

# A Meticulous Scholarly Work

*Review by Alden Thompson*

I want to thank the Association of Adventist Forums for the invitation to respond to Herold Weiss's book. It is a great privilege for me to join in dialogue with one of my former teachers at the seminary, a teacher whom I much admired and who gently pushed me to challenge my own conservative inclinations.

At a time when narrative and testimony have almost driven serious analysis and exegesis from the Church and have even made significant inroads into academia, I am powerfully tempted to read even this highly technical work as autobiography. As I worked my way through it, I could not rid myself of the recurring mental pictures: Herold Weiss, with Earle Hilgert and Sakae Kubo, if I remember correctly, teaming up to teach Introduction to the New Testament to a huge crowd of unruly seminarians assembled in the chapel at Andrews University.

The lectures did not always strike home, probably because our teachers were already running with the horses and battling their way through the swelling of the Jordan, to borrow figures from Jeremiah 5, but their students were just trying to keep up with the footmen, and were already weary from simple battles in a peaceful land. We weren't ready for the Jordan yet.

It was in a class in Old Testament Theology where I saw Weiss really shine. I tackled Helmer Ringgren's *The Messiah in the Old*

*Testament* for a serious book review and turned it in with fear and trembling, hoping that I had understood the book. He said good things about my review, and even agreed with my assessment. I was greatly relieved. I suspect that not only his teaching, but also his positive response help to explain why I have such good memories of him.

But other pictures also crowded in upon me as I read, for the seminary was in turmoil when I was there, from 1965 to 1967. After the dust had cleared, some of the finest, god-fearing teachers on earth were gone. I don't want to know which ones left voluntarily and which ones were asked to leave. Such questions are often too painful even to discuss in private, much less in public.

Weiss went to teach in a Roman Catholic university while continuing to worship on Sabbath with his Spanish-speaking soul mates. And now he writes a meticulous scholarly work about the Sabbath, not from anger, but from love. I think I catch glimpses of that love lurk-



ing in the shadows of his carefully developed arguments.

So what of the book's strengths and weaknesses? First, it is a highly technical work, and except for the quite readable final chapter, would be challenging for anyone not trained in biblical studies. The Greek and Hebrew scripts are used instead of transliterations—one could have wished that the press had found a final Greek sigma somewhere among its fonts and that it could have at least gotten right the Hebrew word for *Sabbath*. But if theology majors are inclined to shrug at the biblical languages, what can we expect from printers?

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The summary itself depends on the carefully nuanced exegetical and historical arguments developed in each chapter. That means that the nontechnical reader will have to live by faith, even in the last chapter. As for usefulness to pastors, teachers, and thoughtful students of Scripture, Weiss tackles several "problem" passages, turning some into better news than we had hoped (Colossians 2, for example), and some into worse news than we had feared (Hebrews 4, for example). Interestingly enough, both Colossians and Hebrews are used by modern evangelical polemicists who argue that the Sabbath is no longer a viable option for Christians.

But Weiss does not reject the Sabbath. He argues persuasively that the Christians in the first century regarded it highly. His analysis of the Synoptic Gospels is most forceful in that respect. What he also does, however, is something that intrigues me a great deal, namely, argue for a typology of Sabbath keepers. This extends from those on the left who have moved the Sabbath into the abstract, symbolic realm, either in a present "realized" sense (John), or in a future eschatological sense (Hebrews)—in other words, they wouldn't go to "church" on a real seventh day any more. On the right side of the spectrum are those who hold to a specific seventh day (synoptic Gospels, Colossians). Paul, at least in Romans, seems to be arguing that these two communities should learn to live together in Christ.

In short, Weiss develops a model in which the "abstract" thinkers on the left move away from a concrete Sabbath tied to the calendar, whereas the "concrete" thinkers on the right defend it with some tenacity. Such a model presents us with real challenges in our modern

world, for unless one moves in the direction of nonjudgmental Myers-Briggs temperament profiles, the tendency of our modern age is to see the abstract thinkers as intelligent, the concrete thinkers as dumb, or at least not as bright.

Indeed, the 16 P. F. Test Profile that I took at Andrews in 1965 when Weiss was teaching at the seminary describes the "concrete-thinking" people as "less intelligent" with "lower scholastic mental capacity," whereas the "abstract-thinking" people are "more intelligent," "bright," with "higher scholastic mental capacity." And that language was still being used in 1981 when

I took the test again (at which point, according to the test, I had become considerably "more intelligent"!).

We all know where *Spectrum* fits on that spectrum.

Now my question is: How can a worshiping community stay together if there are no concrete markers to hold it together? The universalizing impulse represented by those who stress the symbolic nature of the Sabbath can be enriching and exciting. But when will they come together for worship and with whom? Maybe it was and is inevitable that the Luke/Acts emphasis "eventually became mainstream Christianity," to quote Weiss (181). In his chart, he describes the Luke/Acts view as follows: "Sabbath observance is an exemplary sign of liberating piety fully exhibited by Jesus and Paul" (180).

In this connection, the history of Reform Judaism is sobering. On rational grounds, the Jews who established Reform Judaism in nineteenth-century Germany moved worship to Sunday and abolished Jewish food laws. But when the community began to disintegrate, they came back to the seventh day and to Jewish food laws, on rational grounds, that is, in order to keep the community together. As a thriving worshiping community, however, Reform Judaism is not one likely to be held up by church growth people as a success story.

Let us be candid, in our modern secular world, integrating belief, worship, and critical analysis is not an easy task. C. S. Lewis commented, while arguing against extemporaneous prayer, that the attempt to carry on "a *critical* and a *devotional* activity at the same moment" is not possible, for those are "two things hardly compatible."<sup>1</sup>

Does Albert Camus's comment about music also apply to religion? "Truly fertile Music, the only kind that will move us, that we truly appreciate, will be a Music conducive to Dream, which banishes all reason and analysis. One must not wish first to understand and then to feel. Art does not tolerate Reason."<sup>2</sup>

Why is it that Annie Dillard would write an article entitled "Singing with the Fundamentalists" and publish it in the *Yale Review*?<sup>3</sup> And why would it be reprinted by the Theological Students Fellowship *Bulletin*, an Evangelical journal?<sup>3</sup>

## Could the author of John and the author of Hebrews worship with their brothers and sisters who preserved the Synoptics?

And what should we make of the dialogue about "unthinking" Hasidic Judaism in Chaim Potok's *The Promise*, the dialogue between David and Reuven Malter, the father-son duo, both committed to scholarly analysis:

*Reuven:* "I wish they weren't so afraid of new ideas."

*David:* "You want a great deal, Reuven. The Messiah has not yet come. Will new ideas enable them to go on singing and dancing?"

*Reuven:* "We can't ignore the truth, abba."

*David:* "No..., we cannot ignore the truth. At the same time we cannot quite sing and dance as they do."<sup>4</sup>

My question would be: Could the author of John and the author of Hebrews worship with their brothers and sisters who preserved the Synoptics? And is Paul's vision of the nonjudgmental church, a church that brings the two segments together, still alive and possible today? I'd love to hear Weiss's comments on such matters.

Finally, I would like to offer a quote from James Williams, author of a 1991 Harper book, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*, one that articulates our challenge today. I don't intend this comment to be any kind of subtle critique of Weiss's excellent book. Not at all. But I do think the Williams quote is pertinent for a community today that wants to think, believe, and worship, and that finds the Sabbath a tantalizing invitation to all three, perhaps in ways analogous to those reflected in the life and experience of Philo the Jew, who, according to Weiss's analysis, could get very upset with

his fellow Jews for slipping away from Sabbath practices. Here, now is the quote from Williams:

As for biblical interpretation, there are not many institutions, outside fundamentalist and evangelical circles, where it continues to hold a preeminent place. And where biblical scholarship is still pursued, much of it is so permeated with overspecialization or intellectual faddishness that it communicates very little to lay people or even to scholars in other fields. Indeed, much of that very

little that it does communicate to the laity is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as destructive, because it appears to negate the value and significance of traditional texts, stories, symbols, and doctrines. One of the primary reasons for this perception is that in the university setting one often finds the point of view that the theologian or the teacher in religious studies is not responsible to any community or circle of people except the academy and its discourse.<sup>5</sup>

As members of the body of Christ, Weiss and I are responsible to a community of believers. Weiss's intriguing book can help us explore what it means to cherish a God-given "day of Gladness."

## Notes and References

1. *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. W. H. Lewis (New York: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, 1966), 239.
2. Albert Camus, "Essay on Music," 1932, cited in Robert Andrews, *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 611.
3. (May-June 1987): 4-7.
4. Chaim Potok, *The Promise* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 325.
5. James Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1991), 2-3.

Alden Thompson is professor of biblical studies at Walla Walla College.

