

B Y J O A N N D A V I D S O N *

INSPIRATION AND SCIENCE

**The topic of the authority of the Bible
is ever at the center of the confrontation between
faith and science.**

The primary “textbook” of the Christian faith, the biblical canon, is at the crux of any discussion of science and faith. Considerations of scriptural authority and veracity ever continue to engage both scientists and theologians.

Of course, the Bible isn’t a textbook in the modern definition of the word. But its materials need to be studied closely, making sure to heed the wide variety of ways in which parts of Scripture relate and interact with one another. Such a study vali-

dates its sweeping claims of divine inspiration. One must deal honestly with the fundamental assumptions and parameters within which the Bible writers consistently work. Thankfully, these are fairly obvious.

None of the Bible writers, for example, ever attempts to prove the existence of God. Without exception, they all assume that He exists.

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Scripture does not teach 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. In the Old Testament, the formula "Thus says the Lord" or its equivalent appears thousands of times, proclaiming the source and authority of the prophetic messages.

They claim to have real knowledge of an infinite God. It was a knowledge God disclosed, not a spiritual insight they devised. They were absolutely certain that God was speaking through them.

Moreover, all the Bible writers affirm that God can do what He declares Himself capable of doing. God insists, for example, 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; . . . 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).¹

At various times in the ancient past, God announced prophecies concerning the history of nations and the coming of the Messiah. Some modern minds assume that God could not be so precise, and thus predetermine that the prophecies were written as "after-the-fact" predictions. This denial of God's ability to know the future, however, is never found in any of the Bible writers.

Furthermore, these modern minds are absolutely certain that, though infinite, God communicates with human beings. Biblical writers never concede that human language is a barrier to direct communication from God. They would denounce modernist contentions that deny any correlation between language and reality. In fact, the Bible writers record numerous incidents of God speaking directly to human beings in the Old Testament: Adam and Eve before and after the Fall (Gen. 1:28-

30; 3:9-19); Job (Job 38-41); Abram (Gen. 12:1-3; 18:1-33); Elijah (1 Kings 19:9-18). The burning bush conversation between God and Moses is followed by other direct exchanges between them. The civil code in the Pentateuch is recorded as words spoken directly by God to Moses.

New Testament writers also knew it was possible for God to speak directly to people in human language: at 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); the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:4-6); instructions to Ananias, including street address (Acts 9:11-16); Peter's vision (Acts 10:13); Paul on his missionary journeys (Acts 18:9, 10; 23:10); and the apocalypse (Rev. 1:11-3:22). Jesus Himself insists numerous times that He speaks the words of God: "The Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it" (John 12:49, NIV). Paul claims to have received revelation from God: "If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37).

God is frequently referred to as speaking through the prophets. Elijah's words in 1 Kings 21:19 are referred to in 2 Kings 9:25 as the oracle that "the Lord laid this burden upon him," and Elijah is not even

mentioned. The message of a prophet was considered equivalent to direct speech from God. In the Old Testament, to disobey a prophet's words was to disobey God. 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. The Lord has sought for Himself a man after His own heart, and the Lord has commanded him to be commander over His people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you" (1 Sam. 13:13, 14).

Scripture does not teach 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. In the Old Testament, the formula "Thus says the Lord" or its equivalent appears a multitude of times, proclaiming the source and authority of the prophetic messages. With it, the Bible writers insist that what they say is to be received not as their pious pronouncements but as the very words of God.

The New Testament apostles claim the same absolute authority, 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). Notably, the same Paul who

urges that believers seek to work together peacefully often employs harsh language to defend the absolute truths 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). The writer to the Hebrews expressed his sense of the absolute authority of the words of Psalm 95:7-11 and Jeremiah 31:33 by using the present tense when speaking of their divine origin, writing: "The Holy Ghost says" (not "said," in the past tense), and, "the Holy Ghost bears" (not "bore," in the past tense) "witness to us." And Hebrews 12:25 insists, "See that you do not refuse Him who speaks."

Biblical writers are invariably seen as messengers sent by God to speak His words. The extravagantly repeated formula "thus says the Lord" or its equivalent clinches the full authority of prophetic words. In fact, a distinguishing characteristic of true prophets is that they do not speak their own words. Throughout the Old Testament, the point is repeatedly underscored that prophetic speech comes from God: "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say" (Ex. 4:12); "I have put My words in your mouth" (Jer. 1:9); "You shall speak My words to them" (Eze. 2:7). 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 by the prophet Jeremiah" (Jer. 37:2). Beginning in the opening chapters of the Bible, one is confronted with a God who communicates to human beings, and He then continues to speak throughout the entire canon.

The Bible never allows the impression that divine inspiration is a residue of what spiritual people have reasoned out themselves. Nor is special revelation ever speculative. Bible writers include matters of cosmology when God acts in human history.

Extensive scriptural evidence strongly suggests that the biblical prophets experienced something far more than a contentless "divine encounter" that merely implanted mystical conviction for God in their hearts. Jeremiah was instructed by God to buy the field of Hanamel. He had been prophesying that the Babylonians would be attacking Jerusalem. When this prophecy was fulfilled, owning property in Judea would be of no value to a person in exile in Babylon. But the command to buy the field had come from God (Jer. 32:6-8). So, though it made no sense to him, Jeremiah paid the full price and had the deed properly signed, sealed, witnessed, and deposited, complying with all the legal requirements as God had directed him.

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God is telling him to do. God seems to be contradicting Himself, and Jeremiah boldly points this out to God (vss. 23-25). Clearly this "word of the Lord" was not something that Jeremiah had calculated on his own. He obeyed, but he did not pretend to understand God's reasoning.

Jeremiah does not tell us how he recognized the "word of God" when it came to him, but clearly it was something plainly obvious and unequivocal. He was certain that God had spoken. It does not seem to have occurred to him that he had any right to deny the validity of God's instructions even though he objected to them.

Another instructive incident in the life of this same prophet is the occasion when Johanan, with the army leaders, asked Jeremiah to intercede with the Lord. They felt the need of divine guidance. The prophet listened, agreed to intercede with God on their behalf, and then promised, "I will tell you everything the Lord says and will keep nothing back from you" (42:4, NIV). Jeremiah waited for 10 days. He was not able to command

the reply from God. Again this was not a case of a prophet devising a response through spiritual reflection. The text is clear: "Ten days later the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah" (vs. 7, NIV). These are but two instructive examples within the extensive canonical records that God does not just fill human beings with glorious feelings, but gives them actual information (Deut. 29:29).

Closely connected with God's direct speech are numerous accounts of a prophet writing down the words of God, which are then received as fully authoritative: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Write this for a memorial in the book and recount it in the hearing of Joshua.' And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord" (Ex. 17:14; 24:4); "Joshua wrote these words [statutes, ordinances, and the words of the covenant renewal] in the Book of the Law of God" (Joshua 24:26); "Samuel explained to the people the behavior of royalty, and wrote it in a book and laid it up before the Lord" (1 Sam. 10:25). Even the recording process is divinely controlled with the penman

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being "moved" (2 Peter 1:21, KJV). The writer is not merely deciding to create literary masterpieces, but writing under God's directive. This written communication thereby has divine authority, as Moses testified: "Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you" (Deut. 4:2, NIV).

The final chapter of the New Testament speaks similarly: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book" (Rev. 22:18, 19, NIV).

Divine inspiration is never controlled by human beings. It is not a human achievement, but supremely a divine activity. Scripture claims that God testifies through His prophets (2

Kings 17:13, 14). God also insists that He revealed Himself and made His acts known (Ps. 103:7) and that He has spoken through Jesus (Matt. 11:27; Heb. 1:1, 2). Moreover, He has commanded that His words be recorded and heeded. What we find in Scripture is not a collection of penetrating human intuitions of divinity. Both Testaments consistently bear witness that the truth of God is not the end-product of diligent human searching for the divine or somebody's best thoughts about lofty matters. It comes exclusively through God's initiative in disclosing Himself to humanity.

Again, 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. Sometimes He spoke in ways that they not did not always understand and on occasion even objected to, yet they never questioned the divine origin of the words. However, the Bible was not verbally dictated by God. When the

human messengers were instructed to record the words of God, they were divinely guided in the selection of apt words to express the revelation, and thus the prophetic writings are called the Word of God. The individuality of each writer is evident, yet the human and divine elements are virtually inseparable.

In describing these elements, Ellen White makes a striking comparison: "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

God declares that He has manifested Himself through human language and ultimately in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is striking that one Person of the triune God is known as the WORD. The inspiration of Scripture is the genuine work of the sovereign God, whose operation cannot be subjected to human control or repudiation.

A close reading of the biblical texts also reveals a basic continuity and unity of both Testaments, as might be expected. Acts 17:11 does not say that the Bereans searched the Scriptures (the Old Testament materials at that time) in order to disprove Paul or to find ground to

accuse him of heresy. They turned to the Word as the means of determining the truth. The extensive citations of the Old Testament in the New Testament also indicate that the earlier writings were considered divinely inspired: Isaiah's words in Isaiah 7:14 are cited as "what the Lord had said through the prophet" (Matt. 1:22, NIV). Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24 as words that God said (Matt. 19:5). He also speaks of "every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4).

Words of Scripture are said to be spoken by the Holy Spirit. In quoting "what was spoken by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16), Peter inserts "says God" (vs. 17), attributing to God the words of Joel. Isaiah 49:6 is quoted by Paul and Barnabas, claiming that an Old Testament prophecy placed obligation on them also, declaring that the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophet Isaiah (Acts 28:25-27). Paul also quotes God's speech in Exodus 9:16 as what "Scripture says to Pharaoh" (Rom. 9:16), indicating an equivalence between what Old Testament Scripture says and what God says.

The minds of the New Testament writers are saturated with the Old Testament. They refer to it regularly and quote it extensively to undergird their theological discussion. Furthermore, the four Gospels make it strikingly obvious that Jesus accepted the full authority of the Old Testament.

Old Testament prophecy was the pattern for His life. He declared often: "it must be fulfilled" or "as it is written." He never rebuked the Jewish theologians of His time for studying the Old Testament, but rather for devising incorrect interpretations to cloud and even falsify God's written word (Mark 7:1-13).

As one reads the four Gospels, it cannot be denied that Jesus Christ claimed divine authority for all He did and taught. "These things I have spoken to you," repeated numerous times by Christ, was His emphatic way of drawing attention to the actual words He used in teaching. And regarding the Old Testament, Jesus urged, "Whoever reads, let him understand" (Matt. 24:15). The fact cannot be evaded that Christ confirmed the absolute authority of the Old Testament. If one accepts the New Testament portrait of Jesus, one cannot cavalierly dismiss His high view of Scripture.

And He expected others to have the same. Often He would inquire: "Have you not read what David did" (Matt. 12:3) or "have you not read in the law" (vs. 5). When questioned on the issue of divorce, He answered "Have you not read . . ." (19:4). In response to a lawyer's question about salvation, Jesus asked: "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" (Luke 10:26). The lawyer answered with a direct quote from the Ten Commandments, and Jesus

declared: "You have answered right" (vs. 28). Responding to 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" (Matt. 22:29, 31).

The prominent Pharisee Nicodemus sought Jesus one night. After discussing His mission, Jesus questioned Nicodemus, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?" (John 3:10, NASB). 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). He expected that the Old Testament prophecies of Scripture would be fulfilled. He declared that Elijah had come, pointing to John the Baptist, and that he had been treated "as it is written of him" (Mark 9:13). When captured in Gethsemane, Jesus didn't flee capture, but said, "I was daily with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize Me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled" (Mark 14:49).

After His resurrection, Jesus gave what is now called the Great Commission: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:18-20). This divine imperative requires the procla-

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mation of all that Jesus had taught to the whole world, specifically implying a cross-cultural communication of the words of God. Nor is this a command that merely secures nominal adherence to some group. Baptism was not the final goal. The new disciple is also to be taught all things Christ commanded.

The apostle Paul's ministry exhibits just such a cross-cultural preaching of the words of God. He also intensifies the consistent biblical procedure of later canonical writers referring to earlier materials in the Old Testament, thus insisting on their authority. In the Book of Romans, Paul builds a powerful argument of the gospel built upon the Old Testament, and in the process demonstrates the paramount principle of listening to what Scripture says about itself.

Though it is sometimes argued today that the truth of the Bible does not necessarily include the historical details, we find Jesus and the New Testament writers accepting the historicity of the Old Testament. In fact, all biblical writers rely on the

very certainty of Old Testament historical events (such as Creation, the Flood, and the Exodus—three events regularly referred to and always presented as actual history) to validate the certainty of future actions of God. "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."

The aesthetic quality inherent in the inspiration of Scripture should not go unnoticed. The exquisite nature of the ancient Hebrew poetry has long been extolled. "God needs prophets in order to make Himself known, and all the prophets are necessarily artistic. What a prophet has to say can never be said in prose."⁴ Indeed, the prophetic messages are regularly couched in poetry.

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cal writing voiced within a distinctive literary expression. God utilizes aesthetic values to intensify His revelation. Under inspiration, Bible writers masterfully record God's orderly action in human history. "The lives recorded in the Bible are authentic histories of actual individuals. From Adam down through successive generations to the times of the apostles we have a plain, unvarnished account of what actually occurred and the genuine experience of real characters."⁵

Within the canon we are consistently reminded to deny the false dichotomy that argues that literary writing precludes historical accuracy. In spite of the fact that to narrate is already to explain, it is significant that the biblical narratives often include specific external referents that can be checked. It is as if the writers were urging the reader to verify the facts for themselves.

For example, Luke couches Christ's birth narrative in public his-

torical details: "In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. . . . Once when Zechariah's division was on duty. . . he was serving as priest before God" (Luke 1:5, 8, NIV).

Luke had already argued for the veracity of his historical narratives: "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (vss. 1-4, NIV).

It must be repeated that it is a false assumption that literary writing precludes historical accuracy.

"The uniqueness and the scandal of the Christian religion rests in the mediation of revelation through historical events."⁶ There is no divergence between history and theology. The Word has become flesh. The Scripture record is rooted in real events of history.

What one might surmise as the correct view of the text should not override what the original authors had in mind. When speaking of the author of Genesis, Julius Wellhausen writes: "He undoubtedly wants to depict faithfully the factual course of events in the coming-to-be of the world; he wants to give a cosmogonic theory. Anyone who denies that is confusing the value of the story for us with the intention of the author."⁷

Herman Gunkel concurs: "People should never have denied that Genesis 1 wants to recount how the coming-to-be of the world actually happened."⁸

But no one speaks to this issue stronger than Ellen White: "The assumption that the events of the first week required thousands upon thousands of years, strikes directly at the foundation of the fourth commandment. It represents the Creator as commanding men to observe the week of literal days in commemoration of vast, indefinite periods. This is unlike His method of dealing with His creatures. It makes indefinite and obscure that which He has made very plain. It is infidelity in its most insid-

ious and hence more dangerous form; its real character is so disguised that it is held and taught by many who profess to believe the Bible. . . . There is a constant effort made to explain the work of creation as the result of natural causes; and human reasoning is accepted even by professed Christian, in opposition to plain Scripture facts."⁹

The "textbook" that Christians hold with the highest authority is self-authenticated extensively. The Christian canon testifies that God does not exist in unbroken silence. He has communicated. He has expressed Himself. As the many biblical writers, along with Martin Luther and the various Reformers insist, the Christian experience of God is acoustical. Indeed, in all the Bible there is not a single example of God appearing without saying something. If there is a vision without spoken words, it is not from God. Moreover, God orders the written transcript of His words. As the prophet Habakkuk recounts, "The Lord answered me and said: 'Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it'" (Hab. 2:2).

Yet, to some readers, the Bible appears as an enigmatic collection of seemingly unrelated materials: narratives, poetry, legal codes, sermons, letters, prophecies, parables, royal annals, and genealogies. The nature of God's revelation is diverse.

In addition to speaking directly

with human beings and commanding those words to be recorded, God employed other supernatural methods of communication: such as with angels (Daniel); theophanies (Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Moses, Paul, John); dreams (Joseph, Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar); supernatural writing (of the Decalogue on stone two times [Ex. 31:18] and at a feast in Babylon [Dan. 5:5]); and a voice from heaven (Ex. 19:9; Matt. 3:17; 2 Peter 1:17).

All these divine manifestations were then recorded and brought together under one cover. But how does one make sense of it all? The issue of interpretation (hermeneutics) is a continuing topic in theological studies. Canonic writers are helpful in this regard as they exegete earlier biblical materials. They also regularly warn that it is possible to misread and misinterpret Scripture. Even Christ Himself warns against false teachers and false teaching. The use of earlier Old Testament materials by later Old Testament writers and then subsequently by the New Testament writers presents a working hermeneutic, undergirded with the presupposition of the complete veracity of the words of God.

Today some suggest that portions of Scripture are of unequal value. No modern writer addresses this issue more forthrightly than Ellen White: "[W]hat 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."¹⁰

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).

The God of heaven has ordained that His Word be contained in a Book. But truly, it is more than a book. Through its many writers we are confronted with an omnipotent God who is in earnest to communicate His will and His ways in human history, and who loves human beings more than He loved His own life.

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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)."¹¹

The assumptions of the biblical writers about God and the historical grounding of divine revelation are clear. Seventh-day Adventists even affirm two critical acts of God in history—one past and one future—in our very name: SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS.

"God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one or nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith."¹²

Yes, God will have such a peo-

ple—will Seventh-day Adventists be among them? □

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¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible texts in this article are quoted from the New King James Version.

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⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Glory of the Lord," *A Theological Aesthetics I* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. 43.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 9.

⁶ Cited by William Lane Craig in *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994), p. 157.

⁷ Cited on *Evolution, Neutrality and Antecedent Probability*, p. 216.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 111, 113.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White Comments, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 919.

¹¹ Fleming Rutledge, *Help My Unbelief* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 25.

¹² White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 595.