

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE A PERSONAL PILGRIMAGE

By Richard M. Davidson
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Andrews University

I have not always held the view of Scriptural authority that I now maintain. My personal pilgrimage has, I believe, helped me understand at first hand the major viewpoints now held both outside and within the Seventh-day Adventist church. Having journeyed through a different perspective on the authority of Scripture and then returned to the position I now hold, I feel that my present convictions are not just a result of what my fathers and pastors and church leaders and the Adventist pioneers taught me. Instead, they are the result of my own wrestling with God and His Word.

I am now convinced that the issue of the authority of Scripture is basic to all other issues in the church. The destiny of our church depends on how its members regard the authority of the Bible.

Please let me share my experience. I was born in a conservative Adventist home and given a solid grounding in historic Adventist teachings and practice under godly parents and academy Bible teachers. But in college I found myself confronted with a crisis over the authority of Scripture. In a class entitled "Old Testament Prophets" the professor (who is no longer teaching Bible in our schools) systematically went through the traditional Messianic passages of the prophets and explained how they really did not

foretell the coming of the Messiah. He then went through the passages Adventists have regarded as referring to the end of time, arguing that they really applied only to local situations in the time of the prophets. Then he took the passages in the prophets that are quoted in the New Testament and insisted that the New Testament writers misinterpreted and twisted them.

By the end of that course, my faith in the authority of Scripture was greatly shaken. My teacher had not explained the method by which he had arrived at his conclusions or the presuppositions that underlay his method, and his conclusions were devastating to me. I was confused, and for some time I preached little on the Old Testament.

My seminary experience in the late 1960s served to confirm the conclusions of my college Bible teacher. In an Old Testament course (taught by someone who is no longer teaching in Seventh-day Adventist schools), I was given an assignment that amounted to half of my grade. The assignment consisted of reading a scholarly debate over the proper method of approaching the Bible, and writing a critique that had to reveal my decision as to which side in the debate was right.

This assignment was a watershed in my hermeneutical pilgrimage. I agonized over the two positions for weeks. I was not told in class which way to cast my vote, but the general tenor of the lectures, I now see, was designed to lead me in the direction of the historical-critical method. At last I decided. I cast my lot with what the article called the "descriptive approach," a veiled name for the historical-critical method.

The paper defending this position was written by the dean of the Harvard Divinity School. (How could I argue against Harvard?) It pointed out that the "descriptive method" was free from the subjective bias associated with a "confessional" approach to Scripture. I became convinced that if I sharpened my tools of exegesis enough, I could confidently and dispassionately decide on the correct meaning of any scripture. I could accurately describe what its author meant. I could dissect the biblical text, conjecture about its original form and intent, and reconstruct its life-setting and the process that gave rise to its final form. If I studied hard, learned appropriate languages, and mastered all critical tools, I would be in

charge. I could scientifically determine without any "faith bias" what was the most probable meaning, authenticity, and truthfulness of any given biblical passage.

For several years while I served as a pastor, I was an avid proponent of the historical-critical method. It was a heady experience for me. I felt good wielding the critical tools and making decisions on my own as to what I would accept as authoritative in Scripture and what was culturally conditioned and could be overlooked.

Then came the Bible Conference of 1974, sponsored by the biblical Research Institute of the General Conference. While attending that conference, I awoke as from a dream. I came to realize that my approach to the Scriptures had been much like Eve's approach to God's spoken word. She was exhilarated by the experience of exercising autonomy over the word of God, deciding what to believe and what to discard. She exalted her human reason over divine revelation. When she did so, she opened the floodgates of woe upon the world. Like Eve, I had felt the heady ecstasy of setting myself up as the final norm, as one who could judge the divine Word by my rational criteria. Instead of the Word's judging me, I judged the Word.

As the basic presupposition from which I had been operating dawned on me, I was jolted to the core of my being. I became eager to understand more deeply the issues in hermeneutics and the proper approach to Scripture. That passion eventually drove me back to the Seminary for doctoral studies. This time at the Seminary I was delighted to find that most of the teachers were coming to the Scriptures from a different perspective from the one I had encountered in the 1960s. The first class I took in the Th.D. program was "Principles of Hermeneutics." Out of it came a settled conviction, one that blossomed into my doctoral dissertation in the field of hermeneutics with special implications for the authority of Scripture, a conviction that has grown more intense as I have myself been teaching the class "Principles of Hermeneutics" for several years.

I have become convinced that on the most fundamental level there are only two major approaches to the authority of the Scriptures in the discipline of Biblical studies and in the church. One is

the historical-critical method along with its daughter methods which employ similar critical presuppositions. This method arose during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and is still very much alive and well. The other is the grammatical-historical Biblical interpretation which rejects critical presuppositions. Revived by the Reformers after a period of eclipse during medieval times and continuing until the present among conservative Christians, this approach also is alive—but perhaps not so well, for many, even among Evangelical Christians, have recently been rejecting it in favor of a modified form of the historical-critical method.

Conflict in the Adventist Church

In Adventism at the present moment, I believe I can say safely though very regretfully, these two approaches toward Scripture are locked in a life-and-death struggle.

I do not want to be an alarmist, and it is not in my nature to seek to stir up controversy or polarization. But I cannot pretend that the problem does not exist. There are many who feel that a discussion on this issue involves merely semantics, that there really is no clear-cut and radical distinction between the two approaches.

But my own experience, based on my own hermeneutical pilgrimage, has convinced me otherwise. I believe that there is a true division on this issue even within Adventism and that the ultimate authority of Scripture is at stake. The subtle but radical difference between the two approaches can perhaps most graphically be shown by placing their main features side by side, and by giving illustrations from real life as I have personally observed them.

The outline on the next three pages presents the basic differences between the historical-critical method and the traditional Protestant (and Adventist) approach, which we may call the “grammatical-historical” or “historical-Biblical” interpretation.¹ This chart is of course schematic and cannot represent fully every variation.

Contrasting Definitions

Edgar Krentz, in his recent but classic treatment, *The Historical-Critical Method*, clearly indicates how the historical critical method is “based on a secular understanding of history”² which

A COMPARISON OF TWO METHODS

Historical-Critical Method**A. Definition**

The attempt to verify the truthfulness and understand the meaning of biblical data on the basis of the principles and procedures of secular historical science.

B. Objective

To arrive at the correct meaning of Scripture, which is the human author's intention as understood by his contemporaries.

C. Basic Presuppositions

1. *Secular norm*: The principles and procedures of secular historical science constitute the external norm and proper method for evaluating the truthfulness and interpreting the meaning of biblical data.

2. Principle of *criticism* (methodological doubt): the autonomy of the human investigator to interrogate and evaluate on his own apart from the specific declarations of the biblical text.

3. Principle of *analogy*: present experience is the criterion for evaluating the probability of biblical events to have occurred, since all events are in principle similar.

4. Principle of *correlation* (or causation): a closed system of cause and effect with no room for the supernatural intervention of God in history.

5. *Disunity* of Scripture, since its production involved many human authors or redactors; Scripture therefore cannot be compared with Scripture ("proof-texts") to arrive at a unified biblical teaching.

Historical-Biblical Approach**A. Definition**

The attempt to understand the meaning of biblical data by means of methodological considerations arising from Scripture alone.

B. Objective

To arrive at the correct meaning of Scripture, which is what God intended to communicate, whether or not it was fully known by the human author or his contemporaries (1 Pet 1:10-12).

C. Basic Presuppositions

1. *Sola Scriptura*: The authority and unity of Scripture are such that Scripture is the final norm with regard to content and method of interpretation (Isa 8:20).

2. The Bible is the ultimate authority and is not amenable to the principle of criticism. Biblical data are accepted at face value and not subjected to an external norm to determine truthfulness, adequacy, intelligibility, etc. (Isa 66:2).

3. Suspension of the compelling principles of analogy to allow for the unique activity of God as described in Scripture and in the process of the formation of Scripture (2 Pet 1:19-21).

4. Suspension of the principle of correlation (or natural cause and effect) to allow for the divine intervention in history as described in Scripture (Heb 1).

5. *Unity* of Scripture, since the many human authors are superintended by one divine author; therefore Scripture can be compared with Scripture to arrive at biblical doctrine (Lk 24:27; 1 Cor 2:13).

6. "Time-conditioned" or "culturally-conditioned" nature of Scripture; the historical context is *responsible* for the production of Scripture.

7. The human and divine elements of Scripture must be distinguished and separated: the Bible *contains* but does not equal the Word of God.

D. Basic Hermeneutical Procedures

1. *Historical context (Sitz im Leben)*: Attempt to understand the reconstructed hypothetical life setting which *produced* (gave rise to, shaped) the biblical text (often quite apart from the setting specifically stated by the text).

2. *Literary (source) criticism*: The attempt to hypothetically reconstruct and understand the process of literary development leading to the present form of the text, based on the assumption that sources are a product of the life setting of the community which produced them (often in opposition to specific Scriptural statements regarding the origin and nature of the sources.)

3. *Form criticism*: The attempt to provide a conjectured reconstruction of the process of pre-literary (oral) development behind the various literary forms, based upon the assumption that the biblical material has an oral pre-history like conventional folk-literature and like folk-literature arises on the basis of traditions which are formed according to the laws inherent in the development of folk traditions.

4. *Redaction criticism*: The attempt to discover and describe the life setting, sociological and theological motivations which deter-

6. *Timeless nature of Scripture*: God speaks through the prophet to a specific culture, yet the message transcends cultural backgrounds as timeless truth (John 10:35).

7. The divine and human elements in Scripture cannot be distinguished or separated: the Bible *equals* the Word of God (2 Tim 3:16, 17).

D. Basic Hermeneutical Procedures

1. *Historical context (Sitz im Leben)*: Attempt to understand the contemporary historical background in which God revealed Himself (with Scripture as a whole the final context and norm for application of historical background to the text).

2. *Literary analysis*: Examination of the literary characteristics of the biblical materials in their canonical form.

3. *Form analysis*: An attempt to describe and classify the various types of literature found in (the canonical form of) Scripture.

4. *Theological analysis of Biblical books*: A study of the particular theological emphasis of each Bible writer (according to his own mind set

mined the basis upon which the redactor selected, modified, reconstructed, edited, altered or added to traditional materials in order to make them say what was appropriate within his new life setting according to new theological concerns; assumes that each redactor had a unique theology and life setting which differed from (and may have contradicted) his sources and other redactors.

5. *Tradition history*: The attempt to trace the precompositional history of traditions from stage to stage as passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation to the final written form; based upon the assumption that each generation interpretively reshaped the material.

and capacity to understand), seen within the larger context of the unity of the whole Scripture that allows the Bible to be its own interpreter and the various theological emphases to be in harmony with one another.

5. *Diachronic (thematic) analysis*: The attempt to trace the development of various themes and motives chronologically through the Bible in its canonical form; based on the Scriptural position that God gives added (progressive) revelation to later generations, which, however, is in full harmony with all previous revelation.

approaches Scripture "critically with the same methods used on all ancient literature."³ "The methods are secular."⁴

We must ask, is secular historical science with its accompanying presuppositions, appropriate for the study of Scripture? Can we approach Scripture solely from "below," from the naturalistic level, in light of the Bible's own claim that it originated from "above," from divine revelation? Can the scientific method dictate how to approach Scripture, or should the method of studying Scripture arise from principles found in Scripture alone?

Contrasting Sets of Objectives

In the contrast between the two sets of objectives outlined in Section B of the chart, we see a radical divergence between historical-critical studies and historical-biblical ones. The objective of the historical-critical method in ascertaining the correct meaning of Scripture is to arrive at the human author's intent as it was understood by his contemporaries in relation to their local setting.

On the other hand, the objective of historical-biblical interpretation (the classical approach of Adventists and the Reformers) is to determine the correct meaning of Scripture as a message sent by God, whether or not it was fully understood by its human writer or his contemporaries. According to 1 Pet 1:10-11 NIV, "The prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow." The prophets did not always understand fully. They searched intently. They tried to understand the import and the fullness, but it was only as Jesus came and explained the Scriptures that the full light of what had been prophesied was understood. They, or rather, Christ is still unfolding their meaning today.

There is a growing tendency even within Adventism to go along with the stated objective of the historical-critical method. Recently I was discussing the appropriate objective of exegesis with an Adventist doctoral student at a secular university. He was quite candid with me. He argued vociferously that exegesis has as its goal an understanding of what the human author's intention was, as understood by his contemporaries.

I replied, "But what about 1 Peter 1:10-12?" My friend was quite aware of the passage but answered, "Well, that particular writing—and I don't believe it's Peter's—is culturally conditioned by the time when it was written; therefore, I can no longer go along with 'Peter's' particular understanding."

I'm not trying to say that every historical-critical scholar would use this student's evasive maneuvering. But I find a trend in our circles to see the meaning of the Scriptures only as they were interpreted and understood by the human authors' contemporaries in relation to their immediate setting.

At a recent meeting of Seventh-day Adventist scholars a lecture was presented on the book of Revelation. The major thrust of the lecture was that the book of Revelation can only be understood in the light of its first-century context, and that it refers only to a first-century situation. The book was intended to bring comfort to those being persecuted or oppressed at that time. Although we may

make some later reapplications, these are not the accurate and true meaning of the text.

At another session I heard Adventist scholars discuss the Messianic psalms. The thrust of the discussion was that there are no Messianic psalms. New Testament writers misinterpreted certain psalms as Messianic. But, I ask, how does this square with the specific declarations of New Testament writers concerning the original Messianic intent of their authors (as, e.g., in Acts 2:25-35)?

The Role of Basic Presuppositions

Our chart lists seven presuppositions underlying each approach to Scripture. Number one is the basic orientation point; two, three, and four are crucial principles, and five, six, and seven are the outworking of these principles. Let's begin with the first and most basic presupposition underlying each approach.

In the historical-critical method the principles and procedures of secular science constitute the external norm for evaluating the truthfulness and interpreting the meaning of biblical data. We recognize at once that the ultimate issue here is: Who has the final word? What is the ultimate norm? Is Scripture to be judged by the principles of a secular historical method or is the method to be judged by Scripture? Do we still believe in *sola scriptura*?—in the Bible only? (I must say I have been shocked to find that this belief seems to be waning in the Seventh-day Adventist church.)

A few years ago, while on a sabbatical study leave, I was invited to a seminar at which Adventist professors discussed inspiration. They asked me what I thought. When I mentioned something about *sola scriptura*, a colleague sitting next to me, who had once been a classmate of mine at the Seminary and had since taken doctoral studies elsewhere, responded, "Do you still believe in *sola scriptura*? That's passé. We no longer take it as our norm." He added, "I believe in inspiration, of course. I believe that the Bible is inspired. So was Mahatma Ghandi. So was Martin Luther King. So is Mother Theresa. If they all were inspired, how can we determine what is true and what is not true among writings that claim to be inspired? We have to develop certain rational criteria which we can apply to each text to determine its truthfulness and authenticity."

Edgar McKnight clearly points out the rationalistic basis of the historical-critical method: "The basic postulate [of the historical-critical method] is that of human reason and the supremacy of reason as the ultimate criterion for truth."⁵

To me the response to this position is plain: "To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa 8:20). The Bible and the Bible only is the ultimate authority. Yes, we have other "authorities," but the Bible is the only supreme authority. In the historical-biblical approach the authority and unity of Scripture are such that Scripture is its own final norm rather than secular science or human reason or experience.

The Principle of Criticism

The principle of criticism is the heart of the historical-critical method, even in its modified forms. Edgar Krentz acknowledges that "this principle [of criticism] is affirmed by all modern historical study."⁶

When critical scholars talk about biblical "criticism" and the historical-"critical" method, they do not mean critical in the sense of examining a thing rigorously, neither do they intend to connote the negative idea of fault-finding, nor do they mean "crucial," as in the expression "this is a critical issue." The technical meaning of "criticism" in the historical-critical method is that "historical sources are like witnesses in a court of law: they must be interrogated and their answers evaluated. The art of interrogation and evaluation is called criticism." In this process "the historian examines the credentials of a witness to determine the person's credibility (authenticity) and whether the evidence has come down unimpaired (integrity)."⁷

In its essence, such criticism is the Cartesian principle of methodological doubt.⁸ Nothing is accepted at face value, but everything must be verified or corrected by reexamining evidence. In everything there is an "openness to correction" which "implies that historical research produces only probabilities."⁹

In effect, this principle makes "me" the final determiner of truth and exalts "my" reason as the final test of the authenticity of a passage. "I" judge Scripture; Scripture doesn't judge "me."

The heart of the matter as I see it is this: Criticism is appropriate for everything in the world except the Scriptures. God asks us to develop our critical powers so that we will not accept anything we hear, see, or experience unless it is in accordance with what He tells us in the Bible. I am not opposed to the critical spirit; I just refuse to use it on the Word of God, which is the critical authority by which I am to be judged. The proper approach, I believe, is found in the grammatical-historical biblical interpretation, which claims that the Bible is the ultimate authority and is not amenable to the principle of criticism. Biblical data are to be accepted at face value and not subjected to an external norm that determines their truthfulness, adequacy, validity, or intelligibility.

Gerhard Maier, a noted European biblical scholar who broke with the historical-critical method, writes in his book *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, that "a critical method must fail, because it presents an inner impossibility. For the correlative or counterpart to revelation is not critique, but obedience; it is not correction of the text—not even on the basis of a partially recognized and applied revelation—but a let me be corrected."¹⁰ The proper stance toward Scripture is captured by the prophet Isaiah: "This is the man to whom I will look: he that is humble and contrite in spirit and *trembles at my word*" (Isa 66:2).

Ellen White clearly rejects the principle of criticism in approaching Scripture:

In our day, as of old, the vital truths of God's Word are set aside for human theories and speculations. Many professed ministers of the gospel do not accept the whole Bible as the inspired word. One wise man rejects one portion; another questions another part. They set up *their judgment as superior to the word*; and the Scripture which they do teach rests upon their *own authority*. Its divine authenticity is destroyed. Thus the seeds of infidelity are sown broadcast; for the people become confused and know not what to believe. . . . Christ rebuked these practices in His day. He taught that the word of God was to be understood by all. He pointed to the Scriptures as of *unquestionable authority*, and we should do the same. The Bible is to be presented as the word of the infinite God, as the *end of all controversy* and the foundation of all faith.¹¹

The presence or absence of the fundamental principle of criticism is really the litmus test of whether or not the historical-

critical methodology is being employed. For this reason I rejoice that the Methods of Bible Study Committee Report rejects the classical historical-critical method and warns that "even a modified use of this method that retains the principle of criticism which subordinates the Bible to human reason is unacceptable to Adventists."¹²

The Principle of Analogy

In close relation to the principle of criticism is the principle of analogy. Edgar Krentz observes that "all historians also accept Troeltsch's principle of analogy."¹³ The principle of analogy is simple: Present experience is the criterion for evaluating the probability that events mentioned in Scripture actually occurred, inasmuch as all events are in principle similar.

In other words, we are to judge what happened in biblical times by what is happening today; and if we do not see a given thing happening today, in all probability it could not have happened then. The implication has been felt in Adventist circles. Some Adventists say that because we do not see special creation taking place now, but only micro-evolution, we therefore have to adopt some theistic macro-evolution to explain the past. We do not see universal floods today, so there cannot have been a universal flood in the past. We do not see miracles, so we have to find natural explanations for the so-called miracles reported in the Bible. We do not see resurrections, so we have to explain away the resurrections recorded in the Bible.

The advocates of historical-biblical interpretation, on the other hand, suspend the principle of analogy in order to allow for the unique activity of God as described in Scripture.

The Principle of Correlation

The principle of correlation is somewhat similar to the principle of analogy. It states that there is a closed system of cause and effect with no room for supernatural intervention. Events are so correlated and interrelated that a change in any given phenomenon necessitates a change also in its cause and effect. Historical explanations rest on a chain of natural causes and effects. A recent article argued, "If the divine cause plays a role then it can't be explained or analyzed historically, and therefore we must assume that any divine cause has made use of only this worldly means."¹⁴

This is not to say that Seventh-day Adventists who employ the historical-critical method do not believe at all in the supernatural. Indeed the historical-critical method as such does not necessarily deny the supernatural. But it involves a willingness to use a *method* that has no room for the supernatural. Scholars using it are required to bracket out the supernatural and seek natural causes and effects. So they look for natural explanations for the Exodus, for the Red Sea, for Sinai, and for how the Scriptures came into being. They look at the way folk literature came into existence in Germanic and other cultures and decide that the Bible came into existence in the same way, through a natural process of oral development, editing, correction, manipulation, and redaction.

Some Adventist teachers currently teach the "JEDP hypothesis" of how the Pentateuch came into being. They show their students how to dissect the Pentateuch and describe the stories of Genesis as simply mythological and poetic rather than historical. Some parents have come to me weeping and have said, "We've set aside thousands of dollars for years to send our children to an Adventist institution and now, as a result of their Adventist education, they have become agnostic. They no longer believe in Christianity, let alone the Adventist church. They no longer accept the authority of the Bible. What can we do?"

What we can do is to suspend the principle of correlation and allow for divine intervention in history as described in the Scriptures. When the Bible speaks of a divine event, we will not bracket it out and try to seek for merely natural and human causes.

Resultant Principles

There are several resultant presuppositions that follow as corollaries from the basic ones we have looked at so far. One result is the conclusion that Scripture is *not* basically a unity, because it is the product of different human authors. Consequently scripture cannot be compared with scripture to arrive at a unified biblical teaching.

Of course there is an illegitimate proof-text method that takes texts from here and there, pulling them out of context and applying them to something the texts were never intended to support. But it also is true that if we believe that a divine Author superintended

the work of the human authors, there must be a basic unity to Scripture. Therefore, scripture *can* be compared with scripture in order to arrive at biblical doctrine. Jesus did this on the way to Emmaus. "Beginning with Moses and the prophets He expounded to them from all the Scriptures those things concerning Himself" (Lk 24:27). That was the proof text method at its best. Unfortunately, there is a trend within Adventism to pit Paul against Peter, Old Testament against New Testament, etc., positing major divergences and contradictions in theological positions. This historical-critical principle is opposed to the Bible's own claim to unity and harmony of teaching.

Cultural Conditioning

This leads us to our next corollary, that Scripture is time-conditioned and culture-conditioned, and therefore many of its statements have no universal or timeless validity. Many, even within Adventism, argue that in the first chapters of Genesis we find simply a time-conditioned, cultural statement of mythological/poetic/theological understanding but not a detailed statement of how creation actually took place. The details of cosmology can be expunged as long as the basic truth, the *kerygma*, of the passage, is preserved, namely that God created. The rest is culture-conditioned.

Recently an Adventist professor talked with me about angels. He said that the very mention of angels in the Bible bothers him. "In fact," he stated, "I'm beginning to conclude that the mention of angels in Scripture is simply a time-conditioned way to get something across to people who believed in such beings in Bible times. Now we live in a secular world in which we no longer have a society that believes in such beings, so we can move away from those time-conditioned statements to the simple fact that God is present."

It is true that God does speak through the prophet to a specific culture. We must understand the prophet's times. Yet God's message transcends cultural backgrounds as timeless truth. "Scripture cannot be broken" (Jn 10:35).

Can the Human and the Divine Be Separated?

A final corollary in the historical-critical method is that the human element can be separated and distinguished from the divine, inspired element.

I listened recently to a tape of a public lecture by an Adventist scholar who argued that the Bible picture of the wrath of God reflects the human element of the writer. Such a picture of God's wrath was not a part of divine revelation, but God *allowed* it to come into Scripture. The lecturer proposed that as we move from the Old to the New Testament, we see the teaching about the wrath of God counteracted by the picture of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

But, to the contrary, I find as we move to the New Testament that the understanding of the wrath of God deepens. The wrath of God is just as real as the love of God, if we understand fully what the Bible means by the wrath of God.

Can we pick and choose? Can we separate the human from the divine in the Bible? Ellen White spoke forcefully to this point:

There are some that may think they are fully capable with their finite judgment to take the Word of God, and to state what are the words of inspiration, and what are not the words of inspiration. I want to warn you off that ground, my brethren in the ministry. "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." There is no finite man that lives, I care not who he is or whatever is his position, that God has authorized to pick and choose in His Word. . . . I would have both 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.¹⁵

Do not let any living man come to you and begin to dissect God's Word, telling what is revelation, what is inspiration and what is not, without a rebuke. . . . 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. *Hands off, brethren! Do not touch the ark.* . . . When men begin to meddle with God's Word, I want to tell them to take their hands off, for they do not know what they are doing.¹⁶

Hermeneutical Procedures

Our chart lists some of the hermeneutical procedures that are used in the historical-critical and in historical-biblical approaches.

We cannot comment in detail on each, but we observe that the same study *tools* are used in the latter as in the former: the same careful attention is given to historical, linguistic, grammatical-syntactical, and literary details. There is no intention in the historical-grammatical approach of lowering the standard of excellence or de-emphasizing the diligent and accurate study of the Scriptures. But there is an intent in historical-biblical study to eliminate the *critical* element that stands as judge upon the Word.

As one examines various procedures of the historical-critical method—historical criticism, literary criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and tradition criticism—three basic steps in each procedure emerge. First, there is a *dissection* of the Word into various sources, oral traditions, and smaller units. Then there is a *conjecture* about the life setting and original source were. Finally, there is a *reconstruction* of what the scholar decides the original must have been like.

In light of these three common procedural steps in historical criticism, a statement by Ellen White is very much to the point. It seems Ellen White knew quite well what was involved in the historical-critical method. In her day it was called “higher criticism.” Note her pointed indictment:

As in the days of the apostles, men tried by tradition and philosophy to destroy faith in the Scriptures, so today by the pleasing sentiments of *higher criticism*, evolution, spiritualism, theosophy, and pantheism, the enemy of righteousness is seeking to lead souls into forbidden paths.

She continues, focusing on higher criticism:

To many the Bible is a lamp without oil, because they have turned their minds into channels of speculative belief that brings misunderstanding and confusion. The work of *higher criticism*, in *dissecting, conjecturing, reconstructing*, is destroying faith in the Bible as a divine revelation. It is robbing God’s word of power to control, uplift, and inspire human lives.¹⁷

Ellen White put her finger on the method, and upon the three basic steps in its application, and revealed the baleful results.

Providentially, a growing number of Bible students who were once convinced of the validity of the historical-critical method are awakening, as I did, as from a dream to learn what they have been

doing. Many have shared with me how Scripture had lost its vitality in their lives, how they no longer were able to preach with power from the whole Word. They always had to stop and think, "Is this portion of Scripture really authoritative?" With joy they have rediscovered the power of the Word as they have renewed their confidence in its full authority. I would like to see every Seventh-day Adventist, every Christian, possess absolute confidence in the Word!

Conclusion

This critique and discussion of the two conflicting approaches to Scripture should not be regarded as an attempt to slander or impugn sinister motives to any of my colleagues inside or outside the Seventh-day Adventist church who practice the historical-critical method. Although I have considered it crucial to indicate by concrete examples the inextricable link between the historical-critical method and its methodological presuppositions, I have sought to preserve the integrity and the anonymity of those whose views I have used for illustration.

It must be recognized that virtually every non-Seventh-day Adventist institution of higher learning which teaches biblical studies (except for a few evangelical seminaries and the fundamentalist Bible colleges) is steeped in the historical-critical method. Exposure exclusively to this method on a day-in-day-out basis in every class and from every professor is likely to produce its effect, even if only subtly. I believe that some who have been trained solely in the historical-critical method and have not had an opportunity to hear a fair presentation of both sides, may be open to a clarification of the issues. This is why I have shared my personal pilgrimage toward a clearer understanding of the full authority of the Scriptures.

Endnotes

1 Conservative biblical scholars have usually called this approach the "grammatical-historical method," more recently (and accurately) the "grammatical-historical-literary method" (see William Larkin, Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988], p. 96). I prefer to avoid referring to this approach as a single unified "method"; instead, I refer more generally to basic "historical-biblical interpretation" that rejects critical presuppositions.

- 2 Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 1.
- 3 Ibid., p. 4.
- 4 Ibid., p. 48.
- 5 Edgar V. McKnight, *Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), p. 45.
- 6 Krentz, p. 56.
- 7 Ibid., p. 42.
- 8 See McKnight, p. 45.
- 9 Krentz, pp. 56, 57.
- 10 Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, trans. Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977), p. 23.
- 11 Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 39. Italics supplied.
- 12 "Methods of Bible Study Committee (GCC-A): Report," *Adventist Review*, January 22, 1987, p. 18.
- 13 Krentz, p. 57.
- 14 Seth Erlandsson, "Is there Ever Biblical Research Without Presuppositions?" *Themelios*, 7 (1978): 24.
- 15 Ellen G. White comment, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7:920. Italics supplied.
- 16 Ibid. Italics supplied.
- 17 Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 474.