

The Tension of Seventh-day Adventist Identity: An Existential & Eschatological Perspective

Jacques Doukhan
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Andrews University

Introduction: “As his name is, so he is” (1 Sam 25:25)

Many of us have struggled with the name of “Seventh-day Adventist.” I still vividly remember a funny incident when I was in the army. The military clerk asked me one day “what is your religion?” I said “seventh-day Adventist.” To my amazement the clerk wrote down “dentist.” We have all experienced some kind of embarrassment in regard to this name. To that natural embarrassment, which has essentially to do with ignorance, I would like to add another difficulty. So far we have understood the name as a mere description of our theological identity. The difficulty I am *referring* to is that our name while objectively describing the components of our faith carries also a tension that makes in fact the essence of our identity.

Definition of Tension: Two Irreconcilable Worlds

Our name is made of a tension between two irreconcilable worlds. This tension hits us already on a primary level: Our name is made of two opposite entities. The phrase “seventh day” is made of a number “7,” which puts us immediately in the concrete realm of figures, the tangible reality of the accountant. It is also made of the word “day” which propels us into time, into our present life. Through this phrase we are precisely connected to the time of the week and to the time of history. Through this phrase we are confronted with existence and we belong to the course of history. The word “Adventist,” on the other hand, is an abstract word whose meaning is

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not clear immediately. It is a word which is generally not translated in other languages. While we translate the phrase “seventh day” in other languages we normally leave the word “Adventist” intact and loaded with mysterious and intriguing meaning. While the phrase “seventh day” connects us with earthly existence and human history the word “Adventist” takes us to the future of history, what comes after human history and belongs to the prophetic domain, pointing to the heavenly order. While the phrase “seventh day” confronts us with the present reality of the earthly city and makes us breathe with the rhythm of time “under heaven” (Eccl 3:1), the word “Adventist” takes us away from here and makes us dream and pray and hope for the coming of the kingdom of heaven, and strengthens in our heart the sense of “eternity” (Eccl 3:11). Interestingly, Abraham Heschel had in mind the same kind of tension when in his own categories and his own terms he pondered the following observation: “Citizens of two realms, we all sustain a dual allegiance: we sense the ineffable in one realm, we name and exploit reality in another, between the two we set up a system of references, but we can never fill the gap. They are as far and as close to each other as time and calendar, as life and what lies beyond the last breath.”¹

It is the purpose of this paper to examine the specific nature of the tension of Seventh-day Adventism, as it is testified in the two poles of this name. I will analyze the various theological applications of each component, “seventh-day” and “Adventist,” respectively tracing its existential and its eschatological dimensions. I will consider the possible bridges between these two irreconcilable worlds and then explore lessons in regard to our identity, who we are or who we should be.

Seventh-day

The seventh-day Sabbath is more than “not Sunday.” It is more than the reclamation of one day versus the other day; being that, the seventh-day Sabbath carries profound and significant theological perspectives. It is first of all the denial of the medieval *contemptus mundi*; it is the affirmation of our connection with this creation, with this time and with this history.

Contrary to Marcion and many of his Christian followers who embraced Sunday (which they see as the day of resurrection, and hence of the

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 8-9.

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deliverance from the physical body), in order to deny the value of material creation including our human body and to exalt instead the spiritual realities such as the soul, the seventh-day Sabbath celebrates God's gift of creation. This means that seventh-day Sabbath keepers ought to affirm the value of their body. What we eat, what we drink and what we breathe, the way we treat our body, our attention to our physical reality is a part of our attention to the seventh-day Sabbath. For seventh-day keepers religion is a concrete matter which implies the physical reality of flesh. This also means that seventh-day keepers should not have a problem with involving the reality of their money and their physical blessings in their religious expression. Giving tithes is like Sabbath another affirmation of our faith in creation and hence the recognition that all belongs to the Creator (Lev 27:30; cf. Ps 24:2; Gen 14:19-21). The "yes" to creation which is contained in seventh-day keeping implies also an attention to the reality of this world. Ecological concerns and care for the problems of environment as well as sensitivity to the beauty of creation and sensual enjoyment of creation are direct applications to that attention. The "yes" to creation is a "yes" to the joy of life. The seventh-day Sabbath connects us with the human reality of this world, with our family (Lev 19:3), but also with our servants and our employees and with the foreigner (Ex 20:10), as well as with the animals of creation (Ex 20:10). The ministries of ADRA and of religious liberty are not just social expressions of our Christian love, or some kind of PR ornaments to impress and seduce the secular world, or just a strategic foreword preparing for the rest of our religious message; they are an inherent part of our religious message: they are rooted in the seventh-day Sabbath, which calls for that responsibility.

The seventh-day Sabbath should also mark our connection with human history; for it is not only the reminder of God's act of creation (Ex 20:11) it is also the sign of God's work in history (Deut 5:15); it conveys the message of *Immanuel* "God with us" and is the mark of His incarnation, not only in the historical person of Jesus Christ but also in His word, the canonical Scriptures; it contains therefore a powerful affirmation of the value of learning and searching the human expressions of the prophetic voice. It is an appeal to the use of our mind and our intelligence in the quest for truth and in the construction of our religious life and thinking. The seventh-day Sabbath takes us into the heart of the Law (see its structural centrality in the Decalogue), which commands us to incarnate our piety into the facts of life. It reminds us that religion is not just made of prayers and

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spiritual meditation; it is essentially an obedience that governs our daily life, in our relationships with ourselves, the world and our neighbor (Prov 15:9; 21:3). In a nutshell, the “seventh-day Sabbath” component is what makes us human, real and present in this world, a dimension that was emphasized by Jesus: “the Sabbath was made for man” (Mark 2:27).

Adventist

The word “Adventist” takes us in the opposite direction; it separates us from this world and this time and fuels our eschatological thinking. Contrary to the traditional emphasis of evangelical and existential theologies which like to emphasize the spiritual kingdom of God in our present relationship with God and insist on the present salvation through immediate access to the heavenly paradise by the soul, we fundamentally proclaim an event which belongs to the “not yet” and pertains to the heavenly order: the future coming of our Lord Jesus Christ from heaven and the instauration of the heavenly kingdom. For us the actual event of salvation is not subjective, a sentimental or an existential encounter, or an individual translation at our death. Salvation is cosmic by nature and has not yet occurred, although it has been anticipated and guaranteed through the event of the cross, and although God is intensely present in our lives through His blessings and our religious experiences. We have understood that salvation originates in heaven, in God’s grace and does not depend on human endeavor or tradition. We believe in the spatial reality of a heavenly sanctuary in which the process of salvation is being decided and shaped. We meditate over the meaning of the heavenly Day of Atonement which characterizes our time of the end and affects our prophetic identity as people of the last days.

We hope in the future resurrection of the dead and the creation of a new and “glorious” body with the gift of eternal life. We also hope in the future creation of new heavens and earth where we will live forever and in perfect peace in the actual Presence of the Lord. All these set ups may be deemed as utopic because they pertain to realities and concepts that are totally foreign to our human experience. They are not, however, the product of our poetic imagination; this is not a scenario of science fiction. These are things which we could not even imagine, things, “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor 2:9). We came to believe in the unbelievable through revelation (1 Cor 2:10). It is that “Adventist”

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component which is open to the supernatural that inspires our view of Scriptures and affects our hermeneutic, obliging to a careful and respectful approach to the inspired Word. We cannot believe in the second coming of Christ with all it implies of breaking through the natural channels of human history and still practice the Historical critical method that is an affirmation to the contrary. In a nutshell the “Adventist” component is what makes us holy and different in this world, pointing to the transcendent, and what justifies our role as witnesses to the other city.

Seventh-day/Adventist

So far my descriptions have not been dramatically new, and everyone could comfortably identify with this picture, except perhaps for the implied tension carried by the contrast between the two worlds. This is precisely the next point which I would like to elaborate. I suggest that our identity is not just made of the two components, distinctively and separately; but it is an identity of tension. The two dimensions are brought out together, in tension to each other and in connection to each other, but also inside of each other: the “seventh-day” is present in the eschatological “Adventist” thinking; and reversely the eschatological thinking should invade our existence.

“*Seventh-day*” with “*Adventist*.” The canonical integration of the OT and the NT in the Seventh-day Adventist appropriation of Scriptures supported by the theological recognition of the same degree of inspiration between the two Testaments is a fundamental principle for our church. I am not sure however, to what extent this principle has been well assimilated and well applied in the life of the church and the personal religious life of the Seventh-day Adventist person, considering the use of the OT in our preaching habits, in our devotions and the ever recurring struggle for the study of Hebrew versus the study of Greek in our schools and Seminaries. One of the most immediate applications of this tension is the association of “the law and the Gospel” which Ellen White uses to explain our “distinctive” name.² It is also significant that it is on the basis of this tension that the name “seventh-day Adventist” has been legally adopted to found the historical creation of the Seventh-day Adventist church: “We, the undersigned, hereby associate ourselves together, as a church, taking the

² Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Co., 1958), 385.

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name, Seventh-day Adventists, covenanting to keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus Christ.”³ Obviously, this confession of faith was based on the apocalyptic text of Revelation interpreted as a prophetic reference to the last day witnesses of biblical truth (Rev 14:12). We also believe that it is that tension that would reconcile “the Law of Moses” and the coming of “the day of the Lord” which should characterize the message of the eschatological Elijah (Mal 4:4-6; cf. also our understanding of the mission of the two witnesses who represent the testimony of the OT and the NT, Rev 11:3-6).

“Seventh-day” in “Adventist.” The connection to time and to history that constitutes the essence of the “seventh-day” is also an integral part of our eschatology. This means that our eschatology is not an ethereal dream outside of the reality of flesh and of history. Paradoxically, the very fact that salvation is a cosmic event objectively located in the future and not just an emotional and “spiritual” experience gives to that event of salvation all its historical evidence. Also, it is because the event of salvation is really historical that it implies the demands of judgment and the needs for righteousness. It is because the heavenly kingdom is a historical reality that we cannot enter that holy space the way we are. God’s justice, with all it implies of absolute eradication of evil is what makes the event of salvation a real historical event and not just a theological concept or a nice pious feeling. Significantly, the event of the eschatological Judgment has been situated within the course of human history in connection with the event of the cross; they belong to the same prophetic line, and are both submitted to the same rigor of numbers, from the seventy weeks prophecy to the twenty three hundred evenings and mornings (Dan 8-9). These two theological ideas, namely, the future cosmic dimension of salvation and the eschatological judgment are, I believe, the most important theological contributions seventh-day Adventists are bringing to the world. These are also the most unpopular ones; because more than any other idea they make salvation a real event and not just a vague theological concept we may play with.

“Adventist” in “Seventh-day.” Our eschatology should not stay aloof and disconnected from the reality of our existence. Our eschatology should be a part of our present life. An illustration of this principle is the manner Daniel uses the phrase that encapsulates the most eschatological hope “the

³ *Review and Herald*, October 8, 1861.

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end of the days” (Dan 12:13), to mark a specific moment in his life (Dan 1:18), a linguistic indication that his life has been invaded and affected by his eschatological hope. The literary connection between the historical section of the book (Dan 1-6) and the prophetic/eschatological section of the book (Dan 7-12) could also be seen as an evidence of the same pattern relating the eschatological to the existential/historical. In a more corporate perspective the book of Daniel describes the impact of hope on the lives and the emotions of the eschatological people: “blessed is he who waits and comes to one thousand three hundred and thirty-five days” (Dan 12:12). Likewise in the book of Revelation the eschatological people who proclaim the message of judgment and creation in their lives and in their words are on earth the sign of the heavenly judgment-Day of Atonement (Rev 14:6; Dan 7). Our Adventist faith should inform and control our seventh-day concrete and historical walk in life. This means that our ethics, the way we relate to each other, the way we forgive each other, the way we eat and drink, the way we work, the way we make our choices should be inspired and nurtured by our eschatology. The future should govern our present.

Biblical Testimonies of Seventh-day/Adventist. It is interesting to note that this tension deciphered in the name “seventh-day Adventist” is found in the Scriptures, as the following examples testify:

1. The canonical structure: The Bible begins with creation (Gen 1:1-2:1) and ends with the coming of the Lord (Rev 22:20). The OT Scriptures attest the same canonical structure, beginning with creation and ending with the coming of the day of the Lord (Mal 4:5) or with the hope of the return from the Babylonian exile on the Sabbatical year (2 Chron 36:21-23). In case some would be tempted to consider this literary observation as the farfetched product of the creative mind of this writer I must send them to the famous OT theologian, Claus Westermann, who before me, noticed this canonical coincidence and concluded its significance in its relation to the “central message” of the Bible.⁴

2. The structural pattern in the Scriptures: It is also interesting to note that this structural pattern is attested elsewhere in the Scriptures:

The book of Genesis begins with creation and ends with the perspective of the Promised Land, the hope of the resurrection and the Garden of Eden (Gen 50:24-26). Likewise, the Pentateuch begins with creation and ends

⁴ Claus Westermann, *Beginning and End in the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 33, 37.

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with the same perspective of the Promised Land and the hope of resurrection (Deut 34:4-6).

The book of Isaiah begins with the call of heavens and earth associated with the image of God nourishing Israel (Isa 1:2) and ends with the creation of new heavens and earth and the perspective of eternal worship of the Lord from Sabbath to Sabbath (Isa 66:22-23).

The book of Ecclesiastes begins with creation (Eccl 1:1-11) and ends with eschatological judgment (Eccl 12:14).

The book of Daniel begins with the food test which alludes to creation (Dan 1:12; cf. Gen 1:29) and ends with the second coming, the day of resurrection “at the end of the days” (12:13).

The Gospel of John begins with creation (John 1:1-10) and ends with the promise of the second coming (John 21:22-23).

3. The definition of “faith” of Hebrews 11:1: It is significant that the only biblical definition of “faith” is based on this association of the same two poles: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for” (refers to the hope of the kingdom of God; cf. Heb 11:40), the evidence of things not seen” (refers to creation; cf. Heb 11:3). Note that the poem begins with creation (Heb 11:3) and ends with the promise of the Kingdom (Heb 11:39).

All these examples, there may be many more, are evidence of the “seventh-day/Adventist” tension in the Scriptures. This tension is therefore not just an apologetic argument supporting the rightness of the SDA message; it is not only founded on proof texts of the Scriptures; it is deeply integrated in the structure of the whole Scriptures. One of the lessons of these two poles of the inspired Scriptures concerns the way we focus on Scriptures. Witnessing to the two poles of the Scriptures, its beginning and end, which is a merismus, means that we should witness to the totality of Scriptures. It requires for a balanced reading of the whole Scriptures (OT and NT). Although apocalyptic texts should retain our particular focus, because of our specific identity and mission as last days witnesses, this attention should not overlook all the rest of biblical revelation. We should also be obliged by the imperatives of the Torah; think and ask questions with the sage of Wisdom literature; enjoy the beauty of biblical poetry; be ethical with the eight century prophets; be stirred by the paradoxical truths of the Sermon on the Mount; be disturbed by the urging engagements of the epistle of James; and be challenged by the difficulties of the Pauline epistles.

Conclusion: The Identity of Tension

The recognition of the “Seventh-day Adventist” identity as an identity of tension implies that we should learn to think the two poles of our identity not in conflict, the one against the other, or even in peace, the one next to the other, but in tension, the one *with* the other. I am not suggesting a philosophical, dialectical approach resulting in some kind of synthesis between the two; nor am I suggesting a political, middle way approach resulting in some kind of compromise between the two. I believe, the two dimensions have to be carried together and totally, because they are both categories of revelation. SDAs who emphasize the “Adventist” at the expense of the “seventh day” component lean to the right wing of the church and run the risk to erode their human and earthly connection. On the other hand SDAs with an emphasis on “seventh day” at the expense of the “Adventist” component lean to the left wing of the church and run the risk of eroding their religious and supernatural connection. What makes the distinctive character of the Seventh-day Adventist message is that it brings the two dimensions into tension with equal emphasis. The Seventh-day Adventist church should not be defined to the right or to the left or even to the center; it should only be defined in tension, as “seventh-day Adventist.”

Jacques Doukhan is Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Exegesis at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and Director of the Institute of Jewish-Christian Studies at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. He also serves as the General Editor for the SDAIBC (Seventh-day Adventist International Bible Commentary) Project. He received a doctorate in Hebrew Language and Literature from the University of Strasbourg and a second doctorate in Biblical Studies and Systematic Theology from Andrews University. He also holds an MA in Egyptology from the University of Montpellier.