

Hermeneutical Turn in Adventism?

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Introducing the Problem

What is the role and relevance of a theology teacher in the church today? When it comes to hermeneutics with its reading, understanding, and interpreting of the Bible in the twenty-first century,¹ what direction is expected from an Adventist theology teacher? Are there any problems with hermeneutics in Adventism today? While we have a voted document on hermeneutics on the GC level,² does it mean that we all read, interpret, and understand the Bible in the same way? Could there be different presuppositions and preunderstandings that are brought to our reading of Scripture? San Antonio's 2015 ordination vote, as well as previous work of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, has shown that we are divided on the issue of hermeneutics. The cleft between the opposing sides cannot be ignored.

Two Tendencies

There are two opposite tendencies when it comes to the interpretation of the Bible. The first one emphasizes literal meanings of words, regardless of their textual context. According to this view, since truth is always the same and unchanging, the context in which truth appears is not of primary importance. This view of Bible reading looks for eternal truth like a dictionary is applied in a one-to-one literalistic manner, since it is believed that the words always have the same meaning, regardless of the context.³

¹ For a broader discussion on hermeneutics, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: The Collected Works and New Essays of Anthony Thiselton* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Craig G. Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 2004); Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

² See "Methods of Bible Study," in *Statements, Guidelines and Other Documents*, ed. Rajmund E. Dabrowski (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald, 2005), 209-218.

³ For further exploration see M. R. Johnston, "The Case for a Balanced Hermeneutic," *Ministry Magazine*, no. 3 (1999).

The second tendency is aware of the context in which truth appears and emphasizes that context is the key to understanding the meaning of words. Since truth is adapted to human circumstances, it is claimed that we cannot understand a truth apart from its context. The prime example for this view is the incarnation of Jesus in first century Jewish Palestine. If separated from His historical context, would Jesus' mission still be understandable to humans? If so, why has God chosen to reveal His truth in certain historical circumstances? Was God unable to present a pure truth without mixing it with historical conditions?⁴

The first view puts an emphasis on the divine side of the Bible, while the second view puts an emphasis on the human side of the Bible. For a healthy approach, we need both divine and human sides. We want to understand God and His truth, but neglecting the human, contextual side of the Bible would lead to misunderstandings and misapplications of the divine truth. Without understanding the incarnation of the truth in a specific context in time and place, we will not be able to properly translate the truth into our time and place in the twenty-first century. There is no pure and undistilled truth separated from a historical context, since Biblical truth always comes in a historically conditioned context. Finally, God meets people where they are.⁵ Thus, we need both divine and human sides, and these two sides are not to be separated.

Three Approaches

Starting with the time of the Enlightenment, theologians have recognized the need for contextual Bible studies and have put an emphasis on historical explorations. Such studies have often been done in an act of freeing themselves from the dogma of the church. Thus, the original Biblical author with his circumstances became the focus of investigation, addressing question regarding, which sources he used (source criticism), which literary forms and traditions he integrated into his writing (form criticism), and how many different authors and traditions contributed to various layers of writing (redaction criticism). Since the Enlightenment, this emphasis on the historical author continued for two centuries before some

⁴ For further exploration, see Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1991); There is a chapter devoted on hermeneutics in William G. Johnsson, *Where Are We Headed? Adventism After San Antonio* (Westlake Village: Oak and Acorn Publishing, 2017), 115-130.

⁵ Jon Paulien, *What the Bible Says about the End Time* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 1994), 34-35.

of the leading theologians turned away from such an exclusively historical approach, which often managed to kill the Biblical author in the process of research.⁶

In the second part of the twentieth century, under the influence of the fast-developing secular literary sciences, some people started applying its results to the study of the Bible.⁷ This new way of reading the Bible put the emphasis not on the historical author but on the text in its present form. The history of the text was not as important as its artistic shape, narrative features, and rhetorical expressions.⁸ Thus, narrative criticism emphasized its direct work on the text as literature, as opposed to the historical work in the search of the original author. Literary features such as points of view, characters, plots, settings, and effects of the narrative were explored for the purpose of understanding the original intention of the text.⁹

Believing that historical and literary studies with their emphasis on the author and the text were neglecting today's reader, some theologians in the last decades of the twentieth century started putting a focus on the reader. So, a reader response criticism was born, with the intent of finding how a text influences readers.¹⁰ This focus on the reader often avoided spending time with historical and literary studies, thus emphasizing today's application.¹¹ Accordingly, every reader is encouraged to find his/her own application, and thus there may be as many truths as there are readers. This approach easily ends up in postmodern deconstruction of the text and in meaninglessness.¹²

Historical studies, literary explorations, and reader-oriented approaches – which of them do we actually need and which can we beneficially use? The historical turn of the Enlightenment taught us to put the original author with his original context in focus. But the overemphasis of the author has led the Enlightenment theologians to lose the text in all-too-critical efforts to investigate its historical origin. The literary turn has taught us to put the text in focus. Overemphasis on the literary features of the text has often been done to the neglect of the historical situation of the original context of writing. Finally, the postmodern turn

⁶ See for example Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament Abt. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1941).

⁷ See Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

⁸ See Mark A. Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

⁹ For the latest developments in narrative criticism see Sönke Finnern and Jan Runggemeier, *Methoden der neutestamentlichen Exegese: Ein Lehr- und Arbeitsbuch*, UTB Theologie 4212 (Tübingen: A. Francke Verlag, 2016), 173-258. Those doing literary studies have been gradually coming to the conclusion that they cannot do so without being aware of the original historical context of the author. See, for a good example: David M. Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

¹⁰ See Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978).

¹¹ See Stanley E. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

¹² See A. K. M. Adam, *What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

taught us to focus on the reader. But the postmodern emphasis on today's reader has tended to neglect both literary features and historical origin, using deconstruction of the text to result in meaninglessness. Where does our focus in Bible reading need to be?

Hermeneutical Triangle

After many attempts and unbalanced emphases during the last couple of decades, some theologians have come to the conclusion that a proper balance between the original author, text, and reader is the best solution for a balanced hermeneutics.¹³ Already Schleiermacher has pointed to the hermeneutical circle, in which the question of understanding is resolved in a constant movement between the text and today's reader.¹⁴ The notion of two horizons, the one of the text and the other of the reader both conditioned in their time and place, is a contribution of Gadamer.¹⁵ Thiselton has expanded on the two horizons whose fusion produces understanding in his first work on hermeneutics, as well as in a number of other publications ever since.¹⁶ James Dunn talks about hermeneutics as dialogue and explains the problem of the hermeneutical circle in this way:

Hermeneutics is best conceived as a dialogue where both partners [text and reader] must be allowed to speak in their own terms, rather than as in interrogation of the text where the text is only allowed to answer the questions asked. To put the same point another way, for a dialogue to be fruitful there must also be genuine engagement of the interpreter with the text... The point is that without the interpreter's openness to being addressed by the text, the interpreter can scarcely hope to avoid abusing the text. Unless the text is, at least in some sense, allowed to set its own agenda, it is questionable whether it is being heard at all... The text in its language and syntactical relationships already has a potentiality for meaning, a potentiality which becomes active and effective in the encounter of reading.¹⁷

In this dialogue view of hermeneutics the reader comes to the text with his/her own questions, but should be ready to let the text address him. Instead of a circle, Osborne in his work uses the term „hermeneutical spiral,” since the movement between the text and today's

¹³ See Ruben Zimmermann, ed., *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verl.-Haus, 2007), 16.

¹⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher and Manfred Frank, eds., *Hermeneutik und Kritik: Mit einem Anhang sprachphilosophischer Texte Schleiermachers*, Suhrkamp-Taschenbücher Wissenschaft 211 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977).

¹⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

¹⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster Pr, 1980). See also Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*.

¹⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 124.

reader moves upwards constantly, producing more understanding.¹⁸ Finally, neglecting present-day readers with their needs and questions can easily miss the purpose of doing theology all together.¹⁹ If theology is disconnected from present times, who is going to need such theology? So, it has become customary to talk about a hermeneutical triangle between the author, text, and reader, in a proper balance, if the truth incarnated under certain historical conditions in the Biblical text is to find appropriate application today.²⁰

We have started this exploration of hermeneutics with the need for divine and human sides. Thus, the divine side has to be present and included. But where is the divine side in the hermeneutical triangle of author, text and reader? I would like to suggest that, if the author is inspired by God for his message, then the divine side is present in his text and will also have an effect on the reader. It is similar to the incarnation of Jesus regarding which we are advised not to separate his divine and human sides. Thus, by the hermeneutical triangle we want to keep the same basic rule. The divine side is included and cannot be separated from the human element of the author, text, and reader.

Adventist Hermeneutical Effort

As the Adventist Church, our only collective expression of appropriate hermeneutical methods is today more than thirty years old. In 1986, when the document titled “Methods of Biblical Study” was voted at the GC Annual Council in Rio de Janeiro,²¹ the influence of the emphasis on the literary features of Biblical text was rapidly increasing, while the postmodern focus on today’s reader was in its first stages. The Rio document was a needed reaction to the overemphasis on the historical author studies, while it neglected to take into account current developments in Biblical studies at that time. The document was within the boundaries of an apologetic attempt to fight the historical-critical method, while literary features and today’s reader were missing from the picture. Since the Biblical hermeneutic calls for a balance between the author, the text, and the reader, this document seems to be one-sided and outdated.

¹⁸ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006). See also Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 123.

¹⁹ Fritz Guy, *Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1999), 159-180.

²⁰ Susanne Luther and Ruben Zimmermann, eds., *Studienbuch Hermeneutik: Bibelauslegung durch die Jahrhunderte als Lernfeld der Textinterpretation: Portraits - Modelle - Quellentexte* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014), 59-64.

²¹ “Methods of Bible Study,” 209-218.

The latest approaches to the Biblical text pose relevant questions for people today. Not engaging with them would mean not being in contact and conversation with our own time and age. Living in the apologetic spirit of the nineteenth century historic Adventism is not a solution.²² Only by living and researching in the twenty-first century will we be able to reach today's generation and address their burning questions. That is, hopefully, why we come to the SBL meetings, the context in which this ASRS session is scheduled. We want to feel the pulse of the time and are engaged in providing Biblical solutions to current questions and problems. Living in the midst of postmodern deconstruction, we sense the limits of our own reactive apologetic approach, wondering where the audience is that still wants to fight the historical agenda of rationalism.

Consequently, our own millennials do not understand our apologetic message and its relevancy in today's world.²³ They are asking how they can make sense of today's meaninglessness and see practical value in the Biblical message. Can the message of the gospel be contextual one more time, reaching the context of our own generation? We need a proactive approach, in which we lead the current discussion, engage in the latest questions, and shape the discourse. A new "repackaging" of our Adventist message for the context of the twenty-first century is what we need.²⁴

Balance in the Hermeneutical Triangle

In that regard, it is about time to consider the hermeneutical triangle and keep the author, the text, and the reader in a proper balance. In the hermeneutical triangle there needs to be a constant movement between the original author, the text, and the reader. Should we be afraid to let today's reader be part of the triangle? Are we in danger of leaving the eternal truth behind and letting it be shaped by today's agendas and concerns? In a balanced hermeneutical triangle, the original author's circumstances and the inspired text itself are the frame in which today's reader should move with his/her application. Playing outside that frame is dangerous and risky, but if the frame is respected there should be no concerns for proper application. The Bible has answers to current questions, but these answers always need to be contextual, respecting original author and inspired text.

²² See George R. Knight, *End-Time Events and the Last Generation: The Explosive 1950s* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2018).

²³ See William G. Johnsson, *Authentic Adventism* (Westlake Village: Oak and Acorn Publishing, 2018), 89-103.

²⁴ See George R. Knight, *The Apocalyptic Vision and the Neutering of Adventism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2008), 19; Similarly in Jon Paulien, *Der letzte Kampf: Offenbarung 12-14 erklärt* (Alsbach-Hähnlein: Blindenhörbücherei der Stimme der Hoffnung, 2016), 11.

Should all three sides of the triangle – author, text, reader – be considered of equal value? By the divinely inspired author it is clear that there is a permanent value. By the divinely inspired text there is no question that a permanent value is included. But how is it by today's readers? Where is the inspired divine side with them? Is there some inspiration in their quest for the answers in the inspired word of God? I would like to pose a suggestion that the notion of today's reader may be combined with the implied reader in the inspired Biblical text. Literary theories have taught us that there is a literary feature of an implied reader in texts, including Biblical texts.²⁵ Being part of the inspired text, the implied reader should include an inspired message for today's readers and their questions.²⁶

What is needed in the hermeneutical triangle is a constant movement between the author, text, and reader. Stopping that constant movement can be detrimental to our hermeneutics and for the proper application to the needs and circumstances of today's world. The history of hermeneutics shows that only a balance in the hermeneutical triangle can lead to a proper answer to the sense of meaninglessness in today's world. We need an integrative and proactive approach, instead of an apologetic and reactive one, and a balanced hermeneutical triangle is offering such an approach.

Concluding Remarks

This paper aims to contribute to the question of which hermeneutics today's responsible Adventist Bible scholars should promote in order to benefit their church and society. It seems that we as the Adventist church need a hermeneutical turn - turning away from the apologetic agenda of the age of rationalism - to engage today's readers by offering the Biblical message as an answer to today's questions and problems. Without engaging readers, we may be dealing with the marginal issues in the eyes of society and miss the opportunity to speak to today's generation. Without that effort we likely will not reach our own millennials for God. The Biblical message needs to speak contextually to our times, thus constituting present truth. In that sense, a revision of the Rio document under the perspective

²⁵ See R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 205-211.

²⁶ Sönke Finnern introduced a cognitive turn in Biblical narratology, trying to describe text-based cognitive scripts and frames of the readers, which the original author had in his mind while composing his text: Sönke Finnern, *Narratologie und biblische Exegese: Eine integrative Methode der Erzählanalyse und ihr Ertrag am Beispiel von Matthäus 28*, WUNT 2 285 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). Thus, cognitive narratology provides additional tools for accessing the reader in the text.

of a balance in the hermeneutical triangle is a recommended task for the current generation of theologians.²⁷

A hermeneutical turn with a balanced emphasis on all three parts of the triangle – author, text, and reader – would make Adventists more sensitive to cultural differences and open for specific needs in different territories. Such cultural sensitivity would encourage appreciation for more diversity within the world church as we look for the best possible ways to proclaim the eternal gospel of God’s love to different people in their languages and cultures. This cultural sensitivity and openness seems to be the solution for the current cleft in the worldwide Adventist church. Without contextual Bible reading and a balance in the hermeneutical triangle there will be no common language among us and no needed unity in diversity of our different cultures and local needs.²⁸

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²⁷ Our fundamental beliefs have been revised and expanded several times since the 1980s, but not so our only collective expression on hermeneutics dated 1986.

²⁸ For Biblical examples of unity in diversity, see Acts of Apostles 15; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Galatians 3:26-29.

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