

An Evaluation on the Book 'Prophets are Human' Written by Graeme Bradford

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This book is by nature and design an apologetic work. Graeme Bradford is attempting to demonstrate that the charges raised against the prophetic ministry of E. G. White are based on a misunderstanding of the manifestation of the biblical gift of prophecy. Bradford lists the main charges raised against her prophetic claim and attempts to solve them through the formulation and use of at least five fundamental hermeneutical principles that according to him are based on what the Bible says about prophets. I will list those principles and then evaluate their implications.

1. *Divine revelation is incomplete:* He argues that God always leaves room for doubt but provides enough evidence to support belief. His revelation is always incomplete. This principle explains why prophets made mistakes. Their fallibility is part of the divine plan. Since God respects our freedom He limits His revelation and does not overwhelm us with indisputably clear evidence.

2. *Revelation is culturally conditioned:* Bradford implies that the way the prophets received and communicated their messages was to a large extent culturally determined. In that process God used cultural practices that were less than ideal. According to him, that is what E. G. White meant when stating that the Bible contains the human mode of thought and expression. In her writings she used information that today is considered to be incorrect, but these concepts were “considered to be true in her day and culture” (p. 50). In using those materials she was not settling once and for all the correctness of the historical or scientific information she was using. Bradford concludes that information not central to what she was trying to communicate could contain errors. That explains her willingness to correct historical

information found in her writings.

3. *Inspiration is thought inspiration:* God did not dictate the Bible but gave the prophets ideas and thoughts through different means. Among them we find visions, dreams, and sometimes dictation. But the prophets also used personal experiences and research to communicate their message (e.g., Luke 1:1-4). This principle establishes, Bradford suggests, that when studying the Bible or the writings of E. G. White we should look for the message God was trying to communicate and not worry about the correctness of the information used by the prophets to express the divine thought.

4. *The central purpose of the prophetic gift:* The prophetic gift has one primary purpose, namely to bring Jesus to the reader. Hence the book *Desire of Ages* is an evangelistic tool. She copied from others not in order to produce a historical document free from errors, but to present in a winsome way the person of Jesus. According to Bradford, if we keep in mind that primary purpose we should not have any problem with discrepancies or errors that could be found in the Bible or in E. G. White.

5. *Prophets are humans:* Prophets received revelations which they had to interpret and apply. In these revelations God used cultural concepts that were familiar to them and their audiences. Bradford argues that it is in the interpretation of the revelation that the prophets are likely to make mistakes (Acts 10:34-35; 1 Pet 1:10-11). For example, E. G. White misunderstood the vision of the shut door. Since prophets are humans, they sometimes fall short of God's ideal for them. The book emphasizes the human side of inspiration. Bradford says very little with respect to God's role in the process of revelation and inspiration.

Evaluation:

Some may find in this volume a good response to the critics of E. G. White. In fact the principles upon which the arguments are based are difficult to refute. Who will argue against the fact that prophets are humans and are not infallible? Who will deny that culture has an

important role to play in the process of revelation and inspiration, or that prophecy has a central purpose, or that God inspired thoughts?

The shortcomings of this book are located in the rather superficial way in which it deals with very complex issues and the lack of any attempt to set proper parameters for the way the principles identified operate. Besides, the book does not explore the divine dimension of inspiration except to say that God inspired the thoughts, guided the prophets, and gave us an incomplete revelation in order to preserve our freedom of choice. In other words, it presupposes a doctrine of revelation and inspiration that is never clearly articulated. Neither does the book take into consideration explanations given by other scholars to the criticisms raised against E. G. White. If we consistently apply the hermeneutics found in this book to the Bible, its authority would be seriously affected.

The drastic dichotomy between thought and word offered by Bradford and others is damaging to the biblical concept of inspiration. The combination of thought inspiration and the central role of culture in the prophetic phenomenon described and promoted by Bradford could also be damaging. For instance, the book of Exodus describes the giving of the Decalogue to the Israelites as a glorious historical event that took place on Mount Sinai. God descended and they heard Him speaking to them. Critical scholars placed this event within the culture of the author and concluded that it never happened. What we have here, they say, is a literary device whose purpose is to invest the law with divine authority. In the ancient Near East a legal code was authoritative if it originated among the gods. The gods gave the law to the king and consequently it was authoritative. The Israelites did not have a king, therefore the biblical writer created a story in which God directly gave the law to the Israelites. The story has one central purpose and it is there where the revelation is found. One should remove the culturally conditioned element—the story of God speaking to the people from a mountain—, and retain the thought that was inspired—God is the law giver.

Culture did play a role in the process of revelation and inspiration. But God took cultural

practices and at times rejected them, modified them to make them compatible with His self-revelation, or accepted some of them as expressing His will or intention. Each case should be carefully evaluated. One should not give the impression that the theological point was the only important thing and the rest of the message is to be credited to the culture in which the prophets lived. Concerning E. G. White one should ask, how do we identify that which is culturally conditioned in her writings? What about her end-time scenario? Is that also culturally conditioned? The best approach is to examine each case on its own merits. Making open-ended remarks that will function as a kind of overarching hermeneutical principle that will solve all real or imaginary problems, creates more problems than it solves.

It is correct to believe that the primary purpose or goal of God's revelation is to exalt and point to Christ. But in achieving that goal the Bible becomes a vehicle for the revelation of God's manifold wisdom in salvation, creation, and the historical development of His plan of salvation. The Bible provides a Christ-centered worldview, a philosophy of life and history. In fact history belongs to the essence of divine revelation. If the Bible contains historical inaccuracies or inconsistencies we should examine each one to establish as clearly as possible the reason for them. In some cases we may have to acknowledge that the prophet may not have been well informed. But we should not solve the difficulty by arguing that the scientific or historical information found in the Bible can be simply ignored because the purpose of the Bible is not to deal with history or science but to nurture our spiritual well-being. This is clearly a very narrow view of the nature of inspiration not found in the Bible nor in the writings of E. G. White.

The book by Bradford will not do much damage among church members who are not aware of the issues I am raising. However, it makes a contribution to the development of an Adventist concept of revelation and inspiration that is not representative of what Adventists have considered to be the biblical understanding of the inspiration and authority of the Bible and of the role of E. G. White.