

Another Look at Adventist Hermeneutics

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Hardly a more sensitive topic exists among Adventist discussions than the question of how we will treat the Bible. It lies near the heart of what matters most deeply but clearly there is variance among us.

Two fundamental questions are worth examining, both essential to the lifeblood of the Adventist movement. First, does a Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutic exist? and second, assuming the first question is answered affirmatively, can we confirm it? Free from commitment to status quo, we remain ready to examine on a recurring basis any previously accepted premise providing we keep in mind that our understanding always is partial if it is compounded with human reason as a component. While we accept that which God has revealed, with regard to our understanding we must examine the merits of each case.

Dealing with our first question, can we say a Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutic exists? Prior to 1950 there was substantial unity on the essentials, although not always yielding the same result. One could cite the king of the north, armageddon, and sometimes rambling discussions on Daniel 11. There was agreement, however, on foundations, agreement that the Scriptures are valid, authentic reports of God's acts both within human experience and beyond, that they remain authoritative and the court of final appeal.

Second, they were understood quite literally unless coercive evidence suggested otherwise, e.g., obvious poetic constructions, allegorical passages, literary figures of speech, prophetic symbols, and typological structures.

Biblical backgrounds received much attention which produced rapid growth of the Adventist interest in Middle Eastern history and biblical archaeology, including a number of unfortunate ark-chasing entrepreneurial ventures. The study of backgrounds was intended to

illuminate the Scriptures and garner evidence of their trustworthiness, not to provide fodder for reinterpreting or conjectural ideas of biblical origins or teachings. Theology transcended sociology, anthropology, and critical studies, all three at that point already 150 years in the making.

Adventists held a high view of Scripture, approached with a sense of respect at times bordering on reverence. Its meaning was enhanced by the study of history and grammatical structures. Bible students accepted the substantive assertions of the Scriptures, allowing each its due weight.

The influence of Ellen White was important but not definitive. Where she made firm assertions with respect to meaning, interpretation was significantly influenced although not determined by her statement. In general, this was the mainframe of Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutic.

That described above is today criticized by internal critics as naive, the observation probably valid to a point. In many ways Adventist hermeneutic had been hammered out under fire of non-Adventist critics. Unquestionably we reached certain conclusions which later measured consideration discontinued, for instance building proof for modern Sabbath observance on a passage in Hebrews 4 and relying on the "this generation shall not pass" of Matthew 24:34 as a time marker for the *parousia*. Such abuses needed correction and have received it, but anecdotal problems are hardly grounds for disassembly of the entire hermeneutical mechanism built upon long experience. The real question is not, Were there errors? but Was the whole sound? Was it a help or obstacle to the discovery of God's will?

Today we face a very different picture. Another school of thought has developed on different premises. It maintains that although traditional Adventist hermeneutic has good features, revision is now in order along rather different guidelines. (1) The new hermeneutic must be designed to cope with troublesome problems, the "issues" rather than structured to enhance our grasp of the main lines of biblical teaching. (2) In addition it must factor in newly

discovered challenges drawn from the social sciences and even the physical sciences and adjust its understanding (interpretation) accordingly. (3) The new hermeneutic must give greater weight to background cultural influences as molding elements in the biblical text and its theology. (4) It must recognize that the text has a developmental history and adjust accordingly what can be accepted as firm, given the premise that influences on formulation of the text must be reconsidered at each given stage of development. (5) It must recognize that our own contemporary biases impose meanings on the text, calling into question the idea that the reader can study an ancient document and on that basis reach any specific guidance for today. This requires a mediating interpretive level between the ancient text and contemporary application, one that abstracts from the text concepts that upon careful consideration may be used in the modern context. The mediating level calls for a rational analysis that all but dismisses the possibility that a teaching might transfer directly from the ancient text to today. (6) We must cease to allow doctrine so great an influence on the meaning of the text. Each text must speak for itself without excess shading drawn from what other texts or biblical authority figures tell us it should mean. (7) We must give weight to the changing nature of revealed truth, "present truth" moving in configurations that oddly coincide well with the contemporary value system so heavily indebted to Enlightenment humanism.

Unfortunately theology is a fad-ridden enterprise. Anyone with 30 years' experience with it has witnessed the waxing and waning of at least five or six "theologies," each acclaimed as the answer but quietly jettisoned to obscurity a few years later, leaving nevertheless a residual touch upon those who abandon it. Existentialism, God-is-dead theology, theology of hope, and others gave way to a theology of liberation, and now a theology of stewardship (ecology) each resting on revision of the meaning of the biblical text.

The result is that we have among us today two hermeneutics, one the historical Seventh-day Adventist approach with minor modification, the other a hermeneutic based on substantial modification, one involving modalities prominent in historical criticism but purging its most

obvious humanistic presuppositions such as denial of the supernatural.

The verity of this dichotomy is well illustrated by the discussion following the 1986 Annual Council approval of a document entitled "Methods of Bible Study." Although the bulk of the document was filled with practical suggestions of use especially for laymen, three paragraphs of the preamble addressed historical criticism.

Within two months following its approval the document was taken to task publicly at a national meeting of Adventist Bible teachers, many of whom took strong exception to its rejection of the historical critical method, especially the sentence, "Even a modified use of this method that retains the principle of criticism which subordinates the Bible to human reason is unacceptable to Adventists." For well over an hour the preamble of the document was peppered with vigorous criticisms, although a proposed resolution of rejection was abandoned as injudicious. Several speakers charged that the scholarly community had been denied voice in formulating this document. However correspondence from these persons on this subject was found later in the files of the Biblical Research Institute. The question was not one of non-involvement, rather that in the end another point of view was adopted.

The crux of the question lies in whether a blending of the historic Adventist approach with historical criticism is possible. Some argue that much in historical criticism is helpful in exegesis and theology. Ultimately a great deal rests on whether historical criticism is a system or more a pool of isolated techniques that can be drawn upon pragmatically according to their usefulness.

Comparison reveals that both systems have elements in common, but there are significant differences in the way the common elements are used. Note the function of historical background studies. We must dismiss the most radical position that mythologizes all biblical reports to the point of disregard for their authenticity. Neither branch of hermeneutic practice among Adventists defends such extremes. As noted earlier, historic Adventist hermeneutic maintains high interest in the study of backgrounds as a basis of understanding

customs of the setting from which Bible books come, of value for the light they throw on the Scriptures.

Historical criticism also devotes much attention to backgrounds, but there is profound difference between the usages. Historical Adventist hermeneutics seeks to know how background contributed to events and teachings as the Holy Spirit transmitted divinely-given content within a local environment. In contrast the historical critic pursues how such an interpretation of events as reported in the Bible could have arisen from the background such as we know it. This is treated as a normal process within a given culture. Such an approach may be willing to grant an existential or even mystical insight on the part of the person transmitting the report to us.

Although historical criticism and traditional Adventist hermeneutics share high interest in background studies, how much in common do they really have? Only coincidentally, for the purposes are different. Although historical Adventist hermeneutic performs certain functions historical criticism also performs, the aim and use to which these functions are put are so divergent that we can hardly call them shared functions. Only at the most technical levels do we enter commonality. When interpreting meaning we enter immediately into areas controlled by governing presuppositions, which for the critical method are in conflict with genuine respect for God's word. As a system, historical criticism is at such odds with God's self-revelation that no merger or blend of systems is possible without grave jeopardy to a genuinely biblical faith.

Two additional elements are worthy of brief attention. The first is epistemology, in essence how we know something. Inquiry here leads us into more fundamental questions yet, for it measures the building blocks of meaning, both at the personal level and that of world view. Some have labeled this field philosophical theology, a forbidding title if ever there was one.

Momentous changes are taking place here. Thought structures of 400 years' standing are

coming apart. Contemporary thinking rests on a philosophical system based on (1) naturalism, the premise that our environment, properly studied, can yield satisfying understanding without reference to God, (2) optimism, the premise that since humans are capable of understanding, understanding leads to inevitable progress, (3) objectivism, the concept that the study of our environment must take place in a manner free from subjective opinion, governed by precise laws, and (4) materialism, in this setting meaning that all that is important lies within time and space and can be analyzed with high levels of precision, especially with mathematical tools.

Presently those scientists in touch with the universe in its extremities, with astronomical physicists and nuclear physicists in the lead, are presenting reports of a universe of such proportions that an organizing mind beyond nature must be postulated if what can be observed is to be coherent. Despite punctuating the equilibria of the evolutionary scale, biologists remain light years behind.

In addition there is an increasing sense of human corruptibility. A humanity that can conquer smallpox seems unable to contain the human greed that draws civilization ever closer to self-annihilation. Both Michael Polyani and Thomas Kuhn, neither contaminated with born-again Christianity, have conspired to perform a demolition on the supposed objectivity of science that demands a new examination of its foundations.

Voices from the contemporary community are calling now for the return of the supernatural to modern methodologies. These trends are accelerated with the widespread collapse of Marxist theory, which was the logical culmination of the modernist system.

Those working in biblical hermeneutics must take note of these radical changes, for their impact on the immediate future will be profound. It is ironic that some among us, generations late in boarding the modernist bandwagon, pull themselves aboard just as the entire contraption begins to disintegrate.

Ultimately a major criterion in deciding what hermeneutic should be followed lies in its fruits. Does our hermeneutic lead to a Christ-centered experience in which the word testifies

of Him? Does it produce a clearer grasp of what the word actually says? Does it point up the abysmal lostness of humanity and the magnitude of God's rescue, as well as a grander global understanding of His sovereignty over all?

Does it build a strong sense of mission and desire for unity in the church, firing zeal for outreach to our neighbors? Does it lead to numerical and spiritual growth of the family of God and provide practical strength in meeting temptation? Does it lead to a resolve to be prepared for Jesus' early return? Such a hermeneutic carries the marks of being genuinely Adventist and will provide the framework for a growing understanding of God's will.