

‘United We Stand’: A Biblical Perspective on Ecumenical Relations

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1. Introduction

Unity has become a particularly appealing concept in our economically, socially, and politically fragmented world. In the face of huge global challenges, we hear people say, how can we survive and even thrive if we do not work together?

With the growth of Christianity stagnating or even in decline in many parts of the world the idea of Christian unity as a means of meeting the tremendous challenges to evangelism and growth has been the focus for many denominations.¹ Advocates for increased ecumenical relations²

¹ The current study is a significantly expanded version of a presentation given at a Bible Conference in Prague, Czech Republic, held in early July 2012, that included Seventh-day Adventist pastors from all German-speaking countries of the Inter-European Division (EUD) as well as pastor from the Czecho-Slovakian Union. The context and challenges facing Adventist pastors in this particular geographical and cultural context naturally guided the framework for this study. I would like to express my appreciation to a number of individuals who have critically interacted with this study and have prodded me to continue looking, including my wife Chantal J. Klingbeil, my friend Dennis Meier, my colleague and mentor Gerhard Pfandl, and others.

² In this study I am trying to consistently use the phrase “ecumenical relations” as it seems to be more neutral than ecumenism or ecumenicalism. Ecumenical relations vary from Christian interdenominational dialogue, cooperation, or even fusion to Christian dialogue and interaction with completely different religious traditions. While pastors ministering in Europe would most likely be more affected by interdenominational dialogue and discussions, the philosophical underpinnings of more macro-style ecumenical relations across the lines of world religions and cultures seem to echo the more low-level ecumenical

KLINGBEIL: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

(and the need for Christian unity) are quick to quote Scripture: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20, 21, NIV).

These verses are crucial for the current topic and require a closer exegetical look.³ John 17:1 clearly underlines the prayer framework of the chapter. Yet, packaged as part of this prayer, John 17 represents one of the longest teaching sections of Jesus, associated with the last supper. A close reading of the biblical text suggests that Jesus was worried about what He knew was soon to take place. Jesus knew that He was about to be delivered into the hands of His enemies; that His divided followers were not ready to face the next hours; He felt the weight of sin pressing on His heart. As Jesus prays He also teaches. There is a clear sequence in the prayer, covering Jesus’ own relation to the Father (17:1-5), followed by specific prayer for His disciples (17:6-19), and finally looking into the future and praying more generically for future believers (17:20-26). The call for unity appears throughout the prayer in different forms, but is most explicit in vv. 20-21. Jesus’ concern for unity must have been triggered by noting the sense of disunity among His followers.⁴ Nobody had stood to wash the feet (John 13) and there are many references in the gospels pointing to the repeated discussions among the disciples concerning leadership, control, and greatness (Mark 9:34; cf. Luke 9:46; 22:24 in the context of the last supper). Was this the group that God had to rely upon in bringing the gospel to *all the world*? Jesus prays for “all”

relations.

³ Note the comments of Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21* (NAC 25B; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 204-5: “These verses have been the subject of a great deal of explication at least since the fourth century, when the discussion focused on the nature of the unity between Jesus and the Father. The Arians employed this text (especially 20:21) to argue for a moral or ethical unity between the Father and the Son rather than an essential unity (cf. 10:30). The issue involves the pattern of John’s argument. It seems certain that he does not argue from human relationships to the divine but from the divine to the human. Therefore one cannot legitimately propose that human experiences of unity, even in the best ecclesiastical situations, are the pattern for divine relationships in the Godhead.”

⁴ An important issue associated with Jesus’ prayer for unity involves the question how this ideal of unity is to be accomplished. Is Christian unity based on human projects, proposals, and planning or is it God-centered and ultimately dependent on divine intervention? See for more on this M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Basis of Christian Unity* (London: Inter Varsity, 1962).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

who would come to believe in Him, i.e., future followers of Christ (and, therefore in this particular context, not *all* the world) and anchors this unity in the unity between the Father and the Son, i.e., the Trinity. The unity of His followers was to be based on a common foundation (“be one *in us*”) and would have a surprising effect: when the “world” (that is, the people) would see this unity in purpose and mission they would believe that Jesus was truly sent by the Father (and thus one with the Father) and the Savior of the world. In summary: Jesus’ call to unity is driven by mission⁵ and is truly radical, as also noted by George Beasley-Murray: “It [the unity that Jesus refers to] is rooted in the being of God, revealed in Christ, and in the redemptive action of God in Christ.”⁶

Historically, the idea of Christian unity had a missiological focus and clustered around the desire to bring Christ to *all the world*. However, fast forward more than a century and the missiological focus was replaced by the desire to accomplish unity,⁷ or in the words of an official document of the World Council of Churches, “a growing number of voices from the churches, especially in Asia but also in Latin America, have spoken of the need for a ‘wider ecumenism’ or ‘macro-ecumenism’—an understanding which would open the ecumenical movement to other religious and cultural traditions beyond the Christian community.”⁸

As I consider ecumenical relations in this study I hope to keep both the larger attempt at ecumenical relations (or “macro-ecumenism” as called in the above quote)⁹ as well as the more familiar interdenominational Christian dialogue in view. In both instances the desire for unity and understanding seems to be the driving force, showing a significant departure from the drive for Christian world evangelism that marked ecumenical relations and ecumenical mission

⁵ Borchert, *John 12-21*, 206.

⁶ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Dallas, TX: Word, 2002), 302.

⁷ Regarding this fundamental change in ecumenical outlook see Bert B. Beach, *Ecumenism: Boon or Bane?* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974), 27-28.

⁸ Cf. “Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches: A Policy Statement,” document adopted by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches and commended to member churches and ecumenical partners for study and action in September 1997. [cited 25 June 2012]. Online: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/porto-alegre-2006/3-preparatory-and-background-documents/common-understanding-and-vision-of-the-wcc-cuv.html>.

⁹ Cf. Herbert Pollitt, *The Inter-Faith Movement* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Trust, 1996).

KLINGBEIL: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

conferences of the late nineteenth century. This shift has also been noted by many authors documenting the change from the “Christocentric universalism” that Willem A. Visser ‘t Hooft (the first general secretary of the World Council of Churches [WCC]) postulated to the understanding of *oikoumene* as the “one household of life.”¹⁰ Since I am not a church historian interested in the historical development of current ecumenical relations,¹¹ nor a systematic theologian who may be better equipped to highlight and evaluate the philosophical or theological underpinnings of ecumenical relations, I would like to return to the biblical foundation for the quest of unity. In the following comments I will discuss relevant biblical data not only because this is my particular area of expertise, but even more so because Scripture’s inherent truth

¹⁰ See Ralph Del Colle, “Ecumenical Dialogues: State of the Question,” *Liturgical Ministry* 19 (Summer 2010): 105-14, esp. 109. Del Colle writes from a Catholic perspective. The notion of the “household of life” as the governing paradigm in current ecumenical endeavors is not only interdenominational and interreligious but is also considered to be helpful in seeking to cross the divide between faith and science, as suggested by Aaron T. Hollander, “Renovating the Household of Life: On the Development of Ecumenical Relations Between Sacred and Scientific,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 45.2 (2010): 265-87. Compare also Margaret O’Gara, “Witnessing the Ecumenical Future Together,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46.3 (2011): 368-77. O’Gara, also writing from a Catholic perspective, focuses primarily upon the Christian attempts at ecumenical relations, particularly the relations between the Catholic Church and Protestants. She considers the nature of the church, theological anthropology, and the relationship between Scripture and tradition as hot spots that require urgent ecumenical dialogue. Regarding the large field of inter-religious ecumenical relations note Volker Kuester, “Who, With Whom, About What? Exploring the Landscape of Inter-religious Dialogue,” *Exchange* 33.1 (2004): 73-92. Kuester provides a very helpful review of issues that separate Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, African religions, etc. He suggests that inter-religious dialogues creates a “third space,” that is theologically located in-between exclusivism and inclusivism and is really a “dialogue of life” (92).

¹¹ Note the contribution of Hans Heinz, “Ökumenische Bewegung und Adventgemeinde,” in *Die Gemeinde und ihr Auftrag* (ed. Johannes Mager; Studien zur Adventistischen Ekklesiologie 2; Lüneburg: Saat Korn-Verlag, 1994), 103-26, providing a brief snapshot of Adventist relations to the ecumenical movement. Compare also the contributions of Raoul Dederen, “Die Einheit der Gemeinde—Probleme und Spannungen,” in *Die Gemeinde und ihr Auftrag* (ed. Johannes Mager; Studien zur adventistischen Ekklesiologie 2; Hamburg: Saat Korn-Verlag, 1994), 237-50; and earlier Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, “Adventists and Ecumenical Relations,” *Ministry* 81.12 (December 2003): 5-9, 28, and Clifford Goldstein, “Ecumenism: Uniting the Churches,” *Signs of the Times* (May 2008). [cited 25 June 2012]. Online: <http://www.signstimes.com/?p=article&a=40023203364.739>; and Walter Douglas, “Unity in Diversity in Christ,” *Ministry* 70.8 (August 1997): 5-8.

claim as the only standard of faith and practice needs to drive theological (and other) thinking of Seventh-day Adventists all around the world—particularly those serving as ministry leaders in a part of the world that proclaimed nearly half a millennium ago loudly and unmistakably the call to *sola* and *tota scriptura*.¹² I realize that the biblical examples selected for this study are only selective, due to limited space and the recognition that final words are usually left to monograph-size research and, even then, should only be “tentative final words.” However, echoing other academic research, the biblical “soundings” will hopefully provide a direction or guide for discovering important underlying principles that are relevant for our thinking about ecumenical relations in the twenty-first century.

2. “Back to Babel”: The Community Project that Divided

Leaving aside for a moment the unity of husband and wife as portrayed in the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2, probably one of humanity’s first post-fall attempts to work together in a coordinated manner is recorded in the tower of Babel narrative found in Genesis 11.¹³ The biblical text highlights in Gen 11:1 the fact that the anonymous builders had *one* language and *one* speech—which sounds like a lot of common ground, avoiding misunderstandings due to linguistic (and consequently cultural) differences or even nuances. The pivotal point of the chiasmic structure of the story can be found in Gen 11:5 when God comes down to “see the city and the tower that the men were building”

¹² As I was developing the ideas contained in this study I became aware of an important collection of Seventh-day Adventist statements and documents regarding ecumenical (or interchurch/interfaith) relations. These documents provide helpful snapshots into historical developments and current thinking but do not provide much help regarding the topic that I was invited to deal with. Cf. Stefan Höschele, ed., *Interchurch and Interfaith Relations: Seventh-day Adventist Statements and Documents* (Adventistica: Studies in Seventh-day Adventist History and Theology 10; Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2010).

¹³ I have discussed the literary structure and significance of this important narrative elsewhere. See Gerald A. Klingbeil and Martin G. Klingbeil, “La lectura de la Biblia desde una perspectiva hermenéutica multidisciplinaria (II)—Construyendo torres y hablando lenguas en Gn 11:1-9,” in *Entender la Palabra. Hermenéutica Adventista para el Nuevo Siglo* (ed. Merling Alomía, Gerald A. Klingbeil, Martin G. Klingbeil and Jorge Torreblanca; Cochabamba: Universidad Adventista de Bolivia, 2000), 175-98. Compare also my comments regarding the importance of a unified language in Gerald A. Klingbeil, “‘He Spoke and It Was’: Human Language, Divine Creation, and the *imago Dei*,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 36.1 (2014): 42-59.

KLINGBEIL: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

(NIV).¹⁴ God's negative reaction at this attempt of human unity is clearly expressed in the divine dialogue found in verses 6 and 7. "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them" (Gen 11:6 NIV) is the final diagnostic. What element of this attempt at unity could God have found so threatening?

The tower of Babel narrative does more than highlight the power of human communication. The anonymous human participants of the story speak repeatedly about the need to build a city and a tower—most likely a ziggurat-like temple structure reaching to heaven (Gen 11:3-4)¹⁵—and the desire to "make us a name for ourselves" (Gen 11:4). Sailhamer notes that, to "make a name" is a phonetic word play with the name of the godly son of Noah, Shem.¹⁶ It also anticipates the divine promise to Abraham in Gen 12:2 וַאֲנִי־לְךָ֙ שְׂמֵךְ֙ "and I will make your name great" (i.e., you and your descendants will be renowned and highly esteemed).¹⁷ In this sense, "making a great name" is a divine prerogative and not the result of human design and efforts. The tower builders are not only trying to erect a structure reaching heaven,¹⁸ they also intend to do so on their

¹⁴ When Scripture tells of God's descending significant things happen: God descends in the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exod 19:11, 18, 20; also in 34:5); when a new administrative structure is implemented God descends to fill the seventy elders with His spirit (Num 11:25; also 12:5). Other references to divine movement from top to bottom can be found in Ps 144:5 and Isa 31:4.

¹⁵ Note the many references (both textual and pictorial) of ancient tower-temples in Klingbeil and Klingbeil, "La lectura de la Biblia desde una perspectiva hermenéutica multidisciplinaria (II)—Construyendo torres y hablando lenguas en Gn 11:1-9," 189-98.

¹⁶ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative. A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Library of Biblical Interpretation; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 134.

¹⁷ Note the divine promise to David in 2 Sam 7:9 which refers to שֵׁם גָּדוֹל "a great name" and the slightly reworded promises to Solomon in 1 Kings 1:47. The result of this promise to David is described in 2 Sam 8:13.

¹⁸ The reaching up-to heaven imagery is also used elsewhere in the HB in connection with hubris. It is clear that the phrase וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם "and its [the tower's] head in heaven" in Gen 11:4 represents an idiomatic expression to describe a monumental and impressive structure. Deut 1:28 and 9:1 read וּבְצוּרַת בְּשָׁמַיִם "and [their, i.e., the cities of Canaan] enclosures [or walls] in heaven." For the Hebrews it was clear that YHWH was in heaven (cf. Deut 4:39, which utilizes the same phrase; similar also Amos 9:6) and thus, anything intruding "heaven" was considered human infringement. Interestingly Cornelis Houtman, *Der Himmel im Alten Testament. Israels Weltbild und Weltanschauung* (Oudtestamentische Studiën 30; Leiden: Brill, 1993), 330, suggests that the term בְּשָׁמַיִם "in heaven" indicates the "Unantastbarkeit Gottes" in the HB. In Jer 51:53 the prophet describes that even if Babylon would go up to heaven, בְּבֵל תַּעֲלֶה הָעִיר בְּבֵל הַשָּׁמַיִם it would still be under YHWH's jurisdiction and

own steam, and openly defy the divine command to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 9:1, 7; cf. 1:28). Human hubris is countered by divine judgment, not because God does not like towers or cities. Rather, the builder’s attempt to usurp divine attributes and prerogatives through united coercive action lies at the heart of this swift divine response.¹⁹

Scripture seems to fault the ancient tower builders on two accounts: their lapse of a sense of God’s mission—which, at that time, was to spread out and fill the earth—and their attempts to do things their own way, highlighting the danger of man-made attempts at unity.

3. “Familiar” Beginnings

Even in a postmodern and genuinely fragmented world families remain to be important building blocks of society—although the notion (or institution) of family is under attack from different sides.²⁰ In the Old Testament world families were even more important. Any attempt at unity would begin with the integration of families.

The call of Abraham involved the call of a family, which by faith had yet to be. God’s call is exclusive (Gen 12:1) and yet inclusiveness is emphasized (Gen 12:3). Abraham’s (often dysfunctional) family was called to be different and custodians of the promise—and yet, ultimately, they were called to mission and become a blessing for the tribes and people living around them. In Abraham’s case this meant leaving his father’s home and country and going to an unknown land where he was to remain a “stranger” and not to assimilate with the local tribal groups, even though we find the patriarch at times collaborating with neighboring clans and people (e.g., during the rescue mission of Lot and the people of Sodom [Gen 14]). When Isaac became of marriageable age, the fear of assimilation (or absorption) with the local population groups led Abraham to send his servant Eliezer to find a wife for Isaac from his

would surely be destroyed. The same vocabulary (בָּנֵי עִיר together with the verb בָּנָה) is also used in Isa 14:13 in the famous passage against the king of Babylon. A helpful discussion of the links and integration of Gen 11 and 12 can be found in D. J. Estes, “Looking for Abraham’s City,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147.588 (1990): 399–413.

¹⁹ Compare Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis. A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 175–84.

²⁰ There is abundant literature documenting this threat to families (including also marriages). Cf. Dennis Rainey, *Ministering to Twenty-first Century Families* (Swindoll Leadership Library; Nashville, TN: Word, 2001).

KLINGBEIL: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

clan and not have him intermarry locally (Gen 24). Even though Nahor's descendants in Syria apparently had their own struggles in relating to YHWH, Abraham felt strongly to find a wife for the son of the promise, Isaac, within his clan, due to their relationship to YHWH.²¹ The biblical authors repeatedly emphasize the fact that distinct religious loyalties and values were the key distinguishing factor, since the tribal groups spoke similar (Semitic) languages, practiced similar life-styles (often preferring a semi-nomadic lifestyle), and shared in some instances also comparable cultural characteristics (e.g., importance of family and clan, power of elders, etc.).

As we move along in the Pentateuch we find explicit legal data concerning the marriage of Israelites with non-Israelites (Deut 7:1-10).²² Looking forward to Israel's increasing interaction with foreign nations,²³ including the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites (Deut 7:1) during the settlement period, there was a need for clarifying the prior order to execute the כְּרָם "ban" on these people groups (as, for example, ordered in Num 21:2-3). As has been argued elsewhere, the complex issue of the "ban" does not

²¹ See, for example, the reference to the household idols in Gen 31:19, 34, 35, suggesting some type of religious assimilation of Nahor's descendants within the larger context of Syrian religion. For a helpful discussion of the identity and significance of the *tērāpîm* see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 292-96.

²² This section of the paper is relying on an earlier detailed discussion of cross-cultural marriage in the OT with particular reference to the postexilic period. Cf. Gerald A. Klingbeil, "'Not so Happily Ever After. . .': Cross-Cultural Marriages in the Time of Ezra-Nehemiah," *Maarav* 14.1 (2007): 39-75.

²³ It should be noted that I just reflect the language use of the Hebrew Bible. The western notion of a "nation" or a "state" (as an integrated and highly complex entity) is not at all present in the ancient Near East. One should rather consider these divisions in terms of distinct tribal groups. For a good discussion of the relationship between the concepts of "nation/state" and "tribe" see the doctoral dissertation of Zeljko Gregor, "Sociopolitical Structures of Transjordanian Societies during the Late Bronze and Iron I Ages (ca. 1550-1000 B.C.)" (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 1996), 127-72, esp. 154-61. Compare also the application of the tribal model to Transjordanian LBA society in Øystein Stan LaBianca and Randy W. Younker, "The Kingdoms of Ammon, Moab and Edom: the Archaeology of Society in Late Bronze/Iron Age Transjordan (ca. 1400-500 BCE)," in *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land* (ed. Thomas E. Levy; London-Washington: Leicester University Press, 1998), 399-415.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

only entail military or socio-political connotations but involves definite religious and ritual implications.²⁴

In Deuteronomy 7:2-3 the text highlights the fact that “banning” these tribes meant practically that Israel should not enter into a covenant relationship with these nations [כרת ברית]. Furthermore, Israel was not to give their sons and daughters in marriage, nor should they seek marriage partners from these groups for their own children. Deuteronomy 7:3 employs the technical term הָתָן “to marry, become a son in law” that can also be found in the crucial passages found in Neh 6:18 and 13:28, illustrating the severity of the problem. The rationale provided by the text is simple and expressively stated in Deut 7:4:

כִּי־יִסֵּר אֶת־בְּנֵיךָ מֵאַחֲרַי וְעִבְדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְחָרָה אַפִּי־הָהָא בְּכֶם וְהִשְׁמִידֶךָ מֵהָרָ

“Because it would turn away your children from following me and they would serve other gods. Then the Lord’s anger will burn against you, and he will swiftly destroy you.”

It would seem that unity with these nations through intermarriage would come at the price of Israel’s unique mission and would involve giving up the truth about the worship of the only true God—even though the issue is not always clear cut.

The list of known cross-cultural marriages in the Hebrew Bible is quite extensive. Interestingly, the biblical text includes both positive and negative evaluations of specific cross-cultural marriages. Some *positive* examples include Rahab and Salmon (according to the genealogy of Matt 1:5), Ruth and Mahlon/Chilion,²⁵ and later Boaz, while negative examples comprise, for example, Solomon and Pharaoh’s daughter (1 Kgs 3:1)²⁶ or Ahab and the Phoenician princess Jezebel (1 Kgs 16:31).

²⁴ This has been argued convincingly (including many further bibliographic references) by Allan Bornapé, “El problema del הָתָן en el Pentateuco y su dimensión ritual,” *DavarLogos* 4 (2005): 1-16.

²⁵ The MT is not clear on who married whom. If order of appearance in the text is any indication, it seems as if Ruth originally married Chilion, since her name appears after Orpah’s name.

²⁶ The critique of this marriage is veiled, but nevertheless present. Compare the poignant remarks in Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (NIBC 7; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 44-45.

KLINGBEIL: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

What particular element made the difference in the evaluation of the biblical authors? Let me rephrase the question in the particular context of this study: what would make unity or ecumenical relations acceptable in OT marriage terms?

Psalms 45 may provide an interesting take regarding acceptable cross-cultural marriages against the backdrop of a royal marriage scenario (perhaps during the time of Solomon?) and the associated status of foreign wives (or queens). Commentators have entitled this psalm as a royal wedding song²⁷ and verse 11 [English v. 10] is highly relevant for our present discussion: שְׁמַעֲיִבְתָּ וּרְאִי וְהָטִי אָזְנוֹךָ וְשָׁכַחְתָּ עַמֶּךָ וּבֵית אָבִי “Listen, oh daughter, watch out and incline your ears: forget your people and your father’s house.” I submit that the admonition to forget both family and the “father’s house” suggests not only cultural or sociological reorientation but must have also involved religious loyalties.²⁸ In this sense the ideal for any king marrying outside the tribal group involved a reorientation of the future queen’s loyalties, including also her religious affiliation.²⁹

The Old Testament data concerning cross-cultural marriages seems to emphasize that integration, or unity, is positive only if it does not come at the expense of recognizing YHWH as the supreme deity or sacrificing the truth claims of a “Thus says the Lord of Israel.” God’s special mission for Israel as His people was not to be surrendered. In the following section we will take a closer look at relationships (and unity) between different subgroups of Israel (i.e., the 12 tribes) as well as groups that were somewhat related to Israel (such as the Ammonites,

²⁷ See here, for example, Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (trans. Herbert Hartwell; OTL; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1962), 360; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59* (trans. Hilton C. Oswald; CC; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 450; Luis Alonso Schökel and C. Carniti, *Salmos I (Salmos 1-72). Traducción, introducciones y comentario* (Nueva Biblia Española; Estella: Verbo Divino, 1992), 644.

²⁸ An important contextual argument for this focus is based on Ps 45:7 where the eternal character of God’s throne is described. Both before and after this reference there are references to the king or his bride. It is God who is the real king with the earthly king (and his bride) representing the shadow (earthly) government. The relationship between original and shadow can also be seen in the sanctuary references (esp. Exod 25:9). In the NT the Epistle to the Hebrews develops this shadow-reality paradigm further.

²⁹ It is interesting to note that Psalm 45:11 seems to represent an inversion of the creation order where man leaves and father and mother and clings to his wife and thus becomes one flesh (Gen 2:24). See here Schökel and Carniti, *Salmos I*, 651.

Moabites, and Edomites), since these types of relations may better reflect the closer relationship of modern Christian denominations.

4. Unity Between Brothers

The previous sections dealt in a canonical sequence with efforts at accomplishing unity involving the tower of Babel narrative (united by language and purpose) and OT concepts of family and marriage relations (focusing particularly upon cross-cultural marriages). In this part of the study I will focus upon the next level of Israelite society, namely tribal relations. How did the 12 tribes interact in the premonarchic period? How was the relationship between Israel and Judah following the division of the Solomonic kingdom? And, finally, how did Israel relate to other, closely related, tribal groups (such as Ishmaelites, Edomites, Ammonites, or Moabites)?

The biblical picture of tribal relations in Israel is complex. Beginning with the often-convoluted interaction of Jacob's twelve sons described in Gen 37-50, the biblical text shows fissures that continuously undermine or even threaten the unity of Israel's tribal system. Sociological and anthropological research has demonstrated the complexity of tribal societies whose members have to balance family and clan loyalties with the commitment to the tribe and should not be confused with the modern notion of a nation and loyalty of citizens to the state.³⁰ In the context of the Old Testament, leadership issues (and the status of the first-born) made family and tribal relations even more complex. Not surprisingly, there are a number of instances in the Old Testament where the eldest (or firstborn) loses his leadership prerogative.³¹ Most research dealing with

³⁰ Compare the valuable research found in Daniel E. Fleming, *Democracy's Ancient Ancestors. Mari and Early Collective Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Gregor, "Sociopolitical Structures of Transjordanian Societies During the Late Bronze and Iron I Ages (ca. 1550–1000 B.C.);" and the slightly dated but still valuable John W. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament* (The Biblical Seminar; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984). The topic has also been covered in Randall W. Younker, "Moabite Social Structure," *Biblical Archaeologist* 60 (1997): 237-48; and Kenton L. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998).

³¹ Note, for example, Jacob and Esau, or the preeminence of Joseph among the 12 brothers of Jacob. Later examples include David's election (bypassing his older brothers) or Solomon's rise to the throne. See the studies of Roger Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born: A Study of a Recurrent Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives* (JSOTSup 133; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together. The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University

KLINGBEIL: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

these inversions focus upon theological reasons—and theology is definitely significant in this context. The upheaval of well-established (even divinely-ordained) lines of leadership always highlight God’s prerogative of divine election—yet at the same time do not necessarily represent divine rejection.

During the period of the Judges tribal alliances shifted constantly. External threats (or enemies) at times united some tribes while other unaffected tribes (often separated by geography and location) did not get involved. A good example of this can be found in Judg 11 and 12 describing Jephthah’s term as judge over Israel. Of Gileadite origin, he fought the Ammonites possibly with the help of members of the tribe of Manasseh whose territory he had to cross in order to defeat Ammon (cf. Judg 11:29); following his victory, Jephthah is challenged by the tribe of Ephraim, leading to inter-tribal military conflict (Judg 12:1-7). The particular tribal identity is underlined by dialectical differences (Judg 12:6).³² As has been noted by Webb, “the essential bond between the tribes was their common history and their allegiance to Yahweh. He himself was their supreme Ruler or Judge (Judg 11:27), and his law was their constitution.”³³ The key constant unifying factor that kept Israel’s tribes together apparently was the Tabernacle and Yahweh worship enforced by charismatic leaders (or judges). While the prologue of the book of Judges portrays Israel as a unity and suggests a “national” or “unified” perspective, the book’s central section describes less the ideal, but more accurately the reality of intertribal conflict, often associated with blatant idolatry or the more subtle religious syncretism.³⁴

Press, 1994); and more recently Merling Alomía, “El motivo del primogénito y su mensaje redentor en el libro del Éxodo,” in *Y Moisés escribió las palabras De YHWH. Estudios selectos en el Pentateuco* (ed. Merling Alomía; Investigaciones Bíblico-Teológicas UPeUenses; Ñaña, Lima: Ediciones Theologika, 2004), 163-204.

³² Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth* (Kregel Exegetical Library; Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2013), 365-67, has noted the important literary role of the Gileadite-Ephraimite civil war for Judges. It reflects the earlier intertribal conflict in Judg 7:24-8:3 and anticipates further bloodshed on an even larger scale in the book’s final chapters (Judg 19-21).

³³ Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 13.

³⁴ Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*, 29-34, has discussed, what he has called, the “Pan-Israelite perspective” of Judges. He summarizes his findings as follows: “Judges does insist on viewing Israel as a unity, but it also reflects the disintegration that marred this period in the nation’s history. The linguistic evidence shows that the pan-Israelite perspective, though idealized to some degree and characterized by hyperbole, is

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

In the early united monarchy Benjamin (under Saul) and Judah (under David) were at times pitted against each other. External threats continued to unite the tribes until David, following his coronation by all twelve tribes, finally succeeded in establishing Jerusalem as the new capital (2 Sam 5:6-12). The fact that the city had not been under the authority of any Israelite tribe was part of David's genius. Furthermore, as the coronation narrative at Hebron amply illustrates, David's divinely appointed kingship and the kinship between the individual tribes was clearly recognized in the offering speech of the ten northern tribes (2 Sam 5:1-5). Following the heydays of David's and Solomon's rule, the ten northern tribes separated from the two southern tribes and their Davidic dynasty (1 Kings 12), resulting in the establishment of two kingdoms (i.e., Israel and Judah). The following 200 years witness numerous military encounters between the two kingdoms, while at times coalitions between the reigning royal families meant limited periods of peace.³⁵ God's prophets were sent to both kingdoms, even though northern Israel had engaged in the idolatrous worship of calves that had been established by Jeroboam I in Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:25-33). Divinely approved engagement between both kingdoms seems to have been predicated on religious reform and a common commitment to the *torah* and the prophetic word that highlighted the law.

The often complex and convoluted relationship between the twelve tribes of Israel provides the backdrop for the even more complex and often antagonistic relationship between Israel and the surrounding tribes (including Moabites, Ishmaelites, Edomites, Ammonites, etc.). The close relationships to these tribal groups are repeatedly highlighted in Genesis (Gen 16; 19:34-38; 21:8-21; 25:12-18; 36). All four tribal groups had kinship links to Israel—and yet, a brief review of the history of interaction between Israel and these tribal groups suggests not only disunity or indifference, but also at times plain hatred and animosity. For example, Edom is subjugated by Saul and David (1 Sam 14:47; 2 Sam 8:13; 1 Kings 11:15-16), but rebels later against Judean control (2 Kings 8:20-22) and is repeatedly mentioned in prophetic texts (Amos 1:11-12

balanced by a realism about the nature of the period" (34).

³⁵ A summary of significant events of this important period of Israel's history can be found in Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *A History of Israel. From the Bronze Age through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 289-355; Iain Provan, V. Phillips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville-London: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 259-77.

KLINGBEIL: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

notes Edom's fury and lack of compassion; cf. Isa 34:5-6; Obadiah). Psalm 137:7 suggests that the Edomites rejoiced over Jerusalem's destruction. However, at times YHWH is portrayed as coming from the region of Edom to aid Israel (cf. Deut 33:2; Judg 5:4; Hab 3:3).³⁶ Similarly, Israel's relationship with Moab was also characterized by conflict (Judg 3:12-20; 1 Sam 14:47; 2 Sam 10:1-14; 2 Kings 3:1-27; etc.), with Israel subjugating Moab during the united monarchic period.³⁷ Interestingly, Moab provides also a refuge for those fleeing a famine in Bethlehem (Ruth 1) and a Moabitess (Ruth) becomes part of the genealogy of David and—ultimately—the Messiah, yet biblical law forbids the inclusion of Moabites and Ammonites into the assembly of Israel (Deut 23:3-6). The tension points to the importance of religious commitment. Ruth's powerful poetic confession "your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16) highlights the significance of the commitment to the God of Israel—on YHWH's terms.

The preceding comments have highlighted the highly complex biblical picture of intertribal relations within Israel as well as with surrounding people groups during different times of biblical history. Crucial to interaction and positive engagement was Israel's faithfulness to the divine commands as well as its ability to resist syncretistic tendencies—both from within and from outside. While modern Christian denominations (or even world religions) cannot just be equated to the tribal realities of ancient Israel within the landscape of the ancient Near East, the importance of faithfulness to the revealed "Word of the Lord"

³⁶ Cf. J. Andrew Dearman, "Edom, Edomites," in *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (5 vols.; ed. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007), 2:188–91; and earlier J. R. Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites* (JSOTSup 77; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989); B. Oded, "Israel's Neighbours," in *The Biblical World: Volume I* (ed. John Barton; London–New York: Routledge, 2002), 492-525. An intriguing explanation of the tension between Israel and Edom can be found in Elie Assis, "Why Edom? On the Hostility Towards Jacob's Brother in Prophetic Sources," *Vetus Testamentum* 56.1 (2006): 1-20. Assis argues that behind to the severe hostility (as also expressed in prophetic sources) lies the notion of election. Compare also the earlier doctoral dissertation by Maxine C. Beach, "Edom Among the Nations: The Roles of Edom in the Hebrew Bible" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate School, Boston University, 1994).

³⁷ Cf. J. Andrew Dearman, "Moab, Moabites," in *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (5 vols.; ed. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009), 4:118-26; J. Maxwell Miller, "Moab and the Moabites," in *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (ed. J. Andrew Dearman; Archaeology and Biblical Studies; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 1-40; Younker, "Moabite Social Structure," 237-48.

and the devastating effect of syncretism within the covenant people throughout their history suggest careful evaluation when considering modern ecumenical relations—both on the macro-ecumenical, but even more on the micro-ecumenical level.

5. Unity and the Schism between Jews and Samaritans

The often strained relationship between Judaism and Samaritans, hinted at in the postexilic texts of Ezra–Nehemiah, provides another useful location for a sounding that may be relevant for the central concern of this study, i.e., the nature of ecumenical relations in the twenty-first century within the larger body of Christian denominations.³⁸ The basic history of Samaritans as a religious group showing homogeneity and shared beliefs is problematic.³⁹ Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom during the divided monarchy, had also been the center of religious diversity. Israelite kings were seldom known for their orthodoxy and Jeroboam's I installation of calves in Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:26-33) should be considered a conscious break with the religio-political establishment in Jerusalem.⁴⁰ In fact, following the canonical sequence of the biblical text, the earliest reference to specific religious syncretism can be found in 1 Kings 17:24-41 in connection with the resettlement of Samaria following the Assyrian destruction of the city and the complete absorption of Israel into the Assyrian empire. Josephus' description of the event echoes this biblical statement (*Ant.* 9.290-291). Interestingly, the self-understanding of their origins in Samaritan sources, claims that the group originated in the eleventh century B.C., during the time of the judges and relate it to the establishment of the

³⁸ I have purposefully bracketed out the larger issue of macro-ecumenical relations between world religions. See above for additional reflections.

³⁹ I am basing my brief observations on Robert T. Anderson and Terry Giles, *The Keepers: An Introduction to the History and Culture of the Samaritans* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 9-34. Compare also Ingrid Hjelm, *The Samaritans and Early Judaism. A Literary Analysis* (JSOTSup 300/Copenhagen International Seminar 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Gary N. Knoppers, "Revisiting the Samaritan Question in the Persian Period," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (eds. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 265-90; as well as relevant entries in standard encyclopedias and dictionaries.

⁴⁰ Cf. S. Lasine, "Reading Jeroboam's Intentions: Intertextuality, Rhetoric and History in 1 Kings 12," in *Reading Between Texts. Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (ed. D. N. Fewell; Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 133-52.

KLINGBEIL: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

cult/tabernacle at Shiloh which was established (so suggest the Samaritan sources) in rivalry to long-established Shechem.⁴¹ In this sense, Samaritans (or Israelites, as they prefer to call themselves) recognize only the Pentateuch as the inspired Word of YHWH and claim orthodoxy going back to the premonarchic period.

The OT, however, underlines the marginal nature of Samaritan worship and chronicles conflict during the Persian period. The opposition to the reconstruction of the temple and its city is linked to Samaria (cf. Ezra 4:7, 8, 17). During Nehemiah's period of leadership Sanballat, the Horonite, is one of the key opponents (Neh 2:10, 19) of the reconstruction effort and is closely associated with Samaria (Neh 4:1-2; 6:1-14). Even though the specific nature of the tension between the Jewish returnees and the Samaritans is never articulated, its existence cannot be ignored. Later Samaritan sources highlight theological discrepancies, such as the inspiration of the Pentateuch versus the entire Hebrew Bible (including also the *nēbî'im* and the *kētūbîm*; the legitimacy of Zion/Jerusalem for the location of YHWH's temple versus Shechem and Gerizim, etc.). Clearly, there was not much common ground between Samaritans and Jews and the attitude of Jews living in NT times (including also the disciples) toward Samaritans was one of rejection, hatred, a sense of superiority, and complete separation.

Jesus' paradigmatic encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4:1-42) provides an intriguing example of how Jesus' dealt with those who were considered outsiders. This is not the time and place to exegete the entire chapter that contains significant material for cross-religious and cross-cultural engagement. Suffice to say that Jesus apparently did not share the hatred of his Jewish contemporaries and actually engaged the woman (with dubious ethical standards) in a conversation starting at basic needs (water) and moving rapidly to the more urgent need of water quenching spiritual thirst. The biblical text seems to reflect a number of orthodox considerations about Samaritans. Jews would not speak to Samaritans nor ask a single woman for water.⁴² They would become unfit to enter the temple (John 4:9, 27). In fact, if possible, Jews would avoid crossing Samaritan territory (cf. John 4:4, "he *needed to go* through Samaria"). As the conversation moves forward,

⁴¹ See Anderson and Giles, *The Keepers*, 10-13.

⁴² Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11* (NAC 25A; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 202.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Jesus is not sidetracked by the woman's attempt to "talk theology" when he gets uncomfortably close to the reality of her life (John 4:16-20). "The hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father," is Jesus' entry to a masterful introduction to the Kingdom of God, involving Spirit-and-truth worship (John 4:21-24).⁴³ Neither geography nor buildings determine a true relationship with the Creator but rather Spirit-guided worship based on truth—as revealed by Jesus. John's repeated reference to "truth" points to God's revelation that shows itself in action (John 1:17; 3:34; 8:32, 36). The significant prayer, already touched upon in the opening paragraphs of this study, includes also the promise of the "Spirit of truth" leading all future disciples into "all the truth" (John 16:13).

Jesus' reference to Spirit and truth at the center of his conversation with the Samaritan woman points beyond engagement to the foundation of true dialogue between (often competing) faiths. Ecumenical relations that do not consider the truth claim of Scripture (including "all the truth") fall short of Jesus' ideal. Jesus' conversation at Jacob's well underlines the importance of dialogue and engagement; however, Jesus does not model confrontation or debate. He reiterates revealed truth, pointing beyond theological nit-picking to missiological commitment, and ultimately calls for a decision. Amazingly, his venturing into Samaritan territory (and theology) bore rich fruits, for "many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified" (John 4:39-41; cf. Acts 8:4-8).

6. Unity and the New Testament Church

The transition from Old Testament people to New Testament church was not an easy one. Yes, the *kairos* (or timing) was right and had been anticipated by the prophets (cf. Gal 4:4). Yes, Jesus' death and resurrection had changed the playing field and had challenged key foundations of Israel—but there was no clear-cut division distinguishing easily between Old Testament and New Testament. The early followers of Jesus were steeped in God's written revelation given by his prophets. They loved the *tōrâ*, the *nēbî'im* and the *kētūbîm*. While many read these texts in Greek (in the LXX) others still practiced their Hebrew and

⁴³ Writes Borchert, *John 1-11*, 207, "The model of Jesus is thus very instructive. He turned the conversation away from place of worship to nature of worship. In so doing, he modeled a correct evangelistic perspective."

KLINGBEIL: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

Aramaic in the synagogal worship service. But something different was about to take place, something that required no great theologians or scholars but the unifying power of the Spirit, working to constitute the new Israel.

Israel within the Old Testament world knew clear ethnic and national boundaries and becoming part of Israel meant embracing a Jewish identity—including many ritual and ceremonial prescriptions, circumcision being one of them.⁴⁴ By New Testament times things had become more complex and the pull to integration with extremely divergent groups a major challenge for the fledgling Christian church. Even within Judaism itself we find a number of intensely opposed factions (or sects), thus making a definition of orthodox Judaism during the time of Jesus more difficult and complex.⁴⁵

This may have been due to the fact that the Christian community rapidly moved from a group marked by ethnic links (i.e., *one* people, *one* land, under *one* God, which is ironically reflected in the declaration of independence of the USA) to a community of believers that transcended ethnic and social boundaries and, thus, was more vulnerable to external pressures from both the Jewish world in which it had its roots and the pagan communities surrounding it. As can be expected, this transition required careful maneuvering. Even the disciples, who had worked most closely with the Master, were not immune from an ethnocentric

⁴⁴ Cases of proselytism to Judaism are documented in the Old Testament (Rahab and her family, Ruth, perhaps also Uriah the Hittite). Following the exile and as a response to Hellenistic Judaism and the advance of Hellenism Judaism became an actively proselytizing religion. Literature from the intertestamental period seems to recognize the figure of the proselyte (e.g., in the book of Judith as well as other Greek and Roman sources). See Michael E. Stone, *Scriptures, Sects and Visions. A Profile of Judaism from Ezra to the Jewish Revolts* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 98. Cf. also the helpful discussion of non-Jews in the DSS in Lawrence H. Schiffman, “Non-Jews in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *The Quest for Context and Meaning. Studies in Biblical Intertextuality in Honor of James A. Sanders* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Shemaryahu Talmon; Biblical Interpretation Series 28; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 153-71.

⁴⁵ The NT reports about Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, while other sources add Essenes, the Qumran community, etc. Compare here the helpful studies found in Jarl Fossum, “Judaism at the Turn of the Era,” in *The Biblical World. Volume II* (ed. John Barton; London–New York: Routledge, 2002), 125-36, James C. VanderKam, *An Introduction to Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), and John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem. Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (2nd ed.; The Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids, MI–Cambridge/Livonia, MI: Eerdmans/Dove Booksellers, 2000).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

perspective when it came to salvation.⁴⁶ It took God two extraordinary visions and miracles to overcome Peter's (representing the early believers of Jewish descent) deep-seated distrust and theological concerns just to enter the house of a Gentile (and, far worse, a Roman army officer) and recognize in him a potential Christian brother (cf. Acts 10).

Another point in case involves the early Christian church's dealings with the issue of circumcision and purity laws. As visible in the intense debate during the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) the church struggled with the issue of balancing the centrality of the cross and of Jesus with the cultural and religious reality of most of its Jewish believers and the trajectory of the covenant people in the OT.⁴⁷ Paul summarizes this dilemma in the following words: "Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ" (Gal 6:12, NIV). Matter of fact, Paul does not reject circumcision per se but echoes many OT references that highlight the importance of "heart" circumcision. "But he is a Jew," writes Paul, "who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God" (Rom 2:29, NKJV). Paul knew the Old Testament and understood that circumcision included something that went beyond the physical act of removing the foreskin of the male baby—true circumcision, repeat the biblical authors over and over again, involves the heart and mind (e.g., Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:3, 4; 6:10; 9:24, 25; Lev 26:41, 42; Ezek 44:6-9).⁴⁸

On the other hand, there was the continuous threat of pagan practices (such as using meat sacrificed to idols [1 Cor 10:28] or offering sacrifices to the Roman emperor), which would cause early Christians to compromise their faith and would neutralize their mission to tell of Jesus' death, resurrection, and soon return.

⁴⁶ Concerning the issue of ethnocentricity within the NT church see Pieter F. Craffert, "On New Testament Interpretation and Ethnocentrism," in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark G. Brett; BIS; Boston–Leiden: Brill Academic, 1996), 449-68.

⁴⁷ Note the discussion in Bernhard Oestreich, "Meinungsstreit und Einheit in der frühen Christenheit," *Spes Christiana* 6 (1995): 14-25.

⁴⁸ Compare the insightful discussion in Werner E. Lemke, "Circumcision of the Heart: The Journey of a Biblical Metaphor," in *A God So Near. Essays in Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller* (ed. Brent A. Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 299-319.

KLINGBEIL: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

The tension between the predominantly Jewish identity of many early followers of Jesus and the attraction to assimilate religious elements found in Greek and Roman culture is visible at many key places in the NT. “There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all” (Col 3:11; NKJV), writes Paul to the Colossians. The fact that Paul had to repeatedly underline the equality of Jew and Greek, or members of the covenant people (insiders) and heathens (outsiders), suggests this tension. “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him” (Rom 10:12). Christianity had to discover that they were something new—a community of faith that ignored regular cultural and ethnic markers (“neither Greek nor Jew”) and highlighted the inclusiveness of their community. In this sense, it had to straddle a thin line leading to a type of unity that was not based on ethnicity, locale, or culture—but that focused on Christ’s centrality and His mission to the world surrounding them.⁴⁹

Despite the storms of persecution, discrimination, and theological debate, the early post-Jesus church kept its unity and, driven by leaders such as Paul, focused on its calling to mission. While they stood apart on some issues of belief and worship practice (e.g., Christians would not, even under threat of death, offer a sacrifice to the Emperor) the NT church engaged society and was not exclusive or monastic—they were truly “in the world, but not of the world” (cf. John 15:19; 17:14-16; Rom 12:2). Paul, who had been trained in rabbinical texts and reasoning but was also at home in Greek rhetoric and philosophy, makes it clear that all he does is for one express purpose: “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22), he writes. Mission drove him—as well as the larger Christian community as they awaited the coming of their Lord.

7. The Rise of Babylon: Babel Revisited

Let’s fast forward, for a brief moment, and leave the NT church in order to review our own time. In 1910 at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh a resolution was passed to “plant in each non-

⁴⁹ I have argued elsewhere about the identity of the “world” in biblical theology. Cf. Gerald A. Klingbeil, “Finding the ‘World’ in Biblical Studies: God-Talk, Culture, and Hermeneutics in the Study (and Teaching) of Faith,” *Scriptura* 101 (2009): 219-34.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Christian nation one undivided Church of Christ.”⁵⁰ It would seem that missionary activities in the various non-Christian countries were being hindered by developing doctrinal tensions and “sheep stealing” instead of Christianizing the non-Christians. The idea of introducing an undivided Church of Christ to the world was laudable but immediately raised the questions of what this undivided church of Christ would look like.⁵¹

After an interruption by two World Wars the World Council of Churches was eventually established to promote unity among the different Protestant denominations. Seventh-day Adventists have never officially participated as members in the dialogue and discussion of the WCC. Our philosophy of history, our own past, present, and future is colored by the recognition of the Great Controversy that rages between God and Satan. Scripture traces some key points of this cosmic battle, including its beginning (Rev 12:7-9), its course (Rev 12; passim in Scripture), as well as the final outcome (Rev 19 and 20). As a church we consider ourselves not just another denomination with some peculiar doctrines adding to the patchwork of Protestantism—we recognize that we are part of a prophetic movement and, primed by Scripture, we pay attention to Satan’s strategies revealed in prophecy. This recognition is not cause for pride and arrogance. To the contrary, its commitment to *sola Scriptura* causes us to tremble at the threshold of the biblical text—to use a phrase used in a volume by James Crenshaw.⁵² Remnant theology within the context of a cosmic conflict requires humility and a Christ-centered approach that echoes Jesus’ own approach to truth and the Spirit-filled search for truth.⁵³

Revelation 13 introduces two symbolic beasts supporting each other.⁵⁴ These two beasts refer to a religio-political power based on man-

⁵⁰ Beach, *Ecumenism: Boon or Bane?*, 84. Cf. also Gerhard Pfandl, “Unity—But at What Cost?,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 10.1-2 (1999): 185.

⁵¹ See Michael Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2003), 51-64.

⁵² James L. Crenshaw, *Trembling at the Threshold of a Biblical Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁵³ See Ángel M. Rodríguez, “Concluding Essay: God’s End-Time Remnant and the Christian Church” in *Toward a Theology of the Remnant* (ed. Ángel M. Rodríguez; Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2009), 202, 203.

⁵⁴ Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI/Carlisle, U.K.: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1999), 707, has noted the aspect of parody and imitation of the second beast, imitating the messianic lamb. Its “lamb-like” appearance hides a ferocious self. Cf. Jon Paulien, *What the Bible Says About the End-Time* (Hagerstown, MD: Review

KLINGBEIL: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

made traditions rather than God's Word, with enough clout to enforce their mandates worldwide. In other words, prophecy warns of a conglomerate of different religious groups that will under an extremely good guise be actively trying to derail God's purposes. Numerous references in Revelation warn the readers to not "worship" the beast. In Rev 16:12-16 (generally considered the sixth bowl), after the drying up of the Euphrates, John sees three unclean spirits—like frogs—come out of the mouth of the dragon, the mouth of the beast, and the mouth of the false prophet. The three-ness has been interpreted as a forgery of the true three-ness, the trinity. This false trinity already made an incomplete appearance in Rev 12 and 13 (dragon, two beasts)⁵⁵ and has traditionally be interpreted by Adventist commentators as references to Rome (or Catholicism), fallen Protestantism, and spiritualism.⁵⁶

In the first century AD the Jewish nation rejected Jesus because it refused to believe the prophecies, which so clearly pointed to Him. They just favored a different picture of the Messiah and were not ready to

and Herald Publishing Association, 1994), 109-19; Ekkehardt Müller, "The End Time Remnant in Revelation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11.1-2 (2000): 188-204; William G. Johnsson, "The Saints' End-Time Victory Over the Forces of Evil," in Symposium on Revelation: Book II (ed. Frank B. Holbrook; DARCOM 7; Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 20-31; Hans K. LaRondelle, *How to Understand the End-Time Prophecies of the Bible* (Sarasota, FL: First Impressions, 1997), 291-309.

⁵⁵ This has been noted by Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 831, who writes: "The pouring out of the bowl sets in motion actions by the three great opponents of the saints and leaders of the forces of evil: the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet, who represent respectively Satan, the Satanic political system, and the religious support of the political system. This is the first occurrence of 'false prophet' (ψευδοπροφήτης) in the Apocalypse. The word summarizes the deceptive role of the second beast of ch. 13, whose purpose is to deceive people so that they will worship the first beast (see on ch. 13, especially 13:12-17)." Compare also David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (WBC 52B; Dallas: Word, 2002), 894, who notes: "These three figures are all mentioned in Rev 13, though the beast from the land of 13:11-17 is here designated the false prophet. There is an interesting connection between 1 John 4:1-3 and Revelation; in 1 John 4:1, 'false prophets' are referred to, while in 4:3 that which false prophets say is called 'the spirit of antichrist.'" Note also Robert G. Bratcher and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on the Revelation to John* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 235, "The dragon ... the beast ... the false prophet: from now on the second beast, the one that came up out of the earth (13:11-15), is called the false prophet (see verse 19:20; and also, verse 20:10). This defines his role as the spokesman of the first beast, with the task of misleading people with his message. In this case one may also express this as 'the second beast, the one who gave a false message.'"

⁵⁶ See F. D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (7 vols.; rev. ed.; Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980), 7:844. Note also Beale's comments in the previous note.

revise their one-sided reading of Scripture. Later on, Judaism and Christianity shared many important truths but Christianity could not sacrifice the cross (i.e., salvation by faith in Jesus' sacrifice) on the altar of peace and unity. First-century lessons of a movement that focused upon the proclamation (in deeds and words) of the Kingdom of God are surely applicable to a church ministering in a postmodern context where differences are minimized and relevance and experience have become primary indicators of truth.⁵⁷

The prophetic interpretation informs any question of ecumenical relations now as it did for the early church. Although we may share many common essential truths with many Christian denominations or even some lifestyle components with other religions we cannot brush essential components of our biblical understanding under the rug in light of prophetic end-time scenarios. Prophecy suggests that worship (including the day of worship) will be a crucial test of allegiance to God within the cataclysmic last events. On the other side, millions of Protestant Christians favor a futuristic or dispensational understanding of prophecy and have settled for the rapture while Seventh-day Adventists await the glorious return of our Savior who will "come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Could it be that the crucial dividing line in the final events on planet earth will not put Christian versus non-Christian but rather my way/my truth/my interpretation versus His way/His truth/His interpretation—and thus be not that distinct from the theological battleground of the first coming of Jesus? Clearly, as has become apparent in this brief overview of biblical prophecy (and, more specifically, eschatology), a biblical discussion of ecumenical relations cannot afford to ignore biblical prophecy.

8. Pentecost: The Reversal of Babel

From the above comments it may seem that any attempt at unity and ecumenical relations is inherently suspect. However, this is not the case. Jesus' call to unity in John 17 is still much needed and relevant but, as with salvation, it must be done God's way and not our own way.

Following the resurrection and later ascension of Jesus, the disciples, in obedience to the instruction of the Master, waited in Jerusalem. Acts

⁵⁷ Note the helpful comments found in V. Philips Long, "Renewing Conversations: Doing Scholarship in an Age of Skepticism, Accommodation, and Specialization," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 13 (2003): 227-49.

KLINGBEIL: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

1:14 emphasizes the unity of the early Christian community and their prayerful attitude. Acts 2:1 locates the narrative in time (i.e., the “Day of Pentecost” which is equivalent to the Israelite Feast of Weeks described in Lev 23:15-21) and again underscores the unity of the followers of Jesus. The fulfillment language of Acts 2:1 (and the numerous other fulfillment formulas included in the NT) remind the reader that the divine plan did not come to an abrupt end with the arrival of the Messiah. Rather, it represents a fulfillment of the promise given in Acts 1:4.⁵⁸ Verse 2 describes a powerful sound “from heaven” that filled the house where the disciples were meeting. The Counselor promised by Jesus (John 14:16-18), the Holy Spirit, fills all present and they begin to speak in other “tongues” (Acts 2:4). This movement from heaven down to earth echoes the divine movement from heaven to earth in Gen 11:5. And in line with Genesis where language became confused, Acts 2 involves speech (*glossolalia*) that functions as some type of reversal from confusion (and lack of understanding) to understanding.⁵⁹ Acts 2:6-7 note the surprise and shock of the multitude that gathered when hearing this strange sound, since all the visitors could hear the disciples speak in their own language. The links between Babel (Gen 11) and Pentecost (Acts 2) can be summarized in the following table.⁶⁰

<i>Babel (Gen 11)</i>	<i>Pentecost (Acts)</i>
Preceded by a call to fill the earth	Preceded by a call to go into all the world
Gathering in disobedience	Gathering in obedience
God comes down	God comes down
Confusion results	Confusion results
People cannot understand (lit. “hear”) one another	People miraculously hear one another
Scattering	Scattering (after some delay)

However, Pentecost does not represent a return to linguistic uniformity. Language and culture still separate people. Rather, the

⁵⁸ Writes John B. Polhill, *Acts* (NAC 26; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 96: “The ‘fulfillment’ language bears more weight than mere chronology as the fulfillment of the time of the divine promise for the gift of the Spirit (1:4f).”

⁵⁹ Notably, the LXX of Gen 11:7 employs a form of $\gamma\lambda\ \sigma\sigma\alpha$.

⁶⁰ This is based on the helpful table found in David I. Smith and Barbara Carvill, *The Gift of the Stranger. Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 14.

unification is linked to a *community*—the nascent New Testament church—and to a *mission*. This new ecumenical unity of Pentecost has a missiological perspective. The gift of “tongues” is given to empower a united community to reach the “world.” Furthermore, it takes down barriers that existed in the early Christian community—barriers between rich and poor, between Jews and non-Jews, between the stranger and the insider. Acts 2:4 reminds us that “all” were filled with the Holy Spirit—not just some carefully chosen leaders. Acts 10:44-46 revisit this important topic as the text describes the Holy Spirit’s falling upon the household of Cornelius—a foreigner and outsider and not a member of the covenant people. As these new Christians speak, the Jewish Christians accompanying Peter are amazed as they see the same phenomenon and understand the worship of their newly found brothers and sisters.

Mission needs to be the driving force for our desire for unity. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is not just a club of like-minded individuals (like AAA in the USA) sharing a common set of beliefs that meet once (or twice) a week for fellowship and community. It must align itself with God’s great dream, the *missio Dei*, of saving a sin-sick world and proclaiming the Kingdom of God that has already come and is about to break into our complacency.

9. Conclusion: Between Isolation and Assimilation

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in the twenty-first century is experiencing the same tension between exclusivism and inclusivism, faced by God’s people in both the Old and New Testaments.⁶¹ Culturally diverse and often challenged by distinct theological perspectives, our unity is at stake and will have serious consequences for our mission as Seventh-day Adventists.

At the same time postmodern culture, historical-critical hermeneutics and theology, and increasingly more fervent ecumenical movements in religious circles are challenging our unique identity as the remnant church.⁶² Jesus’ focus upon truth and the Spirit in His “ecumenical”

⁶¹ Note the important study of these concepts and their OT background in Martin G. Klingbeil, “Exclusivism versus Inclusivism: Citizenship in the Pentateuch and its Metaphorical Usage in Ephesians,” *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 9.2 (2006): 129-44.

⁶² The remnant motif is rooted in Scripture. Cf. Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant. The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah* (3rd ed.; Andrews University Monographs. Studies in Religion 5; Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University

KLINGBEIL: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

conversations help us understand the importance of revealed truth and the blueprint for unity as presented in the Bible.

In both the Old and New Testaments God's people do not exist in splendid isolation, but always seem to be in dialogue with others. However, this dialogue does not happen on the terms of diverse or current political or cultural agendas, but rather on the terms of the revealed will of God. It is the existential interaction (both individually as well as in community) with this divine revelation that will provide a critical filter for all ecumenical activity.

As Seventh-day Adventist Christians we do strive for and promote unity with others on common issues (e.g., religious freedom, specific relief projects, or carefully planned public engagement)⁶³—but are cautious of a theologically motivated get-together.

Here are four elements that require our attention when we want to think biblically about ecumenical relations:

1. It requires a crystal-clear idea of what our mission is.
2. It needs a clear understanding that the *missio Dei* is also our mission—and that this mission needs to be undertaken according to

Press, 1980); Kenneth Delinor Mulzac, "The Remnant Motif in the Context of Judgment and Salvation in the Book of Jeremiah" (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 1995); A. Ganoune Diop, "The Name 'Israel' and Related Expressions in the Books of Amos and Hosea" (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 1995); Ekkehardt Müller, "The End Time Remnant in Revelation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11.1-2 (2000): 188-204; Héctor Urrutia, "El mensaje del remanente final en los libros sapienciales," in *Pensar la iglesia hoy: hacia una eclesiología adventista. Estudios teológicos presentados durante el IV Simposio Bíblico-Teológico Sudamericano en honor a Raoul Dederen* (ed. Gerald A. Klingbeil, Martin G. Klingbeil and Miguel Ángel Núñez; Libertador San Martín, Argentina: Editorial Universidad Adventista del Plata, 2002), 71-92. The discussion within the SDA Church of the exact meaning of the remnant concept for the 21st century is fervent and is (at least partially) influenced by hermeneutical presuppositions. Compare Richard Lehmann, "Die Übrigen und ihr Auftrag," in *Die Gemeinde und ihr Auftrag* (ed. Johannes Mager; Studien zur adventistischen Ekklesiologie 2; Hamburg: Saatkorn Verlag, 1994), 73-102; Gerhard Pfandl, "The Remnant Church," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 8.1-2 (1997): 19-27; Ronald D. Bissell, "Reflections on the SDA Church as the Eschatological Remnant Church," *Asia Adventist Seminary Studies* 4 (2001): 69-75; Gideon Duran Ondap, "Diversity in the Remnant Concept in the History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church" (M.A. thesis, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, 2003).

⁶³ Historically, Seventh-day Adventists have been strongly supportive of abolition and also prohibition.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

the principles of God's kingdom (no coercion, no manipulation or compulsory activity, etc.).

3. It may also mean submitting our will and perspectives to be shaped and guided by God's Spirit and plans. It does us well to remember that the first Christian mission drive was actually a response to persecution—something that does not look very promising or appealing in the rearview mirror.

4. And, finally, any ecumenical relations must be Scripture-based and driven by a vital relationship with Jesus.

When Peter and John were taken before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4 they were made a truly ecumenical offer: *you can believe whatever you like, you can be another Jewish sect—but you cannot preach the name of Jesus anymore*. For Peter and John, who knew Jesus personally, this was not an option. They were not trying to be different for the sake of being different but they knew that wherever the present socio-political winds were blowing they had to “obey God rather than men!” Any ecumenical relations that are guided by our desire to be better known or more widely accepted or recognized and compromise on biblical truth are questionable. *We cannot look for the lowest common denominator in our quest for unity.*

Jesus commanded His disciples to stay and wait for the Comforter who would lead them into all truth (Acts 1:4, 5)—and empower them for mission. Our search for unity God's way will lead to true John 17 unity and ultimately to the fulfillment of the great gospel commission: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt 24:14, NIV).

KLINGBEIL: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

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