

Inerrancy, Adventism, and Church Unity
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Nothing is more important to a Christian community than its view of the Bible. And nothing is more perplexing to members of a community than the presence of conflicting views about the Bible. For Protestants, for whom *sola scriptura* is a basic theological principle, divergent perspectives on the Bible can be particularly, and painfully, divisive. In fact, there may be no issue within the range of Christian doctrine where lines are drawn more sharply and sides are taken with more determination than here. But the issue is here to stay, and for Adventists today it is inextricably connected to the current debate over women's ordination. The purpose of this paper is to note one source of tension among SDA scholars and express the hope that we can learn to live with it whether or not we find a way to resolve it.

Among conservative Evangelical scholarship, the concept of biblical inerrancy has generated a great deal of discussion, much of it contentious. Although Adventists have hardly ever applied the word, "inerrancy," to their views of the Bible,¹ a number of SDA scholars seem to subscribe to the logic of inerrancy and endorse certain aspects of the inerrantist position. I fear that this implicit acceptance of inerrancy may have a fragmenting effect on our community, as it has on others. In what follows, I will briefly outline the features of inerrancy as conservative Evangelicals describe it, note the appearance of inerrantist ideas within Adventism, and suggest ways to avoid its divisive effects.

Evangelicals and inerrancy

References to biblical inerrancy appear frequently in the publications and organizations of conservative Evangelical Christianity. For example, the Preface to the New King James Version of the Bible informs readers that "all participating scholars" were asked to "sign a statement affirming their belief in the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture, and in the inerrancy of the original autographs."² And the concept of Biblical inerrancy occupies a prominent position in the doctrinal statements of a number of conservative religious institutions and organizations, such as Biola University,³ Dallas Theological Seminary,⁴ and the Evangelical Theological Society,

¹ An exception was Benjamin L. House, *Analytical Studies in Bible Doctrines for Seventh-day Adventist Colleges: A Course in Biblical Theology* (Berrien Springs, MI: College Press, 1926).

² Copyright 1997, Thomas Nelson, Inc.

³ According to the "Doctrinal statement of Biola University," "The Bible, consisting of all the books of the Old and New Testaments, is the Word of God, a supernaturally given revelation from God Himself, concerning Himself, His being, nature, character, will and purposes; and concerning man, his nature, need and duty and destiny. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are without error or misstatement in their moral and spiritual teaching and record of historical facts. They are without error or defect of any kind."

⁴ Article 1 of the "Full Doctrinal Statement" of the Dallas Theological Seminary, entitled "The Scriptures," contains the following affirmation: We believe that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God," by which we understand the whole Bible is inspired in the sense that holy men of God "were moved by the Holy Spirit" to write the very

whose membership includes several thousand religion scholars. ETS members are required to subscribe annually to the following statement: “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs.” The organization’s website adds this statement, “The case for biblical inerrancy rests on the absolute trustworthiness of God and Scripture’s testimony to itself,” and directs members to the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978) for more information regarding the intent and meaning of biblical inerrancy.

As the ETS website suggests, the Chicago Statement is a touchstone for many when it comes to the meaning of inerrancy. The product of a three-day consultation held in 1978, it explains the rationale for and spells out implications of the idea. Since it is inspired by God, the Statement asserts, the Bible is “of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God’s instruction, in all that it affirms,” including its statements about God’s acts in creation, the events of world history, and its own literary origins. Indeed, to limit in any way this “total divine inerrancy” inescapably impairs the authority of Scripture. Divine inspiration extends to the whole of Scripture, right “down to the very words of the original.”⁵ “Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching,” so “scientific hypotheses about earth history,” to cite one example, may not be used “to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.”⁶

The Statement also identifies “grammatico-historical exegesis” as the appropriate method of biblical interpretation and denies “the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching, or rejecting its claims to authorship.”⁷ While the only reference to historical criticism per se appears in Article XVI,⁸ it is clear that the document sets forth an alternative to both the method and the results of critical approaches to the Bible.

The most extensive argument for biblical inerrancy remains Carl F. H. Henry’s six-volume magnum opus, *God, Revelation, and Authority: The God Who Speaks and Shows*.⁹ According to Henry, revelation is supernatural in origin and propositional in character. Indeed, the very notion of truth implies propositional-informational content and linguistic form. And because propositions are nothing if not verbal expressions, the divine authorship of scripture must extend not only to

words of Scripture. We believe that this divine inspiration extends equally and fully to all parts of the writings—historical, poetical, doctrinal, and prophetic—as appeared in the original manuscripts. We believe that the whole Bible in the originals is therefore without error.

⁵ Article VI.

⁶ Article XIX.

⁷ Article XVIII. According to the Statement, biblical inerrancy and infallibility, though not identical, are inextricably connected. And while divine inspiration, and inerrancy, too, strictly speaking, apply directly to the original biblical autographs, the Bible as we have it is nonetheless the infallible Word of God (see Article XI).

⁸ “We deny that inerrancy is a doctrine invented by Scholastic Protestantism, or is a reactionary position postulated in response to negative higher criticism.”

⁹ 6 vols.; Word Books, 1976-1983. For a more extensive discussion of Henry’s account of inerrancy, see my review of *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vols. 1-4, and Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, vols. 1-2, in *Religious Studies Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (April 1981), pp. 107-114.

the concepts expressed in the Bible, but to the very words employed by its writers. Propositional revelation necessarily implies verbal inspiration.

Henry's approach to the question of inerrancy is decidedly deductive. If the Bible is entirely reliable, then it must be error-free in every respect. Conversely, if accepting its teaching in any respect commits us to error, it cannot be trustworthy and its divine authority is impugned.¹⁰ Henry therefore rejects the views of those who appeal to the phenomena of scripture against the concept of inerrancy, or who apply inspiration to the concepts of scripture or to the authors' intentions, but not necessarily to the words or data employed in their expression. If we separate divine authority from biblical inerrancy, he insists, we lose inspiration as a guarantee of biblical truth, and we are left with the unacceptable notion that God inspired falsehood. Accordingly, nothing is incidental to the purpose of scripture. Error anywhere means that its divine authority is hopelessly compromised.¹¹

For all his emphasis on inerrancy, Henry believes that too much can be made of the idea, and he is unwilling to make it a test of evangelical orthodoxy. The same cannot be said of other advocates of inerrancy, however.

Church historian Martin Marty once observed that the 1980's were a time when the world was moving away from toleration, not toward it.¹² That was certainly true of one of America's largest denominations. During that decade variations in views of biblical authority had a fragmenting effect the Southern Baptist Convention. As described by one participant, "Beginning in 1979 and continuing until 1990, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) was torn apart by the most serious controversy in the history of the denomination." "Two factions, Fundamentalists and Moderates, polarized the SBC from 1979-1990..."¹³ Although a number of issues were at stake, the popular rallying cry of the Fundamentalists was "the inerrancy of the Bible." And, perhaps significantly, those on different sides of this issue placed themselves on opposite sides of the question of women's ordination. Fundamentalists argued for biblical inerrancy. Moderates "contended for the authority of Scripture 'for faith and practice' but not as an inerrant scientific and historical book." "Fundamentalists insisted on a hierarchical model of male-female rela-

¹⁰ In his extensive critique of fundamentalism, James Barr argues that the concept of biblical inerrancy rests on philosophical presuppositions rather than biblical exegesis. "The link between authority or inspiration on the one side and inerrancy on the other rests on one basis only: supposition. Here conservative evangelicals go over to a purely philosophical and non-biblical argument: if it was inspired by God then how could there be error of any kind in it?" According to Barr, this has "no rootage in the Bible and belongs to purely philosophical assumption ..." (*Fundamentalism* [Westminster Press, 1977, 1978], pp. 84-85).

¹¹ Henry qualifies his insistence on biblical inerrancy in a number of ways. For example, he says, it does not mean that the Bible is technically precise by modern standards. More significantly, it does not mean that the extant copies of biblical manuscripts are error-free. Inerrancy applies only to the autographs. The extant manuscripts are characterized by "infallibility." The originals must have been, because God was directly responsible for their production. In contrast, the copies cannot be inerrant, because God was not directly responsible for their production. Human copyists were involved.

¹² Cited in *The Struggle for the Soul of the SBC: Moderate Responses to the Fundamentalist Movement*, ed. Walter B. Shurden (Mercer University Press, 1993), p. 282.

¹³ Shurden, p. xix.

tionships and denied a woman's right for ordination.... Moderates advocated equality between women and men and affirmed ordination for women."¹⁴

Contrasting Adventist hermeneutics

Just what the Bible represents and just how the Bible is appropriately interpreted form the back story of current SDA discussions over the ordination of women. Which biblical statements present us with the timeless principles by which Christians should live and which statements reflect the customs and cultures of by-gone ages, and are no longer normative has always been a source of perplexity, and it has emerged with new urgency in the current ordination debates, as this month's report of the North American Division's Theology of Ordination Study Committee indicates.¹⁵ Behind this familiar principle-application distinction lies the issue of just what the Bible represents, and how its contents are appropriately construed. While we have, to date anyway, avoided the turmoil afflicting other denominations, the sharp lines that have been drawn among SDA scholars between those who reject any use of historical critical methods of Bible study and those who find them helpful in modified form is reminiscent of divisions that have emerged in other conservative Christian communities over the issue of biblical inerrancy.¹⁶

Historical criticism rejected

While Adventists typically avoid the expression "inerrancy," a good deal of the language and logic employed by those who advocate the concept appears in SDA discussions of biblical interpretation.¹⁷ Notable examples include the document voted by the 1986 Annual Council, "Bible Study: Presuppositions, Principles, and Methods,"¹⁸ which is often cited as the authoritative SDA position on Bible study.¹⁹ Another is Richard M. Davidson's essay on "Biblical Interpreta-

¹⁴ Shurden, p. xx.

¹⁵ In his contribution to the report, "Hermeneutics and the Ordination of Women," Kyoshin Ahn notes that there are "two major sets of hermeneutics in the Adventist church": the "historical-grammatical method, which places strong emphasis on a plain, natural, and literal meaning of words," and the "principle-based reading," which includes a consideration of contextual, linguistic and historical-cultural reading strategies. Ahn notes that those who opposed the ordination of women took the first strategy; those who favored it, the second. According to the Report both approaches accept "thought-inspiration" and fall within the guidelines of the Methods of Bible Study voted by the General Conference in 1986. To clarify their relationship to hermeneutical methods that fall outside these guidelines, the report places these two perspectives along "a continuum of hermeneutical approaches" that also included "historical critical" and "literalistic" approaches to the Bible at opposite extremes.

¹⁶ For example, see Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Review and Herald, 1991), and the reactions to it by a various SDA scholars in *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, ed. Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson (Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1992).

¹⁷ I'll set aside certain coincidences, such as the fact that a number of SDA scholars hold membership in the ETS, and the fact that the Andrews Study Bible uses the NKJV.

¹⁸ The statement originated as a report to the 1986 Annual Council by the "Methods of Bible Study Committee."

¹⁹ In describing the principles of the third International Bible Conference held last year in Jerusalem, for example, the conference program referred to the "Methods of Bible Study" voted in 1986 (Third International Bible Conference Jerusalem 1012, Program Book, p. 4).

tion,” which appears in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*.²⁰ Both documents affirm God’s direct influence on the authors of the biblical writings and insist that human reason must stand under the authority of the Bible. Most important, they reject historical criticism and insist that any reliance on its methods is inappropriate for SDA Bible scholarship.²¹

According to Methods of Bible Study statement, “even a modified use of [historical critical] method that retains the principle of criticism which subordinates the Bible to human reason is unacceptable to Adventists.” Such an approach, the document warns, “deemphasizes the divine elements in the Bible as an inspired book (including its resultant unity).”

In his SDA Handbook essay, Davidson rejects the “historical-critical” in favor of the “historical-biblical” method of interpretation.²² Whereas the former makes human reason the ultimate criterion for truth, he maintains, the latter uses “methodological considerations arising from Scripture alone.”²³ Following an informative review of historical critical approaches to the Bible, Davidson presents a side-by-side comparison of the two approaches. Because the disciplines of literary (source) criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and canon criticism all treat the biblical documents as products of human ingenuity rather than divine inspiration, Davidson argues, all their results are suspect, including the familiar theory that the authors of Matthew and Luke relied on a written version of Mark.²⁴

No SDA scholar rejected the use of historical critical approaches to the Bible more emphatically than Gerhard F. Hasel. Over the course of a highly productive and tragically truncated career, Hasel repeatedly insisted that historical-critical method cannot do justice to the divine dimen-

²⁰ *The Handbook of SDA Theology*, ed. George W. Reid, Raoul Dederen, et al. (Review and Herald, 2000).

²¹ For informative studies of varying SDA attitudes toward historical critical methods see Robert K. McIver, “The historical critical method: the Adventist debate” (*Ministry*, March, 1996); and Reinder Bruinsma, “Adventist and Protestant Fundamentalism” (*Spectrum*, Winter 2002, pp. 24-36).

²² Cf. the thesis of Gerhard Maier’s book, *The End of Historical-Critical Method*, (trans. Edwin W. Leveranz and Rudolf F. Norden [Concordia, 1977]): “the historical-critical method is to be replaced by a historical-Biblical one” (p. 52 [quoted in Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Fortress Press, 1977), p. 68]).

²³ *Handbook*, 94-95.

²⁴ Davidson approvingly cites Etta Linnemann’s conviction that none of the Gospels is dependent on another, so there is no “Synoptic problem” (*Handbook*, p. 92). For more from SDA scholars about Etta Linnemann and her rejection of historical critical approaches to the Bible, see Frank M. Hasel, “‘The Word of God should be the measure’: An interview with Etta Linnemann” (*Ministry*, July 8, 2008, pp. 13-15); Norman R. Gulley, “An Evaluation of Alden Thompson’s ‘Incarnational’ method in the Light of His View of Scripture and Use of Ellen White,” in *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, pp. 81-83; and Gerhard F. Hasel, who describes her book on historical criticism as “a must for understanding the historical-critical method of today” (“Reflections on Alden Thompson’s ‘Law Pyramid’ within a Casebook/Codebook Dichotomy,” in *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, p. 169, f.n.15). One wonders if Linnemann’s view of the Synoptic Gospels may have contributed to a change in the curriculum at the SDA Theological Seminary. While attending the Seminary in the late sixties, I took a graduate seminar on “the Synoptic Problem.” Some years later, however, an acquaintance of mine earned an MA in Bible Studies at Andrews University, but never even heard of the Synoptic problem until they went on for further study at another university.

sion of the Bible as the Word of God and therefore does not provide a hermeneutic adequate for both the divine and human dimensions of the Bible.²⁵ One of the reasons he most frequently gives is that method and presuppositions are inseparable. In other words, one cannot make use of any historical critical approaches to the Bible without committing oneself to the idea that the Bible is to be viewed as nothing more than a collection of human documents. Citing Ernst Troeltsch's statement, "Whoever lends it [historical criticism] a finger must give it a hand," Hasel insists, "The theologian or exegete must not get the impression that he can safely utilize certain parts of the historical-critical method in an eclectic manner, because there is no stopping point."²⁶

Historical criticism affirmed

The exclusion of historical criticism from SDA biblical scholarship on the grounds that it is incompatible with confidence in divine authority of Scripture is reminiscent of the concept that the Bible is directly attributable to divine inspiration and therefore without error in any of its affirmations.²⁷ Does this mean that Adventists are, at least implicitly, committed to inerrancy?

Not necessarily, especially if one notes that this rejection is not typical of Adventism. In fact, it may represent an exception to the way Adventists have generally thought about the Bible. Note, for example, the striking contrast between the 1986 Methods of Bible Study declaration, "even a modified use of historical critical method ... unacceptable to Adventists," and this statement that appeared in the Bible Commentary in 1956: "there is a legitimate, as well, as a destructive, higher criticism."²⁸ The call to reject all historical critical study of the Bible thus rep-

²⁵ "Principles of Bible Interpretation," in *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Gordon M. Hyde (Review and Herald, 1974), p. 167.

²⁶ *Understanding the Living Word of God* (Pacific Press, 1980), p. 26. As the quotation from Troeltsch indicates, some of the best known proponents of historical criticism share Hasel's all or nothing approach to the discipline(s). According to Rudolf Bultmann, for example, "The mythical view of the world must be accepted or rejected in its entirety" ("New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch [Harper & Row, 1961], p. 9). And the historical method presupposes that it is possible to understand the whole historical process as a closed unity, which cannot be rent by the interference of the supernatural powers ("Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, selected, translated, and introduced by Schubert M. Ogden [Meridian Books, 1960], pp. 291-292).

²⁷ As the Chicago Statement asserts: "Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms..." and "Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives."

²⁸ "Legitimate criticism," the article continues, "seeks to take all that linguistic, literary, historical, and archeological study has proved in regard to the Bible, and to use this in determining the approximate dates of writing, the probable authors, where the authors' names are not stated, the conditions under which they wrote, and the materials they used in their writing" ("Lower' and 'Higher' Biblical Criticism," in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 [Review and Herald, 1956], p. 188). For an engaging account of the production of the SDA Bible Commentary,

resents a notable departure from the views that respected SDA biblical scholars held a number of years ago.

It also varies from what seems to be the qualified approval of historical critical methods we find in *The Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, which followed the 1974 Bible Conference. In his contribution to the book, Raoul Dederen described the Enlightenment approach to history as the reflection of “a genuine interest in resurrecting the past,” and a “perfectly legitimate undertaking,” which, “while it developed independently of the church,” yielded many positive results when it was when applied to the Bible. The methods of literary and historical criticism, says Dederen, provided us “with a flood of light on our ‘background’ knowledge of the Bible. We are much better informed today than before on the period in which the various books of the Bible were written, the kind of men they were written by, the particular problems the writers faced, and the historical conditions under which they lived.”²⁹ Since we need divine illumination in order to understand “what God really effected in Israel and expressed in the Bible,” the knowledge achieved by historical inquiry is “inadequate.” But this does not render it unacceptable. Instead, says Dederen, “These two levels of reading the Bible are not contradictory” and may be assembled into a unity.³⁰

In a similar vein, Edward Zinke notes a number of the benefits to be gained from “certain aspects of modern biblical studies.” They include establishing an accurate text of the Bible, sharpening our understanding of the language of the Bible, greatly illuminating the background and climate in which God revealed Himself to His people, and providing new dimensions for interpreting the biblical message.³¹ Notwithstanding these benefits, Zinke wonders if it is possible to separate the method that produced these benefits from the presuppositions of those with whom they originated.

These qualified affirmations of historical inquiry into the biblical texts leave us with an important question. Granted that something more is needed to appreciate the Bible as God’s Word than a purely historical investigation can give us, are the results of such investigation acceptable as far as they go? Do all uses of historical critical inquiry inevitably involve a depreciation of the Bible as the inspired means of divine revelation? Are method and presuppositions so inextricably connected that one cannot welcome the gains of historical inquiry without undermining confidence in the Bible’s inspiration? Zinke’s essay raises the question, but the answer he and Dederen give is not entirely clear. In some ways they seem to issue a caveat rather than

see Raymond F. Cottrell, “The Untold Story of the Bible Commentary,” *Spectrum: Journal of the Association of Adventist Forums*, vol. 16, no.3 (August 1985), pp. 35-51.

²⁹ Raoul Dederen, “Revelation, Inspiration, and Hermeneutics,” in *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 9-10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

³¹ “Postreformation Critical Biblical Studies,” in *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 85.

a call to reject such methods out of hand, although, as we have seen, the church's official position hardened noticeably in subsequent years.

Historical criticism incognito

There is another similarity between SDA biblical scholars who reject historical criticism and those who endorse inerrancy: in practice each group departs from the view of the Bible it embraces in theory. To quote a chapter title from Thom Stark's book, *The Human Faces of God*, "inerrantists do not exist." The point of his exclamation is that proponents of inerrancy never consistently adhere to the method of "historical-grammatical exegesis." In actual practice, he argues, they embrace a "hermeneutics of convenience," bringing biblical statements into harmony with their theological presuppositions whenever the two conflict.³² We could say something similar about SDA scholars who reject historical criticism. Whatever our position on the question of its acceptability, in practice all SDA biblical scholars find the selective use of historical critical methods not only helpful, but in certain cases indispensable.

For example, even though the Methods of Bible Study statement formally rejects "even a modified use of historical criticism as unacceptable to Adventists," other parts of the Statement clearly endorse such a use. While "the *usual techniques* of historical research" are inadequate for interpreting Scripture, the Statement concedes that "there may be *parallel procedures* employed by Bible students to determine historical data" (emphasis mine). In certain cases, apparently, historical critical methods, or something very much like them, are permissible.³³

Accordingly, the Statement calls on readers to determine the literary type the author is using, acknowledges that a given text may not conform in every detail to present-day literary categories, and notes that archaeology, anthropology, and history may contribute to understanding the meaning of the text. In other words, to understand a biblical passage, we need to appreciate the historical context surrounding its composition.

Most significantly, the Statement acknowledges that a background knowledge of Near Eastern culture is "indispensable" for understanding certain biblical expressions. Indeed, "in order not to misconstrue certain kinds of statements, it is important to recognize that they were ad-

³² Thom Stark, *Human Faces of God: What Scripture Reveals When It Gets God Wrong (and Why Inerrancy Tries to Hide It)* (Wipf & Stock, 2011), pp. 15, 37. James Barr makes a similar observation. "In order to avoid imputing error to the Bible," he argues, "fundamentalists twist and turn back and forward between literal and non-literal interpretation" (*Fundamentalism*, p. 40).

³³ According to Davidson, both historical critical and historical biblical methods "analyze historical context, literary features, genre or literary type, theology of the writer, the development of themes, and the process of canonization." The difference is that the latter "analyzes but refuses to critique the Bible" (*Handbook*, p. 96). The extensive similarities between the two, and the selective use of historical critical methods they represent, blurs the distinction between the two approaches to the Bible (Cf. Stuhlmacher's description of Maier's proposal as a "half-hearted dependence on historical criticism" [Stuhlmacher, p. 70]).

dressed to peoples of Eastern cultures and expressed in their thought patterns,” rather than ours. Indeed, a number of biblical passages, according to the Statement, “commonly are misunderstood because they are interpreted today from a different viewpoint.”³⁴ To cite an important example, “Hebrew culture attributed responsibility to an individual for acts he did not commit but that he allowed to happen. Therefore the inspired writers of the Scriptures commonly credit God with doing actively that which in Western thought we would say He permits or does not prevent from happening, e.g., the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.” Given the difference between our perspective and that of the biblical writers, the straightforward assertion, “The Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (Ex 9:12), is not to be taken at face value. A knowledge of ancient Hebrew culture permits a different interpretation.

It appears that the judicious use of reason, and appeals to the insights of historical criticism, have been summarily dismissed by the Statement only to be employed when they are needed in order to avoid unwelcome exegetical conclusions. What the text says, and what it evidently meant to the people who originally wrote and read (or heard) it, is not what the text means for us, that is, not if we recognize the vast difference between our customs and theirs and, more important, between their theological perspective and ours.³⁵

A well-known instance where Adventists employ historical and literary considerations in order to discount the literal reading of a biblical passage is Luke 16:19-31. *The Andrews Study Bible*, for example, describes Jesus’ account of the rich man and Lazarus as “an imaginary story, built on popular folk tales.” So, the conversation it records between the rich man and Abraham never took place. Instead, it represents a “popular yet mythical story” that Jesus used in order to illustrate the point that worldly wealth is no guarantee of eternal bliss. Instead of taking all biblical statements literally, we must attribute many of them to the cultural perspective of the time, and occasionally to sources other than divine inspiration.

The same is true of certain descriptions of the natural world. In a response to a reader’s question about Psalm 121:6, “The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night,” George W. Reid, then director of the Biblical Research Institute, admits that no danger to human health is posed by the moon, and attributes the notion of being smitten by the moon to the author’s prescientific worldview. So, “While God was revealing Himself and His truth to the ancients, He did not at the same time correct every misunderstanding they had accepted as part of their cul-

³⁴ Expressions such as “the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh” (Ex. 9:12) or “an evil spirit from God...” (1Sam 16:15), the imprecatory psalms, or the “three days and three nights” of Jonah as compared with Christ’s death (Matt. 12:40),

³⁵ Other aspects of the Bible also require us to acknowledge the vast difference between ancient and modern perspectives, including divinely commanded genocide and the tacit acceptance of practices that many Christians today find morally objectionable, such as, polygamy, divorce, and slavery. “Although condemnation of such deeply ingrained social customs is not explicit, God did not necessarily endorse or approve all that He permitted,” asserts the Statement.

ture. This is especially true of their views of natural phenomena.” “The idea of evil stemming from the moon ... bear[s] witness to the pervasiveness of the moon folk legend in the popular mind. The Bible describes the ancients as believing certain things about the operation of nature that we now know to be inaccurate. Even inspired Bible writers, while they received truth from God, were not, in the process of inspiration, purged of all incidental misbeliefs. [I]n many branches of knowledge, [God] has left humans to discover His ways by careful study of the created universe.”³⁶ To summarize, biblical statements are not automatically to be taken at face value and regarded as divinely authoritative. In numerous cases, they give expression to ancient religious, ethical, and cosmological beliefs that are no longer credible.

Historical criticism and Ellen White’s writings

There is another reason for us to question the rejection of all historical critical methods of Bible study. Adventist scholars have found them immensely helpful in responding to questions about Ellen White’s inspiration. Several decades ago, various inquiries into the writings of Ellen White, first by independent scholars and then by church sponsored research, revealed that she made extensive use of other writings and relied heavily on literary assistants. Though SDA leaders were well aware of this long before and some were deeply concerned about the problems it could create for the rank and file of church members,³⁷ the issue was not addressed openly until the early 1980’s. When it finally was, church leaders argued that these practices should not undermine our confidence in the inspiration of her messages because we find abundant evidence that the writers of the Bible themselves followed similar practices.

In a 1980 article, “This I Believe about Ellen G. White,” Neal C. Wilson, President of the General Conference, declared, “Originality is not a test of inspiration,” and to support this conviction he appealed to the evidence of literary dependence in the Bible itself. He notes that “in her writing Ellen White used sources more extensively than we have heretofore been aware of or recognized,” but insists that “A prophet’s use of sources other than visions does not invalidate or diminish the prophet’s teaching authority.” To support this point, he cites the example of Luke, author of the third Gospel. “Luke was not an eyewitness,” Wilson observes. “He used the mate-

³⁶ George W. Reid, “Windows on the Word”: “Smitten by the moon?” (Adventist Review, April 28, 1983).

³⁷ SDA leaders knew of this decades ago and wondered how they could address the topic without undermining the faith of church members in Ellen White’s ministry. For an extensive analysis of W. W. Prescott’s deep perplexity over widespread misconceptions of Ellen White’s writings, see Gilbert M. Valentine, “The Church ‘drifting toward a crisis’: Prescott’s 1915 Letter to William White” (*Catalyst*, vol. 2, no. 1 [November 2007], pp. 32-94). Although the issue was seriously considered by church leaders at the 1919 Bible Conference, their discussion was not publicly available, nor even generally known, until the minutes of the conference were finally published—sixty years after the conference took place (*Spectrum*, Winter 1979).

rials available. One of his source materials though he did not mention his indebtedness to it, was Mark's Gospel, much of which was directly copied, often word for word."³⁸

In a later *Adventist Review* article, Wilson once again mentioned the similarity between Ellen White's writings and the Gospel of Luke. "Our knowledge of how the Lord worked in the life and experience of Ellen White," he wrote, "helps us understand how the Bible writers functioned under the Spirit's influence."³⁹ So, knowing how Ellen White's writings were produced helps us understand how the Bible writers functioned, and knowing how certain biblical writers worked helps us understand the composition of her writings.⁴⁰ What we find in both cases is literary dependence, or to put it another way, a lack of total originality.

The qualification "total" is important, because a writer may use material derived from others in a highly original way. And this brings us to another way in which Adventists have made use of historical critical methods. In his book, *Luke, A Plagiarist?*⁴¹ George Rice demonstrates that the third Gospel provides a distinctive portrayal of Jesus' life and work, in spite of the fact that the author's account has a great deal in common with the first two Gospels. Indeed, it is precisely by comparing it with Matthew and Mark that we come to appreciate his unique perspective. Rice presents what he calls the "lucan model of inspiration"⁴² as a distinct alternative to the prophetic model, which involves dramatic visions and dreams. And although he never characterizes his book as an exercise in "redaction criticism," Rice's treatment of Luke clearly exemplifies that particular historical critical method.⁴³

Given Wilson's endorsement of the consensus among the majority of NT scholars regarding the similarities between Luke and Mark, viz. that Luke was directly dependent on a written version of Mark, it is puzzling to find SDA scholars suggesting years later that none of the Gospel writers drew material from the others, but that all derived their accounts of Jesus' life directly from eyewitness testimony. It is also puzzling to find a later General Conference President flatly con-

³⁸ "This I Believe about Ellen G. White," *Adventist Review*, Vol 157, No 12 (March 20, 1980), pp. 8-10.

³⁹ "The Ellen G. White writings and the church," *Adventist Review*, July 9, 1981, p. 4.

⁴⁰ This is not to say, of course, that Wilson endorsed all uses of historical critical methods. A subsequent article urges readers to avoid the extremes of both liberalism and conservatism. Though we must reject the idea of biblical inerrancy, it says, we dare not treat the Scriptures as just another human document. Accordingly, "we cannot, without extensive modification and a different set of presuppositions, employ the critical method used by secular scholars in the study of the Bible." ("Together for a Finished Work," *Adventist Review*, December 17, 1981, p. 5).

⁴¹ *Luke, A Plagiarist?* (Pacific Press, 1983).

⁴² "How to Write a Bible," *Ministry*, June 1986, p. 9.

⁴³ Redaction criticism "is concerned with studying the theological motivation of an author as this is revealed in the collection, arrangement, editing, and modification of traditional material, and in the composition of new material or the creation of new forms within the traditions of early Christianity" (Norman Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?* [Fortress Press, 1969], p. 1).

demning historical critical method as “one of the most sinister attacks against the Bible” and “a deadly enemy of our theology and mission.”⁴⁴

Looking at the way Adventists go about interpreting the Bible, we have to wonder about the emphatic exclusion from acceptable scholarship of all historical critical methods, even in modified form. The principle seems out of harmony with our actual practice.

Historical criticism and inerrancy: ironic similarity

When lines are so sharply drawn on issues of such importance, it may be impossible to stake out a middle ground or imagine anything in the way of compromise that would transcend the divergent perspectives. But there are a couple of factors that may reduce the force of the challenge that historical criticism seems to pose for those who accept the authority of Bible. One of them is to note the fact that historical criticism and biblical inerrancy have something in common. The roots of both lie in the Enlightenment, the historical phenomenon that transformed the shape of human knowledge.

The Enlightenment background of historical criticism is well known. The conviction that all reality can be accounted for in terms of human understanding lies behind methods that approach the contents of Bible as the products of human invention and the expression of human ideas. The standard of truth to which the Bible’s claims are subject is that of rational intelligibility. What is not so well known is that inerrancy trades on the same view of rationality.

When inerrantists insist that the Bible is absolutely trustworthy in all its assertions—not only in the “spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes” found in the Bible, but also in the fields of history and science—they are actually embracing an Enlightenment standard of truth—in other words, a standard that derives, not from the Bible itself, but from outside the Bible. The Enlightenment led people in general to accept a mechanistic view of reality. They wanted to sweep away the medieval cosmos in favor of a literal, scientific account of the physical world. Many believers followed suit. They construed the Bible as an accurate chronicle of events, and tried to extract the maximum of exactitude from its various contents. From this perspective, the reliability of the Bible stands or falls with the precision of its historical accounts and its descriptions of the natural world. If the Bible is divinely inspired, critics and believers agreed, its claims must be accurate by scientific standards. Otherwise, the Bible is refuted.⁴⁵ Critics concluded that the Bible failed to meet these standards; inerrantists insisted that it did.

This view of the Bible imposes an immense apologetic burden on those for whom the Bible has religious significance. They must defend its authenticity at all costs. If the Bible is inspired, and divine inspiration entails factual accuracy, then believers must demonstrate that the Bible

⁴⁴ These remarks come from President Ted N. C. Wilson’s July 3, 2010 sermon, his first as the newly elected President of the General Conference.

⁴⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 330.

measures up to modern standards of historical and scientific inquiry. Regrettably, in the thinking of some, this view of things makes the Bible hostage to a scientific perspective. According to Robert E. Webber, for example, “Both conservatives and liberals have approached the Bible through empirical methodology in search of truth. Liberals used reason to demythologize the Bible... [C]onservatives argued for the exact correctness of everything in the Bible.... In this vicious circle the liberals tore the Bible to shreds with biblical criticism while the conservatives continually followed ... trying to put the pieces back together with rational arguments.” And with this, Webber concludes, something essential was lost. “[T]he foundation of the Christian faith shifted from the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ to the centrality of the Bible.”⁴⁶ If Webber has a point, those who are determined to defend the Bible’s inspiration from all the perceived threats of historical criticism may be forcing the Bible into a container where it doesn’t really fit, or, to change the metaphor, playing the game by their opponents’ rules.

Criticizing historical criticism

This is not to say that there is nothing objectionable about historical critical approaches to the text. The point is that we are not forced to choose between a preoccupation with the Bible’s complete accuracy and an uncritical embrace of historical criticism. We can appreciate a good deal of what historical critical approaches to the biblical documents have to tell us about their background, their composition, and their history. And we can do this without accepting all their conclusions, nor inevitably embracing their presuppositions. And most important, we can maintain that for all its supposed gains, the most important aspects of the Bible involve things that historical criticism doesn’t really touch. As it turns out, the shortcomings—or shortsightedness—of historical criticism are well known to those for whom the Bible has great value. And a good many scholars have remarked the limitations of historical critical methods of study.

Eleonore Stump, for example, makes extensive use of biblical narratives in her influential treatment of the problem of suffering, *Wandering in Darkness*. And she defends her approach to the Bible by noting the deficiencies of historical critical methods. Such methods, she observes, subject the biblical material to analysis by division, reducing it to original fragments, seeking to determine the earliest stratum of tradition behind the material and regarding the later redactors as artificially imposing their views on the material. Such scholarship may be valuable in illuminating various periods of biblical history, she concedes, but it tends to eclipse other approaches, and it is a rather “blunt instrument” for examining certain features of the Bible. What is interesting about a text, says Stump, is hardly exhausted by a historical examination of it or the circumstances in which it arose. We may have other concerns as we study the Bible, and it is perfectly acceptable to approach the biblical texts in different way. We can view

⁴⁶ *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Baker, 1999), p. 45.

a biblical narrative as a unity, even if it was composed of “simpler bits assembled by editors with varying concerns and interests.” And we may be interested in the meaning a passage has when taken in the context of the Bible as a whole.⁴⁷

Putting historical criticism in its place

If Stump is right, there must be a way between the horns of this dilemma: either affirm the humanity of the biblical documents, accept the negative conclusions of historical criticism, and abandon confidence in the Bible as divine revelation; or affirm the divinity of the Bible, deny any applicability of historical critical method to its contents, and quarantine our faith from contact with the rest of human knowledge. In other words, there must be a way to avoid both biblical inerrancy on the one hand and historical reductionism on the other.

Our reflections suggest two steps toward this goal. One is to apply historical criticism to historical criticism. If as historical critics themselves claim, “no method of interpretation can transcend its cultural milieu,” then “no biblical critic can escape the reach of history to achieve true meaning by the use of reason and critical method.” Despite the Enlightenment confidence in independent human reason, “There is no ‘absolute moment’ in which the interpreter of the Bible becomes the objective outsider who exercises disinterested awareness, uncovers the facts and pronounces final judgment.”⁴⁸ Recognizing the cultural assumptions from which historical criticism springs gives us a way to discriminate among its claims. We can accept some of the insights that historical criticism gives us into the biblical texts, but we are under no obligation to accept all of its conclusions. In other words, as the Bible Commentary of 1956 indicates, we can make legitimate use of historical critical methods, while avoiding its destructive consequences.

A second step is to recognize that historical criticism typically overlooks the essential nature of the biblical texts. The Bible is first and foremost a religious text. Whatever its more particular features, its specific aim is to put human beings in touch with God, and to ignore this intention is to fail to take the text seriously. A view of the Bible that takes seriously what the Bible is ostensibly and obviously about must consider the claims that the Bible makes on the reader, a claim that God reaches into history and offers us salvation.⁴⁹

To say that the biblical writings are human products is both important and helpful. But by itself it is insufficient. The fact that the biblical documents are thoroughly human does not mean they are merely human, that they exhibit no transcendent dimension whatsoever. If we ask, What occasioned their production, their collection, their preservation, their enduring power to attract

⁴⁷ *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 34, 32.

⁴⁸ Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs* (2nd ed.; Eerdmans 2002), 330, 331-332.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 336.

and transform lives? For what purpose were they preserved?—if we ask these questions, the answer takes us beyond the sphere of human invention. These documents were nothing less than the response of faith to God’s actions in history—in the history of the people of the covenant and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

If we keep in mind the essential purpose of the Bible, we can learn from critical studies of the texts. The Bible carries divine authority, but God’s word reaches us in the form of human words, composed by human agents. From this perspective, the Bible is instrumental to its purpose, but neither identical nor incidental to it. The essential purpose of the Bible is to communicate God to human beings and to awaken a response within us. It does this through a variety of human writers and literary forms. Its central concerns are clear and its essential claims are reliable, whether or not all its descriptions of historical events and natural phenomena are factually precise.

A concluding hope

People looking at Adventism from the outside would probably be most impressed with the things we hold in common, the beliefs and practices we all embrace, the forms of service we all endorse, the worldwide mission we are all committed to. It is ironic to find that within our community we are deeply concerned about our differences. Yet, as a church historian once observed, “nothing divides so bitterly as common convictions held with a difference.”⁵⁰

Divergent perspectives regarding women’s ordination have become enormously important to us. Many among us believe they pose a real threat to unity within our church. I hope it never comes to that. I also hope that divergent views regarding the Bible will not threaten unity among SDA scholars. By itself, the view that the Bible is inerrant, whether embraced explicitly or implicitly by some among us, does not pose a threat to our unity ... unless it is elevated to a standard of SDA orthodoxy. In other religious communities, that is exactly what it has done. I hope we can avoid it within our own.

All Adventists agree that the Bible is the Word of God, the product of divine inspiration, and as such the ultimate authority in matters of faith. They also agree that divine revelation takes expression in the Bible through human words and thoughts. As we have seen, however, there are significant differences among SDA religion scholars concerning the implications of these two

⁵⁰ Gerald R. Cragg, *Freedom and Authority* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 222; quoted in Shurden, p. 278. This phenomenon is not peculiar to Christianity, of course. In a recent lecture, Rabbi Hillel Cohn noted the sad irony that just as the walls that have for so long separated Jews and non-Jews are coming down, intrafaith relations, relations between Jews and Jews, have become more strained (“Interfaith and Intrafaith: Where We Have Been and Where We are Going,” 18th Annual Rabbi Norman F. Feldheim Lecture, Congregation Emanu El, Redlands, California, February 6, 2013).

features of the Bible—divine origin and human expression—for our approaches to biblical study. For some, the human dimension of the Bible invites us to explore the historical aspects of the Bible, including the composition and collection of its constituent documents. For others, the divine authority of the Bible forecloses such inquiries. Is our common conviction in the dual nature of the Bible strong enough to enable us to transcend the differences in our emphases? The future unity of the church may depend to no small degree on our ability to answer this question affirmatively.

I began by saying, “Nothing is more important to a Christian community than its view of the Bible.” In conclusion I would like to rephrase that. “Nothing is more important to Christian *community* than its view of the Bible.” A common reverence for the Bible as the Word of God, a reverence which respects its divine authorship, but does not insist that there is only one view of inspiration that upholds that authorship, can provide us with a uniting, unifying basis for developing our doctrines, nurturing our spirits, and inspiring us to finish the work to which we are all committed.

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