



# New Directions for The Old Testament

Holistic approaches to Scripture, and new explorations of old arguments, offer promising opportunities for Adventist scholars.

by Greg A. King

EVERY DAY, ON THE WAY TO WORK, I PASS THE house where the late Edwin R. Thiele lived. I first heard of Thiele's monumental contribution to Old Testament studies when I was a college student at Southern Missionary College. In my Old Testament Studies class, I learned about Thiele's dating system, and the story of how his scholarly work provided a chronology for the Hebrew monarchy. I read how his confidence in the reliability of God's Word provided the foundation he needed to engage in original research and resolve some problems that his professors thought insoluble.<sup>1</sup> Later, as I completed my doctorate and went on to my own work in Old Testament studies, I found Thiele quoted, endorsed, and disagreed with, but certainly not ignored.

Another area in which Adventist scholars

have made a noteworthy contribution is archaeology. The contributors include the late Siegfried Horn and a number of students and successors, whose reports are read at yearly gatherings of biblical archeologists and whose scholarship is widely respected outside the denomination.<sup>2</sup>

## Holistic Approaches

BUT what of other areas within the field of Old Testament studies? At the current juncture, several areas are taking a direction that offers splendid opportunities for the involvement of Adventists. For example, Adventists have traditionally advocated a holistic approach to the various books of the Old Testament; that is, taking the various Old Testament books as whole entities, instead of dividing them into very small fragments. This approach has always seemed to Adventists to hold greater promise for understanding and proclaiming the power, vitality, and freshness inherent within the message of the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup>

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Sometimes designated as “canonical” or “integrative,”<sup>4</sup> the holistic approach has recently become more popular. It stands in contradistinction to the method that has typically been used by scholars to interpret a specific Old Testament book. For instance, in a prophetic book, scholars would use such criteria as form criticism, theological perspective, style, and meter, and then attempt to determine which units were authentic and which were inauthentic. Often scholars would credit relatively little of the book to the prophet whose name it bore. Then, taking the units deemed to be authentic, they would interpret them, largely in isolation from one another, in order to determine the theological message of the prophet.<sup>5</sup>

Now, however, a number of scholars have moved away from this approach and embraced a holistic method. The starting point of study is the final form of the book. For these students, the book's theological message should be drawn from the entire book. This trend is visible in a number of recent studies. One of the most obvious examples of the contrast between the new methodology and the old is found in two strikingly different commentaries on Amos, both by renowned scholars. Writing several decades ago, Hans Walter Wolff set forth an elaborate and detailed hypothesis for the composition of the Book of Amos. He posited six stages, extending from the time of the prophet to the post-exilic era.<sup>6</sup> As might be expected, Wolff contended that the hopeful conclusion to Amos (9:11-15), as well as a number of other passages, did not originate with the prophet himself.

Taking an abrupt about-face at the first part of this decade, Shalom Paul asserts in his extensive commentary the unity and authenticity of the entire book. He maintains that no portion of the Book of Amos needs to be understood as coming from a time later than the prophet.<sup>7</sup> To discern the message of the

prophet, one must draw from the entire book. Intriguingly, both these volumes appear in the same Hermeneia commentary series.

Of course, scholars sometimes adopt the holistic approach for reasons other than those that have traditionally been given by Adventists. Some reason that since the canonical form of the book is the only one we have, it alone should be the basis for our interpretation.<sup>8</sup> We simply don't know much about the composition of the book, so we should take it as we have it. However, Adventists can be encouraged by the fact that an increasing number of scholars are taking a holistic approach for historical reasons as well. That is, they say that Old Testament prophetic books today have basically the same form they did during the prophet's lifetime.<sup>9</sup>

## Practical Issues

A second trend in Old Testament studies that Adventists have reason to welcome is the subordination of critical concerns to theological and practical issues. Adventists have long held that biblical scholarship is not an end in itself, but should make a practical and meaningful contribution to the life of the church. This second trend in Old Testament scholarship is a natural outgrowth of a holistic approach to Scripture. Earlier generations of academics tended to be preoccupied with identifying the original source to which a certain unit (or even a few words) of Scripture could be traced (whether the Yahwist, the Deuteronomist, Deutero-Isaiah, etc.). They also carefully reconstructed the supposed social and historical context of the unit. Recent scholars are more inclined to focus on the theological message of a given biblical book and its practical ramifications for the people of God.

One of the prime examples of this recent trend is J. Clinton McCann, Jr.'s excellent volume, *A Theological Introduction to the*



*Book of Psalms.* "I am interested," he says, "in what the Psalms teach—about God and God's rule, about humanity and its role, about sin and forgiveness, about vengeance and compassion, about salvation and the life of the faithful."<sup>10</sup> To those who might accuse him of a non-scholarly interpretation of the book, he asks, "What could be more *historically* honest and *critically* appropriate than to approach the book of Psalms the way its shapers intended—as *torah*, 'instruction'?"<sup>11</sup> In other words, the Psalms were not preserved to enable us to reconstruct the liturgical history of ancient Israel (as the form critics might suggest), nor were they simply valued as examples of beautiful poetry (as the rhetorical critics might imply). "Rather, the Psalms have been preserved and treasured because they have served to instruct the people of God about God, about themselves and the world, and about the life of faith."<sup>12</sup>

Adventists, who have insisted that scholarship must be relevant to the life of the community of believers can happily embrace this trend. We agree that Old Testament studies must seek to deepen the commitment of believers to the Lord as our Creator and Redeemer.<sup>13</sup>

Adapted from a detail of "Initial B, with King David Kneeling," by Zanobi Strozzi.



## Exploratory Revisions

A third noteworthy trend is the willingness to scrutinize, question, and challenge positions held to be settled by earlier scholars. Examples arise from two different areas of the discipline. In studies of the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible—few mainline scholars would have predicted serious challenges to the Documentary Hypothesis. The idea that the Pentateuch was composed of four diverse, originally independent sources, labelled J, E, D, and P, that were written over a period of centuries and were only combined into one document late in the Old Testament period, became so strongly entrenched it was often assumed instead of argued for. This situation has changed. The withering critique by the liberal scholar Rolf Rendtorff<sup>14</sup> has many scholars admitting that the Documentary Hypothesis at least needs modification.

Another example of a challenge to a widely held view comes from the field of archaeology. Bryant Wood, in an article that achieved international attention, contested the conclusions of Kathleen Kenyon concerning Jericho. To recognize the significance of his article for biblical studies, one must understand that Jericho has often been given as the prime example of the unreliability of the Bible's account of the Israelites' entry into Palestine. According to Kenyon's analysis of the data, there was no settlement at the site at the time the Israelites entered the land. On this point the biblical account could not be historically reliable. In a stunning challenge to Kenyon, Woods argues that the city was strongly fortified at the time when the Bible indicates the Israelite invasion occurred; that the city walls were likely toppled by an earthquake; and that the city was later burned.<sup>15</sup> Each of these conclusions is congruent with the biblical narrative describing Jericho's fall. Several scholars have attempted to refute Wood's points,

but good evidence continues to commend his position.

## The Old in the New Testament

A fourth trend that should attract Adventists is the increasing emphasis on intertextuality in biblical interpretation. Intertextuality refers to the citation of, allusion to, or reflection on an earlier text in a later passage of Scripture. Scholars have long written about the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament. However, they are increasingly observing and writing about the use of the Old Testament in the Old Testament.<sup>16</sup> In fact, a new commentary series specifically focuses on the intertextual study of Scripture.<sup>17</sup>

Seventh-day Adventist scholars can certainly resonate with this trend because we have a long tradition of comparing Scripture with Scripture; for example, we consider Genesis' declarations about Creation to be integrally connected to proclamations on earth's

origins found in the Psalter. The burgeoning study of intertextuality reaffirms the time-honored principle that Scripture is its own best interpreter.

Given the fact that these trends provide opportunities for Adventist Old Testament scholars, one might ask, What contributions are Adventists making? Have we helped advance these trends? In general, the answer is No. With a few exceptions, such as those of Thiele and our widely regarded achievements in the field of archaeology, the impact of Adventists on Old Testament studies as a whole has been almost negligible. However, it doesn't have to remain that way, for current trends that approach the Bible holistically, emphasize theological and practical issues, challenge widely held theories, and compare Scripture with Scripture, provide splendid opportunities for Adventists to plunge into the world of Old Testament scholarship. Today, the door is wide open for Adventists to make a lasting scholarly contribution, while simultaneously proclaiming the relevant message of the Old Testament to an age that desperately needs it.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For his own recounting of the story, see Edwin R. Thiele, "The Chronology of the Hebrew Kings," *Adventist Review* (May 17, 1983), pp. 3-5.

2. For two recent positive references to Adventist archaeology in widely distributed periodicals, see William G. Dever, "The Death of a Discipline," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 21 (September/October 1995), p. 53; also, David Neff, "Why We Dig the Holy Land," *Christianity Today* (October 23, 1995), pp. 14, 15.

3. I find it interesting that even some of those who appreciate many aspects of the earlier fragmentary approach recognize that it has an inherent sterility and barrenness. For example, John D. W. Watts, in *Isaiah 1-33*, Word Biblical Commentary 24 (Waco, Texas: Word, 1985), p. xxiii, observes regarding the commentary by his mentor, Hans Wildberger, a volume for which he has great respect, that despite "the inevitable worth of his commentary in summarizing and evaluating all the results of historical-critical research to date, it does not succeed in presenting an understandable interpretation of the book. He has followed the method of historical exegesis, and his work presents the tremendous work

of that method. But it does not make the book come alive for the reader or student."

4. For a helpful survey of these so-called literary approaches to Scripture, see Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 13-45.

5. This method was used by Charles Taylor in "The Book of Zephaniah: Introduction and Exegesis," *The Interpreter's Bible*, George Arthur Buttrick, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), Vol. 6, pp. 1009-1011, who held that in chapter two only vss. 1, 2a, 4-6, 7b, and 12-14 may be from Zephaniah. He also questioned the authenticity of the entirety of chapter three, and even raised doubts about portions of chapter one.

6. See Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, trans. Waldemar Janzen, S. Dean McBride, Jr., and Charles A. Muenchow, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

7. See Shalom Paul, *Amos*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

8. For example, see Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah* Anchor Bible 25A (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

9. For three different examples from the prophetic

corpus, see Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos*, Anchor Bible 24a (New York: Doubleday, 1989); Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, Anchor Bible 22 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983); J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993).

10. J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), p. 19.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 21.

13. For one example, see James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox, 1994).

14. See Rolf Rendtorff, "The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch," trans. John J. Scullion, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 89 (JSOT/Sheffield Academic Press, 1989).

15. Bryant Wood, "Did the Israelites Conquer Jeri-

cho?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 16 (March/April 1990), pp. 44-58.

16. For intertextuality within the Old Testament as a whole, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), and Danna Fewell, ed., *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1992). For intertextuality in relationship to a specific book within the Old Testament, see Alice Bach, "Intertextuality and the Book of Jeremiah: Animadversion on Text and Theory," in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, J. Cheryl Exum and David J. Clines, eds. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

17. *The Mellen Biblical Commentary: Intertextual*, from the Edwin Mellen Press. Several Adventist scholars, including William Shea, Richard Choi, John McVay, and I have each agreed to contribute a volume to this series.