14. How Scripture and Authority Are Understood by Teachers in Adventist Schools in North America

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The Battle for the Bible

Seventh-day Adventists (SDAs) stand squarely in the Protestant tradition which places great emphasis on the authority of the Bible. They are so convinced of the centrality of Scripture that the following preamble is placed in front of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists (2015): "Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures."

Within North America, SDAs' stress on the authority of Scripture positions them as conservative Christians within the wider mix of Christians active in the United States of America and Canada. It is natural that ideas circulating within conservative Christian groups are of interest to Adventist thought-leaders, especially ministers and teachers. Questions of the authority of Scripture are intimately tied up with the way the Bible is interpreted. And when it comes to how to interpret the Bible, there are strong voices advocating different approaches, some of which will now be explored.

Many of the current controversies surrounding biblical hermeneutics can be traced to the debates about "higher criticism" and the "historical critical method" that became intense in the United States of America (USA) towards the end of the 1800s. The term,

"higher criticism," became code for a cluster of ideas that were first discussed in continental Europe (particularly Germany), and were considered in academic circles in the United States towards the end of the 19th century. This set of ideas was analyzed by Dyson Hague in an influential set of pamphlets titled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to Truth*. The influence of these pamphlets lies in part in their widespread distribution. In the introduction to the set it is claimed that they had been sent to "every pastor, evangelist, missionary, theological professor, theological student, Sunday school superintendent, Y.M.C.A and Y.W.C.A secretary in the English speaking world, as far as the addresses of all these can be obtained" (Fundamentals, 1910, p. 4).

Hague notes that Lower Criticism is a term used to describe an analysis of the ancient manuscripts of the Bible, while Higher Criticism "means … the study of the literature structure of the various books of the Bible" (Hague, 1910, p. 87). He notes that although inherently neutral, the term had become synonymous with "attacks on the Bible" for the following reasons:

> … some of the most powerful exponents of the modern Higher Critical theories have been Germans, and it is notorious to what length the German fancy can go in the direction of the subjective and of the conjectural. … the dominant men in the movement were men with a strong bias against the supernatural. … they were men who denied the validity of miracle … men who denied the reality of prophecy … And worst of all. The Higher Critics are unanimous in the conclusion that these documents [the documents used to make up the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch] contain three species of material: (a) the probably true (b) the certainly doubtful (c) the positively spurious. (Hague, 1910, p. 90–91, 97, 103)

While Hague's hostility toward the ideas of the higher critics is evident, he has captured the anti-supernaturalism that lies at the heart of much Higher Criticism, and the hermeneutical method on which it is based, the historical-critical method, at least as it is expressed by German writers.

Ernst Troeltsch is often cited for the clarity in which he explained the basis for the historical-critical method. For Troeltsch (1913), "scientific" exegesis (interpretation) involves three principles:

correlation, analogy, and criticism. Correlation here means that events should be explained in terms of historical processes and not in terms of supernatural intervention. Analogy means that history is homogeneous and that sociological and economic models developed to explain contemporary societies are of use in explaining the ancient world. Criticism means that our judgments can only claim probability, not truth (Troeltsch 1913, p. 2, 729–53; Hasel, 1980, p. 25–26; cf. Hasel 1985, p. 73–78; Ninow, 1997, p. 9-11). Inherent in Troeltsch's approach is the *a priori* exclusion of supernatural intervention as an explanation of historical events.

Given the centrality of miracles in the biblical account, there is little surprise that the anti-supernatural starting point for the academic understanding the Bible advocated by Troestsch and others provoked a considerable backlash. By the early part of the 20th century, though, the historical-critical approach to the Bible had gained the upper hand in the major centers of theological education in the United States (Harvard University, Yale University, the University of Chicago, etc.) as well as in Germany and the United Kingdom, where much theological education took place in government-funded universities. But because the American universities were less dependent on government subsidies, there was a difference in the outcome within the United States. While theological education at the universities at Harvard, Yale and Chicago continued to prosper, independently of them several new institutions were established to offer theological education that espoused the traditional beliefs in the reality of miracles in the Scriptures. These included such institutions as the Moody Bible Institute, Bob Jones University, Wheaton College, and Gordon College of Missions and Theology (Falwell, 1981, p. 111–112). These universities and colleges were able to draw their students from conservative Christian congregations which described themselves as fundamentalists, and who were in broad agreement with five distinctive beliefs of Christianity, viz:

1. "The inspiration and infallibility of Scripture.
2. The deity of Christ (including His Virgin birth).
3. The substitutional atonement of Christ's death.
4. The literal resurrection of Christ from the dead.
5. The literal return of Christ in the Second Advent" (cited from Falwell, 1981, p. 7).

Of these, it is the concept of the infallibility of Scripture that is most relevant to the topic of this chapter, the authority of the Bible. As Harold Lindsell expresses it in his book, *The Battle for the Bible*,

> Since Christianity is indubitably related to and rooted in the Bible, another question follows inexorably … "Is the Bible trustworthy?" There are only three possible answers to this question. The first is that the Bible is not at all trustworthy … The second possible view of the reliability of the Bible is that it can be trusted as truthful in all its parts. By this I mean that the Bible is infallible or inerrant. It communicates religious truth, not religious error. (1976, p. 18)

The doctrine of biblical inerrancy, then, is a way to make a strong claim for the authority of Scripture. That it is a doctrine that remains important for conservative Christian academics may be seen in the fact that inerrancy is embedded in the "Doctrinal Basis" of the American-based Evangelical Theological Society, which publishes the academic journal, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Association*, which asserts:

> Doctrinal Basis: The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory. (www.etsjets.org/about; cf. Graham, 2016, p. 1–15)

The Debate on Biblical Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority within Seventh-day Adventism

As a way to interpret the Bible, the historical-critical method has received periodic but intense scrutiny within Seventh-day Adventist academic circles (McIver, 1996, p. 14–16; Spangler, 1982, p. 28–39). While there are still some that would advocate the historical-critical method as something that can be used safely by Adventists, provided that one discards the anti-supernatural element of it (e.g. Herr, 2017), the majority of Adventists who write about it reject the historical-critical method (Davidson, 1990, p. 36–56; de Oliveira, 1991, p. 13–14; Reid, 1991, p. 69–76; Rodríguez, 2016, p. 85–97). (It should be noted that both Reid and Rodríguez have been directors of the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists). Indeed, the document, "Methods of Bible Study,"

which was voted by the leadership of the SDA Church at the 1986 Annual Council, specifically rejects the historical-critical method, on the grounds that,

> In recent decades the most prominent method in biblical studies has been known as the historical-critical method. Scholars who use this method, as classically formulated, operate on the bases of presuppositions that, prior to studying the biblical text, reject the reliability of accounts of miracles and other supernatural events narrated in the Bible. Even a modified use of this method that retains the principle of criticism, which subordinates the Bible to human reason, is unacceptable to Adventists. (Methods of Bible Study, 1987, p. 22)

While the authors of this document might reject the historical-critical method, they nonetheless advocate that those that study the Bible should:

> Study the context of the passage … ascertain the historical circumstances in which the passage was written … Determine the literary type the author is using … parables, proverbs, allegories, psalms, apocalyptic prophecies … poetry … for passages employing imagery are not to be interpreted in the same manner as prose. … explore the historical and cultural factors. Archeology, anthropology and history may contribute to understanding the meaning of the text. (Methods of Bible Study, 1987, p. 23)

Considerations of history and culture are typical of historical-critical approaches to Scripture, but those formulating the "Methods of Bible Study" document clearly felt comfortable in allowing such considerations, given that they state, "Human reason is subject to the Bible, not equal to or above it … Scripture cannot be correctly interpreted without the aid of the Holy Spirit" (Methods of Bible Study, 1987, p. 23). Indeed, as Roy Gane points out, all Adventists who take the interpretation of Scripture seriously consider that a better understanding of the background culture and the historical events of the Biblical passage is most helpful in interpreting the Bible. He states:

> Interpretation of the biblical text should be contextual in the broadest sense. This involves taking into account and weighing carefully any textual, historical, archaeological, and culture evidence that may be relevant to a given passage. (Gane, 1999, p. 5)

It is probably fair to say that biblical scholars in the SDA Church believe in the genuineness of the accounts in the Bible, believe in the possibility of miracles, and believe that Jesus did rise from the dead as described in the New Testament. In sum, they believe in the authority of Scripture. Amongst their peers in the academic disciplines relating to biblical studies, they are viewed as very conservative in their approaches to the interpretation of the Bible. It is probably what lies at the root of the distrust that is often felt about the historical-critical method.

While there is general agreement on the attitude of the SDA Church and the historical-critical method, there is less unanimity about the idea that the Bible is inerrant. In an effort to demonstrate that the Bible is without error, there are some that seek to reconcile the differences between the various passages of the Bible (e.g. see chapters by Samuel Koranteng-Pipim and Randal Younker in Holbrook & van Dolson, 1992, p. 31–67, 173-–99). Others point to the small differences that may be observed between parallel accounts of the same event in the Gospels and reach different conclusions. For example, William Johnsson says,

> … we should speak of inspired persons rather than inspired words … while Biblical history is accurate, since Yahweh manifests Himself in time, it is to some degree flawed. For example, the words of Jesus and the accounts of His ministry show variations and discrepancies, even as the chronologies of the Kings and Chronicles are not in perfect agreement. But in no way is the central message of the inspired writings diluted by these discrepancies. They are of a minor order; the chief thrust in every case is clear. The Scriptures are inerrant as a guide to salvation. (Johnsson 1981, p. 6; cf. Thompson, 1991, p. 123–31, 173–94, 214–36)

While ministers and theologians have vigorously debated the two positions presented, it remains to be seen how much of this discussion has been followed by the teachers in the Adventist Schools in the North American Division (NAD).

Survey Results: Authority in Questions of Right and Wrong

Several questions in the survey addressed the questions of authority and how the teachers understood Scripture (see chapters 6 and 7 for more information about the Survey and the participants who responded to it). For example, the following question relating to sources of authority with regard to questions of right and wrong was asked in three branches of the survey (Questions 48, 70, and 88, in Branches B, C and E): "When it comes to questions of right and wrong, which of the following do you look to most for guidance? Would you say …? [You may choose up to two answers]." The possible responses provided on the survey were as follows:

- Religious teachings and beliefs
- Philosophy and reason
- Practical experience and common sense
- Scientific information
- Don't know

As respondents were free to choose two of the responses, the responses were coded as follows:

1. Religion: Religious teachings and beliefs
2. Religion and Philosophy
3. Religion and Common Sense
4. Religion and Science
5. Religion and Philosophy and Common Sense
6. Philosophy: Philosophy and reason
7. Philosophy and Common Sense
8. Philosophy and Science
9. Common Sense: Practical experience and common sense
10. Common Sense and Science
11. Science: Scientific information
12. Don't know

Some of these options were not chosen by any participant (e.g. 5. Religion; 7. Philosophy and Common Sense; 8. Philosophy and

Science; 10. Common Sense and Science; and 12. Don't know). The results for the other options are reported in Table 14.1 in the two columns under the heading, "NAD Teachers," first as the frequency of those participants who chose that option, and then as a percentage of the 483 respondents who answered this question. The most frequently chosen options are listed first. In the column labelled "Pew Survey" data are provided from the 2014 "U.S. Religious Landscape Study," which was conducted in 2007 and again in 2014 by the Pew Research Center. The wording of the question in the survey used by the teachers was derived from the question used by the Pew Research Center, with one difference: the teachers were permitted to choose two options. The "U.S. Religious Landscape Study" only permitted one option to be chosen. Hence, the results are reported for the four principle options for the Pew Research Center's data.

Table 14.1 NAD Teachers' Responses to the question, "When it comes to questions of right and wrong, which of the following do you look to most for guidance?"

	NAD Teachers		Pew Survey
	Freq	**%**	**%**
Religion: Religious teachings and beliefs	200	41.4	33
Religion and Common Sense	181	37.5	
Religion and Philosophy	30	6.2	
Common Sense: Practical experience and common sense	26	5.4	45
Religion and Science	15	3.1	
Religion and Philosophy and Common Sense	15	3.1	
Philosophy: Philosophy and Reason	9	1.9	11
Science: Scientific information	7	1.4	9
Total	**483**	**100.0**	

Adventists have the conviction that their religion should affect their everyday life and, true to their religious roots, a majority of teachers in Adventist schools in the NAD said that they used either religion or religion and common sense to determine questions of right and wrong. The data from the Pew Research Institute indicate that 45% of North Americans use common sense to determine issues of right and wrong, while 33% of them rely on religion as the basis for their

decision-making. The corresponding percentages among the NAD Teachers are 5% for common sense versus 41% for religion, although it must be observed that another 37% use a combination of religion and common sense.

The question does not inquire about the place the Bible takes in the minds of the teachers, but given the authority that the Scriptures are given in Adventist circles, it is likely to be an important factor. After all, the first of the 28 Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists states, "The Holy Scriptures are the supreme, authoritative, and the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience …" The words, "revelation of the will of God, and the test of experience," highlight the crucial place the Bible has in determining questions of right and wrong within the SDA church.

Survey Results: Conception of the Bible

In both branches C and E, the following question was asked (Questions 65 and 92; the bold words are used in subsequent tables to represent each potential answer): "Read the following statements carefully, then mark next to the statement that is closest to your understanding of what the Bible is:

- The Bible contains no more truth or wisdom than do the **religious books of other world religions**;
- The Bible is the work of people who collected stories that had been created to explain the mysteries of life. It **contains** a great deal of **wisdom about the human experience**;
- The Bible is the work of people who genuinely loved God and who wanted to **share** their **understanding of God's activity in the world;**
- The Bible is the work of people who were **inspired by God** and who represented God's message in terms of their **own place and time**;
- The Bible is the work of people who **copied what God told them** word for word, and who wrote without being influenced by their own place and time;
- The Bible is the work of people who were inspired by God and who, though expressing their message in terms of their own time and place, **expressed eternal truths**."

The choices provided to participants summarize many of the responses that have been made in academic and non-academic circles to the challenges of the authority of the Bible, especially those growing from the skepticism regarding the biblical miracles and doubts about the authenticity of many of the biblical accounts such as are expressed by many writers who espouse the methodology of the historical-critical method. It is true that many academics do treat the Bible no differently from the religious books associated with other religions (e.g. Smith, 1994). Others affirm that the Bible, like Scriptures from other religions, is a record of different individuals' experience of the mysteries of life, including the supernatural, and contains much wisdom (Armstrong, 2019). These are options provided for participants. By way of contrast, those that believe in the inerrancy of the Bible would be able to answer the option, "copied what God told them word for word." Two of the options state that the Bible is inspired by God, but add the consideration that the message in represented in terms of the time and place of the writers. Such consideration is in line with the document endorsed by the administration of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, "Methods of Bible Study" (1987). The last option adds the rider that, while the Bible was expressed in terms appropriate to the time and culture of the biblical writers, it nevertheless contains eternal truths.

The responses of the participants are recorded in Table 14.2, under the subheadings, Frequency and Percent. The column with the subheading 2013 NAD gives the NAD results from the 2013 Global Member Survey, in which the same question, with the same wording, was asked of participants (Gillespie, 2013, p. 37).

Table 14.2 NAD Teachers' Choices of the statement that is closest to their understanding of what the Bible is.

	Frequency	Per-cent	2013 NAD
Inspired by God / time and place / eternal truths	232	79.7	20
Inspired by God, represented in terms of their own place and time	50	17.2	70
Copied what God told them word for word	4	1.4	7
Contains wisdom about the human experience	3	1.0	<1
Like the religious books of other world religions	1	0.3	<1
Share understanding of God's activity in the world	1	0.3	3
Total	**291**	**100.0**	

It is noteworthy how few of the participants chose the option, "The Bible is the work of people who copied what God told them word for word, and who wrote without being influenced by their own place and time" (1.4%). This option is closest to the position which is strongly advocated by inerrantists. It was chosen by 7% of the respondents to the 2013 NAD Members survey.

By way of contrast, 80% of the respondents agreed that the "Bible is the work of people who were inspired by God and who, though expressing their message in terms of their own time and place, expressed eternal truths." Almost all the rest (17%) agreed that "The Bible is the work of people who were inspired by God and who represented God's message in terms of their own place and time." In other words, 97% of respondents thought that the Bible was inspired, and further nuanced their answer with the observation that it was written in terms of its time and place. This being so, it is very interesting to observe that a significant percentage of teachers think that the Bible should be interpreted literally, word for word (see next Section).

Survey Results: Should the Bible be Read Literally?

A question that inquired whether participants considered that the Bible should be read literally, word for word, was placed in both Branches C and E (questions 64 and 91). It was expressed as follows:
"Which statement about the Bible comes closest to your own view?
The Bible is to be taken literally, word for word
OR
Not everything in the Bible should be taken literally, word for word"

The results are reported in Tables 14.3 and 14.4 in two different ways. First as a cross-tabulation against the age of participants, and secondly, as a cross-tabulation against education level. The two options are reported as "Literal, word for word" or "Not everything literal." In order to make it easier to compare the different age-groups or levels of education, two additional rows have been added to these tables. They contain the percentage of an age-group or education level that has chosen the option between "literal" and "not everything literal."

Table 14.3 Cross-tabulation between "Literal / Not everything literal" and "Age-group"

		Q9 My Age Group:						
		20-29	**30-39**	**40-49**	**50-59**	**60-69**	**70-79**	**Total**
Q64 & Q91 Which statement about the Bible comes closest to your own view?	Literal, word for word	1	21	23	12	17	1	75
	Not everything literal	16	32	48	38	29	1	164
	Total	**17**	**53**	**71**	**50**	**46**	**2**	**239**
	% of Age-Group Literal	5.9	39.6	32.4	24.0	37.0	50.0	
	% of Age-Group Not literal	94.1	60.4	67.6	76.0	63.0	50.0	

A majority of teachers (164 or 68.6%) think that "not everything in the Bible should be taken literally, word for word." The first observation to be made about this result is that it is unexpectedly low in the light of the relatively sophisticated view of Scripture expressed by 97% of the respondents. One would have thought that those who agreed with the statement that the Bible was written by "people who were inspired by God and who, though expressing their message in terms of their own time and place," would have been reluctant to approach scripture entirely literally. One thinks of the relatively well-known quotation from Ellen G. White, SDA pioneer and visionary:

> The Bible points to God as its author; yet it was written by human hands; and in the varied style of its different books it presents the characteristics of the several writers. The truths revealed are all "given by inspiration of God" (2 Timothy 3:16); yet they are expressed in the words of men. The Infinite One by His Holy Spirit has shed light into the minds and hearts of His servants. He has given dreams and visions, symbols and figures; and those to whom the truth was thus revealed have themselves embodied the thought in human language. (White, 1911, p. v)

According to White, it is the writers of the Bible who were inspired, not their specific words. On the other hand, that such a significant minority of respondents chose to read their Bibles literally, word for word, is likely to be traced back to a sincere desire to take the Bible seriously.

A feature that stands out in the data shown in Table 14.3 is that while most age-groups include a strong minority who read their Bible literally, there was only one respondent under the age of 30 that does so. Sixteen of the seventeen respondents aged from 20 to 29 years who answered this question stated that they do not think everything in the Bible should be taken literally. This is markedly different from the situation in the other age-groups.

Table 14.4 provides the distribution of responses to the question, "should the Bible be read literally?" across the levels of education attained by the NAD teachers.

Table 14.4 Cross-tabulation between "Literal vs Not everything taken literally" and "Education Level"

		Q10 My Education (click "highest" you have completed):				
		Associate Degree	**Bachelor's Degree**	**Master's Degree**	**Doctoral Degree**	**Total**
Q64 & Q91 Which statement about the Bible comes closest to your own view?	Literal, word for word	1	21	23	12	17
	Not everything literal	16	32	48	38	29
	Total	**17**	**53**	**71**	**50**	**46**
	% of Age-Group Literal	5.9	39.6	32.4	24.0	37.0
	% of Age-Group Not literal	94.1	60.4	67.6	76.0	63.0

It might be expected that the higher the education level attained, the less likely it would be that a person would interpret the Bible literally. This is in fact the case—there is indeed a clear decline in the numbers who read the Bible literally from those with bachelor's qualifications, through master's to doctoral qualifications (40% / 32% / 24% respectively). But even so, 24% of those with doctoral-level qualifications stated that they read the Bible literally.

Summing Up

From the responses to the questions asked, one cannot really discern any particular influence on the teachers in Adventist schools in the NAD of either liberal approaches to the interpretation of the Bible (as represented by the historical-critical method) or the influence of inerrantists.

As a group, the teachers in Adventist schools in the NAD base their moral decisions— decisions about what is right and wrong—on religion, or on religion and common sense. Many of them still read their Bibles literally, word for word; but the majority are of the opinion that not everything in the Bible should be understood literally. As a group they believe the Bible is written by those who were inspired by God, but who wrote in a specific time and place.

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