

*Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 6/2 (1995):52-62.  
Article copyright © 1995 by Miroslav M. Kis.

## BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND MORAL AUTHORITY

By Miroslav M. Kis

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary  
Andrews University

Much of the contemporary debate about the usefulness of Scripture in moral life is caused by the presuppositions held by the various contenders rather than from the contents of the Bible itself. These assumptions naturally impact on the questions of the accuracy of the ancient texts and their relevance for contemporary culture and the sinful human condition. In this essay I wish to show that the omission of some very basic day-to-day courtesies given to the interpretation of secular documents are frequently withheld from the interpretation of the Bible. As a result, the trust of the reader in the Word of God as a moral guide is often unduly shaken.

### Interpretation Rests on Identification

If we chance upon an ancient letter and decide to interpret its contents, we need at least four pieces of information: First, who is its author? Second, who is its recipient? Third, what is the life situation of the recipient? And fourth, what are the writer's intentions or purposes for writing the letter? If the document is neither signed nor addressed, and if it is difficult to infer the situation of the recipient or the intentions of the author, then any attempt at interpretation becomes a guessing game. One interpretation will be as good or bad as any other, and the meaning of the same letter will vary drastically even if only one basic factor is changed by the interpreter.

For instance, if we conjecture that the letter comes from a

mother who wishes to reassure her son, a CEO (a chief executive officer in a large business) of her love, we will hear and note the words which fit that relationship, and our interpretation will be affected by it. If, however, we suppose that the son is a criminal in prison, and not a CEO, then, of necessity, we will emphasize different words and concepts and give the whole message an entirely different thrust.

When we come to the Bible, we are faced at the onset with an important decision. Either we grant the Bible sufficient trust and accept its claims about authorship, recipient, situation addressed, and the intentions of the Author, or we choose to alter or deny those claims. In the case of the latter, the interpretation will reflect our opinions and contribute to a large number of conflicting readings. This liberal approach to Scripture overlooks several crucial points.

**The Bible's Self-Identification. The Bible explicitly articulates the four basic items of identification as can be seen in the following summarizations:**

1. *The Bible is Autographed.* Its Author is God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, steadfast in love and faithfulness, ready to forgive sinners but intolerant of sin (Exod 34:6, 7). Because He is eternal (Jer 10:10), He is changeless (Mal 3:6). Because He has foreknowledge (Ps 139:1-6), He is a prudent and wise counselor (Deut 30:15-19). Because He is love (1 John 4:8), He is worthy of our obedience.

2. *The Bible is Addressed to Human Beings.* Humans are limited in ability and understanding (Job 42:1-3), unfit for autonomy (Jer 10:23), helpless in the face of death (Isa 40:6-8) and yet endowed with potential, precious in His sight (Ps 8:4, 5), and loved as a parent loves his/her children.

3. *The Bible Discloses Humanity's Helpless, Sinful Condition.* God knows human infirmities (Ps 103:13, 14) and measures all needs accurately (Isa 53:4-6). His letter of love addresses human beings in their helplessness. Every bit of advice and each commandment is scaled to reach down to the human plight and not to the level of some ideal, perfect state of being.

4. *The Bible Brings the News of Salvation.* While addressed to human beings marred by sin, God's Word is not at home in the sinful life. Like medicine it fits the condition; but it also works miracles

to change and heal (Heb 4:12; 2 Cor 5:17). Without it humans would remain in darkness about their nature, condition, and destiny. More importantly, they would remain ignorant of the great plan of salvation, of the victory over sin and death, and of their bright and happy eternal future.

With these four items of identification at hand, the reader can reconstruct the Author-recipient relationship, and the causal connection between the human predicament and salvation. The interpretation of Scripture need not follow the haphazard road of human conjecture as illustrated by much of 19th and 20th century theology.

**The Challenge.** To challenge the claims of any document may mean the critique arrogates a better knowledge of the matter than the document or the original author. The burden of proof lays heavily on those who challenge the identity of the Bible, however. It is a heavy burden indeed. Why should the insight of someone who lives two millennia after the composition of the document be more trustworthy than the testimony of those involved in the process? How can I doubt Peter's claim of inspiration when I did not have such an experience nor was I there to examine the phenomenon? Only if I set myself as a judge, and my wisdom as the final criterion, can I presume such a responsibility. Thus one presumes to affirm authoritatively what the writers of the Bible, and even Jesus, really had in mind, what they actually knew, or could not have known about certain subjects about which they wrote or spoke.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably the opinions on what could or could not be known vary with each attempt to gain insight. Such a task is an impossibility, even more so when trying to read the mind of those who lived thousands of years ago!

Is it so unreasonable then, to hear the Bible as it speaks? Is there more wisdom in trusting human insight into the mind of another, even when it becomes clear that the interpreter's goal is to arrive at conclusions which fit preconceived ideas? To listen intelligently, with courtesy and humility, will prove much more profitable even when faced with questions of biblical accuracy and relevance.

#### Charges Against Biblical Relevancy

**The Issue of Biblical Accuracy.**<sup>2</sup> The indictment of inac-

curacy in the biblical text strikes at the very core of the trustworthiness of Scripture as a moral guide. How can one rely on false information? It is alleged that there are evidences of a pre-scientific mode of thinking by biblical writers. This results in a vague, incomplete, and even misleading message.

The creation story is a case in point. Genesis 1-2:3 offers an account of the six-day creation of the world. How could the writers of Genesis know that? asks J. Barr. The fact is, he responds, they did not. They knew the legends and myths of the surrounding cultures, they had their own experience of nature around them, and they were immersed in the theological ethos concerned with differences made between plants and animals. From this background alone, not from inspiration or revelation by God, comes the Genesis story. The Bible never claims that God revealed the story to humans; therefore, He did not. For that reason creation did not happen as described in Genesis.<sup>3</sup>

But why not? What would it take for someone with a similar outlook to accept that "All Scripture is inspired by God"? First of all, we would need somewhere in Genesis 1 or 2 a statement such as "thus says the Lord" (so says J. Barr) or the narrative would not be credible. "Essential stories like the account of creation (Genesis 1) or Adam and Eve (Genesis 2 and 3) are told without any express insinuation that the words or the matter have been 'given' to the writer or divinely communicated at all."<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, the creation narrative must be in harmony with the 20th century scientific data.<sup>5</sup> The findings of geology and biology confirm the development of living beings according to their species from lower animals, and not created by God as the writers of Genesis affirm. When it comes to such historical or factual information which could be considered accurate or inaccurate, the Bible has no "thus says the Lord,"<sup>6</sup> which, apparently opens the possibility to interject a "thus says the human science," according to J. Barr.

Thirdly, the Bible lacks academic rigor, precision, and exhaustiveness. Its language is vague, indefinite, and confusing. Some expressions used betray a pre-scientific understanding of the nature of the universe. Heaven has no pillars, the earth does not rest on foundations, nor is it flat.

Barr suggests that the Bible cannot speak authoritatively outside the narrow concerns of theology.<sup>7</sup>

The above three expectations warrant a more extensive and detailed treatise than we can provide in a limited space.<sup>8</sup> We can make only a few observations. In the first place, from where have these requirements for understanding Scripture originated? We wish to reaffirm our conviction that these expectations are an integral part of the presuppositions which the interpreter brought to the task a priori, and are not necessitated by evidence of falsehood in the text itself. That is, the reader has decided beforehand what could and what could not be true, and then has interpreted the text accordingly.

This has serious implications for Christian ethics. The Christian approach to moral life places the Bible in the position of ultimate authority. If, however, the meaning of biblical content is determined presuppositionally and a priori by the perspective of the interpreter, and if categories foreign to the Bible serve as criteria, then moral guidance faces some form of relativism as its only option. Then the decisions of serious moral consequence depend on the ideology of the reader who interprets (and there can be as many ideologies as readers).

However, there is another consideration. The biblical law of consequences (Gal 6:7), for example, pays no attention to the intentions and presuppositions of the interpreter. If someone decides that monogamy is equally legendary for him as the six-day creation is for J. Barr (this on the basis of some assumptions), and if this person decides not to respect the exclusiveness and sanctity of marriage, the consequences for adultery will follow notwithstanding. For that reason, precisely, many Christians strive to come to God's word ready to hear Him. Their experience, as well as the biblical promises and examples, show unequivocally that negative consequences follow closely the violation of the obvious meaning which comes from the pages of the Bible, and not from a meaning produced when a different mind-set is superimposed on the text.

It is common knowledge, of course, that we all have our assumptions and outlooks, and how difficult it is to be a perfectly open and unbiased reader. It takes a conscious and determined

effort to have at least a partial inner silence and to achieve a sufficient level of concentration so as to hear the Bible speak to us personally. While, these tendencies flash caution lights we must not give in to the temptation to impose our own ideology on the biblical text just because perfect objectivity cannot be achieved.

The difficulties which arise from apparent imprecision and the use of pre-scientific terms need not discourage us either. God's word can be trusted as a moral guide. Complete and absolute exhaustiveness and accuracy cannot be achieved even at the level of a science textbook.<sup>9</sup> As the evidence shows, God has chosen to use several styles of writing rather than just one, namely, scientific, academic, and scholarly. The Bible was written for practical purposes. Scripture addresses human life in the total context of needs and struggles with the intention to guide humanity out of a quagmire of suicidal sinfulness. Information alone, no matter how rigorously exact and academically flawless, cannot encompass the totality of human existence, because it has limits as a tool of communication. God's agenda includes more than information alone, and more people than scholars.

**The Issue of Relevance.** At this juncture, our particular interest focuses on one aspect of the relevance of biblical teachings as they interface with human sinfulness. God's will, expressed in the commandments, examples, parables, and the life of Jesus looms high above any best-known human achievement. "You, therefore, must be perfect" . . . (Matt 5:48); "You shall be holy . . ." (I Pet 1:16); "Go, and do not sin again" (John 8:11), are well-known statements that defy realism. They often raise doubts as to the moral usefulness of Scripture. Why do such impossible, idealistic requirements exist? If God has inspired the biblical writers, and if He knows what fallible and fallen creatures can, and cannot do, then what good can possibly come from such pronouncements? How relevant are detailed instructions on driving a car or flying a jet when given into the hands of a child?

Christians have related to this issue in several ways. The divergences follow the presuppositions they hold as they approach the text. Those who reject these statements may be classified into two groups.

1. *Antinomianism.* Under the economy of grace, some argue,

such assertions need not be taken literally. These are vestiges of a law-centered behavior from Old Testament times. Our behavior matters little if we are in Christ whose perfection, holiness, and sinlessness became ours independent of what we do or do not do, provided we believe in Him.

2. *Situationism*. Others insist that love makes everything we do perfect, holy, and sinless. Even an outright transgression of any of the Ten Commandments, if premeditated with love as its norm and love as its end, is transformed into an act of courage and virtue.

Much has been written about both of these approaches to interpretation. Both antinomianism and situationism yield unsatisfactory moral results, and their faithfulness to the entire message of the Bible have been successfully challenged.

Those who accept the challenge of perfection, holiness, and sinlessness may also be identified broadly into two camps.

1. *Perfectionism*. At the opposite extreme from antinomianism stand those who argue that if God, who knows us, requires perfection, holiness, and sinlessness, then it means we can do it if we try hard enough. They subject their lives to severe discipline and austere control. Ascetics of all ages, Puritans, and Christians with a legalistic mind-set illustrate this group.

Much has been written on this issue as well, and more needs to be done. Our focus must center on another approach in order to understand the expressions of God's will in the Bible.

2. *Theological Relativism*. Many who accept the call to be perfect, holy, and sinless view these injunctions as mere statements of an ideal. Such goals they argue will never be reached. God did not intend to burden us with impossible demands. He only intends to motivate and orient our lives towards these lofty objectives. Even the life of Jesus serves only as a moral influence, as an example to see, but not as an example to emulate. We cannot be exactly as Jesus, and we must not presume such a possibility.

For example, God's will for us is to respect human life. We have no right to take it or to harm this precious gift of God. Abortion is not in harmony with the biblical message or with the sixth commandment. Pro-creative and sexual activities must be strictly reserved within the confines of a responsible Christian marriage.

This is the so-called "ideal will" of God. The Bible is clear on this subject.

However, we are reminded by the idealist that we live in a sinful world. We are sinners. God's "ideal will" cannot be practiced. Fortunately for us, His "ideal will" can be substituted, so the argument goes, by His "permissive will." We are told that He will overlook and graciously forgive our sins, and we must not be fearful of Him. As we consider our options we can count on Him, so that our plans, and the policies of the church, can reflect God's "permissive will" and not His "ideal will." The implication here is that God's "ideal will" may be irrelevant and out of place in our sinful state and condition.

Because He is a forgiving Father, and not an inflexible judge, it is argued that our lifestyle can also be flexible. We must anticipate His mercy and count on it in advance. Our sense of duty must be a sense of adjusted duty, not a sense which reflects a direct connection with His law. When we read "You shall not steal," we are advised not to interpret the statement to mean "Do not steal because you will face the consequences of your misbehavior." Rather, it is recommended that we factor in God's love and hear Him say: "Do not worry if you have to steal. I am not that particular."

This is definitely a more pleasant interpretation of the biblical content. It fits well into our comfortable, western lifestyle. However, an important question begs for attention: Is this reading coherent with the complete message of the Bible, or are we witnessing another attempt at superimposing a personal, private desire upon the text? Is it in harmony with the four basic identification points of the Bible, the points which we must respect in order to interpret its message aright?

Admittedly, several statements in the above reasoning ring true. For example, we do live in a sinful world, we are sinners, God's will does describe what appears to us now as an impossible ideal, and we are not Jesus the Messiah, the Savior of humanity. Furthermore, it is a beautiful fact that God forgives sins. Yet, we must examine the angle from which these truths are approached, as well as their partial understanding of them and/or selective applications.

1. We know we live in a sinful world, and not because mass

media made us aware of it or because scientific research has proven the fact. It is the Bible that affirms our sinfulness, and at the same time it claims its main function is to speak to human beings steeped in the self-destructive mode of living. And this is precisely the first important point. God's revelation of our sinfulness is not merely diagnostic, an attempt to explain our strange behavior. God's will in the Bible is tailored to fit us, our condition, our needs, and our hopelessness. It suits us like a medication matches a sickness, like an exercise corresponds with a heart condition, like a diet harmonizes with a cure. His will, in the Bible, does not concern sinless beings even as a medication does not pertain to healthy persons. Therefore, His will is most appropriate and eminently useful.

2. The ideal, nothing short of that, is desired by every loving parent for his/her children. A child, flying a jet may indeed be an absurd proposition. Spiritually speaking, however, the wonderful truth is that next to the child in the cockpit sits a flying Ace holding in His hands, securely and confidently, the identical controls. Such a prospect, far from being frightful and overwhelming, promises to be exciting and successful. Nothing, absolutely nothing, should be changed or omitted from those detailed instructions about flying, because He can fly us ideally. In fact, the so-called "permissive will" can only cheapen the experience, underestimate the Pilot, and ultimately miss the runway.

3. We cannot be Jesus. Only He can save us to the uttermost. He is the *monogenēs*, the one of a kind, the unique Son of God. While we cannot *be* Jesus, we can be *like* Him. "We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ . . ." (Eph 4:15). The ultimate goal of Scripture's ministry is to foster, to nurture Christlikeness, not just to require or expect it. The "mature manhood," the "measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13) is what we can grow into under the influence of God's Word.

It is presumptuous and conceited to trust and count on God's grace as we *plan to sin*. This was the essence of Christ's temptation atop of the temple (Matt 4:5-7). God's grace is abused when we insist on jumping into trouble, playing with sin, or actually sinning and then expecting Him to prove His love by providing us with a parachute.

### Correct Interpretation: Faithful to Bible Data

Interpretation of Scripture must be an adventure in discovery, an exercise in humility, and an experience in spiritual growth if it is to provide moral guidance in the contemporary setting. Interpretation is discovery because God has revealed His will to us. He has said what needs to be said, and done what is necessary for our salvation. No additions or subtraction are permitted (Rev 22:18, 19), no inventions or alterations are required. Scripture is completed, signed, and delivered.

Interpretation must not generate or produce contradictory meanings. It must remain dependent and faithful to the existing text and the dynamic which comes from the Author-recipient relationship, as well as the Author's stance on relation to the recipient's life condition. An interpretation cannot say that *creatio ex nihilo* did not happen if the document states it did—and remain a valid interpretation. It is possible that a theologian, who prefers to think along today's scientific modes, presents a different theory of origins. That is a legitimate endeavor. However, when some alternate theory contradicts the Scripture and yet claims that the thesis is an interpretation of Scripture, then such behavior is misleading and reprehensible on moral grounds. It is also conceivable that someone may attempt harmonization between evolution and creation. Such an attempt is legitimate as well. But if the message of the Bible is thereby damaged or deformed, then such an activity cannot be called interpretation.

Interpretation of Scripture must be an exercise in humility.<sup>10</sup> We come to its pages with open minds to learn, with attentive ears to hear, and with willing hearts to obey. The most erudite among us is a mere *school child* at the feet of God's Word. If we would meet Paul or Isaiah today, we could teach them a few things about the modern state of knowledge. In terms of learning they would be our students. However, when these persons write under divine inspiration the roles must be reversed.

If a scholar desires to subject the Scripture to the modern literary or historical analysis, treating the Bible as if it were like any other piece of ancient literature, such a work would be fascinating. But when such an exercise is completed and the data gathered, it would be hazardous to consider such findings as truth. The initial

presupposition limits the text to only one narrow mode of apprehending reality. The mere fact that the text can be studied with literary means as any other piece of literature does not make the scholar an authority over the Bible or the text an ordinary text. A presupposition has no power to change reality. To understand God's Word we must stand under it and be willing to be guided by it through our moral perplexities.

Finally, the interpretation of Scripture must be an experience in spiritual growth. The purpose for writing the Bible is the salvation of humanity (2 Tim 3:15-17). A faithful elucidation of its meaning makes the Word more accessible without weakening or diluting its content. If we change the principles of a healthy or a good life, we will reap the results. If interpretation strives to satisfy any other need than the need to overcome sin, such a work, no matter how rigorous, creative, and laudable, cannot maintain Scripture as a moral guide. Exegesis alone, even with the best hermeneutical apparatus, will produce distorted or partial results if the presuppositions guiding the research do not harmonize with the biblical claims, and the above mentioned identifying marks.

### Endnotes

\*Biblical citations are from *The Revised Standard Version*, 1946, 1952.

1 James Barr. *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 132-138.

2 This issue has received comprehensive treatment by Noel Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988).

3 Barr, pp. 132-134.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

8 Weeks, especially pp. 95-118.

9 In a college astronomy textbook we find such expressions as "sunrise" and "sunset" even though we all know that such terms are pre-scientific. See T. T. Arny, *Explorations, an Introduction to Astronomy* (Boston: Mosby, 1994), E4-0 and E4-1.

10 J. M. Templeton, *The Humble Approach* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981).

*Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 6/2 (1995):63-76.  
Article copyright © 1995 by Elden M. Chalmers.

## CONSCIENCE

By Elden M. Chalmers

Retired, formerly SDA Theological Seminary  
Andrews University

The purpose of this study is to examine certain psychological views of conscience in the light of Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White. Our analysis will focus on certain critical dimensions out of which may emerge a particular Adventist view of conscience in harmony with Scripture. The clarification of an Adventist view of conscience is believed to be vital for the development of a systematic psychology in agreement with Scripture and Adventist principles.

A review of the psychological and theological literature suggests the following as major questions about conscience: What is conscience? What is its source? Is conscience innate in man, and does it unfold spontaneously after birth? Is man born only with the capacity for the development of conscience? Does the process of socialization determine the essence of conscience? Is conscience a transcultural phenomenon? How does a man's response to conscience affect his spiritual potential and his emotional health?

Until the 1950's, textbooks in psychology rarely, if ever, mentioned moral development or conscience. Psychology was trying to establish itself as a science, especially by using objective methods. Psychology's work was restricted to the more readily objectifiable areas of study rather than areas as elusive as conscience.

In more recent years, however, learning theorists, psychoanalysts, and developmental psychologists have developed techniques for the study of conscience and other aspects of moral development.

In 1968, the topic was considered of sufficient importance to