

Archaeology and history may prove the Bible to be reliable historically, but that is not all that believers claim for it. To make the Bible normative in matters of science or history is to make the Bible obsolete. The Bible is normative for faith because it represents the struggle of faith against idolatry. The Bible has normative force in matters of faith not because the mind of God is encapsulated in it, but because it represents the triumph of God over every idol.

It would be ironic, indeed, if in the name of the Bible a mere ideology were said to represent the mind of God. The Bible testifies to God's activity, but any human understanding of this activity is limited by human conceptions that are conditioned by time and space. For faith, it is tragic to confuse matters of faith with matters of belief.

The truth of faith transcends the facts of the stories in the Bible. Belief in the historical validity of the biblical stories should not be confused with faith. For matters of belief are subject to historical and literary verification, and can be established with more or less probability. It is not a matter of faith to decide who wrote I Kings, II Chronicles, Jeremiah, or the Epistle to the Galatians. It is not a matter of faith to determine the difference between the first 11 chapters of Genesis and the rest of the book or the first ten chapters of II Corinthians and the rest of the epistle. Faith can ascertain that Jesus is the Christ, but it cannot ascertain the historical conditions surrounding Jesus, the Christ. Faith is certain of an event in history that has transformed history for the faithful. A particular version of an event in history is subject to change without notice if new evidence should

come to light. The Gospels unashamedly report different versions of the same historical events. All of them are equally valid vehicles for the confessing of faith. A faith that feels bound to defend a particular version of an event has become idolatrous. It is no longer faith, but ideology. To make the authority of the Bible dependent upon its scientific or historical accuracy is to misunderstand what it is all about, and to ignore the process by which it came about.

It has been said that the message of the Bible is summed up in its first four words, "In the beginning God . . .," and the rest is commentary. Biblical man begins with the affirmation that God is. He does not affirm this by means of concepts and categories that suggest an objectively detached observer. Instead, he tells a personal story. He affirms his participation in life. And his story means much more than what is says. His story is a symbol of his faith.

The truth of faith cannot be uttered in any other way than in symbol and metaphor. The language of the Bible is the language of metaphors: The People, The Covenant, The Tree, The Crown, The Bread, The Wind, The Vine, The Way, Reconciliation, Justification, Sanctification, Redemption. The truth of the Bible is the truth of God Himself, the Truth of Eternal Life.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. It is quite unfair to ascribe to F. Schleiermacher this understanding of feeling. It became true of his later followers. By the word "feeling," Schleiermacher was trying to describe the bedrock upon which human existence is built, that which is "unconditioned."

2. For full exegetical support, see R. Bultmann, "The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament," in *Existence and Faith*, edited by Shubert Ogden.

3. Job 38-41.

## A Reply to Dr. Weiss

by Frederick E. J. Harder

**D**r. Herold Weiss begins by identifying a very real obstacle to fruitful discussion of the doc-

*Frederick E. J. Harder is executive secretary of the Board of Higher Education of the General Conference.*

trine of revelation, namely, the formulation of a theory that grows out of presuppositions rather than out of an inductive study of Scripture. He is concerned primarily with those concepts of revelation which have their origin in a quest for absolutist authority. Equal concern, however, must be maintained for those attitudes

toward revelation which originate in a desire to have no authority. For if the former results in safely isolating “the Bible from the rest of the world’s objects,” the latter makes no distinction between the Bible and “any other book.” Both positions begin with certain presuppositions, and neither develops a doctrine with which the Bible can be harmonized without resort to procrustean interpretation. If, as is stated in the final sentence of the article, “The truth of the Bible is the truth of God Himself, the truth of Eternal Life,” the Bible must be treated as being in some sense unique.

Weiss rightly observes that “fear of the objective study of the process by which the Bible came about is certainly founded upon false assumptions.” However, scholars do not always agree as to which data are objective or on how they are to be interpreted. For example: when we read in Genesis 14:14 that Abram and his men pursued the four kings “as far as Dan,” and then find in Joshua 19:47 that “Dan” was called “Leshem” prior to the Canaanite conquest under Joshua, the obvious conclusion is that the Genesis statement was not written in its present form prior to the Canaanite conquest. The data are clear, and the interpretation logical. On the other hand, when we read in Daniel 8:20-22 that Babylon was to be followed by the kingdoms of Media and Persia which, in turn, would be destroyed by the king of Greece, whose kingdom later would be divided into four, must we follow the same logic and conclude that this was written after the designated kingdoms had held power and, in turn, been superseded? The answer depends on one’s presuppositions about divine foreknowledge and the process of revelation. If one assumes that there is no such thing as true foreknowledge, he must date the prophecies of Daniel after the fact, in which case they are history written in the guise of predictive prophecy. On the other hand, if one believes that “there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known . . . what will be in the latter days,” he can accept these as the predictions they purport to be. The linguistic reasons for dating the book of Daniel in the Hellenistic Period (insofar as they are “objective”) may then be interpreted as indicating a later revision of an earlier work without

calling into question the integrity of its substance.

The quarrel with much biblical criticism—whether it be textual, historical, literary, etc.—is not with the “objective” data it uncovers but rather with the naturalist presuppositions which too often underlie the method, e.g., an *a priori* rejection of miracle and the supernatural. Surely, “the Bible does not feel at home” with these anymore than it does among any other unbiblical presuppositions. If the verbal inspirationist is guilty of minimizing the role of human instrumentalities in the revelatory process, then the higher critic too often is guilty of minimizing the action of God in the process. Just as 17th century orthodoxy developed a dogma of verbal inspiration so 19th century liberalism reduced divine revelation to the level of human discovery.

*“He is concerned with those concepts of revelation which have their origin in a quest for absolutist authority. We must be equally concerned for those attitudes which have their origin in the desire for no authority.”*

Dr. Weiss summarizes the problems by several assertions:

“Christ is the final and complete revelation of God to man.”

“Even though He communicated through words that had a cognitive content, His basic purpose was to give man life.”

“Revelation . . . is first of all a divine disclosure that creates community in which life expresses this revelation in symbols of action, imagination and thought under the guidance of prophets.”

“It is in this way that revelation communicates new life and conquers the internal conflicts between reason and faith in man’s sinful condition. Revelation is an event in which God becomes manifest and in which people respond wholeheartedly so that their given conditions in religion and culture are changed radically.”

All of these declarations should be kept in

mind when reading Weiss's denials that revelation provides man with information above and beyond that which he may obtain from other sources. He is emphasizing the impact that divine revelation has on the receptive human heart rather than dealing with the avenues through which revelation may make that impact. These avenues necessarily are cognitive, for there are no others.

Ellen White frequently spoke of the relationship between knowledge and life. The following excerpts are merely representative of many other similar statements:

"Christ is the truth. His words are truth, and they have a deeper significance than appears on the surface, and a value beyond their unpretending appearance. Minds that are quickened by the Holy Spirit will discern the value of these words."

". . . The acceptance of truth will make every receiver a child of God, an heir of heaven. Truth that is cherished in the heart is not a cold, dead letter, but a living power."

"Truth is sacred, divine. It is stronger and more powerful than anything else in the formation of a character after the likeness of Christ."

"We must have more than an intellectual belief in the truth. . . . When truth is held as truth only by the conscience, when the heart is not stimulated and made receptive, only the mind is affected. But when the truth is received as truth by the heart, it has passed through the conscience, and has captivated the soul with its pure principles. It is placed in the heart by the Holy Spirit, who reveals its beauty to the mind, that its transforming power may be seen in the character."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the foregoing is summarized in one brief statement: "A right knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ whom he has sent is eternal life to all who believe."<sup>2</sup> Certainly, those who have experienced revelatory phenomena most clearly have described them in cognitive terms. How else could they communicate meaningfully with respect to them? If communication of such experiences is not important to the revelatory experiences of others, what is the value of the Bible? A dichotomy between truth about God and union with God exists only if truth remains at the informational level. It disappears when

one responds to it with his whole being.

To hold that revelation is the self-disclosure of God for the purpose of drawing man into a personal saving relation is meaningless unless the Christology of the New Testament is in fact true. Among the various views of revelation is the common agreement that God has disclosed something. It would seem that any doctrine of revelation which is placed "squarely within the biblical framework" must hold that it is a means by which a personal God imparts to individual persons (and to some persons much more clearly than to others) truths, meaning, values, purposes and an awareness of His divine presence.

In the first chapter of John, some categorical assertions are made:

"In the beginning was the Word."

"The Word was with God."

"The Word was God."

"All things were made through Him."

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

"To all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become the children of God."

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men."

It is legitimate to ask whether these are statements of fact or not. It is legitimate to ask this even though no answer, either affirmative or negative, can be empirically substantiated. If the question be asked of a Christian by a non-Christian, an equivocal answer is not adequate. It is not enough to say, "There are faith statements which are true for me but may not be true for you." At the operational level of everyday life, these assertions either give true information, or they are falsehoods.

The plea that Dr. Weiss makes is that we not ignore the general presuppositions underlying all knowledge as we approach the Bible. He asks that we develop a doctrine of divine revelation based on what the Bible actually says, and he suggests that in order to determine this, one must start with an historical and critical examination of the Bible. Such examination of any particular passage will include a determination of the text and of its literary form, a search into the historical situation in which it was written, a determination of the meaning which the words had for the original author, and an interpretation of the passage in the light of its total context. In addition, an Old Testament passage

must be studied with the Old Testament as its background. He insists that the Bible may be understood correctly only when the best procedures of historical and textual criticism are combined with faith.

The process of revelation must be understood as an antidote against the extremist position which would degrade the prophet to little more than a magnetic tape on which God dictated His messages. Weiss is very close to the position Ellen White took when he says: "At the foundation of the words of the prophet are found the action of God and the prophet's response in faith. He has seen God in action. He is witnessing. He is confessing."

Compare the following statements:

"God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. . . ."

"It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. . . . The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of man are the word of God."<sup>3</sup>

Weiss points out that 17th century orthodoxy was challenged by 18th and 19th century rationalism and science. He also indicates that 19th century biblical scholarship went astray in its exalting of reason as a value superior to and independent of revelation. However, it is questionable that a synthesis can be achieved satisfactorily by emphasizing a dichotomy between *knowledge* of life and life, or between a *concept* of death and death. Although these are not synonymous terms, knowledge and concept are preparatory for the experiential reality, and this is an essential function of revelation. Furthermore, to say that "for God to reveal Himself no word need be spoken," is not to say that God never reveals Himself through words.

Weiss's emphasis on human faculties involved in the communication of revelation suggests the need for fuller recognition of the important human elements in the process of receiving and recording revelatory disclosures. Caution is due in the tendency to take an all-or-nothing, black-or-white attitude toward any claim to divine guidance. Ellen White recognized the limitations on revelation inherent in the recipient's imperfect understanding, in his lack of skill in expression, in his circumscribed experience, and in the limitations of human language and concepts. This surely implies a grey area in all revelatory experiences and in any records of them. "The Bible, perfect as it is in its simplicity, does not answer to the great ideas of God; for infinite ideas cannot be perfectly embodied in finite vehicles of thought."<sup>4</sup> It is likely that many of the problems which arise in regard to the use of Scripture or any other revelatory literature are attributable to our failure to recognize this principle.

Ongoing dialogue about the doctrine of revelation is an imperative for our church at this time. Likewise, an intensified and broadened study of Scripture is an absolute necessity in these days when research in all areas of knowledge is adding so enormously to humanity's fund of information.

Traditionally, Seventh-day Adventists have tended toward the rather rigid position of John Calvin. Although official publications deny acceptance of the dogma of verbal inspiration, frequently there is a lack of understanding as to the full implication of this denial and a failure to replace it with a more consistent, realistic position. We cannot with impunity continue to ignore the problems involved. There needs to be a frank recognition of issues accompanied by courageous effort toward their solution.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. "The Truth as It Is in Jesus - No. 1," *Review and Herald*, 76 (February 14, 1899), No. 7, p. 97.
2. "Denouncing the Pharisees," *Review and Herald*, 75 (February 22, 1898), No. 8, p. 117.
3. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Book 1, p. 21.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 22.