

THE *Bible* Says

BY HEROLD WEISS

When I was a teenager attending the Colegio Adventista del Plata (CAP) in Argentina, a friend told me a joke. It went like this—

There was a very devout believer who kept a Bible on top of the night table and every morning after getting out of bed opened it at random to receive the Word of God for the day. One morning the Bible opened, and his eyes fell on Matthew 27:5, “And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.” He thought something had gone wrong. Frustrated, he closed the Bible and opened it again. This time his eyes fell on Luke 10:37, “And Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’” I remember that I was a bit unnerved; I had been taught that it was beneficial to have a text for the day. That was what *La Devoción Matutina* was all about.

At the time, I was taking a class in Bible doctrines with the president of the college, a veteran pastor who had been

the president of the Austral Union of the South American Division. He had studied theology in what everyone then considered the golden age of theological education at the CAP, the 1940’s. All students of Elder Livingston had

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powerful memories of that most revered teacher. In his class on Bible doctrines, following the Livingston model, every period began with a quiz asking us to write down word for word, punctuation marks included, one of the ten verses that had been assigned at the previous session. The final exam was to memorize word for word, with correct punctuation, 150 verses

in the Spanish Reina Valera version, and to know the content of three hundred other verses. When I finished that class, I was confident that I could tell what the Bible says on basic questions, but I did feel that there was much more to be learned from the Bible.

Sixty-eight years later I realize that the memorizing of all those texts served me well. The way I have used

that reservoir of knowledge, however, has gone through several transmutations. After coming to the United States, and graduating from Southern Missionary College, I was fortunate to take classes in exegesis of the letter to the Galatians and of 1 Peter with Professor Ronald Loasby at the SDA Theological Seminary. From him I learned that collecting *texta probantia* was not the way to know what the Bible says. Books must be understood on their own terms. Even if the authors of the New Testament used passages from the Old Testament to bring out the significance of Jesus's life without taking into consideration their contextual or historical significance, we were now living in the twentieth century, when historical and literary studies had opened new ways to read.¹ At the Seminary, I learned that the practice of proof-texting had been judged and found wanting by those who were serious and humble about learning what the Bible has to say.

The uncomfortable joke my friend had told me at the CAP years before actually was a good one because it highlighted the irrationality of proof testing. It was not only a caricature of the devotee; more importantly, it exposed the fallacy of extreme Bible dependency. Irony is one of the best ways to tell the truth, and the truth was that picking texts at random, or with an agenda, is a fool's errand. At the CAP I had already been aware that I could read large sections of the Bible and make no sense of what I was reading. Undoubtedly, those who wrote it knew what they were writing, and those who preserved their writings for centuries before they were considered *Scripture* understood what they read because they considered it worthy of preservation. As Richard Coffen wrote recently, "If the results of revelation and inspiration made no sense to those original recipients of the divine message, then God's Word was not communication."²

An open reading of the Synoptic Gospels in the original Greek showed me that each one of them gave

a different sequence and made changes in the details of the same events. Doing this allowed them to use the story to present their different theological understandings of the significance of Jesus's life. Each author composed his gospel separately, according to his theological agenda, and wrote it for a specific audience facing a particular situation. This means that constructing our own version of an event in the life of Jesus by blending the details from different gospels does not give us a unified historical account of what happened. It is quite understandable why repeated searches for the historical Jesus, from the end of the eighteenth century until today, tell more about their authors than about Jesus, as Albert Schweitzer correctly pointed out back in 1906.

Proof texting is irrational because the Bible contains so much that points away from the idea of a single author writing a manual from A to Z. The old joke had made me uncomfortable because I had been led to believe that biblical messages are not contaminated by any worldly, human influence. They come out of the blue and are aimed at all humans without distinction. This posture proposes that if any portion of the Bible is difficult to understand, it must be understood in the light of another biblical passage that is clear. Of course, the classification of a text as difficult or clear is determined by whether it fits the presuppositions of the reader about what the Bible can say. This method for reading is based on the notion that the Bible has only one author and, therefore, it is its own best interpreter. It relegates the writers of the Bible to mere scribes taking dictation and ignores that they wrote for the benefit of concrete audiences facing discrete historical circumstances. The Bible itself, however, amply demonstrates the active role played by the authors of the different books addressing different problems. The example of the differences in the synoptic gospels, referenced above, is not at all isolated.

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Faithful Jews and Christians have long felt tension over how the Bible was written. They recognize the significant role of the human agents who put words in writing. Consider Caravaggio's 1602 painting, *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew*. In it, an angel is telling Matthew the points he needs to cover, as he is using his fingers to indicate a sequence. Matthew is represented with the flowing robes of an important person, like the depictions of philosophers in Renaissance paintings. His posture is precarious. Rather than sitting at a stately desk, he is standing with the left knee on a bench that has one of its posts over a ledge. His torso is turned, and his eyes look up disconcertedly at the angel, not quite sure of what to do. It would seem that Caravaggio is depicting his own uncertainty as to how the Bible was written.

Are we to credit the human authors of the biblical books for the actual wording of the biblical texts, or was the Bible "verbally inspired"? This question has been at the forefront of biblical Christianity for centuries. It is no accident that almost any conversation about a theological point to be determined from the Bible soon becomes a debate about biblical inspiration. As I argued in a previous contribution to this journal, the current crisis



Rome, Italy: *Inspiration of Saint Matthew*, 1602 Baroque painting by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, in Contarelli chapel, Church of St. Louis of the French (San Luigi dei Francesi)

in the Adventist Church was not brought about by the need to decide whether or not to ordain women or how best to reorganize the ecclesiastical bureaucracy to ensure transparency and accountability, but by the issue of how to understand the inspiration of the Bible.³

Contemporaneous schools of thought develop their own vocabularies, and their writings must be read according to the technical meaning given to words by the different schools. For example, the books of the Old Testament understand all reality to be material, without differentiating types of matter. At the time when the

books of the New Testament were written, the Platonists understood that the material world was only a shadow of the real world, the ideal world. They distinguished matter, something that is in the process of becoming something else, from form, or idea, something that is unchangeable. The Stoics, for their part, thought that all reality is material, but distinguished different types. The transitory phenomenological material world, available to the senses of human beings, is an emanation of the hypostatic material world, which is permanent and unavailable to human perception. Both types of matter are distinct and different from primordial, undifferentiated, formless matter.

The symbolic universes of different schools of thought must be considered if one wishes to understand what the Bible says. To read Genesis 1 and claim that the author describes how formless matter was given form, since he was well aware of the difference between matter and form, is anachronistic at best. It assumes that the text of Genesis functions in a Platonic symbolic universe. Those who do this are not bringing out the message of the text but putting in a message of their own.

The authors of the Bible wrote each book separately, for their contemporaries, without any awareness that they were writing “the Bible.” Most readers now understand that each book operates on a simple landscape within the horizon of its own symbolic universe. The books of the Bible were written in different cultural settings over a period of 1,200 years. The difficulty in a text does not arise because it does not fit my presuppositions as to what the Bible can or should say. It arises out of my incomplete understanding of the symbolic universe of the author of the biblical book I am reading. No doubt the intended audience lived within the same symbolic universe and understood its message easily. Failing to take into account not just the way in which a text functions within a paragraph, but also the way in which a biblical book functions within its symbolic universe, results in an abuse of the author’s words.

We live within a global cultural matrix in which the factors that used to distinguish primitive from advanced societies, Eastern from Western mentalities, Northern from Southern mores, intuitive from scientific knowledge, tribal memories from historical evidence, and religious rituals from faith commitments have become better understood;

in some cases they have ceased to be, and in others they have been redefined. This means that we are more aware of the need to reconstruct the symbolic universe of the different biblical authors as carefully as possible. Only then can we read their words intelligently. It is no longer possible to claim, like some do, that the Bible is above all cultures. The cultural differences between the authors of the biblical books are in plain view.

There is no such thing as an a-cultural word or text. Human beings communicate to each other within a culture. The culturally conditioned messages of the different biblical authors are quite capable of being transposed to any other culture, just like a melody may be transposed to a different musical key. Verbal messages and musical melodies cannot be heard in a vacuum, and nature does not have them. To be meaningful and persuasive, messages must be couched in the culture of the intended audience. Unfortunately, the ecclesiastical authorities of the Adventist Church are opposed to the transposition of the Gospel to the twenty-first-century global culture. Instead of using tradition as a foundation for the future, they have chosen to make it a monument to a long-past world view.

Often one reads that the Bible says this or that. Well, if what is needed to affirm it is a text of Scripture, it is possible to claim biblical support for almost anything: slavery, patriarchy, ethnic cleansing, holy war, the exclusion of women from teaching, vengeance as a demand of justice, torture, and the death penalty for those who steal, male homosexuals, adulterous women, transgressors of the prohibition to work on the Sabbath, etc. Some teach that the Bible says that God created the universe in a week of seven days about 6,000 years ago, and what the Bible says is the final truth. Their teaching is based on Genesis 1 and arithmetical computations of the genealogies in other chapters of Genesis. They purposely overlook what other biblical authors have to say about the world created by God, and what we know about the nature of ancient genealogies. Some claim that the Bible says that only those who are perfect, that is, are conquerors over all temptations to sin, can be taken to heaven, and they have a list of texts to prove it. Finding support for a view by reference to a biblical passage, while ignoring what else the Bible says about a topic, is an arbitrary exercise. I can’t understand how anyone can claim to be telling what the

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Bible says about this or that while dismissing most of the information in the Bible about it.

According to many Christians, the Bible says that the future is predetermined. The end has been decreed since the beginning. God already knows everything, and what God knows cannot be wrong. The future is closed. On the other hand, some Christians claim that God can change his mind at any time. God's hands are not tied by what he knows. God's freedom is absolute. The Bible makes clear that the future is open.

The evidence shows that *both* views are present in the Bible. The prophets, Amos, Hosea, Micah, etc., told the people that on account of their current behavior the future was to bring about their doom. They were feeling secure on account of their national sovereignty and economic prosperity. Theirs was a false security, however. Because of their evil ways, God was going to send drought, famine, locusts, and pestilence to punish them. The prophets insisted that the people needed to abandon their present way of life. They urged them to change course, to turn away, to repent. God is not bound to do what I prophesy. When the author of the post-exilic chapters of Isaiah argued that the proof that Yahve was the only true God was that what he predicted through prophets came to pass, an anonymous prophet wrote Jonah to argue that God can change his mind and make prophets look like fools. God is a God of grace; the future is open.

The biblical apocalyptic texts, however, were written for people who found themselves in a totally different situation. They had little control over their circumstances as exiles in a foreign land or vassals of neighboring empires. Their rulers demanded assimilation to their cultural norms and religious practices. The authors of apocalyptic texts were motivational speakers telling their audiences to hold on, remain faithful to the Creator God who rules the world and has everything under his control. Even if at

the moment God's retributive justice seems not to be at work, to the point that the faithful may suffer martyrdom, don't give up on your allegiance to God. What you need is perseverance, patient endurance. God will intervene to bring about a radical vindication of His justice and your faithfulness. This message only makes sense if the future is already determined within a closed universe. The time of the end has already been decreed and will take place soon. The future is closed.

Do all apocalyptic authors give the same description of what Christ is doing after he was raised from the dead by God? Clearly not. According to John the prophet at Patmos, Christ has been victorious over Satan and is now sitting with his father on his father's throne. According to the author of the exhortation to the Hebrews, he has entered the Most Holy Place in the sanctuary made of *hypostatic* matter, visible only by faith. He now is a superior High Priest who not only expiates the sins of those who draw near to him but also takes away the guilt that remains in the conscience of sinners. According to Paul, Christ is now waging war in the cosmic spheres between heaven and earth in which the principalities and powers of the air are still operating. Once he has subjugated them, the imminent *Parousia* will take place. The three descriptions of what Christ is doing between his resurrection and the *Parousia* function in three different symbolic universes: a mythological three-story universe, a Stoic universe, and a Neo Platonic universe.

This means that it is impossible to say "the Bible teaches what I teach." Biblical authors must be identified and contextualized. Take for example the characterization of the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. Is Christianity a Jewish sect like Pharisaism, the fulfillment or the perfection of Judaism, the legitimate heir of the treasures of ancient Israel, the antidote to Judaism, or a totally new beginning only tangentially related to

Judaism? According to James, Peter, and John, as reported by the author of the Acts of the Apostles, Christianity is a Jewish sect. According to the gospel of Matthew and the author of the epistle to the Colossians, it is the perfection or fulfillment of Judaism. Christianity is the heir of its riches. According to the author of the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, Judaism is what gives Christianity a foundation, legitimacy. Christianity is not a newcomer to the religious horizon; it has deep roots. According to Paul and the author of the gospel of John, it is a new creation by the power of the Spirit. Much of the Bible must be ignored to maintain that what the Bible says is totally coherent. Writing to different audiences in different cultural environments, each author was inspired to express his faith and confirm the faith of his readers in the God who created and has ultimate control over the world, in a way that motivated faithfulness. What they wrote was persuasive because it made sense to their intended audiences, even if the reactions to their messages were quite diverse.

I pointed out that in order to make the Bible relevant some people choose the passages they prefer and ignore the rest. Making a choice is unavoidable because the Bible contains too many different, at times contradictory, points of view. Therefore, it is necessary to be honest and more specific when identifying the source of one's understanding of the Christian Gospel. My understanding of the Gospel is in terms of the letters of Paul and the gospel according to John. They proclaim that God intervened in the unfolding of history and brought about a new creation. Their affirmation of the rule of the Spirit for the benefit of humanity, however, is nuanced according to their different symbolic universes. As an apocalypticist, Paul envisioned the new creation in cosmic terms, where some regions of the cosmos are still occupied by evil spirits. He thought their defeat was to take place momentarily. Those who through baptism participate in the death and the resurrection of Christ are raised by the Spirit to live guided by the Spirit now and, at the imminent *Parousia*, will receive spirit-bodies. The gospel according to John telescopes the apocalyptic timeline into an ever-present moment of confrontation with Jesus. Facing Jesus, every human being must determine whether he is Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph and Mary who, according to "the Jews," is a bastard, or he is the One sent from above

by the Father to give life and light to the world. Those who have faith in God and see Jesus for who he truly is are no longer creatures from the world below. They have been born from above by the Spirit. They now live by the power of the Spirit sent by God as "another Comforter." He empowers those who have faith to have their being in the world of the Spirit rather than the world of the flesh.

Both Paul and the Johannine community saw themselves living as new creatures thanks to the power of the Spirit that energized and guided them. They rejected the law of Moses as the giver of life, which was at the core of the contemporary Judaism of the scribes and the Pharisees. I believe Christianity is the religion of resurrection by the power of the Spirit that gives life. The search for the riches of the Bible comes to fruition with the discovery of the ways in which its authors proclaimed the riches of God. I find the phrase "the Bible says" misguided and pompous. I give credit to the authors of the views I hold and, if appropriate, recognize the views of other biblical authors. All Christian denominations claim to base their diverse creeds on what the Bible says. The resulting Christian cacophony is a distraction, the echo of the plurality of views present in the Bible. Those who claim to tell what the Bible says, I fear, misrepresent the testimonies of the authors of the books in the Bible, and usurp for themselves the formal authority of the Bible.

Endnotes

1. For an analysis of how some stories of the Old Testament may have been understood by the original audiences, and were interpreted by the authors of the New Testament and by the Rabbis whose sayings are found in the Mishna, see Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* (Harper One, 2020).
2. Richard Coffen, "A Fundamental Exegetical Principle," www.atoday.org, October 27, 2020 (italics are his).
3. "Reflecting on San Antonio," *Spectrum*, Summer 2015: 80–84.



HEROLD WEISS'S latest books are *Meditations on the Gospel According to John*, *Meditations on the Letters of Paul*, and *The End of the Scroll: Biblical Apocalyptic Trajectories*.