The Heroic Crusade Redux

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Biblical Interpretation and Credibility

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The Historical Grammatical Method vs. The Historical Critical Method By: Sean Pitman (8/19/11) Protestant Christians are famous for the mantra, “The Bible and the Bible only.” Yet, as Seventh-day Adventist protestants in particular, how do we know that this phrase is true? How do we know that the...

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The Heroic Crusade Redux

August 19, 2011 32 Comments

By Dr. Wesley Kime

About a year ago Dr. Ervin Taylor, founding editor-publisher of *Adventist Today*, emeritus professor of Anthropology at UC Riverside, pioneer apostle of progressive Adventism, famous curator of scientific evidence for eonic Evolution, theistic or otherwise, came over here to proclaim, rather formally, that Dr. Pitman had undertaken a “truly heroic crusade”.

Dr. Taylor recognized Dr. Pitman’s leading out against mainstream science by undertaking to provide, in the words of the citation, “solid modern scientific evidence to support the conclusions he has reached because of his religious beliefs,” notably a literal Genesis 1 Creation. Though heavy with cheery irony, with Pitman sounding more like Don Q flailing windmills than Daniel standing against Babylonians, as many of us saw him and blessed him for, and always will, Taylor’s encomium spotlighted the crusade.

That was a year ago. Another crusade has taken over these pages, warranting as formal a recognition as last year’s.

This crusade is not Dr. Pitman’s. Rather he is the butt of it, thrown smack into the den of lions. A flash mob, of good diversity, from all poles of this here big tent, has materialized from among the lecterns and from deep within our own pews.

Dr. Pitman, erstwhile defender of the faith, wielder of the Sword of Evidence “to support [as the citation says]…his religious beliefs,” is now denounced as the repudiator of religious belief. A heretic worse than Arius or Canright, perpetuator of a heresy worse than Sunday observance or dancing, plus he’s mean-spirited. An embarrassment to E.G. White and Ted Wilson, even.

Last year the very idea of using scientific evidence against Evolution or for a literal 6-day Creation was a violation of science itself, a perversion of science, a crime against science. A judge had said so. Science falsely so called. That was last year.

But now such employment of science, rather than just texts, in support of Creation is not just a crime against science but a sin against the Creator.
This is the thrust of this year’s crusade: Genesis 1 is to be accepted not from evidence but by faith. Science is, in the Latter Rain, to be as dreaded and eschewed as images of Baal by Israel of old. O turn ye! Turn ye!

From the pew is heard, “Though the whole world of science be for Creation, yet will I not hear those other voices.” From the lectern the cry, even more urgent (“HELL-O-O-O-O!”) and sans a nanogram of irony, “Though the whole world of science be against Creation, yet will I believe.”

The lecternists’ altar call, with synthesizer organ background, devolves solely (we trust there’s no hidden agenda) upon Creation being 100% unprovable and Evolution 100% proved, air tight, hermeneutically sealed. Dr. Taylor drops by ever so often to offer his Erv’s Odds. Last I saw, he (cheerily) grants like 1.48% of the data as not inconsistent with Genesis 1, but over here not a shred-y-shred-shred-shred is granted or permitted.

And inasmuch as there’s not a shred of evidence, it is alleged, for Genesis 1, which we are stuck with, it follows logically and otherwise that we have no recourse but to proceed on faith only. If Pitman’s heroic crusade is powered by the likely existence of scientific evidence, high faith’s holy campaign hangs on the absolute nonexistence of it, and we’ll swing our sword at any little lizard of evidence for Creation that shows its head. If Dr. Pitman has vested interest in evidence, ours is in quashing it.

And furthermore Genesis 1 is to be reverenced not just despite the evidence being against it but because all the evidence is against it. Alas for your doctoral thesis, if thus structured. We’re all, all sides of us, relieved that Galileo wasn’t.

Hmmm. In this campaign against Dr. Pitman, he is singled out as the epitome of the evil doctor. In Dr. Pitman’s behalf, in God’s behalf, I object. If St. Paul in his crusade could not gloat before the Lord, neither can S. Pitman. The case for evidence doesn’t hang on Dr. Pitman; it hangs, arguably (but elsewhere), on the very character of God, as Dr. Graham Maxwell (prof. of theology, deceased, LLU) taught. It hangs on science itself, as I was taught long before Sean was born, back in the days of Victorian legalism, at, of all places, LSU (nee LSC), by, of all people, my major biology professor, who shamelessly de-promoted Evolution in the context of evidence. Don’t recall he mentioned faith once. Faith was confined to religion class, as it should be. But that was before evidence had to be downgraded and faith updated.

I propose that the next crusade, heroic and holy, be to reunite faith with evidence as equals integral and integrated, like the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, like frontal cortex and brain stem, like breathing in and breathing out, systole and diastole, the left and right ventricles, one balancing and empowering the other, like male and female, and what God hath joined together let no man put asunder.
Protestant Christians are famous for the mantra, “The Bible and the Bible only.” Yet, as Seventh-day Adventist protestants in particular, how do we know that this phrase is true? How do we know that the Bible is the only valid rule of faith whereby all else must be judged? It is one thing to be able to correctly interpret the claims of the biblical authors (i.e., the science of **hermeneutics**). It is another thing entirely to determine that what the authors are saying is actually true (the science of **epistemology**). Yet, there are many within our church, and other churches as well, who suggest that if the Bible is in fact the very Word of God, that it should be accepted without question, without any effort to test its claims against empirical reality to judge if it is or is not actually true.

For some, this seems to fall in line with a statement on Bible study published in 1986 by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a portion of which reads as follows:

In recent decades the most prominent method in biblical studies has been known as the historical-critical method. Scholars who use this method, as classically formulated, operate on the basis of presuppositions which, prior to studying the biblical text, reject the reliability of accounts of miracles and other supernatural events narrated in the Bible. Even a modified use of this method that retains the principle of criticism which subordinates the Bible to human reason is unacceptable to Adventists.

The historical-critical method minimizes the need for faith in God and obedience to His commandments. In addition, because such a method de-emphasizes the divine element in the Bible as an inspired book (including its resultant unity) and depreciates or misunderstands apocalyptic prophecy and the eschatological portions of the Bible, we urge Adventist Bible students to avoid relying on the use of the presuppositions and the resultant deductions associated with the historical-critical method.

In contrast with the historical-critical method and presuppositions, we believe it to be helpful to set forth the principles of Bible study that are consistent with the teachings of the Scriptures themselves, that preserve their unity, and are based upon the premise that the Bible is the Word of God. Such an approach will lead us into a satisfying and rewarding experience with God.

**Presuppositions Arising From the Claims of Scripture**
Presuppositions

Arising From the Claims of Scripture

The sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments are the clear, infallible revelation of God’s will and His salvation. The Bible is the Word of God, and it alone is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested (2Tim. 3:15, 17; Ps. 119:105; Prov. 30:5, 6; Isa. 8:20; John 17:17; 2Thess. 3:14; Heb. 4:12).

Scripture is an authentic, reliable record of history and God’s acts in history. It provides the normative theological interpretation of those acts. The supernatural acts revealed in Scripture are historically true. For example, chapters 1-11 of Genesis are a factual account of historical events.

1. The Bible is not like other books. It is an indivisible blend of the divine and the human. Its record of many details of secular history is integral to its overall purpose to convey salvation history. While at times there may be parallel procedures employed by Bible students to determine historical data, the usual techniques of historical research, based as they are on human presuppositions and focused on the human element, are inadequate for interpreting the Scriptures, which are a blend of the divine and human. Only a method that fully recognizes the indivisible nature of the Scriptures can avoid a distortion of its message.

2. Human reason is subject to the Bible, not equal to or above it. Presuppositions regarding the Scriptures must be in harmony with the claims of the Scriptures and subject to correction by them (1Cor. 2:1-6). God intends that human reason be used to its fullest extent, but within the context and under the authority of His Word rather than independent of it.

3. The revelation of God in all nature, when properly understood, is in harmony with the written Word, and is to be interpreted in the light of Scripture.

Bible Study: Presuppositions, Principles, and Methods

This statement was approved and voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee at the Annual Council Session in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, October 12, 1986

http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/other-documents/other-doc4.html

As already noted, this document seems to suggest, at least to some, that the claim of the Bible to be the Word of God by which everything else must be judged should be accepted at face value, a priori, without any effort to test the claims of the Bible against what seems to be empirical reality. For example, the truth of Biblical prophecies concerning historical events should not be dependent upon if those events were or were not actually fulfilled in real history. In other words, the Bible maintains credibility as the Word of God regardless of if any or all of its claims do or do not happen to match what appears to us to be empirical reality.

This argument is expanded by Phil Brantley, a lawyer who frequents various discussion blogs regarding issues within the Adventist church:

“Practitioners of the historical-grammatical hermeneutic do not object to documenting fulfillment of prophecy by reference to external data, because in so doing one is not necessarily putting Scripture to the test. This is because the prophecy is considered true and correct, irrespective of whether it has been fulfilled…”

The authority of Scripture and its various authors is validated by numerous authorities within...
Scripture itself. [Some argue that] because Scripture is validated in this way, we can also put Scripture to the test by reference to extra-biblical empirical data.

Let me broaden my previous point. Not only science data (Gen. 3:17-18, Rom. 8:20-21), but the counsel of other spirits (Is. 8:19; 1 John 4:1-3), tradition (Matt. 15:3, 6); human philosophy (Col. 2:8); human knowledge (1 Tim. 6:20), reason and emotions (Gen. 3:1-6, Prov. 14:12), miracles and fantastical occurrences that we observe (Rev. 13:13, 16:13-14), the inspired writings of Ellen White (Matt. 7:15-23, 1 Thes. 5:20-21 and her own testimony), fulfillments of extra-biblical prophecies that we document and verify (Matt 7:15-23), the voice of God as we perceive it (Is. 8:20), the counsel of the Holy Spirit as we perceive it (Is. 8:20), etc., all must be held subservient to the authority of the Word of God. We are not at liberty to put Scripture to the test by reference to any extra-biblical empirical data...

The sixteen evidentiary items that I list arise out of Scripture and are not dependent upon external data in such a way that such external data puts Scripture to the test…”

So, according to Brantley, the Bible is true irrespective of if its prophecies or any other statements regarding the empirical world are or are not fulfilled in reality. It is for this reason that Brantley and those who strongly agree with his perspective think that the promotion of the evolutionary views of mainstream scientists in our own schools, like La Sierra University, shouldn’t be a problem. After all, regardless of what the “science” says about origins, we can have faith that the Bible is correct since it is, by definition, the Word of God. The empirical evidence should not, therefore, have any real weight against anything that God had said – right?

My question is: How is this not the very definition of blind faith? How do we know, among many competing options, which voice really is the voice of God?

If the Bible happened to claim, in no uncertain terms, that the Earth was a flat disk, not a sphere, or that the Sun rotated around the Earth or that the American Indians were really descendants of the “lost tribes of Israel” (as the Book of Mormon claims), would we accept such claims as literally true just because the Bible said so? If the Bible said that what looks like a circle is really a square, would that change the circle into a square? – or would it remain a circle and change one’s rational view of Biblical credibility? Is not the credibility of the Bible regarding its metaphysical claims dependent upon the established credibility of those various claims regarding the empirical world that can actually be investigated and tested in a potentially falsifiable manner? Does not the Bible itself invite us to test its claims to see if they are or are not true? (Malachi 3:10, Psalms 34:8).

Consider, as another relevant example, the case of Jesus and his healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-10). The first thing Jesus said to the paralytic was, “Your sins are forgiven”. This statement angered the teachers of the law who were there because a claim to be able to forgive sins was equivalent to claiming to be God. So, Jesus responded by asking a question:

“Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins…” He said to the paralytic, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.”

What would have happened to Jesus’ metaphysical claim to be able to forgive sins if his empirical claim to have the power to heal the paralyzed man had proved false? – if the man had just laid there paralyzed on his mat when Jesus gave the command to “get up and go home”? You see, Jesus himself tied in the credibility of his metaphysical claims to his empirical demonstrations of Divine power. If the empirical demonstrations failed, his metaphysical assertions could also be proven false.
I propose that the same is true for the credibility of the Bible. The credibility of the metaphysical claims of the Bible that cannot be directed investigated or tested (such as the Virgin Birth, the raising of the dead, or the future life in Heaven to come) is based on the demonstrated credibility of those claims of the Bible that can be investigated and tested against known empirical reality (such as historical prophecies, the Noachian Flood, and the recent arrival of all life on this planet). If Biblical prophecies concerning empirical reality can be shown to be false, not in line with what really happened, then the credibility of the Bible’s metaphysical claims would suffer as well – for most rational people anyway. The same is true for other Biblical statements concerning empirical reality, such as the recent formation of all life on Earth and a truly worldwide Noachian Flood. If such claims can be clearly falsified, Biblical credibility suffers. It is for this reason that many of those who have become convinced that the Bible has made many such errors no longer view the Bible as anything more than a moral fable.

In order to effectively support the claim that the Bible is truly superior to all others claiming to be the “Word of God” (like the Book of Mormon, the Hindu Vedas, or the Qur’an), the Bible must present superior evidence to support this fantastic claim to truly useful privileged information that really did come from God Himself – if it is to be believed by most people, especially young people, with intelligent, rational, candid minds who are at least open to this possibility.

Consider the comments of the well-known Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias along these lines.

Ravi was asked: **What do you say to a pastor who says, “Apologetics is just philosophy, and we do not need that. All we need is the Bible”?**

I desperately wish it were that simple. When pastors believe and teach, “all we need is the Bible,” they equip their young people with the very line that gets them mocked in the universities and makes them unable and even terrified to relate to their friends. If pastors want their young people to do the work of evangelism — to reach their friends — that line will not get them anywhere. Even the Bible that Christ gave us is sustained by the miracle of the Resurrection.

The Resurrection gave the Early Church the argument that Christ is risen: We saw, we witnessed, we felt, and we touched. The apostle Paul defended this gospel. He went to Athens and planted a church there. In Ephesus he defended the faith in the school of Tyrannus. We also need to become all things to all people.

If a pastor says, “All we need is the Bible,” what does he say to a man who says, “All I need is the Quran”? It is a solipsistic method of arguing.
All I need is my own point of reference and nothing more than that. Even the gospel was verified by external references. The Bible is a book of history, a book of geography, not just a book of spiritual assertions.

The fact is the resurrection from the dead was the ultimate proof that in history — and in empirically verifiable means — the Word of God was made certain. Otherwise, the experience on the Mount of Transfiguration would have been good enough. But the apostle Peter says in 2 Peter 1:19: “We have the Word of the prophets made more certain … as to a light shining in a dark place.” He testified to the authority and person of Christ, and the resurrected person of Christ.

To believe, “All we need is the Bible and nothing more,” is what the monks believed in medieval times, and they resorted to monasteries. We all know the end of that story. This argument may be good enough for those who are convinced the Bible is authority. The Bible, however, is not authoritative in culture or in a world of counter-perspectives. To say that it is authoritative in these situations is to deny both how the Bible defends itself and how our young people need to defend the Bible’s sufficiency.

It is sad that some people think a person who asks, “Why the Bible?” is being dishonest. This is a legitimate question.