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Celebrating the Baptism of Jesus: A Chronological Case for AD 27

Jônatas Leal

Introduction

Jesus is the center of history, both theologically and chronologically. While His birth divides the Western calendar into before and after Christ (BC and AD), His death and resurrection mark a new chapter not only for human redemptive history, but also for all creation. Surprisingly, however, the date for His baptism is often neglected in this discussion and yet we have some strong historical evidence for it.[1] Despite the challenges involved in studying ancient chronology, there is convincing biblical, historical, and archeological evidence for establishing solid dates for the major events related to His life.

This article deals specifically with the date of Jesus' baptism. Its objective is to explore the available biblical and historical evidence to pinpoint the precise year of this event. Although this evidence is scattered throughout various scholarly works, this paper aims to gather it into a single, cohesive framework while accounting for the broader chronological context. In the end, it will become clear that the year AD 27 is the most solid option when all available evidence is considered.

The discussion is divided into three parts: First, a brief section clarifying essential chronological concepts will prepare the reader for the analysis that follows. Second, the direct evidence that determines the date of Jesus' baptism is explored. Finally, the paper demonstrates how the date of Jesus' birth and the prophecy of the seventy weeks corroborates the conclusion that AD 2027 is the two-thousandth anniversary of Jesus' baptism.

Ancient Chronology: The Issues

The lack of consensus regarding the exact chronology of Jesus' life—or many other ancient events—is due to several factors. Neither the Old nor the New Testament utilizes a calendar dating system tied to a continuous chronological era. Furthermore, ancient peoples used their own calendar systems, which were based on the sun, the moon, or a combination of both.[2] For example, Egyptian and Roman calendars were solar, consisting of a fixed period of 365 days. To minimize the discrepancy between the Julian calendar and the tropical year—which lasts exactly 365.2422 days—the Romans added one day every four years. Even so, as centuries passed, the Julian calendar accumulated a lag that reached ten days by 1582. This led to the Gregorian reform, which established the leap-year system still used in the West today.

The Christian era system was created in AD 525 by the monk Dionysius Exiguus. The birth of Jesus divides the calendar, with preceding years counted backward as Before Christ (BC) and subsequent years counted as Anno Domini (AD). In this system, there is no "year zero," as 1 BC is followed directly by AD 1—a gap that creates a one-year shift in calculations spanning both eras.

It is precisely at this point that the apparent discrepancy arises between the date of Jesus' baptism in AD 27 and His age of about thirty at that time. Dionysius ended up designating the first year of his Easter table as 532 years since the Incarnation. This placed the birth of Christ in the year 753 *Ab Urbe Condita* (from the founding of Rome), which was the standard method of reckoning time in the Roman Empire. This occurred because Dionysius lacked the historical data available today that allows us to establish Christ's birth around 4 BC with reasonable certainty.[3]

By contrast, the Hebrew calendar was lunisolar. Months lasted twenty-nine or thirty days, and the beginning of each month was determined by the visibility of the new crescent moon. To correct the roughly eleven-day difference relative to the tropical year, an intercalary month was added every two or three years. This addition was governed by the ripening of barley, which was required for the wave-sheaf offering during the Feast of Firstfruits in the middle of the first religious month, called Abib (between March and April in our modern calendar). If the barley was not yet ripe during the final month of the year, a thirteenth month was inserted. The regularity of the seasons in the Near East during biblical times was so consistent that, over a nineteen-year cycle, the Hebrew calendar returned precisely to its original starting point, synchronizing accurately with the tropical year.[4]

Another important aspect to consider when studying biblical chronology is the lack of standardization in reckoning the regnal years of ancient rulers. There were three primary methods for calculating these years: the factual method, which accounted for exact dates including days and months (common among the Romans); the accession-year system (non-inclusive), in which the partial year of ascending the throne was not counted in the official reign length; and the non-accession year system (inclusive), which counted that partial first year as a full year. Because of these distinct approaches, the date assigned to the same historical event could vary by up to a year on the calendar.[5]

Despite these challenges, Adventist scholars have drawn on biblical, historical, and recent astronomical data to overcome the ambiguities discussed here, confidently proposing a coherent chronology of Jesus' life.

Dating the Baptism of Jesus

Accounting for these chronological variables helps to examine the timeline of Jesus' baptism more accurately. Most debates regarding the precise date of this event stem from variations in interpreting these factors. Nevertheless, two major historical benchmarks offer vital anchors for clarifying the timeline: the commencement of John the Baptist's ministry and the ongoing reconstruction of the temple under Herod the Great.

The Beginning of John the Baptist's Ministry

The commencement of John the Baptist's ministry marks a significant milestone in the New Testament and has direct implications for the timeline of Jesus' life. Following the narrative sequence in the Gospels (Matt 3:1–12; Mark 1:1–8; John 1:19–28), it is evident that Jesus began His own ministry shortly after John's, although the exact interval is not stated.

Jesus' Age at His Baptism

According to Luke, Jesus was "about" (*hōsei*) thirty years old when He began His ministry (Luke 3:23). The term used for approximation reflects the cultural context of the time, where establishing general timeframes was often prioritized over precise dates. Nonetheless, the use of *hōsei* in other biblical accounts suggests that authors sometimes also intended a degree of specificity. For example, both approximation and precise language are used interchangeably to describe the same event in Matthew 27:46 ("about [*hōsei*] the ninth hour") and Mark 15:34 ("at the ninth hour"). Similarly, in Acts, Luke notes that the angel appeared to Cornelius in vision "about [*hōsei*] the ninth hour of the day" (Acts 10:3). Later in the same chapter, Luke quotes Cornelius' words, "at the ninth hour I prayed in my house." This might indicate that the historical reference in Luke 3:23 can be quite precise.

Another clue for determining Jesus' age at the beginning of His ministry can be found in Jewish tradition. During New Testament times, Jewish religious leaders typically commenced their activities at around thirty years of age.[6] This aligns well with the chronology presented in the Gospels. If this is accurate, we can infer an interval of roughly six months between the start of John the Baptist's ministry and that of Jesus, reflecting their age difference. We can infer the age of John at the beginning of his ministry only based on Jesus' age at His baptism because we know John was six months older than Jesus (cf. Luke 1:24, 26).

Hence, it is likely that Jesus began His ministry—or was baptized—within the same year that John the Baptist initiated his, though Jesus' baptism may have occurred just a few months after John's preaching began. The chronological details in Luke 3:1, therefore, are crucial for dating Jesus' baptism. It is reasonable to assert that Luke 3:1–2 contains the most concentrated and detailed chronological information in the Gospels, including the only New Testament reference to a specific year: the fifteenth year of Tiberius. In this verse, Luke references five political rulers alongside two religious leaders, offering valuable details that provide seven chronological markers to help establish the timeframe for the commencement of John the Baptist's ministry. Pilate served as prefect of Judea from AD 26 to 36/37, [7] while Herod Antipas was removed from power in AD 39.[8] Philip passed away in AD 36, and Lysanias, who was tetrarch in Abilene, remains undatable.[9] Although Annas served as high priest from AD 6 to 15,[10] his influence continued to be significant during the tenure of his son-in-law Caiaphas, who held the position from AD 18 to 36/37.[11] This enduring influence is why Annas is mentioned alongside Caiaphas in the Gospels of Luke and John, as well as in the book of Acts (John 18:13, 24; Acts 4:6).

The mention of these rulers provides a date range for the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry and the baptism of Jesus. Considering the overlap of their respective reigns, John must have begun his ministry between AD 26 and AD 39. However, the subsequent detail provided by Luke allows us to pinpoint this event with greater precision, which brings us to the next point of consideration: the fifteenth year of Tiberius.

The Fifteenth Year of Tiberius

There are at least two key reasons to emphasize Luke's mention of the fifteenth year of Tiberius. First, it stands as the only reference to a specific year in the New Testament. Second, while it serves to date the baptism

of Jesus, it also marks a point of significant debate that warrants careful consideration.

There is a consensus that Tiberius ruled Rome as its sole emperor from Monday, September 17, AD 14, until his death on March 16, AD 37, at the age of seventy-seven.[12] While some hastily conclude that Jesus' baptism should be dated to AD 29 (fifteen years after AD 14), several factors need to be considered regarding the precise dating of the fifteenth year of Tiberius' reign.

The dating hinges on four key aspects: whether Tiberius' co-regency with Augustus should be included, which calendar Luke had in mind (Jewish, Syro-Macedonian, Egyptian, or Roman/Julian), whether he was using a spring-to-spring or fall-to-fall calendar system, and what system for calculating regnal years was employed (accession or non-accession year). Jack Finegan notes that these variations lead to sixteen possible interpretations.[13] There is not enough space here to address each possibility in detail, but some observations are worth noting.

Perhaps the most crucial aspect to consider is the perspective from which Luke was writing. If we assume that he was writing to a Roman official, some suggest he was using the Roman method for counting years of rulership. However, Theophilus' ethnic identity—be it Roman, Greek, or even Jewish—cannot be determined based on the available evidence. His name is Greek, yet Luke reserves the honorific title "the most excellent" for Roman governors like Felix and Festus. At any rate, it seems likely that Theophilus was a member of the Greco-Roman elite, perhaps a Roman officer.

Despite the ambiguity surrounding Theophilus' ethnicity, it is clear that Luke was writing from a Jewish perspective. This holds true whether Luke was a Jew or a Gentile who converted to Judaism. According to Huffman, Luke's presentation of Jesus as the Messiah is the most Jewish among the New Testament writings. Additionally, Luke prefers the term *laos* (people)—which is a Jewish way of referring to God's people—over *ekklesia* when discussing the church. Furthermore, Luke employs a biblical Greek style that reflects the Septuagint.[14] It is also worth mentioning that Luke himself admits to relying on Jewish eyewitnesses to compose his gospel, making it obvious that a Jewish perspective would be pervasive even when addressing a primarily non-Jewish audience.

If Luke is accounting for the years of rulers from a Jewish perspective, it would be reasonable for him to count the first year of Tiberius "from [AD 13] Tishri 1, with his second year commencing on the first New Year's Day of his reign, which is Tishri 1 in A.D. 14"[15]—utilizing the civil Hebrew calendar from Tishri to Tishri based on the non-accession year.[16] This way, if Luke used the standard Jewish calendar to calculate dates, the fifteenth year of Tiberius spanned from fall AD 27 to fall AD 28.

Another way to approach this chronological conundrum is to count Tiberius' ruling year from his joint rule with Augustus. The historian Tacitus describes Tiberius Nero as *collega imperii*, or "colleague in the empire."[17]

Although the use of co-regency to calculate regnal years is not attested in Roman historiography,[18] the practice of counting co-regency for regnal years is widely attested in the Jewish tradition. Edwin Thiele outlines several instances of overlapping or split reigns across the Hebrew monarchies, each triggered by a distinct political or physical emergency: Omri and Tibni (1 Kgs 16:21–22), Jehoash and Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 14:8–13), Menahem and Pekah (Hos 5:5), Asa and Jehoshaphat (1 Kgs 15:23; 2 Chron 16:12), Jehoshaphat and Jehoram (1 Kgs 22:4), Amaziah and Azariah (Uzziah) (2 Kgs 14:8–13), Azariah and Jotham (2 Kgs 15:5), and Hezekiah and Manasseh (2 Kgs 20:1–6). Thiele also shows that Hebrew historiographers consistently followed the convention called dual dating, in which the total length of a reign includes the king's year as co-regent plus his years of sole rule, while the synchronism given for his "accession" actually marks the end of the co-regency, not its beginning.[19]

Henderson Velten and Juarez de Oliveira favor starting the count of Tiberius' fifteenth year from his co-regency with Augustus, beginning in AD 12. Among the various methods of determining Tiberius' fifteenth year, they find three that align perfectly with the baptism of Jesus in AD 27.

> 1. Direct counting of the years of Tiberius' reign, starting from the beginning of his co-regency with Augustus; 2. Counting the years of Tiberius' reign, starting from the beginning of his co-regency, using the Julian calendar and including the accession year. 3. Counting the years of Tiberius' reign, starting from the beginning of his co-regency, using the Syro-Macedonian calendar and excluding the accession year.[20]

They acknowledge that counting the years of Tiberius' rule from his co-regency using either the Julian calendar or the Jewish religious calendar (spring-to-spring) with a non-accession year system also does not alter the date of Jesus' baptism in AD 27.[21]

Whether reckoning Tiberius' fifteenth year from his co-regency starting in AD 12 (supported by Jewish historiographical traditions of dual dating) or using a civil Tishri-to-Tishri non-accession calendar from his sole

reign in AD 14, the resulting timeframe spans from fall AD 27 to fall AD 28. When aligned with the overlapping dates of the historical rulers in Luke 3:1–2, John the Baptist commencing his ministry in the spring of AD 27, and the roughly six-month interval between John and Jesus' ministries based on their age difference, we can confidently conclude that Jesus was baptized in the fall of AD 27. This chronological scenario is confirmed by the timeframe of the Herodian Temple's reconstruction.

The Reconstruction of the Temple by Herod the Great

In John 2:20, the Jews responded to Jesus' bold claim that He could raise "this temple" in three days by questioning, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" (NKJV). John clarifies that Jesus was not referring to the Herodian Temple but to His own body (John 2:21). While this statement is not intended as a historical account of chronology, the significance of this information should not be overlooked. When viewed in light of the cumulative evidence, it supports AD 27 as the year of Jesus' baptism.

It seems clear that this dialogue occurred close to the first Passover of Jesus' ministry (cf. John 2:12–13).[22] Since Jesus' ministry also ended at Passover and spanned three and a half years, Jesus' baptism must have occurred six months before this first Passover, placing it in the fall. If it is possible to determine the year in which the reconstruction of the temple started, then one can determine the year Jesus was baptized. At this point Flavius Josephus provides valuable historical evidence.

According to Josephus, Herod initiated the reconstruction of the temple in the eighteenth year of his reign in Judea.[23] It is important to note that in John 2:20, the Jews were referencing the extensive renovations carried out by Herod, which led to what became known as the Herodian Temple. Josephus also indicates that Herod was declared king of Judea by the Roman Senate during the consulship of Gnaeus Domitius Calvinus and Gaius Asinius Pollio, which occurred in 40 BC, spanning from January to January.[24] However, it was not until three years later that Herod successfully took Jerusalem, having defeated Antigonus, the last Hasmonean king and high priest. Josephus calculates Herod's regnal years from this pivotal moment when he effectively began to rule over Judea.

Historical records indicate that Herod captured Jerusalem sometime during the summer or fall of 37 BC, in the year of Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa and Lucius Caninius Galo. If Josephus uses a religious calendar that runs from spring to spring (Nisan to Nisan) and does not count the accession year, Herod's eighteenth year would be dated from the spring of 20 BC to the spring of 19 BC.[25] According to Josephus, Herod entered Jerusalem during the Day of Atonement (Tishri 10), which takes place in the beginning of the fall.[26] Josephus also notes that Herod's siege lasted six months (from spring through summer to the beginning of fall).[27] This places Herod's conquest of Jerusalem in the fall season. Josephus also points out that the initial phase of renovation took a year and a half, with the inauguration of this phase coinciding with Herod's conquest of the city. The inauguration of this phase was timed to coincide with the anniversary of his conquest of the city (which was in the fall). Therefore, adding forty-six years (John 2:20) to the starting point of the renovation in the spring brings the timeline directly to the spring of AD 28. This is approximately six months after the fall of AD 27, when Jesus was baptized.

Confirming the Date of Jesus' Baptism

The historical scenario discussed in the previous section is further substantiated by broader biblical evidence. In fact, one does not need to depend solely on the historical information found in Luke 3:1 and John 2:20. The starting point of the seventy-week prophecy provides an additional confirmation that Jesus' baptism took place in AD 27.

According to Daniel 9:25, the starting point of the seventy-week prophecy is identified as "the going forth of the word" (RSV). Understanding this starting point hinges on the true meaning of "from the going forth of the word." In its original context, the expression refers to a royal decree that allowed for the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, which was crucial for achieving political independence. A walled city like Jerusalem could effectively resist military intervention. Therefore, this event was more than just a construction project; it symbolized a significant step towards autonomy.[28]

Biblically and legally, a royal decree takes effect upon publication and communication to its intended recipients, not merely when the king signs or proclaims it.[29] Furthermore, a semantic analysis of "restoring and building" Jerusalem entails both physical reconstruction and the establishment of political governance.[30] Among the Persian decrees, only that issued by Artaxerxes I Longimanus in 457 BC granted Ezra the legal authority to set up a judicial system and rebuild the city walls.

Establishing 457 BC as the king's seventh year requires navigating some historical complexities, particularly regarding the calendar Ezra employed. While some scholars advocate for a Babylonian spring-to-spring reckoning, biblical texts such as Nehemiah, as well as the Gemara and the Elephantine papyri, indicate that post-exilic Jews consistently used a fall-to-fall civil calendar for counting foreign regnal years.[31]

Additionally, we must consider the timing of Artaxerxes' accession. Cuneiform records suggest Xerxes'

death occurred around August 465 BC, but the transition to Artaxerxes was fraught with turmoil. Palace intrigues involving Artabanus and the execution of the legal heir Darius likely extended the interregnum period, pushing Artaxerxes' formal accession past Tishri 1 (September 17).[32] Utilizing a fall-to-fall accession-year model shifts his first regnal year to 464–463 BC, placing his seventh year firmly in 457 BC.

Two key pieces of evidence indicate that the decree was implemented in late 457 BC. First, the specific sacrifices Ezra offered upon arriving in Jerusalem correspond with the calendrical offerings outlined in Numbers 28–29.[33] Second, and even more compellingly, the seventy-week timeline aligns directly with the sabbatical and Jubilee cycles. Calculations related to Nehemiah's wall project suggest that 457 BC marked the beginning of a sabbatical and Jubilee year. Leviticus 25 stipulates that a Jubilee year—and the liberty it represents—is proclaimed on the Day of Atonement (Tishri 10), making this feast the most likely starting point.[34]

Beginning in the fall of 457 BC, the completion of the sixty-nine weeks, or 483 years, culminates in AD 27. The baptism of Jesus marks the onset of the final week of the seventy weeks designated for Daniel's people (Dan 9:24). In the middle of this last week, the prophecy foretells that the Messiah would be "cut off" (Dan 9:26), pointing to His death in the spring of AD 31.

Conclusion

Despite the complexities involved in the study of ancient chronology, the timeline of Jesus' life can be reconstructed when all available evidence is seriously taken into consideration. After reviewing the biblical and historical evidence, it becomes clear that the year AD 27 emerges as the best candidate for Jesus' baptism. Thus, the traditional view held by Adventism is not only still tenable, but also offers the best framework for the data available. In 2027, Christians are invited to celebrate the two-thousandth anniversary of this great milestone in redemptive history. By passing through the Jordan in baptism, Jesus initiated His ministry—a path that would lead from service to suffering to glory. It is a glory in which all His children may share when they accept His sacrifice, trust in His heavenly ministry, and follow in His footsteps of discipleship.

Endnotes

Correction: A previously published version of this article said that "The regularity of the seasons in the Near East during biblical times was so consistent that, over an eleven-year cycle, the Hebrew calendar returned precisely to its original starting point. . ." This sentence has been corrected to reflect that the calendar had a nineteen-year cycle.

1 Unfortunately, some of the events that changed the course of history are surrounded by controversy. This is the irony of dealing with the chronology of the life of Christ. There is no consensus outside Adventism on the precise dates of Jesus' birth and death, and a careful reading of the vast literature on the subject reveals the difficulties faced by interpreters attempting to pinpoint these dates on the calendar. I will deal with more detailed evidence for the date of Christ's death in a longer chapter in a forthcoming book published by the Biblical Research Institute.

2 Francesca Rochberg-Halton, "Calendars: Ancient Near East," in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

3 Usually, the date of Jesus' birth is linked with the death of Herod. Since Herod was alive and active during the time of Jesus' birth (Matt 2:16), the date of the king's death establishes a firm *terminus ante quem* (outer limit) for Christ's nativity. According to Josephus, Herod ruled for thirty-seven years following his Roman proclamation as king and for thirty-four years after his conquest of Antigonus in Jerusalem. The Roman Senate declared Herod king of Judea during the consulship of Gnaeus Domitius Calvinus and Gaius Asinius Pollio, spanning from January to January in 40 BC. This would set the end of his reign at 3 BC rather than 4 BC. Josephus, in *Wars of the Jews* 1.665, wrote, "So Herod, having survived the slaughter of his son five days, died, having reigned thirty-four years, since he had caused Antigonus to be slain, and obtained his kingdom; but thirty-seven years since he had been made king by the Romans." William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 596. There is no historical justification to dismiss Josephus' chronology based on the presumed eclipse of 4 BC. Moreover, Herod the Great's death in 3 BC aligns perfectly with the timeline of Jesus' life. The birth of Jesus in 4 BC also corresponds seamlessly with a major prophecy that foreshadowed the beginning of the Messiah's ministry and His eventual death with remarkable precision. More recently, scholars have revisited the evidence and proposed other dates for Herod's death. See James A. Moseley, "Pinpointing Key Dates in Jesus' Life: His Birth, the Start of His Ministry, and His Crucifixion," *Eleutheria: John W. Rawlings School of Divinity Academic Journal* 8, no. 1 (2024): 209; Ben Witherington III, "Birth of Jesus," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 67; T. D. Barnes, "The Date of Herod's Death," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 19, no. 1 (1968): 208; W. E. Filmer, "The Chronology of the Reign of Herod the Great," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 17, no. 2 (1966): 293; and Henderson Hermes Leite Velten and Juarez Rodriguez de Oliveira, *A Astronomia e a Glória do Adventismo: Um Estudo sobre a Precisão do Cálculo Profético de Daniel 8:14 e 9:24–27* (Vitória, Brazil: Luz do Mundo, 2018), 289.

4 Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 300.

5 Edwin Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 43–60; and Andrew E. Steinmann, "Reckoning Tiberius's Reign and Jesus's Baptism," *Tyndale Bulletin* 73 (2022): 100.

6 According to Numbers 4:3, 30, 39, 47, the Levites were supposed to start their service at age thirty. David became king at the same age. This is also reflected in the Dead Sea Scroll community where a man would enter military and communal life not before thirty. See 1Q28a Col. I:12–16. Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, "The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition (translations)" (Leiden: Brill, 1997–1998), 101. In the rabinnical tradition, the age of thirty was the recognized threshold for full maturity. See *m.Avot* 5:21, available at Sefaria Library, accessed September 29, 2026, https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.5.21.

7 Daniel R. Schwartz, "Pontius Pilate (Person)," in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 395–401.

8 Frank Dicken, "Herod Antipas," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry, David Bomar, Derek R. Brown, Rachel Klippenstein, Douglas Mangum, Elliot Ritzema, Carrie Sinclair Wolcott, Lazarus Wentz, and Wendy Widder (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), Logos edition.

9 Scott T. Carroll, "Lysanias (Person)," in Freedman, *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, 425.

10 Richard R. Losch, *All the People in the Bible: An A–Z Guide to the Saints, Scoundrels, and Other Characters in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 39.

11 Titus Kennedy, *Excavating the Evidence for Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2022), 223.

12 The life of Tiberius is recounted by Tacitus in *Annals* (books 1–6), Suetonius in *The Twelve Caesars*, and Cassius Dio in *Roman History* (books 57–58). In a more recent biography, Robin Seager provides a complete portrait of his life. See Robin Seager, *Tiberius*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005). We can establish precise equivalent dates for these ancient events due to the seamless connection between ancient Roman record-keeping and our modern Western calendar. By the time these historians documented their accounts, the Romans had already adopted the Julian calendar, a solar calendar remarkably similar to ours. This enables us to cross-reference consul and regnal years effectively. Additionally, since the seven-day week has remained continuous and uninterrupted, we can perform astronomical calculations to ascertain, with mathematical precision, the corresponding days in our Gregorian calendar.
13 Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 332–337.
14 Douglas S. Huffman, *The Story of Jesus Continues: A Survey of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2025), 32.
15 Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Review and Herald, 1980), 246.
16 According to Nichol, "since the rabbinical tradition concerning the reckoning of the years of Jewish kings . . . is demonstrated by Josephus as valid for the 1st century, we may reasonably regard the other portion of the same tradition as valid also; namely, the Jewish reckoning of *foreign* kings from Tishri 1." Nichol, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 246.
17 Tacitus, *Annals* 1:3, available at Internet Classics Archive, accessed September 29, 2026, https://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.1.i.html.
18 Andrew E. Steinmann, "Reckoning Tiberius's Reign and Jesus's Baptism: First- and Second-Century Evidence Concerning Tiberius's Fifteenth Year (Luke 3:1)," *Tyndale Bulletin* 73 (2022): 91–118.
19 Thiele, *Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 58–65.
20 Velten and de Oliveira, *A Astronomia e a Glória do Adventismo*, 298.
21 Velten and de Oliveira, *A Astronomia e a Glória do Adventismo*, 298.
22 Nichol, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 923.
23 See Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 15.380, in Whiston, *The Works of Josephus*, 423.
24 Velten and de Oliveira, *A Astronomia e a Glória do Adventismo*, 302.
25 Velten and de Oliveira, *A Astronomia e a Glória do Adventismo*, 302. Evidence that Josephus used non-accession reckoning for regnal years is clearly seen in how he calculates the reigns of Herod the Great, his sons, and Herod Agrippa I. See Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 292–301, 370–371. Support for this view is also given by Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*, ed. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, Pamela Vermes, and Matthew Black, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973), 1:200–201, 201n1, 327; and H. W. Hoehner, "The Date of the Death of Herod the Great," in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan*, ed. J. E. Bond and A. Wikgren (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), 101–111.
26 Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13:487–488, in Whiston, *The Works of Josephus*, 396–397.
27 Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 5:398, in Whiston, *The Works of Josephus*, 717.
28 In his extensive study, Brempong Owusu-Antwi observes that while in Daniel 9:23 *dābār* is at the vertical level, in Daniel 9:25 *dābār* is at the horizontal level. He concludes that "the context of the expression in Dan 9:25 involves a proclamation that would change the political and physical status of Jerusalem." Brempong Owusu-Antwi, *The Chronology of Daniel 9:24–27* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1995), 158. Thus, in this context, *dābār* can be considered a royal proclamation equivalent to the Aramaic ṭəʿēm. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. and trans. M. E. J. Richardson, 4 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999), under "טַעַם."
29 See also Richard M. Davidson, "When Did the 2300 Days of Daniel 8:14 Begin and End? Fresh Evidence from Scripture, Chronology, and Karaite History," in *Eschatology from an Adventist Perspective: Proceedings of the Fourth International Bible Conference Rome June 11–20 2018*, ed. Elias Brasil de Souza, A. Rahel Wells, László Gallusz, and Denis Kaiser (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2021), 98.
30 Owusu-Antwi, *Chronology of Daniel 9:24–27*, 158–224.
31 Sigfried H. Horn and Lynn H. Wood, *The Chronology of Ezra 7* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1953), 84–89, 148–149; Rick Lanser, "Did Ezra Come to Jerusalem in 457 BC?," Daniel 24–27 Project, Associates for Biblical Research, September 10, 2019, https://biblearchaeology.org/abr-projects/the-daniel-9-24-27-project-2/4549-did-ezra-come-to-jerusalem-in-457-bc; and William H. Shea, "A Review of the Biblical Evidence for the Use of the Fall-to-Fall Calendar," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 12, no. 2 (2001): 152–163.
32 Lanser, "Did Ezra Come to Jerusalem in 457 BC?"
33 Davidson, "When Did the 2300 Days of Daniel 8:14 Begin and End?," 99–100.
34 Davidson, "When Did the 2300 Days of Daniel 8:14 Begin and End?," 105.

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Religious Liberty and the Character of God

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The great controversy is premised on a question about God's character.[1] Is He just? Is He loving? Is His government established upon voluntary love, or merely required compliance?

Consider any war between two sides. Two nations. Two armies. Both are looking for the same thing: an edge, the one advantage that decides the outcome. It may be technological, or numerical, or a matter of air superiority. It may be tactical—a more experienced general who reads the field better than his counterpart.

Yet there is a subversion far more devastating than any achieved by open conflict. It occurs when ground is gained not by overcoming the enemy, but by operating under the opposing side's own banner. No superior firepower is required when the adversary accomplishes the work from within the ranks of the faithful. It is worth considering whether one of Satan's most effective tactics has been relying not on secular critics outside the faith, but on Christians themselves—acting in good conscience yet operating under a portrait of God that misrepresents Him.[2]

This dynamic has recurred across Christian history. While skeptics and secular critics have challenged faith for centuries, the impression many form of God can, at times, owe less to external opposition than to the conduct of those who profess His name. During the medieval era, for example, the church's alignment with civil power—expressed through inquisitions, the suppression of dissent, and wars waged in Christ's name—left a legacy that continues to color the way Christianity is perceived.[3]

The Foundation of Religious Liberty

If one were to devise a strategy to foster widespread skepticism, what concept of God would be most effective? A recent lesson in the collegiate quarterly *inVerse* raises a question along these lines and provides an insightful entry point into the great controversy as a dispute over God's character, misrepresented across centuries and into the present.

The lesson points to the doctrine of eternal torment:

> Imagine an eternal hell, where flames engulf the damned, searing flesh that never burns . . . and where screams of agony echo endlessly in the darkness. . . . How could a loving, merciful Creator condemn His creation to such a fate? The cruelty of the doctrine of eternal torment seems to shatter the very foundation of God's character . . . a God who is just, loving, and merciful.[4]

Ellen G. White makes a similar observation in *The Great Controversy*:

> How repugnant to every emotion of love and mercy, and even to our sense of justice, is the doctrine that the wicked dead are tormented with fire and brimstone in an eternally burning hell; that for the sins of a brief earthly life they are to suffer torture as long as God shall live. . . . It is beyond the power of the human mind to estimate the evil which has been wrought by [this] heresy. . . . When we consider in what false colors Satan has painted the character of God, can we wonder that our merciful Creator is feared, dreaded, and even hated? The appalling views of God which have spread over the world from the teachings of the pulpit have made thousands, yes, millions, of skeptics and infidels.[5]

How, then, is skepticism generated? The formula is to render God repulsive—to depict Him as arbitrary, terrifying, or morally severe. How one pictures God bears directly on how one relates to Him. It shapes the motives for accepting Him and the impetus for serving Him. And since God seeks an unforced response of love rather than coerced obedience (Josh 24:15; Deut 30:19; Rev 3:20; 22:17), a portrait that renders Him terrifying undermines the very allegiance He invites. Few will love a God they believe to be cruel.[6]

Historically, the doctrine of eternal torment has functioned as precisely such a distortion. Like an abused creature recoiling from an outstretched hand, a mind conditioned to view God through the lens of arbitrary severity can instinctively react with defensive hostility. When this distorted portrait takes root first, it can close the heart before the gospel is fully heard, leading some to turn away from God before ever giving Him a fair hearing.

A Second False Portrait[7]

Yet eternal torment is not the sole distortion of God's character. A second false portrait is emerging today—more subtle, rapidly gaining ground, and with potentially the same chilling effect on faith.

Were those who profess the name of Christ to turn to state power to enforce religious conformity, a similar formula would be at work. Law can produce the appearance of faith. It can secure attendance, profession, and outward observance, because these are acts the state is competent to require and verify. It cannot reach the assent of the will, which lies beyond the capacity of any statute. The distinction is not incidental. What legal coercion secures, it achieves by constraining the freedom to choose otherwise—the unforced choice that authentic faith requires. A profession extracted under duress reflects the severity of the penalty, not the conviction of the soul. The result is a population that *looks* Christian, which is fundamentally different from a population that *is* Christian. It tells a watching world that God seizes by force what He has only ever sought freely.[8]

At a deeper level, these two distortions share a common underlying logic. The doctrine of eternal hellfire, as traditionally depicted, presents a stark ultimatum: comply or face endless punishment. Political coercion projects a parallel demand: comply or face civil penalty, silencing, or marginalization. One projects divine retribution into the age to come; the second inflicts state penalty in the present. The mechanisms differ, but the impression conveyed to a watching world can end up looking distressingly similar: a deity whose authority rests on leverage rather than love.

The danger of this second portrait can be harder to discern because of its immediate appeal, especially amid perceived moral decline. It promises to stabilize society, curb immorality, advance Christianity, and restore a nation's spiritual heritage. Such aspirations are understandable. To be clear, opposing religious coercion is not a call to abandon public morality or civil law. Government has a legitimate role in preventing harm and maintaining civil order (Rom 13:1–5), prohibiting theft, violence, and fraud. The boundary is crossed when civil law steps beyond preserving public order to enforce acts of devotion or religious observance. And because invoking state power for righteous ends can appear so noble, the misrepresentation of God embedded within religious enforcement is easily overlooked. What it conveys is a God who governs by compulsion rather than consent—an impression especially troubling to those who perceive Christianity primarily through its historical or political footprint.

Consider what a searching observer beholds when state authority is enlisted for faith. In some contexts, statutes explicitly restrict how minority traditions may worship. In others, legal frameworks quietly disadvantage minority believers in employment, education, or public life. And in still others, social and legal pressures make religious dissent costly enough that conformity becomes the path of least resistance.

Wherever state power enforces religious devotion, the faith invoked is placed on trial. Observers evaluate not merely the regime, but the character of the god in whose name it claims to act. If eternal fear has driven millions into skepticism, political coercion threatens to alienate millions more.

What We See in the World Today

This is not a theoretical concern. I recently returned from an interdisciplinary conference in Asia—a secular gathering of scholars, legal experts, and policy specialists examining religious freedom in the region—where similar patterns surfaced across a variety of national contexts.[9] Participants detailed the rise of religious extremism, the instrumentalization of faith for political ends, an erosion of civic trust, and the shrinking of the moderate middle. Many highlighted the acceleration of religious nationalism, wherein states increasingly define their national identity through a dominant faith.

A crucial distinction must be drawn here. A society may possess a deeply rooted religious heritage while leaving freedom of conscience unmolested; conversely, an explicitly secular state may bear down heavily on people of faith. What is in view here is narrower than national identity yet broader than any single ideology: structural arrangements in which the machinery of the state is turned directly toward belief itself—favoring, mandating, or suppressing religious observance. Across diverse regions, the consequences remain strikingly consistent: institutional discrimination against religious minorities, restrictions on worship, and the proliferation of anti-conversion laws.

Such dynamics do not emerge in a vacuum. Movements of this kind tend to gather momentum where a community perceives its identity to be threatened—whether by rapid social change, economic strain, or the fear that an inherited way of life is being displaced. The underlying anxieties are often genuine.[10] What concerns me here, however, is not the grievance itself, but the coercive response it generates—and what that response ultimately communicates about the god invoked to support it.

One conversation brought this trajectory into sharp focus. I met a legal scholar and religious freedom advocate from a region where this pattern is advancing and religious minorities are being steadily squeezed out. She described the systematic pressure unfolding in

her country as minority institutions closed—hospitals, schools, and houses of worship. Seventh-day Adventists are experiencing these constraints as well and, in her assessment, if current trends persist, few institutions outside the dominant faith will remain.

In that setting, the majority religion is not Christianity—a fact that underscores a critical lesson: if coercion exercised outside the Christian tradition alienates minds and distorts truth, how much more tragic is it when Christians adopt those very methods in Christ's name? When believers enlist state power to compel conformity, the God being misrepresented is our own.

Whether this protective space is contracting globally, and at what rate, remains an empirical question beyond the scope of this article. What is clear, however, is how Seventh-day Adventists have historically understood their responsibility toward it. The church has long viewed the defense of religious liberty not as a matter of institutional self-interest, but as a core theological calling. What we defend is not merely our own access, but the moral conditions under which any conscience can genuinely act. That includes consciences that will never share our convictions—the neighbor who finds our message unpersuasive, the authorities who view our presence with suspicion, or the individual who hears us out and still chooses to say no. A freedom defended only when it serves one's own community is not a principle; it is merely self-interest. We are called to safeguard the freedom to accept the gospel, to embrace another faith, or to profess no faith at all.

His Character Is to Be Made Known

The core issue, then, is not fundamentally a legal one. Constitutions and statutes can safeguard the civil space in which faith is chosen, but they cannot reshape what an individual has come to believe about God.

This is why religious liberty, for Seventh-day Adventists, is a theological commitment prior to being a legal strategy. A God who desires unforced love rather than mere compliance must leave the freedom of response genuinely open. Everything flows from this conviction: why the church has advocated for freedom of conscience from its inception, and why we labor to establish it where it is absent and preserve it where it remains.

To be sure, this work is frequently entrusted to attorneys and advocates relying on arguments framed in constitutional and statutory law. That work is indispensable, and nothing here is intended to diminish its necessity. Yet focusing exclusively on legal mechanisms risks reversing the true order of priority. Civil law secures the space; what makes that space worth defending is what we understand about God and His character. As coercive pressures mount—particularly from within professing Christianity itself—effective advocacy will increasingly depend on believers who grasp why the freedom to reject God matters deeply to God Himself.

Writing of the spiritual conditions preceding Christ's return, Ellen G. White describes both the prevailing darkness in the world and the specific calling of those who represent Him:

> It is the darkness of misapprehension of God that is enshrouding the world. Men are losing their knowledge of His character. It has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. At this time a message from God is to be proclaimed, a message illuminating in its influence and saving in its power. His character is to be made known. . . . There is nothing that Christ desires so much as agents who will represent to the world His Spirit and character. There is nothing that the world needs so much as the manifestation through humanity of the Saviour's love.[11]

Notice what is requested here. It is not fundamentally an apology for divine authority, a display of power, or a warning regarding the consequences of refusal, but agents who embody His character. The remedy she identifies for a world enshrouded in misapprehension is not raw argument. It is people.

Consequently, this work cannot be confined to legal scholars or those with standing before courts and legislatures. The vast majority of people will never encounter formal religious liberty advocacy. They will simply encounter individual believers—in a workplace, a neighborhood, or a quiet conversation across ideological divides. The portrait of God that ultimately reaches them is the one conveyed in those everyday interactions.

Herein lies the ultimate rationale for defending freedom of conscience: safeguarding a person's right to say no to God is what preserves the moral integrity and authenticity of their yes. Love that cannot be freely withheld ceases to be love. God recognizes no allegiance secured through fear, coercion, or civil leverage.

The transformative power of this perspective is not merely theoretical; its impact often becomes clear when individuals encounter it for the first time. Not long ago, I engaged in conversation with a musician and scholar who writes for a European electronic band while pursuing a second doctorate in philosophy and theology. Our discussion turned to the biblical framework of religious liberty.

I noted that for the Christian, religious freedom is not primarily a political concession, but a direct implication of the character of God. Because God is love, He desires to be received and served exclusively on that basis—not out of fear, under coercion, or by institutional

mandate. The insight resonated with him. He immediately requested reading recommendations to explore the theological foundation further. For Adventists, this paradigm can seem familiar and settled; yet to someone encountering it anew, grounding human liberty in the non-coercive nature of God proves profound.

Too often, religious freedom is articulated in purely legal terms—appearing to other faith communities as self-preservation, and to secular observers as a demand for special privilege. Rooting freedom in the divine character elevates the entire discourse, revealing a Creator who seeks only voluntary devotion and rendering any resort to Christian coercion a profound self-contradiction.

The Greater Challenge

Secularism, religious apathy, and a general skepticism toward traditional faith are among the challenges most frequently raised when Christians contemplate the future of mission. These are formidable headwinds, and their gravity should not be minimized. Pressures on religious expression are genuinely felt—whether regarding free speech, rights of conscience, or institutional autonomy. When believers look toward legal mechanisms for protection, it is often out of a sincere desire to safeguard liberties they see slipping away.

Yet the more consequential difficulty may lie closer to home. Coercion in matters of faith runs counter to how God has always worked, regardless of who employs it. But the issue takes on a far darker dimension when those who claim to represent Him take it up—when Christians enlist civil authority to enforce religious conformity—because the method itself is then attributed to God. This brings us back to our starting point: the most damaging misrepresentation of God may come not from those who oppose Him, but from those who bear His name.

One may love God, desire a more virtuous society, and conclude that the most direct way to protect what is good is to require it. But as noted earlier, the nature of the requirement makes all the difference. While civil statutes legitimately address public harms—such as theft, violence, and fraud—laws that mandate religious devotion attempt to compel what lies beyond the competence of any statute: the genuine assent of the heart. Where civil power is used to enforce worship in Christ's name, it is God Himself whose character bears the misrepresentation.

Seventh-day Adventists have long interpreted both history and Scripture through this theological lens. We recognize this dynamic in the centuries when the medieval church wielded the civil sword, and our reading of apocalyptic prophecy—specifically Revelation 13—prepares us for its end-time resurgence. Scripture indicates that the final conflict over conscience will not stem primarily from overt secularism, but from a coalition of religious entities enlisting state power to enforce worship under the banner of civic and moral renewal.[12]

Four Points for Consideration

First, we are called to reclaim religious liberty as a fundamental article of faith. Religious freedom is not merely a civic value we share with society, nor is it a pragmatic strategy for protecting our own institutions. It is a direct implication of the character of God. The freedom to accept or refuse Him is the divine condition under which genuine love becomes possible. Everything we do in the public square must flow from our conviction regarding His non-coercive nature.

Second, we must recognize that the most subtle threat to the gospel often arises from within Christendom itself. When believers attempt to preserve Christian influence or restore moral order through civil mandates and state power, they undermine the very faith they seek to advance. We must remain vigilant against the temptation to achieve spiritual ends through coercive means, understanding that where civil authority enforces devotion in Christ's name, it is God's character that bears the misrepresentation.

Third, we must weigh the evangelistic cost of our representation. As Ellen G. White observed regarding traditional depictions of eternal torment, misrepresenting God's character has driven millions into skepticism—and political coercion threatens to do the very same. Both distortions operate on a shared coercive logic: *comply or suffer*. How we represent God profoundly shapes whether a searching world will give the gospel an honest hearing or recoil from a deity depicted as arbitrary and forceful.

Fourth, we are called to be active agents who defend conscience for all people. Adventists must be among the first to uphold freedom of conscience unconditionally—whether for fellow Christians, members of other faith communities, or those who profess no faith at all. Defending another person's right to say no to God is not a compromise of our faith; it is the ultimate affirmation of it. It demonstrates to a watching world that our Creator reigns by voluntary love, never by force.

The portrait of God held by the world has been forming across centuries, and it continues to be drawn today. Adventists carry a solemn responsibility in how that portrait takes shape. In the end, defending another person's freedom to say no to God may well be the clearest sermon we ever preach—especially to a world evaluating Christ primarily by what they observe in us.

This article is adapted from a devotional presented at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists World Headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, August 25, 2026.

Endnotes

1 See Job 1:6–12; Ezekiel 28:12–18; Romans 3:4; Revelation 12:4–9. On the character of God as the question at issue in the controversy, see Ellen G. White, "Why Was Sin Permitted?," chap. 1 in *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1890); and Ellen G. White, "The Origin of Evil" and "The Controversy Ended," chap. 29 and chap. 42, respectively, in *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911).

2 This paradox of internal misrepresentation parallels Jesus' confrontation with the religious establishment in Matthew 23. While Christ directly rebuked the pretense of the leaders (vv. 13, 23), the broader tragedy lay in how a system of legalistic burdens—devoid of "justice and mercy and faith"—led even sincere guardians of truth to distort God's character and alienate honest seekers: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in" (v. 13, NKJV). Jesus consistently exposed this dynamic across His ministry, warning against hypocritical pretense and human traditions that obscure divine love (see Mark 7:6–7; Luke 12:1; John 8:42–44; cf. Isa. 29:13). Reflecting on how religious zeal can be perverted, Ellen G. White observes that while Satan had long used heathenism to turn humanity from God, "he won his great triumph in perverting the faith of Israel," leading those appointed to represent Him to "misrepresent the character of God, and cause the world to look upon Him as a tyrant." Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 35–36.

3 Whatever one concludes about the scale of the suffering involved, the broader point holds: the church's own conduct, sometimes more than the arguments of its critics, can shape the picture of God that people form. The New Atheist writers of the past several decades have drawn heavily from this historical record alongside their objections to the biblical text. See Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), esp. chap. 3, "An Inquisition of Reason"; Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), esp. chaps. 7–8, "The 'Good' Book and the Changing Moral Zeitgeist" and "What's Wrong with Religion? Why Be So Hostile?"; and Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), esp. chaps. 2, "Religion Kills"; 8, "The 'New' Testament Exceeds the Evil of the Old"; and 13, "Does Religion Make People Behave Better?"

4 Anil Kanda, "How to Create an Atheist," in *Apologetics: Mars Hill*, Collegiate Sabbath School Quarterly January–March 2026 (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald), 113.

5 White, "First Great Deception," in *The Great Controversy*, 535–536.

6 John C. Peckham, *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

7 The second false portrait examined in the following section concerns the enlistment of civil authority to enforce religious devotion—specifically within Christian contexts. This emphasis is not intended to minimize or overlook the grave violations of religious liberty committed, both historically and presently, by secular, atheistic, or totalitarian regimes. Rather, the scope of this article is shaped by the historic Seventh-day Adventist eschatological framework derived from Revelation 13, which anticipates an end-time crisis arising when professedly Christian entities enlist civil power to enforce religious observance. On this reading, a future union of church and state in the United States culminates in religious legislation enforced through civil penalties—a structural recurrence of the medieval church-state arrangement symbolized by the healing of the "deadly wound." That prophetic expectation directly informs the focus of this article. For several foundational pioneer expositions, see J. N. Andrews, "Thoughts on Revelation XIII and XIV," Review and Herald, May 19, 1851, 81–86; and White, "God's Law Immutable," "Liberty of Conscience Threatened," and "The Impending Conflict," chaps. 25, 35, and 36, respectively, in *The Great Controversy*. For recent Adventist treatment, see Angel Manuel Rodríguez, Daniel Kwame Bediako, Carl P. Cosaert, and Gerald A. Klingbeil, eds., *Andrews Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 of 2, *New Testament* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022), 1974–1980.

8 Recent movements within American Christianity bear directly on a question Adventists have long considered: the role Revelation 13 attributes to the United States in a future union of church and state. Dominionist theology holds that Christians are divinely mandated to assume authority over the primary institutions of society—a conviction expressed most influentially in the "Seven Mountain Mandate," which targets Christian control over religion, education, business, politics, arts and entertainment, media, and the family. While the movement most explicitly associated with this framework is the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR)—American in origin but global in reach—these currents also reflect broader developments across American evangelicalism toward the embrace of Christian nationalism. The literature on these converging trends is extensive; several representative articles from *Liberty* magazine offer accessible overviews alongside foundational book-length studies examining both NAR and wider evangelical shifts. See André Gagné, "Remaking the Kingdom," *Liberty*, March/April 2026, https://www.libertymagazine.org/article/remaking-the-kingdom; Matthew D. Taylor, "America's Spiritual Warriors," *Liberty*, September/October 2024, https://www.libertymagazine.org/article/americas-spiritual-warriors; Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Matthew D. Taylor, *The Violent Take It by Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening Our Democracy* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2024); and Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (New York: Harper, 2023). Similar currents are visible within federal advisory bodies and proposed policy frameworks. For example, the draft report of the U.S. Religious Liberty Commission, released through the Department of Justice, characterizes the "wall of separation" as a misconception and urges Americans to "build bridges, not walls, between the City of God and the City of Man." Among its advisory recommendations is that the White House and federal agencies celebrate the nation's religious heritage through presidential proclamations marking holy days alongside national calls to prayer and fasting. While the report explicitly disclaims theocracy—holding it, along with secularism, incompatible with the First Amendment—its proposed vision reflects significant overlap with Christian nationalist discourse. Paula White-Cain, identified in previously cited Taylor, "America's Spiritual Warriors" as a central figure in the NAR, serves as a member of the commission. See Religious Liberty Commission Draft Report (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2026), https://www.justice.gov/religious-liberty-commission/media/1449896.

9 Because my responsibilities involve potential engagement with government representatives in several of the countries in view, I have kept these observations general, including the conversation described in this article. The patterns described here are documented in the annual reporting of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, in Pew Research Center's ongoing measurement of global religious restrictions, and in the field-based country reporting of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, a UK-based Christian human rights organization specializing in freedom of religion or belief. See United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2026* (Washington, DC: USCIRF, 2026); "Religious Restrictions Around the World," Pew Research Center, June 15, 2026, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/feature/religious-restrictions-around-the-world/; and "Reports," Christian Solidarity Worldwide, accessed September 28, 2026, https://www.csw.org.uk/reports/.

10 On the conditions under which religious nationalism emerges, see Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to al Qaeda*, Comparative Studies in Religion and Society (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

11 Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1900), 415, 419.

12 Prophecy points to a deceptive, counterfeit movement masquerading as genuine Christianity, echoing Christ's warning of end-time deceptions so compelling that, if possible, even the elect might be misled (Matt 24:4–5, 24; 1 Thess 5:3; cf. Rev 13:13–14). On the pretext of moral and civic restoration, Ellen G. White observed that movements advocating state enforcement of worship gain traction by framing their agenda as an urgent response to "corruption which is rapidly spreading" and claiming that compulsory observance would "greatly improve the morals of society." Whether her analysis in *The Great Controversy* is understood as a predictive outline of future events or as partly descriptive of her late nineteenth-century socio-political context, it provides a valuable framework for evaluating such developments:

by coupling genuine moral reforms with compulsory religious mandates, such movements "combine with falsehood just enough truth to give it plausibility," concealing coercive requirements beneath a veneer of wholesome public virtue. See White, *The Great Controversy*, 587.

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"From Cause to Manifestation": Rereading John 9:3

Leandro J. Velardo

". . . but that the works of God might be made manifest in him." — John 9:3 RSV

The disciples' question in John 9:2 reflects an explanatory framework widely attested in Second Temple Judaism: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (RSV).[1] Jesus' response in John 9:3, however, raises an interpretive problem of considerable interest: ". . . but that the works of God might be made manifest in him" (RSV; see also Jer 31:29–30; Ezek 18). The dominant interpretation has understood this clause as expressing purpose, thereby establishing a teleological relationship between the man's congenital blindness and the subsequent manifestation of divine activity. On such a reading, for example, James Bartley concludes that God providentially prepared the man born blind so that Jesus might later reveal His identity as the Son of God through the healing miracle.[2]

Whatever the theological merits of this interpretation, the primary issue is linguistic.[3] The question turns on both the structure of the discourse and the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of the *hina* clause in John 9:3—that is, what the clause conveys and how it functions within the discourse.

Although modern English translations exhibit remarkable uniformity in their rendering of the verse, the Greek text allows for alternative construals. These

readings arise from both differences in discourse segmentation and the range of discourse functions associated with hina clauses in Hellenistic Greek.

Two major lines of interpretation deserve brief attention.

Reading 1: Alternative Segmentation

On the basis of certain features of the earliest manuscript tradition—notably the absence of punctuation and the practice of *scriptio continua*—together with considerations related to Johannine discourse structure, several scholars have proposed an alternative segmentation of John 9:3–4.[4]

According to this proposal, the final clause of verse 3 should be construed with the material that follows: "But in order that the works of God might be made manifest in him, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is yet day; night comes in which no one can work" (John 9:3b–4).[5]

Under this interpretation, the *hina* clause does not provide an explanation for the origin of the man's blindness. It establishes the pragmatic frame within which Jesus' subsequent action is to be interpreted; the *hina* clause functions prospectively, orienting the reader toward the action that follows rather than retrospectively explaining the man's condition. The discourse thus shifts attention from the cause of the affliction to the manifestation of God's works through Jesus' ministry.

Reading 2: Alternative Functions of the *hina* Clause

If the traditional segmentation is retained, the interpretation of the verse depends primarily on the semantic function and pragmatic force of the *hina* clause.

Option 1: Telic *hina*

The most common interpretation understands *hina* as marking purpose: "(He was born blind) so that the works of God might be manifested in him."[6] On this analysis, the clause carries a final force, thereby establishing a purposive relationship between the man's blindness and the manifestation of God's works.

Option 2: Volitive (or Imperatival) *hina*

A number of scholars have argued that *hina* may occasionally assume a volitive or imperatival function.[7] On this basis, the clause may be understood as: "(He was born blind), but let the works of God be manifested in him." Here *hina* does not indicate purpose but exhortation. Accordingly, the clause ceases to function as an explanation of the blindness and instead directs the reader's attention to Jesus' response to the blind man's plight.

Option 3: Ecbatic *hina*

A third possibility is to interpret *hina* as expressing result, a usage that is attested in post-Classical and New Testament Greek.[8] The clause may then be paraphrased as: "(He was born blind), but the outcome of this situation is that the works of God will be manifested in him." Under this analysis, the semantic relationship is one of consequence, not purpose. The revelation of God's works is therefore understood as the outcome of Jesus' restorative activity and not as the intended purpose of the man's congenital condition.[9]

Conclusion

From a linguistic perspective, a non-teleological reading offers a more coherent account of the *hina* clause in John 9:3. The discourse unfolds from the description of the man's condition to Jesus' response, His restorative action, and finally to the manifestation of God's works. Within this progression, the manifestation of God's works emerges as the consequence of Jesus' action rather than as the intended purpose of the man's blindness.[10]

Whether one adopts the alternative punctuation suggested in Reading 1 or one of the non-purposive interpretations discussed under Reading 2, the exegetical implications are broadly similar. In either case, the man's congenital blindness is not to be understood as a condition brought about for the specific purpose of revealing God's works. By contrast, the narrative places its emphasis on the manifestation of God's works through the restorative activity of Jesus, whose role as the "light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5) provides the theological framework for interpreting the narrative (see John 9:1, 6–7, 11, 35–38).

Endnotes

1 For Jewish perspectives on the relationship between sin, suffering, and divine judgment reflected in this question, see Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 5 vols. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1924), 2:527–529. For further discussion, see David C. Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

2 James Bartley, Juan B. Patterson, and Joyce Cope Wyatt, *Juan*, Comentario Bíblico Mundo Hispano 17 (El Paso, TX: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 2005), 210.

3 For alternative interpretations, see, among others, John H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 1929), 2:324–326; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 2 vols., Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 1:371–372, 376–378; Charles K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1978), 356–357; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 3 vols. (London: Burns & Oates, 1980), 2:240–242; Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 361–363; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 476–480; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2nd ed., Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1999),

154–155; and Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 776–777.

4 See, e.g., John C. Poirier, "'Day and Night' and the Punctuation of John 9:3," *New Testament Studies* 42 (1996): 288–294; and John C. Poirier, "'Day and Night' and the Sabbath Controversy of John 9," *Filología Neotestamentaria* 19 (2006): 113–120.

5 Following the discourse segmentation proposed by Poirier, "'Day and Night' and the Punctuation of John 9:3," 294.

6 Cf. Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1961), 186–188.

7 Cf. Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol. 3, *Syntax* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963), 94–95; Nigel Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1965), 145–148, esp. 145–147; and Charles F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 144–145.

8 Cf. Blass, Debrunner, and Funk, *Greek Grammar*, 198. It should be noted that *hina* may be used "to convey a sense of result or consequence" (Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, Biblical Languages: Greek, 2nd ed. [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994], 235). Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici 114 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1963), 122, observes that "constructions used classically in final sense only are now used in consecutive sense. . . . The very conjunctions ἵνα and ὥστε can be interchanged at times, so that ὥστε may have an obviously final sense or ἵνα an obviously consecutive one." Similarly, Edwin Mayser, *Grammatik der griechischen Papyri aus der Ptolemäerzeit mit Einschluss der gleichzeitigen Ostraka und der in Ägypten verfassten Inschriften*, vol. 2, bk. 3 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1934), 51, classifies certain *hina* constructions as "Substantivsätze der Wirkung" ("clauses of effect or result"). See further Antonius N. Jannaris, *An Historical Greek Grammar Chiefly of the Attic Dialect as Written and Spoken from Classical Antiquity Down to the Present Time Founded upon the Ancient Texts, Inscriptions, Papyri and Present Popular Greek* (London: Macmillan, 1897), 455; and Chrys C. Caragounis, *The Development of Greek and the New Testament: Morphology, Syntax, Phonology, and Textual Transmission*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 167 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 224–225.

9 The disciples themselves employ *hina* in a clause that may plausibly be understood as expressing a perceived consequence of sin ("Who sinned … so that he was born blind?"). This immediate discourse context therefore renders a resultative understanding of *hina* in Jesus' response linguistically plausible, even if not required.

10 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 471, likewise observes that when Christ "corrected their error, He did not explain the cause of the man's affliction, but told them what would be the result." This observation reflects the same interpretive movement from cause to manifestation that underlies the ecbatic interpretation of the passage.

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Never give up your faith and hope in God. Cling to the promises. Do not trust in your feelings, but in the naked Word of God. Believe the assurances of the Lord. Take your stand upon the plain "Thus saith the Lord," and rest there, feeling or no feeling. Faith is not always followed by feelings of ecstasy, but "hope thou in God." Trust fully in Him...

Ellen G. White, The Upward Look (Review and Herald, 1982), 176

BRI International Bible Conference in the Baltic Union

Frank M. Hasel

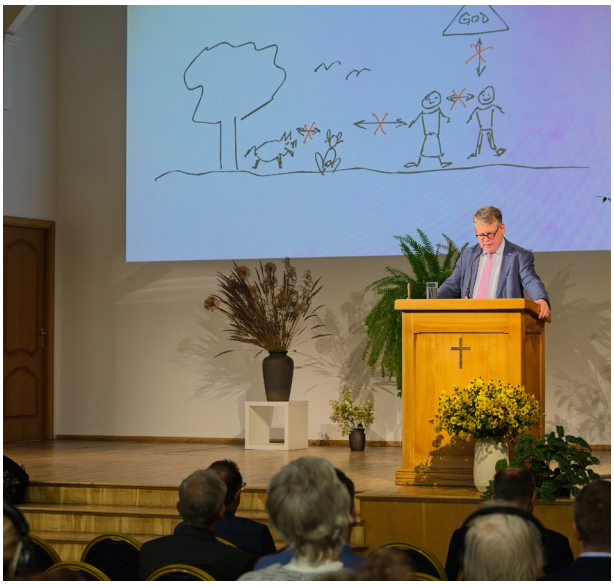
From September 12 to 15, 2026, the Biblical Research Institute, together with other scholars from Andrews University and the White Estate, conducted a well-attended international Bible conference for all Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). The conference was held at the Seventh-day Adventist Union headquarters and main church in Riga, the capital of Latvia.

Church elders and church members were invited to attend the first two days, and pastors from all three countries attended the last two days. Among other topics, the conference focused on issues related to the Trinity, last generation theology, biblical hermeneutics, the significance of the resurrection for our theology, the use of AI and modern technology, and Ellen G. White's understanding of God and our response to critics. The BRI also gifted a complimentary copy of the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* to every pastor in attendance. Between presentations, there was time for BRI members to also engage in small group discussions with pastors from all three countries. In these smaller circles it was possible to interact with the pastors on a deeper personal level. Topics ranged from challenges they face in their ministry, last generation theology, Ellen G. White and her authority, to specific questions about prophetic interpretation and difficult-to-understand Bible passages.

Conferences like these are unique opportunities to explore important theological questions, strengthen Adventist identity, and foster theological unity.

Frank M. Hasel
Associate Director
Biblical Research Institute

BRI director Elias Brasil de Souza gifting a book to David Nõmmik, president of the Baltic Union.



Frank M. Hasel's presentation on last generation theology.

From left to right:
Artur Stele with David Nõmmik, Baltic Union president; Keldie Paroschi speaking on the significance of the resurrection for our faith; Daniel Bediako presenting on the topic of the Trinity; small group discussions with pastors from the Baltic Union; and a panel discussion with some of the presenters of the Bible conference: Elias Brasil de Souza, Denis Kaiser, Keldie Paroschi, Daniel Bediako, Anna Galenieks, Eriks Galenieks, and David Nõmmik.

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