Sabbath in the Book of Isaiah

Daniel K. Bediako

ABSTRACT—The Sabbath is an important theological concept in the book of Isaiah. The significance attached to the Sabbath does not only find expression in the prediction of its observance in the renewed conditions following the captivity, but also in the fact that continual possession of the promised land would depend upon proper Sabbath-keeping. The final verses connect Sabbath-keeping with eschatology by implying that Sabbath will be observed in the “new heavens and new earth.” Through contextual analysis, however, it is suggested that the eschatology in this text is best understood in a postexilic sense (i.e., an extended period following the return from captivity) rather than in an apocalyptic sense. Further, the creation of “new heavens and new earth” is to be understood as a highly poetic expression anchoring the redemption and restoration of Judah from the Babylonian captivity. Sabbath-keeping sums up righteousness.

Keywords: Captivity, Creation, Restoration, Sabbath-keeping

I. Introduction

The book of Isaiah contains several references to the Sabbath. While the opening indictment oracle excoriates the people of Judah for improper Sabbath-keeping (Isa 1:13), the aftermath oracles indicate that Sabbath-keeping will be an integral part of the restoration following the impending judgment (Isa 56:1-6; 58:1-14). In fact, Sabbath-keeping bears an eschatological significance, for when God creates the “new heavens and new earth,” the Lord will be worshipped on the Sabbath (Isa 66:23). The connection between

Manuscript received Dec. 30, 2011; revised Jul. 11, 2012; accepted Aug. 13, 2012.

Daniel K. Bediako (bediako76@yahoo.com) is with the School of Graduate Studies, Valley View University, Accra, Ghana.
Sabbath-keeping and eschatology in Isa 66:22-23 has been an issue of interest especially to Seventh-day Adventists, even though other questions are often raised on the meanings of the Sabbath passages in the book. This article undertakes a theological survey of the concept of the Sabbath in Isaiah, seeking to clarify meanings of the relevant passages.

II. Isaiah 1:13-14

Isa 1 briefly locates the historical setting of the book (v. 1) and introduces a poignant diatribe against Judah (v. 2), especially its leadership (v. 10). The situation of Judah is vividly pictured:

Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; For the LORD speaks, Sons I have reared and brought up, But they have revolted against Me. An ox knows its owner, And a donkey its master’s manger, But Israel does not know, My people do not understand. Alas, sinful nation, People weighed down with iniquity, Offspring of evildoers, Sons who act corruptly! They have abandoned the LORD, They have despised the Holy One of Israel, They have turned away from Him (vv. 2-4; NAS).

This benumbing corruption (vv. 5-6) will soon lead to Judah’s desolation through captivity (vv. 7-8). Due to the atrocities of Judah, the Lord declares that He has no pleasure in their sacrifices, new moons, Sabbath, and other sacred convocations, and will not listen to their prayers (vv. 11-15):

Bring your worthless offerings no longer, Incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and Sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, They have become a burden to Me. I am weary of bearing them (vv. 13-14; NAS).

The invective against the sacrificial system and feast days including the Sabbath in Isa 1:13 has been interpreted by some to mean the abrogation of the cult (Muilenburg, 1957, p. 172; Leupold, 1971, p. 62; Roth, 1988, p. 335; Kaiser, 1983, p. 30). However, a careful reading of the passages above reveals that the Lord is not