The historical-critical method: the Adventist debate

Robert K. McIver

The debate provides an opportunity to affirm a common ground, avoid the perils, and get on with our primary mission.

How shall we understand the Scriptures? The question has been debated in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in recent years. This is not surprising in a church that bases its beliefs on Scripture, for a shift in the way Scripture is approached has the potential to influence significantly many aspects of church life. A recent publication states: "At stake is the very authority of the Scriptures and the continued existence of the Seventh-day Adventist people as a Bible-centered, Bible-based movement and church."[1]

An essential element of the debate is whether it is appropriate for Adventists to use the historical-critical method. In this article I plan to trace briefly the history of this specific aspect of the debate, within Adventist circles, to sketch the concerns of the different parties in the debate, to outline the common ground between the parties, and to close with some of my own personal convictions.

History of the debate

Known as "higher criticism," right up to the early 1970s the historical-critical method was perceived as highly suspect by almost all Adventists who were aware of it. This suspicion is reflected in the 1919 Bible and History Teachers Conference. From that time on, the attitude has surfaced intermittently in some leading Adventists who reveal strong sympathy with many in the Protestant Fundamentalist movement in the United States who oppose higher critical scholarship.

By the 1974 Bible conferences, however, it was clear that the Adventist scholarly community had become much more aware of the methodological issues raised by the historical-critical method. At the conferences one of the major papers, presented by E. E. Zinke, dealt with an extended history of approaches to the study of the Bible. This paper is a history of biblical exegesis and theology, starting with Origen, dealing with the Antiochine school, and moving through the Reformation to the period of modern theology, beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher. It also covered the form criticism of Hermann Gunkel (OT) and Otto Dibelius (NT). For Zinke the methodology and conclusions of such writers was clearly "outside" of Adventism, although he showed a clear grasp of the relevant literature. Some of the other papers presented at the conference likewise revealed a knowledge of the issues raised in the general scholarly literature. The historical-critical method was still an enemy "out there," but it was a better-known enemy.

The debate in recent literature

Soon the issue of whether or not Adventists should use the historical-critical method took center stage, particularly during the meetings known as Consultation 1 and 2, held in 1980 and 1981. These meetings between church administrators and Bible scholars took place at a time of theological and administrative ferment in Adventist circles. Both consultations considered the appropriateness of the historical-critical method. At Consultation 2, for example, each of the discussion groups addressed the issue: "Should an SDA college or university

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employ as a Bible teacher a person committed to the historical-critical method [including such methods as form criticism, redaction, criticism, tradition criticism]?" According to the minutes, several of the groups suggested that the terminology, historical-critical method, was so easily misunderstood that perhaps Adventist biblical scholars should adopt a different name for what they did. Several of the methodologies, however, were generally considered helpful if used apart from their negative antisupernatural presuppositions.

Since these consultations, there have been several important Adventist studies dealing with the legitimacy or otherwise of the historical-critical method. The December 1982 issue of *Spectrum*, under the theme "Ways to Read the Bible," ran two articles advocating that it is possible to use the methodology without its antisupernaturalist presuppositions. Gerhard Hasel's 1985 book *Biblical Interpretation Today*[2] was written "to describe in as succinct a fashion as possible the origin and growth of the historical-critical method and its usage today," as well as to develop a more suitable methodology appropriate for Adventists.[3]

The 1986 Annual Council voted to approve the document "Methods of Bible Study."[4] This document rejects any use of the historical-critical method as classically formulated, although it does carefully outline that biblical study should take into account the original language, historical context, and literary form of the passage concerned.

The year 1987 marked the formation of the Adventist Theological Society, with its clear "criteria" for membership based on certain beliefs, including the following: "I reject the use of any form of the 'historical-critical' method in biblical study."

While Alden Thompson's book *Inspiration*[5] is about the more theological topic of inspiration of the Scriptures, at times it does deal with issues of methodology and approach, and on occasion specifically with the historical-critical method. Some involved in the hermeneutical debate have perceived this book as the archetypical product of historical-critical methodology. At the 1991 meeting of the Adventist Theological Society this book was discussed at length, and several of the papers from that meeting have been included in their publication *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration.*

The debate is not over.[6] However, within the literature discussed above, several key concerns emerge. It is to these we now turn.

The key issues: one view

Several recurring themes evident in the literature raise the alarm against the use of the historical-critical method by Adventists. First, such writers emphasize the danger of putting human reason above Scripture. For Adventists, Scripture is God's Word and the source of authority, not human reason. A related problem for many is the element of subjectivity that inevitably accompanies any human sifting of a particular passage of Scripture.

A second danger is that the historical-critical method removes the divine from Scripture, leaving only the human. This has the effect of causing the exegete to lose sight of the overall unity of Scripture, which in turn reduces the spiritual value of Scripture.

In their reaction to Thompson's book, published in *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, several of the writers take exception to his willingness to find contradictions and downright errors in the Bible. Samuel Koranteng-Pipim deals with the issues of numbers and provides a possible reconciliation of the different numbers recorded for the two different accounts of the census of Israel done by David, as well as a defense of the statistic that 2 million Israelites left Egypt (pp. 51-60). Randall W. Younker criticizes Thompson for ignoring other possible explanations for the date of the Exodus, Amram's prolific brothers, and the universal flood (pp. 174-193). The basic concern that appears to underlie these and other defenses of the historicity of the biblical account is that religious truth is related to historical truth. If the Bible is not true in the history it presents, then how can it be true in anything else that it says?

Finally, there is serious concern that the acceptance of the historical-critical method will inevitably lead to acceptance of its presuppositions. In other words, use of any of the methodology means a writer or researcher is in effect agreeing with the principles of "scientific exegesis," such as correlation, analogy, and criticism as defined by Ernst Troeltsch.[7] Thus the concern is that any use of the historical-critical method means an antisupernaturalist stance and is therefore an abandonment of retaining a faith relationship with the Bible as the Word of God.

The key issues: another view

Other thought leaders in the church express a different set of concerns. First, there is the concern that our doctrine of inspiration and our methodology be consistent with what we find in the Bible and not be something forced on the Bible despite the evidence. They point out that even though the liberal scholars were the first to bring attention to these matters, we still should not allow that to blind us to the fact that there is a distinctive human component in Scripture and that there is *both* an underlying unity together with an actual diversity of viewpoint in the Bible. For example, the four Gospel writers, as Brunt points out,[8] do emphasize different things as they report on the same historical events or teachings of Jesus. At the root of this concern is the traditional Adventist value of truth, although this specific concern is, as stated below, common to both sides of the debate. These are matters growing out of the nature of Scripture, and we must not hide from them.

Second, there is a pastoral concern for what will happen to those who have been given an inadequate view of Scripture. Will they lose their faith unnecessarily when they actually read the Scriptures for themselves and find that they are different from what they had been led to believe? In this, one

can often hear the pain of the writers. Many of them have had to work through this specific issue in their advanced degree studies. They have had to come face-to-face with the phenomena of Scripture and been forced to attempt to reconcile these phenomena with their conservative stance toward the Bible.

Third, there is the insistence that one can use many of the tools of modern exegetical methodology without accepting the antisupernaturalistic presuppositions.

Is there any common ground?

Everyone agrees that the stakes are high. But amid the heat of controversy it is possible to miss seeing the large amount of common ground that almost all of the participants share. First and foremost, this is a debate among Adventists, and therefore all participants share a common background. This background normally includes a common Adventist schooling and Adventist professional ministerial training. Almost all involved in the discussions have been pastors for part of their career, and almost all have had a background in teaching. All in the debate are committed to the Adventist Church and desire its prosperity. They share in a common quest for truth.

Second, their Adventist roots and the essence of their personal faith have endowed them with a conservative approach to the Scriptures. All would readily agree on the power and presence of the supernatural and the reality of miracles and that the Bible is foundational and normative to their faith and practice. All would vehemently reject the extreme skepticism of such scholars as Ernst Troeltsch and Rudolf Bultmann.

Third, all agree on the divine/human or incarnational model of inspiration. They might criticize their Adventist partners in dialogue for overstressing either the human or the divine aspect, but both sides of the discussion agree that the inspiration of the Bible is like the incarnation of Jesus: a union of the divine and the human. All wish to emphasize that the Bible is the Word of God and that there are human elements in Scripture.

Finally, all agree that a knowledge of archaeology, history, original languages, and the like facilitate a better understanding of Scripture.

The debate centers partly on whether or not these should be called by the label "historical-critical method" and partly on the legitimacy of some of the more radical approaches that can be taken to Scripture. But this debate should not obscure the fact that many of the same approaches and information bases are used by all participants.

As I see it

A characteristic of early Seventh-day Adventists was their willingness to debate important issues freely and openly. Therefore, because the issue of how to understand Scripture is so fundamental to the very basis of Adventist belief and practice, the current discussion regarding hermeneutical method is to be welcomed, if, that is, it is conducted in an open manner.

There is, however, a danger in serious debate over important issues: that of dividing the participants into "good guys" and "bad guys." We must not ignore how this has happened in the experience of other denominations such as the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. This "them and us" attitude makes it all too easy to assume one's own side has all the right, while the other side is quite wrong in most everything it says. All too easily the debate degenerates into each side taking up a position and defending it against all comers, while doing everything possible to outwit and outmaneuver the "opposition." But each side of this debate has legitimate concerns, most of which are shared by all the participants. Indeed, one could even question whether the large amount of common ground shared by participants in the debate might not mean that what we have here is not so much an impasse as an opportunity to find a better basis from which to work.

I would also wish to stress the danger of uncritically accepting of the assumptions shared by many liberal scholars who use the historical-critical method. As Adventists we cannot adopt an antisupernatural approach to Scripture. To the best of my knowledge, no participant in the debate thus far has suggested that we should. So while we are interested in the historical background of a passage of Scripture, we do not limit our understanding of events as things merely historically conditioned. Adventists wish to maintain that the Bible *is* the Word of God, a record of God's acts within history.

On the other hand, I would like to stress the dangers inherent in some approaches to Scripture. For example, a faith in the Bible that is based simply on its inerrancy is very fragile. It can be destroyed by only *one* discrepancy that cannot be explained to the satisfaction of the individual believer. Adventists rightly wish to maintain a conservative attitude to the Bible. They are inclined positively to the historical and theological information contained in it. But it is important to avoid a one-sided overemphasis on the divinity of the Bible, because there *is* undeniably a human dimension to Scripture. Our theory of inspiration should not be one that has to be imposed on Scripture. We should study the Bible to see what an inspired book is like, not bring a preconceived notion of what it should be like.

Finally, may I suggest that it might be time to drop the terminology "historical-critical method" from the debate. The term is so loaded and so often misunderstood that it has come to be an inadequate description of what is under consideration. One group uses the term in one way, and another uses it differently. Indeed, a good part of the heat of the debate grows out of this matter of definition. To me, it would be much better if we abandoned debate about the "historical-critical method" and focused our attention on how we all might understand Scripture better.

This is a suggestion that has been made before,[9] and I acknowledge that

it will not instantly resolve all the rather complex issues surrounding our approach to the Bible. It would, however, remove one of the larger causes of misunderstanding in the debate so that attention can be focused on the essential elements.

The debate concerning the best way to understand the Bible is one of critical concern to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As with all such debates, there is a significant opportunity for the church to advance in its understanding of truth. There is also the risk that the church will step away from where the Spirit would lead it. ■

[1] Frank B. Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson, eds., *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1992), p. 8.

[2] Gerhard Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Research Institute, 1985).

[3] *Ibid.*, p. vii.

[4] See *Ministry*, April 1987, pp. 22-24.

[5] Alden Thompson, *Inspiration* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1991).

[6] The spring 1993 volume of the *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* has two articles dealing with the dangers of the historical-critical method: Gerhard Hasel, "The Origin of the Biblical Sabbath and the Historical-Critical Method: A Methodological Test Case" (pp. 18-46), points out that if one accepts the dating of the different Old Testament writings assigned by historical critics, then the reasons for believing in the divine origin of the Sab-bath would be fatally compromised. Bruce Norman's article, "Presuppositions: The Key to the Formulation of Biblical Doctrine" (pp. 47-54), concludes that "the acceptance of the historical-critical method, even in whatever modified form, will inevitably mean the acceptance and use of its presuppositions" (p. 59). See also Mario Veloso, "Modern Scientific-Critical Method—A Testimony," *Adventist Perspectives* 6, No. 2 (1992): 29-35.

[7] See Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today*, pp. 73-78. Troeltsch's "scientific" exegesis involves three principles: correlation, analogy, and criticism. Correlation means that events should be explained in terms of historical processes, *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 claim only probability, not truth.

[8] See Brunt.

[9] See George Eldon Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), pp. 35-40; I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 84-86; Clark Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 136-150.

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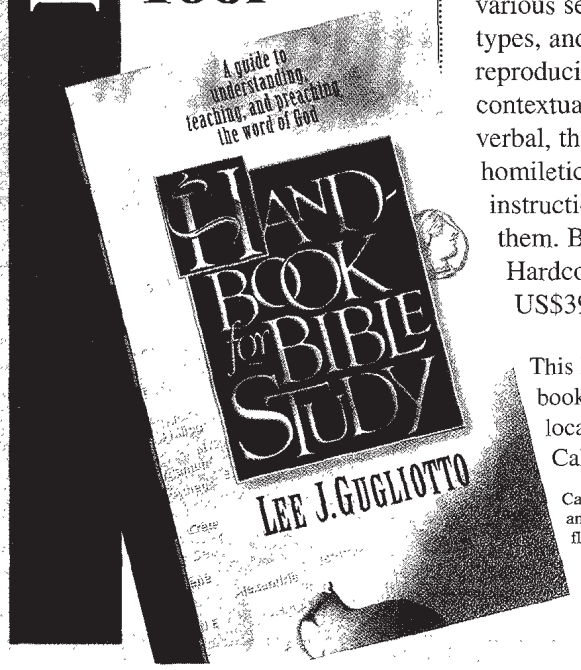

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