

Practical Spirituality in Isaiah 1:10-20

Paul Z. Gregor
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Andrews University

Most studies of Isaiah tend to focus on the rich theological and historical elements that pervade the book. However, Isaiah also provides important insights into practical spirituality—especially that needed by the leaders of God’s people. In this paper, I would like to focus and reflect on this often neglected, but important theme that runs through the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah began his ministry around 740 BC when the Assyrian empire was in decline. The time of the great Assyrian kings such as Ashurnarsipal II and his son Shalmanaser III, who erected the famous Black Obelisk, was long gone. With the disappearance of Shalmanaser’s son, Smamshi-Adad V, the Assyrian empire was on the verge of total extinction. The reign of Smamshi-Adad V was followed by several weak kings who spent all their energy and time intriguing to remain in power. Due to the lack of financial resources, the army became powerless which brought political instability to the provinces controlled by the crown. In return, the weakness of the Assyrian empire triggered socioeconomic instability and brought prosperity to small countries such as Judah.

The message recorded in chapter 1:10-20 probably came to the prophet Isaiah at the beginning (ca. 740 BC) of his prophetic ministry when Assyria was beginning its decline. Thus, there was no foreign power to restrict and control the market and international trade in Judah. This in turn opened tremendous opportunities for certain classes of citizens of Jerusalem and Judah in general to exploit the situation for their own benefit. The appetite for riches, prosperity and greed increased greatly. Thus, lack of compassion for those who were in poverty and destitution was evident in both kingdoms

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(Judah and Israel). The prophet Amos, who ministered in Israel just a few years before Isaiah accepted his call to minister to Judah, sent strong messages of God's disapproval to the Israelites against such practices (Amos 2:6; 4:1; 5:11, 12, 15). In the kingdom of Judah, the situation was not much different. Therefore, Isaiah addressed, right at the beginning of his ministry, the same concern. The heart of his message in Chapter One indicates that there will be no escape for those who continue to oppress the unprotected while at the same time parading their faux spiritual performances in the temple's court.

The prophet Isaiah starts his book with a clear warning issued to his contemporaries. Right after the introductory statement he opens with an invitation (v. 2) using two verbs שְׁמַעוּ (hear) and יִשְׁמַעוּ (give ear), and both are in the imperative form indicating an order or command. The two nouns (heaven and earth) that follow these verbs serve as the subject and are called to be witnesses to the unfaithfulness of God's people. Isaiah skillfully uses imagery both, from the creation story where these two nouns were used for the first time, and Deuteronomy (4:26; 30:19; 31:28). The phrase "heavens and earth" in the creation story encompasses everything God created in the beginning. Thus, God invites everything he created to stand witness to the apostasy of His people. According to some, the calling of witnesses into action indicates that this whole section (vs. 2-20) is presented as a typical court hearing or covenant lawsuit,¹ while Gunkel believed that the lawsuit motif is found only in 18-20.²

Whatever the case, Isaiah successfully employs the same pair (שְׁמַעוּ and יִשְׁמַעוּ) in exactly the same form (imperative) a second time, in verse 10. Here, as earlier, the couplets are used in the opening statement for the following section, which may stand as an independent literary unit (vv 10-20). This section can clearly be divided into four segments where verse 10 serves as an introduction and verse 11 represents the first part. The second

¹ J. Harvey, *Le plaidoyer prophétique contre Israël après la rupture de l'alliance* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1967), 38, 39; J. J. M. Roberts, "Form, Syntax, and Redaction in Isaiah 1:2-20," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 3/3 (1982): 292-306.

² H. Gunkel, "Die Propheten als Schriftsteller und Dichter," in *Die grossen Propheten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1926), lxiii; R. Davidson, *The Covenant Lawsuit Motif in Canonical Perspective*. Paper read, Evangelical Theological Society 60th Annual Meeting. Providence, Rhode Island, 20 November 2008.

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part encompasses verses 12-15, the third part verses 16 and 17, while verses 18-20 represent the last part with the conclusion.

The first and second segments start with a question. Both questions are set in such fashion that there is no need for an answer because the questions are rhetorical and the answer is obvious. It seems that God's people during the time of Isaiah misunderstood God, leading them to undertake only their perceived obligations. In spite of the fact that they obviously fulfilled their obligations in an adequate manner, the tone of these two parts is negative, and God is clearly not satisfied with their performance.

The third part starts in a different way—there is now no more time for questions. God calls the people to action through command. This part, in a way, explains in detail why their performance, described in the previous sections, was insufficient. It reminds the people of Judah what they were not doing and what they were supposed to do. The last part also opens with a command but an invitation is implemented with a tone which is not so gloomy as in the earlier parts. It ends with the hope and promise of endless blessings. However, there is serious warning of possible total downfall. Refusal to obey God's instructions would directly lead them to an open rebellion against God, which would ultimately result in their total destruction.

Textual Analysis

The introductory statement is made of two parallel lines where every word in the first line has its pair in the second line.

שְׁמַעוּ דְבַר־יְהוָה קְצִינֵי סֹדִם
הֲאִזְנִינוּ תוֹרַת אֱלֹהֵינוּ עִמָּרָה

Four couplets which exist between these two parallel lines are easily recognizable. Earlier it was understood that the “poet goes back to the beginning again, and says the same thing once more, though he may partly or completely change the actual words to avoid monotony.”³ But a more recent understanding of parallelism indicates that paralleled couplets serve to supplement each other in their intensity and meaning.⁴ Thus, שְׁמַעוּ is paralleled with הֲאִזְנִינוּ, in the same way the phrase דְבַר־יְהוָה (word of Yahweh) is paralleled with תוֹרַת אֱלֹהֵינוּ (teaching of God). Furthermore,

³ T. H. Robinson, *The Poetry of the Old Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1947), 21.

⁴ R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1985), 7.

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the word קִצְיָנִי (leaders of) is paired with עַם (people of) in the second line, while the word סֹדֹם (Sodom) serves as a twin to the word עֲמֹרָה (Gomorrah) in the second line.

Both words שָׁמַע and שָׁמַע are in the imperative and as such dominate the statement. It seems that the word שָׁמַע was more popular since it was used extensively in the Old Testament. In spite of the fact that it was usually translated as “hear,” or “listen,” it also implies obedience as well. Whenever it is used its subject is compelled to react. Since it is a progressively active verb, action is demanded upon its implementation. One must act by accepting or rejecting the motion but cannot ignore it.

Its parallel word in the second line, שָׁמַע, is used only 42 times in the Hebrew Bible, and always in the *hifil* except for one case (Eccl 12:9) where it appears in *piel* form and as such has a different meaning (weigh, test, prove).⁵ It is most probably a cognate to an Akkadian verb *`adina* which means “to listen.”⁶ Most of its occurrences appear in Hebrew poetry (Psalms 15 times, Job 6 times, Proverbs 1 time, and Ecclesiastes 1 time). Among other books where the same word is found, it occurs most frequently in the book of Isaiah (8 times).

Out of all its occurrences throughout the Old Testament it stands alone only 14 times, while another 28 times it appears in relationship with its parallel counterpart, where its most common pair is שָׁמַע (24 times). Only on four occasions is the verb שָׁמַע found with other cognates. It is parallel with שָׁמַע (incline, attend)(3 times) and שָׁמַע (incline)(1 time). When it is paired with שָׁמַע, it is used in second place in the majority of times except for three times when it stands in the first position with שָׁמַע second. When it functions as a pair it usually “summons to receive instruction.”⁷ Other suggestions indicate that this parallelism may allude to the idea of summoning two witnesses.⁸

⁵ H. Wolf, “שָׁמַע,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:28-29.

⁶ K. T. Aitken, “שָׁמַע,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 1:340.

⁷ H. W. Wolff, *Hosea: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Hosea* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1974), 97.

⁸ L. Kohler, *Deuterocesaja stilkritisch untersucht* (Giesen: A. Topelmann, 1923), 112.

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It is not clear whether שָׁמַע explains or strengthens its parallel verb אָזְנָה in the first line. Since the noun אָזְנָה (ear) derives from the verb אָזְנָה, its proper meaning would be “give ear,” or “to act with the ears.”⁹ If this is the case then instead of clarifying and strengthening the verb in the first line, by using the verb אָזְנָה, the author intended to implement a tone of seriousness.

The next parallel pair appears in a construct chain where דְּבַר־יְהוָה from the first line matches אִלְהֵינוּ תוֹרַת the second. Usually the word דְּבַר simply means “word” or “thing,” but whenever it is in a construct with יְהוָה it stands for the word of God in general and always refers to His Law in a narrower sense. This meaning is supported by the fact that its parallel word in the second line, is תוֹרַת which refers to God’s Law or His teachings. Furthermore, God’s תוֹרַת is to be associated “with character and attitudes and relationship.”¹⁰ The last two words in each line also appear in a construct chain where קְצֵי in the first line, and עַם in the second line, are in their construct state. They are followed by two absolute state nouns which, in fact, are proper names of two ancient cities, Sodom and Gomorrah. The word קְצֵי is a carefully selected word, which refers to rulers, who are a special class of individuals at the top of the social scale. However, this is not the only possible word the author could employ to describe leadership. Indeed the repertoire is wide, but the author chooses this one for a special reason. Other terms such as מְנַשֵּׁל (Gen 45:8), נָגִיד (1 Sam 25:30), or שֹׁפֵט (Ex 16:22) were popular and widely used, usually indicating good leadership (Joseph, David, leaders of the congregation). On the other hand, the word קְצֵי is used only 12 times in the Old Testament and in most cases refers to a person who is responsible for

⁹ G. Liedke, “אָזְנָה Ear,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 1:71.

¹⁰ J. N. Oswald, *The Book of Isaiah; Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 96.

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recruiting soldiers,¹¹ military commanders, leaders in general or dictators.¹² Its cognate is probably an Arabic verb *qadn* or *qadi* meaning judge.¹³ Furthermore, the prophet Micah portrays the leaders (יִצְרָר) of Judah as those who perform the act of cannibalism toward their own people (Mic 3:2-3).

Its parallel word in the second line is אֲנִי and it normally indicates people in respect to their relationship.¹⁴ Here the author reminds Judeans about the covenant relationship with their God and their obligation to it. Besides the word אֲנִי, another Hebrew word אֲנִי which usually refers to a political entity and mainly is related to non-Jewish peoples.¹⁵ By using אֲנִי, the author clarifies the word יִצְרָר in the first line indicating that the audience is not some ancient population in Sodom and Gomorrah but rather the leaders/dictators and the entire nation of Judah. By placing them on the same level with the cursed people of Sodom and Gomorrah the author's intention is to indicate God's disgust with their relationship, spiritual growth, and performance towards Him. Thus, right in the beginning He warns them that their end might be the same as those who perished in the two ancient cities.

After the first two lines of introduction (v. 10), Isaiah introduces his audience, which includes the entire nation of Judah with the first section (v. 11). The section opens with a question in respect to their obligation and responsibility toward the temple sacrifices. Many years ago God had provided them with strict instructions regarding different types of sacrifices they had to bring to the temple. The book of Leviticus provides a detailed account as to how to prepare different animals for various transgressions.

¹¹ G. Van Groningen, "יִצְרָר," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), 2:807.

¹² F. Brown, et al, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 892.

¹³ K. T. Aitken, "יִצְרָר," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 3:960.

¹⁴ A. R. Hulst, "אֲנִי/אֲנִי," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1966), 2:900.

¹⁵ H. C. M. Vogt, *Studie zur nachexilischen Gemeinde in Esra-Nehemia* (Werk: Kommissionsverlag Dietrich Coelde, 1966), 152-154.

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There are three parallel lines in this section, the first line serving as an introduction. By using the word זָבַח (sacrifice) the author brings into focus the entire sacrificial system. The second and third lines specify in more detail everything encompassed by the term זָבַח. While the second line deals with parts of animals being offered and burned on the sacrificial altar in the courtyard (עֲלוֹת אֵילִים - burnt offerings of rams; מִרְיָאִים בֶּחֱלֵב - fat of fatlings), the third line cuts even deeper by indicating that the blood of animals would not even be acceptable. Here, the author lists three animals; פֶּרֶךְ (young bull), כֶּבֶשׂ (lamb), and עֲזָזִיד (he-goat). Young bulls played an important role for the redemption of the priests who were the spiritual leaders for the entire congregation (Lev 4:2-12). In addition, the same animal was offered when the entire community sinned against God (Lev 13-21). The lamb was offered every day during the morning and evening services for the sins of the congregation of Israel (Ex 29:38-39). The he-goat was sacrificed when a ruler needed cleansing from his sins (Lev 4:22-26). Furthermore, on a designated day of the year (day of Atonement) the most sacred place (Holy of Holies) was cleansed by the blood of a he-goat (Lev 16). This was the most important day of the sacrificial calendar when all the sins of the people of God were taken away and they were redeemed in God's presence.

Obviously, the people of Judah who lived during the time of Isaiah were aware of the importance of the sacrificial system. Burnt offerings coupled with burnt fat which brought a sweet aroma before God were not bringing delight to God and as such did not produce the desired results. Additionally, the blood of animals that was poured daily and yearly as a symbol of redemption and reconciliation was insufficient. It seems that everything the Judeans did was in vain and it was not accepted by God. Even blood, which served as a cleansing agent to bring the people closer to His presence, was not productive. Evidently, the entire sacrificial system which was established by God Himself was insufficient and no longer effective.

Similar to the first section (v. 11), the second section (vv. 12-15) also starts with a question. In addition to the ineffective sacrifices they bring, it seems that other elements which demonstrate their performance are not satisfactory either. This time incense is mentioned (v. 13) which correlates well with the last part of the same section where prayer (v. 15) is

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referenced, too. These two elements seem to be part of their private and corporate spirituality but performed publicly in God's temple.

Between incense and prayer the author sandwiches holidays which were separated and consecrated as special for bringing closeness to God. He mentions four of them which were observed as holy days. The first indicated in the text is $\Psi\text{ׁ}\text{ׁ}\text{ׁ}$ (New Moon). This was a monthly holiday set apart for the people of Israel to observe since the time of Moses. It was celebrated on a monthly bases at the beginning of each month.¹⁶ It was announced by the sound of silver trumpets, when peace and burnt offerings were involved (Num 10:10). It was listed with Sabbath and the three pilgrim festivals; the feast of unleavened bread, the feast of weeks, and the feast of tabernacles (2 Chron 8:13). It was one of the appointed feasts and its observance was important for the entire community.

The second sacred day was $\text{ׁ}\text{ׁ}\text{ׁ}\text{ׁ}$ (Shabbat) which refers to the seventh day of every week. This weekly observance was established and known much earlier than the beginning of Israel as a nation. It was established during creation when God Himself rested, consecrated, and proclaimed it holy for all generations to come. It was set apart from all other days and it became the sign which "the Creator has stamped on world history. . . as His seal of ownership and authority."¹⁷ Later, it was indicated that the Sabbath is a sign between God and His people (Exod 31:16, 17). The word $\text{ׁ}\text{ׁ}\text{ׁ}$ is used here for "sign" and it derived from the verb $\text{ׁ}\text{ׁ}\text{ׁ}$ (to mark). This verb was used in Numbers 34:10 where the people of Israel were supposed to "mark" their boundaries. Marking boundaries indicates ownership. With this in mind the Sabbath is a sign or mark of God's ownership. By celebrating the Sabbath, humanity in general, and the people of Israel in particular, indicated that they belong to God and are his possession.

The third holy day listed is $\text{ׁ}\text{ׁ}\text{ׁ}\text{ׁ}$. This term is used mostly in Leviticus (8 times) and in Numbers (6 times). It is usually translated as "assembly," "convocation," but also it may refer to "reading" (Neh 8:8). The word is used only 18 times in the Old Testament and most of the time

¹⁶ C. P. Weber, " $\Psi\text{ׁ}\text{ׁ}\text{ׁ}$," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), 1:266.

¹⁷ M. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King; the Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Studies and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 19.

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is paired with the word קֹדֶשׁ (holy). Whenever this pair (מִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ) appears it indicates a special holy time, one day long, when the people had to abstain from any work. This happened every seventh day of the week (Lev 23:3), during Passover (Lev 23:7, 8), during the feast of unleavened bread (Num 28:18, 25), Pentecost (Num 28:26), the feast of trumpets (Lev 23:21, 24; Num 29:1), the Day of Atonement (Lev 23:27; Num 29:7), and the feast of tabernacles (Lev 23:35, 36; Num 29:12). Evidently, whether it was weekly, monthly, or yearly observance מִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ represented a holy and separate day devoted to God.

The fourth term on the list was אִתְּכֶם (assembly). It is a rare word used only 3 other times apart from the book of Isaiah (twice in Joel 1:14; 2:15, and once in 2 Kgs 10:20). Due to its limited usage it is not clear what kind of holy day this term designated. The context in Joel indicates that these are special, unpredicted and irregular occasions when the entire nation is in distress. Second Kings indicates a similar understanding of the term. Here king Jehu is assembling all the priests of Baal proclaiming an אִתְּכֶם in order to gather them in one place and kill them (2 Kgs 10:18-27). By listing אִתְּכֶם with other holy days Isaiah indicates the seriousness of the situation in Judah and Jerusalem.

In addition to the sacrifices mentioned in the first section (v. 11) God is not satisfied with the observance of the holy days, whether weekly, monthly, yearly, or even when they occurred occasionally. He is also dissatisfied with their prayers which are not making any difference because they fall on deaf ears. The last line in this section reveals the reason why their overall performance which is made of sacrifices, prayers, and the observation of holy days is useless and ineffective. “I will not listen,” God says, because “your hands are full of blood” (v. 15). That the author probably uses this gruesome image metaphorically is evident in the last line of the second section, which serves as a connecting link to the next section where the text explains what “bloody hands” represent, though literal murder must not be ruled out.

Unlike the first two sections which start with a question, the third section opens up with an imperative. In fact out of nineteen words in this section eleven are verbs where all but two are used in the imperative. The other two (רַעַע – do evil and יַטֵּב – do good) are infinitive absolute in

form.¹⁸ Infinitive absolutes sometimes serve “as a substitute for a finite verb form”¹⁹ and as such could be employed as a device in expressing divine commands (Exod 20:8; Deut 5:12; 2 Sam 24:12). Therefore, all the verbs used here are commands.

This section starts with two verbs *יָחַץ* (wash) and *רָחַץ* (clean) which serve as an introductory statement. Right at the beginning God commands them, “wash” and “clean yourselves.” After this powerful request, God specifies in detail what “washing and cleaning” designates. The rest of this section could be subdivided into two parts. In the first part (v. 16) they are told what they must stop doing. Two imperative verbs supported by another verb in the infinitive absolute at the very end of this verse suggest immediate action. They must cease to do evil and remove it from their everyday practices.

The second part (v. 17) of this section starts by indicating what they must do. Even though this command “learn to do good” and “seek justice” is applicable to every individual in the community of God, the last part of this verse suggests that this command is imposed mainly on leaders who are called to be *שֹׁפְטִים* in verse 10. One of the main roles of those who were called to lead was to implement justice in the courts and protect those levels of the society which needed protection, such as orphans and widows, against merciless lenders. Even outside of Judah and Israel, leaders and especially kings, were responsible for the protection of the weak.²⁰ Obviously, the people of God in general and their leaders in particular failed to administer justice in their dealings with each other and to those with whom they came in contact.

This section requires two actions from the people of God. First, God indicates that they must stop doing wicked deeds. But this is not enough, he goes a step further, indicating that they can not ignore injustice and remain passive, they must start doing good. This message is in harmony with the New Testament understanding of practical spirituality, “Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, it is sin” (James 4:17).

¹⁸ Brown, 405, 996.

¹⁹ P. H. Kelley, *Biblical Hebrew, An Introduction Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 185.

²⁰ M. D. Coogan, *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Louisville, KY: The Westminster Press, 1978), 74.

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The last section of this literary unit also starts with a command. However, to this the imperative particle סֵן is added which makes the imperative emphatic or more urgent, or at times may be an appeal (e.g., in Gen 22:2). Further, its urgency or petition is supported by the verb קָבַח (to reason) which appears in the *niphal* with a cohortative ending. This combination, the *niphal* plus cohortative ending is used only by Isaiah. Elsewhere, other authors use this verb in the *niphal* form but always in a situation where there is a dispute between two parties (Gen 20:16; Job 23:7), and as such it is the language of courts.

Interestingly, the court scene comes into focus only after the third section where the people are told what they must do. When this requirement is fulfilled God invites them to “reason.” By using this mode (particle סֵן and cohortative ending) Isaiah moderates the strength of the preceding imperative. It is an invitation where God pleads with his people to come and to reason together (v. 18). The author uses the imperative and the cohortative with סֵן particle between them as a vehicle to bring hope and restoration motifs into perspective, thus indicating that there is still a chance of redemption, covenant renewal, and a future for God’s people. However, not before certain conditions are met (v. 19).

In the last section or conclusion (vv. 19-20), the people are offered two choices (עֲמַע) obedience or (מָרָד) rebellion. The author skillfully employs the same word (עֲמַע) from the introduction again. The people are not only invited to listen or hear, but to obey. This motive of obedience and rebellion was borrowed from Deuteronomy 11:26-32 and it belongs to a covenant between God and His people. The prosperity expressed by the phrase $\text{טוֹב הָאָרֶץ הַזֶּה אֲכַלְתֶּם$ (the good of the land you shall eat) indicates God’s willingness to forgive previous transgressions provided His people straightened out their ways in respect to their interpersonal relationships.

Verse 20 serves as a clear warning in case they remain disobedient. Here for the second time the verb אָכַל (eat) is used, but not in a positive tone as in the previous verse. The verb is reinforced by the *pual* form, indicating a terrible consequence of destruction by the sword. The choice is theirs, they shall eat the good of the land, or they shall be eaten by the sword. The last line of this section $\text{כִּי פִי יְהוָה דִּבֶּר}$ (for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken) serves as a perpetual warning indicating how serious God is about this matter.

Conclusion

It seems that the people of Judah and Israel, along with their spiritual and political leaders, performed all their public and private spiritual duties according to the letter. However, all this was in vain unless they first removed evil from their midst and sought to do good. In spite of the fact that their overall performance was insufficient, the text never suggests that the bringing of sacrifices and the observance of the holy days was abolished and no longer required. Both, sacrifices and observance of the holy days, were still mandatory, though no longer producing the desired results. It all would have a deeper meaning and purpose if their interpersonal relationships were on an acceptable level. Their relationship on the vertical level (between them and God) would be possible only if the horizontal one was also functioning. The fact that this understanding is in agreement with the statement of Jesus: “So if you are standing before the altar in the Temple, offering a sacrifice to God. . . leave your sacrifice there beside the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God” (Matt 5:23-24) makes this message applicable for the New Testament times and for our day as well. As noted elsewhere: “character and attitudes and relationship, all of which may be symbolized in the ceremonies but which are not to be replaced by the ceremonies”²¹ cannot be separated from interpersonal relationships or our relationship to God Himself.

Paul Z. Gregor was born in Croatia. He received his MA in Religion at Newbold College and his PhD at Andrews University. He served as a missionary in Jamaica working for the Northern Caribbean University from 2003 to 2007. Currently, he serves as a professor of Old Testament and Biblical Archaeology at Andrews University. He has published numerous books and articles in Croatian as well as in English. pgregor@andrews.edu

²¹ Oswald, 96.