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WHAT DOES “INSPIRED” MEAN— AND NOT MEAN

One of the keys to interpreting Scripture is understanding the nature of inspiration.

Prophetic inspiration is a mysterious and complex subject that has generated many discussions in Seventh-day Adventist circles over the years. Those discussions result largely from the nature of divine inspiration and the human inability to fully grasp the supernatural inspiration process. William G. Johnsson suggests that “defining inspiration is like catching a rainbow. When we have put forth our best efforts, there will remain an elusive factor, an element of mystery.”¹

But this should not prevent us

from recognizing that God’s Word provides helpful knowledge of His mysterious communication process. While humbly admitting the limitations of our own reasoning, we should thoroughly study what the inspired writings actually say about themselves.

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The mainstream Jewish-Christian tradition holds that “in the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways.” As God’s spokesmen, the prophets delivered His message to the people either orally or in a written form—or even in a dramatized way. But the passing away of the Bible prophets in ancient times, and of Ellen G. White more recently, has limited the prophetic legacy quite exclusively to its written form.

A better understanding of divine accommodation and cultural conditioning of inspired writings can help us avoid the extremes of *decontextualization*, which takes the inspired writings out of the cultural context in which they came into existence, and *acculturalization*, which empties those writings from their divine nature that transcends culture.

Divine Accommodation

The mainstream Jewish-Christian tradition holds that “in the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways” (Heb. 1:1, NIV). As God’s spokesmen, the prophets delivered His message to the people either orally or in a written form—or even in a dramatized way. But the passing away of the Bible prophets in ancient times, and of Ellen G. White more recently, has limited the prophetic legacy quite exclusively to its written form. In

order to understand how the divine message became incarnated in the inspired writings, one has to consider the work of the Holy Spirit in speaking through genuine prophets and addressing issues of that time.

Speaking Through Available Resources. Foundational in God’s relationship with humankind have been both the prophets, as communication agents, and the languages used, as communication devices. The prophets were called and enabled by God to speak to the people in their own language. But the divine empowerment did not make void the individuality of each prophet. In 1867, Calvin E. Stowe explained: “The Bible is not given to us in any celestial or superhuman language. If it had been it would have been of no use to us, for every book intended for men must be given to them in the language of men. But every human language is of necessity, and from the very nature of the case, an

imperfect language. No human language has exactly one word and only one for each distinct idea. In every known language the same word is used to indicate different things, and different words are used to indicate the same thing. In every human language each word has more than one meaning, and each thing has generally more than one name. . . .

"The Bible is not a specimen of God's skill as a writer, showing us God's mode of thought, giving us God's logic, and God's rhetoric, and God's style of historical narration. . . . It is always to be remembered that the writers of the Bible were 'God's penmen, and not God's pens.'

"It is not the words of the Bible that were inspired, it is not the thoughts of the Bible that were inspired; it is the men who wrote the Bible that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words, not on the man's thoughts, but on the man himself; so that he, by his own spontaneity, under the impulse of the Holy Ghost, conceives certain thoughts and gives utterance to them in certain words, both the words and the thoughts receiving the peculiar impress of the mind which conceived and uttered them, and being in fact just as really his own, as they could have been if there had been no inspiration at all in the case. . . . Inspiration generally is a purifying, and an elevation, and an intensification of the human intel-

lect subjectively, rather than an objective suggestion and communication; though suggestion and communication are not excluded.

"The Divine mind is, as it were, so diffused through the human, and the human mind is so interpenetrated with the Divine, that for the time being the utterances of the man are the word of God.²

It is worth noting that in 1886, Ellen G. White reproduced much of this statement when she penned, "The Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language. Jesus, in order to reach man where he is, took humanity. The Bible must be given in the language of men. Everything that is human is imperfect. Different meanings are expressed by the same word; there is not one word for each distinct idea. . . . The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers.

"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.”³

While Ellen White’s statement is much indebted to Stowe’s, she differs significantly from him in a few points. For instance, while Stowe stated that neither the “words” nor the “thoughts” of the Bible were inspired, White speaks only about the “words” as not being inspired. She also left out Stowe’s idea that inspiration is primarily “an intensification of the human intellect subjectively, rather than an objective suggestion and communication.”

Yet, even so, we are still left with some puzzling questions: If only the prophets themselves were inspired, and not their words, what has remained since those prophets passed away? Should we assume that we are left today with only a *non-inspired* Bible written anciently by *inspired* writers? And more: If this were the case, how could we harmonize such a view with Paul’s statement that “All scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16, NRSV)? How could we explain Ellen White’s own declarations that “The scribes of God wrote as they were dictated by the Holy Spirit, having no control of the work themselves,”⁴ and that she herself was “just as dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in relating or writing a vi-

sion, as in having the vision”⁵

Analyzing Ellen G. White’s writings on prophetic inspiration, one can easily see that she expected something more from the Scriptures and from her own writings than just the notion of a non-inspired text that only contains an inspired message. Such a notion can be held only by those who accept the correlated theory that the Bible *contains* the Word of God without *being* the Word of God. Nonetheless, the statement that “it is not the words of the Bible that were inspired” can be better harmonized with her overall understanding of inspiration by assuming that she meant simply that God did not choose the actual wording of the Bible. This view seems to be endorsed by the following statements from her:

“I am just as dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in relating or writing a vision, as in having the vision. It is impossible for me to call up things which have been shown me unless the Lord brings them before me at the time that he is pleased to have me relate or write them.”⁶

“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

From these statements, we might

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conclude, in general terms that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the prophets themselves selected the wording of the inspired writings. There were instances, however, in which the actual wording was provided to them. For this reason we have to recognize the "symphonic" (or, perhaps, "polyphonic") nature of inspiration, instead of just holding to a specific "monophonic" theory of inspiration.⁸ But even in those cases in which God provided the wording to His prophets, He did it within their respective linguistic frameworks, without voiding their personal individualities. In other words, although the communication skills of the prophets usually improved over the years, the divine messages were still expressed within the limitations of the human languages used, like a precious "treasure in jars of clay" (2 Cor. 4:7, NIV). So, each prophet transmitted the divine message "in a different way, yet without contradiction."⁹

Addressing Contemporary Issues. The divine accommodation included not only the use of human language, with all its limitations, but also a strong thematic contextualization into the culture of the community of people to be reached by the divine message. This form of contextualization finds its climactic expression in and is modeled by the incarnation of the Son of God, who became the Son of man to save sinners from the bondage of Satan (John 1:14; Phil. 2:5-11). Ellen White explains, "In Christ's parable teaching the same principle is seen as in His own mission to the world. That we might become acquainted with His divine character and life, Christ took our nature and dwelt among us. Divinity was revealed in humanity; the invisible glory in the visible human form. Men could learn of the unknown through the known; heavenly things were revealed through the earthly; God was made manifest in the likeness of

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men. So it was in Christ’s teaching: the unknown was illustrated by the known; divine truths by earthly things with which the people were most familiar.”¹⁰

This pattern of incarnation extended far beyond the reality of Christ becoming human flesh. It also shaped Christ’s teachings and even the prophetic revelation in general. According to Ellen White, “The Great Teacher brought His hearers in contact with nature, that they might listen to the voice which speaks in all created things; and as their hearts became tender and their minds receptive, He helped them to interpret the spiritual teaching of the scenes upon which their eyes rested. The parables, by means of which He loved to teach lessons of truth, show how open His spirit was to the influences of nature and how He delighted to gather the spiritual teaching from the surroundings of daily life.

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But the whole process of divine accommodation cannot be restricted to the use of the human language and the illustrations taken from the natural world and the daily life. Much of the prophetic writings addressed contemporary issues like the problems of idolatry, immorality, and other pagan customs. So, instead of arising within a cultural vacuum, the divine messages spoke directly to the contemporary cul-

ture. Yet, one of the most important (and most controversial) questions is the following: To what extent are the divine messages conditioned by the cultural milieu in which the prophets wrote them?

Cultural Conditioning

There are at least two distinct perspectives from which one can define the cultural conditioning of the inspired writings. One is the *horizontal perspective*, which ends up reading the inspired writings as a mere product of the religious community in which they came into existence. Overlooking to a large extent the divine authorship of the inspired writings, those who accept this view usually study the inspired writings by means of the historical-critical method. Another is the *vertical perspective*, which recognizes the presence of cultural elements within the inspired writings, without denying the writings' general status as the Word of God. This approach can survive only with the use of the historical-grammatical method. These two perspectives deserve further consideration.

Horizontal Perspective. Attempts to define the cultural conditioning of the inspired writings from a horizontal perspective tend to place them on a humanistic/cultural basis. Raymond F. Cottrell reflects this view in his articles "Inspiration and Authority of the Bible in Relation to

Phenomena of the Natural World" and "Extent of the Genesis Flood," published in 2000. Cottrell, a former associate editor of the *Adventist Review* and the founding editor of *Adventist Today*, tried to solve some of the basic tensions between faith and reason, and between the Bible and natural sciences and secular history, by suggesting a clear distinction between the "inspired message" of the Bible and the "uninspired form in which it comes to us." Yet Cottrell viewed "the inspired message on record in the Bible" as "culturally conditioned" and "historically conditioned." For him, "historical conditioning permeates the entire Bible. It is not incidental, nor is it exceptional or unusual; it is the invariable rule."¹²

Under the assumption that "in matters of science, the Bible writers were on a level with their contemporaries," Cottrell could suggest that on these matters our understanding should be informed by the more reliable data provided by modern science. His attempt to harmonize the Bible account of Creation with modern science led him to the conclusion that "at an unspecified time in the remote past, the Creator transmuted a finite portion of his infinite power into the primordial substance of the universe—perhaps in an event such as the Big Bang."¹³ The notion that "the words and forms of expression in the Bible were historically

conditioned to their time and perspective” led the same author, elsewhere, to the conclusion that the Genesis Flood did not extend beyond the known “lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea.” He further stated that “only by reading our modern worldview of ‘all the earth’ [Gen 7:3] back into the Hebrew text can the idea of a world-wide flood be established.”¹⁴ Undoubtedly, such views empty Scripture of much of its supernatural content.

Another example of a horizontal perspective of cultural conditioning is proposed by Alden Thompson, now-retired professor of religion at Walla Walla University. More moderate than Cottrell, Thompson still makes the inspired writings dependent too much on the religious experience of both the prophets themselves and the community in which they lived. In his five-part series “From Sinai to Golgotha,” published in December 1981 in the *Adventist Review*,¹⁵ Thompson argued that “the growth from Sinai to Golgotha, from command to invitation, from fear to love, is a Biblical pattern” that “is also reflected in the experience and theology of Ellen White.”¹⁶ He theorized that it took the Israelites “1,400 years to make the journey from one mountain [Sinai] to the other [Golgotha],” and Ellen White “almost 60 years” until the 1888 Minneapolis Conference, where “the bright rays of light from Calvary fi-

nally dispelled the last shadows of Sinai.”¹⁷

So, in Thompson’s opinion, “on the one hand stands the ‘encouraging’ God of *Steps to Christ* and *The Desire of Ages* [both published after 1888]; on the other, the ‘discouraging’ God of the *Testimonies* [several of which were published prior to 1888].”¹⁸ This notion of a “maturing” prophet was further developed by Thompson in his book *Escape from the Flames: How Ellen White Grew from Fear to Joy—and Helped Me Do It Too* (2005).¹⁹

The second half of the 19th century saw a significant development indeed in the formation and consolidation of the Seventh-day Adventist doctrinal system. Though the post-1844 period was marked by the definition and integration of Adventist distinctive doctrines (sanctuary, three angels’ messages, seventh-day Sabbath, conditional immortality of the soul, gift of prophecy, etc.), the post-1888 period was characterized by the rediscovery and integration of some major Evangelical doctrines (justification by faith and the Trinity, including Christ’s self-existence and coeternity with the Father, and the personality of the Holy Spirit).

There is no doubt that over the years Ellen White helped the church to grow in its understanding of biblical truth. But Thompson overstates the fact that to a certain extent she was a child of her own time. By qual-

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ifying as "mature" her post-1888 more expanded and elaborated theological expositions of truth, he tends to downgrade the value of her pre-1888 materials as less-developed treatments of the same subjects, suggesting that they are inaccurate and unreliable. While she was one of the main spokespersons for the post-1888 Christ-centered emphasis, this does not mean that she shared the same legalistic views of her fellow believers of the pre-1888 period.

Ellen White's "Morning Talks" at the 1883 General Conference Session contain some of her more insightful treatments on justification by faith. Even her earlier writings include insightful glimpses into the subject.²⁰ Already in her very first vision, on the Midnight Cry (December 1844), she saw that the Advent people were safe in their traveling to the New Jerusalem only if "they kept their eyes fixed on Jesus, who was just before them, leading them to the city."²¹ She saw also that the saints cried out at Christ's return, "who shall be able to stand?" to which He replied, "My grace is sufficient for you."²²

The views of Cottrell and Thompson demonstrate how the horizontal perspective of cultural conditioning binds much of the inspired writings to the cultural milieu in which they came into existence. By accepting the primacy of ancient surrounding cultures over divine revelation, Cottrell sees the Bible as an expression of those cultures, with very few ideas transcending them. By contrast, Thompson views large segments of Ellen White's writings as primarily a reflection of her own experience within the believing community to which they originally spoke. At any rate, both approaches undermine many of the universal principles that placed those writings in direct opposition to contemporary cultures.

So the prophets are recognized as children of their own time, speaking to the needs of contemporary people, but with very little to say outside their own cultural milieu. Taking Thompson's "from-Sinai-to-Golgotha" theory seriously, we would be tempted to select the latest writings of each prophet in order to form a special canon of more "mature" writings, in contrast to the remain-

Practices that are mentioned only in a certain context, without being kept in other ones, are more likely cultural in nature. Since the seventh-day Sabbath is commanded in the Old Testament and kept in the New Testament, it has to be regarded as universal. Meanwhile, Paul's advice not to wed was undoubtedly a temporal application, for elsewhere he counsels younger women to marry.

ing “immature” (or at least “less mature”) earlier writings. Would one suppose that Paul reaches the culmination of his theology with 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, which are practical books, rather than in his earlier writings, such as Romans and Galatians? Should we regard Ellen White’s book *The Great Controversy*, published in its revised version in 1911, as more “mature” and reliable than *The Desire of Ages*, printed 13 years earlier (in 1898)? Would not this mature-immature approach be another kind of “canon within the canon,” similar to the one Martin Luther based on the Christological principle? And more: Would this not place the reader as the judge of Scripture? Could one argue that there is a chronological-theological development in the Old Testament, from the “primitive” Pentateuch to the “mature” post-exilic books (Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi)?

Several questions are raised also by the notion that the “maturing”

process took “1,400 years” for the prophetic writings of the Old Testament and “almost 60 years” for Ellen White’s writings. How long does it actually take for a prophet and his or her writings to mature? If historical maturity was reached only at Golgotha, should we consider all pre-Golgotha prophetic writings as immature? If Ellen White’s writings reached maturity only after 40 years of her prophetic ministry, what can we say about those canonical prophets with a much shorter ministry? Whatever direction one chooses to go in answering these questions, it seems that there is only one acceptable solution for such tensions: Early prophetic writings might be less developed than later writings, but they are equally trustworthy and reliable because their trustworthiness and reliability rest not on the prophets themselves but rather on God, who revealed Himself through the prophets.

Vertical Perspective. The *vertical*

perspective of cultural conditioning recognizes that the inspired writings were given through imperfect human language, addressing contemporary local issues, and being limited by local circumstances and personal characteristics (cf. John 16:12). While the *horizontal* perspective regards the inspired writings largely as confined to the religious (and sometimes even secular) culture in which they came into existence, the *vertical* perspective recognizes those writings as the divine judges of contemporary cultures and even of all other cultures. It is only this approach that allows the inspired writings to hold their status as the Word of God for humankind. But in order to understand their nature properly, one needs to distinguish universal principles from temporal applications of such principles.

One of the most difficult tasks in interpreting the inspired writings is how to distinguish universal principles from temporal applications. Such difficulty is caused largely by the fact that those writings are frequently considered merely from the perspective of the contexts in which they were originally penned and to which they were addressed. Such knowledge is indispensable to identify the temporal applications and their impact on the local community to which the message was originally addressed, but it still leaves the application open too much to the subjective views of the interpreter. Any

serious interpretation should identify not only the specific context to which the messages were originally addressed, but also their broader interaction with the whole accumulated heritage of prophetic literature. While *contextual* knowledge helps one to better understand temporal applications, *interactive* knowledge helps to identify universal principles more precisely.

An interactive study of the inspired writings recognizes that prophets lived in different cultural settings, speaking largely to those settings. For example, much of the Old Testament was written within the context of the surrounding Canaanite cultures. The New Testament came into existence within the Greco-Roman civilization. So, doctrinal teachings and ethical principles that flow from the Old Testament into the New Testament are most certainly universal in their application.

In contrast, practices that are mentioned only in a certain context, without being kept in other ones, are more likely cultural in nature. Since the seventh-day Sabbath is commanded in the Old Testament and kept in the New Testament, it has to be regarded as universal. Meanwhile, Paul's advice not to wed (1 Cor. 7:6-9) was undoubtedly a temporal application, for elsewhere he counsels younger women to marry (1 Tim. 5:14). So, from this perspective, the

interaction within the Biblical canon itself places the prophetic messages as evaluators of culture, instead of mere cultural products.

In many instances, the message of Scripture was presented not only in opposition to the local culture, but also as transcending that culture. Ekkehardt Mueller suggests that “what God has done for the Exodus generation applies likewise to later generations,” who “still participate in his saving actions (Deut 5:2-4).²³ Furthermore, those who accept the predictive nature of Bible prophecy in general and apocalyptic prophecy in particular recognize that the content they carry applies to the time when a given prophecy is to be fulfilled.

But, even so, in Scripture we find some cultural components that, being chosen by God as signs of loyalty, end up assuming a universal application. For example, baptism and the foot-washing ceremony, based on Jewish cleansing practices, were perpetuated by Christ’s commands to all Christians of all ages (Matt. 28:18-20; John 13:1-17).

While Cottrell was not concerned with highlighting universal principles in his studies of the inspired writings, Thompson certainly was, as evident in his “law of love” motif, which unfolds itself from the one, to the two, the 10, and the many commandments.²⁴ But there are at least two major problems with Thompson’s approach.

First, the multiple universal components of the inspired writings are reduced basically into a law motif, which fails not so much by what is said but rather by what is ignored. The author would be better off by enriching his law-*monophonic* notion with a broader multi-thematic-*polyphonic* perspective, including even the theme of grace in the Old Testament.

Second, Thompson’s “from-Sinai-to-Golgotha” hermeneutical principle tends to downgrade many of the universal components of the Old Testament and of Ellen White’s pre-1888 writings. By accepting such a hermeneutical principle, we would have problems, for example, in handling the Creation story. Since its most comprehensive records are found at the very beginning of the Bible (Genesis 2 and 3), without any significant enlargement elsewhere in the Old and New Testaments, should we consider them as “less mature”? Or should we limit that principle only to matters of salvation?

Although prophets, like all other human beings, also grow in knowledge, understanding, and experience, God’s supernatural revelation is not always dependent on the prophet’s maturity. Actually, God does sometimes reveal information that goes far beyond the prophet’s own level of understanding, as in the case of the prophet Daniel. (See Daniel 8:26, 27; 12:4.) This may hap-

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pen in later or even in early stages of someone's prophetic career. So, it seems more consistent just to recognize the existence of thematic-existential developments in the inspired writings, without labeling them as "mature" and "less mature." The true Christian is indeed someone who lives "by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4, NRSV).

Seventh-day Adventists are being strongly tempted today, as have been many other Christians in the past, to reread the universal principles of Scripture from the perspective of their own cultural practices and to use alternative hermeneutics to endorse such practices. The historical tendency has been either to *decontextualize* the message, leaving it almost incomprehensible and irrelevant to the present generation, or to *acculturalize* it in such a way that it loses much of its original identity.

The risk of decontextualization can be lowered by recognizing that the divine message became incar-

nated in the inspired writings by the work of the Holy Spirit, who spoke through available human resources and addressed concrete contemporary issues. The danger of acculturation can be avoided by rejecting those aspects of the *horizontal* perspective of cultural conditioning that end up reading the writings as a mere product of an ancient religious community, and by accepting the *vertical* perspective, which recognizes the presence of cultural elements within the inspired writings, without denying their general status as the Word of God. A careful interpretation of the inspired writings has to recognize in them the existence of an ongoing dialogue between universal principles and temporal applications of such principles.

But, after recognizing such dialogue, the interpreter is faced with the challenging task of distinguishing universal principles from temporal applications. Contextual studies help the student to identify the temporal applications and their impact

on the local community to which the message was originally addressed, but they still leave the interpretation open too much to the subjective views of the interpreter. Any serious interpretation should also identify the broad interaction of the messages with the whole accumulated heritage of prophetic literature. While contextual knowledge helps one to better understand temporal applications, interactive knowledge helps to identify more precisely universal principles. After all, the inspired writings have to be relevant to our own generation without losing their original identity. □

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