

## THE CRISIS OF THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE AS THE WORD OF GOD

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It is widely acknowledged that the most important crisis facing Christian churches today involves the authority of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> And what is true of Christian churches as a whole is true also in the microcosm of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Many knowledgeable Adventist leaders—administrators, pastors, educational leaders, scholars, teachers, and laity—are painfully aware that the major crisis of the later decades of the twentieth century, even in the Adventist movement, is the authority of the Bible as the Word of God. Should the Bible give direction to all teachings, the full belief system, the entire life style and policies that Adventists stand for, or should the Bible be used only to some degree, or not be used at all when interpretations differ?

It is both amazing and disturbing that the chairperson of a major commission studying a divisive issue in the Adventist church recently concluded that, inasmuch as some of the papers of experts studying biblical aspects of the topic diverged in their conclusions, these papers canceled one another out and the Bible offers no "thus saith the Lord" on the matter as a basis for a denominational decision. The issue is one of biblical authority in determining doctrines for church life and practice.

But does it really follow when experts disagree on their interpretations of biblical evidence that the Bible cannot be used to decide a question? Is it not rather mandatory, when divergence of

interpretations exists, that we inquire as to the hermeneutical methods that the experts are using and what presuppositions are at work?

On the very same issue confronting the commission that we just mentioned, other Christian bodies have found biblical evidence to guide them.<sup>2</sup> Should Adventists lightly disregard the potential of further study of Scripture and of the methods of Scripture study? And should we not ask if we have contextualized the Bible. Have modern socio-cultural forces been allowed to influence what we permit the Bible to mean? Is pragmatism to reign in the Advent movement? Are we willing to surrender the foundation of our faith and make a very unfortunate statement about the authority of the Bible? Surely nothing should be allowed to override the abiding authority of the Bible as the Word of God to give direction to the community of believers in all places and at all times.

This recent illustration seems symptomatic of the broader crisis of the authority of the Bible as the Word of God today. As in other denominations that hold a high view of Scripture, historic biblical positions are under attack in the Adventist church and are either being rejected outright or modified almost beyond recognition in a process of symbiosis.

But let us pause to reaffirm our confidence in the Seventh-day Adventist church as God's true end-time remnant. The crisis of biblical authority is so severe that we would be irresponsible not to address it, but we fully believe that Seventh-day Adventists constitute a unique prophetic movement, called into existence "for such a time as this" to proclaim to every nation, tongue, and people, with power and conviction the soon and visible return of Jesus Christ, a message based on the proclamation of the "three angels messages" of Revelation 14. What is stated in this paper is not at all to be understood as criticism. God forbid! We simply observe with eyes open and heads held high, certain trends and issues that seem to be eating away at the core of the message on which the Seventh-day Adventist church is based. God's special "messenger to the remnant" (and this is what Ellen G. White is and will remain), has stated profoundly, "We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in

our past history.”<sup>3</sup> She has also stated, profoundly, in the *Great Controversy* chapter, “The Scriptures a Safeguard,” that

God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain “Thus saith the Lord” in its support.<sup>4</sup>

I am convinced that the “people” she speaks of here, the people that maintain the Bible and the Bible only as the “standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reform,” is God’s remnant church. Thus what we are attempting to do in this presentation is not to criticize but to reassert the rightful place of the Bible in the remnant’s life and mission in the face of increasing challenges that have diminished and are undermining its biblical foundation.

At this point let us look at some aspects of modern scholarship outside the Seventh-day Adventist church, and by analyzing how they developed, learn how we can prevent their influence from having a negative impact on Adventist theology, thought, and life.

A few weeks ago, when the current issue of one of my professional journals arrived, my eye immediately fell on an article by Professor James Barr (formally of Oxford University and now of Vanderbilt), one of the best known and most seminal critical biblical scholars of our time. The article, I found, dealt with the reliability of the creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2—a topic which is currently being hotly debated in Adventist circles. Professor Barr mentioned what the modern, historical-critical scholar says about Genesis 1 and 2:

He [the historical-critical scholar] does not tell you “what happened,” he does not tell you anything factual about the origin of the universe, because he does not know anything about that; and not only does he not know, he knows that the biblical writers didn’t know either. . . . The question is not: what exactly happened; but what was in their [the Bible writers’] mind, what theology did they have, that led them to express their ideas about creation *in this way and not in some other*. . . . But it’s the theology, in the last resort, that explains

the story and makes sense out of it. That is how the [historical-critical] scholar works.<sup>5</sup>

Barr concluded, “The Hebrew theology of creation and the world expresses itself in a story which is allegorical.”<sup>6</sup>

Professor Barr’s description of the story of creation as “allegorical” in essence and non-factual in nature may be true for the type of liberal, historical-critical scholarship which he represents. So how would this branch of modern scholarship represent the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

The apostle Paul writes in 1 Cor 15:14, “If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is in vain and our faith is empty.” But when Barr asked in his article, “What ‘really happened’ in the resurrection of Jesus?”<sup>7</sup> he answered, on behalf of his fellow historical-critical scholars, “Look in the commentaries on the Gospels, and you will find that they can’t tell you that.”<sup>8</sup>

Barr made the same kind of statement about the temptation of Jesus. And turning to the ascension of Jesus Christ, we ask again, “What ‘actually happened’ in the ascension of Jesus to Heaven?” and find that Prof. Barr replied, “They [historical-critical scholars] don’t know that either; not only do they not know, they don’t even try to discuss it.”<sup>9</sup>

In passing we recall some of the many “explanations” that have been offered of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, such as the vision hypothesis (in which some followers of Jesus are said to have seen Jesus as risen Lord only in visions but not in reality), and the psychological hypothesis (according to which Jesus was raised only in the minds of the disciples but not bodily), etc.<sup>10</sup> If any of these explanations were correct, the question should not be “What happened to the body of Jesus?” but “What happened to the brains of the disciples?”<sup>11</sup>

From what we’ve shown already it must be clear that the authority of the Bible as the Word of God is severely limited, restricted, reinterpreted, and redefined in historical-critical scholarship on such basic points as creation,<sup>12</sup> miracles in both the Old Testament and New Testament, the temptation, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and Christ’s second coming.

These matters are but symptomatic of a host of others. There are historical-critical scholars who still question, or question anew,

the very existence of Abraham and the other patriarchs (and throw doubt on the narratives about them),<sup>13</sup> the existence of Moses,<sup>14</sup> and the factuality of the exodus as depicted in the Old Testament.<sup>15</sup>

Why is all of this important for our topic, the authority of the Bible as the Word of God? The historical-critical scholarship we are looking at is based on certain axioms, predetermined norms, and *a priori* assumptions, at work<sup>16</sup> openly or ever so subtly in such methodologies as source criticism,<sup>17</sup> form criticism,<sup>18</sup> tradition criticism,<sup>19</sup> and redaction criticism.<sup>20</sup> These constituent methodologies of the historical-critical method claim to be able to determine what the biblical text is and what its prehistory was, with various socio-cultural forces allegedly shaping the text in the supposedly long development from its earliest stages to its present form.

It helps to remind ourselves that the historical-critical method seems fairly new when one considers the nearly 2,000 years of the Christian Church. It is, in fact, only about 200 years old and has been in full swing for only 100 to 150 years. Its subsidiary methods, tradition criticism and redaction criticism, have flourished in full form for only 30 to 50 years. Just the same, the historical-critical method has had an immense impact and has influenced every church, ours included. Although not all scholars use the historical-critical method in the same way, no one who uses it at all can treat the Bible as the full Word of God.

Let us look further at the history of the method. For the sake of brevity, it has been suggested that "the divine authority of the Bible was not questioned until the rise of rationalism"<sup>21</sup> about 200 years ago.<sup>22</sup> The father of modern liberal theology, Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, wrote his influential book in 1799 entitled *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, in which he not only defined the essence of religion as "feeling" but also "rejected the absolute authority of Scripture."<sup>23</sup> To be sure, in doing so Schleiermacher reaped the influences of earlier developments. With the Copernican revolution and the development of the scientific method, the authority of the Bible became for some restricted as regards matters of natural science.<sup>24</sup> Even so, Christians generally continued to hold that the Bible was inspired by God in its entirety, as the revelation of God to inspired prophets, and that therefore it

is authoritative for all times and all situations in all it says. But in the later part of the 18th century (Schleiermacher's day) and on into the 19th century a significant change took place in the understanding of the Bible. Under the new appraisal, many scholars finally asserted that "we have to study the Bible the way we study all other pieces of literature."<sup>25</sup> The Bible, they said, is made up of documents of the past; it has no special nature, and no special method of interpretation is needed to explain it.

Under the impact of the new mode of thought, the *historical-grammatical* method of biblical interpretation, which had been used by the great reformers and their followers, was set aside, because it maintained and was built on the foundation that the Bible was inspired and fully authoritative. By contrast, the historical-critical method, insisted that the Bible is not the unique Word of God (written in normal human languages). The humanity of Scripture was emphasized as all important.

At the beginning of the 20th century neo-orthodoxy came along, reaffirming that the Bible is not the Word of God but teaching that it can *become* the Word of God in certain ways. Yet even in neo-orthodoxy, the Bible is a fully human book.

A related view of more recent origin is known as "canonical criticism," another form of the historical-critical method, developed by Professor James A. Sanders.<sup>26</sup> Sanders bluntly states that to do "canonical criticism" "one must insist that the Bible is not the Word of God."<sup>27</sup>

The major issue in all these approaches is "the nature of authority"<sup>28</sup> of the Bible—for, in the words of Professor B. W. Anderson, "Authority does not lie in Scripture but between the lines of Scripture in something which can be recovered only by the tools given us by the Enlightenment."<sup>29</sup> This redefinition of biblical authority as residing between the lines of Scripture and not in the Bible itself indicates that those who believe it perceive inspiration as having operated not on the biblical prophets who wrote the Bible but on the ancient religious communities and the socio-cultural forces which they assume to have shaped traditions over long periods of time until the traditions had evolved into the final text of the Bible.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to these views, the Christological analogy compares the union of the divine and the human in Scripture with the union of the divine and the human in Jesus Christ. Ellen G. White long ago supported this Christological analogy:

The Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that 'the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.' John 1:14.<sup>31</sup>

It is vital that Seventh-day Adventists maintain this concept of the Bible's union of divinity and humanity.<sup>32</sup> This "union of the divine and the human" puts the Bible into a class by itself different from all uninspired literature past or present. To insist on the human nature of the Bible to the exclusion of the divine because the Bible participates in the limitation of human language, and on this basis to insist that the Bible is fallible and limited in authority, implies that the parallel with Christ is destroyed.<sup>33</sup>

I would like to return to the historical-critical view that the Bible is to be understood and thus to be interpreted in the same way as other ancient documents. This supposition demands a radical revision of the concept of revelation such as has been offered by Karl Barth,<sup>34</sup> the influential neo-orthodox theologian, and many others.<sup>35</sup> This view argues that (a) the Bible is everywhere historically conditioned or time-bound,<sup>36</sup> (b) there is no unity in Scripture,<sup>37</sup> (c) "God's purpose cannot be traced in a sequence of historical events (a 'history' in the ordinary sense) or in a reconstruction of historical events,"<sup>38</sup> (d) there is no salvation history from creation to consummation,<sup>39</sup> and (e) there is no "absoluteness."<sup>40</sup> The prolific author and biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann avers that in the historical-critical paradigm "absolute truth is not available to us."<sup>41</sup> This assumption that "absolute truth" is not available to us in the Bible gives the historical-critical scholar a sense of "greater freedom in interpreting the Bible,"<sup>42</sup> because its meaning or teaching can be adjusted on the basis of various modern cultural norms.

As long ago as 1974 Gerhard Maier announced the demise of the historical-critical method in his book, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*.<sup>43</sup> Even a year earlier than that, in 1973, a

scholar teaching then at the prestigious Union Theological Seminary in New York dared to state, "Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt."<sup>44</sup> However, the fact is that the historical-critical method is very much alive<sup>45</sup> and is being widely practiced today in a variety of ways, invariably based on Enlightenment and other presuppositions and tools.<sup>46</sup> To be sure, it is heavily criticized from both within<sup>47</sup> and without,<sup>48</sup> but it lives on. We hear voices calling for change, enlargement, and adaptation. Some historical-critical scholars themselves are saying that "only a change in direction of our basic hermeneutical approach to the [NT] texts will enable us to rescue the thought found in the New Testament from threats produced by increasingly sophisticated [historical-critical] research."<sup>49</sup> The problem of historical-critical research, according to Professor Robin Scroggs, for example, is that it so contextualizes the [biblical or] NT text "that the necessary bridge between then and now is thought to be impossible."<sup>50</sup>

In the approach known as "contextualism," the Bible is seen as a book of purely human origin, like any other book or document, which must be interpreted on the basis of its ancient Near Eastern context alone.<sup>51</sup> In place of the principle of "the Bible as its own interpreter," which is based on an understanding of the Bible as a "union of the divine and the human," contextualizing looks for meaning entirely within the cultures of the ancient world. The socio-cultural horizons of the past in which the Bible was born are the only contexts allowed to shape the interpretation of the Bible today. These contexts include "social stratification," "economic realities and dynamics," "family structures and social mores," "psychological dynamics" and "literary and rhetorical conventions."<sup>52</sup> Contextualizing the Bible in this way imprisons the meaning of the biblical text in the culture of the past.

Various scholars strongly object, and some modern literary critics call for a new "reader-oriented criticism."<sup>53</sup> This method claims that the biblical story is the vehicle for an idea that can be abstracted, extracted, or brought out, but that whatever the text, passage, story, or book means to today's reader, this is its true meaning! Accordingly the Bible has no meaning in itself. In this new approach meaning is sought in the modern reader but not in the Bible.

Let us take the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2 and see, as an example, how it has been contextualized in modern historical-critical scholarship. Under the influence of the evolutionary hypothesis and its world-view, historical-criticism has to find a way to deal with the creation as depicted in Genesis 1-2 other than a straightforward literal reading would demand. It insists at the outset that Genesis 1-2 cannot be taken literally, because (a) it does not fit into the modern world view, and (b) it is a product of the ancient world and its context. Notice this recent example of contextualization:

Genesis 1, which [historical-critical] scholars place in the sixth century before Christ, was created for exiled Jews who were far from home and who felt that the world was falling apart. Everywhere they looked they saw Babylonian flags and Babylonian tanks and they wondered how they could be faithful Jews. The priests wrote a liturgy through which those Jews were able to say, "The world does not belong to Babylon, because in the beginning God made heaven and earth. We don't have to kneel before the Babylonians."<sup>54</sup>

What type of literature is Genesis 1 in this view? Certainly not literal history! "Genesis 1 . . . is a liturgy,"<sup>55</sup> Professor Brueggemann asserts, and "liturgies aren't sketches of absolute truth."<sup>56</sup> On the basis of placing Genesis 1 in the Babylonian exile, we could engage, this writer insists, in conversation about *civil disobedience* but not about creation and evolution! Genesis 1 as liturgy makes the point that "the world is very good and it belongs to God."<sup>57</sup> And that is it.

From this current example of contextualization let us move back to the turn of the century when the influential Continental scholar Hermann Gunkel designated the book of Genesis as "saga [or 'legend' in the English translation]."<sup>58</sup> Genesis 1 is a primitive saga attempting to answer the question, "Whence came heaven and earth?" and also "Why is the Sabbath sacred?"<sup>59</sup> As "saga" it is not to be understood literally. Though written in prose,<sup>60</sup> it is to be taken as poetry in meaning.<sup>61</sup>

Other scholars have called Genesis 1-2 a collection of "myths" (Susan Niditch),<sup>62</sup> an "allegory" (James Barr),<sup>63</sup> "poetry" (Bruce Vawter),<sup>64</sup> a "hymn" (Gordon J. Wenham),<sup>65</sup> or simply "a story, with no foundation in the actual history of the ancient world" (Bernhard

W. Anderson).<sup>66</sup> But whatever these scholars designate Gen 1 (or Gen 1-2) to be, they all agree on the assertion that it is non-literal, non-historical, and non-factual.<sup>67</sup> They reduce it to nothing more than "a triumphant affirmation of the power and wisdom of God and the wonder of his creation."<sup>68</sup> In their view, the creation-science debate is sidetracked. Genesis 1-2 tells us that God is Creator and that is it! As to *who* created, *what* was created, *how* it was created, and *when* it was created only the first question is answered in Genesis 1-2: Who created? Answer: God created.

Yet the profound first sentence of the Bible, which has no parallel in the ancient world at all, answers all *four* questions and so does the remainder of Genesis 1-2: *When* did He do it? "In the beginning [in six days at that, as the remainder of the passage shows]." *Who* created? "God." *How* did He make heaven and earth? "God *created*." *What* did He create? "The heaven and the earth." To limit Genesis 1-2 to a theological assertion answering only one of these four questions, is gross reductionism based on modernism, evolutionism, and historical-criticism, and is entirely out of harmony with the biblical text and biblical realism.

As stated above, no denomination or educational system in our time is totally immune from the influences, subtle and not so subtle, of historical-critical methodologies. The battle in the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, during which the entire faculty of its Concordia Seminary walked out in 1974 over the right to use historical criticism, is telling evidence of the conflict which the historical-critical method is capable of bringing about.<sup>69</sup> The current conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention and its huge seminaries shows that the battle is still being fought in rapidly changing conservative Christian seminaries.<sup>70</sup> The evolution of Fuller Theological Seminary in California over the past quarter of a century from being an evangelical to being a neo-evangelical and now towards becoming a post-neo-evangelical seminary<sup>71</sup> shows what can happen merely by changing faculty members and seminary leadership.

Has the Seventh-day Adventist church been confronted and, if so, how has it reacted? The story would fill a book. But if I am not mistaken and at the risk of over simplifying, I should say briefly

that there have been in the Adventist movement three main phases of involvement with the issues under discussion.

The first phase came during the Millerite awakening and early Sabbatarian Adventism. Millerite Adventists and the early Sabbath-keeping Adventists were directly confronted in the 1840s by opponents who reflected historical-critical trends<sup>72</sup> in regard to the prophetic interpretation of Daniel and Revelation—and the Adventists forcefully repulsed the attack. The historicist hermeneutic of the Millerites and early Sabbatarian Adventists had no room for historical criticism; it certainly had no room for Antiochus IV Epiphanes as the fulfillment of the little horn in the long-range prophecies of Daniel.

The second major Adventist battle with the historical-critical method took place during the first three decades of this century.<sup>73</sup> Between 1905 and 1930 some fifteen articles appeared in the *Review and Herald* alone denouncing what was then called “higher criticism,” a term not widely used today but identical with the liberal approach of the historical-critical method we’ve been talking about here.

For example, Charles M. Snow, associate editor of the *Review*, wrote an article in 1907 titled “The Higher Critic and God’s Word.” Its lead sentence said, “We see frequent evidence of the fact that the two chief aims of the Higher Criticism are to destroy faith in the Bible as the Word of God, and to destroy confidence in Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of mankind.”<sup>74</sup> Referring to the virgin birth and other miracles, it observed that the “Higher Critic also declares that a belief in the miracles of the Bible is not essential, and he discards them.”<sup>75</sup> If the anti-supernaturalism of higher criticism is allowed to reign, Snow said, there is nothing left for the believer. “Admit the premise [of no miracles] of the Higher Critics concerning what constitutes the Word of God . . . , and it logically follows that there is nothing but the black goal of the unbeliever at the end of the race.”<sup>76</sup> In a second article, “The New Salvation,” Snow dwelt on the theme that growing acceptance of Higher Criticism was causing “the destruction of faith in the teachings of God’s Word and the destruction of faith in the plan of salvation which God instituted” and was thus “bound to result in a man-made salvation.”<sup>77</sup> Elder Snow’s perception was precise and is as correct today as it was in

1907. Where higher criticism is allowed to function, the authority of the Bible is diminished, and there can be no true salvation history.

An editorial in the *Review and Herald* in 1908 affirmed,

There are some things which are settled for all time. There are some fundamental positions in this advent movement which are not subject to revision. There are some doctrines which have made this people what they are; and having been wrought into history, they cannot be lightly questioned or flippantly insinuated against without impugning this whole movement.<sup>78</sup>

The editorial continued with a direct statement relating to people who wished to remain uninvolved: “There are times when it is both criminal and fatal to be neutral.”<sup>79</sup>

Brother L. A. Smith in 1905 had a brief article on “Modern Criticism of the decalogue,” in which he objected that “modern criticism” wanted to rewrite the decalogue.<sup>80</sup> We may wonder how Smith would have reacted if he had lived to see the form-critical and tradition-historical studies of the decalogue being produced in our day.<sup>81</sup> Whereas the Bible says God wrote the decalogue and that He did so at the time of Israel’s journey in the wilderness, the modern historical critic gives the “actual setting at the time of Josiah or the Exile.”<sup>82</sup> Most modern historical critics question whether anything in the decalogue could have come from the time of Moses—and refuse even to discuss whether any of it came from God. The verdict of the most extensive historical-critical study on the decalogue in recent years is negative.<sup>83</sup>

“Revelation and Speculation,”<sup>84</sup> an article published in the *Review and Herald* in 1905, referred to geology and “the opening chapters of the Bible [where] we have a brief and simple but comprehensive account of the creation of the heavens and the earth.”<sup>85</sup> “It is time,” its author said, “for those who really believe the Bible to be the Word of God to take their stand squarely and uncompromisingly upon revealed truth and against those human speculations. . . .”<sup>86</sup> In another article in the *Review and Herald* L. A. Smith cited an anonymous writer who had observed that the “new theology” based on higher [historical-]criticism offered “infallible scholarship instead of an infallible Bible;” and ‘modern thought’ instead of a ‘Thus saith the Lord;’ ‘culture,’ instead of conversion; ‘the natural in all things, the supernatural in noth-

ing.”<sup>87</sup> Affirming the Bible as “the infallible Word of God,” Smith called for acceptance of “what the Bible says without calling any statement an error, or a human idea, or spiritualizing it until it has no definite meaning.”<sup>88</sup>

In yet another article, H. F. Phelps denied “the tenets of the Higher Critics” on the basis that “the Bible is the product of an infinite mind, thoughts of an infinite God.”<sup>89</sup> An unsigned article concluded, “We are opposed to the principle of higher criticism, whether advocated within or without the denomination.”<sup>90</sup> Earl A. Rowell titled an article: “Higher Criticism the Enemy of Seventh-day Adventists.”<sup>91</sup>

It is evident that in the early decades of the twentieth century the *Review and Herald* opposed higher criticism. Its writers maintained that higher criticism undermines the faith,<sup>92</sup> dissects the Bible,<sup>93</sup> rejects the virgin birth, Christ’s miracles, and His bodily resurrection,<sup>94</sup> discredits the decalogue, changes the Sabbath commandment,<sup>95</sup> declares the story of Jonah a myth,<sup>96</sup> denies the literal creation,<sup>97</sup> declares that Job never lived,<sup>98</sup> removes belief in a personal God,<sup>99</sup> asserts that Daniel never existed,<sup>100</sup> denies “the infallibility of God’s Word,”<sup>101</sup> and in general undermines the authority of the Bible<sup>102</sup> and the historic view of inspiration.<sup>103</sup>

F. M. Wilcox observed that in his day, “the seeds of doubt and skepticism” being sown “by the higher critics and advocates of liberal theology” were “honeycombing the professed church of Christ.”<sup>104</sup> Is it conceivable that they were even then having an influence on the Adventist church?

For an answer we look to Ellen G. White and what she had to say about higher criticism. At a New Zealand camp meeting in 1893, attended by Ellen White, a Methodist minister’s printed sermon on higher criticism was handed to Elder G. B. Starr. The discussions on the inspiration of the Bible that this sermon brought about, Ellen White reported, “led to more lessons on this subject, and a sermon on ‘Higher Criticism’ that was well attended by the people of Napier.”<sup>105</sup> In telling about this, Ellen White made a revealing statement regarding the influence of higher criticism on some Adventists. “We were surprised,” she wrote, “to see the extent to which our own brethren had been affected by this infidelity [of Higher Criticism].”<sup>106</sup>

In 1894 Ellen White referred again to “higher critics,”<sup>107</sup> and in 1897 she wrote an article on “The Perils of the Last Days” in which she warned that a

night, dark and portentous, is enclosing the Christian world. . . . Systems that make the truth of God of none effect are cherished. Many are teaching for doctrine the commandments of men; and their assertions are taken as truth. The people have received man-made theories. So the gospel is perverted and the Scriptures misapplied. . . . Men’s theories and suppositions are honored before the Word of the Lord God of hosts. The truth is counteracted by error. The word of God is wrested, divided, and distorted by higher criticism.<sup>108</sup>

Later, in a paragraph subheaded “Higher Criticism” she said,

When men talk of higher criticism; when they pass their judgment upon the word of God, call their attention to the fact that they have forgotten who was the first and wisest critic [Satan]. He has had thousands of years of practical experience. He it is who teaches the so-called higher critics of the world today. God will punish all those who, as higher critics, exalt themselves, and criticize God’s Holy Word.<sup>109</sup>

It is evident that Ellen White opposed the higher critics, those who wrest, divide, and distort the Word of God. In 1903 she spoke against higher criticism again in the book *Education*.<sup>110</sup> In 1911, in *Acts of the Apostles*, she referred to the “pleasing sentiments of higher criticism, evolution, spiritualism, theosophy, and pantheism, . . .”<sup>111</sup> She added,

To many the Bible is a lamp without oil, because they have turned their minds into channels of speculative belief that bring misunderstanding and confusion. The work of higher criticism, in dissecting, conjecturing, reconstructing, is destroying faith in the Bible as a divine revelation. It is robbing God’s word of power to control, uplift, and inspire human lives.<sup>112</sup>

In an earlier book, *The Ministry of Healing* (1905), Ellen White remarked on the condition of the world into which Jesus Christ sent his disciples, when “Satanic agencies took possession of men” and “God’s word had been set aside for tradition and human speculation.”<sup>113</sup> She then asked, “What is the condition in the world today? Is not faith in the Bible as effectually destroyed by the higher criticism and speculation of today as it was by tradition and rab-

binism in the days of Christ?"<sup>114</sup> Her analogy between the situation of "today," in which "higher criticism" is wresting, dividing, distorting, dissecting, conjecturing, and reconstructing the Bible, with that of Christ's day, when the Word of God had been set aside for tradition and human speculation, is revealing. In her view the same power is at work today as was at work then.

The third phase of Adventist reaction to higher criticism (i.e., to the historical-critical method), after the reactions in our foundational years and in the early 1900s, began during World War II and continues into the present. It is characterized, broadly speaking, by a gradual and cautious acceptance of major tenets of the historical-critical method by some Adventist scholars, primarily in "first world" countries. In recent years some scholars have left denominational positions in consequence of their historical-critical views. Others have moved into various denominational leadership or administrative positions where their views do not need to be exposed. Some have become increasingly cautious in expressing their methodological foundations. Meanwhile, opposition is seen in various quarters of the church, but significant groups of students continue to be exposed to various forms of the historical-critical method, presented as an appropriate hermeneutic.

The General Conference and North American Division in 1974 organized Bible Conferences at Andrews University, Pacific Union College, and Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists, under the leadership of the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference. The focus was on proper methods of biblical interpretation. Fifteen different presenters offered papers based on a high view of Scripture as fully inspired, and either opposed or steered away from the historical-critical method. In connection with these Bible Conferences, the Biblical Research Institute published a notebook<sup>115</sup> and a bound volume titled *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*.<sup>116</sup> This book surveyed the presuppositions and methodologies of modern historical-critical methodologies and their impact on the authority of the Bible in contrast to a biblical view of revelation-inspiration as the ground of biblical authority. It also emphasized principles of biblical hermeneutics based on the internal testimony of the Bible itself.

These Bible Conferences and publications were by and large well received by Adventist pastors and leaders around the world—but not by all.<sup>117</sup> As we enter the 1990s we face the challenge of the historical-critical method, and in some quarters also sociological and literary methods of interpretation of Scripture that call for careful analysis and scrutiny. At the same time, more and more Adventist thought leaders are affirming the true Adventist heritage that honors the Reformation principle that the Bible is its own interpreter,<sup>118</sup> the position strongly championed by Ellen White, "Scripture interprets scripture, one passage being the key to other passages."<sup>119</sup>

It is appropriate that we close this article with a reaffirmation, as brief as it has to be, of the foundations of the authority of the Bible as the Word of God.

1. What role did God play in the origin of the Bible? 2 Tim 3:16 NASB replies, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, . . ." The Greek word for "inspiration" is *theopneustos*, meaning "God-breathed," or "produced by the creative breath of God."<sup>120</sup> Amos 3:7 assures us that "surely the Lord God does nothing, unless he reveals His secret to His servants the prophets."

The New Testament makes abundantly clear that the Old Testament, the Bible of Jesus and the apostles, is inspired and authoritative.<sup>121</sup> Romans 1:2 calls it "the Holy Scriptures"—or "the oracles of God" (NASB, RSV) or "the words of God" (NIV). Jesus Christ affirmed the unity and indivisibility of the Scriptures by saying, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (Jn 10:35). Peter said emphatically, "No prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet 1:20-21 RSV). The "prophecy" originates from God and comes to the inspired human agent through the moving of the Holy Spirit. Matt 22:31, 43; Acts 1:16; 3:21; 28:25; 1 Pet 1:11; 2 Pet 1:21; Heb 3:7; 9:8; 10:15 all attest that the Bible was produced by the Holy Spirit.

What level of authority does the Bible accord to the New Testament? Jesus told the disciples, "He who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16). Various New Testament writings claim explicitly to have been inspired. John introduced the book of Revelation, by analogy with Deut 4:2 and Eccles 3:14, as "the revelation of Jesus

Church" sent by God Himself (Rev 1:1-3). The book of Revelation concludes with the affirmation that its contents are "the words of the prophecy of this book" (Rev 22:18). At the end of his gospel John specifically asserted that what he had recorded was "true" (Jn 21:24).

Peter equated the letters of Paul with "the rest of the Scriptures" (2 Pet 3:16), indicating that Paul's epistles are Scripture just like the rest of the Bible. Paul himself frequently pointed to the Holy Spirit as the source of his writings (see 1 Cor 7:40; 14:37; 2 Cor 3:5-6; 4:13). Ellen White accepted the testimony which the Bible makes about its divine origin, even though it was written by humans:

The Bible points to God as its author; yet it was written by human hands; and in the varied style of its different books it presents the characteristics of the several writers. The truths revealed are all 'given by inspiration of God' (2 Timothy 3:16); yet they are expressed in the words of men.<sup>122</sup>

Here we recognize again that in the Bible we find the divine-human unity typical also of Jesus Christ.

2. What do the unity and the divine inspiration<sup>123</sup> of the Bible tell us about the authority of the Bible as the Word of God and about how it should be interpreted? Inasmuch as the authority of the Bible resides in its origin in God, it must be regarded as unique, the only scripture which is authoritative for all people, everywhere, and at all times. Even though its universal authority is questioned, qualified, or rejected by historical criticism, its God-given authority remains. God revealed its content by means of the Holy Spirit. The prophets, i.e. the human agents, received this divinely revealed information and recorded it as the writings that constitute the Bible. God is the information giver, and man, the prophet, is the information receiver and information recorder. It goes without saying that the Holy Spirit superintended the recording (the writing down) of the information in such a way as to guarantee that it would be expressed trustworthily in the human language used by the prophet. Paul did not write, "All inspired men are inspired by God," but "All Scripture is inspired by God." The prophets were "men moved by the Holy Spirit" (1 Pet 1:21 rsv); thus what they produced, i.e. "all Scripture," is also inspired. The Holy Spirit

superintended the Scriptural end product as an essential part of the inspiration process.

In view of what the Bible says about itself, the Bible cannot be interpreted just like "any other book or document of the ancient world"—or of the modern world for that matter. Christians of every century have recognized for these very reasons that the only true, adequate, and appropriate hermeneutic of the Bible as the Word of God in human form must be a hermeneutic of Scripture, a hermeneutic by Scripture, and a hermeneutic for Scripture, in short, a biblical hermeneutic. "The Bible is its own expositor."<sup>124</sup> While it is all too true that "man is fallible," it is equally true that "God's Word is infallible."<sup>125</sup> This Word, so interpreted, is the source of the life and mission of God's remnant church, giving it authority and power. It will guide the remnant church and its members to the promised glory.

### Endnotes

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2 A recent study of the Bible in regard to the ordination of women to ministry has concluded that "despite disclaimers to the contrary, women's ordination in left-wing [Presbyterian] denominations has been promoted and enacted only because of the denial of the authority and normativity of Scripture. Sometimes this denial has been explicit, . . . Often it has been more subtle, as in articles which conveniently neglected to discuss biblical texts seemingly inimical to female ordination, and in committee reports which were more interested in public opinion, and the church's experience than in the teaching of the Word of God. In denominations where the Bible is regarded officially as inerrant [carrying final authority], there has been a general rejection of the induction of women into ruling and teaching office [which call for ordination]." (Frank J. Smith, "Petticoat

Presbyterians: A Century of Debate in American Presbyterianism on the Issue of the Ordination of Women," *Westminster Theological Journal* 51/1 [1989]: 72-74.

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4 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif., 1911) p. 595.

5 James Barr, "The Literal, the Allegorical, and Modern Scholarship," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 44 (1989): 12.

6 *Ibid.* p. 13.

7 *Ibid.* p. 10.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

10 For these and other views, see Berthold Klappert, *Diskussion um Kreuz und Auferstehung* (2nd ed.; Wuppertal, 1967).

11 L. Morris, "Resurrection of Jesus Christ," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1988), 4:153.

12 Bernhard W. Anderson, ed., *Creation in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1984).

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17 *Ibid.*, pp. 7-36, pp. 51-57.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 36-43, pp. 58-64.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 43-50.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 64-72.

21 Donald Guthrie, "Biblical Authority and New Testament Scholarship," *Vox Evangelica* 16 (1986): 7, 8.

22 See note 1 above and R. M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*. (rev. ed.; New York/London, 1966), pp. 145-152; W. G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*, trans. S. M. Gilmore and H. C. Kee (Nashville, 1972); E. G. Kraeling, *The Old Testament Since the Reformation* (New York, 1969).

23 Grant, p. 155.

24 Galileo Galilei's famous sentence, "The Bible tells us how to go to Heaven, not how the heavens go," reveals that he followed the superimposition of the Ptolemaic cosmology on Scripture as was customary in medieval times and the Catholic Church. See Charles E. Hummel, *The Galileo Connection: Resolving Conflicts Between Science and the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill., 1986).

25 Walter Brueggemann, "The Bible as the Living Word of God," *Perspectives* 4/7 (1989): 4.

26 See his books *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia, 1972); *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia, 1984); *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia, 1987). Among those who follow Sanders or who are sympathetic to him are Bernhard W. Anderson, "From Sacred Story to Sacred Text: Canon as Paradigm: A Review Essay," *Religious Studies Review* 15/2 (April 1989): 97-100; Peter R. Ackroyd, *Studies in the Religious Traditions of the Old Testament* (London, 1987).

27 Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, p. 65.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

29 Stated by Anderson, *From Sacred Story*, p. 99, as applying to himself and Sanders.

30 Sanders, *Canon and Community*, pp. 77, 78; Anderson, *From Sacred Story*, p. 99.

31 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 8.

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50 *Ibid.*

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## THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE A PERSONAL PILGRIMAGE

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I have not always held the view of Scriptural authority that I now maintain. My personal pilgrimage has, I believe, helped me understand at first hand the major viewpoints now held both outside and within the Seventh-day Adventist church. Having journeyed through a different perspective on the authority of Scripture and then returned to the position I now hold, I feel that my present convictions are not just a result of what my fathers and pastors and church leaders and the Adventist pioneers taught me. Instead, they are the result of my own wrestling with God and His Word.

I am now convinced that the issue of the authority of Scripture is basic to all other issues in the church. The destiny of our church depends on how its members regard the authority of the Bible.

Please let me share my experience. I was born in a conservative Adventist home and given a solid grounding in historic Adventist teachings and practice under godly parents and academy Bible teachers. But in college I found myself confronted with a crisis over the authority of Scripture. In a class entitled "Old Testament Prophets" the professor (who is no longer teaching Bible in our schools) systematically went through the traditional Messianic passages of the prophets and explained how they really did not