

THE REVELATION AND INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE IN ADVENTIST THEOLOGY, PART 1

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In their statement of Fundamental Beliefs, Adventists claim to build their teachings and practices on the *sola Scriptura* principle.¹ The *sola Scriptura* principle assumes an understanding of the revelation-inspiration² of the Bible. Consequently, the application of the *sola Scriptura* principle in the thinking and life of the church depends on the way members and theologians understand the revelation-inspiration of Scripture. One would expect Adventist theologians to be of one mind on this grounding theological issue. However, Adventist historians report that throughout the twentieth century conflicting views on revelation-inspiration have found their way into the scholarly Adventist community.³ During the last decade of the twentieth century, the debate became explicit,⁴ and recent publications indicate that it has not subsided.⁵

Because the existence of conflicting views on revelation-inspiration inevitably leads to the weakening of the *sola Scriptura* principle and disunity in the thinking and mission of the church, Adventists need to consider the issue of revelation and inspiration in greater analytical and theological depth. In this context, the purpose of this article is to understand the various models of interpreting revelation-inspiration presently operating within Adventist theological circles in order to

¹General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1988).

²I hyphenate the words “revelation-inspiration” to indicate they are inseparable aspects of the same process.

³Alberto Timm presents a good introductory historical survey in “A History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on Biblical and Prophetic Inspiration (1844-2000),” *JATS* 10/1-2 (1999): 542. George Knight underlines the use of the verbal-inspiration theory as a tool to counter modernism in *A Search for Identity: The Development of Seventh-day Adventist Belief* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 128-138.

⁴Conflicting views about revelation and inspiration became explicit when Alden Thompson published *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1991). Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson responded by editing *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, Adventist Theological Society Occasional Papers (Berrien Springs: Adventist Theological Society, 1992).

⁵Consider, e.g., Raymond F. Cottrell, “Inspiration and Authority of the Bible in Relation to Phenomena of the Natural World,” in *Creation Reconsidered: Scientific, Biblical, and Theological Perspectives*, ed. James L. Hayward (Roseville, CA: Association of Adventist Forums, 2000); and Graeme S. Bradford, *More than a Prophet: How We Lost and Found Again the Real Ellen White* (Berrien Springs: Biblical Perspectives, 2006).

discover how they relate to the *sola Scriptura* principle that serves as the cognitive foundation of Adventist theology, and to determine whether a new model that is reflective of Adventist theology is needed.

To understand and evaluate the various ways of thinking about the revelation-inspiration of Scripture, more than an accurate description of what each view maintains is needed. Perspectives from which to analyze, understand, and evaluate current models of revelation-inspiration are also needed. Consequently, this article will explore the nature of the issue, the basic biblical evidence on the inspiration of Scripture, the basic methodology involved in understanding the process of revelation-inspiration, and the two basic models of revelation-inspiration generally found in Christian thinking. Finally, with these backgrounds in mind, an analysis will be made of the three main ways of understanding the revelation-inspiration of the Bible presently operating in Adventist thinking.

The Nature of the Issue

Divine Revelation and the Origin of Theological Knowledge

God is known to humanity only by way of revelation. Theologians speak of a general revelation through nature and a special revelation in Scripture, but on what basis do they understand this revelation? How do they know that there are two kinds of revelation, or that God reveals himself at all? Theologians work either from their own imaginations and speculations or from a publicly accessible revelation of God's thoughts and will.

Christians generally recognize Scripture as the public and specific revelation of divine thought and will to humanity. There is in nature no divinely originated information about the existence of general or special revelation. Whatever is derived from the interpretation of nature is the result of private thought processes. Thus humanity only knows of the existence of general and special revelation because God has revealed it in Scripture (Ps 19). However, a significant number of modern and postmodern Christians believe that the existence of a special cognitive revelation from God is impossible. They assume human beings wrote the Bible. Scripture and theology, then, are the result of ever-changing human imagination. Thus these theologians directly oppose Peter's conviction (2 Pet 1:16) that we do not find myths but truths in Scripture. Not surprisingly, such approaches interpret Scripture as a book of human history.

Author and Interpretation

Whenever we read a text, we correctly assume that someone has written it. Knowing the author of a written piece helps the reader to understand it. However, it is not always necessary to know the author of a text in order to understand its meaning. For instance, if I find a note in my office saying, "Come home immediately," I cannot miss its intended meaning. If I

additionally know that my wife has written the message, I will understand it as a command and I will rush home. Conversely, if I know that there is no one at home because I live alone, I will understand it to be a prank from some of my fellow workers. Similarly, when interpreting complex literary or scientific pieces, knowing the author will also help us to understand not only the face-value meaning of a text, but also its deeper meanings. Conversely, if I want to know a person, reading his or her writings is of primary importance to my undertaking. Thus ascertaining authorship is essential to the study of Scripture.

If the reader is convinced that God is the author of Scripture, then his or her theological understanding of Scripture will differ considerably from that of a reader who is persuaded that Scripture was written by well-intentioned religious persons describing their own personal experiences. Since Scripture is a complex literary piece, our conviction about who the author or authors were will greatly impinge on our theological interpretations of its multifarious contents. Thus understanding who the author or authors of Scripture were becomes a pivotal presupposition from which believers and theologians approach their interpretation of Scripture, formulate Christian teachings, and experience the transforming power of Scripture in everyday life. In short, understanding the process of revelation-inspiration becomes a necessary assumption of a hermeneutics of Scripture and its theology.

Biblical Evidence

Obviously, there is an author of Scripture. By what means is the author's identity known? In answering this question, we must begin by paying close attention to what the biblical authors say about the origination of Scripture. There is extensive OT and NT evidence that the biblical authors considered God to be the author of Scripture.⁶ The *loci classici* of the biblical doctrine of Scripture are 2 Tim 3:15-17 and 2 Pet 1:20-21.

Paul's θεόπνευστος

Paul's statement about the origin of Scripture is brief and general: "All Scripture is inspired by God (πάσα γραφή θεόπνευστος)" (2 Tim 3:16, NAB). Paul used the word θεόπνευστος, which means literally "God-breathed," to convey the notion of divine inspiration. It is not known what a "divine breathing" could mean when literally applied to the generation of Scripture. However, we may attempt to understand it metaphorically. Thus understood, the word means that God is directly involved in the origin of Scripture (i.e., the words of Scripture). While Paul categorically affirms that God is the author of Scripture, he does not explain the mode of divine operation. Paul is not concerned with questions such as how God originated the Scriptures, what was involved in the divine breathing, or how God related to the human agents.

⁶Gerhard F. Hasel, "Divine Inspiration and the Canon of the Bible," *JATS* 5/1 (1994): 76-89.

Peter's φερόμενοι

Peter's remarks on the origin of Scripture are more nuanced and specific than Paul's. Whereas Paul unambiguously states God's causal involvement in the generation of Scripture as writing (γραφῆ), Peter brings to view a structure always implicit in the divine acts of revelation-inspiration of Scripture: "men spoke from God being led (φερόμενοι) by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:21).⁷ Peter thus explicitly underlines the nearly obvious fact that human beings have written Scripture. In the origination of Scripture, then, human agencies acted under the leading of the Holy Spirit. In short, both God and human beings were involved in the generation of Scripture.

Peter, however, carefully and forcefully qualifies the intervention of human agents: "Knowing this first: every prophecy of Scripture does not come into being (γίνεται) from [one's] own interpretation (ἐπιλύσεως)" (2 Pet 1:20). The Greek word ἐπίλυσις means literally "a release or liberation"; figuratively, it bears the notions of "explanation," "exposition," or "interpretation." Because the text is speaking of the coming into being or origination of Scripture, it is unlikely that ἐπίλυσις refers to the reader. Peter may be arguing that even when human beings were involved in writing Scripture, they did not originate the explanations, expositions, or interpretations of the various subject matters presented in Scripture.

If the human writers were not the ones who created the views and teachings of Scripture, then where do they come from? In a follow-up sentence, Peter explains that "not by the will of man was ever a prophecy brought about (ἤνέχθη, from φέρω), but men spoke from God being led (φερόμενοι) by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:21).⁸ Peter once again denies the human authorship of Scripture. He further clarifies the issue by noting that the will of human beings was not involved in the creation of Scripture. What roles did human beings carry out? They spoke (ἐλάλησαν), proclaimed, and communicated the explanations, expositions, and interpretations that originated in God as the author. Speech and writing are expressions of thought. Thus God's direction accompanied the writers of Scripture not only when they wrote, but also when they spoke. What they said, however, was not the manifestation of their own reasoning, imagination, or creation. It was the manifestation of God's thoughts and actions.

⁷It can also be translated "being moved."

⁸As with θεόπνευστος, the word Paul used to talk about the origination of Scripture, φερόμενοι appears only once in the Bible. φερόμενοι is a verbal form of φέρω. Various inflections of the verb φέρω appear more than sixty times in the NT in a variety of nuances, including "to bear, carry, carry along, carry forward, bring along, move, drive, and lead." Peter used φέρω in the passive voice as a participle modifying the word "men." Thus "men were led or carried along by the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit performs the action and it is received by men. At the origin of Scripture, then, we find the activity of the Holy Spirit in the writers of Scripture.

The Problem behind Revelation-Inspiration

Notably, Peter agrees with Paul by unequivocally affirming God's direct involvement in the generation of Scripture. However, neither Peter nor Paul explains the concrete ways in which the divine and human agencies interfaced, nor their specific *modus operandi*. In fact, the concrete way(s) in which the divine-human agencies operated are not completely explained anywhere in Scripture.

From our contemporary intellectual perspective, Paul's and Peter's statements sound more like a claim than a theological explanation. Moreover, their affirmation appears problematic. How should the simultaneous operation of God and human agencies as the writers of Scripture be understood? Scripture nowhere addresses this problem. As we attempt to provide answers of our own, we embark on the task of theology. Theology searches for understanding. Thus Paul's and Peter's statements provide not only a problem to solve, but also an important fact that no doctrine of revelation-inspiration should ignore. They teach that God is the author of all Scripture (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21).⁹ Theologians should find a way to understand how this took place and, at the same time, account for the human side that factors into the way Scripture was conceived and written.

The biblical doctrine of Scripture sets up the problem behind the doctrine of revelation-inspiration. Throughout history, theologians have understood the biblical claim to its divine-human origin in different ways. Their various answers to this question have become leading hermeneutical presuppositions that have decidedly influenced the entire task of exegetical and theological research, even to the point of dividing Christianity into two distinctive schools of thought across denominational lines. That the doctrine of revelation-inspiration should have such a momentous, paradigmatic influence on theological thinking should not be surprising. After all, it deals with the origin and nature of theological knowledge.

Methodological Detour

Before briefly considering leading models of revelation-inspiration, it is necessary to make a methodological detour by first precisely ascertaining the technical meaning of revelation-inspiration, by reflecting on the types of evidence upon which theologians build their understanding of revelation-inspiration, and by discovering the hermeneutical presuppositions from which they develop their views. In other words, it is necessary to clarify the object, data, and hermeneutical presuppositions involved in the conception and formulation of the doctrine of revelation-inspiration. This brief detour will help to clarify what others have said on this issue and what should be borne in mind in interpretations of it.

⁹Hasel's study, 86, clarifies that both the OT and the NT are included within the universal range of Paul's "all Scripture is inspired by God."

The Working Definition of Revelation-Inspiration

When theologians describe the doctrine of revelation-inspiration, they use the words “revelation” and “inspiration” in a technical sense. “Revelation” broadly refers to the process through which the content of Scripture emerged in the mind of the prophets and apostles. “Inspiration,” broadly speaking, refers to the process through which the content in the mind of the prophets and apostles was communicated in oral or written forms. Thus revelation is a cognitive process, while inspiration is primarily a linguistic one.¹⁰

The biblical writers did not use the word “inspiration,” which comes from the Latin translation of *θεόπνευστος* (2 Tim 3:16) and *φερόμενοι* (2 Pet 1:21). Moreover, the biblical authors did not use the notions of “revelation” and “inspiration” in the technical, analytical sense used in this article; rather they used them interchangeably.¹¹ According to the context, these words may refer to the origin of the thoughts of the prophets and apostles, to the process of communicating them in a written format, or to a combination of both. Not surprisingly, a large number of Adventist and evangelical theologians do the

¹⁰Sec, e.g., Raoul Dederen, “Toward a Seventh-day Adventist Theology of Revelation-Inspiration,” in *North American Bible Conference* (North American Division: unpublished paper, 1974), 7-8.

¹¹Though Ellen White does not use the words “revelation” and “inspiration” in the technical meaning I am employing in this chapter, neither does she warn against making such distinctions as some seems to suggest (see P. G. Damsteegt, “The Inspiration of Scripture in the Writings of Ellen G. White,” *JATS* 5/1 [1994]: 174). She is supposed to have warned against making a distinction between revelation and inspiration when she wrote: “Do not let any living man come to you and begin to dissect God’s Word, telling *what is revelation, what is inspiration and what is not*, without a rebuke. Tell all such they simply do not know. They simply are not able to comprehend the things of the mystery of God” (*Sermons and Talks*, 2 vols. [Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990, 1994], 1:73, emphasis supplied). However, this sentence does not warn against making the technical distinction between revelation and inspiration, but between what is and is not revelation-inspiration. That becomes clear when one goes on to read the last two sentences of the same paragraph: “What we want is to inspire faith. We want no one to say, ‘This I will reject, and this will I receive,’ but we want to have implicit faith in the Bible as a whole and as it is” (*ibid.*). This fits her clear opposition to any view of inspiration that may lead the reader to pick and choose what is and is not authoritative in Scripture. E.g., she wrote that “there are some that may think they are fully capable with their finite judgment to take the Word of God, and to state what are the words of inspiration and what are not the words of inspiration. I want to warn you off that ground, my brethren in the ministry. ‘Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.’ There is no finite man that lives, I care not who he is or whatever is his position, that God has authorized to pick and choose in His Word” (*ibid.*, 1: 64). Moreover, the way that I will use the words “revelation” and “inspiration” in this article seems compatible with Damsteegt’s analysis, 175, of White’s view on inspiration. He concludes that she “saw inspiration as a process in which divine light was communicated to the human recipient [revelation] and imparted to the people in a trustworthy manner [inspiration].”

same. A proper understanding of the origination of Scripture, however, requires a careful analysis of the cognitive and literary processes involved.

The Evidence

On what evidence do theologians build their understandings of the doctrine of revelation-inspiration? Since the divine-human interactions that originated Scripture are not available for direct inspection, theologians work from the direct results of Scripture. Theologians have come to recognize two types of evidence in Scripture: the doctrine of Scripture and the phenomena of Scripture. Since I have already dealt with the biblical doctrine of Scripture, in this section, I will briefly introduce what is meant by the phenomena of Scripture.

When theologians talk about the phenomena of Scripture, they are not usually referring to biblical teachings about Scripture, but to the characteristics of Scripture as a written work and to its entire content.¹² Consequently, while access to the biblical doctrine of Scripture involves theological analysis, access to the phenomena of Scripture takes place through historical and literary analysis. The first line of evidence underlines the role of the divine agency in the process of revelation-inspiration, while the second reveals the role of human agencies. Failure to integrate both lines of evidence has led to both conservative and liberal interpretations of revelation-inspiration in Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Adventist theologies.

To overcome the conservative-liberal impasse currently facing Christian theology in general and Adventist theology in particular, it is first necessary to listen to and integrate the entire range of available evidence.¹³ Consequently, Ekkehardt Mueller correctly concludes that “in formulating a doctrine of inspiration, one cannot disregard the textual phenomena, and one should not discard the self-testimony of Scripture. The Bible must be allowed to speak for itself.”¹⁴

Hermeneutics and Revelation-Inspiration

Scripture does not answer the epistemological question about the origin of theological knowledge pressing upon modern and postmodern Western theologians. After concisely reviewing the historical development of Adventist thought on revelation-inspiration, Timm arrives at the unavoidable conclusion

¹²For Ekkehardt Mueller, the phenomena of Scripture include, e.g., differences and discrepancies between various biblical passages (“The Revelation, Inspiration, and Authority of Scripture,” *Ministry*, April 2000, 22). Under the phenomena-of-Scripture label, liberal authors include contradictions and theological and factual errors.

¹³On this point, Knight, 193, underlines that “one of the great needs of Adventism is a body of literature on the subject of biblical inspiration that develops inductively from the inside of Scripture. It should seek to discover how the Bible sees itself, what claims it makes for itself, what types of data it states went into its development, and how it treats various categories of information.”

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 22-24.

that “the time has come for Seventh-day Adventists to move beyond apologetic concerns into the task of developing a more constructive *theology* of inspiration.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, how do we engage in constructive theology? How do we develop an understanding of a subject matter that Scripture does not speak about directly, but indirectly implies? The short answer to this challenge is by doing systematic theology. How do we do systematic theology, and how does it relate to biblical and exegetical theologies? These questions reveal that the time for Adventist pioneers has not yet ended. There are still unentered territories not only in Adventist missions, but also in Adventist theology.

For the limited purposes of this article, let us say that the constructive task of theology consists in understanding a specific theological issue. In our case, the issue is the process of revelation-inspiration, as technically defined above. Since there is no understanding or interpretation without presuppositions, it is helpful to recognize that any constructive study of the doctrine of revelation-inspiration builds upon presuppositions. We should use this insight as an analytical tool to understand the way in which various interpretations of revelation-inspiration have been conceived and formulated. If properly used, this insight may help Adventism to formulate its own understanding.

Since the doctrine of revelation-inspiration is a foundational presupposition directly influencing the entire task of Christian theology, some might suggest that we are involved in circular reasoning. We seem to be saying that the doctrine of revelation-inspiration is the presupposition for hermeneutics, and that hermeneutics is the presupposition for the doctrine of revelation-inspiration. There is no circular reasoning here, however, because I apply the notion of hermeneutics in two clearly different levels.

Traditionally, Adventist theologians have associated hermeneutics with biblical interpretation.¹⁶ However, recent studies have broadened our notion of hermeneutics by linking it to the functioning of reason.¹⁷ In a few words, hermeneutics applies to the way in which human reason works.¹⁸ To know is

¹⁵Timm, 542.

¹⁶See, e.g., Gerhard F. Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, 1985); and Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Commentary Reference Series (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 58-104. See also the following evangelical theologians: David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994); Henry Al Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981); Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991); and Walter C. Kaiser and Moises Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

¹⁷For an introduction to the development of philosophical hermeneutics, see Raúl Kerbs, “Sobre el desarrollo de la hermenéutica,” *Analogía Filosófica* 13/2 (1999): 3-33.

¹⁸Hans-Georg Gadamer, however, has underlined the universality of hermeneutics

to interpret.¹⁹ Consequently, interpretation or hermeneutics takes place whenever human beings begin thinking about an object, text, or issue. Thus the different types of hermeneutics can be identified and classified according to the object they address. In Christian theology, hermeneutics works on three levels: the text, the theological issues, and the philosophical principles. Because of their relative broadness and influence, we can speak of macro, meso, and micro hermeneutics, respectively.²⁰ While micro hermeneutics refers to textual interpretation and meso hermeneutics to issue or doctrinal interpretation, macro hermeneutics deals with the first principles from within which doctrinal and textual hermeneutics operate.²¹

When we affirm that the doctrine of revelation-inspiration assumes hermeneutics and, at the same time, that hermeneutics assumes a doctrine of revelation-inspiration, we do not engage in circular reasoning because we are speaking of different levels of hermeneutics. The doctrine of revelation-inspiration conditions the interpretation of biblical texts (i.e., micro hermeneutics) and theological issues (i.e., meso hermeneutics). At the same time, when we search for the meaning of the doctrine of revelation-inspiration, we assume some broad, far-reaching notions (i.e., macro-hermeneutical principles).

as present in all human understanding. Hermeneutics, in this general sense, considers the way in which human beings think ("The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. David E. Linge [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976], 1-17; and *idem*, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall [New York: Continuum, 1989]).

¹⁹David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 9. For an introduction to hermeneutics as the general theory of interpretation, see Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan, 1980); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. Heinz Kimmerle, trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1977). From a theological perspective, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); *idem*, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); and *idem*, "Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997), 520-537.

²⁰I am borrowing here the "macro, meso, and micro" categorization that Hans Küng uses to speak about the scientific paradigm in theology (*Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*, trans. Peter Heinegg [New York: Doubleday, 1988], 134).

²¹Macro hermeneutics is related to the study and clarification of philosophical issues directly or indirectly related to the criticism and formulation of concrete heuristic principles of interpretation. Meso hermeneutics deals with the interpretation of theological issues and, therefore, belongs properly to the area of systematic theology. Micro hermeneutics approaches the interpretation of texts and, consequently, proceeds within the realm of biblical exegesis.

What are the presuppositions involved in the understanding of revelation-inspiration? Who decides which presuppositions should be used? Let me start with the latter question. The presuppositions are not arbitrarily decided because they are necessarily required by the phenomenon of revelation-inspiration itself. Biblical evidence shows that the revelation-inspiration phenomenon always involves divine and human actions.²² Consequently, theologians unavoidably bring their own conceptions of divine and human natures to play in their doctrines of revelation-inspiration. These are macro-hermeneutical principles, which are assumed as principles in meso and micro hermeneutics. God's nature and actions, as well as human nature and actions, have been variously interpreted by Christian theologians. Thus different views of God and human nature have produced different interpretations of revelation-inspiration. With these methodological clarifications in mind we turn to the history of interpretation of revelation-inspiration.

Models of Revelation-Inspiration in Christian Theologies

Theologians have interpreted the doctrine of revelation-inspiration in many ways,²³ with most explanations falling into two primary models of interpretation: the classical and the modern.²⁴ These models have influenced the development of Adventist understanding of the doctrine of revelation-inspiration.

Verbal Inspiration

During the first eighteen centuries following the death of Christ, the doctrine of revelation-inspiration was not disputed. Following Christ's example, his followers took the biblical teaching about its inspiration at face value. They had no reason to think otherwise. They assumed God, through human instrumentality, wrote the Bible.

While classical theologians maximized the role of divine activity in the process of revelation-inspiration, they minimized the role of human agencies. For them, there was no doubt that God, through his Holy Spirit, was the author and writer of Scripture. Prophets and apostles were only the instruments that God used to write the very words of Scripture. Because God is believed to have written the words of Scripture, this view has come to be known as the

²²Raoul Dederen provides a summary of biblical evidence on the revelation-inspiration phenomenon in "The Revelation-Inspiration Phenomenon According to the Bible Writers," in *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, ed. Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson, Adventist Theological Society Occasional Papers (Berrien Springs: Adventist Theological Society, 1991), 12-29.

²³For a brief introduction to the history of the doctrine of revelation-inspiration, see Bruce Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1972).

²⁴See Fernando Canale, "Revelation and Inspiration: The Classical Model," *AUSS* 32 (1994): 7-28; idem, "Revelation and Inspiration: The Liberal Model," *AUSS* 32 (1994): 169-195.

“verbal” theory of inspiration. Not surprisingly, this notion has led to a high view of biblical authority, echoing the claim of the biblical authors themselves. The words of the Bible are the words of God. This assumption, however, did not prevent Christian theologians from misreading Scripture.

During this period, some authors giving thought to the process of revelation-inspiration placed the emphasis on inspiration. According to this view, revelation is the supernatural generation of thought (e.g., visions, dreams), which accounts for a few portions of Scripture. Conversely, inspiration is the divine, supernatural intervention in the writing of Scripture and therefore extends to the whole Bible. Alden Thompson comments that the definition of revelation-inspiration in this case implies that “inspiration becomes almost synonymous with revelation. Thus the inspiration process virtually becomes another form of revelation. The human recipient is viewed simply as the passive instrument through which the divine words flow.”²⁵

This view builds on an extrabiblical philosophical understanding of macro hermeneutics. Early in the history of Christianity, theologians began to define their macro-hermeneutical principles from Greek philosophical sources. Through a process that took centuries to reach its climax, the biblical notion of God was slowly replaced by the Greek idea of God. God was no longer a being who dwells among his people and acts directly within the flow of history, but a distant, timeless, nonhistorical being. The same process led to the replacement of the biblical notion of conditional immortality with the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul. This paradigmatic switch at the macro-hermeneutical level set the stage for the classical and modern schools of theology and their understandings of revelation-inspiration.

A further theological development that resulted from a change in paradigms was traditionally referred to as divine providence and, more recently, *Heilsgeschichte*. By the fifth century A.D., Augustine was already using this idea as a macro-hermeneutical presupposition in his exegetical studies and theological reflections. In so doing, he tied the notion of divine will and activity to the timeless nature of God.²⁶ The idea of divine, sovereign providence as an all-embracing causality encompassing the full extent of nature and history originates from this fateful combination.²⁷ Centuries later, this notion came to shape Martin Luther’s²⁸ and John Calvin’s²⁹ understandings of the gospel, as well as the understanding of the verbal inspiration of Scripture.

The verbal-inspiration model behind biblical inerrancy is not thus a mere

²⁵Thompson, 50-51.

²⁶Augustine, *Confessions*, 12.15.18.

²⁷This notion was developed at length by John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. Reid (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1977).

²⁸Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, ed. Philip S. Watson, trans. Erasmus Middleton (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1953), 21-28; 158-185.

²⁹John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. and intro. J. K. S. Reid (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1997), 56-58.

affirmation of biblical evidence, but an interpretation of the way in which the Bible came into existence. This theory was conceived from the perspective of the paradigmatic macro-hermeneutical shift described in the last two paragraphs. Thus the biblical affirmation that the Holy Spirit led the prophets' writing is understood on the assumption that God operated as a sovereign, irresistible cause that overruled any causality originating from human freedom. The macro-hermeneutical notion of God stemming from nonbiblical sources shaped the interpretation of the way in which God is supposed to have operated when inspiring Scripture. On this assumption, God is not only the author of Scripture, but also the writer.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, evangelical theologians used the verbal-inspiration theory, also known as plenary inspiration, to fight against modernism as expressed by the historical-critical method and encounter theory of inspiration, thereby challenging traditional Christian theology.³⁰ Working from the macro-hermeneutical perspective of divine, sovereign providence, Archibald A. Hodge (1823-1886) and Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921) spoke of inspiration as divine superintendence operating via concursive confluence with human agencies. They rejected the notion that God dictated Scripture to the biblical writers.³¹ As *modus operandi* of inspiration,

³⁰This theory is also known as "plenary" inspiration. Some theologians consider "plenary" and "verbal" inspiration to be different theories of inspiration, while others consider them different labels to designate the same way of understanding inspiration. I. S. Rennie suggests they are different theories of inspiration ("Plenary Inspiration," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984], 860-861; idem, "Verbal Inspiration," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984], 1242-1244). Charles Hodge considered them to be synonyms for the same way of understanding revelation-inspiration (*Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970], 1: 165). When compared with the "encounter" and "thought" theories, it becomes clear that the "verbal" and "plenary" accounts of inspiration are variations of the same theory. In fact, the words "plenary" and "verbal" are not contradictory, but show complementary emphases. "Plenary" signals opposition to those that claim only some portions of Scripture are inspired (partial inspiration). "Verbal" indicates opposition to the notion that only the prophets' thoughts and not their words are inspired. Both consider inspiration to be divine assistance that renders the words of Scripture inerrant. Archibald Alexander clarifies that the "plenary" view of revelation-inspiration upholds the absolute inerrancy of Scripture (*Evidences of the Authenticity, Inspiration and Canonical Authority of the Holy Scriptures* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1836], 223, 230). The primary difference between "verbal" and "plenary" inspiration is thus one of emphasis. The "verbal" version emphasizes divine sovereignty, while the "plenary" version probes in more detail the way in which divine sovereignty interfaces with human instrumentality (ibid., 224-225).

³¹John Calvin's (*Commentary on 2 Timothy*, 3:16) and Ellen White's (*Review and Herald*, January 22, 1880, par. 1, and *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948], 4: 9) statements referring to God's "dictating" Scripture should probably be taken in a figurative sense.

dictation was considered to be “mechanical” and did not correspond to the way God acted.³² Instead they argued that a concursive confluence between divine and human agencies was a dynamic concept that better expressed what took place in inspiration. According to them, God and humans worked together freely and harmoniously, each producing according to his or her proper nature. Yet because the Holy Spirit works internally and therefore secretly, this explanation adds little to the understanding of inspiration. The basic nature of verbal inspiration centers not in the concursive-confluent mode, but in the sovereign, irresistible causality of divine providence.³³ As a result, biblical writings are considered not only to be fully inerrant, but also to possess “a divine quality unattainable by human powers alone.”³⁴

The sculptor-chisel-sculpture analogy helps to visualize the way in which the verbal theory of inspiration conceives the manner in which the divine and human agencies operate when generating the writings of the Bible. As the sculptor, and not the chisel, is the author of the work of art, so God, and not the human writer, is the author of Scripture. Human writers, as the chisel, play only an instrumental role.

The most noticeable hermeneutical effects of the verbal theory are recontextualization and inerrancy. Recontextualization recognizes that understanding always relates to contexts. In the interpretation of a text, the historical situation from which it originated plays a pivotal role. In claiming that a timeless God is the author and writer of Scripture, verbal inspiration places the origin of biblical thought in the nonhistorical realm of the supernatural. Historical contexts and contents are bypassed in favor of timeless, divine truths. This nonhistorical recontextualization has assumed various forms, ranging from the classical depreciation of the historical-literal meaning of the biblical text in favor of allegorical, spiritual meanings to the fundamentalist reading of Scripture. Fundamentalism assumes that each biblical statement is an objective communication of supernatural, absolute truth. Thus Scripture reveals truths that always mean the same to all readers throughout time.

³²Dictation refers to the way in which the human and divine agencies operated. Most evangelical theologians reject the notion that God literally dictated the Scripture to human writers. They understand that Calvin used the term “dictation” metaphorically rather than literally. Dictation is considered “mechanical” because it does not make room for the human agency.

³³Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield defined inspiration as “the superintendence by God of the writers in the entire process of their writing, which accounts for nothing whatever but the absolute infallibility of the record in which the revelation, once generated, appears in the original autograph” (*Inspiration* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 60).

³⁴Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 58.

Encounter Revelation

Modernity generated a radically new understanding of revelation-inspiration. This interpretation did not come from accepting biblical statements at face value, but from complicated philosophical arguments. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of modern theology, drew the blueprint that later proponents of encounter revelation would follow. This theory does not revolve around inspiration, as does the verbal view, but around a radical reinterpretation of revelation.

Briefly put, according to encounter theory, revelation is a divine-human encounter without the impartation of knowledge. "Thus, the content of revelation is regarded no longer as knowledge *about* God, not even information *from* God, but God Himself."³⁵ Consequently, not one word or thought that is found in Scripture comes from God. Encounter revelation is thus the opposite of verbal inspiration. Rather, the context of Scripture originates from the historically conditioned response of human beings to the personal, noncognitive encounter with God. The Bible is a human book like any other book. The obvious disregard for the scriptural claim that God is the author of Scripture does not seem to bother supporters of this theory. The study of how the content of Scripture originated is left to historical investigation. Assuming that God did not contribute to the content of Scripture, historical critics see Scripture as the result of a long process of cultural evolution. Human imagination, community, and tradition are the grounds from which the human books of Scripture come. Not surprisingly, some exegetes believe that inspiration operates not on individuals, but on the entire community.³⁶ According to this view, inspiration did not reach to the personal level of prophetic thoughts or words directly, but influenced the social level of the community within which the authors of Scripture lived and wrote. Not surprisingly, Scripture's contents are human, not divine.

Modernity brought about a radical change in the philosophical understanding of human reason. The classical notion that reason is able to reach eternal timeless truth was considered impossible. Kant argued that reason can only operate within spatiotemporal limits.³⁷ Why did a change in philosophical teaching affect the understanding of revelation-inspiration? Since early in the history of Christian thinking, theologians have derived their understanding of macro-hermeneutical presuppositions from philosophy. Due to this methodological assumption, the modern change in the philosophical understanding of reason presented theologians with an alternative. Conservative theologians chose to build their theologies on the classical view of reason, while liberal thinkers built on the modern limited view of reason.

³⁵Raoul Dederen, "The Revelation-Inspiration Phenomenon," 11.

³⁶Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority: Nature and Function of Christian Scripture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999).

³⁷Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1990), see esp. "Transcendental Aesthetics," 30-43.

Modern theologians assume that God is timeless and that human reason cannot reach to the level of timeless objects. Within these parameters, there can be no cognitive communication between God and human beings. Christianity revolves around the notion that God relates to human beings. Encounter revelation suggests that the divine-human encounter takes place not at the cognitive, but at the “existential” or “personal” level.³⁸ Thus revelation is a divine-human encounter, real and objective, but which involves absolutely no communication from God.

The most noticeable hermeneutical effects of the verbal theory of inspiration can be summed up in two words, recontextualization and criticism. As the encounter theory of inspiration leads to recontextualization, so does the encounter theory of revelation. Both approach biblical texts and ideas from horizons alien to biblical thinking. While verbal inspiration assumes that Scripture reveals objective, timeless truths, encounter revelation assumes that Scripture is a pointer to an existential, noncognitive, divine-human encounter. Scripture then has no revelatory content, but a revelatory function as a pointer or witness to revelation. Second, since the content of Scripture originated (contrary to Paul’s and Peter’s views) from the impulse and wisdom of human beings, it must be subjected to scientific criticism and only used metaphorically for religious purposes. Due to the human origination of the biblical content, the interpreter assumes Scripture contains errors not only in historical details, but also in all that it expressly teaches, including teachings about God and salvation.

Models of Revelation-Inspiration in Adventism

It is difficult to assess how theories such as verbal inspiration and encounter revelation affect Adventism. Edward Heppenstall properly described the general way in which most Adventist writers approach the study of revelation-inspiration by saying that “this church has no clearly defined and developed doctrine of revelation and inspiration. We have aligned ourselves with the evangelical or traditional position.”³⁹ In this section, I will attempt to describe only the main models of revelation-inspiration that Adventist theologians have adopted.⁴⁰

³⁸I have placed “existential” and “personal” within quotations marks because the divine-human relation takes place within the shared timelessness provided by divine timelessness and the immortality of the human soul, which, according to classical thinking, shares, though in a lower and imperfect level, in the timeless level of reality.

³⁹Edward Heppenstall, “Doctrine of Revelation and Inspiration (Part 1),” *Ministry*, 1970, 16.

⁴⁰For a detailed introduction to Adventist reflection on revelation-inspiration, see Timm, 487-509. Timm, 490, notes: “That early Seventh-day Adventists regarded the Scriptures as infallible and inerrant is evident from the uncritical reprint in the *Review* of several portions from non-Adventist authors that fostered such a view. In 1859, for example, the *Review* reprinted a large paragraph from Louis Gausson’s [book,] *Theopneustia*, stating that not ‘one single error’ could ever be found in the more than 31,000 verses of the Bible.” An overview of the same history can be found in

Verbal Inspiration

In the 1960s and early seventies when Heppenstall wrote his assessment of Adventist views regarding the doctrine of revelation-inspiration, most Adventists did not give much thought to the question and, consequently, embraced by default the theory of verbal revelation. According to Timm, early Adventist authors used the verbal theory of inspiration as an apologetical tool against Deism.⁴¹ This trend intensified after the death of Ellen White when Adventism faced modernism.⁴² It may still be the default explanation of revelation-inspiration implicitly held by most Adventists who have not yet considered the issue explicitly.⁴³

In the context of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy shaping the American religious landscape during the first half of the twentieth century, several Adventist authors addressed the question of revelation-inspiration at some length. Among them, for instance, Carlyle B. Haynes addressed the issue in two chapters of his *God's Book*.⁴⁴ He demonstrates his adherence to the verbal theory of inspiration when he affirms that "revelation is *wholly supernatural*, and *altogether controlled* by God."⁴⁵ God exercises his supernatural control and superintendence over prophets and apostles when they write the revelations they have received: "Whether dealing either with revelation or with facts within his knowledge, the Bible writer required *inspiration* to produce a record preserved from all error and mistake."⁴⁶ Absolute inerrancy follows from the total control of the human agent by the Holy Spirit. God is totally in control of the process of writing, and the human agent is a passive instrument.

The parallel with the verbal theory of inspiration is unmistakable. Haynes connects his notion of inspiration, perhaps unknowingly, to the evangelical understanding of divine sovereignty. Verbal inspiration depends on the

Thompson, 267-272.

⁴¹Timm, 487-509.

⁴²Knight, 128-138.

⁴³Samuel Koranteng-Pipim provides a recent explicit example of this trend (*Receiving the Word: How New Approaches to the Bible Impact Our Biblical Faith and Lifestyle* [Berrien Springs: Berean Books, 1996]). Pipim, 51, does not explicitly deal with the doctrine of revelation-inspiration, but assumes the evangelical verbal theory, as many Adventists have done in the past. His approach is apologetical against the inroads of modernism and the historical-critical method of exegesis in Adventist theology. He seems to distance himself from the evangelical verbal theory of inspiration when he emphasizes the "trustworthiness" of Scripture rather than its "inerrancy" (54-55). Yet he, 227, comes very close to inerrancy when explaining that, while "no distortions came from the hand of the original Bible writers, some alterations and minor distortions have crept into the Word during the process of transmission and translation."

⁴⁴Carlyle B. Haynes, *God's Book* (Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1935), 129-131.

⁴⁵Ibid., 144 (emphasis supplied).

⁴⁶Ibid., 136.

understanding that God exercises absolute control on the biblical writers. As already explained, this conviction does not stand on biblical but on philosophical grounds. Unknowingly, then, the verbal-inspiration theory embraced by conservative Adventist theologians depends on the Augustinian-Calvinistic understanding of macro-hermeneutical presuppositions derived from a Neo-Platonic view of reality. Thus, although the verbal theory affirms a high view of Scripture, its precise expression "inerrant in the autographs" *de facto* denies its revelatory supremacy (i.e., *sola Scriptura* principle) in the task of doing Christian theology because the autographs of Scripture no longer exist. In Adventism, the adoption of verbal inspiration generates the same hermeneutical effects described above. These effects are especially counterproductive in Adventism because its theology has been built on the implicit assumption of a quite different understanding of the macro-hermeneutical realm.

Encounter Revelation

Since the encounter model of revelation is the alternative way to face the challenge of modernism and the historical-critical method, it is not surprising to find Adventist theologians adopting this line of thinking. It is uncertain how many Adventist theologians may have implicitly adopted this view or may adopt this view in the future, but at least one Adventist scholar has explicitly argued in favor of the encounter theory of revelation-inspiration.⁴⁷

In an article by NT scholar Herold Weiss, the modern encounter view of revelation is recommended to the Adventist community. Weiss believes revelation takes place as a noncognitive, divine-human encounter: "I do not understand revelation to be essentially the communication of divine information given by the Spirit to the writers of the Bible; nor do I consider faith to be the acceptance of this information. Revelation, rather, is first of all, a divine disclosure that creates a community in which life expresses this revelation in symbols of action, imagination and thought under the guidance of prophets."⁴⁸

He develops this view with even greater force and clarity, noting that

In a more technical sense, however, revelation refers to the actual God-disclosure. It suggests the disclosing of that which was veiled. And the important thing to see is that when God reveals, He does not disclose *something*: things, words, a book. He unveils *Himself* by acting on behalf of people. People experience, or witness, His being or His action. For God to reveal Himself, no word need be spoken. Even in a prophetic vision the words of God are the words of the prophet; each prophet imposes his own style and his own vocabulary on the lips of God. God reveals Himself, then, by acting on selves; there is no book in between.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Herold Weiss, "Revelation and the Bible: Beyond Verbal Inspiration," *Spectrum* 7/3 (1975): 49-54.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 53.

Thus, according to Weiss, the words and concepts of Scripture come not from God, but from the prophets and apostles who respond and testify to the so-called objective but noncognitive and wordless event of revelation described above. The process of thinking and writing is the human response to the encounter.⁵⁰

This view produces a dichotomy between faith and belief. While belief belongs to the realm of history and is verifiable, faith belongs to the realm of the divine transcendence and is not verifiable.⁵¹ Scripture, as a written work, represents the thoughts and words of the prophets, not of God. Scripture testifies about the acts of God in history. These “acts,” however, are devoid of thought and words, taking place not within the realm of history (i.e., belief), but within the inner realm of nonhistorical, subjective human experience (i.e., faith).

The resulting interpretation of Scripture builds on this dichotomy. The historical-critical method is applied in all its force on the human side—there is no methodological modification because the divine, supernatural encounter, for all practical purposes, plays the same role of the Troeltschian naturalistic presuppositions.⁵² The human side includes the entire content of Scripture. Exegetes deal with the historical content of Scripture, applying the historical-critical method. When theologians interpret Scripture, they do not do so in order to understand what the biblical authors directly spoke about, but to recover the indirect, noncognitive, objective cause *behind* the words. This side of “faith” uses biblical language as indirect metaphorical pointers to the prophet’s encounter with God. The goal of this exercise is not to find truth, but to adumbrate the nonhistorical, noncognitive mystical experience with God in order to inspire personal life experiences.

Thought Inspiration

Ellen White strongly influenced Adventist thought on the doctrine of revelation-inspiration. By her example and teachings, she pointed away from both verbal

⁵⁰Weiss, 53, states: “Inspiration is the next step in the process. God’s action needs to be interpreted, and inspiration is the working of God’s Spirit with a personality so that the significance of God’s action may not be lost. The inspired person—called a prophet—testifies that the action was not the result of just human or natural agencies, but that through them God was at work. He introduces words into the process. Grammar, style, cultural setting, needs of the audience, purpose for testifying, personal biases, human conditions—all of these factors enter into the formulation of what the prophet says under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Here the prophet’s faith and reason are joined.”

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 54.

⁵²Ernst Troeltsch, discusses the principles of the historical-critical method in *Religion in History*, trans. James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 11-32. See my evaluation and criticism of Troeltsch’s principles of historical criticism in *The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology: A Hermeneutical Study of the Revelation and Inspiration of the Bible* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Lithotech, 2005), 436-442.

inspiration and encounter revelation. By attempting to understand the doctrine of revelation-inspiration by taking clues from White's teachings and prophetic experience, many Adventists have adopted the idea of "thought inspiration." They seem convinced that this view properly reflects her views on inspiration.

One of the earliest expressions of thought inspiration in Adventism took place in 1883. It affirmed "the light given by God to his servants is by the enlightenment of the mind, thus imparting the thought, and not (except in rare cases) the very words in which the ideas should be expressed."⁵³ On the basis that inspiration acts on the biblical writers' thoughts and not on their words, this statement marks a clear departure from verbal inspiration. Eighty-seven years later, Heppenstall articulated this insight into a broad theoretical profile.

Heppenstall articulated the concept of thought inspiration as an alternative to encounter revelation and a departure from verbal inspiration. Correctly rejecting the noncognitive basis of encounter revelation, he proposed that the process of divine revelation took place at the level of the biblical writer's ideas, concepts, and teachings.⁵⁴ Revelation is conceptual, taking place in the mind of the writer. Unfortunately, he did not specify the means through which such conceptual revelation was formed. Likewise, inspiration also took place in the mind of the writer. He suggested that in inspiration the Holy Spirit controls the mind of the human writer in order to guarantee "the accuracy of that which is revealed."⁵⁵ He proposes that "Inspiration is co-extensive with the scope of what is revealed and assures us that the truths revealed correspond to what God had in mind."⁵⁶

In both revelation and inspiration, God operates on the thought and not on the words. Through revelation God generates ideas in the mind of the prophet, while through inspiration he assures the accuracy of the revealed ideas in the mind of the prophet. However, on the basis that "one of the unknown factors in inspiration is the degree of the Holy Spirit's control over the minds of the Bible writers,"⁵⁷ Heppenstall's position implied that divine inspiration does not reach the words of Scripture. Consequently, he adheres to what we could call "thought inerrancy." Thus only the biblical thought, not the words, are inerrant. Conveniently, for the sake of an apologetics against the biblical and scientific criticisms of scriptural content, believers can argue that errors and inconsistencies are due to imperfect language, not to imperfect thought or truth.

In summary, according to thought inspiration, divine revelation-inspiration operates in the truth behind the words, but falls short of controlling the words. Hence, in Scripture, infallible truth is presented in fallible language. Scripture,

⁵³"General Conference Proceedings," *Review and Herald*, Nov. 27, 1883, 741-742.

⁵⁴Heppenstall, 16.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Edward Heppenstall, "Doctrine of Revelation and Inspiration (Conclusion)," *Ministry*, August 1970, 29.

therefore, contains errors in matters of detail, which do not affect the revealed thought.

Exegetes are aware of the role of the human component of revelation-inspiration in a degree unknown to most theologians, historians, pastors, and believers. Moreover, exegetes move within a discipline that approaches Bible studies from macro presuppositions dictated by the limited parameters of contemporary factual sciences.

In 1991, from the perspective of biblical studies, Thompson's publication of *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* brought the issue of biblical inspiration to the forefront of Adventist discussion.⁵⁸ A year later, a group of Adventist theologians published a critical response to his proposal.⁵⁹ Thompson distinguishes between revelation and inspiration.⁶⁰ Revelation is the supernatural communication of thoughts and truth to prophets. Thus it is "some kind of special input from God, a message from Him to His creatures on earth."⁶¹ Divine thought is communicated by means of supernatural interventions, such as visions, dreams, a voice from heaven, miracles, words written on stone, and Jesus Christ.⁶² Inspiration, however, becomes a fuzzy, subjective "fire in their bones" that moved prophets and apostles to write and speak from the presence of the Holy Spirit.⁶³ Far from claiming that inspiration makes the words of the prophets become the words of God, Thompson thinks that "inspiration" means that "God stays close enough to the writers so that the point comes through clear enough."⁶⁴ Thus in the process of inspiration, God works neither on the prophet's thoughts nor on his or her words. Inspiration is a divine presence that the prophet feels in the bones, not in the mind.

For Thompson, while all of Scripture is inspired (i.e., the divine presence felt in the bones of the writer) only some portions are revealed (i.e., come from divine thought, propositions, and miraculous actions). Thompson argues this point by saying, incorrectly, that "*the Bible does not say that all Scripture was given by revelation.*"⁶⁵

Raoul Dederen, reacting against this notion, concludes that "to hold that all is inspired but only part—i.e., a small part—is revealed and on that basis address and attempt to solve the apparently contradictory statements in

⁵⁸See n. 4 above.

⁵⁹Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson, eds., *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, Adventist Theological Society Occasional Papers (Berrien Springs: Adventist Theological Society, 1992).

⁶⁰For a brief analysis of Thompson's view on revelation-inspiration, see Dederen, "On Inspiration and Biblical Authority," 93-95.

⁶¹Thompson, 47.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid., 53.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid., 48 (emphasis original).

Scripture remains unsatisfactory.⁶⁶ Because Scripture does not assume the technical distinction between revelation and inspiration when describing its origin, Paul can claim that the entire content of Scripture originates in God. Thus, according to Scripture, the entire Bible is both revealed and inspired.

Where do other unrevealed portions of Scripture come from according to Thompson? He correctly argues that many portions of Scripture originate from research and experience. However, these contents, being of human origin, can only hold authority based on inspiration. Yet if biblical writers experienced inspiration neither cognitively nor linguistically but subjectively as a fire in their bones, we are left with the unavoidable conclusion that large portions of Scripture present fallible human ideas.

Although Thompson avoids talking about exegetical methodology, his proposal shows in some detail how, for example, Jerry Gladson's proposal of a "modified" use of the historical-critical method would look if applied in Adventist theology. He argues, against Gerhard Hasel and Gordon Hyde, that Adventists can use a "modified" version of the historical-critical method. His proposal revolves around the notion that the historical-critical method can be used when one exchanges the Troeltschian naturalistic presuppositions with Christian supernatural ones. He introduces the supernatural *de facto* by affirming the thought inspiration of the biblical text. Consider, for instance, his conviction that "an Adventist need not feel uneasy when he or she realizes the text has been shaped by human activity. Behind it divine inspiration works both in the initial inception of the message and its preservation through whatever stages it may have required. This enables Adventists to avoid the pitfalls of a strict, naturalistic biblical criticism, while recognizing the legitimate fruits of the critical method in calling attention to the human factor."⁶⁷ In other words, Gladson's proposal demonstrates that one can use the historical-critical method without subscribing to the naturalistic presuppositions on which the historical-critical method has been built.⁶⁸

Gladson also argues on the basis of the thought-inspiration paradigm. According to this view, Adventist scholars should feel free to apply the

⁶⁶Dederen, "On Inspiration and Biblical Authority," 101.

⁶⁷Jerry Gladson, "Taming Historical Criticism: Adventist Biblical Scholarship in the Land of the Giants," *Spectrum*, 18/4 (1988), 19-34. Note that inspiration is "behind" the text or human factor. The historical-critical method has not changed because the affirmation of supernatural inspiration abides by the naturalistic presupposition, which does not allow God to act historically within the flow of historical spatiotemporal causes. God and the supernatural are carefully placed out of the reach of historical criticism behind the closed historical continuum.

⁶⁸Gladson, 28, argues that one can use historical criticism on the assumption of divine transcendence and thought inspiration. He draws from the verbal-revelation theory the notion of mysterious divine superintendence. This notion opens the door to historical criticism because it hides divine intervention behind the continuum of historical events. What Gladson seems to miss is that the use of divine transcendence as a macro-hermeneutical presupposition can be understood in different ways.

historical-critical methodology to the portions of Scripture that originate in human research and experience. The historical-critical method, however, is not “modified” by accepting thought inspiration (or revelation in Thompson’s language), and by circumscribing the biblical materials that fall outside of thought inspiration. In order to apply the historical-critical method to the entire Bible, inspiration (or revelation in Thompson’s language) must be replaced by encounter revelation.

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Thought Inspiration

Thought inspiration involves positive and negative points. On the positive side, for instance, it provides a midpoint between modernistic noncognitive encounter revelation and absolutely inerrant classical verbal inspiration. Thought inspiration also has the positive effect of directing the interpreter’s attention to the weightier matters discussed in Scripture and away from the minutiae. Finally, this view of inspiration has the obvious advantage of accounting for biblical phenomena that do not fit within the verbal-inspiration theory.

However, thought inspiration also has disadvantages. The thought-words dichotomy, on which the theory builds, leads to the claim that inspiration does not reach to the words of Scripture. Unfortunately, this claim and the thought-words dichotomy on which it builds are not supported by Scripture, White, or philosophical analysis. Although thought inspiration accounts better for the phenomena of Scripture and White’s experience in writing her books than verbal inspiration, it fails to account for the clear biblical claim that inspiration reaches to the words themselves (2 Tim 3:16). Moreover, a detailed study of White’s thought on inspiration seems to suggest that, according to her, divine inspiration does reach the words and assures the “total trustworthiness of the biblical record.”⁶⁹

The classical Ellen White statement used by Adventist proponents of thought inspiration reads:

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. Nevertheless, 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.⁷⁰

Unfortunately, the last sentence of White’s paragraph is often left out, in which White clearly states that divine inspiration—which includes the technical definition of revelation and inspiration—works not on the words (as the verbal theory affirms), but in the formation of the writer’s thought. In this way, inspiration reaches to the words of the prophets, which “are the word of God.”

⁶⁹Damsteegt, 162.

⁷⁰Ellen White, *Selected Messages*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958, 1980), 1: 21.

In other places, White explains how God was present, guiding when she was writing.⁷¹ It seems clear that White would not support “thought” inspiration as many understand it at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Consequently, it appears misleading to use one aspect of her complex view on inspiration to give authority to a theory she would not approve.⁷²

Moreover, philosophical reflection suggests that “language and thinking about things are so bound together that it is an abstraction to conceive of the system of truths as a pre-given system of possibilities of being [thoughts] for which the signifying subject [biblical writer] selects corresponding signs [words].”⁷³ Thoughts and words belong together.⁷⁴ A thought with no word or words to communicate perishes in the mind of the thinker.

Another problem is that, for all practical purposes, thought inspiration reduces inspiration to revelation.⁷⁵ Technically, revelation deals with the formation of ideas in the mind of biblical writers, and inspiration with the process of communicating revelation in written or oral formats. When thought inspiration claims that divine assistance to the prophet does not reach the words, it is thereby limiting divine intervention to revelation. The practical problem with this view is that we have no access to prophetic thought, which died with the prophets, but only with their human fallible words.

Finally, the problems of thought inspiration considerably increase when the thought-word dichotomy hides the history-salvation dichotomy that finds its ground not in biblical but in Platonic thinking. Exegetes and theologians working from these dichotomies feel free to criticize the historical content of Scripture from a scientific viewpoint because they assume that the divine theological content of Scripture is both beyond the human words of the text and the history of salvation it reveals. Since theological content is not strictly

⁷¹See, e.g., a number of other places where she supports this position (*Mind Character and Personality*, 2 vols. [Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1977], 1: 318; *Selected Messages*, 1: 27, 36, 37; *Manuscript Releases* (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1993), 2: 156-157; *Selected Messages*, 3: 36. Moreover, in numerous passages White refers to Scripture as “the inspired word” or “words” of God, (see, e.g., *Evangelism* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1970], 269; *Selected Messages*, 1: 17; *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1956), 108; “How to Study the Bible,” *Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald*, July, 19, 1887); and “words of inspiration” (see, e.g., *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1943), 198; *Testimonies for the Church*, 2 :605). It seems clear that White would not support “thought” inspiration as many understand it at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Consequently, it appears misleading to use one aspect of her complex view on inspiration to give authority to a theory she would not approve.

⁷²See also Damsteegt, 160.

⁷³Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 417. Gadamer seems to imply that Greek philosophy, based on a timeless notion of reality, drives an abstract wedge between thought and word (*ibid.*, 417-418).

⁷⁴Our thoughts are influenced by the language that shapes it.

⁷⁵The same criticism that Thompson leveled against verbal inspiration; see above.

tied to the words of Scripture, exegetes and theologians use their imaginations and present the results as the theological content of the text. Not surprisingly, some Adventist theologians and scientists, trying to accommodate the biblical account of creation to evolutionary scientific teachings, use thought inspiration to justify their approach. They explicitly argue their case based on thought inspiration and the assumed disjunction between thoughts and words.⁷⁶

The thought-word dichotomy assumed in thought inspiration derives from the same macro hermeneutics on which classical Christian theologians ground their soul-body dichotomy. Just as by observing the body we do not gain knowledge about the soul, so by reading the text of Scripture we are clueless as to the divine thought in the mind of the biblical writer. In short, if inspiration did not reach the words, how are we sure that we find any divinely originated thoughts in Scripture? If the separation between thought and words makes room for small errors, why should it not also make room for substantial errors in theological teachings?

Conclusion

Presently Adventist scholars work by implicitly or explicitly assuming three different interpretations of revelation-inspiration: verbal inspiration, encounter revelation, and thought inspiration.

These theories are by no means of minor theological importance. On the contrary, they reveal different theological schools or theological paradigms, which decidedly influence the entire task of exegetical and theological research, even to the point of dividing Adventism into distinctive schools of thought across the world. This conflict of interpretations should alert us to the importance of arriving at a proper understanding of revelation-inspiration.

Our research has not found any serious scholarly attempt by an Adventist theologian to deal with the cognitive origin of Scripture. Instead, Adventist scholars adopt and adapt the theoretical models of explanation produced by classical (verbal model) and modern (encounter model) theological traditions. These models build on human philosophical presuppositions about divine and human nature. In so doing, they violate the *sola Scriptura* principle and therefore go against the first fundamental belief of Adventist doctrines.

First, the encounter theory does not support a *sola Scriptura* theology because it teaches that the content of Scripture originates from human

⁷⁶See, e.g., Cottrell, 195-221. See Cottrell's views on the basis of a literal exegesis of Genesis ("Literary Structure of Genesis 1:1-2:3: An Overview," in *Creation Reconsidered: Scientific, Biblical, and Theological Perspectives*, ed. James L. Hayward [Roseville, CA: Association of Adventist Forums, 2000], 239-248); on the assumption of thought revelation that the truth of the text is in the theological thought behind the text ("Prophets: Infallible or Authoritative?" in *Creation Reconsidered*, 223-233). See also Frederick E. J. Harder, who merges the doctrines of creation and Christology. In the process of so doing, the Great Controversy motif is reinterpreted along theistic evolutionary lines ("Theological Dimensions of the Doctrine of Creation," in *Creation Reconsidered*, 279-286).

knowledge. Second, while, at first glance, the verbal theory seems to support a *sola Scriptura* theology because it teaches that God is the “real” writer of Scripture, the teachings of Scripture do not support the understanding of divine actions that the verbal theory assumes. Although Scripture teaches that God is the author of Scripture, it does not claim that he is the writer. Moreover, the phenomena of Scripture do not support the notion that God is the writer of Scripture. In addition, by having the words of Scripture originate directly from God’s timeless eternity, the verbal model disregards the content of biblical words that represent God’s acting and speaking to the prophets from within the flow of human time and history. All these are examples that point to the conclusion that the verbal model of revelation cannot actually support a theology based only on Scripture. Finally, the hard wedge driven between thoughts and words makes it impossible for the Adventist “thought” inspiration to support the *sola Scriptura* principle.

If Adventist theology wants to remain faithful to the *sola Scriptura* principle, then it should search for a new model of revelation-inspiration. We will consider, in a second article, the possibility of building a biblical model of revelation-inspiration that may support the *sola Scriptura* principle and strengthen the unity and mission of the Adventist Church.