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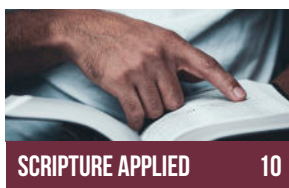
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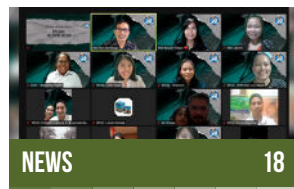
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# Doxologies in Amos: Yahweh's Right and Righteousness in Judgement

Daniel Bediako

## Introduction

The book of Amos is a small book—nine chapters, 146 verses, and about 2,050 Hebrew words—but it is a challenging book. Works on this book are legion, the interpretation of almost every clause is debated among scholars, and all kinds of methods have been applied to its study—from historical criticism with its question of the “historical Amos” and the *ipsissima verba*, through form-criticism with its interest in genre, traditions, and *Sitz im Leben* of the oracles, and redaction-criticism with theories of presupposed layers of redactions, to literary approaches that read the book as a comedy or drama. Liberation theologies have also derived inspiration from the prophet's critique of eighth-century BC Israel's social injustice and corruption.<sup>1</sup>

The debates and disagreements aside, scholars agree that judgment is a key theme in the book of Amos.<sup>2</sup> Some would even go so far to suggest that judgment is the *only* theme of the prophet. In his announcement and description of the impending punitive judgment of Israel, Amos on three occasions seems to burst into a hymnic praise of the immeasurable power of the Lord (Amos 4:13; 5:8–9; 9:5–6) that invites the reader to investigate things further. In this study, we will briefly describe these doxologies and indicate their relationship to God's right to judge and His righteousness in judgment as presented in the book of Amos.

## Doxologies of Judgment

The doxologies (Amos 4:13; 5:8–9; 9:5–6) occur in the context of judgment, hence they have been referred to as “doxologies of judgment.”<sup>3</sup> They speak eloquently of, and increasingly portray, the Lord's sovereign power<sup>4</sup> and His right to judge. But as we will see, God's righteousness shines through His judgment. R. Reed Lessing notes that

the first doxology (4:13) follows the recital of the plagues in the judgment oracle in 4:6–12. The second . . . is imbedded in an oracle of judgment. The third doxology comes at the end of the five visions of impending judgment in 7:1–9:4. In this way the doxologies are drawn

into the rhetoric of judgment. The praise evokes in suffering believers a trusting confidence that Yahweh in his righteousness eventually will deliver them from all evil, but for unbelievers the doxologies ironically reinforce that his judgment is unavoidable and inescapable. For them such hymnic language serves to evoke fear rather than joy.<sup>5</sup>

We will discuss each of the doxologies and try to shed light on the role of these doxological judgments.

If Amos 4:12 summons Israel to prepare themselves to face the Lord, the first doxology establishes the legal and moral authority of God in doing what He is about to announce: “For behold, He who forms mountains, and creates the wind, who declares to man what his thought is, and makes the morning darkness, who treads the high places of the earth—The Lord God of hosts is His name” (Amos 4:13). Verse 13 depicts the attributes of God as Creator, Omniscient, and Sovereign. The three key verbs describing God's activity of creation in Genesis 1–2 appear in Amos 4:13. God “forms” the mountains, “creates” the wind, and “makes” morning darkness. The reference to mountains and winds may be understood in a positive, ordinary sense, hence recalling Genesis 1. But the making of the morning as darkness presents a negative picture. In Genesis 1, morning is light, and darkness is night. The reversal of these phenomena often describes disaster. This seems further highlighted by the use of different terms for “morning” and “darkness” instead of the terms used in Genesis 1. In Amos 4:13, the term for “morning” means “dawn” (Gen 19:15; 32:25), when light breaks forth (Job 3:9; 38:12; 41:18; Song 6:10; Isa 8:20; 58:8), and the term for “night,” which appears only in this verse and in Job 10:22, seems to denote “darkness.” It is related to a verb that means “to be dark,” which is used in Job 11:17 in parallel with another term that means “dark” or “gloom.” With this description, Amos indicates that the God who is the Creator of both material realities and phenomena is also the one who can reverse what we call “nature.”

Another assertion in this doxology is the Lord's omniscience. He “declares . . . thought!” The verb translated “declare” means to “tell” (Gen 3:11; 9:22), “declare”

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(Gen 12:18; Deut 5:5; Mic 3:8), or “reveal” (Gen 41:25; 2 Sam 7:11; Job 11:6). But whose thought is being declared here? The clause literally reads, “he who declares to human what is his thought.” Since “his thought” is farther away from the subject (i.e., “he who declares”) and is close to the indirect object (i.e., “human”) we may argue that “his thought” is the “thought” of human beings. The word translated “thought” occurs only in Amos 4:13. It is related to a verb that means “complain, muse, talk” (Judg 5:10; Pss 55:18; 77:4, 7; 104:34; 105:2; 119:97; Prov 6:22) and cognate nouns that also mean “complaint” or “musing” (1 Sam 1:16; 1 Kgs 18:27; 2 Kgs 9:11; Job 7:13; 9:27; 15:4; Prov 23:29). The ability to declare the musing of humans is a characteristic of the Omniscient. The Lord knows the thought/musing of humans (cf. Jer 17:9–10). Although most scholars suggest that “thought” is the thought of God,<sup>6</sup> it should be noted that what is being described in Amos 4:13 is God's power and that the idea of God declaring human thought may better fit the context, for it is something that only God can do. The God of Israel is all-knowing; nothing escapes His notice, and so He judges rightly.

The final assertion of the doxology is that the Lord “treads the high places of the earth.” “High places” may denote mountains (Num 21:28; Ezek 36:2; Mic 3:12), places of worship (1 Sam 9:12; 1 Kgs 14:23; 22:44; Ezek 16:16), or battlefields (1 Sam 1:19, 25). To “tread” or even to “ride” upon high places is a metaphor for victory or the subduing of someone/something. The promise that Israel would ride upon high places describes their possessing the promised land (Deut 32:13; 33:29; Isa 58:14). The Lord's treading upon the high places of the earth or the waves of the sea portrays His sovereignty and judgeship (Job 9:8; Amos 4:13; Mic 1:3). In Micah 1:3–7, the Lord's coming is depicted as treading upon the high places and His coming is for the judgment of Israel. The personal name of the God of Israel, *Yahweh*, is used in Amos 4:13 together with “God of hosts,” which fittingly describes the coming of the Lord with an army to defeat Israel. This name speaks to God's sovereignty over the world.

The second doxology constitutes the center both of the book of Amos and of the chiasm in 5:1–17. The focus of these sections of the book is on the sovereignty of God as marked by His creatorship and judgeship.

He made the Pleiades and Orion; He turns the shadow of death into morning and makes the day dark as night; He calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out on the face of the earth; The Lord is His name. He rains ruin upon the strong, so that fury comes upon the fortress. (Amos 5:8–9)

Five verbal forms are used to describe the idea of sovereignty: “make,” “turn,” “call,” “pour,” and “rain.” Yahweh is the Creator God. The names “Pleiades” and “Orion” occur only in Job (9:9; 38:31) and Amos (5:8). In both books the context is God's work of creation. These constellations represent God's creation of heavenly bodies. The references to “morning,” “darkness,” “waters,” and “earth” add to “Pleiades” and “Orion” to complete the list of the spheres of God's creation: heavenly bodies, phenomena, water, and land. Because the Lord created all these things, He has power over them.

The expression “deathly darkness” recalls the famous verse of Psalm 23:4 (see also Job 3:5; 10:21–22; 12:22; 16:16; 24:17; 28:3; 34:22) and represents distress (Ps 107:10, 14; Isa 9:10; Jer 13:16) and danger (Ps 23:4; 44:20; Jer 2:6). The Lord is able to “turn” deathly darkness into morning light. Like the idiom of turning mourning into joy (Ps 30:12; Jer 31:13), turning darkness into light depicts hope and joy (Job 12:22; Pss 18:29; 112:4; Isa 9:1; 29:18; 42:16; 58:10; Mic 7:8). Should Israel seek the Lord, He is able to replace the calamity of darkness with the joy of the morning.

But the Lord is also able to turn daytime into night darkness. Darkness describes distress (Isa 5:20; 42:7; 49:9; 59:9; 60:2; Lam 3:2; Mic 7:8) and judgment or calamity (Ezek 22:8; Joel 2:2, 31 [MT 2:4; 3:4]; Nah 1:8). The Lord's bringing of darkness is a picture of His meting out judgment. So, Amos says that the day of the Lord is a day of darkness, not of light (Amos 5:18, 20). If Israel can turn justice into wormwood (Amos 5:7), the Lord can turn Israel's daytime into darkness in reaction to their injustices.

The sovereignty of the Lord is also demonstrated by the fact that He can “call” the waters of the sea to “pour” upon the surface of the earth. Water can figuratively represent danger and destruction (2 Sam 5:20; 22:17; Ps 66:12; 69:2–3; Lam 3:54; cf. Gen 6–8). Thus, this is a negative imagery as it depicts God's power to unsettle the waters of the sea to cause an engulfing flood.

Like the first doxology, the second includes the declaration of the name of the Lord. He is *Yahweh*, the name He revealed in a special way to Moses and Israel (Exod 3:13–15; 6:2–3). It is a name that highlights God's covenantal, redeeming love<sup>7</sup> and holiness, but this name is also used in contexts of judgment (appearing eighty-one times in the book of Amos).

The fifth verbal form comes in Amos 5:9, which states that the Lord can “rain” ruin upon the strong. The root of the verb translated “rain” may basically denote “flash” or “spark,” and by extension “gleam” or “smile” (Job 9:27; 10:20; Ps 39:14). The sense here is that the Lord can cause “ruin” to “flash” upon the strong. The word translated “ruin” occurs twice in this verse Amos 5:9 (also in 3:10). It is related to a verb that means “to

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deal violently,” “devastate,” “ruin,” “destroy” (e.g., Judg 5:27; Isa 15:1; Jer 5:6; 51:55; Ezek 32:12; Hos 10:2; Mic 2:4). The noun may denote “violence” as a social evil (Isa 59:7; 60:18; Hos 12:2; Hab 1:3), but it also means “devastation” and spoiling of a nation (Isa 13:6; 16:4; 22:4; 51:19; Jer 48:3; Hos 7:13). Both the verb and the noun are related to the divine name *Shadday*, usually translated “Almighty.” Indeed, this divine epithet by which Yahweh revealed Himself to the patriarchs (Exod 6:3) is a powerful and awesome name. It has negative connotations, but within the covenant relationship the name is positive: in His name *Shadday* the Lord promised to dispossess the Canaanites to give the land to Abraham, and to disrupt nature to allow Sarah and Abraham give birth at a time they do not expect (Gen 17:1–19). Elsewhere, the name occurs often at difficult moments, moments where the Lord is seen to be “destructive” or one who brings calamity. Naomi complains that *Shadday* dealt bitterly with her and brought calamity upon her (Ruth 1:20–21). The name occurs often in the book of Job where the man experiences excruciating pain and loss (e.g., Job 6:4; 21:20; 22:3; 23:16; 27:2). Isaiah 13:6 states that the day of the Lord comes like “destruction from the Almighty”). In Amos 5:9, to “flash destruction upon the strong” is to bring “destruction upon the fortress.” The words “strong” and “fortress” are related in this verse. The word translated “fortress” denotes both “fortification” or “fortified city” (Num 32:17, 26; Josh 10:20) and “fortress” or “stronghold” (Num 13:19; 2 Kgs 8:12; Jer 48:18), which represents the “strength” of a city and gives a (false) sense of impregnability (e.g., Num 32:17; Jer 4:5–6; 5:17; Nah 3:14). Military strength and fortifications cannot stop the Lord from executing judgment on the wicked. Amos implies in this doxology that the power of the Lord is shown not only in creation and in the protection of His faithful ones; it is also shown in the destruction of those who have willfully exercised their free will against Him.

The third doxology also emphasizes God's sovereign power:

The Lord God of hosts, He who touches the earth and it melts, and all who dwell there mourn; all of it shall swell like the River, and subside like the River of Egypt. He who builds His layers in the sky, and has founded His strata in the earth; who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the face of the earth—  
The Lord is His name. (Amos 9:5–6)

He has power over the earth. When He “touches” the earth, it “melts” and its inhabitants “mourn.” This is a touch of judgment that recalls the drying up of the life support mechanisms elsewhere (Amos 1:2; 4:7; 7:4). In Amos 8:8, we read that when the Lord visits the works

of Israel, the land will tremble before the enemy army and its inhabitants will mourn because of the tumult and destruction that follows. In Amos 9:5, the land “melts,” translating a verb whose meanings include “melt” (see also Ps 46:6) in the sense of “dissolve” (Ps 75:3; Isa 14:31; Nah 2:6).<sup>8</sup> If the “melting” results in a watery mass (see Amos 9:13 where the same verb occurs in the sense of “flow”), then the idea is that the land will “dissolve” to “swell” like flood. In Amos 8:8, the trembling of the land is compared to the swelling/flooding of the river—it will swell and subside like the river of Egypt, like the Nile's annual flooding and receding. There is a close similarity of phraseology between 8:8 and 9:5: “all who dwell” in her, “mourn, swell like the River,” and “subside like the River of Egypt.” As in 8:8, the context is the day of the Lord, when He will work calamity among His wayward people, a calamity that is necessitated by their choices.

The second part of the third doxology emphasizes the Lord's sovereignty over not only the earth but also over the heavens and the waters of the sea (9:6). He “builds” His “layers” in the heavens. The word translated “layers” denotes “ascent” of a hill or city or stairs of a house (Josh 15:3; Judg 8:13; 1 Sam 9:11; Neh 9:4; 12:37; Ezek 40:31, 34) and here seems to represent a dwelling place. If Amos here refers to God's abode in heaven, then it is better to translate “heaven” (KJV, NET) instead of “sky” (NKJV) and the reference would be to His heavenly temple (cf. 1 Kgs 10:19–20). The statement that the Lord “has founded His strata in the earth” is best understood to mean that He has “established the vault of the sky over the earth.”<sup>9</sup> He rules over the earth from heaven. And Isaiah would state that the heaven is the abode of the Lord and the earth is His footstool (Isa 66:1; see also Pss 78:69; 104:3).

As in Amos 5:8, and in exact wording, the sovereignty of the Lord is also expressed by His ability to call *for* the waters of the sea to pour upon the surface of the earth as in a tsunamic flood. And as in the first and second doxologies, the declaration of the name of the Lord appears in the third: *Yahweh* is His name, the name that would remind Israel of the character and acts of the covenant-making God.

### The Meaning and Purpose of the Judgment Doxologies

The doxologies reiterate the theme of judgment in Amos. They serve to praise God's sovereign power to judge: the one who is about to judge is He who forms mountains, creates winds, reveals deep secrets, turns morning into darkness, and treads on the high places of the earth (Amos 4:13); it is He who made the heavenly bodies, turns deathly shadows into morning, darkens daylight, commands the waters of the sea, and rains

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ruin upon the strong (Amos 5:8–9; 9:6); and it is He who touches the earth and it melts and foams like flood, and has the heavens as His abode (Amos 9:5–6). Although in their specific contexts they occur within the indictments against Israel, the power of the Lord to judge is not limited to Israel. The nations will be judged because of their crimes against humanity (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13). Judah will be judged because they have despised the law of the Lord and followed lies of idolatry (Amos 2:4). And Israel will be judged because of corruption and untold injustices against the poor in their midst (Amos 2:6–8). The judgment of Israel is described as the “day of the Lord.” It is a day of darkness and gloom (Amos 5:18–20; 8:9), panic (Amos 2:14–16; 9:1–4), evil and bitterness (Amos 6:3; 8:10–11), overthrow (Amos 8:8), destruction and death (Amos 3:11–12, 14–15; 5:1–3, 9; 6:9; 7: 9; 9:1–4, 8–10), and captivity (Amos 5:5, 27; 6:7; 7:17). The purpose of the doxologies seems to be to demonstrate that the Lord has the power to bring about the “day of the Lord” against Israel. In context, therefore, the doxologies may be understood as part of the descriptions of the coming day of the Lord against Israel, and thus constitute warnings of judgment. The first doxology follows the invitation to Israel to “prepare to meet your God” (Amos 4:12), declaring that the Lord has the power to do to Israel as He has warned about. This “meeting” with the Lord is a meeting of judgment on the day of the Lord. The second doxology follows God’s lament over Israel and a call to repentance (Amos 5:1–7), warning that should Israel fail to heed the call to turn to the Lord, He will exercise His power to bring about punitive judgment. And the third doxology follows the description of the day of the Lord in Amos 9:1–4 where we read that His hand will be against Israel wherever they turn to bring about judgment. Here again, the doxology emphasizes that He who has promised to judge Israel has the power to do so. Finally, the connection between the day of the Lord and the doxologies is also marked by the fact that the concepts of darkness, panic, and overthrow run through the descriptions of both.

### God’s Right to Judge

The book of Amos not only describes God’s power to judge, but it also shows that He has the right to judge. The book opens with judgment oracles against nations in Syro-Palestine (Amos 1:3–2:5). As both the doxologies and these oracles emphasize, Yahweh is not just the God of Israel; He is the God of the world. The sovereignty of Yahweh is demonstrated in several ways in the oracles against the nations (Amos 1:3–2:16). He rules over the nations—even over those whom He did not specially elect for mission (Amos 3:1–3)—and holds them responsible

for their actions. As the Creator and Sustainer of the earth, He requires accountability of humans everywhere, especially those He places in positions of authority. He has the right to punish Israel for their stubbornness by the hand of foreign nations (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13), but He also holds these nations responsible for mishandling His people (1:4–5, 7–8, 10, 12, 14–15).

If Yahweh would punish pagan nations for their misdeeds, He certainly would not pardon the continued disobedience of His people Israel who were supposed to uphold justice and righteousness as a holy nation. So, if Yahweh has the right to judge because He is the Creator of the world, then He has double right to judge His Israel. He is the Creator of every individual in Israel, but He is also the Creator of the people as a nation: He redeemed Israel from Egyptian bondage and cut a covenant relationship with them, giving them the special privileges of His special presence (Amos 2:10; 3:1–2).<sup>10</sup> The covenant provided that the Lord would be Israel’s God and they, His people (Amos 7:8, 15; 8:1; 9:10, 14–15; Exod 6:7; Jer 32:36). Israel would experience blessings if they served and worshipped Him alone, if they desisted from following other gods, and if they loved their fellows and treated them with dignity and integrity. Failing this, Israel would experience the curse of the covenant—famine, foreign hegemony, and exile from the land (Deut 28).<sup>11</sup>

God is merciful and slow to anger, but the book of Amos shows that eighth-century Israel grew worse in atrocities and injustices than the heathen nations, so that the time was ripe for the Lord’s intervention. The reigns of Jeroboam II and Uzziah saw the extension of territorial boundaries (Amos 6:13; 2 Kgs 14:25–27) and the Israelite elite reaped the fruits of the resulting economic prosperity. During this “silver age of Israelite history,” the wealthy engaged in luxurious and self-indulgent lifestyle, building luxurious houses (Amos 3:15; 5:11) and eating extravagantly (Amos 6:4–6). But extravagance of the upper class usually comes at the expense of the common people and further widens the gap between the two. The provisions of the covenant relationship included that Israel would imitate the Lord in justice and mercy (Exod 34:6; Deut 10:18; Isa 61:8; Jer 9:24). He provided for the defense and support of the poor—needy, widow, orphan, stranger (Exod 22:22–24; Deut 10:18; 14:29; 24:19–21; Ps 82:2–4). And He required the elders of Israel to judge righteously (Lev 19:15; Deut 24:17). The call to let justice and righteousness run like a river in Amos 5:24 is a call to faithful covenant keeping that affects the individual’s relationship both with the Lord (Deut 6:5) and with fellow human beings (Lev 19:18). However, in the days of Amos, the social structures instituted for the care of the poor seem to have collapsed at the watch of Israel’s leaders and the

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elite subjected the poor to all forms of injustice and oppression.

Israel's disregard for the Lord and His covenant demonstrated itself in spiritual and social corruption. The book of Amos highlights that, spiritually, Israel's corruption was expressed by her pride (Amos 6:13; 8:7, 14), idolatry (Amos 4:4; 5:5, 26; 7:9, 16; 8:14), immorality (Amos 2:7), oppression of the righteous and holy (Amos 2:6, 12), attempts to silence the prophets (Amos 2:12; 7:12–13), disregard for the Sabbath (Amos 8:5), and religious formalism (Amos 4:4; 5:5, 21–27; 8:14) with a false sense of spirituality (Amos 4:4–5; 5:14, 18; 6:1, 3). Socially, Israel's corruption exhibited itself through injustices against the poor and needy, including physical oppression, denying them justice at the courts, and even selling them into debt-slavery.<sup>12</sup> The wealthy and upper class of Israel seem to have become so degraded that they did not know how to do right anymore (Amos 3:10). Their pursuit of personal gain led the people to abandon the value of love and care for others as required of the covenant community. The atrocities of the elite of Israel against the powerless is described as turning justice and righteousness into wormwood and gall, into intense bitterness (Amos 5:7; 6:12).

When God's people disregard the covenant and its requirements, they not only lose its blessings, but also invite its curses (Deut 28). Israel was a "sinful kingdom" (Amos 9:8) deserving of punishment (Amos 5:12–20; 8:4–6). Consequently, God summons them to prepare to face Him in judgment (Amos 4:12). And because He is sovereign over everything, both the animate and the inanimate creation will stand at His service against wayward Israel—light and darkness will give way (Amos 4:13; 5:18–20; 8:9), winds and waters will obey His word (Amos 4:7–9; 5:8; 9:6), and locusts will stand at His service (Amos 4:9; 7:1–2). Israel will experience that Yahweh can create and has the right to uncreate, a fact that the doxologies underscore (Amos 4:13; 5:8; 9:8).

### God's Righteousness in Judgment

The descriptions of the day of the Lord and the doxologies in Amos not only illustrate God's power and right to judge Israel, but they also show that He remains righteous even when He punishes. This fact is expressed in several ways in the book.

First, Amos reminds Israel that the Lord has done everything good for them. He fulfilled His promise to Abraham by displacing the Amorites from Canaan and giving the land to Israel (Amos 2:9–10; cf. Gen 15:13). He gave His good laws and promised blessings for obedience (Amos 2:4). Of all the nations, He knew only Israel (Amos 3:1–2). And He raised prophets and Nazirites to remind the people to seek righteousness in fulfillment

of their covenant obligations (Amos 2:12). But Israel continually transgressed God's law, slighting the covenant and the Lord (Amos 2:4, 6–8; 4:1–2, 4–5; 5:10–11). The tumults within Israel in the eighth century evidenced that the people had grown worse than the heathen nations (Amos 3:2, 9–10, 14; 5:12; 8:7; 9:8). Israel had destroyed the very purpose of the covenantal relationship: justice and righteousness (Amos 5:7; 6:12).

Second, the Lord had been patient with His people despite their refusal to repent, warning and hoping that they would change their course. As the longsuffering and forgiving God (Amos 7:2–3, 5–6), He warned Israel many times and through several means. He warned of the consequences of continued disobedience. The phrase "for three transgressions . . . and for four" (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6) that occurs in each of the eight oracles underscores God's willingness to forgive the wayward once they change the course of their actions towards justice and righteousness. Scholars have debated the meaning of this repeated formula.<sup>13</sup> The formula "three . . . and four" appears in Proverbs 30:15, 18, 21, 24, 29. In these passages, the formula is followed by a list of four things. The assumption that the numerical formula is only imaginative and is not meant to be taken literally does not hold in view of the usage of the similar pattern in Proverbs (see also Prov 6:16–19). Similarly, other ancient Near Eastern poetry uses numerical formula in a literal sense, such as the Ugaritic "two . . . three" and "seven . . . eight" patterns (e.g., "two sacrifices does Baal hate, three, the Rider of the Clouds"<sup>14</sup>). But there is a difficulty in Amos. While the transgressions of each nation are stated, it is not possible to itemize these transgressions into three or four. However, if we could understand "for three . . . and for four" to mean that the Lord would forgive the transgressions of the nations a couple of times, and if we should understand the oracles against the other nations as preparatory to God's message to Israel, then an interesting phenomenon emerges in the presentation of the visions in the book that may enable us to understand the formula in relation to God's judgment upon Israel. There are five visions in chapters 7–9. In visions 1 (locusts) and 2 (fire), the Lord listens to Amos' plea and relents His destruction. In visions 3 (plumbline) and 4 (basket of summer fruit), the Lord states that He will "not pass them by" (Amos 7:8; 8:2), which has the same sense as "I will not turn away" (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6). In vision 5, Amos only sees the Lord commanding the destruction of Israel.<sup>15</sup> So in the narration of the visions, the Lord forgives the transgression of Israel two times, but the third and the fourth times, He promises to punish.

The pronouncement of judgment against the nations surrounding Israel in chapters 1–2 is itself a warning to

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Israel that if the Lord would not let the sins of the heathen go unpunished, He would not let Israel continue in sin. Following the pronouncements against the nations (Amos 1:1–2:5), the rest of the book focuses on the situation of the northern kingdom. Israel had strayed from the covenant (Amos 2:16–16) and in chapter 3 the Lord *warns* them through His prophets—for the Lord would not do anything unless He revealed it through His prophets (Amos 3:7–8)—but Israel asked the prophets to stop prophesying. Philistia and Egypt are summoned to attest to the atrocities within Israel that require the intervention of the Judge of Israel (Amos 3:9). As the law required a minimum of two witnesses in cases that required the application of the death penalty (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6), the Lord summons these two nations as witnesses in the legal proceedings against Israel. The sordid nature of Israel's transgressions justifies the judgment that the Lord will execute. If Israel would not heed to verbal warnings (Amos 3:1–15), would they change their ways when they suffer acts of judgments (chap. 4)? The Lord *punished* Israel through, for example, droughts and famine, and harassment by other nations (Amos 4:1–11). Five times, the Lord sought to lead Israel back to Himself through disciplinary actions, and five times we read, “Yet you have not returned to Me” (Amos 4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11). Because Israel failed to repent, the Lord announces a more severe punishment: they would be *exiled* from the land (chaps. 5–6). The coming captivity and exile are the focus of chapters 7–9. If chapters 1–4 present the basis of Israel's final punishment, chapters 5–6 announce that punishment, and chapters 7–9 describe the punishment and its effects. From his descriptions, one can imagine that Amos already has access to the autopsy report of Jeroboam's Israel even before the demise of the kingdom: Israel's was a self-inflicted, coronary infection that led to heart failure—failure to remember God's covenantal word, to heed the warnings of judgment, and to repent amidst acts of judgment. In response, the Lord promises to set His face against His people, except He “will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob” (Amos 9:8). From all indications, Israel deserved to be disinherited, but God still loved His people. Although He would visit them with destruction and captivity, He would still preserve a people for Himself. Only a righteous God would do this.

Third, we find in the book of Amos that the Lord is hesitant to punish. He is indeed longsuffering. Even while announcing judgment (Amos 5:1–4:14), the Lord mourns for His people. The announcement of judgment is cast in the form of a divine lament over Israel that is replete with calls to repentance. He beckons Israel to seek Him and live, so as to avoid the day of the Lord (Amos 5:4–6, 14–15). The call to “seek me and live” is the summary of the divine exhortation. The verb translated “seek”

means also to “consult, inquire of, resort to.” It occurs four times in Amos 5: Israel is called to seek the Lord in order to live (Amos 5:4, 6), to seek good and live (Amos 5:14), and to not seek Bethel (Amos 5:5). In Amos, to seek the Lord means to pursue righteousness instead of injustice (Amos 5:6–7, 12, 15, 24)—to do good<sup>16</sup> instead of evil (Amos 5:13–15; 6:12)—and to truly worship the Lord instead of the falsehoods at Bethel and Gilgal (Amos 5:4–6, 26).

Fourth, the God of Israel is a holy and righteous God. The reference to “His name” in each of the doxologies is a reminder of the Lord's character of righteousness (Amos 4:13; 5:8; 9:6). His name is holy (Amos 2:7). And He swears by His holiness (Amos 4:2). Israel will be punished because of their unrighteousness, and this is because Yahweh is righteous and demands righteousness from His people. The metaphor of the plumbline shows that Israel is a crooked nation that falls short of uprightness (Amos 7:7–8).<sup>17</sup> Israel is a “sinful kingdom” (Amos 9:8) that has turned justice and righteousness to wormwood (Amos 5:7; 6:12). But Israel needs to reflect the character of their God, so the Lord calls them to cease evil and pursue justice and righteousness (Amos 5:14–15, 24; 6:12). For the righteous God, righteous character is more important than sacrifices; even if the people offered more sacrifices, tithes, and offerings than required (Amos 4:4–5), these could not substitute righteous character (Amos 5:21–25).

Fifth, even though the Lord would punish Israel for their continued disobedience, He remains faithful to the covenant. If Israel would seek the Lord, they would no longer have to prepare to face Him in judgment (Amos 4:13). But the Lord is merciful and forgiving (Amos 7:1–3, 4–6), so that He will keep His covenant no matter what (Amos 9:8, 14). When the Lord judges, He protects; when He judges the wicked and unrepentant generation, He fulfills His promises of salvation by protecting a righteous remnant.<sup>18</sup> Even though Israel deserves destruction and the Lord vows to remember their many sins (Amos 5:12) and “destroy it from the face of the earth” (Amos 9:8), there is hope for Israel because He will “not utterly destroy the house of Jacob” (Amos 9:8). So, Israel's “day of the Lord” is both the day of judgment and the day of salvation. The righteous God will still keep His covenant by preserving a remnant of Joseph (Amos 5:15).<sup>19</sup> He will save a remnant by/with the “corner of a bed and on the edge of a couch” (Amos 3:12) as the shepherd rescues “two legs or a piece of an ear” of the sheep being preyed upon (Amos 3:12). He will save the remnant as a “firebrand plucked from the burning” (Amos 4:11). Cities with military strength of one thousand and one hundred will be survived by one hundred and ten persons respectively (Amos 5:3), as if to save a tithe of His people. He will shake Israel among

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the nations as the farmer shakes the sieve, and no pebble shall fall through to be collected among the remnant (Amos 9:9–10).<sup>20</sup>

Finally, Amos indicates that the righteousness of Yahweh will be acknowledged by Israel even during their punishment. Israel had no excuse whatsoever to disregard the covenant, to ignore the divine warnings in word and in action, or to forget about their history. On the contrary, Israel had every reason to trust in the Lord for their redemption, blessings, and the privileges of special divine presence in their midst. So, when the Lord finally judges, He is beyond accusation because He has provided His people with everything they needed as well as ample time for them to mend their ways. They will remember that the Lord had been faithful to His part of the covenant. And indeed, as we see throughout the pages of Amos, Israel would acknowledge that the Lord had gone beyond the extra mile of to get His people back on track with Him, but that He could not turn them to Himself against their willingness. This is a trait of a just and righteous God. While He does encourage people to choose His ways, He allows them to exercise their power of choice. Israel's acknowledgement of the Lord's righteousness in judgment seems to be presented in two instances in Amos. First, in the description of the disastrous effect of the day of the Lord in chapter 6, a scenario is presented of two persons who go to the house of a dead relative to pick up their mortal remains for burial. One tells the other, "Hold your tongue! For we dare not mention the name of the Lord" (Amos 6:10). In calamities the name of the Lord would usually be mentioned, either in cry for help (2 Chr 14:11; Ps 109:26) or to attribute the calamity to Him (Josh 7:7; Amos 7:2). Why does the speaker in Amos 6:10 ask that the name of the Lord not be mentioned? Israel has been wayward, has refused to repent despite repeated warnings, and hence is deserving of the calamity that has come upon them. It was the Lord who wrought the calamity in response to Israel's sins, so it was pointless to invoke His name under the circumstances. It is also possible that the speaker implies that invoking the holy name could lead to further destruction.<sup>21</sup> Second, according to Amos 8:11–12, during the day of the Lord Israel would search for God's word of comfort, but there would not be a prophet to proclaim such word to them; Israel would only remember that God had sent His prophets to warn them of a calamity that would not have happened had they listened to the prophets, but this would be too late.<sup>22</sup> The day of calamity would take its full course, and the billows would subside only when the Lord was done with His work against His people. The experience of Israel would testify that sin does not only infect the heart; it leaves irrecoverable scars on the world. When destruction would eventually surround Israel, their sad hearts would witness the far-reaching results of waywardness.

Israel's vain search for God's word of comfort on the day of judgment means also that they would at that time acknowledge God's rightness, righteousness, and justice even in their punishment.

The question has often been asked as to why God could bring calamity or destroy people and yet remain righteous. But God's righteousness is not demonstrated only in the fulfillment of covenantal blessings; righteousness is also expressed in the fulfillment of the covenantal curses. Righteousness is not only positive. Judgment against sinners is equally a manifestation of God's righteousness. So, Isaiah states that "though your people, O Israel, be as the sand of the sea, a remnant of them will return; the destruction decreed shall overflow with righteousness" (Isa 10:22–23). Righteousness also means justice, and justice demands that the perpetrator of evil is punished. But the question we also need to ask is whether the righteous God could continually allow evil to ruin His creation and void His purposes and promises. In no uncertain terms Amos announces repeatedly that Israel's situation was beyond repair—they no longer knew how to do right. It would be a violation of God's own character and His covenant to let Israel continue to perpetrate evil and idolatry. His intervention would mean destruction for Israel, but it would also mean the continuation of the covenant promises. This is where the concepts of salvation and judgment intertwine. This pair reflect the twin characteristics of mercy and justice and cannot be separated because they are two sides of a coin. The judge acquits and sentences. God is committed to resolving the conflict between God and evil, to end sin and suffering and usher in everlasting righteousness. And His character of love, justice, and righteousness will remain untainted throughout the process. The rightness and righteousness of God is demonstrated in divine judgment, but punitive judgment is not the final word of God. The book of Amos demonstrates that God's final word is redemption and eternal life of righteousness in His presence.

Salvation is an act of divine grace on the part of the righteous God (Amos 5:15; 7:1–6). And Amos 9:11–15 elegantly presents hope beyond the crises, hope of restoration. The Lord will gather His remnant from the nations and bring them back to the land (Amos 9:9). In Amos 1:2–9:10, we see a picture of the Lord roaring like a lion to warn, destroy, and scatter, but in 9:11–15 we find that the heights of His covenantal love overshadow the depths of devastation that attend His anger. God embraces even when He threatens. He loves, even when He punishes. He punishes, but He also makes a way for the continuation of His unfailing covenant. When the closing verses of the book arrive, they look beyond Israel of Amos' day, beyond their atrocities and the devastation that waywardness brings, beyond the current generation, and beyond the ten tribes of the northern kingdom. "On that day," the



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Lord will raise the booth of David and repair its breaches (Amos 9:11). He will restore the fortunes of Israel and they will rebuild the cities, plant vineyards, and enjoy life to its fullest in safety; it will be a time of peace, not war (Amos 9:13–14), a time the Lord will replant His people in the land, never again to be uprooted (Amos 9:15). Israel will return from captivity as one people under David, the Messiah, and the remnant of the nations will join God's people in worship.<sup>23</sup> Rich agricultural metaphors of lasting peace and prosperity depict in lush the ultimate restoration of the people of God. At the end of the book of Amos, God's people are back to Eden, where the Lord will plant His new creation—the remnant that keeps His commandments and the faith of His Messiah—that will forever live in love and perfect harmony with their God.

## Conclusion

Although it would seem awkward at first glance that Amos should praise the Lord's power and activity of judgment, the doxologies in the book point to the fact that God's act of judgment is also a demonstration of His righteousness. The judgment of the nations as well as the judgment of Israel in the book of Amos is a microcosm of the final judgment. This judgment will include both the salvation of the righteous and the destruction of the wicked. Yahweh is a God of justice and righteousness, and He demands that humans imitate His character by seeking

justice and righteousness. Although He is longsuffering and forgives sins, He is also the just God whose actions must match His character. God will save a remnant because He is faithful to His promises and because the remnant seeks Him. But He will also destroy sinners who have had the opportunity to repent but who have failed to do so. God's destruction of sinners accords with His character of justice and righteousness, and this is part of His solution to the sin problem. As in the situation of Israel, the entire universe will get to acknowledge that the Lord is righteous in all He does—"true and righteous are His judgments" (Rev 19:2; cf. 15:3–4; Jer 11:20). In the end, the question will not be whether a righteous God should destroy, but whether a righteous God could let evil continue to ravage His beautiful and precious creation; not whether God can destroy and remain morally good, but whether He can remain morally good without resolving the sin problem.



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## Endnotes

1 See, e.g., M. Daniel Carroll R., *Contexts for Amos: Prophetic Poetics in Latin American Perspective*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 132 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992); and Carroll R., *Amos: The Prophet and His Oracles* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

2 See M. Daniel Carroll R., *The Book of Amos*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 87–98; and David A. Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 25 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 111–119.

3 See F. Horst, "Die Doxologien im Amosbuch," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 47 (1929): 45–54; J. L. Crenshaw, "Amos and the Theophanic Tradition," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 80 (1968): 203–215; Crenshaw, *Hymnic Affirmation of Divine Justice: The Doxologies of Amos and Related Texts in the Old Testament*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 24 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975); Crenshaw, "The Influence of the Wise Upon Amos: The 'Doxologies of Amos' and Job 5: 9–16; 9: 5–10," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 79 (1967): 42–52; P. Carny, "Doxologies—A Scientific Myth," *Hebrew Studies* 18 (1977): 149–159; and Tchavdar S. Hadjiev, *The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 393 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 124–139.

4 "The theological contribution these doxologies of Amos make is immense. They affirm that Yahweh is the all-powerful Creator who is above any might or power from any source, human or other. Yahweh is the only and unique Protector" (Gerhard F. Hasel, *Understanding the Book of Amos: Basic Issues in Current Interpretations* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991], 89).

5 R. Reed Lessing, *Amos: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture, Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2009), 286.

6 See e.g., Carroll R., *The Book of Amos*, 286; Göran Eidevall, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 24G (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 149; JoAnna M. Hoyt, *Amos, Jonah, and Micah, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 160; Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos*, Hermeneia, trans. W. Janzen, S. D. McBride Jr., and C. A. Muenchow, ed. S. D. McBride Jr. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1977), 224; and Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 456.

7 But in the Hebrew Bible God also calls Himself several names including *El Shadday* (Gen 17:1), *Yahweh* (Gen 22:16), *Elohim* of Abraham and Isaac (Gen 26:24), *Yahweh Elohim* (Gen 28:13), and *Jealous* (Exod 34:14). In Amos, the Lord is referred to as *Yahweh*, *Adonay*, *Elohim*, *Tsebao't*, and several other descriptions. He is "the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts" (Amos 5:27; cf. 4:13). The common thinking that the God of Israel has one name is misleading. But God's name is more than just the letters of the alphabet; His name is His character. To know God's name is to hold fast to Him in love (Ps 91:14).

8 Some translate with verbs like "quaver"/"shatter," as in terrestrial convulsion (Paul, *Amos*, 280), "totter" (Carroll R., *The Book of Amos*, 486), and "convulse" (Hoyt, 309–310). The idea of the earth trembling can be associated with or may parallel *mug* (cf. Nah 1:5), but the context of Amos 9:5 suggests that here the verb may be understood not in the sense of trembling.

9 The word translated "strata" occurs only four times and in each instance seems to carry a different meaning: "bunch" of hyssop (Exod 12:22), "band" of soldiers (2 Sam 2:25), or "bands" or "thongs" of yoke (Isa 58:6). If we are to stress the meaning of *al*, "upon," in Amos 9:6, then *aguddah* refers to

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something that has been established “over” the earth and not “on” it.

10 Although the covenant between God and Israel is not mentioned by name, the book is replete with inferences to it: “I . . . brought you up from the land of Egypt . . . to possess the land of the Amorite” (Amos 2:10; cf. 3:1), “law of the Lord . . . commandments” (Amos 2:4), “You only have I known” (Amos 3:2), “seek me and live” (Amos 5:4), “My people” (Amos 7:8, 15; 8:1; 9:10, 14–15), and “yet I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob” (Amos 9:8) are but a few examples.

11 On covenant and judgment in Amos, see Reinaldo W. Siqueira, “The Presence of the Covenant Motif in Amos 1:2–2:16” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1996), 180–281.

12 The wealthy classes of society actively and violently (Amos 3:10; 6:3, 12) oppressed the lower classes (Amos 2:6–8; 4:1; 5:7, 10–13, 24; 6:12; 8:4–6). These injustices are vividly described: they (1) “sell the righteous for silver and the poor for a pair of sandals” (Amos 2:6; 8:6), (2) “pant after the dust on the head of the poor” (Amos 2:7), (3) “pervert the way of the humble” (Amos 2:7), (4) “oppress the poor” and “crush the needy” (Amos 4:11), (5) “tread down the poor and take grain taxes from them” (Amos 5:11), (6) “divert the poor from justice at the gate” (Amos 5:12), and, ultimately, “swallow up the needy and make the poor of the land fail” (Amos 8:4). And their merchants make “the ephah small and the shekel large”—selling grain at weights less than standard while taking money at weights more than standard—use false balances, and sell chaff of wheat, resulting in their buying of the poor (Amos 8:5–6).

13 Seeing that Amos does not list four sins of each nation, scholars are divided on the interpretation of this formula: (1) Amos skips three sins and mentions only the “back-breaking” sin (Hubbard, 134; Hoyt, 49), but in some instances, more than one sin is stated; (2) the formula is not to be taken literally—that is, the numbers do not indicate a particular number of offenses (Francis D. Nichol, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 4 [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1977], 956), but this formula is not used elsewhere without enumerating any lists; (3) Paul suggests that “the transgression(s) enumerated was (were) the most vile, abominable, and despicable of all,” but that this is a “novel poetical way by which the prophet expresses the concepts of totality and climax” (Paul, 29–30). Eidevall, 102, also suggests that this “staircase parallelism that recalls the so-called graded numerical sayings” may have been employed for twofold rhetorical function: it “emphasizes that the ensuing accusation concerns an outrageous incident that is part of a pattern of repeated unethical conduct” and “creates a sense of suspense.” However, (4) others find a literal application of the formula in the oracles. While suggesting a nonliteral understanding of the formula, Eidevall still observes that the oracles against Syria, Philistia, Ammon, and Moab contain one accusation each, Tyre has two accusations, Judah has three, and both Edom and Israel have four accusations each (Eidevall, 102). Thus, Edom and Israel are presented as the worst among the nations; their sins fill up. R. B. Chisholm, “For Three Sins . . . Even for Four’: The Numerical Sayings in Amos,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (1990): 188–197, finds four crimes of Israel but as many as ten accusations; and (5) some think that “three . . . four” means “seven,” and find seven sins of Israel that are met with seven judgments (M. Weiss, “The Pattern of Numerical Sequence in Amos 1–2: A Re-Examination,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 [1967]: 416–423, argues that the formula in Amos is a *sui generis* both structurally and stylistically and concludes that because “three” and “four” are the “most natural components of the number seven,” the prophet had the number “seven” in mind [ibid., 419–420]), or that the  $x/x+1$  pattern is to be extended to the level of the entire oracles rather than just the crimes of each nation (Carroll R., *The Book of Amos*, 130). For other views, see Carroll R., *The Book of Amos*, 129–130.

14 See Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, *Analecta Orientalia* 38 (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1965), 170; and Michael D. Coogan, *Stories From Ancient Canaan* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1978), 98.

15 Related somehow are the five historical punishments of Israel in Amos 4:6–11. Five times Israel refused to return to the Lord. While these five judgments constitute hash warnings, they are still judgments,

and may be understood as preliminary punishments after Israel’s “three . . . and for four.”

16 God is good (2 Chr 30:18; Ps 34:9; Nah 1:7). His deeds, way, judgments, commandments, and statutes are good (Pss 25:8; 119:39, 68; Neh 9:13; Ezek 20:25).

17 Based on a similar term in Akkadian (*annaku*) that means “tin,” most scholars translate the Hebrew term *’anak* as “tin” instead of “plumbline” (since the work of B. Landsberger, “Tin and Lead—The Adventures of Two Vocables,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 24 [1965]: 285–296). But the divergence of scholars on the application of this meaning to Amos 7:7–8 (with views including “tin wall,” “plaster,” “grief,” “the prophet,” etc.) should advise against importing such meaning to the passage in Amos. It is true that the Old Testament has a different term for “plumbline” (*mishqele*, 2 Kgs 21:13; Isa 28:17; and *eben*, Isa 34:11; Zech 4:10). But the Old Testament also has a different term for tin (*bedil*, Num 31:22; Zech 4:10). Since Amos sees the Lord standing by the wall of *’anak*, holding *’anak* in the hand, and placing *’anak* in the midst of Israel, it is natural to conclude that *’anak* is related to construction. The term may refer to “lead,” which was used as weight in the plumb line, but even if it means “tin” the traditional understanding of the term as plumbline still makes sense. Interestingly, Zechariah 4:9–10 uses the phrase “the stone, the tin” in the sense of the plumbline.

18 On the concept of the remnant in Amos, see Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant From Genesis to Isaiah*, Andrews University Monographs 5 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1972), 173–215.

19 The statement “it may be that the Lord will be gracious” (Amos 5:15) does not express doubt at the Lord’s mercy. The adverb *’ulay* means “perhaps” or “maybe.” Although it may be used to express that which is unlikely to happen (1 Kgs 18:27; Isa 47:12; Jer 51:8), it commonly expresses hope rather than doubt (Gen 16:2; 18:24; Exod 32:30; Josh 14:12; 1 Sam 9:6; Isa 37:4; Zeph 2:3). Later in the case of Judah, the Lord states, “It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that everyone may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin” (Jer 36:3). In Amos 5:15, the prophet expresses hope that the Lord will be gracious (*khanan*) to the remnant of Israel.

20 The action of the Lord here is likened to how materials in a sieve wander when shaken. The sieve was used to sift grain in order to remove foreign material that may have been gathered with it after the stalks were threshed on the threshing floor and winnowed. In the sieving process, only the grain dropped through to the ground/container (where the grain is collected; cf. Nah 3:12); the refuse remained in the sieve and was discarded. Since in Amos 9:9 *tsorer* is that which will not fall through to the ground, it is most likely that it refers to “pebble” (cf. 2 Sam 17:13) rather than “grain” (cf. NKJV). Israel will be tossed about among the nations as part of the divine punishment, yet the good grain will fall through the sieve to the container to be gathered and stored. If this is the meaning of verse 9, then verse 10 seems to identify *tsorer* with the self-indulgent and oppressor upper class of Israel who will be destroyed, a fact that the following verse stresses.

21 For other views on the “hush” statement, see the survey in Hoyt, 244–245 and Carroll R., *The Book of Amos*, 383–384.

22 Nichol, 4:980: “In the final “day of the Lord,” just before the second advent of Christ, this experience of ancient Israel will be repeated, when the impenitent of the whole earth, suffering under the seven last plagues, will seek relief from calamity by any means possible, even turning to the Word of God, which they had formerly neglected to study and obey (see GC 629).”

23 In Acts 15:15–17, James cites Amos 9:11 and interprets the “booth of David” and the possessing of the nations to indicate the salvation that has come through Jesus and that is open to everyone who believes in Jesus as Lord and Savior. As enshrined in the promise to Abraham, the gospel of Israel is also gospel for the nations—those who bless themselves in Abraham by seeking refuge in his Seed (Gal 3:29).

# Lessons from Matthew 22

*Clinton Wahlen*

In Matthew 22, Jesus tells a parable that likens the kingdom of heaven to a wedding feast that requires wearing a wedding garment (vv. 1–14). Then a series of questioners come forward: Pharisees ask about paying taxes to Caesar (vv. 15–22), Sadducees question Him about the resurrection (vv. 23–33), and a lawyer asks which commandment is the greatest (vv. 34–40). Though all three questioners call Jesus “Teacher,” in Matthew there is an element of unbelief in this form of address (cf. Matt 12:38). The chapter concludes with Jesus initiating a discussion about the Messiah that silences all His opponents (vv. 41–46).

## Interpretation of Matthew 22

### 1. Verses 1-14, Parable of the Wedding Feast

- The parable describes a wedding celebration hosted by a king for his son.
- As with the previous parable (see Matt 21:33–39), the servants who are sent receive violent treatment, dishonoring the king and his son.
- Wedding celebrations for rulers and other notable people in Israel were expensive, lavish events to which an entire village might be invited and would normally span several days.
- The parable unfolds in two distinct stages: (1) the king deals with the invited guests who refuse to come; (2) he inspects those who do come as to whether they are wearing appropriate attire for the occasion.
- Although invitations for such an event would be sent to everyone well in advance, those invited did not even inform the king of their inability to come until his servants urged them to come.
- The flimsy reasons given for not coming would have been highly offensive because they suggest each had more important business. But what could be more important is difficult to imagine. Of course, the king was also in a position to severely punish those who refused the invitation and treated his messengers so harshly.
- The description of armies coming, destroying the people, and burning up their city (v. 7) is not to be considered as an example of prophecy after the event. In ancient times, the destruction of rebellious cities was nothing unusual. Also, Jerusalem had already been destroyed once by Babylon, and Daniel predicted its destruction again (Dan 9:26; cf. Matt 24:15).

- Rather than let the food go to waste, the king sends out invitations to everyone, including the peasantry who are sure to come for such an experience of a lifetime and who will appreciate the king’s generosity.
- The varied character of the guests (“both bad and good,” v. 10)<sup>1</sup> and the king’s inspection of them represents a judgment scene. Those who accepted the invitation are examined in order to determine who were fit to take part in the festivities.
- Wedding garments were apparently provided, which is the best way to explain why the man is singled out in verse 12. He is apparently wearing ordinary clothing. His speechlessness shows he knew his attire was inappropriate.
- God’s provision of “the garments of salvation” and “the robe of righteousness” is compared to wedding attire (Isa 61:10) and may be alluded to here.
- This parable points to an investigative judgment of those who have accepted the gospel invitation in order to determine whether they have continued to wear this robe of righteousness. Although salvation is free, yet the life of the follower of Jesus must match the profession.
- The parable also indicates this judgment occurs prior to the second advent when the destiny of human beings is still being decided because, when Jesus comes, His reward is with Him, “to give to everyone according to his work” (Rev 22:12).
- Consignment of the man to outer darkness symbolizes his final destruction.<sup>2</sup>
- The “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 22:13) describes the terrible condition of those who will be condemned at the final judgment (Matt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 24:51; 25:30; cf. Ps 112:10).
- The word translated “chosen” is used three other times in Matthew, always of those ultimately saved in the kingdom of glory (Matt 24:22, 24, 31).

### 2. Verses 15-22, Obligations to Caesar and to God

- The successive questioners approaching Jesus signal an escalation in the opposition to His ministry.
- Herodians were supporters of the Herodian dynasty and the Hellenizing influence they represented. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were stringent in their observance of Jewish laws and traditions and longed for independence from Rome. These groups would not normally be allies, but they view Jesus’ growing popularity as a serious threat.

## Lessons from Matthew 22

- The flattery with which the interlocutor begins, condemned as it is in Scripture (e.g., Ps. 55:21; Prov 26:28; 29:5), probably alerts Jesus to the unfriendly nature of the question to follow.
- Paying taxes was no more popular anciently than now. “Some estimate that a Jewish family paid approximately 49 percent of its annual income to these various taxes,” including 32 percent to the Romans.<sup>3</sup> Besides, for the Jews, paying taxes was not only a tacit admission of Roman authority; with the image of Caesar on the coins it could be considered a form of idolatry (Exod 20:4–6).
- In answering, Jesus immediately calls out the hypocrisy of pretending to believe His message while posing a question to ensnare Him.
- If Caesar is pictured on the coin, it obviously belongs to him and, therefore, should be given back to him. Jesus’ question, in asking about the “image” (Gk. *eikōn*) on the coin reminds us that we have all been made in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27 LXX, also employs *eikon*) and, as Christians, that image, marred by sin, is being progressively restored in us (2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10).
- The verbal cognate of the Greek word translated “inscription” (Matt 22:20) is used of God’s law being inscribed on the heart of believers (Prov 7:3 LXX; Heb 8:10; 10:16; cf. Isa 44:5, ESV).
- Jesus zeroes in on the problem, calling the Sadducees “self-deceived,”<sup>5</sup> giving two reasons: (1) They do not know the Scriptures, having rejected most of them as uninspired and having limited God’s word to what they were willing to believe and practice; (2) they do not know the power of God, having limited it to what their finite minds could conceive as possible.
- The Bible gives us an adequate basis to believe in the resurrection. First, it acknowledges that, after death, the body disintegrates to dust (Gen 3:19). Second, if God knows our physical substance (Ps 139:16) and has given each hair a number (Matt 10:30), surely He is able to resurrect us to immortality. This can be affirmed because the Bible clearly teaches it, even if the process whereby this happens is beyond our present understanding.
- The idea there will be no marriage in heaven has perplexed Christians throughout history. The happily married won’t want a divorce (which God hates, Mal 2:16), and singles are hardly being incentivized to get married to avoid eternal celibacy. Such human reasoning is flawed for the same reason as that of the Sadducees: it rejects the word and power of God. It’s better to acknowledge there are mysteries yet to be revealed, particularly about the life to come, that God gives good gifts to His children (Matt 7:11), and He can do more than we can ask or even imagine (Eph 3:20).

### 3. Verses 23–33, Question About the Resurrection

- According to Mark, Jesus had taught in the temple for several days by this time. No doubt the Sadducees were eager to reestablish their authority over the temple complex.
- First-century excavations in the upper city of Jerusalem have revealed luxurious houses, complete with sizable courtyards, private immersion pools, and exquisite stoneware vessels that were impervious to ritual impurity. Bridges conveniently connected this part of the city directly to the temple complex. As Jesus indicated, some were enjoying “their reward” already (Matt 6:2, 5, 16).
- The question of the Sadducees is based on the practice of levirate marriage, “whereby the nearest kinsman of a man who dies without sons marries his widow” (Deut 25:5–10).<sup>4</sup> It seems the case of seven brothers presented to Jesus was from a known family since they are described as being “among” them (v. 25, ESV). Each brother in turn dutifully marries the widow of his recently deceased sibling because none left children.
- Polygamy in Israel was not unusual, especially in patriarchal times, but for a woman to have more than one husband, let alone seven altogether, was inconceivable.
- Since the Sadducees only accepted the books of Moses as authoritative, Jesus answers them on that basis. God identifies Himself as the “I AM” or self-existent One (Exod 3:14), saying in the same context, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exod 3:6). Although the patriarchs are all dead and buried, “God is not the God of the dead” (Matt 22:32). As the Creator and source of all life, He does not define Himself in terms of the dead, “but of the living.” Therefore, it can be assumed they will not remain dead but be resurrected to life.
- When the resurrection takes place is immaterial to the point Jesus makes. It is the *fact* of the resurrection that matters. God “gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did” (Rom 4:17). “He sees the end from the beginning, and beholds the result of His work as though it were now accomplished.”<sup>6</sup>

### 4. Verses 34–40, the Two Great Commandments

- Unwilling to admit defeat, the Pharisees continue questioning Jesus. One of their number skilled in the law of Moses tests Jesus’ knowledge of the law. Jewish discussions of the Torah identify 613 separate laws,

so the question as to which was the greatest would seem to pose a significant challenge.

- Jesus unhesitatingly answers by identifying not one but two commandments, saying everything found in Scripture ultimately depends on them. Loving God is said to be “first”—that is, it must take precedence. However, since the second commandment is “like it,” it is not less important, but only second because it cannot be first. In reality, the two are inseparable: “For he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also” (1 John 4:20–21).

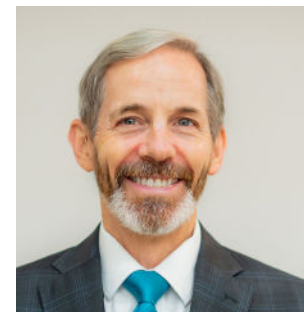
## 5. Verses 41–46, the Messianic Son of David

- Although none of the questioners could entrap Jesus He succeeds in entrapping them by asking about the Messiah’s lineage. As expected, He is identified as the son of David, presumably a lesser figure since, in Jewish understanding, the father is greater than the son. Also, as forefather of the Messiah and the preeminent king of Israel, David should be greater than one who came later and who would merely restore Israel.
- Jesus quotes Psalm 110, ascribed to David, to prove that the Messiah is in fact greater. We hear a divinely revealed conversation (v. 1) between the LORD (Heb. *Yhwh*) and the Messiah, whom David calls “my Lord” (Heb. *’adōnay*). This distinction of persons is only clear in written Hebrew; in Greek both designations are translated with the same word (*kyrios*). In Israel, a son might call his father “lord” (as in Matt 21:30), but the father would never so address his son.
- With a master stroke Jesus proves that the Messiah is greater than David and that His place is in heaven at God’s right hand. No one dared question Jesus anymore because His brilliant answers only enhanced His standing with the crowds and diminished the standing of the Jewish leaders.

## Application of the Chapter

Some lessons from Matthew 22 include:

1. In the parable of the Wedding Feast the king’s invitation was as wide as imaginable but only a few came. Of those who did come, not all prepared properly for the great event. This echoes warnings of Jesus (e.g., Matt 7:13–14), and the reality of a judgment to come based on our response to the invitation (2 Cor 5:10; Rev 22:12).
2. Sometimes it is argued that taxes are not obligatory, but Jesus is clear that they are and so is Paul (Rom 13:6; cf. Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13).
3. Jesus’ statement to “render . . . to God the things that are God’s,” is a reminder that all our abilities, talents, and resources we have received. As David said, “all things come from You, and of Your own we have given You” (1 Chr 29:14).
4. By returning to God a tithe or ten percent of our financial resources, we acknowledge His ownership of all we have, that we are stewards of what He has entrusted to us. In addition, freewill offerings show our gratitude to God for all He has done for us, including His granting us the “power to get wealth” (Deut 8:18).
5. We should recognize that our own understanding is finite and not limit God’s word to what we are willing to believe and practice, nor reject biblical truths that our minds consider impossible.



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## Endnotes

1 All biblical quotations are from the NKJV, unless otherwise indicated.  
2 Clinton Wahlen, “Greek Philosophy, Judaism, and Biblical Anthropology,” in “*What Are Human Beings That You Remember Them?*” Proceedings from the Third International Bible Conference Nof Ginosar and Jerusalem June 11–21, 2012 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015), 114 (in reference to *hadēs* in the Septuagint): “It is not a place of final rewards but conforms to the Hebrew notion of *she’ol* in referring to the grave as a place of darkness and destruction, the absence of life rather than its shadowy continuation.” Similarly, Richard Bauckham, “Hades, Hell,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed., David Noel Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 3:14.

3 Michael J. Wilkins, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (New Testament), 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 1:137.

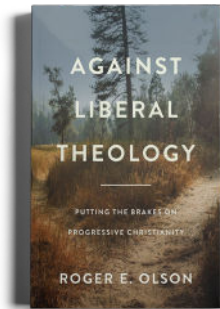
4 Carolyn Pressler, “Levirate Marriage,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 803.

5 The middle form Greek verb *planasthe* can mean “deceive oneself” (Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 822).

6 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 606.

# Against Liberal Theology: Putting the Brakes on Progressive Christianity

Frank M. Hasel



## Against Liberal Theology: Putting the Brakes on Progressive Christianity

Roger E. Olson.  
Grand Rapids, MI:  
Zondervan Reflective,  
2022. 180 pp.  
USD 18.99.

Renowned Baptist theologian Roger E. Olson<sup>1</sup> has written a thought-provoking book in which he compares the basic beliefs of the Christian faith with the main ideas of liberal theology. For him “liberal” does not apply to political beliefs or commitments. It is not about politics, economics, social philosophies, or mere open-mindedness to new ideas. Olson restricts the term “liberal” “only to theological liberalism and liberal theologians” (p. 14). In eight chapters he provides the reader with a concise overview of the historical background of liberal theology (chapter 1), its sources and norms (chapter 2) and then looks at their understanding of the Bible (chapter 3), God (chapter 4), Jesus Christ (chapter 5), salvation (chapter 6), and the understanding of the future (chapter 7), before in the final chapter he addresses the crisis of liberal theology. In each chapter Olson quotes leading representatives of liberal theology and examines their understanding of the key tenets of Christianity. In doing so, Olson focuses his attention mainly, but not exclusively, on representatives from North America.

His analysis and evaluation of liberal theology is even more remarkable because Olson himself is a representative of a “post-conservative Evangelicalism”<sup>2</sup> and elsewhere strongly argues for a “big-tent” view of the Evangelical movement or a “generous orthodoxy.”<sup>3</sup> Still, Olson is concerned about liberal theology and has issued a clarion call for all Christians to examine and evaluate liberal theology and its implications for authentic, orthodox Christian faith. His “aim is to inform people

what liberal Christianity is and why they ought to think critically about it” (p. ix). According to Olson, this is a much-needed task because liberal Christianity “is attractive in some ways and to many people” (p. x). While many of these people do not buy into liberal Christianity entirely, they are nevertheless influenced by it directly or indirectly and “their ideas trickle down and ripple out into churches and affect the beliefs and lives of ‘ordinary Christians’ – those who never attend seminary or write theology books or pastor churches” (p. 10).

While liberal theology is not monolithic or homogeneous, it has some common, unifying features (p. 2), including “their basic approach to authority in theology, the nature of theology itself, the nature of God and of Jesus Christ, the meaning of salvation, the nonreality of miracles, and the authority of modernity, the culture of the Enlightenment, and (allegedly) modern science” (p. 15).

Olson perceptively points out the cultural and secular mindset of modernity that is at the foundation of liberal theology. For liberal theologians, the Bible is not the criterion of truth. For them the Bible does not norm us; it only forms us (p. 36). In other words, the Bible may have an influence on us, but it is not the final norm that decides theological questions. Thus, Olson points out that “liberal theology looks to the best of *contemporary* culture and thought as authoritative for Christian theology” (p. 10, emphasis original). No matter whether this perspective is modern or postmodern, liberal Christianity will inevitably adjust and accommodate itself to what is deemed to be best of contemporary culture and thought, which in turn becomes its supreme norm. This has implications for “working out its beliefs, its teachings, its focus, its mission” (p. 10). Olson is convinced that “even one liberal idea, such as that Jesus Christ was not divine in the same way as God, can serve as a leaven that leavens the whole loaf of a Christian denomination or congregation or ministry or even mind” (pp. 28–29).

His interpretation of liberal theology is carefully substantiated with numerous quotations from leading

liberal theologians throughout the book. In one way or another, liberal theology always takes its stand on the verdicts of modern knowledge and experience without bowing to external authority claims. It accepts the naturalistic premises of modern historiography and specializes in cultural accommodation. In trying to be progressive, liberal theologians seek to bring biblical claims into line with beliefs derived from modern critical consciousness. Thus, liberal theology takes “for granted that the authority of reason makes the mythical aspects of Christianity problematic for modern theology” (p. 22).<sup>4</sup> With this outlook, liberal theology “elevates modern reason and experience to sources and norms that trump the Bible and orthodox Christian tradition” (p. 39).

According to one leading expert of liberal theology, liberal Christians give “too much authority to modern culture in the course of liberating American Christianity from its scriptural and ecclesiastical houses of authority” (p. 167).<sup>5</sup> While in liberal theology the Bible might form us—that is, it might shape our lives to some degree—it does not stand in authority over us and our thinking (p. 63). Olson points out that “in most cases that means a nonsupernatural interpretation of the Bible and Christianity—a Christianity without miracles” (p. 7).

The conclusion that Olson draws from his insightful and fair examination of liberal theology is sobering: liberal Christianity is not a valid variation of Christian belief; it is rather “an entirely different religion from orthodox Christianity” (p. 33). This judgment might sound harsh to some ears, but throughout his book Olson displays an irenic spirit and makes repeatedly clear that he does not judge the eternal salvation of those he differs with, nor does he judge anyone’s personal Christian faith; all he does is judge whether a theology is authentically Christian (p. 164). In light of the significant alterations of Christian belief in liberal theology, even a post-conservative theologian like Olson senses the need and responsibility to open our eyes to the fact that “when someone denies the deity of Jesus Christ, explicitly or implicitly, he or she cuts the cord of continuity with biblical and historic-orthodox Christianity and steps outside of and away from Christianity. That person’s religion is another one, not authentically Christian” (p. 101).

Indeed, according to Olson “liberal Christian theology is a different species from biblical, historical, classical, orthodox Christianity because it has cut itself off from all authority except that of the individual’s self and modern thought, and modern thought is basically secular” (p. 41, see also pp. 48, 52, 96, and *passim*). For Olson liberal theology has overemphasized God’s immanence to the point of losing God’s transcendence (p. 52); it “has cut the cord of continuity between itself

and classical, orthodox Christianity so fully and finally that what is left is unrecognizable as authentically Christian” (p. 73). One challenge many people face when dealing with liberal scholars is that liberal theologians often use the same terminology but thoroughly redefine its meaning. Olson rightly points out, however, that “a word can be redefined only so thoroughly before it loses meaning. A religion can be revised only so thoroughly before it becomes something else” (p. 119). For instance, the term “resurrection” is carefully reinterpreted by liberal theologians to mean something different from the historical and realistic events of the Bible. In liberal theology these terms become mere symbols “without any connection to a real event, past, present, or future” (p. 24). There is a distinct disconnect in liberal theology between major Christian symbols and history (p. 24).

In light of such a massive transformation of biblical content and belief it is no wonder that “liberal churches . . . are struggling to survive” (p. 116). Olson quotes one of the leading experts on liberal theology, Gary J. Dorrien, who bemoans that “liberal congregations neglected the Bible, showed little or no interest in evangelism, and sneered at revival preaching. Their own preaching was sentimental and psychologized; they prized gradualism and niceness, looked for God only in the universal, and had no concept of divine judgement or the fear of God” (p. 168). According to Olson, the problem with liberal theology “is not so much what it affirms as what it implicitly or explicitly denies” (p. 95). Olson is certainly right in his assessment—that in liberal theology often legitimate points are affirmed but other essential aspects of the Christian faith are denied—but the problem is even deeper than that. It has to do with different presuppositions that are at work and that are derived from a secular and naturalistic worldview. One wonders where this accommodation to culture and to a modern secular worldview began to take roots in liberal churches? For Olson, “the simple answer is in their seminaries” (p. 164).

In comparing liberal theology with orthodox faith, Olson is aware that the interpretation of the Christian faith throughout history is not uniform and monolithic. Yet he claims that for “biblical-orthodox Christianity in all its denominational varieties, salvation is God’s supernatural work through Jesus Christ” (p. 122) and that “all have always agreed” (pp. 122–123) on some common ground when it comes to basic aspects of salvation. It seems that Olson is stretching the historical accuracy of some of his historical conclusions when he makes such a sweeping statement. What is even more concerning is his claim that “all of this is found in the New Testament, the ancient church fathers, the medieval theologians, the Reformers, the post-reformation pietists and revivalists, and all modern orthodox theologians

## Book Review

and churches” (p. 123). Here the wish for continuity and unity throughout church history is stronger than the historical reality. While much of Olson’s observation and analysis of the loss of the authoritative role of Scripture in liberal theology is correct, one also notices a repeated reference in his argumentation not to Scripture alone, but to “Athanasius and other ancient church fathers” (p. 115) or what he repeatedly calls the “orthodox Christian faith” (passim). This emphasis on extrabiblical traditions and church fathers leads him to affirm certain teachings, such as eternal hell (pp. 23, 125, 131, 147, 154), as orthodox biblical faith. This portrays not only a problematic picture of the character of God, but also is not as unvaryingly supported by all biblical Christians throughout the ages, as he claims. His emphasis on the value of the great orthodox tradition and the creeds (pp. 113, 124) raises important questions about the role of Christian tradition for the definition of what constitutes orthodox biblical faith.

All this being said, Olson’s book nevertheless provides a perceptive analysis of liberal theology. It does not shy away from a candid analysis and verdict that should make us think about the impact of liberal theology for Christianity at large and for our own faith tradition. For all those who want to understand better the nature and impact of liberal theology today, this book provides ample food for thought and is highly recommended.



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### Endnotes

1 Olson has written several important books, among them *The Story of Christian Theology* (Wheaton IL: InterVarsity, 1999). He has also co-authored with Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Wheaton, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

2 See his position in Andrew Naselli and Collin Hansen, eds., *Four Views on The Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

3 See Scott Wenig, review of *Four Views on The Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, edited by Andrew Naselli and Collin Hansen, in *Denver Journal* (May 2012), <https://denverseminary.edu/the-denver-journal-article/four-views-on-the-spectrum-of-evangelicalism/> (accessed January 9, 2023).

4 Olson here quotes from Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900–1950* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 534.

5 Olson quotes from Dorrien, 411.

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The word of God, like the character of its divine Author, presents mysteries that can never be fully comprehended by finite beings. The entrance of sin into the world, the incarnation of Christ, regeneration, the resurrection, and many other subjects presented in the Bible, are mysteries too deep for the human mind to explain, or even fully to comprehend. But we have no reason to doubt God’s word because we cannot understand the mysteries of His providence. In the natural world we are constantly surrounded with mysteries that we cannot fathom. The very humblest forms of life present a problem that the wisest of philosophers is powerless to explain. Everywhere are wonders beyond our ken. Should we then be surprised to find that in the spiritual world also there are mysteries that we cannot fathom? The difficulty lies solely in the weakness and narrowness of the human mind. God has given us in the Scriptures sufficient evidence of their divine character, and we are not to doubt His word because we cannot understand all the mysteries of His providence.

Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, 106.

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# Biblical Theological Retreat - Bali 2023

The Biblical Theological Retreats organized by the BRI are intended to provide opportunities for meaningful personal fellowship and exchange of ideas with theology professors of Seventh-day Adventist institutions worldwide. During these meetings, BRI scholars present topics that are of current interest to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and update attendees on the various projects

of the Biblical Research Institute. The relaxed schedule of the retreats also allows theology professors in each division to interact, share experiences, and encourage one another in this special field of mission. The BRI has had already BTR's with theology teachers from three different divisions and meetings with theology teachers from other divisions are planned for 2023 and 2024.



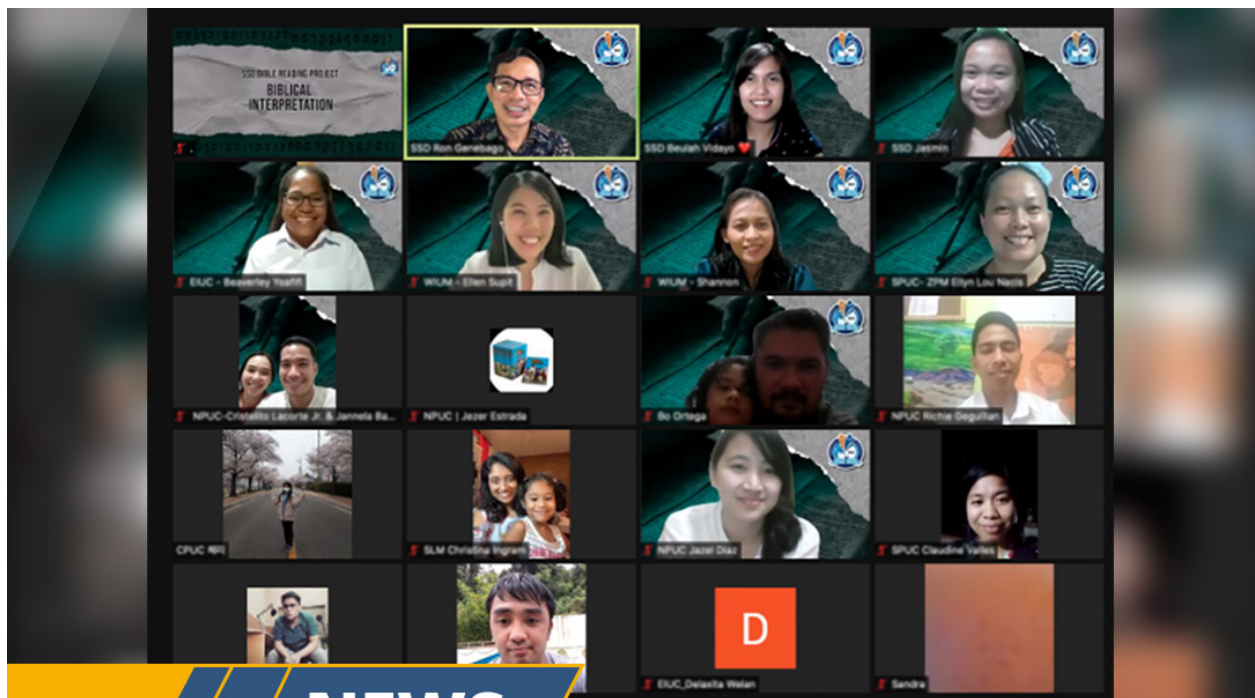


# SSD Bible Reading Project Holds Biblical Interpretation Webinar

The Southern Asia Pacific Division (SSD) Youth Bible reading project, which was founded to lead youth to love Scripture as their standard of living while reflecting a Christlike character, held a Biblical interpretation webinar from December 3-4, 2021, via Zoom. It was organized to motivate and assist the youth of the SSD to have a better understanding of the Biblical text and context and to







grow in Scripture. The webinar consists of 14 lectures presented by 12 renowned Adventist scholars. The videos are available in several different languages and can be found on the BRI YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCckULruZAnkMWFnKjv8UK0A>

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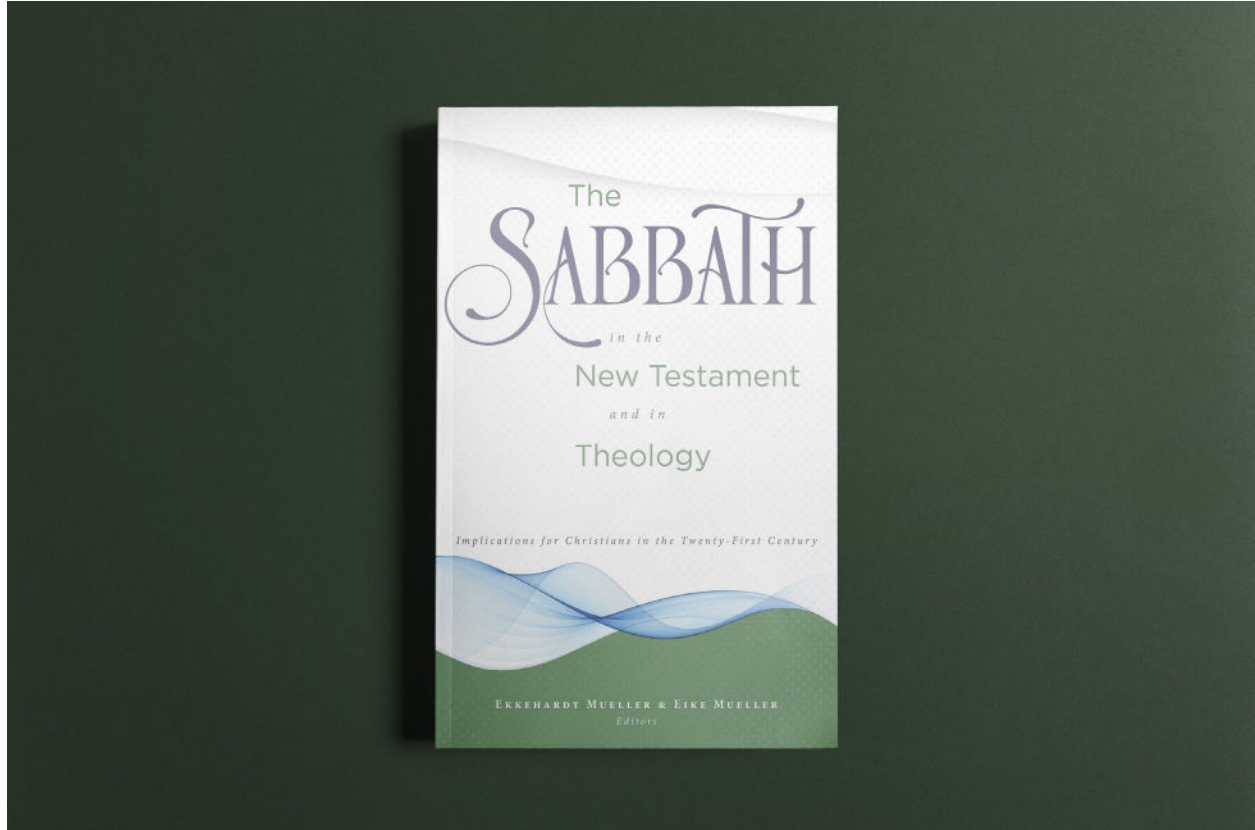


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