

# **Authority of Scripture — Approaching Revelation and Inspiration**

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The Bible, revelation, inspiration, and Scripture's reliability and authority are hotly debated today, with repercussions for Adventists. In some cases even the possibility of divine revelation and inspiration is totally rejected. In others revelation and inspiration are reinterpreted.[1]

The issues are hot because these topics belong to the most fundamental ones in theology, having a strong impact on the beliefs and the everyday lives of Christians. Although Jesus and salvation through him form the heart of our theology and experience, it is ultimately only through the Scriptures that we receive necessary information about Him and redemption. There we know Jesus= in his multifaceted ministry on our behalf. How we understand Scripture will shape our perception of him and our understanding of discipleship.

This article focuses on the methods of studying revelation, inspiration, and authority of Scripture. It will not discuss these biblical doctrines per se, butBprovides limited short definitions.

## **1. Definitions**

According to the biblical testimony special revelation[2]is an act of God in which he reveals to specific persons (1) himself, (2) truths of various natures, and/or (3) his will. As a result of God=s initiative and action these humans, called prophets, have access to an experience which otherwise is not open to humans, receiving knowledge not otherwise available.

According to Scripture inspiration is God=s act in which he enables the prophet to

understand and communicate the received message. By this process the proclaimed message becomes word from God and is not just human word. In order to communicate revelation reliably, inspiration is needed. However revelation and inspiration cannot be sharply separated.

Speaking of the authority of Scripture we believe that Scripture as "the infallible revelation of His will." [3] is the standard for a Christian life. Everything has to be tested by it. Each doctrine must be founded upon it. Scripture, then, has priority over all human thought, research, and emotion.

## **2. Methodology**

No scholar or scientist works without certain presuppositions. On this topic, some will overtly deny such things as divine revelation and inspiration. Others claim the opposite. Some hold that there *may* be divine inspiration. Based on these presuppositions some scholars consider the Bible to be merely a human book, or a divine book, a mixture of the two, or a book with both characteristics at the same time. Such preconceived ideas influence the research.

Several approaches present themselves. They are not exclusive but can be combined with one another. One option is to proceed inductively. Another one is to work deductively. In the first instance the researcher can choose to study inspiration by means of extrabiblical sources and draw conclusions which then are applied to the Bible. Another possibility is to create analogies in order to demonstrate how inspiration works and to make deductions. Again the respective approach selected will shape the outcome.

### **a. Inductive versus Deductive**

The major choice is whether to proceed inductively or deductively. Normally an inductive approach begins with the investigation of biblical phenomena. One reads, for

instance, through the Gospels, compares them with each other, and detects differences and so-called discrepancies. One studies Chronicles and Kings and notices gaps and divergence. A comparison of Paul=s experience as reported in Acts and in Galatians seems to reveal differences. Supposedly, even his conversion accounts in Acts do not correspond. An inductive approach oftentimes does not allow for harmonization even where it seems to be possible and advisable. It is preoccupied with finding differences rather than agreement and unity. And it always works with only parts of the entire puzzle. Nevertheless, based on this type of collected and interpreted data a doctrine of inspiration is formulated. The problem with this approach is that it largely disregards the self-testimony of Scripture. The starting point is not what Scripture claims to be, but the phenomena of the biblical texts as seen and interpreted by a rational human being of the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A deductive approach begins with the self-testimony of Scripture, that is, the texts which directly or indirectly refer to revelation, inspiration, and authority of Scripture. A doctrine of inspiration, for example, is formulated based on the claims of Scripture and its numerous references to this topic.

Probably, the issue of inductive versus deductive is not simply a matter of either/or. Both approaches are needed. In formulating a doctrine of inspiration one cannot disregard the textual phenomena and one should not discard the self-testimony of Scripture. The Bible must be allowed to speak for itself. Thus, the question is How do we start? or Which approach comes first? In a trial, it is only fair to listen to a witness first and to take him or her seriously before one questions his or her statements. To a certain degree, Heinrich Schliemann even took Homer=s writings at face value and excavated Troy, a city previously believed to be fiction only.[4] Because the Bible claims revelation and inspiration, it is fair to start from there and to ask oneself how the phenomena can be reconciled with this assertion.[5]

### **b. Use of Extrabiblical Sources**

Among others, the history of religions school has used extrabiblical sources to interpret Scripture, such as Babylonian myths, Hellenistic mystery cults, and ideas of the Roman Emperor cult.[6] Their views have been read back into the Bible. We would be very hesitant to use such a procedure, since Adventists accept the principle of Scripture being its own interpreter.

However, we must go a step further. To study inspiration in an inspired, non-canonical prophet, for instance in E. G. White, and read the data gathered back into the Bible is--on the basis of the sola scriptura principle--also not acceptable. The Bible can stand on its own, and a biblical doctrine of inspiration must be derived from the Bible and the Bible alone. Genuine non-canonical prophets may provide helpful information, but to view the Bible through the processes involved in the inspiration of a non-canonical prophet is circular reasoning.[7] In addition, we must ask if by allowing for such an approach a sort of principle of uniformity is at work. Although the Bible does not provide evidence for stages of inspiration, that is, one prophet being more inspired than another, the question remains whether or not inspiration really worked the same way in all prophets. The outcome is equal in so far that revelation, God's message, is passed on faithfully, but the processes are not necessarily identical. Jeremiah's experience in dictating God's message to Baruch while being inspired (Jer 36) is obviously different from Luke's experience in gathering information and under inspiration putting together his gospel.

### **c. Use of Analogies**

Analogies can be extremely helpful. They are like pictures that bring home a point to the audience. But analogies, like parables, have limitations. They should not be overextended. To create an analogy and make deductions from that analogy may not any longer correspond with reality.[8] Therefore, we need to exercise caution.

One of the most common analogies is the so-called incarnational model. In this case, Scripture is paralleled with Jesus Christ. There are theologians who deny the divine character of Scripture. There are others who omit or underestimate the human factor. The incarnational model stresses both the human and the divine. However, even after accepting the last option, a question remains. Are the human and divine sides complementary, yet separable? Or is there an inseparable unity between the human and the divine?

In the case of Jesus, Christians claim that he was truly God and became also truly man. Human and divine cannot be split apart in Jesus. This seems also to be true for Scripture. 2 Pet 1:21 points to a cooperation between the Holy Spirit and human agents, acknowledging the divine and the human. Yet, Scripture was not created by humans. Through God prophets talked about God. God is the origin and final author of Scripture. Gerhard Maier summarizes this in three points:

#1) >Men spoke=; that is, representatives of >normal= persons at a particular place and time, not >instruments,= >writing implements,= or the like; and they used a >normal= human language . . . #2) None of them, curiously enough, spoke from the standpoint of men, but >from God=; that is sent from him, empowered, proceeding from his vantage point and bringing across a message from him that is no less than a >divine= message. #3) The one who brought about this peculiar state of affairs is the 'Holy Spirit.' [9]

Prophetic messages and prophetic writings are the words of the Lord and are accepted by God as such.[10] Biblical books are the word of the Lord.[11] Thus, the human and the divine in Scripture are not complementary. They are integrated. Consequently, different sets of tools in order to study the human side and the divine side of the Bible cannot do justice to its unified nature, the truly incarnational character of Scripture. And by the way, many tools of scholarship are not just neutral. They are linked to presuppositions so much so that by eliminating these presuppositions the tools themselves have evaporated.[12]

In all these questions, Christians are always referred back to Jesus Christ, their Lord and Savior and their Exemplar. How did Jesus come to grips with Scripture in his time, with issues such as revelation, inspiration, and authority? Jesus made statements about Scripture, and he used Scripture profusely. Certainly, he was not naive or ignorant with regard to the issues we raised. Here is Jesus' position on Scripture:

Jesus trusted Scripture. For him the OT, his Bible, is God's word. Through human agents God has spoken.

Jesus regarded the prophets as reliable communicators of God's words and accepted inspiration on the part of the writers of the OT. Scripture contains genuine predictive prophecy. Many of these prophecies he regarded to be fulfilled in himself.

Jesus accepted the historical reliability of Scripture, including all the important events in Israel's history as well as creation and flood.

Jesus considered as author of a book that person who was identified as such in the respective biblical book.

Divine interventions in history such as miracles posed no problem for Jesus.

Jesus interpreted Scripture literally and typologically. Critical methods in expounding the Bible were foreign to him. Although he must have known so-called discrepancies in Scripture he never focused on them and did not even mention them.

Jesus considered Scripture not only as addressed to the original readers and hearer but also to his generation. Scripture transcends culture.

Jesus' understanding of God's will and his actions in history are founded on Scripture. Biblical doctrines can be derived from the O.T. At the same time, the O.T. was the standard for his life as well as a justification of his behavior.

Scripture has practical value. It fosters faith. It can be used as the authority and weapon

against temptations.

Jesus expected his contemporaries to know Scripture[13]

### **3. Suggestions**

How then can we handle these issues of revelation, inspiration, and authority of Scripture? Here are some suggestions:

Start with an attitude of trust instead of a position of doubt. This does not exclude openness.

Take seriously Scripture=s self-testimony.

Do not deny or underestimate problems in the biblical text. Take care, however, not to overstate them. Be careful with extreme positions on personalized inspiration as well as mechanical inspiration.

Look for solutions with regard to the biblical phenomena without trying to make them fit artificially and be able to suspend judgment. If you cannot find a solution that does not mean that there is none.[14]

Use an appropriate interpretive method and suitable exegetical tools that fit the character of God=s word.

Live the word of God.

Proclaim it, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

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- [1]. Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth", J. M. Robinson und J. B. Cobb, Jr., Hrsg., in Theology as History, New Frontiers in Theology, Bd. 3 (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 101-133; Gabriel Moran, The Present Revelation: The Search for Religious Foundations (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 38-40, 130, 227, 299, 341; Gerhard Maier, Biblical Hermeneutics (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 97.
- [2]. Theologians distinguish between general revelation, which, e.g., is found in nature, and special revelation.
- [3]. See the Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists, no. 1, in *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, @ (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1995), 7.
- [4]. Cf. Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1981), VIII: 965.
- [5]. Cf. Peter M. van Bemmelen, *Issues in Biblical Inspiration : Sanday and Warfield* (Berrien Springs, MI : Andrews University Press, 1987), 377-378.
- [6]. These were proposed by Gunkel, Reitzenstein, and Bousset.
- [7]. By means of Biblical criteria a prophet is declared genuine and inspired. Then this very prophet is used to formulate a doctrine of inspiration of the Bible.
- [8]. It may be useful to compare the nature of Scripture with the nature of light. However, to conclude that for these different aspects of light different tools must be used and apply this to Scripture seems to go too far. Scripture may be similar to light, but it is not light in the literal sense. Cf. Richard W. Coffen, "A Fresh Look at the Dynamics of Inspiration: Part 2," *Ministry* February 2000, 20-23.
- [9]. Maier, 102.
- [10]. See Jer.36:1-6 and Jer 25:2-8.
- [11]. See Micah 1:1; Hos 1:1; Zeph 1:1.
- [12]. See, e.g., form criticism which investigates the oral stage of material, smallest units that were, for instance, created at a campfire or a funeral procession. No revelation took place. Texts developed along evolutionary lines.
- [13]. References can be found in Ekkehardt Mueller, "Jesus and Scripture in the Gospels," unpublished manuscript, March 1999.
- [14]. See Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951).