Creation in the Old Testament Prophetic Literature

The prophets of the Old Testament wrote their inspired messages from God based on a clear understanding of His role as Creator.

Martin G. Klingbeil

Justification by Faith

Adventist belief continues to affirm this great truth proclaimed by the Protestant Reformers.

Peter M. Van Bemmelen

Obedience in the Letter to the Hebrews

The Epistle to the Hebrews makes some startling assertions about God’s expectations of us.

Felix H. Cortez
Creation in the Old Testament Prophetic Literature

The prophets of the Old Testament wrote their inspired messages from God based on a clear understanding of His role as Creator.

Martin G. Klingbeil

“Creation,” writes Rolf Rendtorff, “to this day has been one of the ‘proverbial step-children’ in the recent discipline of Old Testament theology.”¹ Brueggemann refers the responsibility for the peripheral position of creation in theology to the dichotomy between the Israelite faith and Canaanite religion, or history and myth, that found its way into biblical theology during the earlier part of the past century.

A number of scholars did recognize the prominence of creation in the theological thinking of the Old Testament, both in terms of position and content. Some placed creation in history through its expression in myth and ritual. Thus it is the primeval event, and the stories told about and enacted upon it, are part of the universal traditions of humankind. The biblical authors were seen to adapt these stories theologically for Israel and to identify them as part of God’s work of blessing.

But the doctrine has also been described as the horizon of biblical theology, relating creation to world order and arriving at the conclusion that history is the realization of this order. “Only within this horizon could Israel understand its special experiences with God in history.”²

Nevertheless, it appears that in most cases the dating of texts lies at the bottom of the question as to where to position creation within the framework of Old Testament theology. Though the Bible begins with creation, biblical theologies mostly do not. Traditional critical approaches to Old Testament texts do not allow for an early dating of Genesis 1–11. Most scholarship has rather taken Isaiah 40–55, the so-called Deutero-Isaiah, dated by literary criticism to post-exilic times, as a chronologically secure paradigm for creation in the Old Testament against which other texts, amongst them Genesis 1–3, are then benchmarked. This leads inevitably to the conclusion that creation is a late addition to the theological thinking of the Old Testament. Implicit in this approach is the danger of circular reasoning, since creation texts are being dated on the basis of religious historical paradigms as late and are then used to date other creation passages accordingly: “It is obviously somewhat paralyzing to realize that we form a picture of Israel’s religious history in part on the basis of certain texts which, in turn, with the help of the picture obtained by historical research, we subsequently judge with respect to ‘authenticity’ and historical truth.”³

Recognizing the unsatisfying results of such a dating scheme, an approach to the topic of creation in the Old Testament should depart from a contextual reading of the texts in question in the various bodies of Old Testament literature.
The prophetic literature of the Old Testament provides a rich tapestry for such a reading since the implicit nature of prophecy in the Old Testament is reformative in nature. It refers back to the historic deeds of Yahweh in the past (creation, exodus, conquest, etc.) and thus motivates a return to Him in the respective present.

**Methodological Questions**

Two points need attention before evaluating the evidence of creation from the Old Testament prophets. The first is the question of intertextuality. Much of the prophets’ messages are evocative of earlier texts, creating points of reference to events in the course of Israel’s history, but at the same time applying them to their present contexts. The second issue grows somewhat out of the first and refers to the question of how to identify references to creation in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament.

Intertextuality has recently come into focus in biblical scholarship. For the sake of this article, intertextuality may be broadly defined as references between texts that can occur on multiple levels. It networks texts in a way that creates new contexts—and new meanings of old texts. It also arranges various texts on a sometimes complicated timeline and thus gives rise to chronological considerations that have been out of focus in previous biblical studies.

Among the prophets of the Old Testament, the following timeline will serve as the chronological framework in which the usage of creation texts in the prophets will to be addressed. They are grouped broadly according to centuries.

![Timeline of Old Testament Prophets](http://www.perspectivedigest.org/article/47/archives/16-3/creation-in-the...)

This rough timeline is intended to help demonstrate how the theological thinking during the
period was reflected in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. It also implies that the prophetic literature of the Old Testament is subsequent to Genesis 1–11, a point that can be argued both on a literary and historical level, but that will hopefully become even more apparent when it can be demonstrated how the prophets were constantly “looking back” at creation. Thus, the events of Genesis 1–3 become the point of reference to which the prophets return when they employ creation terminology and motifs.

**Eighth-century Prophets**

These would include Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah, which in itself is an impressive mix of messengers and messages. Jonah, of course, directed his prophecies toward the international arena, while Amos and Hosea addressed the Northern Kingdom, and Micah and Isaiah prophesied in Judah before or until after the fall of Samaria. The geographic spread should indicate the pervasiveness of creation thought during this century.

*Jonah.* Jonah’s message is full of ecological content and as such allusive of creation. In outing himself to the sailors, Jonah defines himself as a follower of the Creator God in a language that is reminiscent of creation and the Decalogue: “Yahveh, God of heaven, I worship/fear who made the sea and the dry land” (Jonah 1:9, my translation). One cannot help noticing the somewhat problematic but very emphatic sentence structure in which the predicate (“worship/fear”) is inserted between the object (“Yahveh”) and its qualifying relative clause (“who made the sea and the dry land”). Jonah sees himself surrounded by Yahweh the God of creation, although ironically he is not quite sure if he should worship or fear Him.

The progressive descent to the depths of the ocean in Jonah’s psalm (Jonah 2:2-9) indicated by the verbal root dry, “to descend” (vs. 6), can be related to Genesis 1–3. According to the ancient Near Eastern and also to some extent Old Testament cosmologies, there is a spatial dimension of above and below, i.e., the Earth is resting on pillars in waters under which the realm of Sheol was to be found. All these elements appear in Jonah’s poem: He finds himself cast into the “heart of the sea” (Jonah 2:3/Gen. 1:10) and cast out of God’s presence (Jonah 2:5) as Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden (Gen. 3:24); he passes through the chaotic waters (Jonah 2:5/Gen. 1:2) and finally descends to Sheol (Jonah 2:2) or the pit (Jonah 2:6). Jonah is sinking toward darkness and death, away from light and creation, a process that is equivalent to de-creation.

In the whole book, obedient creation is in juxtaposition to disobedient humanity, and the Creator is portrayed as continually being involved in His creation by throwing a storm at Jonah (Jonah 1:4), appointing a fish to his double rescue by letting it swallow the disobedient prophet (vs. 17) as well as vomiting him onto solid ground (2:10). He furthermore prepares a plant (4:6), a worm (vs. 7), and an east wind (vs. 8) in order to bring His despondent servant to his senses. Creation is not just an event of the past, but recurs through Yahweh’s permanent involvement in His creation and with His creatures. But foremost, all creation is geared toward Yahweh’s salvation acts toward humanity, and the question that concludes the Book of Jonah finds its answer in the book’s presence
in the canon, reiterating Jonah’s belief in the supreme Creator-God as initially ironically stated in his confession to the heathen sailors (1:9).

Amos. Creation in Amos is an analogy of history, presenting Yahweh as Creator continuously interacting with His creation, and more specifically in this prophetic book, in a context of threatening judgment but also salvation. Creation terminology appears predominantly in the three hymns (Amos 4:13; 5:8, 9; 9:5, 6) that have a structuring influence in the overall outlay of the book.

Creation language is predominant in these five verses, and a number of lexical creation markers appear: “to create,” “to form,” and “to make.” Interestingly, all these markers are participles, a syntactic peculiarity that can be found throughout the Book of Amos. Nevertheless, God’s creative activity in each instance is brought into relationship with the human sphere, indicating how creation touches on human life.

One can perceive a certain progression among the three hymns in terms of how God’s intervention impacts upon humanity. In Amos 4:13, God reveals His judgment intentions to humankind; Amos 5:8 and 9 describes the destructive aspect of God’s judgment; Amos 9:5 and 6 finally describes the human reaction to the divine judgment.
The startling aspect of Amos’s presentation of creation is that it is intrinsically linked to judgment, almost in such a way that creation forms the explanation for destruction. What starts as a hymn of praise for Yahweh the Creator becomes a threatening description of Yahweh the Judge. This apparent contradiction has startled a number of scholars and most probably, and more deliberately, also Amos’s audience. The position of inherent security based on belief in the Creator-God is challenged by Amos, and what has provided a basis for a false religious auto-sufficiency becomes now the rationale for judgment, reversing the original function of the hymns.

By means of the hymns, Amos makes it clear that Yahweh is not a God who could simply be controlled. He challenged certain positions of presupposed rights—by means of which the people presumed the right of existence—from the broader perspective of God’s creation. Thus, creation can be contextually oriented toward both comfort and judgment, whereas in Amos it is mostly directed toward judgment.

To accept Yahweh as the Creator also implies the acceptance of His power to de-create. On first sight, creation used in this way, is disassociated from salvation, but when judgment is understood as preliminary and partial to salvation, than de-creation becomes a necessary precursor for re-creation. Amos drives this point home by the formulaic usage of the expression “the Lord is his name” (Amos 4:13; 5:8; 9:6), indicating that this is also and remains to be God, He “is not only the God who creates, but He also destroys.”

The Book of Amos concludes with a glorious perspective on restoration after judgment (9:11-15) introduced by the eschatological charged phrase “on that day.” The passage alludes to the creation theme by employing building terminology (“to build,” vss. 11, 14) and the metaphor of Yahweh as King. Thus within the theological thinking of Amos, the correct understanding of creation becomes a prerequisite to the comprehension of re-creation.

Hosea. Creation in Hosea is closely linked to the theme of the creation of Israel as a nation, again as with Amos in a context of pending judgment. Creation is not only analogous to history, but is history itself.

Hosea begins to develop his creation theology with an allusive description of de-creation in Hosea 4:1-3, in which an interesting reversal of the order of creation as presented in Genesis 1 takes place. God is having a “controversy, case” with or against Israel (Hosea 4:1), which in the relationship-focused context of Hosea could be better understood as a quarrel between husband and wife that also constitutes the underlying metaphor of the book. Based on Israel’s sins (vs. 2), Hosea 4:3 invokes judgment by introducing the creation, viz. the anti-creation theme: “Therefore the land will mourn, and all who live in it will waste away; the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea will be extinguished” (my translation). The three groups of animals represent the three spheres in which life is found on Earth, and the reversal of their order as known from creation in Genesis 1 invokes the idea of judgment as de-creation, where creation just shrivels up when confronted with and abused by sin.

The affinity between Hosea 6:2 and Deuteronomy 32:39 can hardly be overlooked in this
context and constitutes another creation motif in Hosea, and the reference to Yahweh as the one who puts to death but also resurrects is pointing to the God of Creation, which is a theme strongly developed in the Song of Moses. Hosea 8:14 picks up on the same motif, again establishing a relationship with the Pentateuch in using the divine creation epithet “Maker,” which also occurs repeatedly in the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:6, 15, 18). However, “the notion of creation leads toward indictment and sentence, not toward praise.”

Possibly the strongest creation text in Hosea is found in 11:1, and it synthesizes the passages mentioned above into the metaphor of Yahweh as the Creator and Procreator of Israel: “‘When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.’” This verse connects to Hosea 1:10 (“They will be called “children of the living God”” (NIV), and to the Exodus, which is described in creation terminology.

Thus, the creation of Israel as a nation during the historic events connected with the exodus from Egypt becomes part of God’s creation. Whom God elects, He also creates, and with that an intimate and eternal bond is created like that between a father and his son. Beyond reiterating and enhancing creation theology, the metaphor is pedagogic in its rhetoric: “By means of this theme of Israel’s creation it is not so much the intention of Hosea to nuance the view that the people had of Yhwh but, rather, to confront them with their own behavior. They are faithless sons.”

**Micah.** Affinities and intertextual issues between the messages of Micah and Isaiah are numerous and have been pointed out repeatedly by various scholars. The most often quoted passage in this context is the almost identical parallel found in Micah 4:1-3, 5 and Isaiah 2:2-5. Though the passage can be taken as an argument for a common prophetic message of the two prophets, for the purpose of this study, the focus rests on the creation imagery transmitted in an eschatological setting via the metaphor of Mount Zion. According to Old Testament cosmology, Zion lies at the center of the created world, and Micah points to the establishment of it in terms of creation terminology (“to establish” [Micah 4:1]). Creation in Micah is focused on destruction and consequent re-creation in the context of the “day of the Lord” with its eschatological implications. The prophet builds a theological bridge between creation in the beginning and in the end around the presence of God as symbolized by the Mount Zion metaphor.

**Isaiah.** As mentioned above, Deutero-Isaiah was the point of departure for many scholars in establishing an Old Testament theology of creation, based on the assumption that Isaiah 40–55 could be dated in the post-exilic period. Nevertheless, recent studies that focus on the literary unity of Isaiah—though few scholars would take the argument to its logical conclusion, i.e., unity of authorship—show that creation theology is present throughout the whole book. In view of the wealth of creation material in Isaiah, a selection of creation texts and motifs demonstrate the main lines of the prophet’s theological thinking on creation. The examples are taken deliberately from across the three divisions proposed by critical scholarship.

Taking Isaiah’s temple vision as a chronological departure point, Isaiah 6:1 describes Yahweh along the lines of the heavenly king metaphor identified earlier as allusive to creation. The Song of
the Vineyard in the preceding chapter presents an important aspect of creation in demonstrating the interconnection of God’s creation and His intervention in history, placing it in the context of Israel’s election. Isaiah 5:12 provides a further insight into Isaiah’s creation theology: Sin is in reality not acknowledging God’s deeds in creation.

In Isaiah 17:7, the prophet takes up the theme developed by Hosea of Yahweh as the “Maker” of humankind. The image of Yahweh as the potter of Isaiah 29:16 has already been identified above as creation terminology and occurs in all three divisions of the book (41:25; 45:9; 64:8). Creation in Isaiah focuses primarily on God’s sovereignty over His creation and humankind’s failure to recognize His proper position within this world order.

Isaiah 40–55 has been called the center of Isaiah’s theology; whereas Isaiah 36–39 fulfills a bridging role carefully linking the previous chapters to the remainder of the book. It has been argued that the so-called Deutero-Isaiah introduces creation as a new theological topic to the book, but the preceding observations show that the theme is “deeply continuous with the Isaian tradition.”

Though creation terminology abounds in the whole book, creation occurs in Isaiah 40–55 in connection with the Exodus and conquest (41:17-20; 42:13-17; 43:16-21; 49:8-12), placing creation in history. Furthermore, creation is positioned alongside redemption (44:24) pointing to the theological significance of the motif in introducing Cyrus as the agent of God’s redemption. In this way, the Exodus serves as a typological guarantee for the future redemption from the Babylonian exile through Cyrus (vs. 28). The theocentric manifestation that God forms light and creates darkness as much as peace and evil (45:7) serves as an introduction to God as a potter metaphor (vss. 9-13), which illustrates the absolute sovereignty of God within the realms of human history. (The view of God also being responsible for the creation of evil fits well within the theocentric Hebrew worldview and forestalls any notions of dualism.)

The final division of the Book of Isaiah (chaps. 56–66) focuses on the creation of Zion with Isaiah 60–62 at the center of the section describing the glorious city. The book’s grand finale in chapters 65–66 adds an eschatological dimension to creation theology in Isaiah describing renewal and restoration in terms of creation. But creation in these last chapters refers not only to Zion as a place, but foremost to its inhabitants, who need re-creation and transformation: “Be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy” (65:18, NIV).

Summarizing Isaian creation theology, the following becomes apparent. Creation in Isaiah 1–39 is focused on God’s sovereignty over His creation and the establishment of a personal relationship with humanity, exemplified by the usage of the potter metaphor, which points back to Genesis 2. In Isaiah 40–55, the theme focuses on the creation of Israel as a nation in history by connecting creation with the Exodus and theologically with salvation. In Isaiah 56–66, creation is centered on the future re-creation of Zion and its people in response to the failure of a pre-exilic Israel. Thus, we have a sequential development of creation theology in the Book of Isaiah that follows a natural progression of thought.
Seventh-century Prophets

A new century in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament is overshadowed by the sobering perspective of the fall of Samaria (722 B.C.) and an increasing urgency for the prophetic message to be heard as the Babylonian exile is approaching. As during the eighth century, the prophetic word is inaugurated by an international message, issued by Nahum against the Assyrians. Habakkuk enters with God into a dialogue about His people, while Zephaniah and Joel enlarge upon the eschatological meaning of the “day of the Lord” motif. Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, finally fails with his message to avert the Babylonian exile.

Nahum. Creation in Nahum is connected to the “day of the Lord,” and the description of its characteristics is reminiscent of creation terminology: “He rebukes the sea and makes it dry, and dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither, and the flower of Lebanon wilts. The mountains quake before Him, the hills melt, and the earth heaves at His presence, Yes, the world and all who dwell in it” (Nahum 1:4, 5). Again there is a context of de-creation driven by cosmological imagery. In the judgment theophany, the created order is impacted by its own Creator in a way that is reminiscent of the Ancient Near Eastern Chaoskampf motif whereas, there is a polemic reworking of the motif with Yahweh depicted as sovereign over all the common Ancient Near Eastern power symbols, such as the sea, the mountains, and earth.

Habakkuk. Habakkuk offers a similar perspective on creation as Nahum in using creation imagery in the context of de-creation during the theophany in the “day of the Lord”: “He stood and measured the earth; He looked and startled the nations. And the everlasting mountains were scattered, the perpetual hills bowed. His ways are everlasting” (Hab. 3:6). In the following verses, Habakkuk describes the impact of Yahweh’s appearance on creation (vss. 7-12). However, through the destructive power of de-creation, salvation is accomplished: “You went forth for the salvation of Your people, for salvation with Your Anointed” (vs. 13). Along the same lines, creation imagery also serves as a point of reference for recognition of the Creator: “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, As the waters cover the sea” (2:14).

Zephaniah. As observed above, Zephaniah 1:3 introduces a reversal of creation by listing the animals in a reversed order as they were originally mentioned in the creation account from Genesis 1. He furthermore uses the familiar word-play in the original language between man and ground known from Genesis 2:7. The reversal of creation order, however, transmits a strong theological message: “In Gen. ii . . . the pun is used to indicate man’s dependence on that from whence he came, whereas Zephaniah uses it to show man’s separation from his creator, Yahweh. A situation that involves a return to the age before creation can result only in man’s destruction.”9 Zephaniah is depicting the progressive loss of dominion over creation by humanity and its resulting de-creation.

Aside from the obvious creation allusions, Zephaniah also refers to another event of the Urgeschichte, i.e., the Flood, by using the phrase “from the face of the earth” as an inclusion for the passage in Zephaniah 1:1-3 (cf. Gen. 6:7; 7:4; 8:8). Within the prophet’s message of judgment, the
Flood serves as an example of present impending doom.

**Joel.** Within the “day of the Lord” imagery, Joel employs creation imagery in order to describe the impact of Yahweh’s theophany on creation as part of that judgment day: “The sun and moon will grow dark, and the stars will diminish their brightness. The Lord also will roar from Zion, and utter His voice from Jerusalem; the heavens and earth will shake; but the Lord will be a shelter for His people, and the strength of the children of Israel” (Joel 3:15, 16). “Heavens and earth” serves as a creation indicator, but again, within a negative context of judgment. The theophanic event is always connected to the experience of God in nature and the impact of His appearance on creation.

The final verses of Joel, however, return to the topic of re-creation describing the future of Zion in paradisiacal terms: “In that day . . . the mountains shall drip with new wine, the hills shall flow with milk, and all the brooks of Judah shall be flooded with water; a fountain shall flow from the house of the Lord and water the Valley of Acacias” (vs. 18). The Garden of Eden mentioned earlier (2:3), which had been destroyed by the locust plague, is thus being re-created. Again, a linear motion from creation to de-creation and finally re-creation can be observed with creation being the overall paradigm that underlies history.

**Jeremiah.** Creation in Jeremiah is so extensive that a number of key passages will have to suffice. The book begins with reference to the creation of the prophet in his mother’s womb (Jer. 1:5) using the lexical creation marker “to form, fashion,” which can be found in Genesis 2:7. The creation of humankind as part of the creation week is repeated in each new creation of new human life.

A survey of creation in Jeremiah has to include Jeremiah 4:23-26, which connects with strong linguistic markers to the creation account as found in Genesis 1. The doom-oracle presents possibly the most faithful account of de-creation, or the reversal of creation, when compared to Genesis 1:2–2:4a. The following table adapted from Fishbane shows the progression:
Though the Genesis account ends with a day of rest, the Sabbath, Jeremiah's de-creation account ends with a day of fury. The deconstruction of creation is taking place, and one can be sure that the listeners (and subsequent readers) of the prophet's message recognized the creation pattern. Creation becomes the paradigm for destruction and serves as the primeval point of departure for contemporary theology. "What acts and words could be more invested with power than those of creation?"\textsuperscript{11}

The antithesis to the doom-oracle is provided in Jeremiah 31:35-37, in which two short sayings conclude the Book of Comfort (30–31) and in creation-language point to the impossibility of Yahweh's destruction of Israel. Yet it is expressed along the lines of remnant theology with reference to the "seed of Israel" and its future hope. Both apparent opposite expressions, Jeremiah 4:23-26 and 31:35-37, show the range of possible applications of creation theology within Jeremiah, but beyond that show that Israel needs to acknowledge Yahweh with regard to its future: "Thus both extremes of expression bear witness the theological claim that finally Israel must come to terms with Yahweh upon whom its future well-being solely depends."\textsuperscript{12}

Jeremiah 10:12-16 is a hymn that celebrates Yahweh's creative power, and it is replenished with creation imagery: "He has made the earth by His power, He has established the world by His wisdom, and has stretched out the heavens at His discretion. When He utters His voice, There is a multitude of waters in the heavens: 'And He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth. He makes lightning for the rain, He brings the wind out of His treasuries.' Everyone is dull-hearted, without knowledge; every metalsmith is put to shame by an image; for his molded image is
falsehood, and there is no breath in them. They are futile, a work of errors; in the time of their punishment they shall perish. The Portion of Jacob is not like them, for He is the Maker of all things, and Israel is the tribe of His inheritance; the Lord of hosts is His name."

Although most commentators point to the contrast between the true God and the idols, the emphasis is rather on a contrast between Yahweh as the creator of life (10:13) and humankind as (false) creator of life (vs. 14). The focus is not on the idol but on its human maker who is "shamed" by his inanimate image, since he is not able to provide the creature with the necessary breath of life, which is the distinguishing characteristic of Yahweh’s creation.

Idolatry is therefore a double sin. The worship of idols denies the reality of God’s complete control over the cosmos because it involves the acknowledgement of other divine powers. And worse still is the pretense of creating life. In doing so, humankind lays claim to divine knowledge.

**Sixth- and Fifth-century Prophets**

The Babylonian exile and post-exilic period brought with it a change in the prophetic message, shifting its contents toward restoration or, speaking within the terminology of this article, to re-creation. Though Ezekiel and Obadiah witness the downfall of Jerusalem, and as such the ultimate fulfillment of the long-prophesied de-creation, Daniel brings an apocalyptic dimension to the topic. Re-creation becomes the prominent topic for post-exilic Haggai and Zechariah, and Malachi finalizes the canonical prophetic chorus of the Old Testament with the restorative message around the Second Elijah.

*Ezekiel.* Petersen comes to the conclusion that "creation traditions are not important for Ezekiel’s theological argument."¹³ His argument, however, appears to be on the assumption of an exclusive positive reading of the creation account which, as has been seen, forms only one part of the theological panorama for which creation motifs were invoked. If understood in this way, Ezekiel "is not concerned with how the world itself came into existence, . . . but rather with re-forming a world gone awry."¹⁴ As illustration, three passages outline Ezekiel’s theological usage of creation:

- Ezekiel 28:11-19 is a prophetic oracle that centers on a description of the king of Tyre as a type for the anarchic cherub, which has been interpreted since the times of the early Christian writers as pointing to the fall of Lucifer. A number of indicative creation linguistic markers are present, yet the context of the passage is focused on the description of the hubris of a fallen angel that is staining a perfect world. As with Jeremiah, creation language is employed as a powerful paradigm to describe the origin of sin.

- Ezekiel 31:1-18 transfers the same scenario into the realm of human history. The cosmic tree representing human kingship, a motif well-known from ancient Near Eastern iconography, is used as a metaphor for the downfall of the king of Assyria, which in turn serves as a warning for Egypt’s future judgment. The chapter describes the glory of the tree within creation terminology and cosmology (e.g., Eze. 31:4/Gen. 7:11) and connects it with paradise (Eze. 31:8, 9, 16, 18). Creation terminology is employed to describe the downfall of two prominent nations, Assyria and Egypt. Thus
not only paradise has been spoiled, but also human history.

Re-creation in Ezekiel and the reversal of de-creation as exemplified by the two previous passages can be found in Ezekiel 47:1-12 within the context of the vision of the future glory of the temple, which in itself serves as a creation motif. This time the trees are growing again, not in rebellion against but under Yahweh’s power and provision of fertility (Eze. 47:12). The sustaining agents of God’s power are the rivers of paradise that connect Ezekiel to the creation account in Genesis 2:10-14. Ezekiel deliberately merges temple/Zion with paradise imagery because the destruction of the earthly temple in Jerusalem and his own exile in Babylon has caused the place of God’s presence to transcend to a heavenly realm, indicating that Yahweh’s presence is continuous and does not depend on human realities.

As the connections between Ezekiel 47:1-12 and Genesis 2:10-14 reveal, Ezekiel understood the symbol of Zion in a new way. Free of explicit reference to the temporal, political realities of kingship, priesthood, and the earthly temple, the temple-mountain and river of Ezekiel’s last great vision stand as timeless symbols of divine presence. For Ezekiel, the earthly Zion, with its city and temple, was a bitter disappointment.

Creation in Ezekiel is used to express his (and the divine) disappointment over angelic rebellion and consequent human history, which replays that rebellion again and again, but he moves beyond that in stating that God is able to re-create something new and eternal from the shreds of human history. However, one should be cautious not to attribute an exclusive other-worldliness to the Ezekiel’s prophecies. One should not forget the prophet’s vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 which employs creation terminology in the re-creation of the house of Israel.

Obadiah. There is no apparent creation terminology employed in the Book of Obadiah except for the usage of the Mount Zion motif (chap. 1:17, 21) which is in juxtaposition to the mountains of Edom (vss. 3, 4, 8, 9). The one who has made his “nest among the stars” (vs. 4) will be brought low because of human wisdom and understanding (vs. 8). Instead, the mountains of Esau will be governed from Mount Zion (vs. 21).

Daniel. There are few studies that engage the Book of Daniel with creation theology, and those who take up the task usually focus on the mythological Chaoskampf motif and its ancient Near Eastern counterparts as found in the description of the waters in Daniel 7:2, 3. According to Wilson, in contrast to Genesis 1, the waters described in Daniel 7 are presented as returning to chaos, and the animals that surface from the waters are composite creatures that do not correspond to the order of creation in Genesis 1. “The world has reverted to its pre-creation state and is clearly in need of re-creation.” This re-creation is achieved in the vision of the Ancient One that constitutes the second part of the vision (Dan. 7:9-14) with the word dominion being the key word and appearing eight times in this chapter. The failure of human dominion over the earth in history as ordained in creation is replaced by God’s dominion over the universe through an everlasting kingdom.

But aside from Daniel 7, there is more on creation in the prophetic book, as Doukhan has shown. Some of the most outstanding allusions:
In Daniel 1:12, the four young men opt for a menu that echoes the pre-Fall diet of Genesis 1:29, and the description of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2:38 invokes creation terminology applying the same attribute of dominion over the earth and all his creatures to the Babylonian king as Adam received in Genesis 1:28.

Clay, which is part of the feet of the statue, is used throughout the Bible within contexts alluding to creation, indicating the religious aspect of the spiritual Rome (Isa. 29:16; Jer. 18:2; Lam. 4:2).

The word-pair darkness/light in Daniel’s benediction (Dan. 2:22) is resounding the creation account of Genesis 1:4, 5.

Another creation word-pair (heaven/earth) is found in Nebuchadnezzar’s prayer after he returns to his senses in Daniel 4:35.

The usage of the cosmic tree motif in Daniel 4 points to the creation account (Gen. 2:9).

The association of “evening-morning” in Daniel 8:14 is found in this sequence and meaning only in the creation story (Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31).

In the concluding chapter of the book, Daniel evokes creation terminology by describing re-creation, which is taking place after the de-creation scenario of the previous chapter (Dan. 11). For the righteous ones there is a passage from sleeping in the dust (12:2) to shining like the stars (vs. 3) and for Daniel in particular from resting to standing up in the final day to receive his inheritance (12:13).

The apocalyptic themes of transformation of history and final return to an Edenic state that are so recurrent in the Book of Daniel are theologically grouped along a process from creation to de-creation and finally re-creation, a topic encountered repeatedly in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament; whereas the timelines in Daniel are broader and informed by his apocalyptic perspective. Eschatology, which moves toward an end imperatively necessitates a beginning, and the theme of creation provides the theological rationale against which eschatology can take place.

Haggai. In Haggai 1:10, the prophet invokes the heaven/earth allusion, demonstrating how the post-exilic community’s lack of faithfulness is causing nature’s or creation’s blessings to be interrupted. Further on, Haggai employs the same word-pair in order to describe how the created order is affected by the “day of the Lord,” but this time from a Messianic perspective: “Thus says the Lord of hosts: “Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory,” says the Lord of hosts”’ (Haggai 2:6, 7).

Zechariah. God as the continuous sustainer of creation is described by Zechariah: “Ask rain from the Lord in the season of the spring rain, from the Lord who makes the storm clouds, who gives showers of rain to you, the vegetation in the field to everyone” (Zech. 10:1, NRSV). The “vegetation in the field” connects with the “plant of the field” of Genesis 2:5. Springtime and fertility are caused by the ongoing process of “creating” the rain clouds. Zechariah’s second oracle (“utterance, oracle,” Zech. 9:1) is introduced by using a distinct creation terminology, however, with a significant
rearranging of the various elements: "A prophecy: the word of the Lord concerning Israel. The Lord, who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the spirit of man within him, declares . . ." (12:1, NIV). Though the stretching out of the heavens is not a direct linguistic creation marker, it nevertheless recaptures the action of Genesis 1:6, 7 and is found throughout the Old Testament (Ps. 104:2; Job 9:8; Isa. 44:24). It is also interesting to note that the object of “to form” in Zechariah 12:1 is not man himself as in Genesis 2:7, but “the spirit of man.”

One has the sense that there is a traditional set of creation vocabulary, but that it could be arranged in various acceptable patterns. Heavens, earth, humanity, and spirit provide the crucial building blocks. Zechariah 12:1 combines them in an innovative and adroit manner.

Interestingly, Zechariah 12:1 serves within the given literary genre as a validation for the following oracle, which is a description of Israel’s new and victorious role among the nations, a new creation of the nation on the day of the Lord.

Malachi. Malachi concludes the cycle of Old Testament prophets with a rhetorical question that parallels God as the Creator with the metaphor of God as a father: “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously with one another By profaning the covenant of the fathers?” (Mal. 2:10). Creation is here being transformed to the intimate level of a father-son relationship, viz. husband-wife (cf. Mal. 2:14, 15), which echoes the intimate creation account of Genesis 2. Creation in the final book of the Old Testament and in its final analysis is not centered on cosmogony but on a personal relationship between God and humankind as exemplified in the order of creation.

Summary

In establishing the broader lines of creation in the prophetic literature of the eighth century, it becomes apparent that creation is progressively anchored in history, theologically made relevant in salvation, and paradigmatically centered in the introduction of the triad of creation–de-creation–re-creation.

Creation in the prophetic literature of the seventh century is historically contextualized by the impending Babylonian exile; whereas, the triad of creation–de-creation–re-creation becomes more and more prominent with the prophets beginning to look beyond the inevitable judgment toward restoration.

The usage of creation during the final two centuries of Old Testament prophetic literature is clearly future-oriented; whereas a theological abstraction has taken place that can be related to the disappearance of the physical temple and monarchy. Though creation is still the overarching paradigm that spans human history, the focus has moved toward the end of that arc which, as in the case of the Book of Daniel, takes on apocalyptic and also Messianic concepts.

Creation in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament is employed as a constant literary and theological reference which connects to a historical past, motivates the interpretation of the present, and moves toward a perspective for the future by means of a continuous contextualization of the
topic via the triad creation–de-creation–re-creation. This reference point is anchored in the creation account as presented in Genesis 1–3.

The final authors of the Hebrew Bible understood creation not as one topic among others or even one of lower significance. For them, creation was the starting point because everything human beings can think and say about God and His relation to the world and to humankind depends on the fact that He created it all.

The intertextual markers that refer to creation in the prophets indicate that they saw it as a literal and historical given; whereas, reference is made indiscriminately to the creation account as presented in both Genesis 1 and 2. The movement of intertextuality indicates clearly that as much as creation forms the starting point of much of the prophetic theological discourse, all markers of creation as discussed here back to the creation model as presented in Genesis 1–3. Though it has not been the purpose of this article to reconstruct the cosmology of the Old Testament prophets, it has become apparent that their worldview drew out of creation and explained and interpreted the world from this perspective. Any discussion of whether the prophets considered creation other than a historical event or even used it only for literary or theological purposes cannot be sustained from the textual data and would be projecting a 19th-century A.D. rationalist debate into a first millennium B.C. context in which it would have not existed otherwise.

Martin G. Klingbeil, D.Litt., is a Professor of Religion at Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

3. Ibid., p. 29.
4. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this article are quoted from the New King James Version of the Bible.
7. Stefan Paas, op cit., p. 431.
10. Michael Fishbane, "Jeremiah IV 23-26 and Job III 3-13: A Recovered Use of the Creation Pattern," Vetus


12. Ibid., p. 159.


Back to top
Perspective Digest - a publication of the Adventist Theological Society

Justification by Faith

*Adventist belief continues to affirm this great truth proclaimed by the Protestant Reformers.*

Peter M. Van Bemmelen

Seventh-day Adventists believe that they have been called to proclaim the everlasting gospel to every nation, tribe, language, and people, in the context of the messages of the three angels in Revelation 14:6-12. These messages are God’s final appeal to the human race before the second coming of Jesus Christ (vss. 14:14-20).

The expression “everlasting gospel,” which occurs only in this passage in the New Testament, has important implications. First of all, it implies that the gospel was in the purpose of God from eternity. This eternal divine purpose is rooted in God’s everlasting love as stated in Jeremiah 31:3 and John 3:16. Second, it implies that there is only one gospel by which fallen human beings can be saved, and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ, as Paul often refers to it (Rom. 15:9; 1 Cor. 9:12). In other words, from the days of Adam and Eve until the end of the world, there has been and there ever will be only one gospel, one way of salvation.

In the words of the apostle, “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9). Speaking of salvation through Jesus Christ before the religious rulers of Israel, Peter was very emphatic: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Adventists have always perceived themselves as heirs of the great truths recovered and proclaimed by the Protestant Reformers. As stated in the concluding report of another bilateral dialogue: “Adventists have a high appreciation for the Reformation. They see themselves as heirs of Luther and other Reformers, especially in their adherence to the great principles of *sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide, solo Christo.*” This places Adventists in harmony with the traditional evangelical understanding of justification by faith and also with the tradition of the early Christian writers, for, according to Thomas Oden, “The major Reformers’ appeals to *sola scriptura, sola gratia,* and *sola fide* are found abundantly in the patristic interpreters of scripture.”

**The Foundational Teaching of Justification by Faith in the Old Testament**

The unity of Scripture does not mean uniformity. To expect very explicit theological statements in the Old Testament such as are found in the Pauline writings shows a lack of appreciation of the diversity in God’s revelations to and dealings with His inspired messengers. Yet Paul himself appeals
to the Old Testament to show the unity between his teaching on justification by faith or righteousness by faith with that of Moses and the prophets: “But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify” (Rom. 3:21). It is therefore essential to study what the Old Testament teaches about righteousness and justification.

The Old Testament proclaims the righteousness of God in all His dealings with Israel. In the majestic song, which Moses by divine command taught the Israelites to sing, Moses proclaims the name of the Lord in these words: “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he” (Deut. 32:4). Yahweh’s righteousness is manifested, according to the covenant blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 28, in acts of judgment (2 Chron. 12:1-6) and in acts of salvation. The latter are at times referred to as the tsidqot Yahweh, which can be translated as the righteousness or the righteous acts of the Lord (Judg. 5:11). It is important to realize that in the Old Testament, the righteousness of God is often equivalent to the salvation of God as can be observed in Hebrew parallelism (Isa. 51:6, 8).

When it comes to human righteousness, the Old Testament presents an apparent paradox. There are persistent and emphatic statements that nobody is righteous, that all have sinned. David pleaded with God, “Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you” (Ps. 143:2). Solomon acknowledged in his prayer at the dedication of the temple, “‘There is no one who does not sin’” (2 Chron. 6:36). He repeats the same thought in Ecclesiastes 7:20: “Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.”

Three times Moses told the Israelites not to think that the Lord was giving them the land of Canaan because of their righteousness; to the contrary he asserted, “you are a stiff-necked people” (Deut. 9:6). The paradox is that the same writers and the entire Old Testament make a distinction between two classes of human beings: “the righteous” and “the wicked” or similar contrasting distinctions. This raises the crucial question: “How can any human beings be called righteous in the face of the assertion that no one is righteous and that all have sinned?” The significance of this question is intensified when people are designated as righteous or blameless or “friend of God” or “highly esteemed,” such as Noah, Job, Abraham, and Daniel (Gen. 7:1; Job 1:1; Isa. 41:8; Dan. 9:23), yet described as having committed sin or confessing sin. It is evident that their righteousness is not identical with sinlessness. How, then, can they be called righteous or blameless? Edmund Clowney highlights how important this question is: “How can a man be just with God? The whole history of the Old Testament hinges on God’s answer to that question.”

The clear-cut answer is that Yahweh, the covenant God, justifies all who believe in Him, who trust His promises, who acknowledge their sin, who cast themselves on the mercy of God and turn away from their unrighteousness. We read that Abram “believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Job, of whom the Lord testified that he was “‘blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil’” (Job 1:8), was asked by the same Lord, “‘Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?’” (40:8). Before the holy and righteous God, Job recognized his sinfulness and replied, “‘My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (42:5, 6).

David, the anointed of the Lord, when convicted of his sin against God through adultery and murder, confessed his sin and found forgiveness (2 Sam. 12:13). According to Psalms 32 and 51, he was justified before God and could sing, “Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!” (Ps. 32:11). This is justification by faith through grace alone. The righteousness of the righteous in the Old Testament is a gift from the righteous Lord. This is why David, throughout the Psalms, exalts the righteousness of God. Paul stated the truth when he asserted that the Law and the Prophets testify that “apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known” (Rom. 3:21).

Edmund Clowney shows that the Hebrew verb hasdiq “always means ‘to declare to be in the right,’ and therefore to acquit or vindicate.” With an appeal to Deuteronomy 25:1, where the judges of Israel are commanded to “justify the righteous and condemn the wicked,” he states that it “is clear that ‘condemn’ must mean ‘to declare to be wicked,’ not ‘to make wicked’ [italics his], and that ‘justify’ must mean ‘to declare to be righteous,’ and not ‘to make righteous.’ This meaning is consistent in the Old Testament.”

The Lord admonishes judges to give just verdicts because God is the supreme Judge, who testifies of Himself: “I will not acquit [or justify] the guilty” (Ex. 23:7). Though God is speaking here in the context of earthly courts of justice, it becomes apparent when we progress through the Scriptures that this statement has a deep significance concerning salvation. It is necessary to stress that “to justify” is a legal term, declaring that someone is not guilty; this basic meaning of justification as a judicial verdict is retained even when it takes on a broader meaning in God’s progressive revelation and in theological reflection on that revelation.

**Justification by Faith in Christ Alone**

Seventh-day Adventists firmly and wholeheartedly believe that salvation is purely a gift from God in Jesus Christ. Sinful as we are, we can add nothing to the perfect righteousness of Christ, which He wrought out in His incarnation by His perfect obedience to the law of God and by His death on the cross for our sins. In the words of one of the Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists:

“In Christ’s life of perfect obedience to God’s will, His suffering, death, and resurrection, God provided the only means of atonement for human sin, so that those who by faith accept this atonement may have eternal life, and the whole creation may better understand the infinite and holy love of the Creator. This perfect atonement vindicates the righteousness of God’s law and the graciousness of His character; for it both condemns our sin and provides for our forgiveness.”

Salvation through Christ alone is central to the Adventist understanding and experience of salvation. Although throughout our history it did not always receive due emphasis, this central belief can be traced throughout that period with increasing accentuation and articulation in books, tracts, and periodicals flowing by the millions from Adventist publishing houses worldwide. The same is true for Adventist evangelism in a myriad of forms from small study groups in private homes to high-tech

In the writings of Ellen White Christ is consistently presented as the only hope and the only way of salvation for sinful human beings. She wrote in 1891, “Of all professed Christians, Seventh-day Adventists should be foremost in uplifting Christ before the world.” She herself did just that as her writings bear witness.

Concerning justification by faith, she was very explicit. Notice her strong emphasis: “There is not a point that needs to be dwelt upon more earnestly, repeated more frequently, or established more firmly in the minds of all than the impossibility of fallen man meriting anything by his own best good works. Salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ alone.8

“The blood of Christ was shed to atone for sin and to cleanse the sinner; and we must take hold of the merits of Christ's blood, and believe that we have life through his name. Let not the fallacies of Satan deceive you; you are justified by faith alone,”9

It is not surprising that Ellen G. White held in high regard Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. “With great clearness and power the apostle presented the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ.”10 She commented on the fact that Paul could but dimly foresee the far-reaching influence his words would have. “Through all the ages the great truth of justification by faith has stood as a mighty beacon to guide repentant sinners into the way of life.”11 She mentioned Martin Luther’s experience and then concluded that for “the epistle to the church at Rome, every Christian has reason to thank God.”12

The importance of the Epistle to the Romans and other epistles of Paul for Adventist understanding of the gospel is manifested in scholarly publications as well as general biblical and devotional reading materials.

As stated earlier, Adventists believe that there is only one way of salvation, and that way is faith in Christ and His righteousness. This central belief can be and has been expressed in different words, just as the Scriptures are not monotonous but present the truth of the everlasting gospel in diverse ways. Though Adventist scholars may differ over emphasis on certain aspects of the gospel, just as differences can be found among scholars of other denominations, there is significant unity concerning the doctrine of justification through grace alone by faith alone. In the words of Adventist theologian Hans LaRondelle:

“Basic to Adventism is the gospel principle that human salvation is not through the law or by human works but solely through the saving grace of God. . . . Adventist belief accepts Christ as man’s substitute and example, in this irreversible order. Faith in Christ as our substitute before God provides our justification as God’s act of declaring the repentant believer righteous. Justification is seen as the opposite of condemnation (see Rom. 5:16; 8:1, 33, 34). The basis for the believers’ justification is not their law observance, but Christ’s sinless obedience (verses 18, 19).”13

Undoubtedly, justification is primarily a judicial declaration by God that the sinner who believes in Christ is righteous. It is the opposite of condemnation. But the faith by which we are justified is not merely a mental assent to a certain doctrine. It is a living faith that takes hold of Christ and His atoning sacrifice. Luther distinguished between “acquired faith” and “true faith.” He wrote: “Acquired
faith has as the end or use of Christ’s passion mere speculation. True faith has as the end and use of Christ’s passion life and salvation. . . . True faith with arms outstretched joyfully embraces the Son of God given for it and says, ‘He is my beloved, and I am His.’”

In a similar vein, Ellen G. White wrote that there “are thousands who believe in the gospel and in Jesus Christ as the world’s Redeemer, but they are not saved by that faith. This is only an assent of their judgment to that which is a fact.”

She calls this a general faith and contrasts it with a faith that lays hold upon Christ as one’s sin-pardoning Savior, a faith that leads to repentance, “a faith that accomplishes its work for the receiver, a faith in the atoning sacrifice, a faith that works by love and purifies the soul.” She further clarified this faith with these words: “The moment true faith in the merits of the costly atoning sacrifice is exercised, claiming Christ as a personal Saviour, that moment the sinner is justified before God, because he is pardoned.”

**Challenges to Adventist Interpretation of Justification by Faith**

Seventh-day Adventists have not escaped accusations that they do not really hold the biblical teaching of justification by grace alone through faith alone. Anthony Hoekema in his book *The Four Major Cults*, expresses as his conviction that Adventists, “though they claim to teach salvation by grace alone,” are in reality guilty of a kind of mixed legalism. He bases this on the Adventist doctrine of the investigative judgment and on Adventist teaching on the need to keep the seventh day as the Sabbath, the proper Lord’s Day (especially in the eschatological setting of Revelation 13:11-17). For these and a number of other reasons, he classifies Seventh-day Adventism as a cult. Similar criticisms have been raised by others, not the least by some former Adventists.

Not everyone agrees with Hoekema’s assessment. In his work *The Kingdom of the Cults*, evangelical scholar Walter Martin showed some serious inconsistencies in Hoekema’s reasoning. Although Martin himself did not agree with certain Adventist beliefs, he accepted as genuine their emphatic affirmation “that salvation comes only by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ’s sacrifice upon the cross.”

It is true that Adventists believe that the law of the Ten Commandments, including the seventh-day Sabbath, is still binding upon the human race. But this does not mean that they believe in any sense that sinners can be justified by obedience to God’s commandments. As stated before, they emphatically reject the idea that sinners are justified through their obedience to God’s law. In this respect, Adventist belief agrees with the position of the Protestant Reformers as stated, for instance, in the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, which says in Chapter 12, entitled, “Of the Law of God”:

“...We teach that this law [the Law of God] was not given to men that they might be justified by keeping it, but that rather from what it teaches we may know [our] weakness, sin and condemnation, and, despairing of our strength, might be converted to Christ in faith. For the apostle openly declares: ‘The law brings wrath,’ and, ‘Through the law comes knowledge of sin’ (Rom. 4:15; 3:20), and, ‘If a law had been given which could justify or make alive, then righteousness would indeed be
by the law. But the Scripture [that is, the law] has concluded all under sin, that the promise which was of the faith of Jesus might be given to those who believe. . . . Therefore, the law was our schoolmaster unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith’ (Gal. 3:21 ff.).”

The same article, however, begins by affirming “that the will of God is explained for us in the law of God, what he wills or does not will us to do, what is good and just, or what is evil and unjust. Therefore, we confess that the law is good and holy.” Adventists, accepting such affirmation as congruent with the teaching of Scripture, believe that the new covenant promise of the Lord, as given through Jeremiah and repeated in Hebrews 8:10, (‘‘I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people’’) is to be fulfilled in the life of all who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior and High Priest.

Though Paul emphatically maintains “that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law” (Rom. 3:28), which is true for Jews and Gentiles; in the same context he affirms that through this faith we do not nullify the law, “Rather, we uphold the law” (vs. 31). Elsewhere, he states the same truth in different words, “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts” (1 Cor. 7:19). This obedience results from the faith and love of Christ, implanted by the Holy Spirit, “for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Gal. 5:6).

Jesus, in the final words to His disciples before His crucifixion, spoke several times about this obedience born of love: “‘If you love me, keep my commands” (John 14:15); “‘As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love’” (15:9, 10); “‘You are my friends if you do what I command’” (vs. 14). Adventists believe that it is this obedience of love to which Paul refers when he writes that “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:10).

Though Adventists believe that Christians are called to “the obedience that comes from faith” (1:5) and that we are “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10), they strenuously reject any suggestion that such obedience and good works are in some sense meritorious. The Council of Trent taught in its Decree on Justification that justification increases “through the observance of the commandments of God and of the Church, faith cooperating with good works”; it also taught the merit of good works as the fruits of justification. Its canons on justification pronounced this condemnation that anyone who said “that the justice received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of its increase, let him be anathema.”

Another anathema condemned anyone saying “that the good works of the one justified are in such manner the gifts of God that they are not also the good merits of him justified.” In other words, justification is increased by obedience and good works, the good works not just being the gifts of God’s grace but also the merits of the justified Christian. This belief was reconfirmed in the
Catechism of the Catholic Church, published with the papal blessing of John Paul II. The Catechism also reconfirmed the Council of Trent’s position that “Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.” This view of justification was and still is emphatically rejected by consistent Protestants, including Seventh-day Adventists.

That the issue is as relevant in the 21st century as in the 16th century is evident from the fact that Francis Beckwith, who was for a short time president of the Evangelical Theological Society, in May 2007 resigned his position and his membership in the Society, after in April rejoining the Roman Catholic Church (the church in which he grew up). According to Christianity Today, Beckwith changed his views on justification because he “found the Protestant view, which assumes that sanctification follows justification, inadequate.” Beckwith became convinced that the Roman Catholic view on justification “has more explanatory power to account for both the biblical texts on justification [and] the church’s historical understanding of salvation prior to the Reformation, all the way back to the ancient church of the first few centuries.”

This highlights the paramount importance and centrality of the doctrine of justification for all who accept the sola Scriptura principle. According to the Christianity Today editorial, the Reformers “rightly taught that only Jesus’ merit counted before God and that only through faith could this merit be ours.” Adventists wholeheartedly concur.

From the preceding discussion, it should be clear that Seventh-day Adventists believe that keeping the Ten Commandments, including observing the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week, is seen as part of the obedience of faith. It is the fruit of justification, never the root. Christ refers to Himself as Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28), obviously not to abolish the Sabbath, but that all who are justified by faith would follow their Lord in keeping the Sabbath as a memorial of creation as well as a seal of their redemption from the slavery of sin through Christ (Ex. 20:8-11; 31:12-17). There is not a trace of legalism in such Sabbath observance.

If our justification is through grace alone by faith alone, does the obedience of faith have anything to do with our salvation? Or to phrase the question differently: Do our thoughts, words, and actions play a role in determining our eternal destiny? These are crucial questions closely related to the issue of the final judgment.

Scripture has much to say about that judgment, not least in the teachings of our Lord as recorded in the Gospels. Said Jesus: “I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted [RSV/NKJV: “justified”], and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:36, 37). Here our Lord talks about justification and condemnation (the judicial declarations of innocence and guilt) in the context of the day of judgment. Obviously, there is an eschatological aspect to justification. Adventists believe on the basis of Scripture that the day of judgment is a very comprehensive concept, and much Adventist literature has been published on the subject. Suffice it to say here that they hold that the judgment is to be distinguished in an investigative and an executive judgment. It is their belief in an investigative judgment that has led to the accusation that they do not really believe
in the Reformation principles of *sola fide, sola gratia*.

In Romans 8:1, Paul tells us that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Earlier, he had affirmed that “since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). All of this is a present reality. Elsewhere it is written, “God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are his’” (2 Tim. 2:19).

It is sometimes argued that such texts show that for those who are in Christ, there is no need to be judged and that the concept of an investigative judgment is unbiblical and takes away the assurance of salvation for believers. This kind of reasoning, however, totally ignores the very clear teaching of Scripture that all will be judged. The Apostle Paul is very emphatic about this fact. “We will all stand before God's judgment seat. . . . Each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:10, 12); “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10).

Other passages of Scripture can be added. Solomon wrote toward the end of his checkered life: “Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (Eccl. 12:13, 14). The Apostle Peter informs us that judgment will begin with the family of God. All who in some way have professed faith in God and Christ will be judged before “those who do not obey the gospel of God” (1Peter 4:17). Do these assertions take away the assurance of our justification?

The clear-cut answer to that question is: “Not if we remain in Christ!” In the parable of the vine and the branches, Jesus stressed the crucial importance of remaining in Him. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). He adds that if anyone who does not remain in Him will be like a withered branch that is thrown into the fire and burned (vs. 6).

The final judgment will bring to light who remained in Christ and who did not. It will be manifested in whether our faith in Christ bore fruit in the obedience of faith or whether it was a sterile faith (James 2:17, 26). It will bring to light in the presence of the entire universe who kept the faith of Christ and who lost hold of the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Paul’s assurance of eternal life is rooted in the fact that he had “kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7), his faith in Christ as his Savior and Lord, the righteous Judge from whom he would receive the crown of righteousness. LaRondelle stresses the relation between the present justification of believers and their justification in the final judgment:

“Paul based our certainty of future salvation on the reality of our present salvation, the certainty of our future justification on the reality of our present justification: ‘Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!’ (Rom. 5:9, italics added; see also verse 17). In other words, when Jesus justifies us, we have full assurance that He will justify us in the final judgment if we remain in him.”

In a different way, P. T. O’Brien, contributor to the book *Right With God*, also stresses the
relation between justification by faith and judgment according to works. He makes it clear, however, that “The ground of justification lies not in works, nor in faith, but ‘in the revelation of God’s grace in Christ embraced by faith.’ Works are indispensable for they demonstrate the presence of true faith and are evidence of one’s being united with Christ in his death and resurrection.” 29 Adventists agree and believe that the judgment, whether the investigative judgment or the executive judgment, is good news for all who, like Paul, by God’s grace have kept the faith in Christ.

Peter M. Van Bemmelen, Th.D., is Emeritus Professor of Systematic Theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in this article are quoted from the New International Version.


5. Ibid., p. 23.


9. Signs of the Times (March 24, 1890).


11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., p. 374.


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., p. 357.


22. H. J. Schroeder, trans., Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books and Publishers,
1978), p. 36.

23. Ibid., pp. 45 (Canon 24) and 46 (Canon 32).


The Epistle to the Hebrews makes some startling assertions about God’s expectations of us.

Felix H. Cortez

At first sight, the notion of obedience does not seem to be prominent in the Letter to the Hebrews. The author uses the verb obey only two times. In the first passage, he asserts that Jesus “became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb. 5:9, NRSV). In the second, he refers to the fact that “Abraham obeyed” when God called him to set out to an unknown place (11:8).

Similarly, the noun obedience appears only once, referring to the fact that the Son “learned obedience through what he suffered” (5:8). Two other references to passive obedience appear in 13:17, referring to the need to obey church leaders, and in 11:7, referring to Noah’s obedience in building the ark.

This superficial first impression, however, is misleading. Hebrews is a moving exhortation built upon the conviction that God “has spoken to us in His Son” (1:2, NASB) and, therefore, “We must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it” (2:1). A study of this complex New Testament document shows that the author seeks through carefully crafted arguments, compelling logic, and moving examples to strengthen the sagging faith of these Christians who courageously suffered in the past public shaming, persecution, and financial loss but have now begun to drift away from Christ and are even in danger of blatant unbelief.

William Lane’s description of this document is on the mark: “Hebrews is an expression of passionate and personal concern for the Christian addressed.” That is why the argument of Hebrews reaches its climax with a strong exhortation to “hear” God’s voice: “See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!” (12:25). Thus, we can appropriately describe Hebrews as a “passionate and personal” exhortation to obey the “word of God.”

The theology of the word of God in the Book of Hebrews is structured around three questions: (1) How has God spoken to us? (2) What has God said? and (3) What are the implications of obedience and disobedience?

How Has God Spoken to Us?

Hebrews 12:18-24 consists of a contrast between mounts Sinai and Zion, which the author develops into an argument “from the lesser to the greater.” The author compares here—once again—the experience of the ancient Israelites before Sinai at the inauguration of the first covenant
to the experience of believers at Mount Zion on the occasion of the inauguration of the new covenant.

On the one hand stands Sinai. (The mountain itself is not referred by name. The description assumes that the readers are familiar with Deuteronomy 4:11, 12. Hebrews 12:21 quotes Deuteronomy 9:19, which refers to Moses’ fear of approaching God after the golden calf incident.) The mountain is enshrouded in the numinous phenomena of the blazing fire, the darkness, the gloom, the tempest, and the sound of the trumpet: all of them powerful physical events that produced fear even in Moses, the mediator of the covenant. This formidable scene climaxes in a “voice” that “made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them” (Heb. 12:19).

On the other hand stands Zion, where a “festal gathering” contrasts with the dreadful scene of Mount Sinai. No phenomena or barriers prevent access to God; instead, believers blend with angels in the celebration that takes place. The description culminates with the “sprinkled blood” of Jesus that “speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (vs. 24, italics supplied).

The main point of the contrast is that at the climax of each event, both Israel and the believers have “heard” a voice. This is the pivot on which the exhorting argument of the passage turns. On this basis, the author warns the readers: “See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!” (vs. 25, italics supplied).

Note that this warning repeats, in essence, the first warning of the letter: “Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (2:1-3).

The question is: How have the readers heard the voice of God speaking to them from heaven? Also, in what sense is this experience greater than the one Israel experienced at the foot of Sinai when they heard the voice of God speak—literally—the Ten Commandments? This leads to the author’s theology of the nature of Scripture.

A World in Which Believers Stand in the Presence of God

No other document of the New Testament quotes the Old Testament as often as does Hebrews. Beyond the amount of quotations, however, there is something unique to Hebrews’ use of Scripture: the oral nature of the word of God and its immediacy.

Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum has noted that almost all the quotations from the Old Testament “are quotations of direct speech” (italics hers). The significant thing is that whether they quote the oracles of the prophets or the meditations of the psalmist, the author of Hebrews understands and presents them as instances of divine utterance. In some cases, Hebrews quotes God’s very words from the LXX; for example, “I will surely bless you and multiply you” in Hebrews 6:14 (quoting Genesis 22:17). In other cases, when Hebrews quotes a person inspired by God, such as a prophet or a psalmist, with few exceptions it makes no mention of the human agent. Sometimes the quotation itself makes clear that God is speaking: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will
establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah’” (Heb. 8:8, italics supplied). At other times, the use of the first person in the quotation itself identifies God as the speaker: “I will be his Father, and he will be my Son’” (Heb. 1:5, italics supplied). Finally, in the vast majority of cases, Hebrews introduces the quotation with a verb of saying in which God is the subject.

Thus, implicitly or explicitly, the author of Hebrews describes God as speaking words of the Scriptures directly to the audience of the letter. Note that the “word of God” is spoken, not written. It is a striking fact that the author of Hebrews does not use the common formula “as it is written.” Many other ancient authors—including Qumran and the Mishnah—use verbs of saying to introduce Old Testament quotations; however, “No other author uses them to the complete exclusion of writing verbs or references to scripture qua scripture, i.e., as written text.”

This leads to the second peculiar characteristic of Hebrews’ use of Scripture: its immediacy. A quotation of direct speech—as the vast majority of Hebrews’ quotations are—is in fact a subcategory of the more general term “quotation,” and it has unique characteristics. A quotation evokes the past and therefore is bound to the original context and meaning. As George W. Savran affirms: “Repetition [i.e., quotation] . . . de-emphasizes the present moment by supplying the perspective of an earlier time.” A quotation of direct speech has a different force, however. It “speaks directly to and within the new context, with as much immediate impact as it had in its original context.” In other words, a quotation refers the reader to a time and context different than his own, but the quotation of direct speech reuses the past to speak to the reader in the present. Thus, the “quotations in Hebrews are reused prophetic oracles” that retain their original oracular force.

The effect of the use of direct speech in Hebrews is, then, that Hebrews’ quotations are not used to refer to or evoke something God said in the past but to “re-present” God’s words to the audience in the present. They speak “directly to and within the new context” of the audience. In this sense, they are a new speech-act of God. Accordingly, Hebrews not only uses verbs of saying to introduce its quotations from Scripture but also, in most of the cases, the verb form introducing the quotation is present indicative or a present participle.

This immediacy of the word of God in Hebrews is very important for its hortatory argument. By means of the quotation of the word of God as direct speech, Hebrews has made a “theological redescription of time and space.” In other words, it has constructed through Scripture a world in which the readers—or, hearers—stand in the presence of God and hear Him speak.

Now, what is God saying?

**What Has God Said?**

Hebrews 12:22 describes God speaking at Mount Zion. This is the only place where Mount Zion is explicitly referred to in the Book of Hebrews; nonetheless, Mount Zion is the scriptural background to the events referred to through scriptural quotations in the Epistle.

First, Mount Zion is the place where Jesus, the Son of God, has been enthroned. The three Psalms used in chapter 1 of the Book of Hebrews to describe the enthronement of the Son have
Mount Zion as their context. Hebrews 1:5 (also 5:5) quotes Psalm 2, which refers to an event happening at Mount Zion: “I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.’ I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’” (vss. 6, 7, italics supplied). Likewise, Psalm 110, quoted in Hebrews 1:3, 13, refers to an event in Zion: “The Lord says to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’ The Lord sends out from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your foes” (vss. 1, 2, italics supplied). Finally, the acclamation of Jesus’ eternal rule in Hebrews 1:10-12 uses the words of Psalm 102:21-25 that have, again, Zion as their context (vss. 13, 16, 21).

Second, Mount Zion is the place where the Son was appointed “priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 5:6). The introduction of Jesus’ appointment as priest (vs. 6) with a reference to His adoption as Son of God (vs. 5) links the appointment of Jesus as high priest with His enthronement as king. Likewise, the scriptural context to Psalm 110:4—the scriptural basis for Jesus’ appointment as high priest—is, again, Mount Zion (Ps. 110:2).

Finally, the argument of Hebrews implies that Zion is also the place where the covenant is inaugurated. Hebrews 7:12 argues that a change in the priesthood implies a change in the law (7:11-19). From this, the author develops the notion that a new covenant has been inaugurated with the appointment of Jesus as high priest (8–10). This is confirmed in Hebrews 12:24, where at the center of the “festal gathering” at Mount Zion stand “Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and . . . the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel”

These three events—Jesus’ enthronement, His appointment as high priest, and the inauguration of the new covenant—constitute the backbone of the structure of Hebrews’ expository sections, and all of them are performed through God’s speech—or what contemporary philosophers would call God’s “illocution.” God enthrones Jesus above the angels (Hebrews 1–2) with the words of a catena of Psalms (Heb. 1:5-14)—especially Psalms 2:7 and 110:1. God appoints Jesus as high priest (Hebrews 5–7) with the oath of Psalm 110:4. God creates a new covenant (Hebrews 8–10) with the words of Jeremiah 31:31-34. Therefore, by referring to and using Scripture as God’s own speech in his exposition, the author of Hebrews has constructed a world in which the audience stands at Mount Zion where they hear God speak and, hence, witness the enthronement of the Son, His appointment as high priest, and the inauguration of the new covenant.

**Implications of Obedience and Disobedience**

This leads to an important realization. To reject the voice of God in Hebrews means to refuse Jesus as the ruler seated at the right hand of God, to disavow Him as high priest in the heavenly sanctuary, and to repudiate the provisions of the new covenant. On the other hand, to “hear” or “obey” the word of God means to acknowledge Jesus as leader and follow Him into God’s rest (Hebrews 4), to confess Jesus as high priest and draw near with confidence because of His intercession into the presence of God (4:14-16; 10:19-23), and to own the provisions of the new covenant by embracing the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ and its benefits, renouncing the multiple
sacrifices of the old covenant.

Thus, the stakes for obedience in Hebrews are very high. On the one hand, the rewards are exceedingly generous. God offers faithful believers even better promises than those offered under the first covenant (8:6). The author asserts that “it is impossible that God would prove false” to His promises so that we who have “taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us” (6:18). For those who take refuge in Him, “He always lives to make intercession for them” (7:25). On the other hand, the penalties are very harsh. The author warns the readers about the dire consequences of disobedience. It is impossible to restore to repentance those who spurn the Son of God (10:26) and hold Him up to contempt (8:4-6). They will suffer “a fearful prospect of judgment” (10:27).

Disobedience implies the rejection of the rule of Jesus as king, His intercession as high priest, and the provisions of the new covenant. In other words, it means the rejection of grace. The promises and warnings of Hebrews are especially relevant for us in the 21st century. We might think that those who heard Jesus speak and saw Him perform miracles have a greater responsibility than we who have met Him only through the words of Scripture.

Hebrews argues the opposite, however. The readers did not hear God speak at Mount Sinai or Jesus while on earth (2:1-4); yet, they have greater responsibility because they hear God’s voice speaking to them through Scripture. This is the most striking teaching of Hebrews regarding obedience. Hebrews places the authority of Scripture over the authority of sense experience. What you “hear” through Scripture is more authoritative than what you see, touch, hear, or taste through the senses.

Luke Timothy Johnson is correct in his conclusion: “Scripture . . . is not simply a collection of ancient texts that can throw light on the present through analogy; it is the voice of the living God who speaks through the text directly and urgently to people in the present. The word of God is therefore living and active (4:12).”

Therefore, Hebrews’ warning continues to be relevant for us who hear today God speak in the Scriptures: “If they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!” (12:25).

Felix H. Cortez, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Academic Secretary of Graduate Programs in the School of Theology at Universidad de Montemorelos, Montemorelos, Mexico.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture references in this article are quoted from the New Revised Standard Version.


4. Ibid., p. 97.


7. Ibid., p. 111.


Back to top