

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Memory, Meaning & Life

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

12-17-2010

Higher-Critical Thinking and Its Effects (Part VI)

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 VI)" (2010). *Memory, Meaning & Life*. 78.
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/mml/78>

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.

Memory, Meaning & Faith

[Main](#)

[About](#)

[Archives](#)

December 17, 2010

Higher-Critical Thinking and Its Effects (Part VI)

To read Roy Gane's previous suggestions regarding the relationship between Genesis and science, [click here](#).



This series on what I call “Higher-Critical Thinking” has discussed a number of strategies by which people attempt to alter the meaning of Scripture so that its divine message does not impinge upon their beliefs and lifestyle. Here is another one:

Make the Bible conform to political correctness.

I have become aware of this approach when some individuals have taken offense to written or oral presentations in which I was simply presenting what the Bible unambiguously says. While they were ostensibly objecting to what I said, it was obvious that their real quarrel was with the Bible.

The first such occasion that I recall came after publication in 1996 of my adult Sabbath School lesson study guide (quarterly): Judges: Deterioration and Deliverance. A few months later, I received a letter from a woman who blasted me because I had insulted her by referring to the obesity of Eglon, the repulsive ancient king of Moab who oppressed Israel and was assassinated by Ehud, the Israelite deliverer ([Judg.3](#)). It was clear that to her, mention of obesity was “off-limits” because it placed a pejorative value judgment on a person.

Of course I heartily agree that we should be sensitive to the feelings of others, including when we refer to bodily characteristics and challenges. But for several reasons, it is not possible to get the point of Ehud’s assassination of Eglon in practical or theological terms without negative reference to the extreme royal corpulence:

1. “The obesity of Eglon (see [verse 17](#)) was a potential obstacle to the effectiveness of a sword short enough to be concealed (see [verse 16](#)), but the facts that the king stood up and Ehud struck so hard that he used the maximum potential of the sword’s length (including the handle!) aided Ehud in killing the king.” ([Roy Gane, God’s Faulty Heroes](#) [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996], 41).
2. “When Eglon’s servants found him dead, the cause of his death would not have been immediately apparent, due to the fact that Ehud’s sword was buried/concealed in the body of the king. Any confusion of the Moabites regarding the cause of death would have delayed their pursuit of Ehud.” (Ibid.).
3. The name “Eglon” likely means “calf.” So scholars have recognized that an Israelite who heard the story would receive the

distinct impression that the Moabite oppressor was like a fatted calf ready to be slaughtered.

4. The Bible describes Eglon's demise in physically repulsive terms (my description was very mild by comparison!), which fitted his character. "However, we must keep in mind that grotesqueness, satire, and comical twists in the story not only rivet the reader's attention and elevate the Israelites at the expense of their enemies, they also contribute to a profound theological and historical point: ...Opposing God is foolishness!" (Ibid., 42). In other words, it is fatuous nonsense.

In my study guide and its companion book (God's Faulty Heroes), I dealt with and tried to accurately reflect the story of Eglon (without overemphasizing its offensive aspects) because it was there—in the Bible. The problem is that the Bible is not politically correct: It offends people through expressions that are not currently deemed polite. Individuals such as the woman who wrote to me are OK with leaving such a story in the Bible, just as long as everyone ignores it. That is, we are supposed to treat the Bible as if the story is not there because it is not nice. This state of denial avoids a disturbing question: If God is responsible for what is in the Bible, is he not nice?

A Loving God

Is our loving Creator-God, who cares about sparrows and numbers our hairs (Matt 10:29-31) really less sensitive to human feelings than we are? Or does he sometimes have reasons for risking offense that outweigh the imperatives of politeness? During His earthly ministry, Jesus was very sensitive to feelings (see, e.g., Lk 7:36-50; Jn 4). But when a Canaanite woman from Phoenicia kept entreating him to cast a demon from her daughter, Jesus replied: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Matt 15:26; NRSV here and below). Talk about a politically incorrect insult! But Jesus was simultaneously testing her faith and teaching His disciples to revise their attitudes toward Gentiles, for the ultimate benefit of millions of people. On that occasion, those priorities were more important than being nice on a superficial level. God also shows great sensitivity in the Old Testament. For example, the Lord says in Isaiah 66: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you" (v. 13). But two chapters earlier, the prophet says: "all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth" (64:6 [Hebrew v. 5]). The real meaning of the Hebrew expression rendered "filthy cloth" is so jarring that modern English translators don't have the courage to render it literally: "cloth of a menstrual period," i.e. for modern readers, a used maxi-pad. For an ancient Hebrew reader/hearer, this language would have been even more extreme and disturbing because menstruation was a form of physical ritual impurity that had to be kept away from the sacred domain (e.g., Lev 15). So why would a prophet of God deploy such disgusting language, which we would never think of using in polite speech among ourselves, let alone in a sermon? Apparently it was more important for Isaiah to emphasize the extreme inadequacy of human works for salvation and utter dependency on divine grace than it was for him to be "nice."

Even more "Political Incorrectness"

There are much more serious clashes between the Bible and "political correctness" than the issue of giving offense regarding matters such as obesity. A few years ago I made a public presentation regarding the Israelites' divine mandate to exterminate all of the corrupt inhabitants of Canaan in holy war (e.g., Deut 20:16-17). I reluctantly had to write on this topic in my commentary on Numbers because such a policy toward non-Israelites, which modern people would term "genocide," is recorded in that book (see Roy Gane, Leviticus, Numbers [NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004], 771-777 on Num 31). After my presentation, there was an outcry against the idea that God would ever actually authorize such atrocities. The idea came through that Moses and the Israelites must have mistakenly supposed that God commanded holy war!

According to the Bible, Moses was the great prophet who uniquely enjoyed face-to-face access to God (Num 12:6-8; Deut 34:10) and was barred from the Promised Land for failing to properly represent God in one particular (Num 20:10-12). If direct biblical assertions that Moses received his cues from God regarding holy war (e.g., Num 31; Deut 7 [cf. 6:1]; cf. Josh 6; 1 Sam 15) are false, how can we trust anything else in the Pentateuch? Or in the later biblical books recorded by lesser individuals, including the New Testament writers. Do you want to believe in Jesus? He treated the laws of Moses as divinely authoritative (e.g., Matt 8:4; Mk 12:26; Lk 24:27). If He was mistaken about Moses, how could He be the Son of God?

Once we start bracketing out parts of the Bible that we deem inaccurate because they do not conform to our notions of what a good God can or cannot do, everything logically unravels and none of the Bible has any credibility whatsoever. By virtually

editing Scripture, we put our own authority in place of God's like other higher-critical thinkers, such as those who physically cut out what they don't like (Jefferson), obscure its meaning with an overlay of human tradition, or separate divine from human elements through historical-critical methodologies. The logical outcome of such approaches is agnosticism.

Why not let God be God and admit that He is not bound by constraints of "political correctness"? He loves the world (Jn 3:16) and does not want any to perish (2 Pet 3:9). But when He has exhausted His options in reaching people with salvation and they still reject Him, He abandons them to destruction (e.g., Isa 5:4-7). In fact, He takes responsibility for destruction of the finally impenitent as an unpleasant task that is alien to His nature (Isa 28:21). His retributive justice directly and miraculously annihilated the entire pre-Flood world (Gen 7), Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19), and Israelite rebels (Num 16, 25), and He will ultimately destroy all evil, including rebels against His government, with fire (Rev 20). In this way He will end all suffering and death caused by sin and oppressors (cf. Rev 21).

According to the Bible, the idolatrous inhabitants of Canaan, who had enjoyed four centuries of grace (Gen 15:13, 16), richly deserved direct destruction by God (cf. Lev 18:3, 24-25). In fact, He was planning to personally drive them out of the Promised Land before His people (Exod 23:23, 27-31) so that they would not lead the Israelites to worship other gods (23:33). But when the Israelites initially refused to take the land by faith (Num 14), God subsequently required more active cooperation in warfare to develop their trust in Him (Deut 7, 20; cf. Judg 3). In this way God accomplished two things at once: He executed the wicked and taught the Israelites, who served as His agent of destruction for a limited time in a very limited geographical area. This by no means legitimates any form of holy war during the Christian era. Already three millennia ago, God meted out punishment resulting from the misguided zeal of King Saul, who initiated genocide on the Gibeonites without direct authorization from Him (2 Sam 21).

This doesn't mean that we feel comfortable about what happened to the Canaanites or that we fully understand the ways of God. But the fate of those ancient people can be a warning to us, and also a motivation for us to reach out to all the modern "Canaanites" around us so that they can be saved as Rahab was (Josh 2, 6).

Another Battleground?

Speaking of the Canaanites, Leviticus 18:3 says: "...and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you." Following is a list of laws against incest, sex during menstruation, adultery, Molech worship, homosexual practice, and sex with animals (vv. 6-23). Verse 24 begins the conclusion to the chapter: "Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants" (vv. 24-25).

Here in Leviticus 18:22 we find the hottest current battleground between the Bible and "political correctness": homosexual practice. Leviticus 20 raises the stakes: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them" (v. 13). Needless to say, this is radically "politically incorrect." However, notice two crucial points:

1. That which is condemned is not homosexual tendencies, but acting on them.
2. The death sentence was to be administered under the ancient Israelite theocratic judicial system, which no longer exists. In modern secular states, we should respect the human rights of all citizens, including those who commit adultery and homosexual acts.

The New Testament raises the stakes even higher:

"Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." (1 Cor 6:9-11).

The good news is: There is redemption for sinners when they accept the transforming, free grace of God provided through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This miraculous change is available for those whose sins are humanly impossible to overcome. The apostle Paul knew actual people in Corinth like that: "And this is what some of you used to be." But those who choose to keep their sins, rather than giving them up to God's cleansing, sanctifying, justifying process will not go to heaven. This applies to any sinners, and would also be true of more "respectable" categories of the "morally challenged," such

as the self-righteous.

But the fact that “sodomites,” i.e., practicing homosexuals (v. 9; cf. [NASB95](#); [NIV](#)), cannot be saved as such without giving up their lifestyle is offensive to some Christians. After a public presentation in which I discussed the biblical view of homosexual practice, a few individuals were clearly angry with me because I presented what the Bible said (see further Gane, Leviticus, Numbers, 325-330; also Roy Gane, “Same-Sex Love in the ‘Body of Christ?’” in [Christianity and Homosexuality: Some Seventh-day Adventist Perspectives](#) [ed. David Ferguson, Fritz Guy, and David Larson; Roseville, CA: Adventist Forum, 2008], Part 4–63-72). Shame on anyone who permits the sacred book to contradict the higher cultural norm and authority (and therefore God) that they have adopted: “political correctness”!

Insofar as “political correctness” seeks to be inclusive and to protect people from being hurt or marginalized, it has healthy intentions that coincide with strong social concerns in the Bible (see, e.g., [Exod 21](#); [Lev 19, 25](#); [Isa 58](#)). But any social consensus or contract, including “political correctness,” goes too far when it attempts to stifle discussion, revise sacred history, or replace God as the ultimate arbiter of morality. If someone doesn’t want to accept the Bible, they should just admit it, rather than attempting to virtually re-write part of it or to attack someone else who presents it without rewriting it.

A Purpose of Scripture

I began this series with another passage by Paul: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” ([2 Tim 3:16-17](#); emphasis supplied). Some of Scripture may be hard to understand ([2 Pet 3:16](#)), but all of it is our friend from God to enhance the quality of our existence in this life and the life to come.

Like a friendly physician, the Bible sometimes wounds us so that we can be healed. As the wise man said: “Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but profuse are the kisses of an enemy” ([Prov 27:6](#)). As sinners, our only safe course is to submit to the accurate surgery of Scripture, rather than seizing the scalpel ourselves to discard it or to make light scratches of our own choosing rather than deep incisions. “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” ([Heb 4:12](#)).

Our only compassionate approach to other sinners is not to treat their condition lightly by saying, “Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” ([Jer 6:14](#); [8:11](#)), as if their problems are inconsequential. Rather, it is to introduce them to Jesus, the Friend of sinners, who came to “save his people from (not in) their sins” ([Matt 1:21](#); emphasis and parenthesis supplied) in order to give them true and enduring peace with God ([Rom 5:1](#)).


Questions

- Can you think of other areas in which the Bible conflicts with “political correctness”?
- Are there parts of the Bible that offend or at least disturb you? Why? Do you see how this tension can be resolved? If not, how will you cope with it?
- How does the Bible balance negative and positive aspects of its Gospel appeal, such as warnings and comfort, curses and blessings? How can we balance them in our ministry to others?
- How can we help people who have been so influenced by cultural norms that they place them above biblical authority?
- Do you regard the Bible as your friend?

Posted by [Roy Gane](#) on December 17, 2010 in [Biblical Backgrounds](#), [Church and Society](#), [History of Interpretation](#) | [Permalink](#)

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

Comments

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

I distinctly remember the emotional fire I felt as I was converting to the Christian faith-- and learned what Christianity taught about gender issues. I struggled hard with issues like abortion, marriage relationships, homosexuality, and what appeared to me to be the disenfranchisement of women in the Bible. A point came when I told the Lord: I don't understand this, but I trust You and I'm going to follow Your Word.

These several years later I see that was the best possible course. God opened up to me many wider, broader truths that clarified my questions. Sometimes He changed my views on the issue, other times He helped me see that I had misunderstood what the Bible was saying. But in both cases the resolution came as I trusted Him and His Word.

There are still parts of the Bible that offend or disturb me, and as I wrestle with them I repeat that prayer: "Lord, I don't understand this, but I trust You and I'm going to follow Your Word." Why does Paul sound so misogynistic sometimes? What is up with episodes ethnically directed genocide? Why was the sign of the covenant something that women could not participate in? But I know that the answers will only come when I'm willing to hear.

Posted by: Kessia Reyne | [January 03, 2011 at 01:52 PM](#)

Beautifully put Kessia. What happens when we surrender our values and interpretations and trust in His divine will and revelation? Perhaps we'll stop trying to become plates and allow the Lord to form us into cups. Or stop arguing as to why we are vessels of wrath because we would more enjoy being vessels of grace. Your affirmation of His supremacy above ours is the Spirit of the Gospel, the Faith of Jesus.

Posted by: David de la Vega | [January 03, 2011 at 02:16 PM](#)

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



[Contact](#)

[Archives](#)

[Feeds](#)

Powered by [TypePad](#)

Copyright © 2010 Andrews University