

God's Word: Its origin and authority

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Editorial Note: *This article is the first in an extended series (throughout 2003 and 2004) that seeks to express the elements of the faith of Seventh-day Adventists in a Christocentric way. Throughout this series Ministry will use the statements of belief found on pages 5 to 8 of the 2002 Yearbook of the Church. The first belief of Seventh-day Adventists discusses the Bible. It says:*

"The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to humanity the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history."

Why do Christians insist on the "absolute" nature of the Bible? The question involves a precise appraisal of the fundamental assumptions and parameters within which the many Bible writers wrote. These are often stated explicitly.

For example, none of the Bible writers ever attempts to prove the existence of God. Without exception, they all assume He exists. Biblical prophets openly claim to have real knowledge of an infinite God. They are absolutely certain God was speaking through them when they thundered, "Thus says the Lord!"

Fleming Rutledge is correct: "The witness of the Bible is that every other god under the sun is a product of human consciousness except only the God of the Old and New Testaments. Whether we believe this or not, we must admit that it is an awesome claim. I am more convinced than ever that the

Scriptures set before us something, or rather some One, who is far beyond anything the unassisted human imagination could dream up."

God's self-disclosure

Moreover, all the Bible writers believe that God is truly who He declares Himself to be. For example, God insists that He can foretell the future, and that doing so is a mark of His divinity: "Present your case," says the Lord. "Bring forth your strong reasons," says the King of Jacob. "Let them bring forth and show us what will happen; let them show the former things, what they were, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare to us things to come. Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods. . . . I am the Lord, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to graven images. Behold the former things have come to pass, and new things I declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them. . . . Indeed before the day was, I am He; and there is no one who can deliver out of My hand; I work, and who will reverse it?" (Isa. 41:21-23; 42:8, 9; 43:13, NKJV).

Through the prophets God announced the great time prophecies

concerning the history of nations and also the coming of the Messiah. There are some who assume God could not be so precise, and so claim that the prophecies were written after the fact as if they were predictions. This attitude or view of God, this questioning of His ability to predict and control the future, is never found in any of the Bible writings.

Furthermore, the biblical writers were absolutely certain that the infinite God can and does communicate with finite human beings. They never argued that human language was any kind of a barrier to direct communication from or with God. In fact, with great frequency God is referred to as the actual Person speaking through the prophet.

For example, Elijah's words in 1 Kings 21:19 are referred to in 2 Kings 9:25-26 as the oracle that "the Lord uttered . . . against him" (RSV). Elijah is not even mentioned in the 2 Kings passage. The message of a prophet was always considered equivalent to direct speech from God. In fact, this identification of a prophet's words with God's words is so strong in the Old Testament that often we read of God's speaking "through" a prophet, and disobeying a prophet's word was tantamount to disobeying God.

In Deuteronomy 18:19, the Lord speaks of the coming prophet, through Moses: "Whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him" (RSV). And when Saul disobeyed Samuel's command at Gilgal, Samuel rebuked him: "You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which he commanded you . . . now your kingdom shall not continue . . . because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you" (1 Sam. 13:13, 14, RSV).

Direct speech

The Bible writers also record numerous incidents of God speaking directly to human beings in the Old Testament, including conversations with Adam and Eve after the Fall (Gen. 1:28-30; 3:9-19) and with Job (Job 38-41). There is also the divine call of Abram (Gen. 12:1-3), the first of several conversations with him; the burning bush dialogue between God and Moses. The civil code

al information (Deut. 29:29). Indeed, it is striking that one Person of the triune God is known as the Word.

The written Word

Closely connected with God's direct speech, one finds numerous accounts of a prophet writing down the words of God, which are then taken as fully authoritative. A few examples can sensitize us to this crucial reality: "The Lord

humans, divine revelation is never controlled by human beings. It is not a human achievement, but primarily a divine activity. What we find in Scripture is neither a collection of penetrating intuitions of divinity nor a discovery of profound human insights.

Both Testaments consistently testify that the truth of God is not the end product of a diligent human search for the divine, or somebody's best thoughts about lofty matters. It comes exclusively through God's initiative as He discloses Himself to humanity. We are not taught that a prophet speaks about God. Rather, God speaks for Himself through His prophets, and human language is assumed to be capable of conveying divine communication. All the biblical writers insist that God made Himself and His acts known.

The New Testament apostles write with the same absolute authority as the Old Testament prophets, insisting that they speak by the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 1:10-12), to whom they credit the content of their teaching (1 Cor. 2:12, 13). Significantly, the same Paul who urges that believers seek to work together peaceably, often uses harsh language to defend the absolute truth of the gospel he has preached (Gal. 1:6-9). In fact, apostolic teaching is very "directive," issuing commands with the strongest authority (1 Thess. 4:1-2; 2 Thess. 3:6, 12—"we command you").

The prophets and apostles do not describe how they recognized the "word of God" when it came, but it is clear they were certain that God had spoken. Even when sometimes God spoke in ways they did not fully understand, and on occasion even objected to, they never questioned the divine origin of the message.

The Bible, however, was not verbally dictated by God. Human messengers were divinely guided in the selection of apt words to express divine revelation, and thus the prophetic words are called the Word of God. The individuality of each writer is evident, yet the human and divine elements are virtually inseparable.

Ellen White offers an intriguing

JESUS EXPECTED OTHERS TO ACCEPT THE OLD TESTAMENT AS AUTHORITATIVE

in the Pentateuch is recorded as words spoken directly by God to Moses. The interchange with Elijah at Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:9-18) is but one of many direct exchanges with the prophets:

The Old Testament prophets are consistently pictured as messengers sent by God to speak His words. The repeated use of the introductory formula, "Thus says the Lord"—or its equivalent, used thousands of times, clinches the full authority of the prophetic message. In fact, a distinguishing characteristic of true prophets is that they do not merely speak their own words.

Throughout the Old Testament, the point is repeatedly underscored that prophetic speech came from God. God said to Moses: "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak" (Exod. 4:12, RSV; cf. 24:3); to Jeremiah and Ezekiel: "I have put my words in your mouth" (Jer. 1:9, RSV); "You shall speak my words to them" (Ezek. 2:7, RSV; cf. 3:27). And people who refused to listen to a prophet were held accountable for refusing to listen to "the words of the Lord which he spoke" through the prophet (Jer. 37:2, RSV).

Such extensive evidence strongly suggests that biblical prophets experienced something far more than a "divine encounter" that merely implanted a mystical conviction and/or admiration for God in their hearts. God does not just encounter human beings with glorious feelings but also with actu-

said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book." "And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord" (Exod. 17:14; 24:4, RSV); "When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book, to the very end" (Deut. 31:24, RSV); "Joshua wrote these words [statutes, ordinances, and the words of the covenant renewal, verse 25] in the book of the law of God" (Josh. 24:26, RSV). "Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship; and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the Lord" (1 Sam. 10:25, RSV).

Thus even the recording process is divinely directed with the penman being "moved" or "impelled" by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). This written communication thereby has divine authority, as Moses testified: "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you" (Deut. 4:2, RSV).

The nature of God's revelation is diverse. In addition to speaking directly with human beings, God also employed other supernatural methods: angels (Daniel); theophanies (Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Moses, Paul, John); dreams (Joseph, Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar); supernatural writing (Exod. 31:18; Dan. 5:5); a voice from heaven (Exod. 19:9; Matt. 3:17; 2 Pet. 1:17).

Divine activity

Though closely involving chosen

insight: "The Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that 'the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us'" (John 1:14).²


Continuity and unity in the Scriptures

A careful reading of the biblical text also reveals a basic continuity and unity in both Testaments. The extensive citations of the Old Testament in the New Testament indicate that the Old Testament writings were considered by New Testament writers to be a divine revelation.

A few of the hundreds of examples include: Isaiah's words in Isaiah 7:14, which are cited as "what the Lord had spoken by the prophet" (Matt. 1:22; RSV); Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24 as words that God said (Matt. 19:5); He speaks of "every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4, RSV). Words of Scripture are said to be spoken by the Holy Spirit. In quoting "what was spoken by the prophet Joel" in Joel 2:28-32, Peter inserts "says God," attributing to God the words of Joel (Acts 2:16, 17). Isaiah 9:6 is quoted by Paul and Barnabas as something that "the Lord commanded us," contending that an Old Testament prophecy placed moral obligation on them also. Paul writes that the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophet Isaiah (Acts 28:25). He also quotes God's speech in Exodus 9:16 as what "scripture says to Pharaoh," indicating an equivalence between what Old Testament Scripture says and what God says.

Just as we saw in the Old Testament, New Testament writers also knew it was possible for God to speak directly to people in human language. This is evidenced by the account of the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22); the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35; 2 Peter 1:17, 18); in the conversion of Saul (Acts 9:4); in instructions to Ananias (Acts 9:11-16); in

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Peter's vision (Acts 10:13); to Paul on his journeys (Acts 18:9-10; 23:11); and in the revelation to John (Rev. 1:11-3:22).

Jesus' view of the Old Testament

Jesus Himself insists on numerous occasions that He speaks the word of God. For example: "The Father who sent me has himself given me commandment what to say and what to speak" (John 12:49, RSV). Paul claims to have received a revelation from God: "If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37).

The minds of the New Testament writers are saturated with the Old Testament. They refer to it often, and quote it extensively to undergird their theological arguments. The four Gospels make it strikingly obvious that Jesus Christ submitted unreservedly to the Old Testament and confirmed its absolute authority for others. In His teaching and ethics it was foundational.

Old Testament prophecy was the pattern for His life, as He often declared: "It must be fulfilled," as it is written. He rebuked the Jewish theologians of His time not for studying the Old Testament, but for permitting human tradition to cloud and even falsify God's written Word (Mark 7:1-13).

Further, Jesus expected others to accept the Old Testament as authoritative. Often He would inquire: "Have you not read what David did . . . have you not read in the law . . ." (Matt. 12:3-5, NKJV). When questioned on the issue of divorce, He answered, "Have you not read . . ." (19:4, NKJV). His response to those upset by children praising loudly in the temple was, "Have you never read . . ." (21:16, NKJV). Once when His authority was being questioned Jesus told a parable, concluding it with these words: "Have you not read this Scripture . . ." (Mark 12:10, NKJV).

Responding to a lawyer's question about salvation, Jesus asked: "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" (Luke 10:26, NKJV). The lawyer

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answered with a direct quote from the Ten Commandments, and Jesus said: "You have answered right . . ." Answering the Sadducees' inquiry about marriage in heaven, He said: "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures . . . have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying . . ." (Matt. 22:29-31).

The prominent Pharisee Nicodemus sought Jesus out one night. While discussing His mission, Jesus questioned Nicodemus, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not know these things?" When asked about last-day events on the Mount of Olives Jesus urged His questioners to read Daniel in order to understand (Matt. 24:15).

The factual and historical reliability of the Bible

The apostle Paul intensifies this pattern of referring to the Old Testament and insisting on its authority. For example, in his Roman letter, he built a

powerful argument, showing that the foundation of the gospel is to be found in the Old Testament, and in the process Paul demonstrates the paramount principle of listening to what Scripture says about itself.

Moreover, while it is sometimes argued today that the truthfulness of the Bible does not necessarily include the historical details, we find Jesus and the New Testament authors accepting the historicity of the Old Testament. In fact, the New Testament writers rely on the historical narratives of the Old Testament to undergird the certainty of future actions of God.

Grudem is insightful when he declares: "Perhaps it has not been stated emphatically enough that nowhere in the Old Testament or in the New Testament does any writer give any hint of a tendency to distrust or consider slightly unreliable any other part of Scripture. Hundreds of texts encourage people to trust Scripture completely,

but no text encourages any doubt or even slight mistrust of Scripture."³

The aesthetic quality of Scripture is an integral part of its nature and quality. The exquisite nature of the ancient Hebrew poetry has long been extolled. In the last quarter-century, the literary quality of the biblical narratives has finally been recognized. It is now acknowledged that these stories were not written primarily for children, but are superb theological statements voiced within a distinctive literary expression. God utilizes aesthetic values to intensify His revelation, and even as a part of it.

Interpreting and understanding Scripture

To some readers, the Bible appears as an enigmatic collection of seemingly unrelated materials: narratives, poetry, legal codes, sermons, letters, prophecies, parables, royal annals, histories, and genealogies, with all of it bound together in one cover, and the question is How can one make sense of it all? The issue of interpretation (hermeneutics) is a continuing topic in theological studies. And Scripture itself clearly instructs that it is possible to misread and misinterpret Scripture. Many of the biblical writers, and even Christ Himself, warn against false teachers and false teaching.

Jesus Himself has provided the key component in the understanding and interpretation of Scripture. In exposing the mistake of the religious leaders of His time of coming to Scripture as though in itself there is some life-giving power, Jesus instead exposed the revolutionary idea of approaching the sacred writings with the realization that they actually testify of Him, and of life through Him (John 5:39, 40).

The apostle Paul testifies that when seeing Jesus in Scripture, a veil is taken away from the eyes (2 Cor. 3:14-16). The two disciples traveling to Emmaus also had an authenticating experience in the correct understanding of Scripture. The risen Lord interpreted the Old Testament Christologically for them, thus causing a "burning" in their hearts (Luke 24:32).

Contemporary Christians, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus,

have read Scripture. They also know of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Yet some have yet to be persuaded to accept the Christ-centered nature of Scripture that the risen Lord presented on the road to Emmaus. To see Jesus Christ in the Bible with the eyes of the heart is to approach its interpretation and thus to understand it for its true intent.

The authority and value of the whole of the Bible

Some take the position that different portions of Scripture are of questionable authority or value. No modern writer addresses this issue more directly than Ellen White: "What man is there that dares to take that Bible and say this part is inspired and that part is not inspired? I would have both my arms taken off at my shoulders before I would ever make the statement or set my judgment upon the Word of God as to what is inspired and what is not inspired. . . . Never let mortal man sit in judgment upon the

Word of God or pass sentence as to how much of this is inspired and how much is not inspired, and that this is more inspired than some other portions. God warns him off that ground. God has not given him any such work to do. . . . We call on you to take your Bible, but do not put a sacrilegious hand upon it, and say, 'That is not inspired,' simply because somebody else has said so. Not a jot or tittle is ever to be taken from that Word."⁴

God Himself expresses the same sentiment: "Thus says the Lord: 'Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist,' says the Lord. 'But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word'" (Isa. 66:1, 2, NKJV, emphasis supplied).

The Christian doctrine of Scripture is about a Book. Really, more than a Book. Through its many writers we meet a

God who yearns for His children, who is in earnest to communicate His love to them and who loves them more than He loved His own life. Fleming Rutledge expresses my sentiments eloquently: "Every time I think I am losing my faith, the Biblical story seizes me yet again with a life all its own. No other religious document has this power. I remain convinced in spite of all the arguments that God really does inhabit this text. With Job, I say yet again, 'I had heard of thee with the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise my words, I melt away in dust and ashes'" (42:5, 6).⁵ ■

- 1 Fleming Rutledge, *Help My Unbelief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 25.
- 2 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Pub. Assn., 1911), 8.
- 3 Wayne A. Grudem, "Scripture's Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture" in *Scripture and Truth*, D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 31 (emphasis Grudem's).
- 4 Ellen G. White in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1957) 7:919, 920.
- 5 Rutledge, 25.

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