



Photo: Bonnie Dwyer

Sea water rushes under the lava in the Galápagos.

“HOW DO WE TELL THIS TO OUR PEOPLE?”:

From 1919 to the Present

BY JAMES J. LONDIS

Unlike other fundamentalist, ultra-conservative denominations, the story of the Seventh-day Adventist Church includes a commitment to the divine inspiration of the Bible *and* the writings of Ellen G. White. Portraying her as an inspired prophet in the biblical tradition, Adventism assumed we fully understood what biblical inspiration meant: it is propositional (thoughts, words), supernatural (sent by God to the person), and not to be questioned. If Ellen White received the biblical “gift

of prophecy,” her inspiration is no different, nor can her authority be doubted. We gave Ellen White an *almost* equal authority in Adventist faith and practice, even though she warned against equating her importance with the Bible. So profound a leader almost demanded we lean in her direction. Since questioning one would undercut both, we questioned neither.

However, our traditional assumptions about the nature of inspiration are no longer sustainable. Their

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collapse began well over one hundred years ago.

In Ellen White’s case, it started with our early leaders, whose proximity to her life and work raised questions they dared not examine until *four years* after her death. By 1919, concerns were so intense they convened an unprecedented “Bible Conference,” during which administrators, editors and pastors came together in prayer and study to understand the “facts” as some viewed them.

Was she given thoughts, words, and propositional content in her visions and dreams? Were her writings a virtual transcription of her experiences or something else? Had she borrowed from others and been edited extensively? If she borrowed from uninspired writers, are they also to be granted special authority? After several agonizing weeks, they could not unify around a theology of her inspiration. Terrified of what might happen to the movement if her “prophetic identity” was modified, they decided to say nothing.

Their silence lasted more than fifty years.

Archived and forgotten, Adventist perceptions of her inspiration were frozen. While less intense, those who ask questions even now risk discipline, loss of employment, even separation from the Church. But the issues will not go away. Adventist historians (circa 1970), after meticulous research, *again* raised the 1919 concerns: this time with unassailable specifics. While discretion prevented many (not all) from walking through her inspiration minefields, their findings spoke for themselves.

We now *must* reassess Ellen White and, by implication, the Bible.

The Bible

Beginning in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and continuing to this day, the formation of the Bible and the meaning of its inspiration have also been extensively researched. Scholars, examining the nature of

scriptural materials and the processes by which they were formed, asked questions reminiscent of those raised about Ellen White. Without living eyewitnesses who wrote in English (as was the case with Ellen White), they mastered ancient languages from distant cultures. For most of them it was a sacred task. However, some exposed to this research found the traditional assumptions and beliefs about biblical inspiration troublesome. For this reason, Adventist leaders convened additional Bible Conferences in the 1970s to look at not Ellen White, but the Bible itself.

Understanding why this happened requires additional history. In the ’60s and ’70s, significant numbers of our college and university professors earned advanced degrees from many of the most prestigious universities. Adventist higher-education accreditation had become increasingly dependent on terminal degrees, including our biblical and theological professors. When they returned, they raised the many issues raised in 1919, only this time, it was about the Bible. Surprised, alarmed, and impressed by what they had learned about the Bible, Church leaders felt that their concerns had to be explored.

As attendees tackled the agenda, their tables covered with Bibles, note pads and pens, differences began to surface. To their credit, somewhat startled administrators listened intently. It is important to note that administration provided years of support to most of them, hoping they would return to strengthen the Church and its mission. Better scholarship should enhance the mission of the Church, especially to young people and questioning members. So, they cheerfully “minded the store” while they were gone. Deeply grateful, many pastors and teachers believed that their experiences would strengthen the Church.

However, not all were convinced. Caught flat-footed by what they heard, and unable to respond, some just listened. Others questioned major points vigorously. As

the hours went on, it became obvious that our traditional approaches to the Bible were misleading, that not every word or thought expressed or historical record should be treated as infallibly delivered. At the conclusion of the first day, a thoughtful leader I admired and trusted, leaned over and asked me: “*How do we tell this to our people?*”

1919 and 2019: Ellen White and Biblical Inspiration Joined Together

On November 21, 2019, approximately 200 Adventist scholars immersed in and knowledgeable about both Ellen White and biblical research, attended the Adventist Society for Religious Studies annual meeting in San Diego, California. Dr. Denis Fortin, professor of Historical Theology and former Dean of the Theological Seminary, delivered the Presidential address. His title itself raised eyebrows: “I Have Had To Adjust My View of Things—Lessons from the 1919 Bible Conference.” In it, he outlined the theological and moral disquiet of the 1919 attendees who, given their recorded comments, probably linked Ellen White’s inspiration issues with the same issues in Scripture. Fortin said:

But there were some attendees in the room at this Bible Conference who knew better than to ascribe inerrancy and infallibility to Ellen White’s writings. The problem though with this opinion is that if one were to say Ellen White’s writings are not infallible or inerrant, what does this imply for the Bible? Holding the view that there is no degree of inspiration between canonical and non-canonical prophets inherently posed this unavoidable comparison and consequent conclusion. If one is not inerrant or infallible than neither is the other. As evangelical fundamentalism sought to organize a resistance to inroads made by modern critical biblical scholarship, for Seventh-day Adventists to challenge the inerrancy and infallibility of Ellen White’s writings was tantamount to side with modern critical methodologies. Thus, almost inevitably, Seventh-day Adventist teachers and evangelists had no other moral and religious choice than to ally with the evangelical fundamentalist perspective. What else could they do? But, how honest would this position be?¹

Fortin sympathized with their dilemma: “How will we tell our believers we need to modify our views of Ellen White’s inspiration and authority?” Presented as the “last word” on doctrine, lifestyle, and biblical interpretation, wrapped in a “triumphalist infallibility” that “dominated Adventist ethos and mindset by 1919,” what approach will now rescue her place in our history? “Wouldn’t our members feel that the ‘brethren’ had themselves lost faith in the gift of prophecy? Would they not feel deceived, even betrayed? Could any imagined outcome keep the Church intact?” As already indicated, in the end it seemed prudent to “agree to disagree” and say nothing. For much of the 1919 conference, doctrinal honesty and personal rectitude wrestled with the consequences of being truthful with the Church.

Fortin sees one comment clearly identifying the challenge before them. On August 1, 1919, G. B. Thompson, also serving as a field secretary for the General Conference, said this:

It seems to me that if we are going to preach the Testimonies and establish confidence in them, it does not depend on whether they are verbally inspired or not. I think we are in this fix because of a wrong education that our people have had. . . . If we had always taught the truth on this question, we would not have any trouble or shock in the denomination now. But the shock is because we have not taught the truth, and have put the Testimonies on a plane where she says they do not stand. We have claimed more for them than she did. *My thought is this, that the evidence of the inspiration is not in their verbal inspiration, but in their influence and power in the denomination.*²

Because the implications of Ellen White’s writing and publishing processes are now recognized, is it not time to be candid about the nature of her inspiration? Perversely enough, we may discover that one of our original assumptions about her was correct; there may be little—if any—essential difference between the Holy Spirit’s cultivation of the Bible, Ellen White, and many others in the history of faith.



Endemic sunflower trees in the highlands
on Santa Cruz Island, Galápagos

Where We Are

To understand the tensions between the more traditional understanding of inspiration troubling some 1919 participants, and the recent challenges to it, see the following officially approved quotations by Adventist leadership.

Interpreting the Scriptures properly is both a privilege and a humbling responsibility. The special focus of this chapter is to discover biblical and theological principles that relate to the place of faith, reason, spiritual powers and the Holy Spirit in the hermeneutical process. The following approach rests upon the concept that *the entire Bible is the propositional, infallible Word of God. It assumes that what the text meant originally is, in principle, what the text means for us today* [italics mine].³

Using military metaphorical language, Paul admonishes his hearers to bring “every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5, NKJV). The implication is that the teachings of Christ, as found in the Scriptures, are to be elevated in authority over competing claims of human reason. In other words, all thoughts, whether geological, philosophical or theological, will resonate with and thus be “captive to” the teaching of Christ.

Placing faith above reason in this fashion prepares the Christian to be willing to *deny the evidence of the human senses if empirical phenomena appear to dispute some teachings of Scripture* [italics mine].⁴

Dr. Frank Hasel warns that we cannot allow “evolutionary presuppositions” to color our understanding of the Bible. We must always see it as “supernatural,” meaning that each writer, copier, editor who contributed to Scripture must be seen as participating in a “supernatural process” each step of the way.⁵

Professor Fernando Canale puts it this way:

With the arrival of the modern and postmodern ages many Christians have concluded that the existence of a special cognitive revelation from God is impossible. Unfortunately, these theologians attempt to interpret Scripture from the assumption that it was written only by human beings. They are dogmatically persuaded that God cannot communicate knowledge to human beings. Scripture and theology, then, are the product of ever-changing human imaginations. Thus, these theologians deny Peter’s conviction that in Scripture we do not find myths but truths (2 Pet. 1:16).⁶

Dr. Angel Rodriguez, former director of the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference, introduced a major publication on the Bible with these words:

This volume introduces the readers to a series of principles of biblical interpretation that is

compatible with the Adventist high view of the Bible as the Word of God. By including chapters dealing with the nature of revelation, inspiration, and the authority of the Bible, it reveals the scriptural presuppositions that Seventh-day Adventists bring to the text as they seek to obtain a better understanding of the Bible and of their own presuppositions.⁷

Lastly:

In general, however, those who hold to the historical-critical method would find it necessary to reject the idea that God imparted to the prophet specific objective knowledge regarding Himself, the nature of the world, and historical events. *Even if the historical critic accepted that possibility it would be necessary for him to verify it on the basis of historical science* [italics mine].⁸

Adventist Scholars Who Defend a Revised Approach to Scripture

Adventist scholars who defend what is called a “modified historical-critical approach” to inspiration recognize that it is a revision of the Church’s established position. While dozens of books and articles explaining the revision by well-known Adventist teachers are available,⁹ I wish to highlight three articles in *Spectrum*. The first was written by an Old Testament biblical scholar who taught at Southern Adventist University many decades ago, the second by a systematic theologian at Loma Linda School of Religion, and the third by a New Testament scholar who currently teaches at Washington Adventist University.

While teaching at Southern Adventist University, Jerry Gladson earned his doctorate from Vanderbilt University in Old Testament. In his article he outlines the tensions between scholars like himself and those resistant to any use of this method. He suggests that we can we selectively adopt the benefits of modern scholarship, *and* preserve biblical inspiration and authority.¹⁰ Gladson’s studies were initially bewildering, obliging him to question the General Conference position that “The historical-critical method minimizes the need for faith in God and obedience to His commandments . . . [and] de-emphasizes the divine element in the Bible as an inspired book.”¹¹

Flummoxed, Gladson asks: Is it really that dangerous?

Are we justified in all the ado we are making over historical criticism? Is there something we can find in the method which will help us in our mission? Or must we totally reject it out of hand as a tool of the devil to distract and confuse our faith in Scripture?¹²

He reviews its historical rise and then clarifies, in his view, what “critical” does and does not mean to scholarship.

Criticism in biblical study does not mean an attack on the Bible. Rather, to cite the dictionary, it signifies the “art, skill, or profession of making discriminating judgments and evaluations, esp. of literary or other artistic works. *Historical criticism means to make careful and discriminating historical judgments about the biblical text.*”¹³

If users of the method arbitrarily dismiss those parts of Scripture that testify to divine activity, that is a separate issue and can be rejected. No Adventist supports a method that limits historical events to the “natural” alone. At issue for Adventism is whether or not the current “propositional” model of God’s revelation emerges from the Bible itself. There can be no doubt the Bible contains miraculous reports. Gladson’s focus is on the “critical” task of comparing the *literary conventions of ancient documents with scriptural documents*.

For instance, ancient documents were more commonly shaped by the community than by single individuals, so modern ideas of strict authorship do not fit well with ancient texts; even sacred documents were commonly edited; reinterpretation and typological assignment frequently took place.

These literary conventions at work in the Bible are discovered by comparing the Bible with ancient nonbiblical documents. Such investigations help us see if there is objective evidence of similar literary conventions in the Bible. *In the same way we examine the literary customs of Ellen White’s day and then peer into her corpus to see to what extent she has followed them* [italics mine].¹⁴

Is there room for divine transcendence operating in and through them? Is there room for inspiration operating in, through, and under ancient literary conventions? This is the real issue at stake.¹⁵

Gladson laments that Adventist scholars must claim they do not use the “new” method if they wish to mine it for its rich insights. He refers to Dr. George Rice’s illuminating study of Luke, which offered new insights into that Gospel,¹⁶ and still received some negative reactions.

Loma Linda University professor Richard Rice mirrors Gladson’s concerns. The fundamentalist view of inspiration (“The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in

its autographs”¹⁷), while technically extreme for Adventist conservatives, still has an appeal to them: namely, the *aura* of “inerrancy.”

While Adventists typically avoid the expression “inerrancy,” a good deal of the language and logic employed by those who advocate inerrancy appears in Adventist discussions of biblical interpretation. Notable examples include the document “Bible Study: Presuppositions, Principles and Method” voted by the 1986 Annual Council, and Richard M. Davidson’s essay on “Biblical Interpretation,” which appears in the *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*. Both documents affirm God’s direct influence on the authors of biblical writings and insist that human reason must stand under the authority of the Bible. Most importantly, they reject historical criticism and insist that any reliance on its methods is inappropriate for Adventist Bible scholarship.¹⁸

Professor Olive Hemmings, our third scholar, has written more recently, not about the method itself, but about the Bible.

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction” (2 Tim. 3:16, NRSV). A large and influential sector of Christendom tends to make claims for the Bible that it does not make for itself—claims that assert or even approach verbal inspiration. There is a particular world religion whose sacred text is said to have come directly from heaven to its single author. We should never be tempted to make such a claim for the Bible because it makes no such claim for itself. This does not in any way mean that the Bible is not inspired or supernatural. . . . Many have made the loose and irresponsible claim that the author of the Bible is God. Such statements tend to issue from a narrow view of inspiration that falls flat when one views it in light of the history and transmission of the manuscripts which comprise the Bible.¹⁹



An oasis amid the lava fields on Isabela Island

Why do so many Adventist scholars oppose *any form* (some insist they can define which ones are “safe”) of a “critical” approach? One can only surmise that if we allowed that some biblical materials were not written under a direct divine influence, it might lead to the intolerable view that “we have elevated human reason above the Bible,” or that *nothing supernatural* was involved. Neither assumption necessarily follows. We must not ignore the facts or bury our questions under presuppositions affirming faith alone. “A simple faith is not the faith of a simpleton.” Its robustness relies on honestly facing any and all challenges to it. The phrase “human reason or the Bible” pulls a grenade pin to halt discussion, and especially surfaces when biblical events do not seamlessly correspond with other records from a specific period.

Rice also remarks that earlier statements from the 1974 Bible Conference approved the “many positive results” of the Enlightenment (historical-critical) approach to history. Such methods have provided us with a “flood of light” on our background knowledge of the Bible.²⁰ He finally notes that *not all Adventist scholars agree with the official Methods of Bible Study Document, partly because some who contributed to that document follow it inconsistently.*

To more fully understand our challenge with the Bible, Rice (like Gladson, Fortin, and others) looks back to the 1919 Bible Conference disagreement. All concur that distancing the Church from our near-fundamentalist position on inspiration provides the sturdiest defense against challenges to Ellen White’s “authority.” Even General Conference President Elder Neal C. Wilson once acknowledged that “originality is not a test of inspiration.

... A prophet’s use of sources other than ‘visions’ does not invalidate or diminish the prophet’s authority.”²¹

A Better Understanding: Paul J. Achtemeier

Other conservative scholars support a modified view, which leaves room for our Adventist conviction that “inspiration” belongs to the Bible as well as Ellen White. Concerned that fundamentalist dogmatism would impede the biblical witness in the modern world, New Testament scholar Paul Achtemeier wrote:

The history of the church has shown clearly enough that to enter this realm [of “inspiration”] is to enter a place where passions run high and invective is close at hand. Yet perhaps there is a place for a book that seeks to express a conviction about the inspiration of Scripture that is able to accommodate the discoveries of modern scholars of the Bible. It is that place which this book seeks to fill.²²

He agrees that Christianity’s claim that the Bible is “inspired” (*as other historical documents are not*) distinguishes it from a number of philosophical and religious systems. Nonetheless, disputes over the meaning of “inspiration” have separated Lutherans from each other and altered the focus of major conservative seminaries. Imposing on the Bible our preconceived opinion about near-inerrancy (plenary or verbal) offers the Church no hope of agreement. Listening to the Bible itself is the only approach that offers a credible solution.

Why do so many Adventist scholars oppose *any form* (some insist they can define which ones are “safe”) of a “critical” approach? One can only surmise that if we allowed that some biblical materials were not written under a direct divine influence, it might lead to the intolerable view that “we have elevated human reason above the Bible,” or that *nothing supernatural* was involved.

What does “listening to the Bible itself” mean for the concept of inspiration? For starters, it affirms that God is speaking to His people *now* through the Bible. “All scripture is inspired [Greek, *theopneustos*, “God-breathed] by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Achtemeier disputes fundamentalism’s claim that this passage provides a systematic, full-blown understanding of what occurred through inspiration. One believes the “words” alone are inspired, another the thoughts, and still another, in some mysterious sense, the human writers.

Toward a Credible View of Inspiration

The Spirit ecstatically seizes biblical writers and provides them either with words, thoughts, or some other form of supernatural “gifting.” All were inspired in the same way. He points to the obvious; a cursory reading of the Bible finds numerous exceptions to this model: poems, histories, proverbs, and Psalms, none of which suggest ecstatic, prophetic-like experiences in the writer(s). If that model cannot be applied to the *entire* Bible, it strains credulity to insist that if a perfect God is the source of Scripture, it too must be perfect: *One mistake nullifies all?*

Since “mistakes” exist, such “absolutism” is impossible. A common example is Peter’s denials of Jesus during His trial found in the Synoptic Gospels. To preserve biblical “perfection,” some suggest that Peter must have denied Jesus on three different occasions, a “too clever” sleight-of-hand for thoughtful readers. Few believe it’s plausible, because a *plausibility explaining the imperfect is more persuasive than the implausible explaining the “perfect.”*

Most scholars appreciate that the Bible was born and nurtured in pre-scientific cultures. For that reason, some parts of the Bible, more “helpful” to believers, may be judged “inspired” *in a different sense* than the prophetic model. The Psalmist praying from the depths of despair is inspired or moved to address God, not “hear” from God as the prophet does. God speaks nothing to him; he speaks everything to God. God is listening, not the prophet. If preserved by the Holy Spirit for canonical purposes, to encourage us when we despair, why can that not also be an “inspired” process?

If, as most scholars agree, the book of Job was not inspired within the prophetic tradition (supernaturally given words and ideas), not “historical” in our modern sense of that term, and yet still in the canon, a believer need not deny it was divinely intended. Notice the elements of one of the greatest literary creations of all time by all accounts. Silently sitting for days on end, Job’s accusers then question and berate him in remarkable poetry? He responds no less eloquently? Frustrated by the cruel injustice of his suffering, he demands Yahweh give him answers? He gets a response, but not the one he thought he deserved. “Behold my creative and redeeming glory in all its fullness and be content!”

This is clearly a contrived literary structure designed to help us understand that the human predicament offers no resolution to unjust suffering. An adequate divine response to Job’s impudent interrogation never emerges. When an awe-filled “revelation” is sent, Job falls back not on an explanation, but on hope and trust in God’s goodness. He learns, and thereby teaches us through the Spirit, that only a revelation of divine power, glory, and redeeming love will shield us from a collapsing faith. God can and will “fix” it all. And it is enough. Job’s author, like Shakespeare and others, likely used the historical events that overwhelmed a historic personage (think Julius

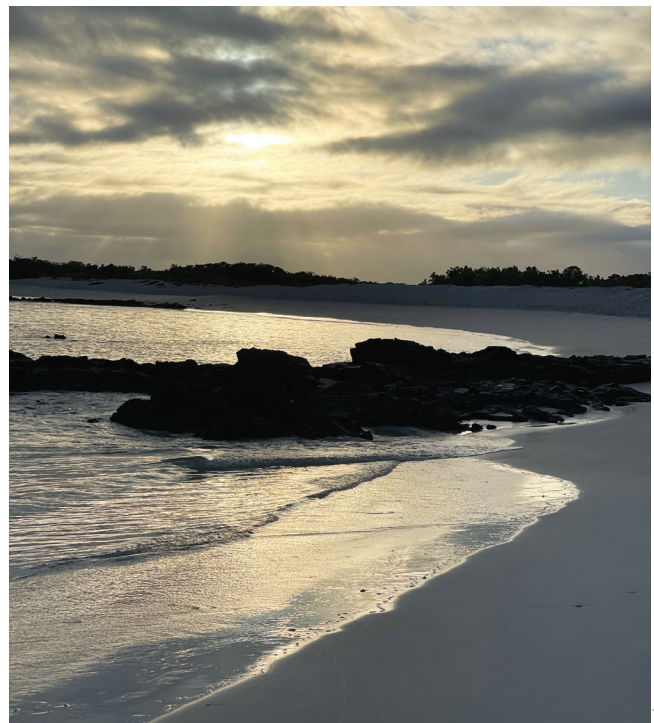


Photo: Bernice Davis

Sunset over a Santa Cruz Island beach

Caesar) and, aided by the Holy Spirit, gave us a profound, enduring understanding of Yahweh and human suffering, which has withstood the test of time. Why is that not “inspired”?

Fundamentalists insist that this view diminishes the so-called “high view of Scripture.” However, Achtemeier explains:

If some writings show a maximum “divine element” others show it as a minimum. If the level of truth in some writings is high, in others it is low. . . . Rather than being in its totality the revelation of God, it is instead the human record of that revelation, carrying with it, as such a record, all the ills to which human accounts are heir.²³

The phrase “human record of that revelation” is anathema to fundamentalist ears. Developed as early as the Reformation, Christians absorbed characterizations of Scripture that precluded the human, such as the “Revelation of God,” “the Word of God,” or the “Infallible Revelation of His Will.” Such uncompromising portrayals of the sacred writings reinforced the notion that each word and idea was “perfect,” even though the letter to the Hebrews implicitly asserts a less-than-perfect biblical revelation prior to God’s “full” disclosure in Christ.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through wisdom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word (Heb. 1:1–3, NIV).

Achtemeier insists that biblical authority must not be sublimated to human achievement, knowledge, and experience. If it were, religious life and experience would not long survive. If one allows human knowledge and experience to be shaped primarily by the present, not the timeless, Scripture cannot be authoritative. Sidling up to “inerrancy,” even from a supposed distance, cannot succeed. Believers who respect scientific research and

biblical scholarship remain quiet, while unbelievers refuse to “hear” a gospel protected by naivety.

Oral and written ancient sources have contributed to the Bible,²⁴ as they have to other ancient writings. Varying accounts of the same events are quite likely due to the copying, editing, and transmission of those documents. Believers must be clear that the Bible is not meant to be a “typical” historical document. If it can use ancient astronomical “mistakes” (the sky is a dome with points of light in it) why must its history be free of error? Because it is *not* error free, it can be more helpful and authoritative to people of faith as they wrestle with the challenges of modern society. Achtemeier says:

First, the point of the biblical material is not primarily historical. It is primarily theological. Such historical accounts as there are, are told for the theological points they help to make. . . . Biblical materials are closer in intent to sermons than they are to textbooks of history. That is not to say that historical accounts are not present and that they are on occasion remarkably accurate. *It is simply to say that the traditions were formulated and the biblical books composed, not to pass on historical information, but to say something about the ways of God with humankind: in the Old Testament through the fate of the chosen people, in the New Testament with the nascent church. To try to make the Bible speak as a historical chronicle is therefore to pervert its intention and distort what it wants to convey [italics mine].*²⁵

Old material can be used in new ways and was used in new ways in the Bible.²⁶

Communal experience produced the Scriptures, including the personal and historical events in which God and the people interacted in a remarkable variety of ways. To limit biblical inspiration to individual experiences written and preserved for all time ignores the textual evidence. Any view of inspiration, therefore, must address the fact that there is an “interrelation of community and Scripture,”²⁷ that God’s activity is within history, and that God became a “wholly historical figure” in Jesus of Nazareth. “To make of Scripture something more supernatural and timeless than God’s own self-revelation

in his Son is surely to withdraw oneself from a serious consideration of the intention of Scripture.”²⁸

How then are we to understand how inspiration may be affirmed as the basis for scriptural authority? How can a human literature persuasively claim the authority of God?

[T]he reading or hearing of it does not necessarily lead to understanding it or accepting its witness as true. What to Paul was sober truth was to Festus sheer madness (Acts 26:24–25). Though the Sadducees revere the Torah, Jesus tells them they do not know the Scripture they themselves have read (Mark 12:24, 26).²⁹

Understanding that leads to faith requires the “inner testimony of the Holy Spirit.” Why else would a lifelong agnostic like C. S. Lewis read the Gospels for the first time and experience faith? It cannot be the words alone.

Unless inspiration continues to the reading and hearing of Scripture, Scripture remains a museum piece, of interest to antiquarians who want to affirm that at one time the Spirit of God inspired a collection of writings, whose present utility is no greater than that of any other object from the remote past. The continuing existence of the community of faith shows that in fact the Spirit has continued to inspire the reading of Scripture and hence inspiration must be understood as a continuing process, not one that ended when the last word of the last biblical book was penned.³⁰

Before Scripture was written down, believers were convinced of its truths in oral traditions, in its “hearing,” not its reading. Therefore, while Scripture itself owns a singular normative authority, there is also a continuing work of the Spirit’s inspiration in the proclamation of the Gospel through preaching, teaching, writing, and all forms of media.

Such interpretation for a new situation of the traditions of the faith is the same procedure by which Amos reinterpreted the traditions

of Israel’s election by God, or by which Jesus reinterpreted the Sermon on the Mount, or by which Paul reinterpreted the way the law had been understood by his religious contemporaries. . . . The inspiring presence of the Spirit, at work as the Scriptures were produced, continues to work as the traditions continue to summon forth responses to ever-new situations. The sermon is thus the essential continuation of the process begun with the foundational events from which the original traditions took their beginning. Preaching is therefore the oral act which repeats the origin of Scripture.³¹

Finally:

[The] Spirit which inspired Scripture has come to dwell in the church. . . . Insights must constantly be tested in and by the life of the community. A life in the twentieth century that exactly replicates a life in either the century before Christ or the first century after Christ would not be a life of faith—it would be a gross anachronism.³²

We should think carefully about assuming Scripture is not similar to the processes that defined Ellen White’s ministry. She too was and is part of a *communal process*. She too is a product of her own cultural milieu and should not be dismissed because she is less than “perfect” in matters unrelated to biblical faith.

If, as some conservative scholars concede, biblical authors used popular views of science in the message they delivered, then Ellen White should not be faulted for doing the same. How can either one be accused of “error” defined in the modern era? Moreover, while scriptural storywriters referred to “historical events” of divine activity and failed to authenticate them by modern standards, why should we be disappointed they reported the same episodes inaccurately? However, does that justify seeing the narrative as no more than an imaginative construct?

Yet, there is also a deeper issue here. It is apparent that the historical traditions contained in the scriptural materials are not so much intent

on reporting the past as they are on anticipating the future. History in the Bible is viewed from an eschatological angle of vision and is more interested in promises and their fulfillment than in sheer facticity of reporting. If history is the arena within which God is at work, a sheerly [*sic*] factual report would completely miss that dimension. . . . The intention of Scripture is to witness to realities larger than minute numerical accuracy.³³

How, then, are we to understand such considerations in terms of the authority of Scripture? On this issue, scholars who agree about inspiration do diverge in some respects. Achtemeier, for example, argues that the *locus of authority must be Jesus Himself*, the one to whom the documents point, and the one beyond Jesus who appointed Him. Believers who read the story of Jesus understand that He exercised “sovereign” authority over people, the forces of evil, and over nature itself.³⁴

Christ is the locus of authority, not primarily the texts that created the church. Like the first believers, the unbelievers who now come to faith experience the Christ of faith. No rational argument about the inerrancy of the canon or its historical reports can awaken that faith; it is the work of the Holy Spirit who still lives in the church. This means that the only “inspiration” we should cite as our authority is neither in the text itself nor in history, but in the astonishing fact that throughout history, the believing community was called into being by the oral and written word. First from Israel, modified in a crowning way by the story of Jesus, and continued in its faith by the written and proclaimed word to the present day! Where

is incontrovertible historical proof of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead? We do not believe because it can be historically verified. We believe because a sacrificial, magnificent community came into being *convinced* that “it” happened, and testified to it at the risk of their lives. Their *faith* gave us the experience of the risen Christ who now lives in us. Their story is like no other in its capacity to awaken reverence and faith.

Where Are We Now?

Therefore, while inspiration (in all its dimensions) continues and thrives in the contemporary church through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, it obviously cannot (and should not) command the normative authority belonging to the Bible. Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley (and Ellen White) have evidenced their own “Spirit-inspiration” by guiding and strengthening the church in the new communities they guided. Their ministry appropriately enjoys a lesser authority than the Bible, but an authority, nonetheless. They are “formative”³⁵ of the ongoing Christian communities they helped establish and, in some cases (if not all), the entire Christian church, but they cannot be “normative” for all Christians in all times. That authority belongs solely to the Scriptures.

Paul Achtemeier’s conviction that aspects of historical-critical scholarship are helpful to Christian living ought to resonate with scholars not mired in fundamentalism. We can believe in divine revelation within Scripture, even as we differ on how biblical authority and inspiration should be conceived. No relatively conservative Christian scholars, from James Barr to Dewey Beegle, deny that while there are many authors, contributors, and editors to the Bible, behind it all is a single reality:

Job’s author, like Shakespeare and others, likely used the historical events that overwhelmed a historic personage (think Julius Caesar) and, aided by the Holy Spirit, gave us a profound, enduring understanding of Yahweh and human suffering, which has withstood the test of time. Why is that not “inspired”?

The Bible is in its origin a *product* of the believing community. Modern biblical study has made this much more plain to us than it ever could have been in the past. Traditional doctrines of Scripture suggested to Christians over many centuries that the Bible was a message *from* God to the believing community. . . . If the Holy Spirit is willing to authenticate the message of very fallible servants, how much more will he authenticate the extant manuscripts and translations!³⁶

“[T]he attempt to found and maintain a church which will keep strictly to a pure fundamentalism seems doomed to disappointment, for there is no such church, however extreme its conservatism, which does not harbor fears that some of its members, its ministers and its professors may be tainted with liberalism, no fundamentalist body or institution in which there is not some element of compromise, some minor concession perhaps to biblical criticism or some admission perhaps that mankind did not begin with a single man Adam.³⁷

No discerning reader can fail to see the potential earthquake for Adventism if our current leadership decides to face what 1919 leaders would not. Silence can no longer protect us. If we are to remain a cohesive fellowship, time, patience, prayer, and charity are demanded. Are we up to it?³⁸

As I see it, G. B. Thompson’s plea to the 1919 Bible Conference, cited by Fortin in his essay, still points the way forward:

It seems to me that if we are going to preach the Testimonies and establish confidence in them, it does not depend on whether they are verbally inspired or not. I think we are in this fix because of a wrong education that our people have had. . . . If we had always taught the truth on this question, we would not have any trouble or shock in the denomination now. But the shock is because we have not taught the truth, and have put the Testimonies on a plane where she says they do not stand. We have

claimed more for them than she did. *My thought is this, that the evidence of the inspiration is not in their verbal inspiration, but in their influence and power in the denomination.*³⁹

We can be confident that the Holy Spirit cares about the Advent movement and the gospel message. By allowing that Spirit to guide us, Jesus assures us we may meet our challenges honestly and faithfully.

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you (John 16:12–14, NIV).

Can we believe Jesus’s promise to help us tell our people? Will the Spirit be allowed to guide us to a better understanding of inspiration?

Endnotes

1. Denis Fortin, “I Have Had To Adjust My View of Things,” *Spectrum* 48, no. 1: 17–18.
2. Fortin, “I Have Had To Adjust My View of Things,” 21.
3. John T. Baldwin, “Faith, Reason and the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2006), 15. Note the phrase “propositional” and “infallible” Word of God. What can that mean other than that, in its entirety and in each particular, these terms define the Bible?
4. Baldwin, “Faith, Reason and the Holy Spirit,” 17.
5. Frank M. Hasel, “Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2006), 27–46. As we will see, there is no evidence that every contributor to Scripture participated “in a supernatural process every step of the way.” Using the phrase “evolutionary presuppositions” is misleading, almost prejudicially attached to Darwin. If the Gospel According to Luke begins by identifying a research and interview process for his recipient, Hasel wants us to assume that every step of that effort was “supernatural.” If otherwise, he “assumes” that it cannot be normative for the believers. There is no good reason to assume that.
6. Fernando Canale, “Revelation and Inspiration,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2006), 47. It should be noted that many scholars do not support the translation or the view of this text which suggests that “inspiration of God”

for Scripture refers to any truths unrelated to the awakening of faith in the community. Science and historical accuracy in every particular are not essential to the meaning of this passage.

7. Angel Rodriguez, *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2006), ix. Please note: “Seventh-day Adventists bring to the text . . . their own presuppositions.” Does this approach allow us to adequately honor what the Bible reveals as we read it? Doesn’t this deductive approach rule out taking seriously what the text reveals about its nature? Why is “inductive” thinking not even permitted?

8. E. Edward Zinke, *Historical Criticism*, Biblical Research Institute. <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/bible-interpretation-hermeneutics/historical-criticism>

9. Of particular significance are the lifelong contributions of Professor Alden Thompson from Walla Walla University. He has published several books and articles that have been immensely helpful to Adventists.

10. Jerry Gladson, “Taming Historical Criticism: Adventist Biblical Scholarship in the Land of Giants,” *Spectrum* 18, no. 4: 19–34. Other scholars who, in various ways, made the same plea, include John Brunt, “How My Mind Has Changed and Remained the Same with Regard to Biblical Interpretation,” *Spectrum* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2006), republished in *Spectrum* (May 31, 2017); Otilie F. Stafford, “The Bible as Visionary Power,” *Spectrum* 13, no. 2 (December 1982).

11. Gladson, “Taming Historical Criticism,” 19.

12. Gladson, “Taming Historical Criticism,” 20.

13. Gladson, “Taming Historical Criticism,” 20.

14. Gladson, “Taming Historical Criticism,” 22.

15. Gladson, “Taming Historical Criticism,” 23.

16. George E. Rice, *Luke, A Plagiarist?* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1983).

17. Richard Rice, “Inerrancy, Adventism, and Church Unity,” *Spectrum* 42, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 10.

18. Rice, “Inerrancy, Adventism, and Church Unity,” 11–12.

19. Olive J. Hemmings, “The Bible: Paradigm of Liberation, Miracle of Amazing Grace,” *Spectrum* website, April 9, 2020. <https://spectrummagazine.org/sabbath-school/2020/bible-paradigm-liberation-miracle-amazing-grace>

20. Rice, “Inerrancy, Adventism, and Church Unity,” 12.

21. Rice, “Inerrancy, Adventism, and Church Unity,” 14. One would do well to read his entire article since it aptly illustrates the confusion at the General Conference level (as well as in our churches) on how to read the Bible for the greatest blessings it offers.

22. Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority? Nature and Function of Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), foreword to the 1st edition—no page number.

23. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority?*, 30.

24. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority?*, 64–79. For a current Adventist example of using an early source to illuminate the Scriptures see Dr. Jean Sheldon’s *Spectrum* digital essay on the Daniel 2 Sabbath School Quarterly Lesson entitled “The Image and the Rock,” January 14, 2020. I quote: “Modern scholars refer to dream divination as the science of oneiromancy. Various

Babylonian works relate how the gods (not always just the dream god) gave revelations to human beings through dreams. Perhaps the most well-known story relates how Ea sent a dream to Atrahasis, the Babylonian Noah, in which Ea foretells a flood (to the reed hut in which Atrahasis slept) that would wipe out humanity and instructs the building of a boat from the reeds of the reed house. By giving Atrahasis the gods’ secret of the flood to the reed hut, the one man in it will overhear the instructions and preserve humanity.”

25. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority?*, 65–66.

26. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority?*, 69–76.

27. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority?*, 79.

28. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority?*, 82.

29. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority?*, 122–123.

30. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority?*, 123–124.

31. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority?*, 128–129 passim.

32. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority?*, 131, passim.

33. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority?*, 133–134.

34. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority?*, 142.

35. A felicitous expression used by both Herold Weiss and Ron Graybill when contrasting Ellen White’s function in the Church to that of the Scriptures.

36. Dewey M. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 308.

37. James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1978), 113.

38. Just one example should make this clear: Some may ask how the importance of the Sabbath can be justified without a literal creation week? That does not trouble me or many I know who believe it can be, but it is only one of dozens of questions to be addressed. To transition to a stronger theological and spiritual future, pastors, members, administrators, teachers, and academics, will need the freedom to disagree without arousing suspicion. And yes, the Fundamental Beliefs will need to be reexamined without calling the loyalty of pastors and leaders into question.

39. Fortin, “I Have Had To Adjust My View of Things,” 21.



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