

INTERPRETATIONS OF GENESIS 1:1

SANGHOON JEE, PH.D.

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines

This study presents the three major interpretations of, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1, NKJV) prevalent among Seventh-day Adventists in order to help distinguish between each interpretation, clarify its tenets, and evaluate its theological implications.

Key Words: Genesis 1:1, creation, gap theory, active gap, no gap, passive gap

1. Introduction

Adventists understand the first verse of the Bible, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (NKJV) as "the foundation for all that follows."¹ Recent debates have swirled around the translation of this verse² leading to diverging interpretations.³ This study will review and analyze the three major interpretations, all of which hold that the Genesis

¹ "An Affirmation of Creation," Report of the International Faith and Science Conferences 2002–2004 (Organizing Committee; Silver Spring, Maryland, October 11, 2004), 1. See <http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main-stat54.html> (accessed 28 August 2011).

² Gerhard F. Hasel, "Recent Translations of Gen 1:1: A Critical Look," *The Bible Translator* 22 (1971): 154–167; idem, "The Meaning of Genesis 1:1," *Ministry* (January 1976): 21–24; H. M. Orlinsky, "The Plain Meaning of Gen 1:1–3," *Biblical Archaeologist* 46 (1983): 207–209; Bruce K. Waltke, "The Creation Account in Gen 1:1–3; Part III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (1975): 25–36; E. J. Young, "The Relation of the First Verse of Genesis One to Verse Two and Three," in *Studies in Genesis One* (Philadelphia & Reformed, 1976), 1–14.

³ Ferdinand O. Regalado, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1: Our World Only or the Universe?," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 13/2 (2002): 109.

creation account must be read literally,⁴ and then provide some considerations for evaluation.

2. Three Major Interpretations of Genesis 1:1

Neils-Erik Andreasen, observes that the opening sentence of the Bible is as plain so that “even a child can understand it, and yet every single word in it has been the object of interpretative disagreement.”⁵ Thus, several interpretations of Gen 1:1 have been proposed by interpreters who understand God as Creator and the Bible as His inspired word. This section examines the three major interpretations of Gen 1:1.⁶

2.1 Active Gap Interpretation

The active gap interpretation holds that “Genesis 1:1 refers to a creation of this physical world and all life upon it” taking place some unknown years

⁴ All three interpretations of Gen 1:1 belong to literal interpretations of the Genesis creation account. The interpretations that view Gen 1:1 from a non-literal perspective, are not considered in the study. Scholars who hold to a non-literal view approach the interpretation of Gen 1:1 in different ways: as mythology based upon ANE parallels, as poetry, as a symbolic text, or as “literary [theological] framework.” For examples and names of each interpretive approach, see Richard M. Davidson, “The Biblical Account of Origins,” *Journal of the Adventist Society* 14/1 (Spring 2003): 10–11. Although there are different approaches, the interpretations are based upon but two influences. One influence comes from outside the biblical text and the other from scientific hypothesis or the modern theory of evolution. Gerhard F. Hasel, “The ‘Days’ of Creation in Genesis 1: Literal ‘Days’ or Figurative ‘periods/epochs’ of Time?,” *Origins* 21/1 (1994): 3.

⁵ Niels-Erik Andreasen, “The Word ‘Earth’ in Genesis 1:1,” *Origins* 8 (1981): 13.

⁶ Gerhard Pfandl, “Does Genesis Teach that the Earth Existed in an Unformed State Prior to the Creation Week?” in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers* (ed. Gerhard Pfandl; vol. 2; Biblical Research Institute Studies; Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 110–111, briefly presents five different interpretations of Genesis 1:1. These five are (1) Genesis 1:1 as a Title; (2) The Ruin-Restoration Theory; (3) The “Passive Gap” Theory; (4) Creation of the Universe on Day One; and (5) The Traditional Creation Theory. Richard M. Davidson, “In the Beginning: How to Interpret Genesis 1,” *Dialogue* 6/3 (1994): 9–10, presents four different interpretations and their variations under the division between the non-literal and the literal interpretations, i.e., (1) Non-literal interpretation; (2) “Active-gap” view; (3) Precreation “unformed-unfilled” view with its three variations; and (4) Initial “unformed-unfilled” view with its two variations (the “no-gap” and “passive-gap” interpretation).

ago (millions or billions of years) "at a time long before the seven days of creation week, but that an appalling cataclysm obliterated every trace of life upon it and reduced its surface to a state."⁷ In other words, Gen 1:1 refers to an old creation of this earth that had been destroyed before the recent creation, which then happened in six literal, contiguous days.⁸ Between the destroyed creation and the six-day creation exists a gap of time, a theory which is based on the interpretation of the first and second verses of Gen 1, and is termed as active gap interpretation (theory).⁹

The active gap interpretation claims that the phrase "the earth was without form and void" (Gen 1:2) should be translated as "the earth *became* without form and void" or "the earth was *caused* to be without form and void," which means that a change occurred from its original condition.¹⁰ Thus for the proponents of the active gap interpretation, Gen 1:3–31 is an account of the recent creation in which God restores what had been ruined previously.

Regarding the gap of time between the so-called old creation of Gen 1:1 and the recent creation in Gen 1:3–31, some proponents claim that (1) Satan was the ruler of the old world; (2) because of Satan's rebellion sin entered the universe; (3) God judged this rebellion and reduced the world to the ruined, chaotic state described in Gen 1:2; (4) the destruction of the old world might have been due directly to Satan's activity or the results of a war between Satan and God; and (5) there might have been repeated creations, each followed by a cataclysm. In this sense, the active gap interpretation (theory) is also called the ruin-restoration theory.

- 7 Gerhard Pfandl, class handouts for CHIS 642 History of the Modern Church: Issues in Seventh-day Adventist Theology, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silnag, Cavite, Philippines, 2009.
- 8 In this sense the theory is a form of Old Earth Creationism that posits that the six-day creation involved literal 24-hour days, but that there was a gap of time between two distinct creations, i.e., the first creation in Gen 1:1 and the second creation in Gen 1:2–31. The theory differs from Day-Age Creationism that posits that the "days" of creation were not literal 24-hours, but much longer periods of thousands or millions of years. The theory differs also from Young Earth Creationism that does not posit any gap of time although it agrees concerning the six literal 24-hour days of creation.
- 9 See, for example, Arthur C. Custance, *Without Form and Void: A Study of the Meaning of Genesis 1:2* (Ottawa: Doorway, 1970); and the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1917, 1967).
- 10 H. Rimmer, *Modern Science and the Genesis Record* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 27–28.

Jack W. Provonsha, a Seventh-day Adventist physician and theologian, seems to favor the active gap interpretation of Gen 1:1.¹¹ Provonsha seems to suggest that Adventists may consider the ruin-restoration theory as propounded by the *Scofield Reference Bible*. Regarding Provonsha's proposal, James L. Hayward observes as follows:

One solution to this knotty problem was proposed by Loma Linda University's theologian and physician Jack Provonsha who . . . was unwilling to skim over the implications of the bulk of scientific data. Instead he resurrected the once-popular "ruin and restoration" theory, suggesting that when Lucifer was cast to earth from heaven he was given "a long period of time" to work out his principle. This included genetic experimentation resulting in the evolutionary process which ultimately led to the development of human-like apes. At some more recent time, Provonsha suggested, God stepped in and created the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve.¹²

Provonsha's proposal was the most serious attempt to harmonize the conservative (traditional) Adventist creation theology with scientific data. Nonetheless, this view has received little support from Seventh-day Adventist scholars.

2.2 No Gap Interpretation

Traditionally, the majority of Jewish and Christian interpreters throughout history have believed that God created the original matter called "heavens and earth" (Gen 1:1) out of nothing at the point of their absolute beginning.¹³ Some Evangelical interpreters, who maintain such a traditional way of interpretation of Gen 1:1,¹⁴ see in the first verse of

¹¹ Jack W. Provonsha, "The Creation/Evolution Debate in the Light of the Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan," in *Creation Reconsidered* (ed. James L. Hayward; Roseville, CA: Association of Adventist Forums, 2000), 303–311.

¹² James L. Hayward, "The Many Faces Advent Creationism: '80–'95," *Spectrum* 25/3 (1996): 22. See also Gary Chartier, "Jack Provonsha on Fundamentalist Geology: More needs to be said," *La Sierra Criterion* 57/6 (1985): 1, 4, 8.

¹³ Richard M. Davidson, "The Biblical Account of Origin," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14/1 (Spring 2003): 20, lists a number of names such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, C. F. Keil, F. Delitzsch, J. Wellhausen, E. Konig, G. Ch. Aalders, H. Leupoid, Alexander Heidel, B. S. Childs, Derek Kidner, E. j. Young, E. Maly, and others. For a list of major supporters of the no gap theory, see Hasel, "Recent Translations of Gen 1:1: A Critical Look," 163.

¹⁴ See, for example, Henry Morris, *The Genesis Record* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), 17–104; and idem, *The Biblical Basis for Modern Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984). Among many, Mark F. Rooker has done some of the best research in defense

Genesis the creation of the whole universe on the first day of the creation week.¹⁵ They claim that the six-day creation week begins in Gen 1:1, and not in Gen 1:3. For them there is no gap of time between Gen 1:1 and v. 2. In this sense, this theory is known as the no gap interpretation.

The no gap interpretation understands (1) Gen 1:1 as a declaration that God created "the heavens and the earth," the original matter, out of nothing, (2) Gen 1:2 as a clarification that when it came from the Creator's hand the original material ("the heavens and the earth") was originally "unformed" and "unfilled" (*tōhū wābōhū*), and (3) Gen 1:3–31 as a description of the divine process of forming the unformed and filling the unfilled.

The key difference between the active gap interpretation and the no gap interpretation is that while the former translates Gen 1:2 as "the earth became unformed and unfilled" the latter translates it as "the earth was unformed and unfilled." In other words, the no gap interpretation interprets Gen 1:2 as a state or condition of the earth when it was first created, not as a sequence or action that the earth underwent.¹⁶

Among Seventh-day Adventists, the no gap view has been modified to hold that it was not the universe as a whole that was created on the first day of the creation week but the earth and the planetary system to the

of the traditional view, and presented a fine counter-argument to the gap theory as well as the precreation chaos theory advanced by Waltke. See Mark F. Rooker, "Genesis 1:1–3: Creation or Re-Creation? Part 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149/595 (Jul–Sep 1992): 316–23; and idem, "Genesis 1:1–3: Creation or Re-Creation? Part 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149/596 (Oct–Dec 1992): 411–27.

For a more thorough defense of the traditional view, see James B. Jordan, *Creation In Six Days: A Defense of the Traditional Reading of Genesis One* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 1999); Douglas F. Kelly, *Creation and Change: Genesis 1:1–2.4 in the Light of Changing Scientific Paradigms* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 1997); Joseph A. Pipa and David W. Hall, eds., *Did God Create in Six Days?* (Taylors, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1999).

- ¹⁵ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1942), 1:14; R. K. Harrison, "Creation," *The Zandervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (M. C. Tenney, ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975–1976), 1:1022; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, (vol. 1; The New American Commentary; Broadman & Holman, 2002), 140–142.
- ¹⁶ F. F. Bruce, "And the Earth was Without Form and Void," *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 78 (1946): 21–23. See also Weston W. Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled: A Critique of the Gap Theory of Genesis 1:1, 2* (Winona Lake, IN: Light and Life, 1973), 105; and Randall W. Younker, *God's Creation: Exploring the Genesis Story* (Nampa, ID: Pacific, 1999).

earth.¹⁷ This interpretation harmonizes with the great controversy theme between Christ and Satan and Satan's activities in connection with the creation of the present world.¹⁸ Thus, the expression "the heavens and the earth" in Gen 1:1 refers to the earth's solar system and *tōhū wābōhū* is a description of the condition of the earth immediately after its creation and before the creation of light on the first day of the creation week.¹⁹ Regalado, for example, concludes:

When we closely examine Gen. 1, especially such words as "in the beginning" and "heavens and earth," contextually and linguistically, we can say that the creation narrative is talking only about our world and is silent about the creation of the entire universe, as we understand the universe today. Moreover, in our study of the Hebraic understanding of the world in the framework of creation, we discover that there is no hint whatsoever that Gen. 1 is concerned with the creation of other planets or other worlds.²⁰

The *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* maintains the same interpretation:

An examination of those occurrences [occurrences of the phrase "the heavens and the earth" in the creation narrative] shows that the word "heavens" does not focus upon the universe, but rather upon the atmospheric heavens that surround this earth. Those were the "heavens" that God addressed when He divided the firmament on the second day of Creation week. Those were the heavens in which the birds flew after their creation on the fifth day (Gen. 1:20). Thus the focus of the use of the phrase "heavens and the earth" in Genesis 1 is upon this earth, not the universe or the starry heavens.²¹

¹⁷ Pfandl, Class handouts for CHIS 642 History of the Modern Church: Issues in Seventh-day Adventist Theology, 38.

¹⁸ See Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts* (4 vols.; Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1945), 3:36–38; and idem, *The Story of Redemption* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1947), 13–18.

¹⁹ Pfandl, "Does Genesis Teach that the Earth Existed in an Unformed State Prior to the Creation Week?" in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, 111.

²⁰ Regalado, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1: Our World Only or the Universe?" *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 120.

²¹ William H. Shea, "Creation," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (ed. Raoul Dederen; vol. 12; Commentary Reference Series; Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 420.

Furthermore, Roberto Ouro writes:

To conclude, considering OT and ANE literature, the expression *tōhū wābōhū* in Gen 1:2 must be interpreted as the description of a “desert, uninhabited, arid and unproductive” place. The earth of Gen 1:2, which “was” *hāy’tā tōhū wābōhū*, refers to the earth in an “empty” state with no vegetation, animals, or people. . . . The concept that appears in Gen 1:2 is an abiotic concept of the earth: i.e., Gen 1:2 describes an earth in which there is no life; it presents the absence of life-vegetable, animal, and human. . . . In no case does the phrase describe a chaotic state of the earth as the result of mythical combats between the gods of the myths and legends of Israel’s neighbors.²²

It can therefore be summed up that the no gap theory holds that the creation of the heavens and earth has to do with the creation of this present world and its firmament. There is no gap between the creation of this earth but Gen 1:2 is an explanation of v. 1.

2.3 Passive Gap Interpretation

Within Adventism, there exists an interpretation of Gen 1:1 that is known as the passive gap or soft gap interpretation. According to this view, Gen 1:1 is a reference to the creation of the universe including the earth in its *tōhū wābōhū* (Gen 1:2) state at a certain time before the creation week took place. The creation week then took place several thousand (approximately 6,000) years ago.

The main distinction between the passive gap interpretation and the no-gap interpretation is due to the question *when* did the absolute beginning of “the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1) occur. While the latter interprets Gen 1:1–2 as part of the first day of the seven-day creation, the former interprets Gen 1:1–2 as a chronological unity separated by a gap in time from the first day of creation as described in Gen 1:3. In other words, the former claims that the present earth with its *tōhū wābōhū* (Gen 1:2) state was created before the seven days of creation week while the latter claims that the *tōhū wābōhū* state belongs to the first day of the creation week.²³

²² Robert Ouro, “The Earth of Genesis 1:2: Abiotic or Chaotic? Part I,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 35/2 (1998): 276. See also idem, “The Earth of Genesis 1:2: Abiotic or Chaotic? Part II,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 37/1 (1999): 39–53; and “The Earth of Genesis 1:2: Abiotic or Chaotic? Part III,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 38/1 (2000): 59–67.

²³ Davidson, “The Biblical Account of Origins,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 21.

The passive gap interpretation has a long history in Adventism. An article titled "The Creationist Model of Origins" in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* reports as follows:

Since 1860 the literature of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has presented more than one viewpoint concerning creation of the elementary matter from which the physical structure of living organism is formed (Smith 1860). Some scholars and church leaders have taken the position that all elementary matter in our planet came into existence at the beginning of creation week. Others have understood the testimony of Scripture to suggest, or at least allow, that the substance of earth and solar system is the result, at least in part, or creative activity before creation week.²⁴

The *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* also says that "almost from the first, some SDA's have allowed that the Genesis account can be understood to mean that God spoke into existence the substance of the earth sometime prior to the events of the six literal days of creation."²⁵ That is to say there were some materials in existence prior to the six-day creation.

Representing the passive gap interpretation, J. P. Henderson wrote, "the creation of the material substance of the heaven and the earth may have been ages prior to the six day's work."²⁶ In 1898, M. C. Wilcox wrote that "when this 'beginning' was, how long a period it cover, it is idle to conjecture: for it is not revealed. That it was a period which antedated the six day's work is evident."²⁷

The passive gap interpretation is accepted by many Seventh-day Adventist scientists as well as theologians.²⁸ Richard M. Davidson is one

²⁴ "The Creationist Model of Origins," *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (rev. ed.; Francis D. Nichol, ed.; Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1976-1980), 1:48. Gerhard Pfandl, however, says that "among our pioneers this was the predominant view," and calls it as the "Adventist-Gap" Theory. See Pfandl, *Class handouts for CHIS 642 History of the Modern Church: Issues in Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, 36-37.

²⁵ *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (rev. ed.; 1976), s.v. "Creation,"

²⁶ J. P. Henderson, "The Bible-No. 7," *Review and Herald* 64/27 (July 5, 1887), 418.

²⁷ M. C. Wilcox, "The Gospel in Genesis One," *The Signs of the Times* 24/27 (July 7, 1898), 16.

²⁸ For example, Clyde L. Webster, Jr., former associate director of the Geo-Science Research Institute, in his book *The Earth* writes, "There is no reference in Scripture within creation week that addresses the creation of water or the mineral content of dry land. . . . The only reference made to their creation is 'in the beginning.' It seems possible then that the elementary inorganic matter is not bound by a limited age as

of the well-known advocates of this view. After presenting seven reasons why he prefers the passive gap interpretation over the no gap interpretation²⁹ Davidson expresses:

I conclude that the biblical text of Gen 1 leaves room for either (a) young pre-fossil rock, created as part of the seven days of creation (with appearance of old age), or (b) much older pre-fossil earth rocks, with a long interval between the creation of the inanimate "raw materials" on earth described in Gen 1:1-2 and the seven days of creation week described in Gen 1:3ff (which I find the preferable interpretation).³⁰

3. Considerations for Evaluation

This section provides considerations for the evaluation of the three major interpretations of Gen 1:1 that have been reviewed. The principles for evaluation include the importance of the interpretation of Gen 1:1 in the Seventh-day Adventist church and theology, the *sola scriptura* principle, and the theological relationship between sin and death.

is the living matter." See Clyde E. Webster, Jr., *The Earth* (Silver Spring: Office of Education, NAD, 1989), 43.

²⁹ Davidson, "The Biblical Account of Origins," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 21-24, presents seven considerations for the passive gap interpretation. First, he quoted John Hartley's observation, "The consistent pattern used for each day of creation ['and God said...'] and 'there was evening and there was morning'] tells us that verse 1-2 are not an integral part of the first day of creation (vv. 3-5). That is, these first two verses stand apart from the report of what God did on the first day of creation." See John E. Hartley, *Genesis* (The New International Biblical Commentary; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson; Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2000), 52. Second, pointing that the phrase "the heavens and the earth" in Gen 1:1 includes the entire universe he concludes that "If 'heavens and earth' refers to the whole universe, this 'beginning' (at least for part of the 'heavens') must have been before the first day of earth's creation week." Third, he argues that the dyad "heavens and earth" (entire universe) of Gen 1:1 are to be distinguished from the triad "heaven, earth, and sea" (the three earth habitats) of Gen. 1:3ff. Fourth, quoting John Sailhamer, "Genesis," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 38, he points out that the Hebrew word for "beginning" in Gen 1:1, *rēšit*, "does not refer to a point in time, but to a period or duration of time which falls before a series of events." Fifth, he points out God's creating by differentiation or separation involving previously-created materials. Sixth, such a "separating" creation concept is supported by the creation account of Gen 2. Seventh, such a pattern of two-stage divine creation activity is seen in other parallels.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

3.1 Importance of Genesis 1:1 for the Seventh-day Adventist Church and Theology

The Genesis creation account is the *sine qua non* of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.³¹ The interpretation of Gen 1:1 occupies an important article of faith on which Seventh-day Adventist theology as well as its message and mission stand. The reason for this is twofold: (1) Adventists believe in a fiat creation; and (2) they are committed to proclaim the three angels' message of Rev 14.³² The report of the International Faith and Science Conference Organizing Committee to the 2004 Autumn Council of the General Conference made a statement about the significance of Gen 1:1 to the Seventh-day Adventist message and theology as follows:

The very first words of the Bible provide the foundation for all that follow. . . . From this view of the world flows a series of interlocking doctrines that lie at the core of the Seventh-day Adventist message to the world: a perfect world without sin and death created not long ago; the Sabbath; the fall of our first parents; the spread of sin, decay and death to the whole creation; the coming of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, to live among us and rescue us from sin by His death and resurrection of all that was lost by the Fall.³³

Thus, it can be said that each of the 28 fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is somehow tied to the Genesis account of creation.³⁴ The "Statement on Creation" approved and voted by the Executive Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists on June 23, 2010, and released at the General Conference Session in Atlanta, Georgia, June 24–July 3, 2010, states:

Belief in creation is foundational to Seventh-day Adventist understanding concerning much more than the question of origins. The purposes and mission of God described in the Bible, human responsibility for stewardship of the environment, the institution

³¹ Moskala, "The President's Page: Creation-The Sine Qua Non of Adventism," *Journal of the Adventist Society*, 1.

³² Marco T. Terreros, "The Adventist Message and the Challenge of Evolution," *Dialogue* 8/2, 11.

³³ "An Affirmation of Creation," Report of the International Faith and Science Conferences 2002–2004 Organizing Committee, 1.

³⁴ Moskala, "The President's Page: Creation-The Sine Qua Non of Adventism," *Journal of the Adventist Society*, 1.

of marriage and the sacred meaning of the Sabbath and find their meaning in the doctrine of creation.³⁵

Therefore, it is necessary to consider the Seventh-day Adventist message and theology as a whole as essential to and affecting the understanding of Gen 1:1.

3.2 Sola Scriptura

Scripture interprets Scripture. This *sola scriptura* principle lays at the foundation for the understanding of the Gen 1 creation account. That is to say, what the rest of Scripture says about creation is not only important but also necessary to a proper interpretation of Gen 1:1.³⁶ The *sola scriptura* principle also means that conscience, reason, feelings, experiences, as well as scientific knowledge are subordinate to the authority of Scripture in the process of interpretation.

Adventists firmly maintain the *sola scriptura* principle that "Scripture is its own interpreter."³⁷ They "acknowledge that for a correct interpretation of Scripture the Scripture itself is foundational."³⁸ This means that external methods from the twentieth and twenty first centuries cannot be read back into the Bible, but that the Bible must be allowed to speak for itself.³⁹

³⁵ "Statement on Creation: The Bible's Worldview," *Official Statements of Seventh-day Adventist Church*, from <http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/bible-worldview.html> (accessed 4 September 2011).

³⁶ Norman R. Gulley, "Basic Issues between Science and Scripture: Theological Implications of Alternative Models and the Necessary Basis for the Sabbath in Genesis 1–2" *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14/1 (Spring 2003): 196.

³⁷ Richard M. Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (ed. Raoul Dederen; vol. 12; Commentary Reference Series; Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 64. Don F. Neufeld, "Biblical Interpretation in the Advent Movement," in *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics* (ed. Gordon M. Hyde; Washington, DC: Biblical Research Committee, 1974), 117–122, shows that Seventh-day Adventists have maintained the *sola scriptura* principle. See also Alberto R. Timm, "A History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on Biblical and Prophetic Inspiration (1844–2000)," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 10/1 (Spring 1999): 513–524; and C. Mervyn Maxwell, "A Brief History of Adventist Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 4/2 (Autumn 1993): 212–217.

³⁸ Frank M. Hasel, "Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture?" in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach* (ed. George W. Reid; vol. 1; Biblical Research Institute Studies; Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2006), 36.

³⁹ This principle does not deny various styles of writing or their historical and chronological contexts, but rather relates them to one another within the whole framework of Scripture.

In applying the *sola scriptura* principle to the doctrine of creation, especially to the interpretation of the Genesis creation account, the question must be asked: "What do other parts of the Bible say about creation?" or "How do other parts of the Bible interpret the Genesis creation account?" The primacy and the sufficiency of Scripture are to be maintained not only in the process of interpreting Gen 1:1, but also in evaluating the interpretations of Gen 1:1.

3.3 Sin and Death

Before choosing a particular interpretation of Gen 1:1, the theological relationship between sin and death needs to be considered. The essential question is, if death existed in the created world before sin came or if death was the result of the fall into sin. As considered earlier, the active gap interpretation postulates that an indefinite span of time exists between Gen 1:1 and v. 2 and that a cataclysmic judgment (including death of animals or other creatures) was pronounced upon the earth during this period. Furthermore, advocates of the active gap interpretation insist that v. 2 describes a changed or destroyed earth of the first creation, and that v. 3 starts the account of the recent creation of the present earth as a re-creation or reforming of the earth from its chaotic state. Therefore, a proper understanding of the relationship between sin and death is critical to the interpretation of Gen 1:1 within the context of Scripture.

The Bible insists that death is an enemy (1 Cor 15:26) and a curse (Gen 3:14–17) pronounced on all creation. The divine judgment came as a result of Adam's sin (Gen 3:17; 1 Tim 2:14), and is not part of God's good creation. Adventists hold that "the Bible attributes the origin of death to sin."⁴⁰ Death is a punishment for sin; death must have come into existence because of Adam's sin.⁴¹ The Bible conveys that there was no death of humans or animals before Adam sinned.⁴² If there were eons of pain,

⁴⁰ Niels-Erik A. Andreassen, "Death: Origin, Nature, and Final Eradication," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (ed. Rauol Dederen; vol. 12; Commentary Reference Series; Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 318. Romans 5:12 says, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned"(NASB).

⁴¹ See Randall W. Younker, "A Look at Biblical and Ancient Extra-Biblical Perspectives on Death," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 16/1–2 (2005): 30–42. Jacques B. Doukhan also maintains that the Bible denies any death before Adam's sin. See Jacques B. Doukhan, "Where Did Death Come From? A Study in the Genesis Creation Story," *Adventist Perspectives* 4/1 (1990): 16–18.

⁴² Both Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:20–26 clearly present the fact that death results from Adam's sin.

suffering, destruction, and death before Adam's sin,⁴³ then much of biblical teaching will be questioned or interpreted allegorically. Hence, the entrance of death into the created world must be understood as happening after the fall into sin. Otherwise, the Genesis creation account becomes theologically meaningless.

In conclusion, any attempt that holds that death was a part of God's original creation does not fit with the biblical text. Andreasen notes, "In the light of Bible teaching regarding its origin, death never can be seen as a natural, inevitable consequence of God's creation or as a normal segment of life."⁴⁴ Thus, the active gap interpretation poses a grave theological difficulty.

4. Summary and Conclusions

Considerable debates over the understanding and translation of Gen 1:1 have contributed to the three interpretations as discussed above. This brief study pointed out the distinctions between the different interpretations and offered some principles in evaluating the theological implications from an Adventist perspective.

Some conclusions drawn from this study can be summarized as follows:

1. Three interpretations of Gen 1:1 co-exists among Seventh-day Adventist scholars, the no gap, the passive gap, and the active gap interpretation.
2. The co-existence of the three interpretations of Gen 1:1 calls for a thorough study of each in order to understand which interpretation is coherent with Seventh-day Adventists theology.
3. The principles used in the process of evaluating the different interpretations of Gen 1:1 show that the active gap interpretation does not seem coherent and acceptable to Seventh-day Adventist theology.
4. Genesis 1:1 leaves a possibility for either the passive gap or the no gap interpretation in the context of Seventh-day Adventist theology.

⁴³ Some seem to believe that there was death of animals or humans, or, at least, of plants, before the Fall, i.e., Adam's sin. See Glenn R. Morton, "Death before the Fall: The Theology." <http://home.entouch.net/dmd/death.htm> (accessed 4 October 2011) and Greg Neyman, "Creation Science Issue: Death before the Fall of Adam." <http://www.answersincreation.org/death.htm> (accessed 4 October 2011).

⁴⁴ Andreasen, "Death: Origin, Nature, and Final Eradication," 320.

5. The passive gap and the no gap interpretations do not undermine the authority of the Bible as God's revelation and the superiority of the Bible over scientific knowledge, but call for further theological consideration for a proper interpretation of Gen 1:1.