

Andrews University

## Digital Commons @ Andrews University

---

Memory, Meaning & Life

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

---

7-2-2010

### Higher-Critical Thinking And Its Effects (Part II)

Roy Gane

Andrews University, gane@andrews.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/mml>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Gane, Roy, "Higher-Critical Thinking And Its Effects (Part II)" (2010). *Memory, Meaning & Life*. 38.  
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/mml/38>

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Memory, Meaning & Life by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact [repository@andrews.edu](mailto:repository@andrews.edu).

# [Memory, Meaning & Faith](#)

- [Main](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archives](#)

« [Contemporary Scholars On Historical Criticism](#) | [Main](#) | [Higher-Critical Thinking And Its Effects \(Part III\)](#)  
»

## July 02, 2010

### Higher-Critical Thinking And Its Effects (Part II)

In the [first post](#) of this series, I discussed some strategies for attempting to change Scripture in order to avoid allowing its system of divine principles to guide belief and lifestyle (against [2 Tim 3:16-17](#)). Strategies that have been employed through the centuries include: cut out what you don't like, supplement Scripture, or treat it as obsolete. Here is another strategy, which has become highly developed:

#### **Treat It As Merely Human.**

During the so-called "Age of Enlightenment" (mainly in the 1700s), brilliant thinkers asserted that authority over human life was primarily based on human reason. The Bible, which establishes paramount divine authority, got in the way of this notion. So some learned individuals claimed that at least parts of the Bible are merely a human production, which brings these portions down to the level of human reason. This approach, which is still widespread in biblical scholarship, claims that the Word of God is contained in Scripture, but there are parts of Scripture that are not the Word of God (so said [Semler](#)).

If some parts of the Bible record or reflect authentic messages from God and others do not, the huge problem is how to differentiate between these components. The process is somewhat like an archaeological excavation, which sifts through a lot of material to find what is valuable. With regard to a prophetic book, such as Ezekiel, the question is: Which words originated with the prophet himself, who had direct access to God, and which words were added later by other people, whose thoughts were merely their own?

In a seminar on Ezekiel at the University of California, Berkeley in 1982, visiting professor [Moshe Greenberg](#) (from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) told our class about the range of critical commentaries on Ezekiel. The most conservative (Fohrer) said that two-thirds of the book went back to the prophet. The most radical (Holscher) had rather arbitrarily decided that Ezekiel only wrote in a poetic style, of which he found only 17 verses out of 48 chapters.

With disagreement of such magnitude, how can anyone be sure what comes from God?

#### **Critical Tools**

Scholars have developed finely tuned "tools" to identify original human elements in the Bible's formation, such as authors/sources, editors/redactors, literary forms/genres arising from particular life situations, and the origin and development of units of traditional material cited in the Bible. It is true that human sources, redactors, forms, and traditions played important roles in development of Scripture. But the Bible supplies

only sketchy information regarding these, in accord with its own concern to project its messages as originating from God.

Of course it is legitimate to investigate all information that the Bible provides regarding its human authorship, including its authors/sources, editors, literary forms, etc. But solid Biblical information is not enough for “critical” scholars bent on virtually editing the biblical text by attempting to separate human from divine material (see Roy Gane, “[An Approach to the Historical-Critical Method](#),” *Ministry*). So they rely on internal literary clues—such as narrative disconnects (real or apparent) and differences in style—to speculatively reconstruct different strands of authorship.

It is true that the Bible contains different strands of authorship. Books such as Numbers, Chronicles, and Luke explicitly state that they used some oral or written sources. There were also editors, such as the anonymous individual(s) who added Deuteronomy 34, regarding Moses’ death. But scholars go beyond solid evidence to hypothetically reconstruct Yahwistic (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomistic (D), and Priestly (P) sources of the Pentateuch, dating from centuries after Moses, whose historical existence is disbelieved or doubted.

If there was no Moses as the primary human author of the books attributed to him by Jesus and the apostles (e.g., [Lk 24:27](#)), he did not receive authoritative messages from God, including instructions for a sanctuary and its services that could serve as an accurate typology of greater and future salvific realities (e.g., [Heb 7-10](#)). In fact, many critical scholars do not believe that the sanctuary, including the ark of the covenant, ever existed as material, historical entities; they were only imaginative inventions of Israelite folklore.

## **Unreasonable Criticism**

The terms “criticism,” “critical,” or “critic” can be positive, as when an art critic analyzes a Rembrandt painting, a rhetorical critic uncovers a literary arch pattern that helps us to understand and appreciate a prophetic oracle, or a textual critic sorts through variants in biblical manuscripts. But source, form, redaction, and tradition criticism are modes of so-called “higher-criticism” that impose human reason over the Bible in ways that affect how people receive its meaning, message, credibility, and authority. Reason itself is good and God-given as an indispensable ally of faith, but reason that displaces God is arrogant and ultimately unreasonable.

Modern critical scholarship of the Bible claims to be “scientific.” But it routinely breaks one of the cardinal rules of science by attempting to build conclusions on analysis of data that it has altered through speculation to fit its presuppositions. A biologist, chemist, or social scientist would not last long if (s)he indulged in a circular approach by adding to or taking away from raw material or data that was supposed to serve as the subject of investigation. But biblical scholars reach the highest levels of academia by publishing erudite theories based on humanly edited versions of the biblical text.

When Moshe Greenberg told our class about the range of critical commentaries on Ezekiel (see above), I asked him where his forthcoming [Anchor Bible Commentary](#) on this biblical book would fit in the spectrum. He replied that his work would not likely be regarded as a critical commentary because he does not believe that the task of a commentator should include editing the text of Scripture. This revealed (1) his integrity as a researcher who does not alter his data, and (2) his understanding that the word “critical” in the context of “[historical-]critical commentary” refers to a process that involves editing the biblical text, which has come down to us in various manuscript forms, in a speculative attempt to reconstruct an original (and therefore divinely authoritative) text. “Critical” does not simply mean that a scholar takes all available and relevant contextual, linguistic, and historical data into account when interpreting the text, as Greenberg does in a masterfully comprehensive way.

It is true that critical scholars and their commentaries have made great contributions to our understanding of the Bible, which we can safely identify only if we are well equipped to differentiate between real data with conclusions logically derived from it versus speculative interpretations. But in recent decades, many biblical scholars have moved away from frustrating attempts to reconstruct earlier phases of the text, which have yielded endless debates about identification of human agents involved in authorship and the extent of their activities, but have not contributed to confidence in divine messages. These scholars prefer to focus on the rich history, meaning, and literary artistry of the existing Bible, which presents enough challenges and rewards for everyone.

## Questions

- What evidence can you find in the Bible regarding its human authorship?
- Why do you think critical scholars are obsessed with reconstructing hypothetical earlier stages of the biblical text?
- Do influences of historical-critical scholarship affect attitudes of non-scholarly Christians and Jews toward the Bible, perhaps partly because many pastors and rabbis are trained by historical-critical scholars? If so, do these influences enhance or detract from faith in God?

---

To read [Part III](#) of this series, [click here](#).

Posted by [Roy Gane](#) on July 02, 2010 in [History of Interpretation](#), [Philosophy of History](#) | [Permalink](#)

[Save to del.icio.us](#) | The Way...

## Comments

You can follow this conversation by subscribing to the [comment feed](#) for this post.

## Verify your Comment

## Previewing your Comment

Posted by: |

This is only a preview. Your comment has not yet been posted.

Post

Edit

Your comment could not be posted. Error type:

Your comment has been posted. [Post another comment](#)

The letters and numbers you entered did not match the image. Please try again.

As a final step before posting your comment, enter the letters and numbers you see in the image below. This prevents automated programs from posting comments.

Having trouble reading this image? [View an alternate](#).

Continue

# Post a comment

## [About](#)

[Memory, Meaning & Faith](#) is a blog covering Christian history in light of contemporary issues.

- [Why We're Here](#)
- [Who We Are](#)
- [What We Believe](#)
- [Commenting Guidelines](#)

## [Subscribe](#)

[Weekly Email Newsletter](#)

## Search

## Popular Posts

- [What Did The Adventist Pioneers Think About Women In Ministry?](#)
- ["Our College" Today](#)
- [The Hour Of His Judgment Is Come](#)
- [Higher Critical Thinking \(Part I\)](#)
- [The Trinity Is A Paradox](#)
- [The Great Commission Inside The Church](#)
- [Arminianism and Adventism Symposium](#)

## Recent Comments

- [Florin Laiu](#) on [2012 Seminary Scholarship Symposium: "Reception of Ellen White's Trinitarian Statements by Her Contemporaries \(1897-1915\)"](#)
- [Florin Laiu](#) on [Higher-Critical Thinking And Its Effects \(Part I\)](#)
- [Joseph](#) on [The Hour Of His Judgment Is Come](#)
- [DC](#) on [The "Found" World of Genesis 1: Is Theistic Evolution a Meaningful Option for Seventh-day Adventists?](#)
- [DC](#) on [2012 Ellen White Issues Symposium: "Threads from an Old Fabric: New Discoveries Regarding the Holy Flesh Movement in Indiana \(1899-1901\) and Ellen White's Response"](#)
- [Rebekah Allen](#) on [What Did Early Adventist Pioneers Think About Women in Ministry?](#)

- [Denis Kaiser](#) on [2012 Seminary Scholarship Symposium: "Reception of Ellen White's Trinitarian Statements by Her Contemporaries \(1897-1915\)"](#)
- [Steve M](#) on [2012 Seminary Scholarship Symposium: "Reception of Ellen White's Trinitarian Statements by Her Contemporaries \(1897-1915\)"](#)
- [Dojein Zivadinovic](#) on [2012 Ellen White Issues Symposium: "Threads from an Old Fabric: New Discoveries Regarding the Holy Flesh Movement in Indiana \(1899-1901\) and Ellen White's Response"](#)
- [Nicholas Miller](#) on [Adventists and Ecumenism: The Good and the Bad](#)

## Categories

- [2010 Adventist Historians' Conference](#)
- [2012 Seminary Scholarship Symposium](#)
- [Adventist Studies](#)
- [Archaeology](#)
- [Arminianism and Adventism Symposium](#)
- [Biblical Backgrounds](#)
- [Blog Information](#)
- [Book Review](#)
- [Church and Society](#)
- [Church History](#)
- [Ellen White Symposium](#)
- [Historical Theology](#)
- [History of Interpretation](#)
- [Missions and Ministry](#)
- [Philosophy of History](#)
- [Quotable](#)
- [Science and Theology](#)

## **Recent Posts**

- [2012 Ellen White Issues Symposium: "Ellen G. White on Leadership and Power"](#)
- [2012 Ellen White Issues Symposium: "Threads from an Old Fabric: New Discoveries Regarding the Holy Flesh Movement in Indiana \(1899-1901\) and Ellen White's Response"](#)
- [2012 Ellen White Issues Symposium: "Can a Biblical Inspired Writer Use Literary Sources?"](#)
- [2012 Ellen White Issues Symposium: "D. M. Canright and Inspiration: The Origin of a Crisis"](#)
- [2012 Ellen White Issues Symposium: "Ellen White and Me"](#)
- [2012 Seminary Scholarship Symposium: "The Authoritative Hermeneutics in Irenaeus and Tertullian"](#)
- [2012 Seminary Scholarship Symposium: "Reception of Ellen White's Trinitarian Statements by Her Contemporaries \(1897-1915\)"](#)
- [2012 Seminary Scholarship Symposium: "A Theology of Music Among Sabbatarian Adventists, 1849-1863"](#)
- [Adventists and Ecumenism: The Good and the Bad](#)
- [The "Found" World of Genesis 1 Part II: How Does Science Inform Theology](#)

## Archives

- [April 2012](#)
- [March 2012](#)

- [February 2012](#)
- [August 2011](#)
- [June 2011](#)
- [May 2011](#)
- [April 2011](#)
- [March 2011](#)
- [February 2011](#)
- [January 2011](#)

[More...](#)

## [Sponsor](#)

[Memory Meaning & Faith](#) is sponsored by the [Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary](#) at [Andrews University](#).

- [Contact](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Feeds](#)

[Powered by TypePad](#)

Copyright © 2010 Andrews University