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ARTICLES

The First Day Of Human History

A Reflection on “the Seventh Day” in Genesis 2:1–3

By Jacques Doukhan

Genesis 2:1–3 contains the first biblical text on the seventh-day Sabbath, which is also the first whole day of human history, as it comes chronologically at the end of the whole event of creation when humans are created. This is therefore a foundational text for the historical and theological understanding of the seventh-day Sabbath for humankind. From the analysis of this first text on the seventh-day Sabbath, this study will identify various dimensions of the seventh-day Sabbath, and thus suggest a theology of the seventh-day Sabbath. This discussion will include an exploration of the significance of the seventh-day Sabbath, first on what this day means in itself: as the seventh day, as a creation day, as a historical day, and as a different day; and second, on what this day means for humans: as a delight day, as an eschatological day, and as a worship day. This study will conclude with a reflection on the spiritual and practical application of the seventh-day Sabbath. Along the way, as far as possible, lessons will be drawn on the issue regarding the historical connection between the seventh-day Sabbath and the preceding six creation days.

Seventh Day

More Than Shabbat

Although this is the foundational text that reports the origin of Sabbath, the name *shabbat* (“Sabbath”), which is generally used to designate this day is absent

in this text. This abnormal absence suggests the intention of the biblical author to clearly distinguish the seventh-day Sabbath from the other “feasts of the Lord” that are also called “sabbaths” or days of rest (Lev 23:15, 24, 32, 38). It is indeed significant that in the list of the “feasts of the Lord” given in Leviticus 23, the seventh-day Sabbath appears outside of the “feasts of the Lord,” in a separate place (Lev 23:3). The mention of the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath precedes the list of the “feasts of the Lord,” which are identified as such in its beginning (Lev 23:4) and in its end (Lev 23:44). The Jewish festivals, or “holy convocations” (*miqra*), are proclaimed by the people themselves (Lev 23:1) and their sanctification depends on the Jewish national community, whereas the seventh-day Sabbath is proclaimed only by God Himself (Lev 23:2; cf. Gen 2:3).¹ Whereas the feast days (other Sabbaths) are related to the life in nature and are astronomically dependent, the seventh-day Sabbath depends only on God. From this distinction, nineteenth-century great Jewish philosopher Samson Raphael Hirsch concludes that the seventh-day Sabbath “is *given* as the starting point and climax of all the holy days.”²

The Rhythm of Seven

The three-times repetition of the phrase “seventh day,” within a rhythm of seven Hebrew words for each line shows a literary construction through which the author intends to emphasize the importance of the “seventh day.”

And on the **seventh day** God ended His work which He had done [seven words in Hebrew]
 And he rested on the **seventh day** from all His work which He had done [seven words in Hebrew]
 Then God blessed the **seventh day** and sanctified it [seven words in Hebrew].

This stress on “seventh” should not be overlooked or underestimated. It is intentional to draw the attention to important theological lessons. First, this is a literary way to emphasize the Sabbath connection with history. The Sabbath is not an abstract spiritual truth that may be applied to any day. It is essentially the “seventh day” (cf. Exod 20:10). It is precisely situated in the chronological flow of time. The “seventh-day” qualification places religion in the flesh of history. Second, the use of the ordinal number “seventh” following the preceding ordinal numbers (first through sixth) reinforces the understanding that the six days of the creation account are of the same historical temporality. They are all solar days (from sunset to sunset). Third, the phrase “seventh day” highlights the non-accidental happening. The seventh-day specification time of creation is not submitted to whims of chance that are a part of the evolutionist paradigm. Fourth, the specification “seventh day” refers to the existential dimension of faith in the flesh of human existence, in time. The “seventh day” refers to a truth that is not just a dogmatic statement to think about, or to believe in our hearts and minds; it is a real and concrete part of the rhythm of life, marked precisely on the “seventh” day, with an exact point of beginning and end. More, the emphasis on this unique day³ rather than on any day—another day or all the days—strongly signifies the monotheistic character of the biblical religion. That God rested on the seventh day expresses the reality of this particular God—the unique God with whom we are supposed to entertain a personal and unique relationship.

The Symbolism of Seven

Among the Hebrew numbers, seven is probably “the number most frequently used in connection to sacred matters.”⁴ It is a sacred number often used in various ritual and religious contexts (ceremonials, feasts, sacrifices, etc.).⁵ Among the numerous symbolic uses of the number seven, “the most comprehensive generalization that can be made is that seven denotes completeness, perfection, consummation.”⁶ The “seventh day” means, then, that we are in a religious context, in a sacred time implying God’s presence and involvement. This means that creation is not the result of chance; for humans it means worship and awe. The “seventh day” means also that God’s creation is finished and perfect and does not need to progress. That the number seven contains symbolic and spiritual references does not mean that it refers to non-real and non-historical entities. Prophecy often uses symbolic

numbers, especially the number seven, in order to predict specific events of salvation (Gen 41:26; Jer 25:11–12; Dan 4:16; 9:25; etc.).

Creation Day

Witness to Creation

The seventh-day section refers explicitly to creation, using the same technical verbs expressing God’s act of creation (*bara*, “create”; *ʿasah*, “make”), the same object of creation (*shamayim waʿarets*, “heavens and earth”), and the same subject of creation (*ʾelohim*, “God”).

The number seven of the seventh day points also to God’s creation in seven days. In fact, the seventh day not only refers to the seven days of creation; it also, more essentially, refers to the rhythm of seven that constitutes the very texture of the event of creation itself, as exemplified in the following instances:

Seven days: the creation week has seven days.

Seven words: the first verse has seven Hebrew words: (*bereshit bara’ ʾElohim et hashamayyim weʿet haʿarets*, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”; Gen 1:1). The second verse is likewise composed of fourteen (seven times two) words.

The keyword *bara’* “create” occurs seven times in the Genesis creation account.

There are seven refrains: the key phrase *wayyar’eh ʾElohim . . . ki tob* (“God saw . . . that it was good”) occurs seven times.

The key phrase *wayehi ken* (“and it was so”) occurs seven times.⁷

This emphatic echo on “seven” between the seventh-day section and the six-day creation account suggests an important historical connection between the two times of creation: the seventh day and the six days share the same historical quality and quantity of time. Both the seventh day and the six days are historical, and both are evening-evening days.

Cosmic Significance

The seventh day is linked with Genesis 1:1, the introductory verse that refers to the creation of the whole universe. Both passages refer to the creation of the “heavens and the earth,” an expression that is a merismus implying the totality of the universe. Also, the two passages are linked through the chiasmic structure (ABB₁A₁):

A. God created		B. the heavens and the earth (1:1)
B ₁ . The heavens and the earth	X	A ₁ . Which God had created (2:1–3)

Note that the introductory line of Genesis 2, “Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them were

finished” (Gen 2:1), does not belong to the sixth day. It is instead the introduction of the paragraph dealing with the seventh day (cf. Exod 20:11). Two clues mark the seventh day: (1) this line follows the refrain “evening-morning,” which always marks the end of the preceding day (see Gen 1:5, 8, 13, etc.). (2) The verbs *wayekullu* (“were finished”) and *wayekal* (“ended”) echo each other, a stylistic way to indicate that they belong to the same paragraph. This literary connection suggests that the seventh day embraces not only all that has been created in the course of the creation week—namely, “the earth” (Gen 1:2)—but also the creation of the whole universe, including the heavens of God that had been created before that week. The seventh day contains not only a historical lesson reminding us that God created us and our world; it also carries a cosmic lesson: this God who created us is the same God who created the infinite universe. Thus, the Sabbath is not only relevant and meaningful for the human earth, which was created in a week’s time; it is also significant for the whole universe, because it is a reminder that *all* has been created by God. In fact, the word “all” (*kol*) is repeated three times, just as the number seven, in the paragraph on the Sabbath (Gen 2:1–3).

Historical Day

The historicity of the seventh day in the biblical creation account is indicated not only through its name (see the section “Seventh Day”), but also expressed through grammatical, linguistic, and stylistic features.

Definite Article

The use of the definite article only for *yom hashishi* (“the sixth day,” Gen 1:31) and *yom hashebi’i* (“the seventh day,” Gen 2:2) reflects the historical character of these two days, the only days when humans were present. The Hebrew definite article has a demonstrative force pointing out the particular condition which is “present to the speaker.”⁸ These two days are lived by the first humans as the first human time, the beginning of human history.

Evening-Morning

The absence of the regular phrase *wayehi ‘ereb wayehi boqer* (“so the evening and the morning”) in the seventh day does not imply a spiritual timelessness of that day “viewed as eternal,”⁹ but expresses, and even highlights, on the contrary, the historical, present, and concrete experience of this day, the only whole day when humans are present, and experience that historical reality, and therefore the only whole day when the mention of “evening-morning” is not necessary. Furthermore, we should note that the ordinal number “seventh” implies that this day follows chronologically

the preceding six days and implies that it refers to the same unit of time (from evening to evening; twenty-four hours) as the preceding six days.

Genealogy

The section of the seventh day in the creation account in Genesis 1–2 is immediately followed by the line *‘eleh toledot hashamayim weha’arets behibaram* (“this is the genealogy [history] of the heavens and earth when they were created,” Gen 2:4a). This phrase defines the literary genre (or style) of the entire creation account,¹⁰ as a genealogy that is in fact a literary way of affirming its historical genuineness. Being the last link of the genealogy, the seventh day comes as the ultimate product of that genealogy and is thus identified as the actual, present, historical witness to the historical reality of the Genesis creation account that generated it. This intention is also reinforced by its literary unity with the other genealogies of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which articulate the rest of the book. From a historical-critical perspective Edmond Jacob points out,

The same priestly author uses the term *toledot* for the creation of the heavens and the earth (Genesis 2:4) as well as for the genealogy of the patriarchs and still today the Jews express this unity of creation and history by dating their calendar from the creation of the world.¹¹

This is why when we separate the creation account from the rest of the narratives of the book of Genesis, we go against the intention of the biblical text itself, as Bernhard W. Anderson warns:

Often, we detach “creation” from this historical context and consider it as a separate “doctrine” (which happens usually in discussions of the relation between science and religion). But this violates the intention of the creation stories. They want to speak to us primarily about history. Accordingly, the greatest weight must be given to the form of these stories: they are “historical accounts” and as such, are part of the historical narration.¹²

Ignoring the historical character of the genealogy of the creation account or of its last link, the seventh day, amounts to questioning the historical character of all the other genealogies, and of all their final respective links to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Different Day

The seventh day is fundamentally different from the other days, an observation that prompted medieval

scholars to place the dividing point between chapters 1 and 2 at precisely this verse. The regular catchphrases that appear in the other days (“God said,” “so the evening and the morning,” and “it was good,”) are absent. Even the creation is different. The seventh day has no corresponding day in the previous sections of creation, as is the case for the other days, where days 1, 2, and 3 correspond to days 4, 5, and 6. The seventh day stands, then, outside the 3 // 3 pattern of the creation week.

1	4
2	5
3	6
7	

This does not mean that the seventh day belongs to another literary context that would be outside of creation, implying another order of time and space. The seventh-day Sabbath also is a part of God’s creation. The Sabbath is not of human or cultural Hebrew/Jewish origin. It rather has “supra-human authority”¹³ (contra the historical-critical explanation of Sabbath).¹⁴ This means that this day is still an inherent part of creation, but that it is the counterpoint to the works of creation, implying a special connection with each of the other days of creation (see Gen 2:3 and the section in the present study, “God Sanctified”).

Delight Day

A Supplement

The coming of the seventh-day Sabbath follows immediately God’s evaluation that “everything He had made . . . it was very good” (Gen 1:31). So far, the qualifying statement that marked God’s daily work of creation was only “it was good,” which appears six times (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). The fact that the phrase “very good” is the seventh occurrence suggests its association with the seventh day. The addition of *me’od* (“very”) implies the idea of totality, for *kol* (“all”) is now included, and therefore concerns the Sabbath, which is precisely the day that concerns the “all” (see the section “Eschatological Day”), and which is the “seventh day” implying completeness (see the section “Seventh Day”). But the Hebrew word *me’od* (“very”) refers to more than a “complete” quantity. This word refers essentially to a non-quantifying qualification; it is used to characterize the unique relationship of love with God: “you shall love the Lord your God . . . with all your might [*me’od*]” (Deut 6:5). This is a quality that cannot be quantified, and expresses rather “an intensity of inwardness . . . the desire to describe the engagement of a person’s whole personality.”¹⁵ This additional qualification¹⁶ suggests that there is something so precious in the seventh-day Sabbath that only a wordless intensity of emotion could somehow evoke it—just as poetry, music, or even silence could do.

What this day contains is beyond the *tob* (the “good,” the “right,” and the “needed”); something that pertains to God’s grace and generosity (see the section “God’s Rest”). David refers to that supplement when he says, “My cup runs over” (Ps 23:5), an experience that he qualifies as *tob wakheshed* (“goodness and mercy,” Ps 23:6). This extraordinary grace does not exist by itself; it comes from God.

A Gift

The Hebrew verb *natan* (“give”) is used in the creation account on the fourth day to refer to God’s first gift of time, the day and the night (Gen 1:17), and on the sixth day for the gift of food (Gen 1:29). The first human experience of God’s grace took place on the seventh day, the Sabbath, that the “Lord has given” (Exod 16:29; Ezek 20:12). Furthermore, the association of the first human experience of time on the seventh day with God’s first gift of the food should make us aware of the importance of the dimension of celebration and enjoyment of God’s gift of the food on the seventh-day Sabbath. It is a day that celebrates God’s creation and God’s gift of the food. This is why fasting on Sabbath, the day that celebrates God’s gift of the food, is an inappropriate tradition that was encouraged by some Gnostics like Marcion and some church fathers who encouraged the early Christians to fast during the seventh-day Sabbath to manifest their rejection of the seventh-day Sabbath.¹⁷

Note that the historical experience of extra intense enjoyment lived on that day does not mean that the seventh day refers to a reality that is different from the creation that is lived on the other week days. The “delight” experienced in this day does not take us out of the earthly reality; on the contrary, it causes us “to ride on the high hills of the earth” (Isa 58:14). The seventh day’s reference to creation is more intense, more “historical,” than what is contained in the other days of the week. On this day, creation is supposed to be more real than on any other day.

Eschatological Day

The Sabbath is a day of hope because it is a time that promises the end of evil, and because it is a time that evokes the lost garden of Eden.

Time of End

Coming at the end of the week, the seventh-day Sabbath is the first eschaton of human history. This weekly eschaton points to the ultimate eschaton, the end of human history with all its load of pain and evil. The eschatological quality of the Sabbath is rendered through the emphatic repetition of the verb *kalah* (“finish,” Gen 2:1–2), which implies the total end of suffering when “God will wipe away every tear from

their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4; cf. Isa 25:8). From the point of view of the weekday, the time of the Sabbath is a time that God’s creation longs for: “the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now” (Rom 8:22).

Time of Nostalgia

The Sabbath is also a time pointing back to the far past. It contains the remembrance of the first Sabbath when humans were totally happy in the perfect garden of Eden with the tree of life and when God was actually present. This idea is in fact implied in the fourth commandment of the Decalogue, which urges us to “remember the Sabbath day” (Exod 20:8). The call to remember does not just concern the fourth commandment; since much of the terminology of the commandment echoes the seventh-day section in Genesis 2:1–3, it is also more directly a reference to the first day of human history, the seventh day of creation in Genesis 2:1–3.

Time of Salvation

The “end” of the week on the beginning of Sabbath reminds that the process of salvation requires the cosmic event of creating a new heaven and new earth, which necessarily implies the end of this one (Isa 65:17; Rev 21:1). It is noteworthy that the phrase “finished the work” that characterizes the time of the seventh-day Sabbath (see the section “God ‘Ended’ on the Seventh Day”) is found again at the end of the seven stages of building the sanctuary in the desert (Exod 40:33) and at the end of the seven years of building Solomon’s temple (1 Kgs 6: 38; 7:51). The sanctuary-temple is thus identified with God’s creation of the world (cf. Ps 78:69). As Levenson points out, the construction of the temple is presented as a parallel to the construction of the world,¹⁸ a significant hint at the cosmic process of salvation.

Worship Day

The seventh-day Sabbath is essentially a time and an act of worship: historically, because it is the time that responded to the event of creation, as reported in Genesis 2:1–3, and theologically, because the act of worshipping the divine Creator is the natural and logical response to God’s act of creation, as affirmed in the Bible in general and in the Psalms in particular.

Sabbath Response to Creation

That Sabbath responds to creation is indicated in the creation account through three facts. First, the seventh-day Sabbath section (Gen 2:1–3) follows

immediately the six days of creation (Gen 1:1–31). Second, the Sabbath text echoes the creation text (rhythm of seven, parallels, linguistic links; see the sections “Time of Salvation” and “Day of Creation”). Third, the biblical text reports the Sabbath as a historical event that responds to God’s works of creation as a time of “rest.” Note that Sabbath worship is the response to God’s creation act in history. It is not the other way around, as some have suggested, arguing that the cult, the practice of worship, brings forth the idea of creation.¹⁹

Worship Response to Creation

In the Bible in general and in the Psalms in particular, creation is always given as the essential reason for worship.²⁰ It is because “it is He who has made us and not we ourselves” (Ps 100:2–3); because “He is our Maker” (Ps 95:6); because we have been created, designed, for worship (Ps 102:18); but also because God created the universe (Ps 95:1–5; Neh 9:5–6; Rev 14:7). Note that the technical word for worship, *hishtakhaweh* (“prostrate,” “worship”), which occur fifteen times in the Hebrew Bible, is ten times directly related to creation and five times indirectly in the context of the sanctuary, the place of worship that symbolizes creation (Ps 78:69).

The Four Paradoxes of Sabbath: Spiritual and Practical Applications

God’s actions on the seventh day are recorded in four verbs that appear in two parallel lines. The first two verbs in the first line describe what God did *on* this day: “God ended” and “God rested.” The next two verbs in the second line describe what God did *to* this day: “God blessed” and “God sanctified.” These four verbs confront us with four paradoxes that carry important lessons about the spiritual life and the practice of the Sabbath.

God “Ended” on the Seventh Day

God has just evaluated His creation as “very good” at the end of the sixth day (Gen 1:31). The comprehensiveness of this end is expressed through the verb *kalah* (“finished,” Gen 2:1), using for the first time the passive form, a way to emphasize that the goal of creation has finally been reached.²¹ And yet, the completion of creation really occurs on the seventh day, and the word *kalah* (“finish”) is repeated, but this time with God as the subject (Gen 2:2)—as if God invested Himself personally at this stage. For the first time the word *mela’kah* (“work”), which refers to skilled work of the finished product, is used and repeated three times, in echo to the phrase “seventh day.” This paradox (apparent contradiction) means that with-

out the seventh-day Sabbath, this moment of grace and faith in the God who works for us and completes our deficiency (see the section “God ‘Rested’ on the Seventh Day”), our work will never be complete, will never succeed. This also suggests a philosophy of work: since the fruit of our work depends on God, we should not worry and be stressed, or maneuver politically and unethically, in order to reach the final product, as holy and important as this goal may be.

God “Rested” on the Seventh Day

However, God does not need to rest (Ps 121:4; Isa 40:28). Only humans need to rest. The lesson of this paradox is twofold, depending on whether this applies to God or to man. On God’s level, this means God’s move to the needy human sphere, as if God becomes incarnated into human flesh. The divine rest becomes the human rest; God’s rest is thus shared with humans who are invited to enter His rest (Matt 11:28–29; Heb 3:18; 4:1–11). The seventh-day Sabbath is thus the manifestation of “God with us” (*Immanuel*), the only human time of the creation week when God rests to make Himself available to humans. On man’s level, the rest of the seventh-day Sabbath means that humans rest from a work they did not do. Humans did not need nor deserve to rest, since they did not work during the creation week; God worked for them while they were still absent. The Sabbath is in that sense the affirmation of the theology of righteousness by faith. We are saved by God’s work for us and not by our own works for God (Gen 15:3; Rom 4:3; 8:3; Eph 2:8–9; Gal 2:16).

God “Blessed” the Seventh Day

The word *barak* (“bless”) implies fruitfulness and a successful future (Gen 1:22, 28). And yet, this is the only day of no work and no production, while the other days, which are days of work and production, are not blessed. We can learn from this paradox that success and production depend more on God than on our own work. Faith is an important component in the success of our effort. Besides the belief in the miracle that God will do what we are incapable of doing, the rational explanation for this wonder resides in the efficiency of a healthy, stressless approach to work. Also, placing our work in the divine perspective of eternity will provide the wisdom and the ethic that will give future to our human limited effort.

God “Sanctified” the Seventh Day

This is the first time that the word *qadash* (“sanctify”) is used in the Bible. As David Shapiro notes, “holiness . . . makes its entrance into the world through the Sabbath.”²² With the seventh day, we move from the sphere of things to the sphere of time,²³ from the appreciation of the “what,” the object of creation which

was qualified as *tob* (“good,” “beautiful,” and “useful”) to the experience of the sanctification (*qadash*) of the “when,” the time which is bound with its content—that is, life.²⁴ To say that a time is “holy” means that during this moment of life, our life is holy, we are holy. This is why the qualifying *qadosh* “holy” is an attribute of God (Lev 21:8) who is called “the holy one” (Ps 71:22; Isa 6:3) or to the people (Exod 19:6) whom God “made holy, ‘sanctified’” (Piel form, expressing causation²⁵), meaning to set apart, to consecrate, “to surrender to God as a possession.”²⁶ What makes the Sabbath a paradox is the fact that by being holy, set apart, it relates to the other days and makes the other days holy. Thus, the seventh day, which is the only day that is separated and different from the other days,²⁷ is also the only day that has an impact on the other days, and also the only day on which the other days have an impact. Practically, this means a two-way current of holiness. In one direction, the Sabbath brings holiness into our weekdays; it has an educational function in the sanctification of our life. In the other direction, the weekdays prepare and anticipate the forthcoming Sabbath day. In other words, the holiness of the life of the people on the Sabbath depends on the holiness of the life of the people during the weekdays; conversely, the significance of the weekdays depends on the holiness of the Sabbath. Another implication of this understanding is the other paradox concerning relationship: the holiness that separates is also the holiness that relates (with humans and with God). Holiness separates for relationship. As Milgrom puts it, “holiness means not only ‘separation from’ but ‘separation to.’” Hence the emphasis on social justice and the family bond in connection to the Sabbath (Exod 19:3; 20:10).

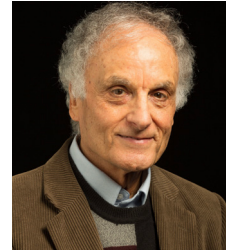
Conclusion

Genesis 2:1–3, which concludes the creation account with the seventh-day Sabbath, the first day of human history, contains many important, rich, and profound truths that are worth being meditated upon. The seventh-day Sabbath is not just a dogmatic truth to be believed and observed. The seventh-day Sabbath is more than about the right day to be kept. Because it is the seventh day (and not another one), it is a day that is full of special meaning. This is the day that takes us out of the worry of this busy and broken world. This is the day that makes us hope, the day that gives us a foretaste of the kingdom of peace, life, and love, the kingdom of God’s presence. This is the day of worship, not as a cultural affirmation or of self-promotion, but as a move towards Him, to worship Him, a day of holiness. This is a day of separation, a different day. But this is also the day that connects us with time, with history, with life, with humanity, with the concrete beauty and taste of God’s creation, and with our unique and personal God, the day of “God with us.” This is the day when the grace of God through His gifts is proclaimed and enjoyed.

Genesis 2:1–3 highlights the historical connection between the seventh-day Sabbath and the six-day creation. The seventh day comes chronologically after the six days, and thus belongs to the same event of God's act of creation in six days. This is also the only day of the creation account, and the first day of human history, when humans are present and witness to their first sunset and their first sunrise. The seventh-day Sabbath is thus situated at the hinge between the past event of creation and the forthcoming human history, and belongs to both slices of history. The seventh-day Sabbath has the twofold function of witnessing the historicity of the past event of creation and also of starting the human history. It belongs to both of them. Questioning the historical substance of the event of the six days of creation would therefore amount to questioning the historical substance of the seventh day.

In fact, the seventh-day Sabbath is the actual tangible and experiential evidence of the historical reality of the six days of creation. To observe the seventh-day Sabbath while dismissing the historicity of creation that it proclaims and to which it belongs is therefore not only a contempt of the biblical testimony, but also simply from the logical point of view blatant nonsense.

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¹ See the rabbinic discussion in *Beitzah* 17a.

² Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Shabbos Perspectives* (New York: Feldheim, 2020), 64.

³ For the evidence that Saturday is the seventh day of the week supported by history, linguistics, the testimony of the Church, the testimony of the Jews, and the Bible itself, see Jacques B. Doukhan, *Genesis, Seventh-day Adventist International Bible Commentary* (n.p.: Pacific Press and Review and Herald, 2016), 68–70, on Genesis 2:2. See also the discussion on the Sabbath in Daniel Bediako and Ekkehardt Mueller, eds., *The Sabbath in the Old Testament and the Intertestamental Period* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2021).

⁴ M. H. Pope, "Number," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, vol. 3 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962), 564.

⁵ See Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 384.

⁶ M. H. Shepherd Jr., "Seven," in Buttrick, 4:295.

⁷ The exact phrase occurs six times. *Wayehi 'or* in verse 3 may functionally equate *wayehi ken*.

⁸ See Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O'Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 247, 13.5.2.c.

⁹ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, New American Commentary 1A (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 181.

¹⁰ For the stylistic features that identify the Genesis creation account as the literary genre of genealogy of the creation account, see Jacques B. Doukhan, *The Genesis Creation Story: Its Literary Structure* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1978), 174–182.

¹¹ Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 139.

¹² Bernhard W. Anderson, *Creation Versus Chaos: The Reinterpretation of Mythical Symbolism in the Bible* (New York: Associate Press, 1967), 33.

¹³ Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 109.

¹⁴ For further discussions on the historical critical views on the Sabbath, see R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 475–483; cf. N. E. A. Andreasen, *The OT Sabbath* (Missouri: Scholars Press, 1972).

¹⁵ Kedar-Kopfstein, "me'od," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren and Heinz-Josef Fabry, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 41.

¹⁶ See the mystical and poetic concept of *neshamah yetera* ("supplement of soul"), proposed by Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish in the Talmud: "The Holy One gives a person an additional soul on Shabbat eve, and at the conclusion of Shabbat removes it from her, as it is stated: 'God ceased from work and was refreshed [vayinafash]" (Exod 31:17; *Beitzah* 16a, 12).

¹⁷ See Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome: Pontifical University Press, 1977), 187–194.

¹⁸ See Jon D. Levenson, "The Temple and the World," *The Journal of Religion* 64, no. 3 (1984): 275–298. John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 182, refutes this interpretation, arguing that "the association is the reverse—namely that the Genesis 1 account is modeled after a temple—inauguration account." Walton's sequence (cult, implying Sabbath → creation) is based on the traditional historical-critical thesis that the theological idea of creation has been generated later in the exilic period from the cultic experience of the priestly setting (P). The implied presupposition relates to the classic Christian existential paradigm (Rudolf Bultmann) that overemphasized redemption over creation, a way of thinking that originated in fact in the Marcionite approach, which opposed redemption to creation, the spiritual Jesus Savior God of the New Testament to the historical Creator Yahweh God of the Old Testament. For a discussion of this problem, see Doukhan, *Genesis Creation Story*, 192–197, 228–233.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Walton's interpretation in *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, 178–192.

²⁰ Ellen G. White's comment on this matter is explicit: "The importance of the Sabbath as the memorial of creation is that it keeps ever present the true reason why worship is due to God . . . the true ground of divine worship . . . is found in the distinction between the Creator and His Creator (*The Great Controversy* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911], 437–438).

²¹ Mathilde Frey, "The Sabbath in the Pentateuch: An Exegetical and Theological Study" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2010), 42.

²² David S. Shapiro, "The Meaning of Holiness in Judaism," *Tradition* 7 (1965): 51.

²³ See Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Noonday Press, 1975), 8: "The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time."

²⁴ In the Old Testament thought, "time is bound up with its content and even identified with it" (E. Jenni, "Time," in Buttrick, 4:646; cf. Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek* [New York: Norton, 1970], 139: "the Semitic concept of time is closely coincident with that of its content." For an illustration of the Hebrew understanding of "time," see, e.g., Ecclesiastes 3:1–8, where time identifies with its content—namely, the events of life (birth, death, planting, healing, etc.).

²⁵ Waltke and O'Connor, 400.

²⁶ Walter Kornfeld, "qdš," in Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, 12:528.

²⁷ Walter Kornfeld, "qadash," in Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, 12:523.

A Moral Fall of a Pastor

A Statement of the *Biblical Research Institute Ethics Committee* (BRIEC)



There are many sad stories in this fallen world in which we live. One among them, especially sobering from the perspective of God's people, is the moral fall of a pastor, a leader of Jesus' "flock" (John 10:16), and a person with a specific divine calling.

1. What Is a Moral Fall?—Definition

Typically, the moral fall of a pastor is associated with an extramarital affair. However, ethical behavior is not limited to sexual morality, although this is an important part of it. Here is a suggested definition of a moral fall: a moral fall is broadly defined as behavior and/or actions which are (1) a serious offense to God's will and His commandments as revealed in Scripture; (2) a severe violation of the rights, the well-being, the security, and trust of other people; and (3) a misdemeanor or crime.

Problematic moral behavior may happen on a large level such as on the state and government level, in various societies, and in business organizations. It may occur in the personal and interpersonal sphere—for example, among individuals and in families. Being in conflict with and opposed to biblical mandates and laws—among them the supreme love commandment (Mark 12:29–30) and Jesus' golden rule (Matt 7:12)—as well as various biblical principles (e.g., covenant-faithfulness, stewardship), such behavior may manifest itself, among others, in:

- financial irregularities (e.g., fraud, theft, corruption, bribery, false information to the detriment of people depending on it, etc.),
- offenses in the area of human freedom and human rights (e.g., human trafficking, various forms of abuse including modern practices of slavery, murder, destruction of people's reputation, oppression, etc.), and
- sexual violations (e.g., sexual abuse of children or spouse, rape, incest, a homosexual lifestyle, adultery, polygamy, etc.).

A pastor's moral problems may be of a non-sexual nature; they may also be found in the area of sexuality. This statement will limit itself to sexual issues.

2. Why Do Moral Falls of Pastors Happen?

A variety of reasons may lead to a moral fall. One is poor judgment. Sometimes a pastor is seen as a perfect person who is desired as a partner by persons whose own marriage does not work well or by singles. Advances may be made. If the pastor does not take precautions and limits visits to certain places and times, a romantic affair may ensue. Extended ministry—for example, too many counseling sessions—to members of the opposite sex may have the same effect.

Hunger for power may be another reason for sexual adventures that may provide the illusion one is in control.

Constantly giving without receiving empties the “spiritual batteries,” and time may not be taken to recharge them, which makes a pastor more vulnerable to temptations. The pastor may be overworked or may be a workaholic and at times seek diversion and relaxation in various media, in pornography, or cybersex, which typically lowers sensibility and sets him/her up for various kinds of sexual misconduct. This may be aggravated through his/her own marital problems and loneliness.

When after all a moral fall occurs, rationalizations may be used to justify one’s behavior. God’s law may be bent or declared non-applicable to suit one’s own lifestyle. If an affair or another violation of God’s standard goes on for a while, the pastor may slip into a lifestyle of immorality, sexual addiction, and even predatory behavior.

While some of these reasons make it more understandable why things happen, at the end there are no real excuses. However, there may be a difference between a pastor who voluntarily confesses his/her sin not only to God, but also to his/her spouse and to church administration while the issue is not yet open knowledge, and a pastor who tries to hide his/her actions only for them to become public anyway.¹

3. Possible Negative Effects of a Moral Fall

As stated above, sexual issues causing a moral fall of a pastor are not only adultery but also rape, sexual abuse of children and spouse, homosexual behavior, incest, bestiality, and others. Typically, sexual misconduct and unfaithfulness, especially when they become public, have serious and devastating effects on the spouse, children, the larger family, church members, the church at large, society, and also the fallen pastor. The detrimental impact of such sinful behavior creates harm in any case. This may be emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, and social harm and may be long-lasting.

Negative effects include a higher risk to attract sexually transmitted diseases and increased potential to marital distress along with blaming, divorce, depression, anxiety, shame, humiliation, confusion and suicidal thoughts. Self-esteem, productivity, and creativity may be decreased, and trust may be lost.

The situation can also lead to domestic violence, increased poverty, and the loss of connections to friends and social networks. Adultery may trigger an unwanted pregnancy with further complications and moral challenges (e.g., the question of whether an abortion should be performed). Marital infidelity may affect church attendance negatively and may weaken the affected people’s relationship with God. The fallen pastor’s negative role model (cf. Phil 3:17; 1 Tim 4:12) has the potential to cause grown-up children and church members to imitate such behavior, either deliberately or inadvertently, and later justify it.

Finally, the church’s witness and her influence on society and other religious groups may be reduced or eclipsed, especially in secular environments in which pastors’ shortcomings regularly appear in the news and jeopardize the church’s name and Christianity’s reputation.

4. The Resulting Responsibility of the Church

In all this turmoil, the sacredness of marriage as a divine institution must not be forgotten. Therefore, in the case of a moral fall as defined above, neither the local church nor the pastor’s employing organization can look the other way and avoid the problem. They must get involved (Matt 18:15–19; 1 Cor 5:1–6) for the sake of the fallen brother/sister and even more so for the sake of all who have been affected and have become victims. This is Jesus’ mandate and an expression of the church’s love and care.

The victims have priority; but the goal of any intervention should also be to help the respective pastor. There are at least two areas in which the pastor is affected by the moral fall: (1) His/her spiritual life is endangered, and he/she needs help to recover a true relationship with God. A moral fall of a pastor is a severe spirituality issue, a grave spiritual failure. (2) His/her ministerial career is affected; the employing institution has to release him/her from his/her pastoral duties. The first issue has priority because it may affect eternal life. The church must help the fallen pastor to see the issue from a biblical perspective, to repent of his/her sins, separate from them, find peace with God and wholeness again, and work on broken relationships with the aim to restore them if possible.

Even more so, the church must care for the pastor’s spouse and family, especially if the pastor does not show insight, and a change of attitude is not achieved. They are the immediate victims but are often forgotten or neglected. The pastor’s family may need counseling, caring friends and a support system, financial help from the church organization for a while, etc. In other words, the approach to the situation should be redemptive.

If the pastor does not repent and does not stop evil behavior, if all attempts to help him/her have been fruitless and unsatisfactory, and he/she continues to live in such sin, church discipline needs to be considered and executed. It is a kind of last resort of the church to call out to the pastor to make things right with God and others. If the pastor changes behavior and sets things right, the fellowship with believers may be restored.

5. Forgiveness Is Possible

So, not only is repentance possible, but also forgiveness. Jesus is in the business of forgiving sins, saving people, and changing them (Acts 5:31; 10:43;

Eph 1:7; Col 1:13–14; 2 Cor 5:17). The paralytic was told, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven” (Matt 9:2). The sinful woman who anointed Jesus’ feet experienced forgiveness of sins (Luke 7:37–38, 47–48). Jesus did not condemn the woman caught in adultery but called her to sin no more (John 8:11). We may pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6:12) and rejoice in the promise: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). But forgiveness does not happen automatically, independent of the attitude of the sinner, nor can it be taken lightly. “Have mercy on me, O God . . . blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Purge me . . . wash me” (Ps 51:1–3). And while we have the promise of forgiveness, strictly speaking, we do not have the right to be forgiven. It is God’s grace.

Forgiveness has not only a divine but also a human dimension. While the victims of our sins are challenged, “If your brother . . . repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him” (Luke 17:3), the perpetrator does not have the right to demand forgiveness. Some victims may not even manage to forgive and rise above the evil experienced. Relationships may be ruined for life.

Forgiveness does not undo evil and erase it from the memory of the victim. While forgiveness may be experienced, in many cases, the effects of the sin may still be with the sinner and the victims. David lost the first child he had with Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:15–16). He had to suffer from a dysfunctional family, which no longer respected him, and from civil war among others (2 Sam 13–20). For instance, a pastor still has to take care of his/her illegitimate child. If he/she has abused a child, imprisonment may be the consequence.

Fortunately, forgiveness and peace with God are possible, although they may not solve all the problems. So, what about the restoration of pastoral privileges and duties?

6. The Special Case of a Pastor

A. Spiritual Leaders in Old Testament and New Testament

Pastors are only mentioned once in the New Testament (Eph 4:11; pastor-teachers) and seem to be a special group of elders. The question of whether a pastor or spiritual leader can be restored to his/her office after a sexual fall is not directly discussed in Scripture. But Scripture does not leave us completely in the dark in this case. For instance, the New Testament indicates that leaders such as teachers have higher responsibilities than other believers, especially as they speak and proclaim the gospel with their

tongue, which is very difficult to control (Jas 3:1; see also Luke 12:48). Also, their lives must be congruent with their teaching. “Greater responsibility brings greater judgment.”²

The Bible contains some narratives dealing with leadership and moral issues as well as the question of restoration or non-restoration. There were other than sexual cases in which people could keep their office or were restored to it: for instance, Gentiles such as Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4:34–36) and Herod Antipas (Matt 14:3–4), as well as believers such as Aaron after the issue with the golden calf and his rebellion against Moses (Exod 32; Num 12) and Peter after disowning Jesus (John 21:15–22). Furthermore, not only did Peter fail, but so did all twelve disciples. These were to become the prime leaders of the church, but Jesus was still physically present, and their extended responsibilities may have begun only with Jesus’ ascension. On the other hand, ten of the twelve spies, leaders sent out by Moses to explore the promised land, died by a plague and were not restored to their responsibilities (Num 13:1–2; 14:37–38).

Obviously, sexual issues are somewhat different from other transgressions. Paul indicates that sexual immorality is a category of sin by itself. It involves the totality of the human being, and its results are extremely far-reaching by even destroying the union with Christ (1 Cor 6:18).³

According to the Old Testament, Samson was involved in immoral sexual behavior that led to his death (Judg 14–16). It was a time when “there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judg 21:25). While David, not directly being a spiritual leader, was able to continue as king after his adultery with Bathsheba—however, under great distress and with his life falling apart—the sons of the high priest Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, did not survive their sexual escapades. “Now Eli was very old; and he heard all that his sons did unto all Israel, and how that they lay with the women that did service at the door of the tent of meeting. And he said unto them, ‘. . . Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear: ye make Jehovah’s people to transgress’” (1 Sam 2:22–24). The prediction that they would die on one and the same day came true (1 Sam 2:34; 4:11). These narratives are descriptive and not prescriptive, but still enlightening.

The New Testament does not contain a record on spiritual leaders of the early church being involved in sexual immorality. Therefore, the issue of restoration does not come up directly. However, the help one gets on this subject may be found in the lists of qualifications for bishops/elders in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:5–6: The bishop/elder must be “husband of one wife.” Obviously, this refers to marital faithfulness. It would exclude from the office of elder persons who have not been or who are not faithful. This text also confronts pastors today. Since “the teacher has the

possibility of greater damage and claims to have a more perfect understanding of doctrine and ethics,”⁴ his/her negative influence is more detrimental than that of others.

B. Personal Ethics and Professional Ethics

The issue of a moral fall of a pastor has also a larger ethical perspective. Pastors are not only church members like all others, but are at the same time professionals such as physicians and medical personnel, lawyers, accountants, and other licensed professions. Not only personal ethics but also professional ethics apply to these groups. This fact may coincide with the New Testament emphasis on teachers having greater responsibilities and having to undergo greater scrutiny. Professionals have obligations and privileges that other people do not have to the same extent. For instance, pastors have the duty to keep information secret that was entrusted to them under the provision of confidentiality, and they have the right to do so even in court—at least in some countries.

A moral fall affects professionals not only privately, but also in their professional career. Their license may be withdrawn permanently—for example, in the case of an accountant involved in monetary embezzlement. They have broken the code of ethics of their profession and can no longer be trusted. This is also true for pastors. A moral fall brings a fundamental dishonor on the ministerial profession. In addition, who knows if a person once involved in sexual immorality and having become a menace to others will not fall back into previous behavior if restored to the original position. “No one can be certain how much damage has been or is being done, nor how long and how complete the recovery will be.”⁵

Thus, the issue is that while a pastor after repentance may be restored as church member, this does not mean he/she can maintain his/her professional status or be restored to it immediately, after a period of time, or at all. Personal forgiveness and professional restoration are two different issues, which are not necessarily connected.

C. The Problem With Sexual Misconduct in Society and Church

Several societies have become quite strict on sexual misconduct. While in some of them homosexual conduct and incest among consenting adults are more or less legalized, sex with minors and sexual abuse are criminal offenses. Sexual abuse of children must be reported to the authorities in the United States. Sexual assault and harassment are reportable and may lead to lawsuits. Greater publicity of sexual assault has come, for instance, through the #MeToo Movement as a social justice movement against sexual abuse and harassment. It has empowered people to publicize their allegations of sexual assaults and has led to court cases for offenses dating back even decades. In the meantime, there is also a #ChurchToo movement

that led to the resignation of pastors. “Many have argued that the current issue of reported child sexual abuse in the Catholic church is one of the biggest crises in the church’s history.”⁶

Thus, even if the church would lay aside all biblical and ethical concerns, restoring a fallen pastor through keeping the person in his/her position or rehiring him/her could, due to the public sexual abuse debate, still become a major problem for the pastor and for church administration, especially if years later a lawsuit would ensue. Even if a pastor would not be sued for child molestation or being involved with child pornography, it may still be possible to argue that his/her sexual involvement with a person of the other sex was possible due to his/her position of power. This would make adultery a form of sexual assault and abuse. A worst-case scenario would be if sexual immorality would be repeated, and the pastor would exhibit predatory behavior. Also, it may not be wise to make a major difference between child abuse, sex with minors, and other forms of sexual immorality such as adultery, incest, and homosexual conduct, some being punished by authorities even with imprisonment. All of them are sinful and some are very much under the scrutiny of society these days with legal implication ensuing.

While the church has the option to keep a pastor who has experienced a moral fall or assign to him/her other work than pastoral responsibilities, the safest course and probably the wisest is to terminate the fallen pastor permanently and help his/her family and him/her to recover spiritually with the possibility that the local church may use his/her voluntary service in areas of no concern.⁷ This is also the position of the World Church as found in the General Conference *Working Policy*.⁸

7. Implications

With a moral fall, the issue is typically open sin, not sin hidden to the public. The church does not police its workforce but needs to put in place—and has at least partially done so—and adhere to a clear code of ethics to be accepted by all employees with stipulations of what will happen in the case of a violation.

In order to avoid as much as possible moral falls among pastors, it should be mandatory for educational institutions, which train future pastors, to address this problem and teach students how to set boundaries.

Students need help to develop a biblical worldview that does not focus on deserving what a person needs—for example, “I take from another person what I do not get from my spouse”—but on God’s good will for us and our relationship with Him. Not ignoring our needs, Jesus still highlighted that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). Moral falls are deep spiritual crises, as seen in Joseph’s refusal to get involved in sexual sin: “How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” (Gen 39:9).

The church needs to have a procedure of how to deal with moral falls of pastors that applies to all, no matter if they are local pastors, theology teachers, departmental leaders, or administrators.

The church may also want to consider establishing a worldwide process of how to serve and help those affected by a moral fall of a pastor.

Church administration is encouraged to have regular seminars for pastoral workers on sexual misconduct and moral falls and/or have presentations on the issue during workers' meetings once a year.

It is better to address the topic of sexual temptation and misconduct regularly and attempt to prevent difficult cases than have to lay off ministerial workers.

Conclusion

The moral fall of a pastor is an enormous tragedy for himself/herself, the pastoral family, and the church.

It creates pain, anger, despair and has other manifold effects on the pastor and others. Yet, the pastor does not need to be seen as a victim because humans have a choice of what they think, occupy themselves with, and do. Nevertheless, in addition to his/her family and the church he/she needs attention and help.

Forgiveness is crucial. The fallen pastor should seek divine forgiveness and forgiveness by all people affected. These are also challenges to extending forgiveness to the pastor. But forgiveness does not necessarily mean restoration in all respects and return to all functions exercised before the moral fall. In many cases, we must live with the consequences of bad choices. Pastoral ministry is not an entitlement, but a privilege given on condition.

Fortunately, we have a heavenly Father, "the God of all grace, who has called [us] to His eternal glory in Christ." He is willing to "restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish [us]" (1 Pet 5:10).

¹ It has been suggested that in a case that has not become public, where the pastor has shown repentance and the spouse is willing to forgive and continue the marriage, it may be possible for leadership to work with the issue through pastoral care by the ministerial secretary or another qualified person. But even this provision may not always work (e.g., in the case of child abuse).

² James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 141.

³ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 238, states, "Because intercourse with a prostitute is 'uniquely body joining, it is uniquely body-defiling' (Fisk 1996: 558). In the context, sex with a prostitute severs the union with Christ and sabotages its resurrection destiny."

⁴ Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 137. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Pelican New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 150, adds, "When we undertake to guide others in the faith, we must be especially careful to exhibit the fruit of that faith by the way we live. Our greater knowledge brings with it a greater responsibility to live according to that knowledge."

⁵ Miroslav Kiš, "Dealing With a Fallen Pastor?," *Ministry Magazine*, January 2005, <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2005/01/dealing-with-a-fallen-pastor.html>, the seventh of eight articles on pastoral sexual misconduct.

⁶ Wikipedia, s.v. "MeToo Movement," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MeToo_movement (accessed January 19, 2022). Geir Moulson, "Retired Pope Benedict XVI Faulted Over Abuse Cases When He Was in Germany," *Huffington Post*, January 20, 2022, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ap-eu-germany-church-abuse_n_61e94f73e4b0c6802ef0bb7f (accessed January 20, 2022), reports, "A long-awaited report on sexual abuse in Germany's Munich diocese on Thursday faulted retired Pope Benedict XVI's handling of four cases when he was archbishop in the 1970s and 1980s. . . . 'In a total of four cases, we

came to the conclusion that the then-archbishop, Cardinal Ratzinger, can be accused of misconduct,' said one of the reports' authors, Martin Pusch. Two of those cases . . . involved perpetrators who offended while he was in office and were *punished by the judicial system but were kept in pastoral work* without express limits on what they were allowed to do. . . . In a third case, a cleric who had been convicted by a court outside Germany was put into service in the Munich archdiocese and the circumstances speak for Ratzinger having known of the priest's previous history. . . . When the church abuse scandal first flared in Germany in 2010, attention swirled around another case: that of a suspected pedophile priest whose transfer to Munich to undergo therapy was approved under Ratzinger in 1980. The prelate *was allowed to resume pastoral work*, a decision that the church said was made by a lower-ranking official without consulting the archbishop. In 1986, the priest received a suspended sentence for molesting a boy" (emphasis supplied).

⁷ If true repentance has become evident, it may be at the local church's discretion to elect a terminated pastor to voluntary leadership positions after a number of years, if there is not serious resistance on the part of her members.

⁸ *Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists*, 2019–2020 ed. (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2019), 487–488: "A minister who experiences a moral fall or apostatizes has made void his ordination. . . . A licensed minister who experiences a moral fall or apostatizes shall be ineligible for future ordination or employment as a Seventh-day Adventist minister. . . . It is recognized that a minister who has experienced a moral fall, has apostatized, or has been disciplined for any other reason listed in L 60 20 above, has access to the mercy and pardoning grace of God and may desire to return to the Church. Such an individual must be assured of the love and goodwill of his/her fellow believers. However, for the sake of the good name of the Church and the maintaining of moral standards, he/she must plan to devote his/her life to employment other than that of the gospel ministry, the teaching ministry, or denominational leadership." See also *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Handbook* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Ministerial Association, 2009), 43–45.

**“Consecrate yourselves wholly to the work of God.
He is your strength, and he will be at your right hand,
helping you to carry out his merciful designs.”**

Ellen G. White, *Review & Herald*, March 24, 1904

Lessons from Matthew 20

By Clinton Wahlen

As Jesus journeys toward Jerusalem, He continues teaching the disciples about the true nature of the kingdom of heaven. Peter's question as to what reward the disciples would receive for having left all to follow Him (Matt 19:27) reveals that they still have much to learn. So Jesus tells them a parable about the rewards received by workers in a vineyard (Matt 20:1–16), followed by the third and final prediction of His approaching death and resurrection (Matt 20:17–19). As if totally ignoring what Jesus has just said, the mother of James and John asks for her sons to have the most prominent positions in the kingdom (Matt 20:20–28). The unit concludes with the healing by Jesus of two blind men on the outskirts of Jericho (Matt 20:29–34).

Interpretation of Matthew 20

1. Verses 1–16

- By use of the word “for,” Jesus connects the parable to the principle of reversal He has just given, “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Matt 19:30). The same principle stated in reverse order appears as the conclusion of the parable (Matt 20:16). In other words, in the kingdom of heaven who is “first” and who is “last” is determined very differently from the way it is determined in the kingdoms of this world.
- Likening the kingdom of heaven to a “landowner” (literally in Greek, “master of the house”; cf. Matt 10:25) indicates that the character and actions of the landowner illustrate how the kingdom of heaven functions.
- The vineyard was an important industry in Israel and used by the prophets as a symbol of the nation (Isa 5:7; Hos 10:1). According to Josephus, the entrance to the temple had a gate “covered with gold” with “golden vines above it from which clusters of grapes hung as tall as a man’s height.”¹
- In the parable, five groups of laborers are hired throughout the day, beginning at six in the morning when it is cool, and they work until six in the evening (cf. Ps 104:22–23). But only the first laborers agree on a specific wage—one denarius, which was the normal pay for a full day’s work (v. 2). The others simply accept the landowner’s promise to pay them “whatever is right” (vv. 3–7), presumably proportional to the hours they worked.
- Were those hired at the eleventh hour working somewhere else, or unwilling to work in the heat of the day, or did they realize only late in the day they needed more money? We are not told but we have the impression that of the five groups hired, these workers were the least desirable.
- In accordance with the law of Moses, the workers were paid at the end of the day (Deut 24:14–15). To withhold it even until the next day might deprive a family of food (cf. Lev 19:13; Prov 3:27–28).
- In verse 8, the landowner is called the “lord” (Gk. *kyrios*) of the vineyard, suggesting that either Jesus or God is represented. The steward (Gk. *epitropos*) refers to a highly responsible person put in charge of a household or lands. The word translated “wages” (Gk. *misthos*) is used frequently of the heavenly reward (Matt 5:12, 46; 6:1; 10:41–42).
- Surprisingly, the workers who came last are treated the best by being paid first and are given a full day’s pay (Matt 20:8–9). Ordinarily we might expect that those who worked the longest would be paid first, but instead they are paid last. The order of payment not only illustrates the larger theme of reversal, but also ensures that all the laborers see the generous character of the landowner.
- Perhaps not too surprising, when those who worked the longest see the wages given to the others, they start expecting to receive more, but receive a denarius like all the others (Matt 20:10). So they begin grumbling and complain to the landowner because he made the last workers “equal to us who have borne the burden and heat of the day” (Matt 20:11–12). Being treated fairly does not necessarily mean being treated equally. The workers were not all equal: they came at different times, worked different hours, and were not paid at the same time. But instead of being compensated for hours worked, there was an equity of outcomes—they were all given a full day’s pay because that was the amount needed to feed their families.

- Interestingly, the landowner addresses the complaining worker, “Friend” (Matt 20:13), used only twice more in Matthew as a form of address: of the man who came to the wedding without a wedding garment (Matt 22:12) and of Judas at the time of the betrayal (Matt 26:50). The landowner does not need to explain his actions but he does so anyway, pointing to the agreement made at the beginning of the day. The emphatic form of the question in Greek (*ouchi*) expects a strong affirmative reply.
- The landowner explains he has the right to do with his money what he wants. If he wants to be generous with it, he can be (Matt 20:14–15). Who can argue with that? His final question (“Or is your eye evil because I am good?”) contrasts his generosity with the greedy attitude of the first-hour workers. What we choose to focus on greatly affects our attitudes and how we view our circumstances. The first-hour workers focus on the earthly wages (Matt 20:8; Gk. *misthos*, “reward”) for their labor and fail to appreciate the character of the landowner. The “I am good” statement echoes Jesus’ self-descriptions in Matthew and elsewhere that hint at His intimate relation to the Father (Matt 11:29; 14:27; 18:20; 28:20; Mark 14:62; John 8:58; cf. Matt 19:17).
- If we find this parable troubling, it is useful to ask ourselves why. Do we identify with the first-hour workers rather than the eleventh-hour workers? And, yet, have we not at some point been in need of mercy or generosity akin to that shown to those who worked only one hour?

2. Verses 16–19

- Of Jesus’ predictions of His sufferings and death, this third one is the most graphic of them all as it includes mention of the death sentence and that He will be delivered to the Gentiles to be mocked, scourged, and crucified. Earlier, Jesus had avoided being taken but now He’s going to Jerusalem for this very purpose (cf. John 10:18).
- Matthew is careful to record the fulfillment of Jesus’ predictions: mockery is noted three times (Matt 27:29, 31, 41); Pilate gives orders to scourge Jesus (cf. John 19:1) and hands Him over to be crucified (Matt 27:26).
- Matthew adds the detail that Jesus “took the twelve disciples aside” to disclose what would soon happen to Him. Many would be traveling to Jerusalem for the approaching Passover and Jesus took steps to ensure His words would not be overheard.

3. Verses 20–28

- James and John were probably the youngest of the twelve (they were with their father in Matthew 4:21). So, although her role is not mentioned by Mark, it would not be unusual in Jewish or Roman settings for the mother to intercede and “was often more effective than a man’s direct petition for himself.”² Her kneeling may hint at the worship of Jesus (as it does frequently in Matthew (see, e.g., Matt 2:2, 8, 11; 4:9–10; 8:2; 9:18; 15:25)).
- Their mother “was among the women who attended Jesus at the cross and later witnessed the empty tomb, which would identify her as Salome (cf. Matt 27:56; Mark 15:40; 16:1), the sister of Mary, Jesus’ mother.”³
- The Greek verb translated “ask” (*aiteō*) is used of requests made to God, and, in fact, only the Father can grant this request, as Jesus proceeds to point out (Matt 20:23).
- The right hand signifies power, authority, and favor (e.g., Exod 15:6, 12; 1 Kgs 2:19; Ps 16:11), so the request is that her sons may be given the second and third positions in the kingdom after Jesus Himself.
- Despite Jesus having just alerted His disciples of the approaching distress, it is as if the disciples failed to hear the warning, so Jesus asks James and John whether they are “able to drink the cup” (of suffering) and “be baptized with the baptism” (of death).⁴ Eventually, all the disciples (except Judas) would come to appreciate these words and would count it a privilege to suffer for Jesus’ sake (cf. Matt 5:10–12).
- To say the other disciples were “displeased” with this request is an understatement. The Greek word used to describe their feelings (*aganakteō*) means “indignant” (ESV) and “angry” (NRSV). But Jesus, unwilling that the worldly spirit of rivalry should persist among His closest disciples, points out that this is the very kind of domination being exercised by Rome that was so resented by the Jews. History is littered with examples of the oppressed, hoping for positive change, who gain power only to become oppressors themselves (cf. Prov 28:15). The solution for this vicious cycle lies within—through a change of heart that only the Holy Spirit can really bring about.
- Followers of Jesus are not to be guided by worldly values, which include domination, coercion, and control. The spirit of heaven is the exact opposite of this. Jesus makes the point quite emphatically: literally, “Not so shall it be among you.” Like Jesus, His

followers are to be actuated by the desire to bless (Matt 5:3–10), give (Matt 10:42), and love sacrificially (Matt 16:24).

- The early Christians counted it a privilege to be “servants” (Gk. *diakonoî*) toward each other (Rom 16:1; 1 Cor 3:5; Eph 6:21; Col 1:7) and “slaves” (Gk. *douloi*) of Christ (Acts 4:29; Rom 1:1; 2 Cor 4:5; Col 4:12) in emulation of *the* Servant par excellence (Matt 20:28; cf. Rom 15:8; Phil 2:7).
- The allusion by Jesus in verse 28 to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (cf. Isa 53:10–11) is not the only one among His sayings (see Luke 22:37; cf. Isa 53:12) and fits the pattern of Jesus’ gradually revealing His messianic identity to His disciples (cf. Matt 16:21). His death being “for many” (Gk. *anti pollōn*) points to the idea of substitution (cf. 1 Tim 2:6).
- Jesus died for “our transgressions,” “our iniquities,” and “the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:5–6; cf. Rom 4:25; 5:6, 8; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 1:4), and has thereby redeemed us from sin and death (Rom 3:24; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14; Heb 9:15).

4. Verses 29–34

- Jericho was the last major town on the way to Jerusalem from Galilee. The older location seems to have been largely abandoned by this time (cf. Neh 3:2; 7:36), with the Roman city of Jericho being to the southeast, nearer the three palaces built by Herod the Great. The final stretch to Jerusalem involves an ascent of three thousand feet (914 m) in just fifteen miles (twenty-five km).
- The blind generally had no means of sustenance besides begging. According to Matthew and Mark, the healing took place as Jesus was leaving Jericho.⁵
- Addressing Jesus as “Son of David” (Matt 20:30–31) expresses not only the faith of the blind men in Jesus as the Messiah; it also shows they had the faith to be healed, a faith that not even the strong rebuke of the surrounding people are able to silence. In fact, it only seems to make them more determined and cry all the louder.
- Jesus’ question as to what the men want (Matt 20:32) may seem strange but Jesus wants to hear from the blind men themselves as to whether they believe He can restore their sight. Matthew’s wording links their plea with Isaianic expectations of the Messiah (Isa 35:5; 42:7; cf. 29:18), suggesting that despite being physically blind, they recognize Jesus as a fulfillment of these prophecies.

- Jesus’ compassion is visibly shown by His touching their eyes (Matt 20:34) and the fact that “they followed Him” shows the healing led to their becoming His disciples.

Application of the Chapter

Some valuable lessons from Matthew 20 include:

1. As with the challenge given to the rich young man, the parable of the workers in the vineyard challenges our scale of values and our attitude toward the heavenly reward. “He who grudges the reward to another forgets that he himself is saved by grace alone. . . . It is not the length of time we labor but our willingness and fidelity in the work that makes it acceptable to God.”⁶
2. The desire of James and John for self-exaltation is like that of Lucifer, which led to the rise of sin in the beginning (Isa 14:12–14). But the kingdom of heaven is characterized by self-sacrificing love and the desire to bless others.
3. While suffering for Christ is never welcome or pleasant, the experience can draw us into closer fellowship with Him and intensify our appreciation of His sacrifice for us (Phil 1:29; 3:10). “Of all the gifts that Heaven can bestow upon men, fellowship with Christ in His sufferings is the most weighty trust and the highest honor.”⁷
4. Rather than trying to take justice into our own hands, the Bible urges us to trust in the “God of justice” and wait patiently for Him (Isa 30:18), because only He can bring peace and establish “justice in the earth” (Isa 42:4; cf. Zech 9:10).
5. The spirit of heaven is the spirit of service (cf. Matt 4:11). Jesus calls upon us to live counterculturally in today’s world, which is so permeated with self-serving and fixated on status, wealth, and influence.
6. Jesus asks nothing of His followers that He Himself has not already exemplified in His own experience (Phil 2:5–8; cf. 1 Cor 11:1).
7. Persevering faith, like that of the two blind men, that no opposition can quench, is an important quality for followers of Jesus. “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33; cf. 2 Tim 3:12).

Clinton Wahlen
Associate Director
Biblical Research Institute



¹ Josephus, *War*, 5:210; cf. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 575: “At the entrance to the temple was a vine of gold and silver, with green leaves and massive clusters of grapes executed by the most skillful artists. This design represented Israel as a prosperous vine.”

² Craig S. Keener, *Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 99.

³ Michael J. Wilkins, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: New Testament*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 1:122–23.

⁴ For examples of these two metaphors, see Isaiah 51:17, 22; Luke 12:50; Romans 6:3.

⁵ According to D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, rev. ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 435, Mark and Luke focus on Bartimaeus, while Matthew's mention of two men “shows personal knowledge of the events.”

⁶ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press, 1900), 402.

⁷ White, *Desire of Ages*, 225.

The BRI Welcomes Two New Scholars

We are very pleased to welcome two new scholars to the BRI team:



Daniel Kwame Bediako, coming from Ghana, West Africa, arrived this July to serve as BRI associate director. He holds a PhD in Old Testament from the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS), Philippines. Daniel is a thoughtful and distinguished biblical scholar and expert in biblical interpretation and biblical Hebrew. He brings with him a rich and fruitful experience as teacher and administrator. Among many other responsibilities, he served as a theology professor and president/vice-chancellor of Valley View University in Ghana for many years. He also is a co-editor of the new *Andrews Bible Commentary*. His wife Gifty and two teenage children accompany him.



Alberto R. Timm joined the BRI in August as the newest associate director. He is from Brazil and holds a PhD in Adventist Studies from Andrews University. Alberto brings with him significant experience and expertise as a professor of theology and rector of the Latin-American Adventist Theological Seminary in the South American Division. Before joining the BRI, Alberto served as an associate director of the Ellen G. White Estate at the General Conference. He has published widely on Seventh-day Adventist theology and doctrinal development and is the author of the Adult Sabbath School Quarterly *On Death, Dying, and the Future Hope* (4/2022). Alberto is married to Marly and is the proud father of three adult children and the grandfather of one.

To our two new colleagues and their families, we extend our warm welcome as they join us in the service and ministry of the BRI on behalf of the Seventh-day Adventist world church.

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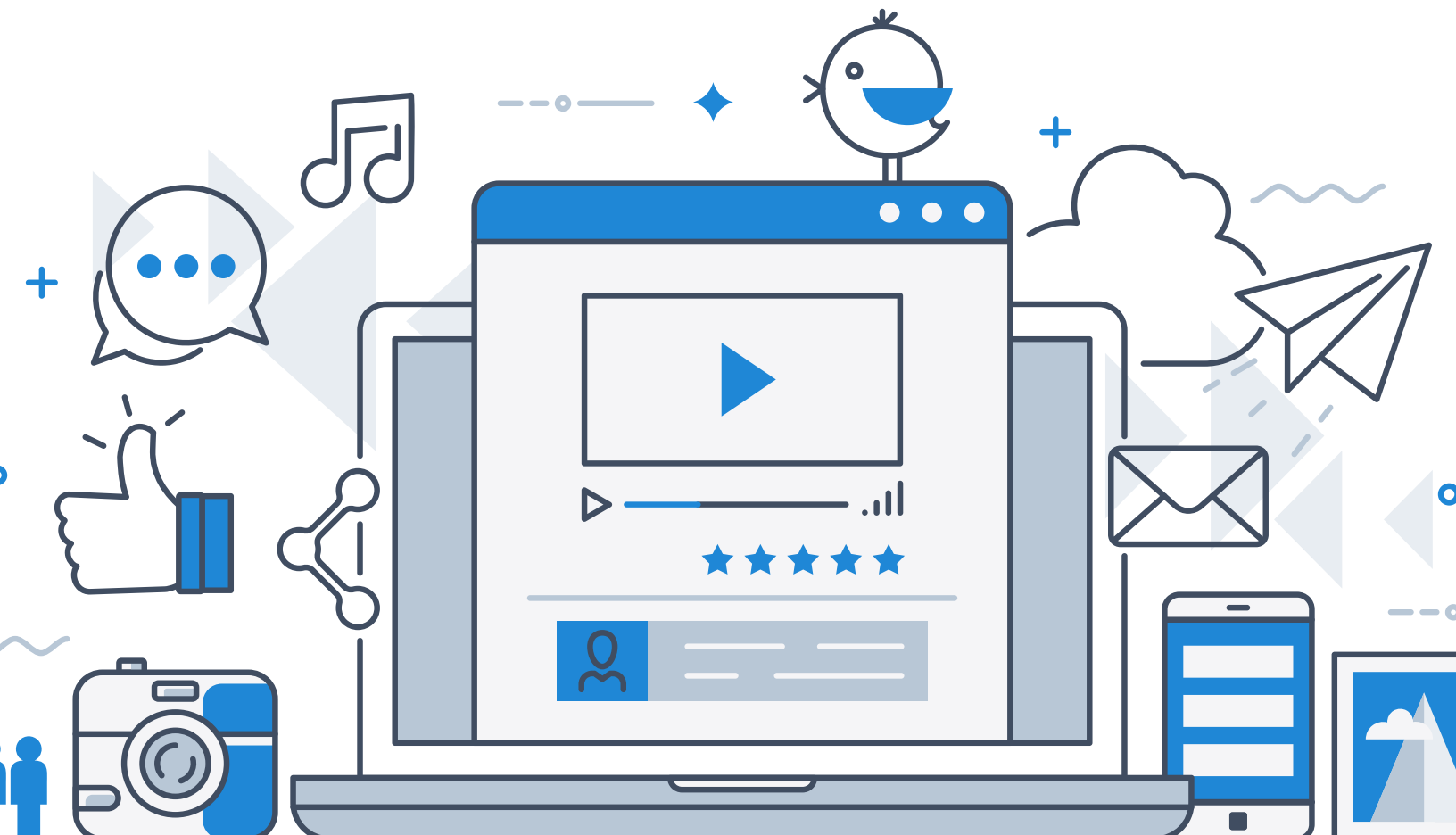
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Index to *Reflections*

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