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ARTICLE

2

Jesus as the Son of God
Clinton Wahlen



SCRIPTURE SPOTLIGHT

10

Why Did God Order the Israelites
to "Utterly Destroy" the Canaanite
Nations, Including Women and
Children?
Michael G. Hasel



BOOK REVIEW

13

Adventists and Catholics: The
History of a Turbulent Relationship
Gerhard Pfandl



EDITOR'S PICK

16

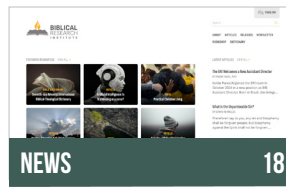
Revisiting the Trinity and Exploring
the Trinity



EDITOR'S PICK

17

Sola Scriptura: Authority,
Reliability, and Relevance of the
Bible



NEWS

18

BRI's Website Has a New Look!



INDEX

19

Index to Reflections

Reflections explores biblical and theological questions and seeks to foster theological and doctrinal unity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Its intended audience is church administrators, church leaders, pastors, and teachers.

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Jesus as the Son of God

Clinton Wahlen, BRI



The nature of God can never be fully understood by finite creatures and will ever remain to some extent a mystery apart from what has been revealed (Deut 29:29; 1 Cor 2:9–12). The most complete revelation of God is found in His Son, Jesus Christ (Heb 1:1–3). But what does the Bible mean when it calls Jesus “the Son of God”? Increasingly this question is asked and different answers given. Some try to suggest that Jesus is the “literal” or “actual” Son of God, meaning by such an expression that He was literally begotten by the Father sometime in eternity past.¹ They object to making Jesus’ unique relation to the Father as the Son of God merely metaphorical and see Proverbs 8:22–28 as describing a literal birth of the Son by the Father so that it is a literal Sonship, not a metaphor.²

It is true that the divine Father-Son relationship cannot be fully encapsulated within the limited conception of metaphor. A real and genuine relation is being indicated. As Jesus Himself describes it, “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him” (Matt 11:27).³ This unity of Christ with the Father is at least threefold—a oneness of *nature*, a spiritual oneness of *character*, and a volitional oneness of *purpose*.

The description of the Son in a given verse of Scripture is amenable to more than one interpretation; the same terminology can have different nuances. For example, “Son of Man” in the Gospels may sometimes mean “human being” (Matt 8:20), similar to references

in the Hebrew Bible to Ezekiel as “son of man” (Heb. *ben ‘adam*),⁴ while at other times this title is like the heavenly “Son of Man” in Daniel 7:13 (e.g., Matt 13:41; 16:27; 19:28; 24:27, 30). Jesus as “Son” should not be underinterpreted, nor overinterpreted; we should allow it to be biblically interpreted and accept *all* that Scripture includes in its meaning.

An important hermeneutical principle is that unclear Bible passages are to be understood in the light of clearer statements that bear on the same subject. So, it is helpful to look first at the Gospels—especially the Gospel of John, which has perhaps the clearest revelation of who Jesus is as the Son of God. Then we will consider some misunderstood statements of Paul within the larger context of his epistles (1 Cor 8:6; 1 Tim 2:5; Eph 4:4–6; Rom 15:6; 1 Thess 1:9–10). These examples are taken as illustrative of a sound hermeneutical method by which the divine revelation given in regard to the Father and the Son may be understood within the larger context of Scripture. Finally, some consideration will be given to insights found in the writings of Ellen G. White.

Jesus as Son in the Gospels

At the outset, the New Testament presents Jesus as our God and Savior because only God can save us; we need to know not only *how* we are saved, but *by whom*. “God has chosen gradually to reveal Himself through the pages of the Bible in harmony with our ability to comprehend it and our need to know more about who He is and His work for our salvation.”⁵ Thus, Jesus is identified as the fulfillment of prophetic hopes, including as the promised “Son” (Matt 1:22–23; Luke 1:32; cf. Isa 7:14; 9:6–7). One of Matthew’s most important themes is Jesus as the Son of God.⁶ “Jesus is the ideal Israel—God’s ‘Son’: called out of Egypt (2:15), passing through the waters of baptism (3:16–17), being tempted in the wilderness and succeeding where Israel failed (4:3, 6).”⁷ His incarnation reflects the involvement of all three Persons of the Trinity. The virginal conception of Jesus through the agency of the Holy Spirit enables Mary to “bear a Son” who would “save His people from their sins” (Matt 1:21 NASB95). According to Luke, the angel

Jesus as the Son of God

Gabriel revealed to her how it could be that she would have a son despite being a virgin: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).⁸ The language describes an unfathomable miracle of creation not unlike the creation of the first human being; since no “word” (Gk. *rhēma*) of God can fail, Mary responds, “Let it be to me according to your word [*rhēma*]” (vv. 37–38).⁹ Similarly, John explicitly alludes to Genesis, that “the Word became [Gk. *egeneto*] flesh” (John 1:14),¹⁰ the divine Son of God took on humanity.

Similarly, at the commencement of Jesus’ messianic ministry, the activity of all three Persons is seen:

When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”¹¹ (Matt 3:16–17)

God the Father and God the Holy Spirit were deeply involved both in the birth of Jesus and at the beginning of His ministry when He was anointed as the promised Messiah and Savior from sin. His unique role as Son within the triune Godhead is emphasized by Jesus Himself in prayer to His Father (Luke 10:21–22) and in His affirmation of Peter’s confession of Him as “the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16–17). Heaven’s revelation alone enables us to see Jesus as the truly divine Son.¹² Such also occurred when, in connection with the darkness lifting, the earthquake, and other supernatural manifestations, the centurion and others guarding the cross “were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Matt 27:54 ESV). This declaration “would involve some understanding of Christ’s character and lineage as divine, even if the full significance of that title would not be comprehensible apart from the teachings of Jesus about the heavenly Father and the nature of His kingdom.”¹³

The Gospel of John presents the most extensive revelation of Jesus as the Son found anywhere in Scripture, and much of this is in the form of self-revelation. John 1:1, despite its seeming simplicity, is breathtaking in its depth. Use of the Greek article *ho* (the) and its strategic omission distinguish God the Father (*ho theos*) from “The Word” (*ho logos*), and clarify the relation between them.¹⁴ Significantly, John focuses here on who and what “The Word” is because he recognizes this needs further inspired clarification. John 1:1 identifies the Word, through a deliberate allusion to Genesis 1:1, as existing

“in the beginning.” The Greek phrase (*en archē*) does not actually have an article because it is impossible to define that point in time.

Similarly, Genesis 1:1 uses language to describe God’s creation of the universe in an indefinite past, while the rest of Genesis 1 focuses on God’s creation of the earth’s biosphere and life on it.¹⁵ The absence of the article in the final clause of John 1:1 (“The Word was God”) makes two things clear: (1) the Word is God, and (2) the Word is a separate Person from the Father. Had the article been used with both nouns, it would provide two descriptions of a single Person, in which case it could be paraphrased as “The Word is the same Person as the Father.” However, the Greek construction excludes this possibility, instead emphasizing the nature of the Word as truly divine, truly God, and yet distinct from the Father.

It is not revealed exactly how far back in time, prior to the creation of the universe, the Word had an existence. But the implication from verse 2 (“the same was in the beginning with God”) is that He has always existed side by side with the Father. “Thus, there never was a time when the Word did not exist.”¹⁶ Jesus Himself implies the same when He says, “I and My Father are one” (John 10:30). This special relation enables the Son to uniquely reveal the Father as “the Word made flesh” (1:14, 18; 12:45; 14:9).

The culmination of John’s breathtaking description of the Word comes in verse 3, with the affirmation that “All things came to exist through Him, and without Him nothing came to exist that had existed” (1:3, author’s translation). God the Father *through* the active agency of the Word created *all things*. Three times in verse three John uses the Greek word *egeneto* (“came to exist”) which appears twenty times in the Septuagint of Genesis 1,¹⁷ confirming that this is the primary Old Testament background of the passage. By contrast, the Word always “was” (Gk. *ēn*), pointing “to eternal existence on the part of Christ.”¹⁸

We turn now to John 17, often called Jesus’ high priestly prayer because He intercedes for His disciples and for all who will believe in Him through their word (vv. 9, 20). The prayer begins with Jesus’ request that the Son might be glorified by the Father so that the Father might be glorified by the Son (v. 1), stressing again the congruence and mutuality of Their relationship. It is no accident that John’s Gospel refrains from referring to Jesus as the Son prior to the incarnation, and that the first mention of it is by John the Baptist (1:34), whom the Synoptic Gospels also indicate as bearing prophetic witness to Jesus, together with the voice from heaven, as the Son (Matt 3:11–17; Mark 1:7–11; Luke 3:15–22).

Furthermore, the classic passages in which Jesus confesses His preexistence together with the Father employ the language of “I am” (Gk. *egō eimi*), *not*

Jesus as the Son of God

Son-language (John 8:58; 14:6, 10; 17:21). By contrast, Jesus' self-revelation as the Son in the Gospel of John is always in the context of the incarnation (e.g., John 3:13–14, 16–18; 6:27, 40; 8:28; 10:36). Jesus also describes Himself with many physical metaphors: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35, 48), "I am the door" (John 10:7, 9), "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11, 14), "I am the true vine" (John 15:1). Jesus frequently employed such metaphors to describe spiritual realities that would otherwise be difficult to understand. The same is true of Jesus as "the Son of God." It describes a *spiritual* reality, not a physical one! All four Gospels recognize this principle.

Seen in this light, Jesus' reference in prayer to His Father as "the only true God" and to Himself as "Jesus Christ whom You have sent" makes perfect sense as specifying the only way of salvation—Jesus had to be born into our world as a human being. It is Christ's life and death during the incarnation by which the plan of salvation was confirmed and the covenant promise ratified (John 17:4). Jesus is not making a philosophical statement about the nature of the Father and the Son. John's Gospel has already made clear the nature of that relationship as it pertained before the incarnation as well as the voluntary submission of the Son during the incarnation (e.g., John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 12:49; 14:10). The resumption of that unique relationship after the resurrection is also referenced repeatedly (e.g., John 13:1; 16:28; 17:5, 11, 13; cf. 1:1–3).

Jesus as Son in the Pauline Epistles

Turning to the epistles of Paul, we find the apostle's description of Jesus as God's Son to be extensive in detail and comprehensive in scope. Our focus here is especially on those passages that have sometimes been misunderstood as teaching something different from what we have seen in John.

Some, for example, point to Romans 15:6: "that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." On the surface, this verse could suggest a literal Father-Son relationship between God and Jesus, because God is called the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁹ But in what sense is this meant by Paul? The Greek is more simply and naturally understood with *theos* (God) governing *tou kyriou* (of the Lord).²⁰ The main thrust of the passage is clear from the previous verse, which is a prayer that God would grant Christians "to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus" (Rom 15:5, emphasis supplied). That is, according to the life Jesus lived on earth, having the attitude of compassion and love that He expressed toward others and encouraged among His disciples. This attitude is to guide Christians in their actions with each other. Oneness of mind and speech, in accordance with

Christ's high priestly prayer (John 17:20–21), would glorify God, who sent His Son Jesus into the world to save us.

There is no hint of a reference to Christ's preexistence here or that Paul in any way intended this as an ontological statement of Christ's nature. Rather, God is the Father of Jesus Christ in the sense that He was intimately involved in the incarnation of Jesus as a human being at His birth (John 3:16; cf. Luke 1:35) and publicly proclaimed Him as the messianic Son at His baptism (Matt 3:16–17). Thus, Paul at the outset of this epistle describes Jesus as God's "Son . . . who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh" and recognized as "the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:3–4). When Paul refers to Jesus as God's Son it is always in light of the incarnation.²¹

Turning to 1 Corinthians 8:6, the context is the worship of idols (and the eating of food offered to them) in contrast to worship of the true God. Paul identifies the Father and the Son in turn as "one God" and "one Lord." Initially, this might seem to distinguish Jesus as a somewhat lesser personage than God the Father. But the unified Old Testament concept of God and Lord should be kept in mind.²² In fact, the repetition here by Paul of the word "one" in the context of God and Lord alludes to the classic confession of God as One in the Shema: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!" (Deut 6:4),²³ which in its context designates *Lord* and *God* as "the same (one) God"²⁴ to warn against the worship of other gods (Deut 6:14–15).²⁵ Paul here, as with other New Testament writers, "affirms the Christian belief in monotheism."²⁶ He "has glossed 'God' with 'the Father,' and 'Lord' with 'Jesus Christ,' adding in each case an explanatory phrase: 'God' is the Father, 'from whom are all things and we to him,' and the 'Lord' is Jesus the Messiah, 'through whom are all things and we through him.' In short, in his interpretation of the Shema, Paul has produced "a sort of christological monotheism."²⁷ If Paul's reference to Jesus as "Lord" should be taken to mean that Jesus is never to be called "God" (despite clear New Testament evidence to the contrary), then based on such an interpretation of this verse the Father should never be called "Lord!"²⁸ Yet this is clearly not Paul's meaning because the rest of the verse indicates that "all things" came into existence through Jesus Christ (1 Cor 8:6b). "If all creation thus exists because of Him, He cannot Himself belong to creation. And if Jesus is not created, He is truly God in the sense in which we use the word 'God.' Only God is uncreated."²⁹

Furthermore, by applying the Shema not only to the Father but also to Jesus, Paul (like other New Testament writers)³⁰ identifies Jesus with Yahweh in the Old Testament. Notice several similar examples in which

Jesus as the Son of God

Paul quotes Old Testament passages referring to God, but applies them to Jesus:

- For “*whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved*” (Rom 10:13, emphasis supplied, quoting Joel 2:32).
- “*For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?*” (Rom 11:34, emphasis supplied, quoting Isa 40:13).
- “That, as it is written, ‘*He who glories, let him glory in the LORD*’” (1 Cor 1:31, emphasis supplied, quoting Jer 9:24).

In all these places “LORD” is in small caps because it refers to God (Heb. *Yahweh*) in the Old Testament passage being quoted, but Paul is talking about Jesus. So, in 1 Corinthians 8:6, when Paul speaks of the Father as “God” and the Son as “Lord,” he is not saying that only the Father is God and that Jesus is some lesser “Lord.” Rather, Jesus is placed on the same level with the Father. In the context of this verse, Paul contrasts the Father as God and Jesus as Lord with pagan deities. “The contrast is between pagan ‘gods’ and the Father as one God, and between pagan ‘many Lords’ and Christ as the one Lord.”³¹

One of the clearest Trinitarian formulations in Paul (but see also 1 Cor 12:4–6 and 2 Cor 13:14) is found in Ephesians 4:4–6, which includes reference to the third Person of the Godhead: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” This statement of faith by Paul is an even clearer example of the aforementioned Shema (Deut 6:4) being employed in a Trinitarian formulation. Paul’s statement is distinctive not only in its recognition of the triune God, but also the relation of each Person with Their distinct function(s) within the Godhead:

- the *Spirit* calls and unites believers into “one body”—the church (cf. 2:16–18);
- the teaching of the *Lord* as the “one faith” (cf. v. 13; Rom 10:8; 1 Cor 16:13), His death and resurrection being represented in the “one baptism” (cf. Rom 6:3–4); and
- the sovereignty of *God* as “Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (ESV).

Paul’s emphasis throughout Ephesians is on the church and this is reflected in the order in which the three Persons of the Godhead are mentioned (Spirit, Lord, God and Father). Unity is the main theme here, as the first two words in Greek of each verse make clear (one body, v. 4; one Lord, v. 5; one God, v. 6), as well as the sevenfold repetition of the word “one.” The unity of the triune God is to be reflected in the unity of believers in one body—the church.

Paul’s statement in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, that the Christians in Thessalonica had “turned to God from

idols to serve the living and true God,” underscores the fact that virtually all of the converts in Thessalonica were Gentiles, as the historical record in Acts 17:4–5 indicates. Describing God as “the living and true God” alludes to the Old Testament characterization of God in contrast to idols. The reference to Jesus as “His Son,” although describing Him as “from heaven,” is set in the context of the incarnation, as shown by the reference to God’s raising Him from the dead.

The words of Paul regarding Jesus as the “one Mediator between God and men” (1 Tim 2:5), while not describing Christ in terms of Sonship, does distinguish Him from God the Father in terms of His role as the high priestly Mediator in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 8:1–2; 9:11, 15). The immediate context describes God in His Old Testament role as “Savior” (v. 3), who wills (Gk. *thelei*) “all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (v. 4, ESV). The Father’s will and role is ultimately a saving one (1 Tim 4:10), since it is He who has given His Son for the salvation of the world (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2). Jesus’ role as Mediator is predicated on the fact of the incarnation, that He is both God and man, and on the redemption (Gk. *antilytron*) His death accomplished for human beings (1 Tim 2:7).

The meaning of all these passages, when studied in their immediate context, becomes quite clear. None of them in any way denies the full equality of Jesus with the Father. Verses that seem to suggest something else should be interpreted in light of the many clear passages throughout the New Testament which teach that Jesus is God. Paul himself, in Colossians 1:15–17, describes Jesus’ relation to the Father in three important ways: (1) Verse 15 says “He is the image of the invisible God.” This means Jesus is the exact representation of the Father in visible form. (2) Verse 16 says “by Him all things were created. . . . All things were created through Him and for Him.” Therefore, Jesus is the active agent working alongside the Father in creation. (3) Verse 17 says “He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.” In other words, Jesus is the One present with the Father in eternity past and able together with the Father to uphold the universe.³²

Jesus as the Son in the Writings of Ellen G. White

Ellen G. White consistently teaches Jesus as equal with the Father, not as some lesser personage or as one who came into existence at some subsequent time to the Father.³³ Even in those places where reference is to Jesus as the Son or as “begotten,” His eternal nature is clear.

In *Patriarchs and Prophets*, several Bible passages are quoted to describe Jesus in His preincarnate state. Proverbs 8 is quoted, characterizing Him as “an associate” with the Father, “a coworker who could

Jesus as the Son of God

appreciate His purposes, and could share His joy in giving happiness to created beings.” After quoting John 1:1–2, the passage continues:

Christ, the Word, the only begotten of God, was one with the eternal Father—one in nature, in character, in purpose—the only being that could enter into all the counsels and purposes of God. “His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” Isaiah 9:6. “His goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” Micah 5:2.³⁴

This key statement tells us some important things about the Son. First, White places Him on the same level with the Father, calling him His “coworker.” Second, how Christ functions as “the only begotten of God” is described as being “one with the eternal Father.” The word “eternal” is important here. No limitation is given to the relation the Son has with the Father. The clear implication is that both are eternal, that Jesus has been a coworker with the Father forever in the past, just as He is and will be forever in the future. Significantly, as we have seen, this is precisely the message of John 1:2, which White quotes just before these words, showing that her use of “begotten” refers not to a literal begetting but to an identity of nature that the Son shares with the Father (as John 1:1 indicates). Third, what is meant by the phrase “one in nature” if not some unity of being? Even the fact that Jesus is divine would not by itself be sufficient to suggest they share the same nature any more than one human being is one with another simply because they share the same humanity.

White’s statement describes Christ’s divine nature further by quoting Isaiah 9:6 (MT 9:5), which refers to Jesus as “The mighty God, The everlasting Father.” The Hebrew form of the latter phrase could also be translated “father from eternity.”³⁵ In harmony with this meaning, note that White immediately quotes Micah 5:2 in order to show in what sense Jesus is everlasting, that He has existed “from everlasting,” the same language found in Proverbs 8:23. This biblical affirmation is directional—Jesus is *from* everlasting (Heb. *mîmê ’ôlām*, “from the days of eternity”), meaning everlastingly looking backward to the past. A nearly identical expression in Hebrew referring to eternity past is used also of the Father in Psalm 90:2: “Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever You had formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting [Heb. *ûmē’ôlām ’ad ’ôlām*, “from eternity to eternity”], You are God.”

Had Jesus been begotten in a literal sense, then it would be difficult to understand how this could be true since He would have had a beginning; He would not have

existed “from the days of eternity.” Describing Jesus as the “everlasting Father” shows His identity with God from eternity past. This should guide us in our understanding of the description of Jesus also as “the Son of God.” Many times White describes Jesus as the “eternal Son” or “the eternal Son of God,”³⁶ once as “the eternal Son of the infinite God,” and even as “the eternal, self-existent Son.”³⁷ Notice how this language is connected to clarify the meaning of Proverbs 8:30 (KJV):

Christ is the pre-existent, self-existent Son of God. . . . [Prov 8:22–25, 29–30 quoted] In speaking of his pre-existence, Christ carries the mind back through dateless ages. He assures us that there never was a time when He was not in close fellowship with the eternal God. He to whose voice the Jews were then listening had been with God as one brought up with Him.³⁸

If “there never was a time when He [Christ] was not in close fellowship with the eternal God,” then His existence must be as coextensive in eternity past as that of the Father. In the same article, elaborating on Jesus’ statement in John 8:58, that “Before Abraham was, I am,” White writes, “Christ is the pre-existent, self-existent Son of God.”

We need to accept all these descriptions of who Jesus is, not just one. He is Son. He is eternal. *And* He is self-existent. The descriptors are unqualified and in no way diminish the Father-Son relation between the two. Nor do they diminish in any way the deity of Christ. He is self-existent. He is not dependent for His existence on anything or anyone outside of Himself. He is eternal, from eternity past to eternity future. Elsewhere White writes,

The Word existed as a divine being, even as the eternal Son of God, in union and oneness with His Father. From everlasting He was the Mediator of the covenant. . . . Before men or angels were created, the Word was with God, and was God. . . . Christ was God essentially, and in the highest sense. He was with God from all eternity, God over all, blessed forevermore.

The Lord Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, existed from eternity, a distinct person, yet one with the Father.³⁹

Here it is affirmed that Jesus “existed from eternity”—in fact, “from all eternity.” The context of this statement describes the rejection by Jews of Christ’s claim to equality with the Father, which is not unlike the attitude expressed by some today who profess to believe in Him.

Christ is not just eternal in the sense that He cannot die, though White explicitly affirms that too:

Jesus as the Son of God

“When Christ was crucified, it was His human nature that died. Deity did not sink and die; that would have been impossible.”⁴⁰ It is important to note what is not said. No reference is made to “His Deity,” as if Christ’s divine nature were separable from that of the Father, but simply to “Deity.” On a related point, White says of her visions, “I have often seen the lovely Jesus, that He is a *person*. I asked Him if His Father was a person and had a form like Himself. Said Jesus, ‘I am in the express *image* of My Father’s *person*.’”⁴¹ So, the Father and the Son can be manifested in two distinguishable forms. But this fact does not negate the reality of their nevertheless sharing a single divine nature.

What, then, is meant by the relation of Jesus to the Father *as Son*? On the divine level, the unity of Their nature preserves Their distinct Personhood even though it is manifested in two distinguishable visible forms. There may even be a distinction of will, which seems to be hinted at by “the counsel of peace” (Zech 6:13) and that “the Father consulted His Son in regard to at once carrying out their purpose to make man to inhabit the earth.”⁴² This divine unity and distinct Personhood seems to be dimly reflected on the human level by virtue of the fact that human beings have been created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27).

As White describes it, before the creation of the earth, Lucifer caused confusion among the angels in heaven over the relation of the Son to the Father and this had to be clarified for them:

Lucifer in heaven, before his rebellion, was a high and exalted angel, next in honor to God’s dear Son. His countenance, like those of the other angels, was mild and expressive of happiness. . . . A special light beamed in his countenance and shone around him brighter and more beautiful than around the other angels; yet Christ, God’s dear Son, had the pre-eminence over all the angelic host. He was one with the Father before the angels were created. Lucifer was envious of Christ, and gradually assumed command which devolved on Christ alone.

The great Creator assembled the heavenly host, that He might in the presence of all the angels confer special honor upon His Son. The Son was seated on the throne with the Father, and the heavenly throng of holy angels was gathered around them. The Father then made known that it was ordained by Himself that Christ, His Son, should be equal with Himself; so that wherever was the presence of His Son, it was as His own presence. The word of the Son was to be obeyed as readily as the word of the Father. His Son He had invested with authority

to command the heavenly host. Especially was His Son to work in union with Himself in the anticipated creation of the earth and every living thing that should exist upon the earth. His Son would carry out His will and His purposes but would do nothing of Himself alone. The Father’s will would be fulfilled in Him.⁴³

While much that characterizes the relation between the Father and the Son has not been revealed, that which has been revealed in the course of the great controversy enables us to understand something of the divine Father-Son relation. Interestingly, even in heaven, God apparently revealed Himself to the angels only gradually, in accordance with their need to understand. Lucifer’s rebellion crystalized in the minds of the unfallen angels the massive and essential difference between Christ as one “equal” with the Father and this “high and exalted” but *created* angel. The Father, understandably, takes the lead in clarifying that the Son is in fact fully His equal, manifesting the divine presence and authority “to command the heavenly host.” The divine relation, based as it is on the everlasting love that prevails between Them, thereby includes Their mutual agreement on every course of action. The submission of the Son to the Father is a voluntary decision and not a forced or inherent subordination. Under such a model, the relation of guiding (the Father to the universe), together with a mutual giving and respect exemplified between the Father and the Son, would pertain within this ideal model of submission. Nevertheless, there is still much we will never know, and these inspired counsels given regarding the divine relations are important to remember:

“The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever.” Deuteronomy 29:29. The revelation of Himself that God has given in His word is for our study. This we may seek to understand. But beyond this we are not to penetrate. The highest intellect may tax itself until it is wearied out in conjectures regarding the nature of God, but the effort will be fruitless. This problem has not been given us to solve. No human mind can comprehend God. None are to indulge in speculation regarding His nature. Here silence is eloquence. The Omniscient One is above discussion.

Even the angels were not permitted to share the counsels between the Father and the Son when the plan of salvation was laid. And human beings are not to intrude into the secrets of the Most High. We are as ignorant of God as

Jesus as the Son of God

little children; but, as little children, we may love and obey Him.⁴⁴

Those who seek to define God are on forbidden ground. We are to enter into no controversy regarding God,—what He is and what He is not. He, the Omniscient One, is above discussion.⁴⁵

Notice carefully this next statement by White that equates what Scripture says of God with what it says of Christ:

In regard to the personality and prerogatives of God, where He is, and what He is, this is a subject which we are not to dare to touch. On this theme silence is eloquence. It is those who have no experimental knowledge of God who venture to speculate in regard to Him. Did they know more of Him, they would have less to say about what He is. The one who in the daily life holds closest communion with God, and who has the deepest knowledge of Him, realizes most keenly the utter inability of human beings to explain the Creator. . . .

God always has been. He is the great I AM. The psalmist declares, “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever Thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God.” [Ps 90:2] He is the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity. [Isa 57:15] “I am the Lord, I change not,” [Mal 3:6] He declares. With Him there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. [Jas 1:17] He [Christ] is “the same yesterday, and today, and forever.” [Heb 13:8] He is infinite and omnipresent. No words of ours can describe His greatness and majesty.⁴⁶

In summary, the statements examined here illustrate clearly that in the writings of Ellen G. White no distinction is made between the Father and the Son in terms of nature, but only of Personhood.

Conclusion

The Bible presents Jesus as the only visible Person of the Godhead, who, like the Father, is divine in every respect and has existed “from everlasting” (Prov 8:23; Mic 5:2). As the New Testament makes clear, these passages refer not to some concrete beginning in the distant past; to the contrary, like the Father, Jesus had no beginning. Interestingly, White explicitly applies these passages to Jesus in order to show not His dissimilarity to the Father, but His identity with Him, and Jesus’ everlasting existence—past, present, and future. This is

why she can frequently refer to Him as “the eternal Son” and similar expressions. Her descriptions make clear that both Jesus and the Father have separate visible forms but share the same “one nature” as God. Her writings also make clear that, while They are to be worshipped as God with equal honor and dignity, Their relation to each other as Father and Son uniquely reflects the divine Counsel of Peace between Them in which a mutuality of love and service exists alongside the willing submission of the Son to the Father and the sovereignty of God over the universe, so that He may be all in all (cf. 1 Cor 15:28).

The Gospel of John presents Jesus as the eternal Word, existing from eternity with the Father as God and Creator of “all things” (1:1–3). Not until the incarnation through the testimony of John the Baptist is Jesus revealed as “the Son of God.” Significantly, the classic references in John to Christ’s preexistence use *egō eimi*—the Greek equivalent of YHWH (cf. Exod 3:14 LXX)—rather than the language of Sonship, which is utilized only in light of the incarnation. Jesus’ high priestly prayer in which He describes the Father as “the only true God” and Himself as “Jesus Christ” (using the twin designations of His saving role), whom the Father “has sent” (17:3), must be seen in this light. Similarly, Pauline language that seems to distinguish sharply between the Father as “God” and Jesus as “the Son of God” or “Lord” emphasizes the respective roles of the Father and the Son in the plan (Gk. *oikonomia*) of salvation (Eph 1:10; 3:9; 1 Tim 1:4; 2:5). This includes the confessional reference to all three Persons of the Godhead in Ephesians 4:4–6. The one reference to the Father as “the living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9) underscores His eternal preeminence in contrast to worthless idols.

Finally, it is important to remember that what we know of God is only “in part” (1 Cor 13:9), and that God has revealed Himself only to the extent we can grasp and benefit from this knowledge (cf. 1 Cor 8:2). There remains a vastness and mystery impossible for finite creatures to explore.

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Endnotes

- 1 Alberto R. Timm, "Modern Adventist Anti-Trinitarianism: Hermeneutical Reflections," *Reflections* 82 (April–June 2023): 2. This is to be distinguished from the view that Christ is "eternally begotten" or "timelessly begotten" by the Father, which is also unbiblical. Cf. Fernando Canale, "How Does Classical Theism in Its Roman Catholic and Protestant Forms Differ from the Adventist Biblical Understanding of the Trinity?," in *Exploring the Trinity: Questions and Answers*, ed. Clinton Wahlen and John Peckham, Biblical Research Institute Studies on the Trinity 2 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2025), 282: "In keeping with the wider teachings of Scripture, Adventist theology interprets the biblical texts about the Son's 'begottenness' and subordination to the Father (Heb 1:5–9) and the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son (John 15:26–27) as referring to the Trinity's mission in relation to creation rather than to the essential nature of the Trinity" (cf. 279).
- 2 E.g., Paul Chung, "I Was Brought Forth," *As It Reads* (blog), October 27, 2017, <https://asitreads.com/2017-10-27-was-brought-forth/>.
- 3 All biblical quotations are from the NKJV, unless otherwise indicated.
- 4 Ninety-three occurrences (Ezek 2:1, 3, 6, 8; 3:1, 3–4, 10, 17, 25, etc.); cf. its use throughout the Hebrew Bible in poetic parallelism to mean human being (e.g., Num 23:19; Ps 8:5 [4 MT]; 146:3; Job 25:6; Isa 51:12; 56:2; Jer 49:18, 33; 50:40; 51:43; Dan 8:17). See Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm, eds., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 4 vols (Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999), 1:138; and G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green, 17 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974–2018), 2:161.
- 5 Clinton Wahlen and John Peckham, "Introduction," in Wahlen and Peckham, *Exploring the Trinity*, 1–2.
- 6 Brandon D. Crowe, "The Trinity and the Gospel of Matthew," in *The Essential Trinity: New Testament Foundations and Practical Relevance*, ed. Brandon D. Crowe and Carl R. Trueman (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 29.
- 7 Clinton Wahlen, *Matthew*, Seventh-day Adventist International Bible Commentary (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, forthcoming).
- 8 No sexual allusion is intended here, on which see Erhard Gallos, "Does the Spirit Coming Upon Mary in Luke 1:35 Employ Sexual Imagery?," in Wahlen and Peckham, *Exploring the Trinity*, 161–166.
- 9 Clinton Wahlen, "Luke," in *Andrews Bible Commentary* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), 1341.
- 10 The aorist form *egeneto* appears twenty times in Genesis 1 and twice in Genesis 2. See the more in-depth discussion of the Johannine prologue immediately below. Another possible allusion to Genesis in connection with the incarnation occurs already in John 1:9, that Jesus, "the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world" (ESV). Just as the light on the first day signaled the beginning of God's work of creation (Gen 1:3), the entrance of this true Light into the world signals the beginning of God's work of redemption.
- 11 This was emphasized again at the transfiguration: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" (cf. 2 Pet 1:16–18).
- 12 In both these passages (Matt 16:17; Luke 10:21–22), Jesus employs the Greek word *apokalyptō*, referring to something divinely revealed; see Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 112.
- 13 Wahlen, *Matthew*.
- 14 Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 269: "The construction the evangelist chose to express this idea [that the Word "shared the essence of the Father"] was the most concise way he could have stated that the Word was God and yet was distinct from the Father" (emphasis original).
- 15 This view of Genesis 1:1, sometimes called "the passive gap, two-stage creation interpretation," argues there is an implied gap in time between the creation of the universe and the unformed earth in verse 1 and the formation of the earth as a habitable planet and life on it beginning with verse 2. Another view compatible with the text, also commonly held by Adventists, is that the entire creation narrative concerns only the creation of this earth with "the heavens" referring to the atmosphere (and, perhaps, the solar system) rather than to the entire universe. Further, see Richard M. Davidson, "The Genesis Account of Origins," in *The Genesis Creation Account and Its Reverberations in the Old Testament*, ed. Gerald A. Klingbeil

(Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2015), 111–113.

16 Robert K. McIver, "Why Is Jesus Called the Son of God?," in Wahlen and Peckham, *Exploring the Trinity*, 41.

17 Genesis 1:3, 5^{bis}, 6, 8^{bis}, 9, 11, 13^{bis}, 15, 19^{bis}, 20, 23^{bis}, 24, 30, 31^{bis} LXX.

18 Thomas R. Shepherd, "The Trinity and New Testament Textual Criticism," in *Revisiting the Trinity: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Reflections*, ed. Alberto R. Timm, Biblical Research Institute Studies on the Trinity 1 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2025), 73n16.

19 C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 1979), 2:738, cites three older commentators (Weiss, Gifford, Lipsius) who favor the translation supporting this idea of *theos* as absolute: "God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (KJV). Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 888n723, cites Stuart and Meyer in support as well.

20 Cf. the similar Greek phrase that appears in Ephesians 1:17, "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ." Moo, *Letter to the Romans*, 888n723, favors this interpretation: "it fits the syntax (articular θεόν [*theon*] and anarthrous πατέρα [*patera*]); it has precedent in Pauline usage [citing Eph 1:17] . . . ; and it is theologically unobjectionable" (noting Jesus' address to the Father, "My God, My God . . ." in Matt 27:46//Mark 15:34).

21 Note Cranfield, *Epistle to the Romans*, 1:58: "This language is thoroughly characteristic of Paul (cf. v. 9 of this chapter [Rom 1]; 5:10; 8:3, 29, 32; 1 Cor 1:9; 15:28; 2 Cor 1:19; Gal 1:16; 2:20; 4:4, 6; Eph 4:13; Col 1:13; 1 Th 1:10; and also passages such as 2 Cor 1:3 which describe God as the Father of Jesus Christ)."

22 Consider the nearly ubiquitous Old Testament collocation "Lord God" (see Gen 2:4–5, 7–9; Exod 3:15; Deut 1:11; Josh 7:7; Judg 2:12; Ruth 2:12; 1 Sam 2:30; Ezra 4:1; Neh 1:5; Pss 31:5; 41:13; Isa 3:15; etc.). In addition, Paul B. Petersen, "The Trinity in the New Testament," in Timm, *Revisiting the Trinity*, 45n13, notes the parallelism between "Lord" and "God" in many of the psalms (e.g., 3:7; 10:12; 18:6; 24:5).

23 Brian S. Rosner, "Paul and the Trinity," in Crowe and Trueman, *Essential Trinity*, 120: "The key words of this verse, namely, 'Lord,' 'God' and 'one,' are taken from Israel's great Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4."

24 Rosner, "Paul and the Trinity," 120.

25 Further on the theological implications of the Shema as not precluding plurality, see Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *God As Trinity* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2011), 23–24, pointing to the use of the Hebrew word *'ehad* rather than *yāhīd*; the latter speaks of uniqueness as in "only" son or child (Gen 22:2; Prov 4:3; Zech 12:10) while the former speaks of a unity of Persons rather than aloneness.

26 Paul B. Petersen, "The Trinity in the New Testament," in Timm, *Revisiting the Trinity*, 45, noting references to the Father as "Lord" in Mark 12:36; Acts 2:34; James 1:5, 7 and the likelihood that YHWH in the Old Testament more than a few times refers to God the Father (citing Exod 7:16; 20:2; 1 Kgs 22:53).

27 N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 129.

28 Petersen, "The Trinity in the New Testament," 45.

29 Petersen, "The Trinity in the New Testament," 45–46.

30 See, e.g., Matt 3:3 parr. (quoting Isa 40:3); Acts 2:21 (quoting Joel 2:32). See also Romans 10:13 (quoting Joel 2:32), Philippians 2:10–11 (quoting Isa 45:23), and Hebrews 1:10 (quoting Ps 102:26 LXX [ET 25]).

31 Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, 2:143.

32 Further, see Richard Sabuin, "In What Sense Can Jesus Be Called 'the Firstborn?'," in Wahlen and Peckham, *Exploring the Trinity*, 207–209; and Clinton Wahlen, *Uniting Heaven and Earth: Christ in Philippians and Colossians* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, forthcoming).

33 Further, see Denis Kaiser, "What Does Ellen G. White Teach about the Trinity?" and Adriani Milli Rodrigues, "What Is the Significance of Ellen G. White's References to Jesus as the 'Eternal Son of God?'," in Wahlen and Peckham, *Exploring the Trinity*, 343–345 and 361–367 respectively. More comprehensively, see Denis Kaiser, "The Trinity in the Writings of Ellen G. White: A Historical Survey," in Timm, *Revisiting the Trinity*, 251–296.

34 Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1890), 34.

35 Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm, "עָרַךְ," in *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. and trans.

under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson, 4 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999), 2:786.

36 Ellen G. White, *This Day with God* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1979), 122; and Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), 615.

37 Ellen G. White to J. H. Kellogg, October 6, 1903, Lt 232, 1903, para. 19; and Ellen G. White, “The True High Priest,” September 26, 1897, Ms 101, 1897, para. 28.

38 Ellen G. White, “Resistance to Light—No. 3,” *The Signs of the Times*, August 29, 1900, paras. 13–15.

39 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 1:247.

40 Ellen G. White to Ministers, Physicians, and Teachers, September 3, 1904, Lt 280, 1904, para. 9.

41 Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1882), 77, emphasis original.

42 Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1947), 19. See also Daniel Olariu, “What Does ‘The Counsel of Peace Shall Be between Them Both’ (Zech 6:13) Mean?,” in Wahlen and Peckham, *Exploring the Trinity*, 111–116.

43 White, *Story of Redemption*, 13–14.

44 Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 429.

45 Ellen G. White to Medical Students and Nurses, November 5, 1903, Lt 240, 1903, para. 5.

46 Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1932), 92.

SCRIPTURE SPOTLIGHT

WHY DID GOD ORDER THE ISRAELITES TO “UTTERLY DESTROY” THE CANAANITE NATIONS, INCLUDING WOMEN AND CHILDREN?¹

Michael G. Hasel

But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded. (Deut 20:16–17 ESV)

Several issues have been raised regarding the destruction of the nations by Israel during the conquest. The first is ethical. Why did God instruct Israel to destroy men, women, and children, as well as cattle and everything that breathes? The second has to do with the character of God. How does this action relate to a loving God who notices when a sparrow falls and who sent His Son to die for all humanity? Does the Old Testament portray a God of vengeance while the New Testament portrays a God of love and grace?

Finally, why did God use Israel to exact these actions against the Canaanites?

Divine Love and Justice

Several general observations are in order as we look at these passages. First, God’s principle of love cannot be understood apart from justice. Love without justice cannot exist. A God who is not just becomes no better than the capricious man-made gods of the surrounding nations. Second, God in His omnipotence understands the motives of the heart. Although God is longsuffering with humanity, there comes a time when justice must prevail, and sin must be eradicated. This act of divine justice occurred at the flood (Gen 6–9) and will take place again at the end of time when the wicked are destroyed (Rev 21–22). In both cases, God, in His justice and in love for His faithful, roots out evil so that humanity can live peacefully with one another and with their Creator.

A Time of Probation

The instructions found in Deuteronomy 20 are part of the laws of warfare outlined in this chapter. They constitute God's instructions to Israel as they are about to enter into the promised land. These instructions must be understood within the context of that event in history and within the broader history of the Canaanites.

For more than two hundred years, from the time Abraham left Haran until Jacob entered Egypt, the patriarchs and their families were God's witnesses among the Canaanites, but the inhabitants of Canaan refused to accept the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus, the destruction of the Canaanites is the outcome of their choice to reject God and their descent into "every evil" and the inherent result that comes from living apart from God. It had been predicted through Abraham that his descendants would be exiled and oppressed for four hundred years before God would lead them out of Egypt. The reason for the long delay is explained in Genesis 15:13–16: "for the iniquity of the Amorite [Canaanite] is not yet complete" (ESV). Other translations read, "had not yet reached their full measure" (NIV84). In other words, God waited for centuries while the Canaanite nations slowly filled up their own cups of destruction by their behavior. Ultimately, God's justice demanded that the outcome of their choices would result in self-destruction. The destruction of the nations in Canaan was not a precipitous act of vengeance; it was the final result of a gracious and loving God who provided every opportunity for them to change their ways (see Balaam in Numbers 22), but who, in the end, could not tolerate their wickedness.²

The extent of their degradation becomes clear from Canaanite texts describing worship practices that included child sacrifices and sacred prostitution.³ The decisions they made affected so-called innocent lives. Even women and children were affected by the depth of evil. It was not God's will that such atrocities continue. It was not because the Israelites were superior that He brought them into Canaan; it was "because of the wickedness of these nations" (Deut 9:5 ESV) that the Canaanites would be dispossessed. For that reason, Deuteronomy 20 and similar texts clearly indicate that Israel was specifically to destroy all the altars, sacred pillars, Asherim, and graven images "in order that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods" (Deut 20:18 NASB).

The Role of Israel

If divine retribution was God's plan, it still does not explain why He used the Israelites to destroy the nations

before them. A broader contextual analysis indicates that it was never God's intention to use the Israelites as the primary agent of destruction. In Exodus 23 God set out His plan for the conquest:

But if you will truly obey his [angel] voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My angel will go before you and bring you in to the land of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will completely destroy them. (Exod 23:22–23 ESV)

The text clearly indicates that if Israel obeyed and did all that God said, God would do the rest. He would destroy their enemies. Their responsibility was to demolish the Amorite gods and "break their sacred stones to pieces" (Exod 23:24 ESV). Deuteronomy 1:30 reaffirms that "The LORD your God who goes before you will himself fight on your behalf, just as He did for you in Egypt before your eyes" (ESV). This is precisely what God had done in the past. When the children of Israel complained to Moses at the Red Sea, Moses responded, "Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. . . . The LORD will fight for you, you need only to be still" (Exod 14:13–14 NIV). Indeed, Deuteronomy 7:18–22, referring to the Red Sea experience, gives precisely the same promise:

But do not be afraid of them; remember well what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt. . . . The LORD your God will do the same to all the peoples you now fear. Moreover, the LORD your God will send the hornet among them until even the survivors who hide from you have perished. (NASB)

God was going to drive out these nations "little by little" (v. 22 NASB). This was God's ideal plan for Israel.

Yahweh's War

But did not God instruct Israel to "utterly destroy" them in these passages? The term that is translated here "utterly destroy" is the Hebrew term *cherem*. It means "curse," or "that which stands under ban," or "that which is dedicated to destruction."⁴ God had dedicated these nations and their gods to destruction because they had violently and persistently opposed Him. Although some scholars have interpreted this destruction as a "Holy War," it was more precisely a "Yahweh War" in the sense that God Himself was the one fighting against the forces of evil and working out divine retribution. Israel was to

Scripture Spotlight

place these nations and their belongings under a ban, meaning that they were to give them over to God for judgment. They were to be completely separated from them. Israel was to take no spoils. They were to make no covenant with them. They were not to intermarry with the enemies of God in order to prevent being influenced by their wicked ways. Instead, Israel was to work with God, their supreme Leader in the theocracy, to bring about His will.

Israel's Choice

In the end, even though God's ideal plan was for Israel to be still in order to see the deliverance of the Lord, God worked with Israel. They chose to be the conquerors themselves and to militarily slay those whom they would dispossess. Once they inherited the land, they did not completely conquer it so that the Canaanite still occupied many cities and territories (Josh 13:2–5; Judg 1:19–35). But God worked with Israel's choices and accompanied them even when they took matters into their own hands. Even so, at the end of his life, Joshua could say,

And the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Girgashite, the Hivite and the Jebusite. Thus I gave them into your hand . . . *but* not by your sword or your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and you have lived in them; you are eating of vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant. (Josh 24:11–13 NASB)

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Endnotes

1 This article is taken from Michael Hasel, "Why did God order the Israelites to 'utterly destroy' the Canaanite nations, including women and children," in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, rev. ed., ed. Gerhard Pfandl (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2017), 177–180.

2 On the iniquity of the Canaanites, see Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1890), 492.

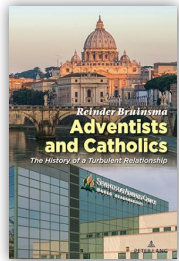
3 John Day, "Canaan, Religion of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:834, 835.

4 On the term *cherem*, see Michael G. Hasel, *Military Practice and Polemic: Israel's Laws of Warfare in Near Eastern Perspective* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2005), 26–28.



Adventists and Catholics: The History of a Turbulent Relationship

Gerhard Pfandl



Adventist and Catholics: The History of a Turbulent Relationship

Reinder Bruinsma

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Reinder Bruinsma is a retired Dutch-born Seventh-day Adventist theologian and church administrator who has served in pastoral care, publishing, education, and administration across Europe, West Africa, and the United States. He is also a prolific author who, among many other books and publications, recently has coedited a controversial book which advocates that people practicing monogamous same sex relationships should have the same rights in the church as people practicing monogamous heterosexual relationships. The book *Adventists and Catholics: The History of a Turbulent Relationship* is a revised and expanded version of Bruinsma's 1993 PhD dissertation titled "A Historical Analysis of Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes Toward Roman Catholicism: 1844–1965," which he successfully defended at the University of London. The book has six chapters, five of which are the revised text of his dissertation. The final chapter covers the recent history of the somewhat improved relationship between Adventists and the Catholic Church.¹ An extensive bibliography of published and unpublished sources and two indices of persons and topics concludes the volume.

Chapter 1 provides a survey of post-Reformation views on Roman Catholicism in England and America. While anti-Catholicism goes back to the establishment of the Church of England under Henry III (1509–1547), with the great influx of Catholic immigrants from Germany and Ireland,² the anti-Catholic climate increased greatly in nineteenth-century America.

Chapter 2 traces the origin and progress of the Millerite movement and its anti-Catholic sentiments.

Chapter 3 addresses the development and views of Sabbatarian Adventists as successors of the Millerite movement. Sabbatarian Adventists interpreted the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation in much the same way as William Miller and his associates had done.

Chapter 4 traces the development of Seventh-day Adventism and Catholicism between 1863 and 1915. While Adventists focused on the papacy as the fulfillment of the little horn in Daniel 7 and 8, and the first beast in Revelation 13, Catholics indicated their willingness to work with Protestants on social issues and in promoting Sunday holiness.

Chapter 5, the last chapter of the original dissertation, continues to describe the developments in Adventism and Catholicism from 1915 to 1965. The latter date marks the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. During this period, Adventism developed into a unified and institutionalized movement that reaffirmed the traditional Adventist prophetic views of the papacy in Daniel and Revelation. During the same period, Catholicism in America grew in numbers (eighteen million in 1920; forty-two million in 1960) and in influence—for example, strongly supporting Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and trade unions and establishing many parochial schools. Nevertheless, anti-Catholic sentiments in America surfaced from time to time on the issue of the separation of church and state.

Chapter 6 is the new chapter in the book. It surveys the theological developments among Seventh-day Adventists and Catholics from 1965 to the present. Within Adventism this period saw a strong expansion of the church's institutional network, particularly in the medical and educational spheres. Theologically the church experienced a distinct polarization between conservatives and progressives. Among Catholics the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) initiated important reforms in the liturgy, the role of the laity, and in the area of freedom of religion, but no doctrinal changes were introduced during or after the Council.

Reinder Bruinsma spends many pages on the historicist understanding of the prophecies in the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation, which is accepted by most Adventist interpreters. He reviews their understanding and its application to the papacy on (1) the year-day principle; (2) the identity of the little horn in Daniel 7, and of the two beasts in Revelation 13; (3) the meaning of the seal of God; and (4) the meaning of the number 666.

Since 1950, besides having observers at the World Council of Churches' Assemblies, as well as at Vatican II, Seventh-day Adventists have had several consultative encounters with the World Council of Churches and several Protestant churches, such as the Lutheran World Federal Church. Between 2000 and 2003 a small delegation of Adventists also met with representatives from the Vatican in Rome to discuss areas of agreement and tensions.

While attacks on Catholics by the official Adventist literature has stopped, the understanding of the end-time prophecies concerning the papacy as the antichrist has not changed and continues to be taught. Bruinsma and other progressive Adventists are frustrated with the continued focus on end-time issues and their application to the Roman Catholic Church (p. 260).³

In October 2020, the well-known Adventist theologian Jon Paulien gave three presentations at a Final Events Symposium of the Central California Conference. In his third presentation on "The Coming Sunday Law Dilemma" he stated that *The Great Controversy* must be read against the background of the nineteenth century, and that Adventists should not assume that end-time events will be identical to *The Great Controversy* in every detail. Many progressive Adventists therefore disagree with the 2021 announcement of Elder Wilson to distribute one billion copies of *The Great Controversy* (p. 278). They are also unhappy with the standard Adventist position that "Rome does not change," which is based on Ellen G. White's statement in *The Great Controversy*, "Let it be remembered, it is the boast of Rome that she never changes."⁴

The book *Adventists and Catholics* in some points provides an excellent historical survey of the relationship between the two churches. As one reviewer said about the first edition of his book that was published in 1999: "Unquestionably, this is the definitive work on SDA attitudes toward Catholicism."⁵ The book is primarily descriptive, with only a few hints of the author's personal view of the issue.⁶ In an article about the first edition of his book in the magazine *Spectrum* in 1999, however, he

spells out his personal assessment of the topic more clearly.⁷ He asks the question: What does the church do with "end-time prophecies that are rooted in a nineteenth-century interpretation of the world?" And these prophecies are primarily found in the book *The Great Controversy*. Anti-Catholicism was rampant in nineteenth-century America, and Adventists fitted right in—after all, it was Catholicism that changed the Sabbath to Sunday.

The Adventist end-time scenario that was based on a diligent study of Scripture was confirmed and spelled out by White in *The Great Controversy*. And "once she codified those views, it became virtually impossible to reevaluate them critically without questioning her prophetic authority."⁸ A second issue with which Bruinsma was unhappy was the fact that in his view Rome has changed, while Adventism has not. "Even in the momentous days of Vatican II (1962–1965) when Catholicism underwent enormous change, the Adventist view remained constant."⁹ The reason, of course, was White's end-time scenario in *The Great Controversy*.

The article in *Spectrum* caused Ángel M. Rodríguez, director of the Biblical Research Institute, to write a letter to Bruinsma, who was then the executive secretary of the Trans-European Division. Rodríguez questioned the "enormous change," which in fact involved none of the doctrines of the Catholic Church. Concerning White, he wrote, "Obviously, if your arguments are valid, then we have to question and reject E. G. White's prophetic authority."¹⁰

Reinder Bruinsma challenged the Adventist Church in the *Spectrum* article by stating, "Some time soon the Church must decide unequivocally whether it is a Christian church—with its own unique witness—amidst other Christian churches, or whether it must stand alone over and against all other Christian bodies."¹¹ In response, we can first point out that for the past sixty years since the Evangelical-Adventist conversations in the 1950s,¹² most Protestant churches have accepted Adventists as fellow Christians.

Secondly, isn't "standing alone" part of our end-time outline for the future? Sabbath keepers and those who follow the call to "come out of her [Babylon], my people" (Rev 18:4) will have to stand alone eventually, as Ellen G. White indicates: "The observance of the seventh-day Sabbath is to be a sign between them and God, showing that they are to be a peculiar people, separate from the world in habit and practice. Through them God will work to gather from all nationalities a people for Himself."¹³

Book Review

In conclusion, we are grateful for the historical record of the relationship between the Adventist Church and Roman Catholicism in the book *Adventists and Catholics*. However, there is no reason to abandon historicism and our interpretations on the little horn of Daniel 7 as symbolizing the papacy. Nor do we need to change our understanding of the two beasts in Revelation 13 and related symbols. What we need to do is

proclaim the three angels' messages and warn the world of these final stages of the great controversy.



Gerhard Pfandl, PhD

Retired, Associate Director
Biblical Research Institute

Endnotes

- 1 See page 240, "The softening of the language regarding the papacy that we noticed in the pre-1965 period also characterized the writings of most subsequent 'main-line' Adventist authors." On page 258, Bruinsma quotes Raymond H. Woolsey's *Evangelism Handbook* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 209–217, who advised evangelists "to use terminology that is familiar to Catholics and to refrain from any negative references to the Catholic church."
- 2 "Between 1830 and 1860 some two million Irish immigrants arrived" in America (p. 18).
- 3 See also his articles in *Adventist Today* in which he criticizes the prophetic interpretation given by Ellen G. White in *The Great Controversy* and wonders how inspired *The Great Controversy* is: Reinder Bruinsma, "The Great Controversy Cult, Part 1: A Message Out of Context," *Adventist Today*, September 26, 2024, <https://atoday.org/the-great-controversy-cult-part-1-a-message-out-of-context/>; and Bruinsma, "The Great Controversy Cult, Part 2: How Inspired Is *The Great Controversy*?" September 27, 2024, <https://atoday.org/the-great-controversy-cult-part-2-how-inspired-was-the-great-controversy/>.
- 4 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 580.

- 5 Brian E. Strayer, under Book Reviews in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 34 (Spring 1996): 106–107.

- 6 Page 244, "No attempt is made to explain why the historicist approach is the best option." Page 245, Bruinsma quotes Jon Paulien who wrote, "All approaches (historicist, but also preterist, futurist and idealist) have a certain degree of validity." Page 247, "Little effort is made by more recent authors to provide a solid basis for the validity for the Year-day principle." Page 273, Bruinsma quotes Paulien, "*The Great Controversy* must be read against the background of the nineteenth century."

- 7 Reinder Bruinsma, "Adventists and Catholics: Prophetic Preview or Prejudice?," *Spectrum* 27, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 45–52.

- 8 Bruinsma, "Adventists and Catholics," 50.

- 9 Bruinsma, "Adventists and Catholics," 51.

- 10 Ángel M. Rodríguez, letter to Reinder Bruinsma, September 14, 1999.

- 11 Bruinsma, "Adventists and Catholics," 52. See also his more recent criticism in the articles listed in note 3.

- 12 See Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers*, rev. ed. (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1995), 454–457.

- 13 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 7:109.

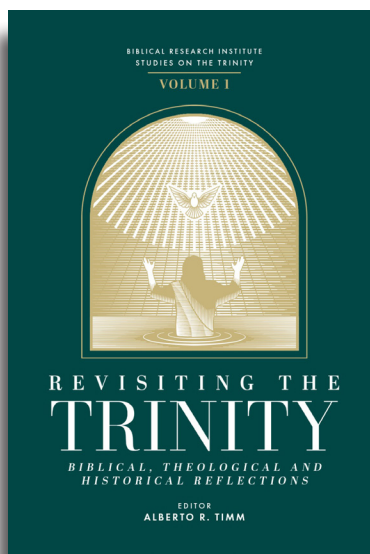
“

It is true that there are real Christians in the Roman Catholic communion. Thousands in that church are serving God according to the best light they have. They are not allowed access to His word, and therefore they do not discern the truth. They have never seen the contrast between a living heart service and a round of mere forms and ceremonies. God looks with pitying tenderness upon these souls, educated as they are in a faith that is delusive and unsatisfying. He will cause rays of light to penetrate the dense darkness that surrounds them. He will reveal to them the truth as it is in Jesus, and many will yet take their position with His people.

”

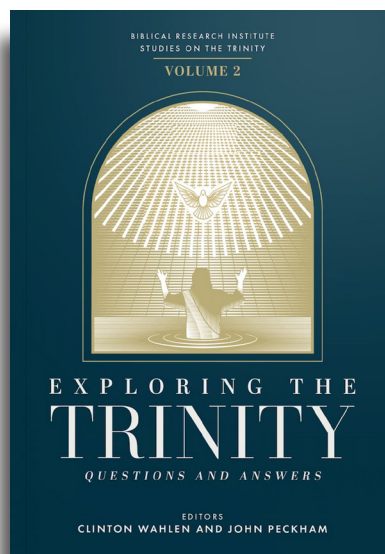
Ellen Gould White
The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan
(Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911), 565.

Revisiting the Trinity and Exploring the Trinity



Revisiting the Trinity: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Reflections

Editor: Alberto R. Timm



Exploring the Trinity: Questions and Answers

Editors: Clinton Wahlen and John C. Peckham

(Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2025)

Many people wonder if the doctrine of the Trinity is biblical, how three Persons can be “one God,” and if it really matters whether we believe in the Trinity or not. In response to these and many other questions, the BRI released two new books on the Trinity.

Volume 1, *Revisiting the Trinity: Biblical Theological, and Historical Reflections* (512 pp.), provides an in-depth interdisciplinary study of this crucial topic. It addresses, for example, the reliability of the Trinitarian statements of the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White and highlights several contrasts between the Catholic philosophical and the Adventist biblical understandings of the Trinity.

Volume 2, *Exploring the Trinity: Questions and Answers* (506 pp.), provides helpful answers to sixty-two

questions people are asking today about the Trinity. This volume covers the Old and New Testaments, theology, church history, Ellen G. White’s writings, and contemporary issues and is written in an accessible manner so that persons with no theological training can easily benefit from it.

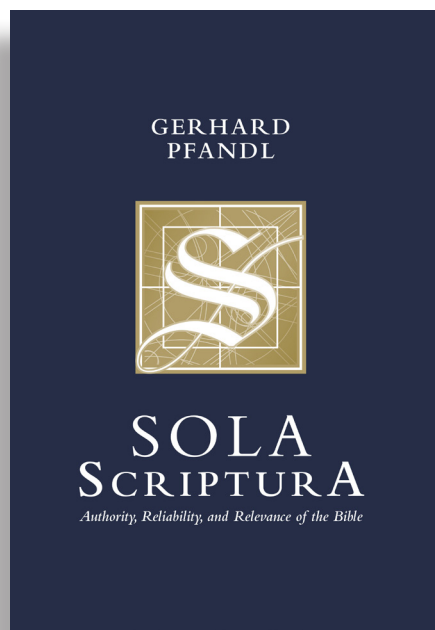
Pastors and church members alike will gain a better understanding of God and His self-revelation and glean meaningful insights into His nature and character that they can share with others. These books should be required reading for every pastor. The book may be ordered online from the BRI Bookshop,¹ by phone at (301) 680-6790, or on Kindle.²

Endnotes

1 “Bookshop,” Biblical Research Institute, accessed June 9, 2025, <https://bookshop.adventistbiblicalresearch.org>.

2 “Exploring the Trinity: Questions and Answers (BRI Studies on the Trinity Book 2),” Kindle Store, Amazon, accessed June 9, 2025, <https://www.amazon.com/Exploring-Trinity-Questions-Answers-Studies-ebook/dp/B0F481GRY8/>.

Sola Scriptura



Sola Scriptura: Authority, Reliability, and Relevance of the Bible

Author: Gerhard Pfandl

(Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2025).

In an age when many people disregard the Bible and some read it through the lens of culture and popular perceptions, *Sola Scriptura* reminds the reader that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, that the Bible alone must be the standard of the Christian faith, and that the Bible is its own interpreter. Among the topics addressed in the fifteen chapters of this book are the issues of the authority, canon, reliability, uniqueness, translation, and

the interpretation of Scripture, as well as its relevance to the 21st century reader. In clear and simple language accessible to the average reader, Dr. Gerhard Pfandl has defended the teaching that the Bible alone is, and must continue to be, the supreme authority in all matters of faith and practice.

This is a book for every pastor, church elder, and person who is interested in the Bible.

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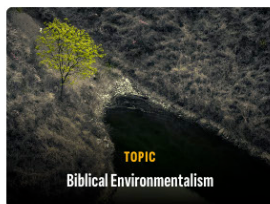
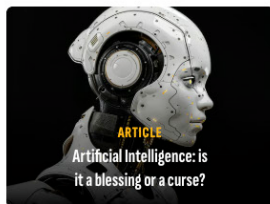
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The new website design makes the website much more user-friendly. It is accessible in English, Spanish, and Portuguese and hopefully other languages will follow soon. It features new articles, the announcement of the latest BRI books and many other resources, many of which can be downloaded for free. All previous issues of

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