

Issues on Revelation and Inspiration

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The topic of revelation and the inspiration of the Bible has become a central theological issue among Adventist theologians and many interested church members. The significance of the topic cannot be exaggerated since it places on the table for analysis that from which we derive our message and life style. Consequently, the way we understand revelation and inspiration, that is to say the very nature of the Bible, will have a direct effect on our faith and practice, and on the role of the interpreter.

Studies made on the history of revelation/inspiration in the Adventist church have indicated that our pioneers simply took for granted the traditional Protestant view of verbal inspiration and that the topic began to be seriously addressed only after 1882.¹ Subsequent discussions of the subject indicate that the church was feeling uncomfortable with verbal inspiration and that other options were being explored, such as the theory of degrees of inspiration proposed by George I. Butler. This theory was soon rejected. An indication of the direction the church would be heading is found in a General Conference statement made in conjunction with the revision of the book *Testimonies to the Church*, by E. G. White, in which it was stated: “We believe the light given by God to His servants is by the enlightenment of the mind, thus imparting the thought, and not (except in rare cases) the very words in which the ideas should be expressed.”² This view came to be known as “thought inspiration.”

In spite of that statement, most Adventists continued to adhere to verbal inspiration and in some cases to mechanical inspiration. The topic of revelation/inspiration became particularly sensitive during the revision of the book *Great Controversy*. Since E. G. White was

considered to be a prophetess, and since the prevailing view was that of verbal inspiration, it was unimaginable to many that her writings would undergo revisions. They should be free from errors. However, she made it clear that she never believed in verbal inspiration, and in the introduction to the Great Controversy she established what she believed was the proper understanding of revelation/inspiration. She simply indicated that revelation operates on the whole person infusing the human mind with divine thoughts.

However, the socio-theological context of the Adventist church in North America directly contributed to the promotion of verbal inspiration. In their struggles against modernism Evangelicals promoted verbal inspiration, and many Adventists who faced the same challenges continued to support verbal inspiration. The 1919 Bible Conference held in Washington DC, July 1-21, 1919, indicated that Adventists were divided on the topic, some still maintaining verbal inspiration and others denying it. During the first half of the 20th century the prevailing theory was that of verbal inspiration. But by the 1950s thought inspiration was beginning to become the main position of the church. The first edition of the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1966) stated that “we do not believe in verbal inspiration, according to the usual meaning of the term, but in what may be properly called thought inspiration.”³

At the moment when a consensus was being reached by the church on the topic of revelation/inspiration another challenge appeared on the theological horizon: The Encounter Theory of Revelation. Encounter theory argued that revelation consisted of an existential encounter between the prophet and God in which God did not communicate any information to the human instrument. The content of the Bible is the prophets’ feeble and fallible interpretation of that personal encounter. The Bible is a witness to that encounter but it does not contain any revelation from God to us; it is a book like any other book. The impact of this theory, coming from non-Adventist liberal theologians, was not significant mainly because a number of Adventist theologians were able to disarm it.⁴

The last quarter of the twentieth century was characterized among Adventists not only by issues related to revelation/inspiration but also by biblical hermeneutics and the inroads of the historical-critical method. Since then much has been written by Adventist theologians on that topic. Concerning hermeneutics, the world church officially rejected the critical methodology because it placed human beings as judges over the Bible. On the topic of revelation-inspiration, Fundamental Belief number one voted at the General Conference Session in 1980 states:

The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history.⁵

This statement establishes, through the use of biblical language, that the Bible is of divine origin and that God was involved in the process of transmitting and recording the divine revelation. It avoids the phrase “thought inspiration” as well as the idea that the very words of the Bible were dictated by the Spirit to the prophet. In spite of the fact that thought inspiration is not explicitly mentioned in Fundamental Belief number one it has become the predominant view among Adventists. Unfortunately, this view has more recently been misused by placing it at the service of the historical-critical methodology.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century thought inspiration has been radically separated from the words of the Bible. It is now argued by some Adventist theologians that the theological task is to uncover the thoughts God revealed to the prophets and not the means they used to embody that thought—e.g. the culturally conditioned story they told or the culturally determined legal materials found in the Bible. This dichotomy between thought and

words allows them to argue, for instance, that we should consider the story recorded in Gen 1 to be an ancient Near Eastern cultural expression used by the biblical writer to communicate the divine thought revealed to him, namely that God is the Creator of everything. That is what was revealed and not that God created in six days and rested on the seventh (the how of creation). Behind this view lurks Greek dualism. Accordingly the “thought” would be the equivalent of the “soul” and the “word” would be the “body.” The task of the interpreter would be to release the thought from the words in order to be able to apprehend the divine.

Such dichotomy is not only foreign to the Bible but it is also absent from the writings of E. G. White. The classical biblical passages on revelation/inspiration (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21) indicate that they used the term inspiration to refer to the origin of the revelation as well as to the end-result of it, the Scripture. They make clear that God was involved in the revelation/inspiration process from beginning to end and that the way the prophets expressed the divine thought was under the guidance of the Spirit. God appropriated the words of the prophets (Ezek 2:7; Jer 1:7) and made sure that they were able to deliver the message in a trustworthy way. The Lord asked Jeremiah, “What do you see?”, and after he described the vision the Lord said, “You have seen correctly” (Jer 1:11-12). Such guidance did not grant the prophets divine perfection in their work. The human element is always present and becomes particularly visible in some biblical discrepancies.

Any attempt to interpret the concept of thought inspiration in E. G. White along the lines of the radical dichotomy that we mentioned is a distortion of what she has to say on the subject. Here is her classical statement:

It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of

the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.⁶

According to her, God addresses the totality of the person and not only one aspect of the personality of the prophets, e.g. the verbal skills of the prophets. Second, what she is describing is the mysterious process through which the divine message or word is “incarnated” into the human condition. The divine mind, she says, is diffused. And by that she means that the divine mind and will are combined with the human mind and will in such a way that what is expressed by the human instrument—“the utterances of the man”—are “the word of God.”

E. G. White does not separate in a drastic way the reception of the message from its delivery. She emphasizes that the words used were not given to the prophet from the divine language or vocabulary, but she insists that in recording the message the Spirit was directly involved: “Although I am as dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in writing my views as I am in receiving them, yet the words I employ in describing what I have seen are my own, unless they be those spoken to me by an angel, which I always enclose in marks of quotation.”⁷

The process of revelation/inspiration reaches the words even though the words themselves are not inspired, that is to say they do not represent the divine language per se and neither were they dictated by the Spirit. However the Spirit guided the prophets in the writing process in the sense that the Spirit made sure that the prophets used to the best of their abilities their own vocabulary to express the message they received in a trustworthy and reliable form. E. G. White suggests that possibility when she comments that there were times when she was not certain of how to express herself and then “the appropriate words” came to her mind.⁸

Obviously the debate among us on the topic of revelation/inspiration will continue. However, any view that undermines or tends to undermine the authority of the Scripture or

that places human beings as judges over it must be rejected as incompatible with the very nature of the Word of God.

¹See Alberto Ronald Timm, “A History of Seventh-day Adventist Church Views on Biblical and Prophetic Inspiration (1844-2000),” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 10.1,2 (Spring-Autumn 1999): 486-542.

²“General Conference Proceedings,” *Review and Herald*, Nov 27, 1883, 741-742.

³Don F. Neufeld, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1966), 585.

⁴See among others, Edward Heppenstall, “Revelation and Inspiration,” *Ministry*, August 1970; Raoul Dederen, “Revelation, Inspiration, and Hermeneutics,” in *Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, edited by Gordon M. Hyde (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Committee, 1974), 1-15; and idem., “Toward a Seventh-day Adventist Theology of Revelation-Inspiration,” in *North American Bible Conference 1974* (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Committee, 1974).

⁵*Yearbook: Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference, 2004), p. 5.

⁶1 *SM*, p. 21 (Manuscript 24, 1886; written in Europe in 1886).

⁷1 *SM*, p. 37. In another place she writes, “I am just as dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in relating or writing the vision as in having the vision” (3 *SM*, p. 48).

⁸1 *MCP*, p. 318.