte to Judaism. Although the early Nero was relatively benevolent, by A.D. 64 he was torturing Christians, whom he held responsible for a great fire that for days burned through wooden tenements in Rome; and it was he who ordered the execution of Paul, and, if tradition can be trusted, Peter.

From A.D. 49 onward, Jewish fortunes sank. Roman officials suppressed Jewish riots in several of the major cities. Two years before his untimely end, Nero sent Titus to Jerusalem to deal with the rebellion there. Its end brought total demolition of the city with exception of the Tower of Antonia, a Roman fortress well inside the city. The following 30 years saw a series of persistent Jewish riots in the East, testing Roman patience and alienating the Roman populace. Ostracism grew. Titus moved to marry Berenice, sister of Herod Agrippa II. A new capitation tax was levied on Jews. Suetonius reports that in time the tax was extended also to those who “live as Jews.” Following the death of the crazed Domitian, his successor, Nerva, revoked the tax on Christians, by doing so tacitly acknowledging their difference from Jews.

With the turn of the century, Jewish fortunes continued almost in free fall. Critics attacked, maligned, gossiped about, and ridiculed Jews. Tacitus, Horace, Cicero, Juvenal, Dio Cassius, and Ovid satirized Jews and cast them in the most unfavorable light. It became chic to mock Jews. Dramatists portrayed Jews as mean, penurious, despicable characters, liars, thieves, treacherous, low-life types.

The late Menahem Stern has collected in three formidable volumes all the known classical references to Jews. It comprises a sad narrative. To cite only one example from Tacitus: “All their customs, which are at once perverse and disgusting, owe their strength to their very badness. . . . They regard the rest of mankind with all the hatred of enemies. They sit apart at meals, they sleep apart, and though as a nation they are particularly prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women.”

Josephus’ greatest work, Antiquities of the Jews, was his attempt to renovate and, if possible, soften the pall of public scorn against Jews. It was at this point, as noted earlier, that Bar Kochba arose with messianic claims. As he was endorsed by the respected Akiba, Palestine’s Jews, chafing under taxes, indignities, and Roman scorn, in large numbers accepted him, leading to a major revolt. Hadrian, a hard military man (ruled 117-138), seized the opportunity to eliminate once and for all the festering Jewish problem. Again Jerusalem was devastated and Palestine’s Jewish population was essentially depleted by mass removal. Hadrian’s new city on the site of Jerusalem, Aelia Capitolina, centered
on a temple to Jupiter, and Jews were prohibited from the city. Throughout the empire the practice of Judaism was banned.

It is not by accident that the earliest verified reports of weekly Sunday observance come from this very time. Bacchiocchi gives special attention to the Jerusalem congregation, noting that up to Hadrian’s destruction in A.D. 135, all the bishops of Jerusalem included on Eusebius’ list were “of the circumcision.” The city was rebuilt as a non-Jewish community, and Eusebius notes a resurgent Christian presence, with the church now under non-Jewish leadership. Bacchiocchi concludes, “The more probable explanation . . . is that after the disappearance of the bishops of the circumcision (ca. A.D. 135), a group of Judaeo-Christians, desirous of reintegrating themselves in the majority, adopted the observance of Sunday in addition to the Sabbath.” Note that Bacchiocchi acknowledges by this time a substantial Sunday observance outside Jerusalem.

Hadrian’s destruction was final. From A.D. 135, there was total cessation of sacrifices, dismantlement of Israel as a nation, and prohibition of Sabbath observance. Although the decree against Sabbath observance was rescinded by Hadrian’s successor, Antoninus Pius (A.D. 138-161), the weight of social disapproval led to increasing Christian abandonment of the Sabbath.

The failure among Sunday advocates to construct a strong rationale in defense of Sunday is striking. Uniformly, the early patristic arguments focus on the evils of Jewish practice rather than the merits of Sunday observance. The abandonment of the Sabbath with its consequent adoption of Sunday stands as a classic example of religious capitulation in the face of hostile social disapproval.

With the turn away from its original Hebrew roots, Christianity advanced rapidly toward Hellenization. Greek dualism displaced the biblical understanding of reality, and rapid changes followed.

It is true that Christians faced severe disadvantages by persisting in Sabbath observance, at times even illegal status. The older religions of the empire had served to create social bonds that held society together.

Christianity moved in a different direction. As is well known, early Christians intentionally distanced themselves from the state and its social structures. Generally Christians did not serve in the army, refused the festivals of the state gods, and refused to enter into any form of political leadership or civil service. By rejecting the old Roman gods, they appeared to their peers as atheists, a charge often made against them. To bear the additional social burden of the Sabbath with its connection to the Jews seemed overwhelming to many.

As Sabbath observance declined, in its place arose the honoring of Sunday, a practice far more compatible with the traditional state religions. Social pressure had overcome biblical truth, and the church entered a new trajectory.

The British scholar Lightfoot’s classification of the apostolic fathers’ attitudes toward Judaism is helpful: The Didache, Hermas, and possibly Papias are favorable; the Epistle of Barnabas and Epistle to Diognetus negative; the remainder mediating. Not surprisingly, the critique of things Jewish found in Ignatius (A.D. 115) develops into Barnabas’ open rejection of Sabbath for its Jewish connections (A.D. 135). The earliest detailed description of a Sunday worship service appears in the final section of Justin Martyr’s First Apology (ca. A.D. 153), which some regard as a later addition.

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not of this world, but centered on an entirely different authority—God. However, those who were attracted soon saw the utility of using social structures. Early Christianity bought entirely different authority—God, not of this world, but centered on an idea completely contaminates biblical thinking, gradually replaces the affirmation of the resurrection, and transforms the kingdom of the dead into the kingdom of God.’”

Adventists are committed to the Scriptures as the source of truth. It is questionable, however, whether they are sensitive to the way social forces invade and mutate the faith originally given to the saints. Historically the Christian Church moved, step by step, led by a series of leaders persuaded that their choices represented enhancements of the faith, but absorbing elements alien to the revealed Word.

The religions of the Roman world were civic religions, social bonds that held society together. Jesus introduced a freedom never before seen, an escape from the bonds of the past, personal, hope-oriented. From civic cement, religion became grace, joy, liberty. In absorbing Roman law, Christianity returned to natural law and structure rather than the life validated by God. Greek philosophy turned theology into a search for abstract truth, whereas the Scriptures advocate a search for the Author of truth. God’s revelation is historical, to be found in God’s intervention in human experience.

The Bible is a series of stories, but not myths intended to unveil abstract truths. The stories are history, the history of God’s temporal interchange with His people. God reveals Himself in action. Profoundly historical, even eternal things appear in temporal garb. The mistake of the early church that persists today is its willingness to absorb alien elements on the premise that they will enhance the growth of God’s work. That very process stains the footsteps of a church eventually captured by the very elements it absorbed.

The results: The church became the structural ideology of continuing society—one more the basis for social integration. From a personal walk with God, it became a collective ideology. Christianity’s prophetic freedom came to be molded into a new garb that outlines a social structure.

Adventists today are in desperate peril that faith will slip from the person in communion with God to parameters of a cultural subset, something called Adventist life or lifestyle. As in ancient Rome, religion will have become once more a mere social cement.

It was this perversion of faith that made it necessary for everyone to become a Christian. To defect was to threaten the whole. So saintly men such as Bernard of Clairvaux could pen glorious words such as, “Jesus the very thought of Thee, With sweetness fills my breast; But sweeter far Thy face to see, and in Thy presence rest.” only to mount a crusade of torture against heretics.

Not even Luther or Calvin detected fully the perversion represented in such religion, but certain of the Radical Reformers did, and it is to their insights that today’s Christian owes a debt of gratitude. In their attempt to return to the New Testament church, they advocated a return to the freedom conferred by Jesus. Almost Luther found it in his Freedom of the Christian Man, but soon it was smothered under a magisterial church.

From the beginning, God set humans free and made them responsible. It was that way in the first Eden; it will be that way in the New Jerusalem.

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ADVENTIST VIEWS ON INSPIRATION

Conflicting views of inspiration among Seventh-day Adventist scholars indicate that they are still divided in their personal understanding of this important topic.

During the period of 1991-2000, Alden Thompson’s *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (1991) brought the debate on inspiration down from the scholarly realm into the church level. The author, a professor of biblical studies at Walla Walla College, regarded revelation in this book as “some kind of special input from God, a message from Him to His creatures on earth” and as “a visible or audible intervention by God.” He defined inspiration as “the Spirit’s special urging of a messenger to speak or write” and “a means to indicate that the Holy Spirit has been active in a special way.” While acknowledging that “all Scripture is given by inspiration” (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16), Thompson suggested that “the most crucial point” of his book was perhaps the idea that “the Bible does not say that all Scripture was given by revelation.”

Thompson evidently intended to come up with a model of inspiration that could provide enough room for both difficulties and cultural accommodations. Room for errors, mistakes, and “fatal contradictions” in the Bible (although Thompson tried to avoid such words) was provided by the human side of his “incarnational model.” Cultural accommodations found special space in his “casebook” (as opposed to “code-book”) approach to Scripture.

For Thompson, “the one great law of love,” the two commandments to love God and to love humanity, and the Ten Commandments “form a pyramid of law that embodies the eternal principles of God’s kingdom,” which are normative “to all mankind at all times everywhere.” “All other biblical laws are applications of those principles in time and place.”

His casebook approach to Scripture also provided for a high position for human reason. According to him, “the casebook approach allows us—indeed, forces us—to recognize that revelation and reason must work together. Revelation always deals with specific cases. Reason, in dialogue with the Spirit, determines which of those cases are most helpful in informing the decisions we make day by day.”

Thompson’s book was controversial from the very beginning. While some endorsed the book, others strongly opposed it. The most significant response to it was the Adventist Theological Society’s *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (1992), with articles by Raoul Dederen (two), Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, Norman Gulley, Richard Davidson, Gerhard Hasel, Randall Youker, Frank Hasel, and Miroslav Kisa.

The basic consensus of those authors was that Alden Thompson’s model of inspiration was based on a partial reading of the Bible and of the writings of Ellen White. Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson even alleged in the preface that Thompson’s study illustrated “the fruits of the historical-critical method,” which had been regarded by the 1986 Annual Council as “unacceptable” for Adventists.

While the previous developments of the Seventh-day Adventist doctrine of inspiration have been largely confined to the phenomena of Scripture and the writings of Ellen White, Fernando Canale, professor of systematic theology at Andrews University, in the summer of 1993 began a five-part series in the *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, proposing a “new approach” to the doctrine of revelation and inspiration. Canale suggested that “a new theological model about the origin of Scripture” could be developed on the basis of an understanding of God and of human nature derived from Scripture rather than from Greek philosophical concepts.

Canale criticized conventional Roman Catholic and Protestant models of revelation-inspiration for their indebtedness to a timeless view of God and to an immortalist concept of the human soul. He explained, in regard to the concept of God, that “when God is conceived to act within a timeless realm, the theological content of Scripture (which is brought into being by God) will also pertain...
to the timeless realm. In this case, the historical side of Scripture is considered to belong, not to its divine cause, but rather to the human condition necessary for the expression of its divinely (timelessly) originated content. Thus, the Scriptures are said to be ‘historically conditioned.’ On the contrary, the concept that God is capable of acting genuinely in history (that is, ‘historically’) leads to a conception of the biblical writings as being ‘historically constituted.’ According to the former view, the historical side of Scripture is external and incidental to its religious and theological contents; according to the latter view, the historical side of Scripture belongs to the very essence of its divinely revealed and inspired contents. 6

The development of a new model of revelation-inspiration based on the sola Scriptura principle would require, according to Canale, the paradigmatic shift to a “temporal-historical conception of God’s being and actions” that allows Him to act “historically in history.” The multiform “divine revelatory activity” in history was viewed as comprising “theophanic, direct writing, prophetic, historical, and existential” patterns, supporting the notion that “the whole Bible is revealed and the whole Bible is inspired.” For Canale, this change of paradigm would require also “a new exegetical methodology” (different from both the classic historical-grammatical method and the liberal historical-critical method). Canale dealt with this new methodology in some later publications.

The spring 1994 issue of the Journal of the Adventist Theological Society came out with several papers on inspiration presented at the 1993 Scholars’ Convention of the Adventist Theological Society, which convened in Washington, D.C., on November 18, and Silver Spring, Maryland, on November 19-20, 1993. The overall tenor of those papers was the emphasis on the infallibility of Scripture, with specific responses to some charges raised against the trustworthiness of the Bible.

In 1995, Robert S. Folkenberg, then president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, stated in the Adventist Review that “our unequivocal, historic emphasis upon the divine inspiration and trustworthiness of Scripture has strengthened our church. It has helped us resist the error of treating some parts of Scripture as God’s Word, while ignoring or rejecting other parts.”

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Several other publications helped to keep alive the ongoing debate on inspiration during the second half of the 1990s. One of the most influential landmarks in that debate was Samuel Koranteng-Pipim’s provocative book Receiving the Word. Pipim, who was at that time a Ph.D. candidate in systematic theology at Andrews University, called the attention of his readers to a significant variety of historical-critical attempts to undermine the authority of the Scriptures within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He also tried to uplift the trustworthiness of the Bible by demonstrating that many of its alleged “errors” are either distortions added in the transmission process of its original text, or shortcuts in our present understanding of its true meaning. 7

That not everybody fully agreed with Pipim’s approach is evident from George R. Knight’s response to it. Knight, a professor of church history at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, criticized Pipim (1) for still believing in “inerrancy and verbalism” 8; (2) for using the “well-known debater’s technique” in which “at one extreme it sets up the ‘right’ position, which is very, very right, while at the other extreme is the ‘wrong’ position, which is very, very wrong.” 9 Knight’s own view of inspiration was more clearly expressed in his book Reading Ellen White, in which he argued (1) that “inspiration is not infallible, inerrant, or verbal” 10; (2) that several factual “mistakes” can be found in the inspired writings; and (3) that those writings are infallible only “as a guide to salvation.” 11 The views of Pipim, on one side, and of Knight, on the other, are representative of the two main conflicting poles around which gravitate the contemporary discussions on inspiration.

Meanwhile, the concept of models of inspiration was much further developed in 1996 by Juan Carlos Viera, director of the Ellen G. White Estate, in his Adventist Review article entitled “The Dynamics of Inspiration.” While George Rice had spoken only of two
Rejecting “verbal, inerrant inspiration” for implying that the prophet would have to function simply as a “recording machine” or as a “court stenographer,” Herbert Douglass argued for “thought inspiration” because “God inspires the prophet, not his or her words.” But the “divinely revealed message, or content,” can still be regarded as “infallible and authoritative.”

models, Viera suggested the following six: (1) the visionary model, in which God speaks “through prophetic visions and dreams”; (2) the witness model, in which God inspires “the prophet to give his or her own account of things seen and heard”; (3) the historian model, in which the message “did not come through visions and dreams, but through research”; (4) the counselor model, in which “the prophet acts as an adviser to God’s people”; (5) the epistolary model, in which “the prophet writes greetings, names, circumstances or even common things that do not require a special revelation”; and (6) the literary model, in which “the Holy Spirit inspires the prophet to express his or her intimate feelings and emotions through the means of poetry and prose, as in the psalms.” According to Viera, “the prophet can make orthographical or grammatical mistakes, as well as other kinds of language imperfections such as lapsus linguae (a slip of the tongue) or lapsus memoriae (a slip of the memory),” but the Holy Spirit “is in control of the inspired message” and “always corrected His messengers in matters important to the church.” Viera’s models reflect more the sources of the inspired content than its actual transmission process.

Two years later, Viera’s book on inspiration, The Voice of the Spirit, attempted to explain the “relationship between a divine message, perfect and infallible, and a human messenger, imperfect and fallible,” in the process of prophetic inspiration. Commenting on Ellen White’s classic statement, “It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired . . . ” Viera suggested that, “taken with all the seriousness that this declaration deserves, it means that expressions such as ‘the pen of inspiration,’ and ‘the inspired writings’ are only symbolic expressions that refer to the message the writings communicate and not to the text itself of the prophetic declarations. Expressions such as these will continue to be used—and there is nothing wrong with that—because we all understand what they mean: that what we may be reading at the moment comes from a mind inspired by the Spirit of God. Therefore, we speak of ‘inspired paragraphs’ or ‘inspired books’ or ‘inspired letters.’ Nevertheless, those expressions, taken literally, would contradict the prophetic thought that tells us that it is not the text, the words, or the language of a declaration that is inspired, but the message these communicate—and that message comes from heaven.”

Support for the notion of a non-inspired prophetic text was found in the fact that Ellen White herself allowed C. C. Crisler and H. H. Hall’s chapter on “The Awakening of Spain” to be added to the Spanish version of her book The Great Controversy. Under the assumption that this chapter shares the same nature of the book itself, Viera was not afraid of stating that the chapter “ended up being part of the text (not inspired) of a book that contains the message (inspired) of God.” This might be easily seen as a significant move toward the liberal position that the Bible is not the Word of God but only contains that Word.

Also in 1998 came Herbert Douglass’s textbook titled Messenger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White. Rejecting “verbal, inerrant inspiration” for implying that the prophet would have to function simply as a “recording machine” or as a “court stenographer,” Douglass argued for “thought inspiration” because “God inspires the prophet, not his or her words.” But the “divinely revealed message, or content,” can still be regarded as “infallible and authoritative.”

Of special significance in the late 1990s were Leon R. van Dolson’s adult Sabbath school lessons for the first quarter of 1999, dealing specifically with the subjects of “revelation and inspiration,” and its companion book titled Show and Tell. Van Dolson, who had been one of the editors of the book Issues in Revelation and Inspiration (1992), defined inspiration in his lessons as “the means by which God safeguarded the production and preservation of the Bible in order for it to become an infallible and sufficient guide to salvation.” But these widespread Bible lessons, as balanced in their content as they could be, were unable to affect Adventist academic tensions about inspiration.

Ekkehardt Mueller explained that “an inductive approach” to Scripture, as used by some scholars, “looks for discrepancies and takes notice of these phenomena. Oftentimes, it does not allow for harmonization even where it seems to be possible and advisable. It is preoccupied with finding differences rather than agreement and unity. And it always has only parts of the entire puzzle.”

are not complementary. They are integrated. Consequently, different sets of tools in order to study the human side and the divine side of the Bible cannot do justice to the unified nature, the truly incarnational character of Scripture.”

Another major appeal for a historically conditioned understanding of inspiration can be found in Raymond Cottrell’s paper, “Inspiration and Authority of the Bible in Relation to Phenomena of the Natural World.” Presented originally at the revisionist 1985 Conference on Geology and the Biblical Record sponsored by the Association of Adventist Forums (publisher of Spectrum magazine), in West Yellowstone, Montana, this paper appeared in print only in 2000, as a chapter of that conference’s symposium, titled “Creation Reconsidered.” Cottrell, a former editor of the Review and Herald Publishing Association and more recently an editor of Adventist Today, tried to solve some of the basic tensions between faith and reason, and between the Bible and natural sciences and secular history, by suggesting a clear distinction between the “inspired message” of the Bible and the “ uninspired form in which it comes to us.” Yet “the inspired message on record in the Bible” is viewed by Cottrell as “culturally conditioned” and “historically conditioned.” For him, “historical conditioning permeates the entire Bible. It is not incidental, nor is it exceptional and unusual; it is the invariable rule.”

Under the assumption that “in matters of science, the Bible writers were on a level with their contemporaries,” Cottrell could suggest that on these matters our understanding should be informed by the more reliable data provided by modern science. His attempt to harmonize the Bible account of Creation with modern science led him to the conclusion that “at an unspecified time in the remote past, the Creator transformed a finite portion of his infinite
From the early 1800s up to the time of Ellen White’s death (1915), traditional views of inspiration were challenged by individuals who either had been personally reproved by Ellen White or had been shocked by the idea that inspired writing could be improved by its author.

power into the primordial substance of the universe—perhaps in an event such as the Big Bang.”

The notion that “the words and forms of expression in the Bible were historically conditioned to their time and perspective” led the same author, elsewhere, to the conclusion that the Genesis flood did not extend beyond the known “lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea.” He even stated that “only by reading our modern worldview of ‘all the earth’ [Gen 7:3] back into the Hebrew text can the idea of a world-wide flood be established.”

This represents, indeed, a major departure from the traditional Adventist understanding of a universal flood, as described in the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, of which Cottrell himself was an associate editor.

But also published in the year 2000 was the most comprehensive official exposition of the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of inspiration. That exposition, titled “Revelation and Inspiration,” was prepared by Peter M. van Bemmelen, professor of theology at Andrews University, and submitted to the analysis of the Biblical Research Institute Committee, prior to its publication as a chapter of the major Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology (2000).

The subject of inspiration is addressed in that chapter from the perspective of (1) its biblical interpretation, (2) its main historical expositions throughout the Christian era, and (3) Ellen G. White’s comments on the topic.

Van Bemmelen defined “inspiration” as the supernatural process by which the prophets were “moved and directed by the Spirit of God, in putting the words of the Lord in written form.” While recognizing that “the locus of inspiration is in the inspired author,” he argued that “there is little doubt that thoughts as well as words are involved in this process,” in such a way that those words are “words from God,” “fully human and fully divine.”

Furthermore, “because all of Scripture is God’s word and every word that comes from God is true, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that all of Scripture is truth.”

In regard to the so-called “factual errors” of the Bible, van Bemmelen recognizes that “no serious student of the Bible will deny that there are difficulties in Scripture,” but he adds that “these difficulties do not affect the clarity of Scripture.”

He warns his readers that the claims and allegations “that there are numerous errors, contradictions, historical inaccuracies, anachronisms, and other flaws in the Scriptures” constitute “a serious indictment against the truthfulness of Holy Scripture.”

But the Bible itself “warns repeatedly against anything or anybody that would undermine or usurp the authority of the Word of God.”

In the first few years of the 21st century, the developing tensions from the previous three decades crystallized into either a more theological approach or a more pragmatic view. Building up on his former articles on “Revelation and Inspiration” (1993-1995), Fernando L. Canale’s major theological and scholarly contributions for the study of the inspiration-revelation process culminated in the publication of his works Back to Revelation-Inspiration: Searching for the Cognitive Foundation of Christian Theology in a Postmodern Word (2001) and The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology: A Hermeneutical Study of the Revelation and Inspiration of the Bible (2005). Committed to the high view of Scripture as the reliable Word of God, Canale argued that Christian knowledge can be regarded as of divine origin only by allowing the Bible to say what it actually says about itself; otherwise, Christian theology is left groundless, without any cognitive foundation.

A more pragmatic and popular view was held by the Australian Graeme Bradford in his books Prophets Are Human (2004), People Are Human (Look What They Did to Ellen White) (2006), and More Than a Prophet: How We Lost and Found Again the Real Ellen White (2006). By accepting the validity of most of the criticisms raised against Ellen White, Bradford’s low view of inspiration provides room for a huge variety of supposed factual errors and inaccuracies within the inspired writings.

Alden Thompson expanded the basic concepts of his series “From Sinai to Golgotha” (1981) into the book Escape from the Flames: How Ellen White Grew From Fear to Joy—And Helped Me Do It Too (2005). Thompson suggests that the concepts exposed within the prophetic writings develop and improve over time to such extent that the early
writings of a prophet can be considered as less mature (and less reliable) than his or her later ones, regarded as more mature (and more reliable).

Bradford’s and Thompson’s emphases on the humanity of the prophets raise the questions, If prophetic writings are quite as permeated by factual errors as non-inspired Christian writings, what is then the advantage of the former writings over the later ones? Are we, as non-prophets, entitled to correct the teachings of the prophetic writings? By doing so, would we not end up regarding our own ideas as more reliable than those exposed by God’s prophets?

The conflicting views of inspiration mentioned above demonstrate that at least some Seventh-day Adventist scholars are still divided in their personal understanding of inspiration.

Summary and Conclusion

Different views on the nature of inspiration have been advocated within the Seventh-day Adventist Church during the 150 years of its history.

 Sabbatarian Adventists inherited William Miller’s high view of Scripture as the infallible and unerring Word of God. That Seventh-day Adventists kept that view of Scripture during the first four decades of their history (1844-1883) is evident from both their responses to infidel challenges against the Bible and their uncritical reprint in the Review of several articles by non-Seventh-day Adventist authors who fostered an inerrant view of Scripture.

From the early 1800s up to the time of Ellen White’s death (1915), traditional views of inspiration were challenged by individuals who either had been personally reproved by Ellen White or had been shocked by the idea that inspired writing could be improved by its author. During that same period, Ellen White wrote some of her most significant statements on inspiration. Responses to higher criticism show that Seventh-day Adventists continued to regard the Scriptures as the infallible and trustworthy Word of God.

The first five years after the death of Ellen White saw the development of an identity crisis about the nature of her inspiration. That crisis reached its climax at the 1919 Bible and History Teachers’ Council. The years following that council viewed Seventh-day Adventists on the side of Fundamentalism in uplifting the trustworthiness of the Bible in the context of the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy. Responses to Modernism demonstrate that Seventh-day Adventists still kept their view of Scripture as the infallible and unerring Word of God.

In the early 1950s, new trends began to develop within Seventh-day Adventism that assumed an increasingly radical tone in the early 1970s. Such issues as encounter revelation and the use of the historical-critical method influenced the Seventh-day Adventist discussions about inspiration. The main forum to foster discussions of those issues was Spectrum magazine.

Despite the emergence of new trends, no significant changes were made in Seventh-day Adventist official statements on inspiration. One has to avoid, therefore, the generalizing tendency of superimposing individual views or segment trends from the scholarly world upon the whole church.

Noticeably, the last few decades have seen the development of a factual and apologetic doctrine of inspiration largely shaped by revisionist studies of Ellen White. As insightful as such developments can be, the time has come for Seventh-day Adventists to move beyond apologetic concerns into the task of developing a more constructive theology of inspiration.

Holding to the Protestant principle of sola Scriptura, Seventh-day Adventists should seriously take into consideration what the Bible and the writings of Ellen White have to say about themselves. As the end-time remnant, Seventh-day Adventists should not give up their identity as a people who live “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4, RSV).

This article concludes a three-part series.

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2 Ibid., pp. 114, 115.
3 Ibid., p. 109 (italics in the original).
5 Holbrook and Van Dolsen, “Preface,” in ibid., p. 7.
13 George R. Knight, Reading Ellen White: How to Understand and Apply Her Writings (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publ.
I have followed the argument where it has led me. And it has led to accept the existence of a self-existent, immutable, immaterial, omnipotent, and omniscient Being” (Antony Flew).

When a world-renowned philosopher and atheist announced that the scientific evidence had shifted his opinion toward belief in God, the resulting reception could be well described as a seismic shift amongst communities that follow developments in Intelligent Design circles. This conversion is shared in world-renowned philosopher Antony Flew’s recent (2007) book, There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind. But aside from the ensuing discussion (some have suggested Flew was manipulated; that his age, then 84, affected his decision, and that his book was solely the product of his editors, which Flew has denied) over the authenticity or nature of Flew’s “conversion,” a brief examination into some of the specific evidences that led him to his decision might prove insightful.

First, however, to be clear: Flew has rejected any notions that he has converted to Christianity or anything of the like. His belief is self-described as simply a basic deism; he still rejects the concept of a personal God. In his own words, “I have become a deist like Thomas Jefferson.” In his book he states, “I now believe that the universe was brought into existence by an infinite Intelligence. I believe that life and reproduction originate in a divine Source.”

Concerning the actual evidence that has sparked his change of mind, Flew observes that “science spotlights three dimensions of nature that point to God. His belief is self-described as simply a basic deism; he still rejects the concept of a personal God. In his own words, “I have become a deist like Thomas Jefferson.” In his book he states, “I now believe that the universe was brought into existence by an infinite Intelligence. I believe that life and reproduction originate in a divine Source.”
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Concerning the actual evidence that has sparked his change of mind, Flew observes that “science spotlights three dimensions of nature that point to God. The first is the fact that nature obeys laws. The second is the dimension of life, of intelligently organized and purpose-driven be-

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*F A I T H  A N D  S C I E N C E  U P D A T E*

John T. Baldwin
ings, which arose from matter. The third is the very existence of nature.” It is the second aspect that this column will address, as it points us, as clearly as nature itself can, toward one of the greatest scientific mysteries the natural world has revealed, and that is the “mind of man.”

In an appendix to Flew’s book, co-author and Christian apologist Roy Abraham Varghese concurs with Flew’s observations and further discusses five readily available phenomena that he sees as only explainable in terms of the existence of God. He lists them as “first, the rationality implicit in all our experience of the physical world; second, life, the capacity to act autonomously; third, consciousness, the ability to be aware; fourth, conceptual thought, the power of articulating and understanding meaningful symbols such as are embedded in language; and fifth, the human self, the “center” of consciousness, thought, and action.” All five of these elements struggle to find any adequate or generally accepted explanations in our current generation’s studies of atheism, or “new atheism,” as Varghese labels it. And all five are centered on or related to the mysterious thing called human nature and more specifically our ability to think.

Although within the Adventist Church much time and effort has been expended (and justifiably so) on issues related to origins and biological complexity, and the biblical exegesis of relevant portions of Scripture to these issues, relatively little research has been done, by Adventists, concerning the philosophical issues related to mind-body studies and the issue of physicalism, a common viewpoint among naturalistic atheists. Perhaps this should not remain so, as this field is ripe for new discussions of God and human nature. And, unlike the studies conducted by Michael Behe and others concerning irreducible complexity at the biochemical and molecular level of our bodies, consciousness strikes directly at the core of how the “image of God” is reflected in humanity, with further implications for how we understand Scripture.

Thought, cognition, and awareness, as articulated by Varghese, provide some of the most puzzling mysteries and potentially useful arguments in defense of Scripture’s portrayal of human nature. As Varghese observes, “At the foundation of all of our thinking, communication, and use of language is a miraculous power.” And one unobservable “scientifically.”

Many advocates of atheism concede this point! As Richard Dawkins acknowledges, “Neither Steve Pinker [a fellow atheist] nor I can explain human subjective consciousness—what philosophers call qualia.” And they (and others) are often honest enough to admit that it “beats the heck out of me” where subjective consciousness comes from. Another atheist, Wolpert, deliberately avoids the entire issues of consciousness by stating so succinctly: “I have purposely avoided any discussion of consciousness.” One can only wonder at the creative power of God to leave humankind speechless.

Finally, and in the context of Flew’s new perspective, he concludes his book with a powerful evaluation of N. T. Wright’s exposition, in Appendix B, of Jesus and the Resurrection. It is utterly moving to hear Flew, the former agnostic and perhaps atheist, write the following about Wright’s account of Christ’s resurrection: “It is absolutely wonderful, absolutely radical, and very powerful.” Truly, the Word of God stands forever to His glory.

Thanks to Michael F. Younker for his invaluable assistance in the writing of this column.

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3 Ibid., pp. 88, 89.
4 Ibid., pp. 161, 162.
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7 Ibid.
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“If the existence of one universe requires an explanation, multiple universes require a much bigger explanation: the problem is increased by the factor of whatever the total number of universes is. It seems a little like the case of a schoolboy whose teacher doesn’t believe his dog ate his homework, so he replaces the first version with the story that a pack of dogs—too many to count—ate his homework” (Anthony Flew).
Lord Cutler Beckett, the merciless chairman of the infamous East India Trading Company that managed British interests in global commerce in the 17th and 18th centuries, is a cunning and ruthless man. Grim, precise, Napoleonic—he commands the worldwide seafaring resources at his disposal with cold-blooded elegance.

Lord Beckett—and, for that matter, the East India Trading Company—are fictitious components that fulfill an especially prominent role in the third of the Pirates of the Caribbean film trilogy: At World’s End.

Lord Beckett’s power extends even beyond the natural world to include, also, the realm of the supernatural. Because he has locked away the beating heart of Davy Jones in a small sea chest, Lord Beckett thinks he is impervious to death itself. In one scene Davy Jones, the sailors’ nickname for lost soul who is the holder of the keys of hell, asserts complete command over his ship, the Flying Dutchman, a legendary ghost ship cursed to sail the seas without ever returning to a home port.

To which Beckett responds with icy arrogance: “This is no longer your world, Jones. The immaterial has become—inmaterial.”

There are at least two meanings to Beckett’s bold proclamation. On the level of the plot of the film, he is implying that because he can at any time put a knife through Jones’s heart and end his existence, he controls even the spiritual world through its leader. On another level, he is expressing the modernist declaration of independence from all the ignorance and superstition of the Dark Ages. He believes that the new world order that he represents has spelled the end of the supernatural. For the modernist, the immaterial had become, truly, immaterial.
Black Pearl on one side, manned by living human beings in the flesh, and on the other side by the Flying Dutchman, crewed by spirits who have fallen for various reasons under its curse.

In short, the worldview of reason had lost to the combined efforts—the fusion, if you will—of the material and the immaterial. In point of fact, popular culture is increasingly rife with stories and images of the supernatural. It seems that consumers of literature, television, video, film, gaming, the Internet cannot get enough. Elves, griffins, wizards, dragons, unicorns, ages of the supernatural. It seems increasingly rife with stories and ideas that composers of literature, television, video, film, gaming, the Internet cannot get enough. Elves, griffins, wizards, dragons, unicorns, basiliks, hobbits, minotaurs, orcs, fairies, mermaids, shapeshifters—the list goes into infinitum mode. Entire encyclopedias have been devoted to full descriptions of such creatures. Bookstores now have whole sections—shelf upon shelf—for selections in science fiction, horror, and fantasy. Most cable TV companies offer the Sci Fi Channel. ⁵

There was a time not so long ago that such fare was considered to be for children only. But it's increasingly clear that artistic depictions of imaginary worlds cannot be dismissed in an effort merely to “put away childish things” (1 Cor. 13:11, NKJV). The themes and issues that appear in these various media have become every bit as profound—and as everyday practical—as those of theology or philosophy.

One of the essential keys to this realization is the idea that stories are potentially more than what happens first followed by what happens next. They consist of far more than a linear series of events. Jesus surely recognized this—as did His disciples. At the conclusion of any one of His imaginative parables, they surely didn’t merely respond with, “Great yarn, Jesus!” Instead, His parables often left them scratching their heads, and this wasn’t the result of lice or psoriasis. It was because they were searching for the meaning of the parable.

In addition to the linear elements of a plot, stories seek to express and explore themes and ideas. When a sinister character like Lord Cutler Beckett makes a comment about the supposed end of all things supernatural, something more is going on than clever dialogue between a living human being and a legendary ghost.

In point of fact Jesus Himself put His own kind of spin on a ghost story in His parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). Here is a fictional story, told in Scripture in red letters, with all that that connotes, in which Jesus shifts into “once upon a time.” And He does so apparently to illuminate a principle that He has elsewhere expressed as “He who is first shall be last.”

But for some of today’s readers, this parable seems to imply a theological concept that is contrary to that of the rest of Scripture. Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus describes death as a conscious state. Yet careful study of Scripture contradicts this concept.

What could Jesus have been thinking?

“In this parable,” Ellen White writes, “Christ was meeting the people on their own ground. The doctrine of a conscious state of existence between death and the resurrection was held by many of those who were listening to Christ’s words. The Saviour knew of their ideas, and He framed His parable so as to inculcate important truths through these preconceived opinions.”¹

In couching so much of His teaching in the form of parables, Jesus clearly understood the impact of the narrative mode. He also surely knew that He could count on the conventions of interpretation that the storyteller should expect from hearers or readers. In the instance of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus was attempting to communicate only one particular point: a person’s eternal destiny is determined by the way in which he or she lives in the here and now.

“It is not wise to use the details of a parable to teach doctrine. Only the fundamental teaching of a parable as clearly set forth in its context and confirmed by the general tenor of Scripture, together with details explained in the context itself, may legitimately be considered a basis for doctrine.”²

These are the guidelines for the interpretation of a fictional parable as it was utilized in the culture of Jesus’ time on this earth. Since that time imaginative writing has expanded to include such genres as the short story, the novel, film scripts, and others. Writers of these forms usually invest meaning in many seemingly inconsequential details. All the subtleties of setting, character, plot, and dialogue can contribute to the ideas that the writer is trying to communicate.

The assertion of the supernatural in the film At World’s End (a telling title, by the way) appears to be only a small expression of the resurgence in our culture’s interest in such things. On at least one level, today’s Christian should resonate with this vigorous response to modernism’s crusade against the spiritual. God Himself is both material and immaterial.

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¹ Christ’s Object Lessons, p. 263.
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