Are Adventists Afraid of Bible Study?

George E. Rice. *Luke, A Plagiarist?* 110 pp. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1983. $4.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Alden Thompson

Luke, A Plagiarist? is a surprising book. And lonely. Surprising, because it reflects a method of study that key spokespeople within Seventh-day Adventism have adamantly opposed during the past decade; lonely, because the last time it appeared in an Adventist Book Center "shopper," it was the only in-depth study of the text of Scripture advertised.[1] Why would the publishers for a "people of the book" advertise a select list of devotional books, stories, and outreach booklets—even a sprinkling of heavier stuff (generally historical studies)—but just one "serious" work on the Bible? Is the Bible too hard for Adventists? Too easy? Or are we just afraid of detailed Bible study?

Both the timing and titling of George Rice's book reflect the heightened interest within Adventism in inspiration and biblical interpretation. Although the title, introduction and conclusion of the book mark it as an apologetic for Ellen White's literary practices, the actual content is a provocative comparison of the gospels, using "redaction criticism," a so-called "historical-critical" method that analyzes an author's purposeful adaptation of traditional (or "borrowed") material. The logic is transparent: if the "inspired" authors of Scripture could borrow, how can Ellen White's borrowing be an argument against her inspiration?

For good reason, George Rice, professor of New Testament in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, does not use the term "redaction criticism" or explain his relationship to the "historical-critical" method. Official Adventist publications have tended to reject any application of the method to Scripture.[2]

Nevertheless, when the church confronted the issue of the historical-critical study of the Bible at Consultation II in the autumn of 1981, the delegates tentatively affirmed (no binding or official actions were taken) that Adventist scholars could indeed make use of the descriptive methodologies associated with the historical-critical method without adopting the naturalistic presuppositions of the more radical critics. Now for the first time—almost unashamedly—an Adventist author and an Adventist publisher have teamed up to show how it is done.[3]

One of Rice's basic contentions is that the differences in the Gospel narratives are both real and intentional, serving the authors' literary and theological purposes. By contrast, most Adventists, along with other conservative Christians, typically treat the differences between the gospels as imaginary or accidental—harmonizing, minimizing, or ignoring them in the interest of producing a single master account.

This harmonizing tendency is deeply rooted in Christian history, reaching back at least as far as Tatian's *Diatessaron*, a four-into-one harmony from the second century. In Adventism, Arthur Maxwell's *Bible Story* and Ellen White's *Desire of Ages* stand in the same tradition, weaving one seamless "life

of Christ'' from the four gospel strands. Somehow, singing in unison has seemed easier than struggling with four-part harmony.

But Rice wants to hear the four parts; he actually relishes ''discrepancy.'' While recognizing the commendable desire of the harmonizers to prove the Bible trustworthy, he argues that the attempt to downplay the differences does the church a ''gross injustice.'' In his view, ''no 'discrepancy,' no matter how 'minor,' is 'unimportant' or 'of a minor order' '' (p. 71). The evangelists themselves (not later copyists) deliberately introduced the ''discrepancies,'' ''changing'' what they found in their sources, for ''each change makes a contribution to what the writer is saying about Jesus'' (p. 82). Furthermore, Rice notes that changes often initiated a chain reaction as the evangelists sought to be consistent with themselves. Thus, ''some changes that appear to be 'discrepancies' are nothing more than attempts at being consistent'' (p. 74)!

To justify such free handling of the gospel traditions, Rice focuses on Luke 1:1-4, proposing a research-based ''Lucan model of inspiration'' as the necessary complement to a revelation- or vision-based ''prophetic model:'' ''The time is long overdue for us to think in terms of both models being present in the work of an inspired writer'' (p. 15).

Although the title implies a defense of Ellen White, the book says very little about her. Rice obviously respects her and has taken seriously her explicit statements on inspiration. That sympathy for Ellen White's stance, combined with a desire to be honest with the text of Scripture, results in an amazing freedom of expression, dangerously free if one thinks in terms of the potential reaction of the church. Rice's chapter titles are incredibly blunt: ''Small, Unimportant Changes,'' followed by ''Large, Important Changes,'' to mention the two most striking examples. He describes the ''relocation'' of the call of the disciples as ''a major piece of surgery performed by Luke'' (p. 84). The story of the woman's anointing of Jesus' feet is ''a surgery even more radical'' (p. 88). Rice is correct, but his language is volatile.

The book's strengths are numerous. Rice deals honestly with the text of Scripture without fear or anger. The reader senses that the author has faced some tough questions, yet still believes. Potential liabilities become assets as Rice demonstrates how the evangelists sought to meet the practical needs of the believers. Nevertheless, some difficulties remain.

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Rice overstates his case when he sees all discrepancies as theologically significant, and has not necessarily solved the problem of ''inconsistency'' by removing the onus from God and placing it on man. Rice does not want to admit inconsistency in a vision (cf. p. 40), but why must ''revelations'' under the prophetic model be rigid, unadaptable, and inenant if we are willing to allow God's spokespeople under the Lucan model to adapt, mold, and apply their messages with freedom? Certainly the differences between the two editions of the decalogue (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5) suggest that we do not know precisely what came from God's finger when he inscribed the law on tables of stone, yet we would certainly say that the decalogue is ''revelation.''

Rice also seems to be methodologically unsound when he occasionally appeals to a particular gospel or to *Desire of Ages* (e.g., pp. 79, 95) as the final authority for certain historical details. Once one allows the human element to the degree that Rice is willing to grant, the inspiration issue becomes more complex than Rice admits.

But if one does not follow Rice, what are the alternatives? Moving to the left on the theological spectrum, one could adopt the 'historical-critical method' in its classic and thoroughgoing form. Based strictly on naturalistic principles, such an approach denies the possibility of special divine guidance or intervention in the production of Scripture (i.e., it would eliminate "revelation" and "inspiration"). The more radical critics virtually deny the historical value of the Gospel accounts, viewing the documents rather as the creations of the early church. Rice rejects such a radical approach, affirming the principle of divine guidance for both models of inspiration, and accepting the historicity of the events narrated in the Gospels.[4]

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Moving to the right, one could reject the historical-critical method, including the use of descriptive tools such as "redaction criticism." One spokesperson for this more conservative position is Gerhard Hasel, currently dean of the Seventh-day Adventist seminary at Andrews University. In his *Understanding the Living Word of God* (1980), also published by Pacific Press, he denies the possibility of a "moderate" position relative to the historical-critical method.[5] In contrast with Rice, Hasel argues against any view that would describe the gospel writers as having "transformed" or as having adapted their material "to fit a particular need." He explains the differences between the Gospel accounts by positing different occasions and settings.[6]

The differences between Hasel and Rice typify the two sides of a debate that has enlivened (and embittered) the academic scene in Adventism during the last decade. Ever since the Biblical Research Institute excluded the "moderate" voices from the Bible Conference of 1974, the use of the historical-critical method has been the focus of an intense struggle at the higher levels of administration and academia in Adventism. The issue simply has refused to die.

As the avalanche of criticism against Ellen White's writings established the human aspects of her literary activity, many Adventists took comfort in the biblical parallels they previously had refused to recognize. With amazing alacrity, the pragmatic White Estate began producing "source-critical" studies in defense of Ellen White, readily citing those parallels. Meanwhile, those who opposed the use of the historical-critical method in the study of the Bible stood their ground.

The continuing tensions ultimately led to the convening of Consultation II in the autumn of 1981. The concluding group reports reflected a willingness to adopt a "moderate" approach to the historical-critical method, rejecting the "all-or-nothing" alternatives at the opposite ends of the theological spectrum. Adventist scholars could indeed use the descriptive tools associated with the historical-critical method (e.g., source criticism, redaction criticism, etc.) without adopting the naturalistic presuppositions affirmed by the thoroughgoing practictioners of the method.

The delegates at the Consultation recommended that a representative group of scholars prepare a document describing how Adventist scholars study the Bible. The General Conference responded somewhat tangentially by appointing a Methods of Bible Study Committee chaired by Richard Lesher, current president of Andrews University. Advocates from both sides were invited to present their cases before a jury.

Some of the scholars who participated in Consultation II expressed their misgivings;

a jury implied prescription rather than description, and raised the spectre of guilt vs. innocence. Lesher's response, however, seemed reassuring: "There is no group in the church that can make a theological decision for the church. Committees do not decide theology for the group, rather they prepare materials for the church's examination and study, and the body of the believers must themselves decide where they stand on the issue."[7]

The appearance of Rice's book while the jury is still out is an indication that a viable spectrum is alive and well within Adventism. Furthermore, it is at least interesting to note that the same press published the books by Hasel and Rice and that both Hasel and Rice are colleagues at Andrews University—with the moderating figure of Lesher as their president.[8]

But perhaps the most intriguing feature of the inspiration discussion in Adventism is the interplay between Scripture and the writings of Ellen White. If the church had not felt the need to defend Ellen White's literary practices, I doubt if Rice's book would have seen the light of day. Is it possible that the crisis over Ellen White's ministry could lead to a rediscovery of the Bible among Adventists?

Furthermore, though Rice himself does not make the point, the content of *Luke, A Plagiarist?* also offers a means of resolving the nagging tensions that many Adventists sense in relating the writings of Ellen White to Scripture. If the gospel writers could differ from one another in their recording and interpreting of Gospel traditions, being more concerned about practical application than absolute historical precision, then we may lay differing inspired interpretations side by side, looking for the "underlying harmony" or a "spiritual unity" rather than an absolute harmonization of every detail.[9]

How many times have devout Adventists turned their attention elsewhere because a fresh insight into Scripture was stifled by the rejoinder, "But Sister White says . . . ?" If I might hazard an answer to the rhetorical question raised at the beginning of this review, I would suggest that the "ABC Shopper" does not advertise in-depth books on Scripture because Adventists actually are afraid of Bible study—our conclusions just might differ from those of Ellen White. No one wants to quarrel with a prophet.

The beauty of Rice's book, if the church could only discover it, is the demonstration of the principle that inspired writers can give differing perspectives on the same passage or event. In other words, we could take Ellen White's applications of Scripture seriously, without using them to quench the spirit in our study of God's word.[10]

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Once upon a time, Adventists bought books from the Adventist Book Center out of loyalty. But times have changed. Part of the reason why Adventist publishers face enormous financial challenges lies in the fact that an increasing number of devout Adventists never darken the doors of an Adventist Book Center. Tired of digging through piles of story books, Adventists have turned to other publishers for serious books on Scripture, but unfortunately they miss the few surprises that the Adventist Book Center does offer. It would be a great tonic to Adventism if books like Rice's were not quite so surprising in the future. Or so lonely.

Alden Thompson is professor of theology at Walla Walla College. He received his doctorate in biblical studies from the University of Edinburgh.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See report on Consultation II in *Spectrum* Vol. 12, No. 2 (Dec., 1981), pp. 40-52. *Luke, A Plagiarist?* was advertised in the supplement to the *Adventist Review* of Feb. 9, 1984. Two later ABC "shoppers," the *Adventist Review* supplement of May 3, 1984, and the "Camp Meeting Edition, 1984," carried no advertisement for the book—nor for any other in-depth study of Scripture.

2. For a typical example of wholehearted opposition to all aspects of the historical-critical method see below, note 5.

3. The book's novelty as well as the community's mixed feelings toward the methods it employs is flagged by the publisher's disclaimer: "The purpose of this book is to investigate a concept of inspiration not generally held by most Seventh-day Adventists" (p. 4).

4. "The Holy Spirit was actively engaged in both models" (p. 25). "Each event recorded by the gospel writers did take place historically" (p. 25).

5. Gerhard Hasel, *Understanding the Living Word of God* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1980): "The theologian or exegete must not get the impression that he can safely utilize certain parts of the historical-critical method in an eclectic manner, because there is no stopping point" (p. 26). For Hasel, the historical-critical method includes "source criticism, form criticism, tradition criticism, redaction criticism," as well as "structural criticism or structuralism" (p. 28).

6. "Jesus seems to have told the same story or parable to different audiences and at different times and places. One Gospel writer may have cited the incidence [sic] in one such setting and another in another setting. The slight differences can thus be much better explained than by the assumption that the words of Jesus, the circumstances, or both were invented by the early church, the respective Gospel writers, or altered to fit a particular need and serve a given purpose of the early church" (Hasel, pp. 224-225).

Another quotation from Hasel highlights even more clearly the differences between Hasel's and Rice's approaches: "The theological interests of Matthew and Luke respectively may be reflected in their selection under the guidance of the Holy Spirit of a related parable from different circumstances in the life of Jesus. Each Gospel writer incorporated the parable he selected into his Gospel. Neither Gospel writer can be said to have manipulated or transformed the material" (p. 227).

7. Personal letter from Richard Lesher to the reviewer, dated Nov. 17, 1982, cited here with Lesher's permission.

8. According to the *Adventist Review*, (Jan. 17, 1985, George Rice has accepted the position of associate secretary at the White Estate, effective as of July 1, 1985.

9. Note Ellen White's statement: "The Bible was given for practical purposes" *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 1, p. 20. The phrases "underlying harmony" and "spiritual unity" are also Ellen White's, cited from the "Introduction" to *Great Controversy*, p. vi, and *Selected Messages*, Vol. 1, p. 20, respectively.

Ellen White also observes: "There is not always perfect order or apparent unity in the Scriptures. The miracles of Christ are not given in exact order" (*Selected Messages*, Vol. 1, p. 20). Rice seems to have adhered rather closely to the implications of Ellen White's statements on inspiration in *Selected Messages*, Vol. 1, and the "Introduction" to *Great Controversy*, but his language is more flamboyant.

10. An ancient tradition (Eusebius, citing Papias, citing John the Elder) suggests a conclusion analogous to that which Rice proposes on the basis of more modern methods of study, namely, that the "practical" needs of the believers provided the occasion for the origin of the gospel accounts. As cited in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* iii. 39, Papias recalls the conversation of John the Elder relative to Mark's Gospel: "Mark having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately everything that he remembered, without however recording in order what was either said or done by Christ. For neither did he hear the Lord, nor did he follow Him; but afterwards, as I said, (attended) Peter, who adapted his instructions to the needs (of his hearers) but had no design of giving a connected account of the Lord's oracles" (translation from *The Apostolic Fathers*, translated and edited by J. B. Lightfoot (Baker Book House reprint of 1891 ed.), p. 265.).