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Scripture and Modern Epistemological Methodologies in Adventist Hermeneutics: An Uneasy Relationship¹

Denis Fortin

Adventists are familiar with the anecdotes and stories of the pioneers' discovery of the biblical doctrine of the Sabbath through contacts with Rachel Oakes, a Seventh Day Baptist woman. A few Adventists kept the seventh-day Sabbath during the Millerite movement in the early 1840s but after the movement began to disintegrate these Sabbath-keeping Adventists became more active in spreading their views. Oakes convinced her pastor, Frederick Wheeler, that he should keep the Sabbath. In turn, Wheeler convinced another pastor, Thomas Preble. Preble wrote an article about it in the *Hope of Israel* in February 1845 and then published it as a tract under the title, *Tract Showing That the Seventh Day Should Be Observed as the Sabbath*. Preble's article and tract got some results and a few more Adventists began to keep the Sabbath.

¹ This paper is adapted from a presentation made at the European Theology Teachers' Convention at Theologische Hochschule Friedensau, Germany, April 1, 2007. The theme of the conference was "Finding the 'World' in Theology: Empirical Dimensions in the Study of Faith."

One of these tracts came across a retired merchant mariner and Millerite leader, Joseph Bates. Impulsive, after reading Preble's tract, Bates dropped everything he was doing and traveled (or likely walked) about 120 miles (200 kilometers) to the little village of Hillsboro, New Hampshire to meet with Frederick Wheeler. We are told that Bates arrived at Wheeler's home very late one evening, woke Wheeler up, and the two studied the Bible all that night. The next morning they visited nearby Sabbath-keeping Adventists and then Bates returned home.

During his return, Bates wrestled with his new discovered knowledge and wondered what effects his new beliefs would have on his family, friends, and neighbors. Crossing the bridge between New Bedford and Fairhaven, Massachusetts, Bates made his first convert out of one of his Adventist friends. "What's the news, Captain Bates?" asked James Hall. "The news," replied Bates, "is that the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord our God." And that is how, in 1845, Bates became one of the pioneers and founders of the Seventh-day Adventist church.

One hundred and sixty-five years later, I wonder what motivated early Adventist pioneers in their search for truth. What was it that motivated Joseph Bates to walk 120 miles to learn more about the Sabbath? To stay up all night to study the Bible? To travel long distances to share this knowledge with unknown people?

These questions deal with basic epistemological assumptions and principles of biblical hermeneutics. It would seem that four such assumptions guided and motivated early Adventist believers: (1) a strong belief in the objectivity of truth – that there is only one truth about a subject; (2) that people can understand that truth; (3) that Scripture forms a compendium of objective truths about God and his will for humanity and these truths can be known by anyone who reads the Bible; (4) that Scripture is the supreme authority on religious beliefs, behavior, and worldview.

Given these assumptions, early Adventists studied Scripture for long hours, seeking to understand the hidden truths of God and to model their lives, their church, and their practices accordingly. They lived by the assumption that if the human mind once accepts something as true it will go on regarding it as true, until something comes up for reconsidering it.² The Adventist approach to knowledge is indeed rationalistic and committed to the use of human reason as guided by Scripture. But this approach is guarded in

² See C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 138–139.

that Adventism has had an uneasy relationship with modern rational approaches and methodologies to finding knowledge.

In order to understand better the approach to hermeneutics Adventism has adopted and how it first responded to modern thinking and methodologies, I will first give a brief summary of the impact of the Enlightenment and rationalism on epistemology and biblical hermeneutics. Then I will review William Miller's approach to the Bible and hermeneutics. I will also give a brief review of Ellen White's ideas on hermeneutics and what she understood to be problematic with modern rational methodologies to the discovery of knowledge. Finally, I will briefly highlight the potential impact of some contemporary methodologies in the search for knowledge on Adventist faith and why our relationship with modern rational methodologies is one of uneasiness. This is a vast subject and this short paper will only briefly and somewhat superficially address what I hope will be some seed thoughts that one day will be explored more deeply.

The Impact of the Enlightenment on Faith and the Bible

The Enlightenment largely changed the western culture's understanding of the human person and how we attain knowledge.³ Enlightenment philosophers appealed to human reason rather than external revelation as the final arbiter of truth. In fact, they appealed to reason in order to determine what constitutes revelation. Anselm of Canterbury's maxim, "I believe in order that I may understand," was replaced with the Enlightenment motto, "I believe what I can understand." This epistemological assumption was clear: people should no longer blindly accept external authorities, such as the Church, rather the truth is to be found in human reason.

For centuries, people had been captive to a monopoly of truth held by the Church and, at first, the Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that sought to bring more balance to the search for knowledge. Many Enlightenment philosophers were committed Christians who sought to find new avenues for knowledge. In the end, however, the Enlightenment inspired

³ This summary of Enlightenment philosophy is taken from Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Twentieth-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 15–23; James M. Byrne, *Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996); James C. Livingstone, *The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1 of *Modern Christian Thought*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997); and Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1, 1799–1870 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972).

a humanistic rationalism in which God, the Scripture and the Church had little influence. Unknowingly, it did this first by replacing God with humanity as the focus of its cosmology. While for Medieval and Reformation theology human beings were important insofar as they fit into the story of God's activity in history, later Enlightenment thinkers tended to reverse the equation and gauge the importance of God according to His value for the human story.

These changes in western culture came about because of two revolutions: one in philosophy, the other in science. Above all, the Enlightenment was a philosophical revolution. This revolution was inaugurated by René Descartes (1596–1650) who is often referred to as the father of modern philosophy. Descartes' intent was to devise a method of investigation that could facilitate the discovery of those truths that were absolutely certain.

His method consisted of four points the first of which established the necessity of doubting the validity and truthfulness of anything that could not be clearly and rationally proven to be so. He doubted all knowledge derived from the senses and claimed the absolute certainty of purely rational knowledge. Given Descartes' attitude of universal doubt, his quest for truth began with the mind itself. His philosophical system evolved out of his famous: *cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"). When the mind resolves to doubt all things, there is one thing that it cannot doubt, that is, its own act of doubting. It is obvious that in order to doubt it must exist. Hence Descartes concluded that rationalism is well fitted to find objective truth. Understandably, Descartes' writings were banned from many universities because he advocated an epistemological system in which the final authority was not divine revelation, but human reason. Although he did not set out to challenge divine revelation but rather to complement it, his thought had the unfortunate consequence of being perceived as compromising revelation.

The Enlightenment was also the product of a revolution in science, which gave rise to a different way of perceiving the world. This approach to knowledge also marked a radical departure from the worldview of the Middle Ages and caused a change in cosmology ushered in by Copernicus that the earth is not the center of the universe. Subsequent discoveries gradually undermined the medieval model of a hierarchical cosmology in which heaven was spatially above the earth and hell beneath it. However, during the Enlightenment, philosophers and scientists like Isaac Newton (1642–1727) believed the universe was comparable to a grand orderly machine created by

God. This universe follows predetermined laws that were instituted by God at creation. Studied carefully, this universe can provide all the knowledge that is really necessary.

Empiricism was the epistemological assumption of the scientific revolution, that new knowledge can be acquired through human observation and the rational analysis of facts. Ultimately, however, this empirical scientific method became a more valid path to knowledge and dethroned the need of God to understand the fundamental realities of the universe. In fact, this approach to the search for knowledge led, in the end, to the rejection of anything that sounds supernatural or beyond the natural.

Both Descartes and Newton sought to use the power of reason to enhance a theological agenda in providing proofs for the existence of God. However, the revolutions they engendered resulted in a new view of the world and of humanity's place in it that has not always been sympathetic to the Christian faith. In time, the natural sciences took over the central role formerly enjoyed by theology in explaining the functions of the world and our purpose in it. The revolutions in philosophy and in science that marked Enlightenment thinking had immense long-term implications for Christian faith and theology.

By the eighteenth century this new scientific mentality inaugurated a changed understanding of the nature of religion. People began to differentiate between two types of religion: natural and revealed. Natural religion involved a set of foundational truths (typically believed to include the existence of God and some universally acknowledged moral laws) to which all human beings were presumed to have access through the exercise of reason and empirical observations. Revealed religion, on the other hand, involved the set of specifically Christian doctrines that had been derived from the Bible and taught by the Church over time. As revealed religion came under attack, natural religion increasingly gained the status of true religion. This alternative to Christian orthodoxy came to be known as Deism.

Deism, as a religious philosophy and movement, sought to reduce religion to its most basic elements. Deists typically rejected supernatural events, such as prophecy and miracles, and divine revelation through the Bible. Many dogmas of the church were dismissed to retain the existence of God and some kind of postmortem retribution for sin and blessing for virtue. Natural religion was viewed, not as a system of beliefs but as a system for structuring ethical behavior. The chief role of religion was to provide a divine sanction for morality.

Of course, Deism drew numerous attacks from those who saw it as a threat to the Christian faith and to revealed religion. Severe blows to Deism, however, did not come from theology but came from philosophers like Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) who challenged the adequacy and sufficiency of rationalism and empiricism to acquire new knowledge. He showed the difficulties inherent in Deism and the impossibility of a purely empiricist epistemology since human reason can only process what it can understand. Like a computer, a mind is capable of receiving, organizing, and employing various sorts of data only to the extent that such data are compatible with its operating system. Consequently, the Deism which flourished in the eighteenth century, was shown to be rationally questionable as much as it questioned appeals to revealed truth.

By the time of the Second Advent movement that gave rise to the Adventist church, Deism was a dying movement and was being replaced with forms of ethical romanticism and protestant liberalism. However, some of the underlying epistemological assumptions of the Enlightenment that gave rise to Deism never disappeared and continue to form the basis for much of science and philosophy today. In spite of what philosophers like Kant and others wrote regarding the limitations of rationalism and empiricism, rationalism is still regarded as the superior epistemological assumption to acquire new knowledge; human reason alone is still believed to be adequate and sufficient to comprehend the universe.

William Miller's Hermeneutics

William Miller, one of the spiritual founders of Adventism, was raised in a devout Baptist home but became a Deist in his early adulthood years. As a Deist, Miller accepted the assumption that God is so transcendent that he cannot intervene in human affairs. He also rejected the concept that God reveals himself through the Bible and that the supernatural activities of God as described in Scripture ever occurred.

In March 1841, the Millerite journal *Signs of the Times* reprinted a short article on Miller that a Massachusetts newspaper, the *Lynn Record*, had published. What is noteworthy in this article is the reason given for Miller's becoming a Deist.

Mr. Miller wishing to understand thoroughly everything he read, often asked the ministers to explain dark passages of scripture, but seldom received satisfactory answers. He was told that such passages were incapable of explanation. In consequence of which,

at the age of 22, he became a Deist or disbeliever in the truth of Revelation. He thought an all-wise and just God would never make a revelation of his will which nobody could understand, and then punish his creatures for disbelieving it.”⁴

As a Deist, Miller did not believe in the objectivity and perspecuity of God’s revelation in Scripture. Not only was God so far removed from humanity that he could not intervene in human affairs, but neither could he reveal himself through human language and certainly not through the Bible as it was a book filled with unintelligible stories and symbols. The only revelation of God that was acceptable to a Deist was through nature and natural law.

Miller’s worldview was shaken to the core, however, when during the War of 1812–1814 between the United States and Great Britain he survived the battle of Plattsburgh in September 1814. In spite of being surpassed in numbers, the American forces won this battle. Deist logic and reasoning could not account for the unexpected American victory and defeat of the superior British army and navy. Miller’s existential experience and deep emotional reflection following this battle became a turning point in his religious life. Within a couple of years, he became convinced that only the grace and mercy of God could have intervened to allow the American side to win this battle. And, consequently, he began to question his Deist worldview and to return to a biblical worldview in which God can intervene in human affairs. Further reflections also led him to revisit his assumption that God does not reveal himself through Scripture. Within a few years of intense Bible study, Miller became convinced that God does indeed reveal himself through the Bible since history demonstrates the fulfillment of biblical prophecies. God can predict the future of humanity.

From then on, Miller deliberately rejected Deism and its assumptions and became “the instrument of more conversions to Christianity, especially from Deism, than any other man now living in these parts,” recounted the Lynn *Record* article. “He has read Voltaire, [David] Hume, [Thomas] Paine, Ethan Allen, and made himself familiar with the arguments of Deists and knows how to refute them.”⁵

Although Millerism built on the American evangelical, pietist and revivalist ethos and impulses of the first half of the nineteenth century, for all

⁴ *Signs of the Times*, March 15, 1841, 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

practical purposes, Millerism became a counter-Deism movement, openly rejecting some key philosophical assumptions emerging from the Enlightenment that God does not reveal himself through history or in Scripture and that the Bible is unreliable as a historical and authentic account of God's work of salvation.

Miller's popular rules of biblical interpretation aimed at countering these Deist assumptions.⁶ He believed in the objectivity of God's revelation in Scripture, that the text of the Scripture is inspired by God and thus a trustworthy revelation of his will, that Scripture can be understood by simply being attentive to the literal and obvious meaning of the words, and that through prophecies God predicts the future of humanity as it relates to the plan of salvation.

Miller's rules of interpretation had a strong impact on Adventist hermeneutics and still do today. Early Seventh-day Adventist pioneers, including Ellen White, built on Miller's rules and also, as he did, rejected the philosophical humanistic assumptions of naturalistic rationalism emerging from the Enlightenment and of new scientific ideas promoted by Darwin and historical-critical scholarship.

Ellen White's endorsement of Miller's rules of interpretation appeared in an article in the *Review and Herald* in 1884.

Those who are engaged in proclaiming the third angel's message are searching the Scriptures upon the same plan that Father Miller adopted. In the little book entitled "Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology," Father Miller gives the following simple but intelligent and important rules for Bible study and interpretation:—

'1. Every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible; 2. All Scripture is necessary, and may be understood by diligent application and study; 3. Nothing revealed in Scripture can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering; 4. To understand doctrine, bring all the scriptures together on the subject you wish to know, then let every word have its proper influence; and if you can form your theory without a contradiction, you cannot be in error; 5. Scripture must be its own

⁶ Miller's rules of interpretation can be found in Sylvester Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller* (Boston, MA: Joshua V. Himes, 1853), 70–72 and in P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1977), 299–300.

expositor, since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a teacher to expound to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of his sectarian creed, or to be thought wise, then his guessing, desire, creed, or wisdom is my rule, and not the Bible.’

“The above is a portion of these rules;” she concluded, “and in our study of the Bible we shall all do well to heed the principles set forth.”⁷

Ellen White also emphasized the “need of a return to the great Protestant principle—the Bible, and the Bible only, as the rule of faith and duty.”⁸ She believed in accepting all of Scripture as a source of beliefs and refused to seek a canon within a canon or to consider some portions of the Bible as less inspired, and therefore less authoritative, than others.⁹

To a large extent, Adventist hermeneutics today still upholds the same principles of interpretation. I understand Adventists to believe still in the primacy and sufficiency of Scripture (“the Bible and the Bible only”), that Scripture is the supreme and final authority in beliefs and practice, to be accepted over tradition, human philosophy, and human reason, experience, knowledge, or science. Adventists believe in the totality of Scripture, that there is no canon within the canon, that the Bible does not just *contain* the word of God, but it *is* the word of God. It is a trustworthy revelation of God. Adventists believe in the analogy of Scripture, that there is a fundamental unity among all the parts of the Bible because it is inspired by the same Holy Spirit. The Scripture is therefore its own expositor, one portion interprets another (cf. Luke 24:27, 44–45). There is consistency among all sections of Scripture. The meaning of Scripture is clear (has perspicuity) and straightforward and can be understood by diligent students. The Bible is to be taken in its plain and literal sense unless there is a clear and obvious figure or symbol intended by the author.¹⁰

A *de facto* outcome of the Adventist position on hermeneutics and epistemology is that any modern approaches or methodologies that

⁷ Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, November 25, 1884.

⁸ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), 204–205.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952), 190.

¹⁰ There have been many articles and books written on Adventist principles of hermeneutics; the following references are a sample of recent publications: George W. Reid, ed. *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, BRIS 1 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005); Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 58–104.

challenges any of these tenets regarding the authority of Scripture is therefore seen as suspect. Admittedly, the Adventist approach to hermeneutics and epistemology is rationalistic in ways similar to many early Enlightenment thinkers. But where Adventist hermeneutics and epistemology differ from some Enlightenment thought and Deism is in the primacy it gives to divine revelation as found in Scripture.

Modern Methodologies and the Authority of Scripture

It is in connection with Ellen White's views regarding earth science and geology that we find her most obvious insights into her hermeneutical and epistemological assumptions. Ellen White was not uninformed when it came to the philosophical presuppositions of modern science and critical scholarship in her day. Regarding geology and science, she believed that nature and revelation share the same author and that true science and religion share an intrinsic harmony. When contemporary science contradicted Scripture, she decidedly maintained submission to the Word of God. Biblical truth was the lens through which she viewed all chronological, historical, and scientific claims.

In her day, Ellen White was aware of new geological ideas such as the uniformitarianism of James Hutton and of the scholarly scorn leveled against the notion of a recent historical creation week. In this context of Genesis reconstruction, she stated both, "The work of creation cannot be explained by science" and "True science and Bible religion are in perfect harmony".¹¹

Perhaps Ellen White's most insightful comments into the implications of modern scientific methodologies on the authority of Scripture were written in the context of her discussion of the Genesis flood in *Patriarchs and Prophets*. In this context she expressed her conviction regarding the authority of the Bible in relationship to earth's history. She stated that "There should be a settled belief in the divine authority of God's Holy Word. . . . Moses wrote [about the flood] under the guidance of the Spirit of God, and a correct theory of geology will never claim discoveries that cannot be reconciled with his statements."¹² This statement indicates that Ellen White understood the

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1942) 414; Ellen G. White, Letter 57, 1896, published in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, ed. F. D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1955) 4:1167. I am indebted to Cindy Tutsch for these insights into Ellen White's understanding of geology, earth science and the Genesis flood (cf. Cindy Tutsch, "The Bible and Earth Science" in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon [Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2013], 654–657).

¹² Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 114.

crucial implications of the relationship between empirical observations and evidences and the biblical account of the flood. Commenting on this point she wrote further, “relics found in the earth do give evidence of conditions differing in many respects from the present, but the time when these conditions existed can be learned only from the Inspired Record.”¹³

She clearly indicated that the implications which human research draws from empirical information and observations must be informed and guided by a biblical worldview and biblical claims. Thus Ellen White rejected uniformitarianism in favor of creationism. She believed that the accounts of Genesis 1–11 are divinely intended to be interpreted historically, and not only theologically. According to her worldview, the only true biblical understanding of the creation and the flood stories is to interpret them as referring to historical events.

Not only did Ellen White reject popular scientific notions of her day relating to geology, she also recognized the dangers of a higher-critical approach to Scripture.

The warnings of the word of God regarding the perils surrounding the Christian church belong to us today. As in the days of the apostles men tried by tradition and philosophy to destroy faith in the Scriptures, so today, by the pleasing sentiments of higher criticism, evolution, spiritualism, theosophy, and pantheism, the enemy of righteousness is seeking to lead souls into forbidden paths. To many the Bible is as a lamp without oil, because they have turned their minds into channels of speculative belief that bring misunderstanding and confusion. The work of higher criticism, in dissecting, conjecturing, reconstructing, is destroying faith in the Bible as a divine revelation. It is robbing God’s word of power to control, uplift, and inspire human lives.¹⁴

One hundred years ago, Adventists understood the dangers of some methodologies and their potential impact on Adventist beliefs and on the authority of the Scripture. To a large extent, these dangers are still present. Ellen White’s insights into the impact of modern rationalistic methodologies on the authority of Scripture have influenced Adventist hermeneutics for

¹³ White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 112.

¹⁴ Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 474. Cf. *Bible Echo*, February 1, 1897.

generations and, I believe, are still valid today. Yet, modern scholarship and methodologies are still challenging Adventist beliefs and worldview.

While we can learn valuable insights from the study of the historical and social context of biblical times—one can think of the many insights from the disciplines of archaeology and anthropology that have enriched biblical studies in the last few decades—nonetheless, we cannot underestimate the impact of these and other methodologies on the reading and the interpretation of Scripture. In Adventist scholarship there is therefore to be an uneasy relationship between modern methodologies that rely only on human rationalistic approaches to knowledge and upholding a trustworthy and infallible word of God as found in the Bible.

When modern rationalistic methodologies are used, in a sense judging the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the biblical text, rationalism and empiricism are placed and valued above Scripture. Many epistemological assumptions of the Enlightenment are still operating with full strength and the Scripture is not considered as the only rule and basis of faith; it is not the final authority in matters of beliefs and it is not really seen as being the inspired word of God.

Yet, Adventist hermeneutics should not be simplistic either in thinking that its epistemological premises are not founded on Enlightenment assumptions as well; that human beings can objectively and faultlessly construct true reality and attain to perfect knowledge is an Enlightenment ideal. Modern methodologies challenge the Adventist claims to know “the truth” perfectly and not to be influenced by modern cultural epistemological norms to arrive at truth.

Be that as it may, William Miller, Joseph Bates and other early Seventh-day Adventist pioneers made a conscious decision regarding the methodology they used to study the Bible and to form their beliefs. It is naive to assume that Miller, Bates, Ellen White, and other early Adventists unknowingly used the predominant hermeneutical methodology of their culture and subconsciously used an unenlightened, simplistic methodology of biblical study. Adventist pioneers understood the times in which they lived and were mindful of the implications of assumptions and presuppositions that conflicted with the word of God. Miller was first a Deist who realized the philosophical shortcomings of Deism and how unsatisfactory a worldview it was. It is in response to Deism that he adopted a strict biblical hermeneutics. And it is also in the context of challenges to biblical faith that Ellen White and other Adventist pioneers upheld a biblical worldview and hermeneutics

and questioned the assumptions and conclusions of new scientific methodologies.

There are and always will be competing philosophies, epistemologies and worldviews in conflict with the biblical one. While we recognize these competing views and attempt to respond to them, we nonetheless need to remain committed to the authority of Scripture and to an implicit submission to what it says. Adventist pioneers showed their intellectual strength and courage when they made a conscious decision to abide by the word of God as the determining epistemological source of their knowledge about God and the world. They were not naive or unsophisticated. They knew and understood the consequences of conflicting worldviews or epistemological assumptions on the authority of the Bible.

The challenge Adventism faces today is to discriminate carefully its use of modern rationalistic methodologies that undermine the authority and reliability of Scripture. A hermeneutics and epistemology that uphold the objective authority of Scripture as the infallible and trustworthy word of God will produce an uneasy relationship with modern rationalistic methodologies.