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Frank M. Hasel
Bogenhofen Seminary

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ELLEN G. WHITE AND CREATIONISM

**The ongoing debate between
Creationists and Evolutionists presents a unique
challenge to the Adventist faith.**

The interpretation of Ellen G. White's statements on creation and evolution is important for two reasons. First, any reading of her writings quickly confirms the fact that she affirmed the biblical teaching of creation as it is established in the Old and New Testament on a literal, historical reading of the text. Second, Jesus Himself affirmed the biblical creation account as historical and normative. Therefore, the biblical teaching of creation is a crucial belief that has far-reaching consequences for the Seventh-day Adventist Church¹ because we

are grounded on the written Word of God and follow Jesus, the incarnate Word of God.

It seems that the issue of creation and evolution has more far-reaching implications for the Adventist Church than did the Desmond Ford issue in the 1980s. Indeed, what is at stake is much more than simply a conflict that can easily be tucked away as a clash between faith and science that otherwise has relatively

**Frank M. Hasel, Ph.D., is Dean of the Theological Seminary at Bogenhofen Seminary, Austria.*

little impact on the rest of what we believe. The doctrine of creation is so prominent in the Bible and in the writings of Ellen White—and is so intimately connected with other fundamental beliefs—that a change in this point inevitably will affect other foundational teachings of the Bible that we as Adventists uphold.

Creation recently has been termed “the *Sine Qua Non* of Adventism.”² It is “an article of faith on which the Seventh-day Adventist Church stands or falls.”³

Further, Ellen G. White and her statements on creation and related issues inevitably raise some important questions. From its inception, the Adventist Church has maintained that Ellen White was inspired in the same manner and to the same degree as biblical prophets, even though Adventists believe that her writings are not “another Bible.” A recent book on the fundamental beliefs of the Adventist Church, published by the Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, unambiguously states: “The writings of Ellen White are not a substitute for Scripture. They cannot be placed on the same level. The Holy Scriptures stand alone—the unique standard by which her and all other writings must be judged and to which they must be subject.”⁴

This is also expressed in the official Fundamental Belief 18, entitled

“The Gift of Prophecy,” which asserts that the writings of Ellen G. White “also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.”⁵ At the same time, Fundamental Belief 18 affirms that “her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction.”⁶

Therefore, her statements on creation and the origin of life raise crucial questions on important topics such as the nature and scope of inspiration, the relationship between the writings of Ellen G. White and the Bible, proper hermeneutics, and the authority of inspired writings as they relate to science.

These issues and their implications are crucial not only for our understanding of Ellen G. White and her statements on creation and evolution, but also for our understanding of the biblical position on creation and related issues.

Ellen G. White Affirmed Creation

There is no need to spend much time in recounting that Ellen G. White did believe in Creation and affirmed it time and again. Yet it is helpful to be reminded briefly of a few aspects that were affirmed by Ellen G. White with regard to creation:

- *Ellen G. White affirmed a supernatural creation.* According to

Ellen G. White, creation was not the result of natural causes.⁷ Rather, in creation the agency of a personal God is manifest⁸: “the earth came forth from the hand of its Maker.”⁹ For Ellen White, the power to create is “the prerogative of God alone.”¹⁰ All things were created by God.¹¹ Hence, the creation of humankind did not take place through impersonal factors in nature, but through “the agency of a personal God.”¹² Thus, humanity was the crowning act in God’s creation.¹³

• *Ellen G. White affirms a creation in six literal, historically consecutive 24-hour days.* Ellen G. White not only affirmed a supernatural creation through a personal God, but she also described creation as having taken place in six literal, historical, consecutive, contiguous, 24-hour days. The days of creation were not “vast, indefinite periods, covering thousands or even millions of years.”¹⁴ To her, “each successive day of creation . . . consisted of the evening and the morning, like all other days that have followed.”¹⁵ In other words, the days of creation week were real 24-hour days, as we know them today.

She was shown “that the first week, in which God performed the work of creation in six days and rested on the seventh day, was just like every other week.”¹⁶ Thus, the seventh 24-hour day of creation week formed the basis of the institu-

tion of the Sabbath day at the beginning of the world.¹⁷ The Sabbath was instituted at the close of creation week.¹⁸ Therefore, the Sabbath is as old as the world itself and is a memorial of creation¹⁹ and a commemoration of creation for all humankind.²⁰ Ellen G. White acknowledges: “Just how God accomplished the work of creation in six literal days he has never revealed to mortals. His creative works are just as incomprehensible as his existence.”²¹

• *Ellen G. White affirmed a recent creation.* In contrast to very long periods of time for the development of life on this earth, Ellen G. White clearly rejected “millions of years,” as would be “required for the evolution of the earth from chaos.”²²

Neither did Ellen G. White propose indefinite periods of time since the beginning of creation. Instead, for her, the age of the earth should be measured within a short chronology of a few thousand years. She clearly connected a short chronology with the reliability of the biblical record and warned that those who try to “account for God’s creative works upon natural principles . . . are upon a boundless ocean of uncertainty.”²³ She stated: “I have been shown that without Bible history, geology can prove nothing.”²⁴

Ellen G. White wrote that “the bones of human beings and of animals found in the earth, are much larger than those of men and ani-

Thus, in contrast to very long ages, as proposed by evolutionary theory, and in contrast to the so-called active “gap” or “ruin and restoration” theory, in which matter and life were supposedly created eons ago and multiple cataclysms and creations took place over a very long time period, Ellen G. White supported a recent creation of life and humans and probably even matter.

mals now living” and added that “the time of their existence, and how long a period these things have been in the earth, are only to be understood by Bible history.”²⁵

Thus, in contrast to very long ages, as proposed by evolutionary theory, and in contrast to the so-called active “gap” or “ruin and restoration” theory, in which matter and life were supposedly created eons ago and multiple cataclysms and creations took place over a very long time period, Ellen G. White supported a recent creation of life and humans and probably even matter.

• *Ellen G. White affirmed creation ex nihilo.* Ellen G. White connected with God’s creation by supernatural means the idea that pre-existing matter is not needed for creation. “In the creation of the earth, God was not indebted to pre-existing matter. ‘He spake, and it was; . . . He commanded, and it stood fast.’ Psalm 33:9. All things, material or spiritual, stood up before the Lord Jehovah at His voice

and were created for His own purpose. The heavens and all the host of them, the earth and all things therein, came into existence by the breath of His mouth.”²⁶

She thus affirmed what the writer of the Epistle of Hebrews stated under inspiration: “By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible” (Heb. 11:3, NKJV). To Ellen G. White, “The theory that God did not create matter when He brought the world into existence is without foundation. In the formation of our world, God was not indebted to pre-existing matter.”²⁷

Ellen G. White affirmed the historical reliability of Scripture and understood the events described in the Bible as actual historical happenings, including God’s process of creation in seven literal days, a global flood, and God’s miracles. Given the clear affirmation of a creation *ex ni-*

To Ellen G. White, atheistic, evolutionary theories are incompatible with biblical faith. To connect these ideas with biblical creation would be a wrong attempt to bring natural science and Scripture into harmony. To uphold the biblical account of creation only because science's picture of physical process has relaxed in the 20th century so that it is congenial to religious belief would make faith dependent upon science, and science the final authority of faith.

hilo in these statements, Ellen G. White did not support the existence of life forms on earth before the six-day creation. She upheld a high view of Scripture, in which all of Scripture is believed to be inspired by God and therefore to provide a trustworthy and reliable account of God's involvement in this world. This raises the question of her relationship to natural science.

Ellen G. White and Science

While Ellen G. White clearly affirmed a literal understanding of the biblical creation account, she was not antagonistic toward natural science. The words *science* and *sciences* occur frequently in the writings of Ellen G. White. She used the word *science* in a variety of ways. Often she used the word *science* in its root meaning of "knowledge" (from the Latin *scientia*).

Thus she wrote of "the science of salvation,"²⁸ the "science of the

Bible,"²⁹ the "science of Christianity,"³⁰ or the "science of cooking."³¹ When the apostle Paul visited Athens, he "met logic with logic, science [knowledge] with science, philosophy with philosophy."³²

She also used the word *science* to describe physiology, which she called "the science of life,"³³ the "science of human life,"³⁴ or the "science of health."³⁵ It was especially in the area of health and medicine that Ellen G. White appreciated the findings of medical science, and encouraged Seventh-day Adventists to enter these fields. She referred to the work of medical missionaries as "scientific work."³⁶

It was the study of nature, however, that she called "natural science." She believed that "Natural science is a treasure house of knowledge from which every student in the school of Christ may draw."³⁷ Statements like this make it clear that Ellen G. White was not antagonistic toward natural

science. She did not keep faith and science separate from each other or relegate faith and science to different areas that have nothing to do with each other. This would have meant that faith is no longer relevant to all areas of life. Instead, she was convinced that God is the ultimate author of Scripture, and she also believed that “God is the author of science,” and therefore, “. . . rightly understood, science and the written word agree, and each sheds light on the other.”³⁸ This raises the important question of the relationship between Scripture and science, especially as it touches upon questions in the area of creation and evolution.

The Relationship Between Scripture and Science

Perhaps one of the most important and encouraging aspects of Ellen G. White’s understanding of the relationship between Scripture and science is the confidence that both can be in harmony.

For Ellen G. White, nature and the Bible have the same author, and therefore one can expect harmony between them. “Rightly understood, science and the written word agree, and each sheds light on the other.”³⁹

The revealed Word of God and the natural world will be in agreement, for “all truth, whether in nature or in revelation, is consistent with itself in all its manifestations.”⁴⁰ Thus, for Ellen G. White, there was

indeed a friendship between faith and science, but not in the sense that God brought into being a creation that evolved according to evolutionary processes for billions of years.

To her, atheistic, evolutionary theories were incompatible with biblical faith. To connect these ideas with biblical creation would be a wrong attempt to bring natural science and Scripture into harmony. To uphold the biblical account of creation only because science’s picture of physical process has relaxed in the 20th century so that it is congenial to religious belief would make faith dependent upon science, and science the final authority of faith.

Ellen G. White was keenly aware that such harmony is not possible when modern science is conducted independent of any acknowledgement of God and even in opposition to God’s Word. She wrote: “I have been warned that henceforth we shall have a constant contest. *Science, so-called*, and religion will be placed in opposition to each other, because finite men do not comprehend the power and greatness of God.”⁴¹

This science, falsely so-called, is based on human conceptions and theories to the exclusion of the wisdom of God as revealed in His written Word. She warned that “when professedly scientific men treat upon these subjects from a merely human point of view, they will assuredly come to wrong conclusions.

... The greatest minds, if not guided by the word of God in their research, become bewildered in their attempts to trace the relations of science and revelation."⁴² For her, "One of the greatest evils that attends the quest for knowledge, the investigations of science, is the disposition to exalt human reasoning above its true value and its proper sphere. Many attempt to judge of the Creator and His works by their own imperfect knowledge of science."⁴³

When natural causes are the sole explanation for what did take place in creation and the subsequent history of this Earth, "[s]cience, falsely so-called, has been exalted above God."⁴⁴ She specifically warned "against the sophistry in regard to geology and other branches of science falsely so-called, which have not one semblance of truth."⁴⁵ In other words, Ellen G. White opposed a naturalistic worldview of science that excludes God from scientific enterprise.

A harmonious relationship between Scripture and science can occur, however, if science is integrated into faith in such a way that Scripture is retained as the superior and ultimate authority. Ellen G. White wrote in 1894: "Science, so-called, human reasoning and poetry, cannot be passed on as of equal authority with revelation."⁴⁶

In her book, *The Ministry of Healing*, she wrote: "Only that which He sees fit to reveal can we comprehend

of Him. Reason must acknowledge an authority superior to itself. Heart and intellect must bow to the great I AM."⁴⁷ Elsewhere she wrote: "Many professed ministers of the gospel do not accept the whole Bible as the inspired word. One wise man rejects one portion; another questions another part. They set up their judgment as superior to the word; and the Scripture which they do teach rests upon their own authority. Its divine authenticity is destroyed."⁴⁸

In contrast to so-called science, Ellen G. White believed that true science is in harmony with Scripture. From this perspective, it is possible that science and faith can work together in friendship and in harmony. It has been correctly pointed out that "the platform from which Ellen White considered the natural sciences was the Bible. She had absolute confidence in Scripture and believed that everything, including scientific theories, had to be measured by the Word of God."⁴⁹ For Ellen G. White, "The Bible is not to be tested by men's ideas of science, but science is to be brought to the test of the unerring standard."⁵⁰ This means that she integrated natural science into faith. The integration of science into faith implies that faith—or Scripture—has priority over science.

It seems that Ellen G. White was well aware of the theory of evolution that was firmly entrenched in the sci-

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entific community at the beginning of the 20th century, particularly in regard to geology, which had developed the most detailed account of evolutionary thought and the need for long ages. Therefore, she seemed to mention especially the science of geology in connection with the issues in creation and evolution. “Geology has been thought to contradict the literal interpretation of the Mosaic record of the creation. Millions of years, it is claimed, were required for the evolution of the earth from chaos; and in order to accommodate the Bible to this supposed revelation of science, the days of creation are assumed to have been vast, indefinite periods, covering thousands or even millions of years. Such a conclusion is wholly uncalled for. The Bible record is in harmony with itself and with the teaching of nature.”⁵¹

At this point, we should remember that while nature and science have God as their author, neither Scripture nor Ellen G. White attribute the quality of inspiration to nature or science.

The Bible is God’s inspired book. Nature and science are not. Nature is God’s creation and came into existence through God’s special design. As such, it reveals something about God, its creator. But nature and science are not inspired.

Furthermore, nature, as it presently exists, is affected by sin. Therefore nature may render an ambiguous perspective that needs the clear and trustworthy authority of God’s inspired Word in describing the origins of life on this earth. While Ellen G. White frequently used the phrase “the book of nature” to speak of God’s creation as revealing something about God’s love and power, she clearly differentiated and distinguished “the book of nature” from the “pages of inspiration,” thus indicating that to her the Bible is the final authority.

Implications and Prospects for the Seventh-day Adventist Church

On the basis of the priority and superiority of Scripture, some re-

We as Adventists actually have an advantage over non-religious scientists because our worldview is broader and more open to dimensions that are closed for secular scientists. To respect the biblical creation account and the inspired insights of Ellen G. White on the issue of creation should motivate us to be even more careful in our scientific and theological work than perhaps a non-religious scientist might be because we accept the biblical record (and the insights of Ellen G. White) as inspired and thus as something intrinsically sacred.

markable possibilities open up to the believing scientist and theologian. As paleontologist and biologist Leonard Brand has said: “One who accepts the Bible as a reliable record of events is not hampered by that worldview, as many would claim, but actually has an advantage. Most scientists are only familiar with one basic understanding of earth history and do not actively ask critical questions of their paradigm.”⁵² In other words, faith does not prevent the believer from thinking. It rather enables the believer to think properly—according to God’s revealed will—and thus to search for creative, new solutions that are in harmony with God’s Word.

Thus, rather than adapting biblical ideas to the latest outlook in science, Scripture can have a unique influence on science by asking questions that could function as a

source of inspiration in developing new strategies of scientific research. Wolfhart Pannenberg’s remarkable words deserve to be taken seriously: “The theologian must not be too quick to adapt theological ideas and language to the latest outlook in the sciences, especially where such adaptation requires substantial readjustment of traditional doctrine. The theological vision of the world can also function as a challenge to science and as a source of inspiration in developing new strategies of research.”⁵³ Such a perspective opens up new windows of opportunities for fresh investigation of origins on the basis of Scripture.

To Ellen G. White, being a Seventh-day Adventist meant, among other things, affirming a recent, literal creation in six consecutive 24-hour days. In dealing with the complex issues of creation, we have to

remember that our faith cannot be based on science as our final authority, but must be based on God's Word—even when we have questions without answers. As Brand has aptly stated: "The God of the Bible is the greatest scholar of all time, and Scripture deals in the highest levels of scholarship, not just in comforting inspirational themes. (When God arranged to have Genesis written, He knew vastly more about radiometric dating than we will ever know.)"⁵⁴ God "knows much more than we do about earth history, and if we know Him and trust His Word we can benefit from the insights in Scripture."⁵⁵

Thus, we as Adventists actually have an advantage over non-religious scientists because our worldview is broader and more open to dimensions that are closed for secular scientists. To respect the biblical creation account and the inspired insights of Ellen G. White on the issue of creation should motivate us to be even more careful in our scientific and theological work than perhaps a non-religious scientist might be because we accept the biblical record (and the insights of Ellen G. White) as inspired and thus as something intrinsically sacred. May this perspective stimulate and motivate us to do sound research and search for better answers.

To dismiss inspired statements made in Scripture and by Ellen G.

White as irrelevant, outdated, or incompatible with our faith raises a number of important questions with serious consequences for the Adventist Church at large.

What is the role of the Bible for our faith and practice? Is the Bible indeed our final norm and ultimate authority, as we profess in our Fundamental Belief 1? Can we trust the Bible in statements that tell us about our salvation if those statements are dependent upon historical events (like the historicity of Adam at creation and Jesus Christ the second Adam in Romans 5:12) and those historical statements cannot be trusted?

What role does Ellen G. White and her writings play for Seventh-day Adventists? Can we still maintain that her writings are "a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction" and also "make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested"⁵⁶ as Fundamental Belief 18 states? Are there degrees of divine inspiration?

Furthermore, can a God who uses an evolutionary process as His method of creation really be worshipped and adored as good and loving? Does a God who allows countless billions of organisms and life forms to suffer and die and even entire species to be wiped out possess

the same values and the goodness with which He is constantly revealed in the Bible? Does the process of evolution, with its extraordinarily wasteful and cruel mechanisms, which are full of predation, selfishness, randomness, disaster, waste, struggle, suffering, and even the death of whole population groups, not pose a significant problem for the goodness and love of God? Aren't the goodness and love of God fundamental to His nature and His desire to save a world that is lost?

In what areas are the Bible and Ellen G. White authoritative for the Adventist Church? Only in matters of salvation and personal spirituality, or can we trust God's Word and

the writings of Ellen G. White also when they touch the complex issue of God's supernatural creation, the Flood, biblical history, etc.?

Does the way we as Christian scientists and theologians do science and present science and theology erode or enrich our faith in God's supernatural creation? How can we engage in science and theology and pass on our findings in such a way that it enriches our faith? These are some questions that deserve to be taken seriously, and the answers we give to them will have consequences far beyond the issue of creation vs. evolution. They will affect many other fundamental beliefs and ultimately our mission and growth. □

“God has illuminated human intellects, and poured a flood of light on the world through discoveries in art and science. But those who view these from a merely human standpoint will most assuredly come to wrong conclusions.”

Ellen G. White



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