

DIVIDED BY VISIONS OF THE TRUTH: THE BIBLE, EPISTEMOLOGY, AND THE ADVENTIST COMMUNITY¹

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Background

A recent controversy at a Seventh-day Adventist university in relation to the teaching of biological evolution highlighted differences within the Adventist Church over how to read and understand the Bible.² A well-known church evangelist objected to some class materials and a syllabus that revealed that some of the university's science teachers were teaching the theory of "naturalistic evolution" as the actual description of the way life originated and developed. The evangelist protested in a letter to church leaders that the university's teaching was undermining his evangelistic efforts as well as the church's teaching on biblical creation.

The letter drew sufficient attention and concern that the president of the university wrote a public letter in response. In his letter, the president insisted that the university had been misrepresented. He asserted that the university did not teach "atheistic evolution," which he felt was implied by the charge of "naturalistic evolution." He assured the church at large that prevailing scientific views were being taught in the classroom in the context of the Adventist values of "biblical creation." To those reading carefully, it seemed that the letters did not reach the level of meaningful dialogue. The defense—we do not teach atheistic evolution—did not really respond to the charge—biblical creation is not being taught.

This was just the latest in a series of incidents that have highlighted both the growing divide in the church over biblical authority and hermeneutics, and the increasing inability of the contending sides to engage in meaningful dialogue. More often than not, both sides speak to their own constituencies within the liberal or conservative camps, rather than to the whole church. Within the church there seems to be a loss of common ground and shared commitments in discussing matters of biblical interpretation and authority.

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²Documentation, including the emails and letters quoted in this introduction, regarding the controversy at La Sierra University and its handling of the teaching of evolution in its science department can be found at <http://www.educatetruth.com>.

There are a number of reasons for the seemingly intractable nature of the debate, but this article proposes that an important one is a lack of understanding regarding the historical development and philosophical background of the fundamentalist/liberal divide that has riven much of Christendom during the twentieth century. The attention paid to this well-known split has generally overlooked some important commonalities between the two groups regarding epistemology, or theories of knowledge. It has also caused many to overlook an alternate approach to epistemology and spiritual knowledge that can avoid the pitfalls of both the liberal and fundamentalist camps.

This paper attempts to identify the historical and philosophical elements undergirding these debates, and to delineate briefly the alternative epistemological approach. It will help clarify the terms of the ongoing discussion over hermeneutics and biblical authority. This in turn will shed light on the recent discussion between the evangelist and the university president as well as on the larger debate in the Adventist community. But it will also serve as a case study for Christians and scholars of other denominations as to how one biblically conservative denomination has been impacted by the fundamentalist/liberal controversies of the last century. Adventism represents in microcosm the tussle in twentieth-century Christianity over how the Bible should be read and interpreted. The story outlined here will provide insights and comparators in relation to the experiences of other churches.

1. Introduction—The Pitfalls of Binary Thinking

Meaningful differences do exist in the Adventist theological world over biblical authority, as shown by the opening story above. However, it is the contention of this paper that apparent differences, and even many minor real differences, are at times unduly magnified because of some fundamental misunderstandings regarding the epistemological basis of the Adventist hermeneutical practices. A clearer understanding of this basis and its historical context may help focus discussions on real, rather than perceived, differences.

One of the ways in which this basic misunderstanding manifests itself is in the frequent attempts to divide basic hermeneutical/interpretive approaches into two camps: the historical-critical method,³ which focuses on the source

³The discussion is complicated by the fact that the historical-critical method of Bible study is hard to define. As the *Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* states, “its definition is almost as controversial as its desirability” (John Barton, “Historical Critical Approaches,” *Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 9). The four elements listed by the *Companion* as characterizing the method are: genetic questions—questions about the authorship, sources and development of the books of the Bible; original meaning—the attempt to find the author’s intent and message for the readers of his day; historical reconstruction—a rebuilding of the historical context of the book and its writer; and disinterested scholarship (*ibid.*, 9-12). This is a very broad definition that many would say would be

and form of the text and the intent of the author; and the grammatical-historical method,⁴ which deals with the interpretation of the final form of the text and allows for truths beyond those envisioned by the human author. The former method has been accused of undermining the supernatural claims and basis of the Bible; the latter has been criticized for ignoring the historical and cultural contexts of the Bible. But this stark division overlooks important intermediate positions, some of which take both the historical nature and the truth claims of the Bible seriously.

Such an either/or approach causes groups to be lumped together that are quite different, and makes communication between the groups more difficult. Those to the right-of-center theologically, at times, accuse those on the left of holding views of the Bible that they may not actually hold, and vice-versa. What emerges is a series of attacks on straw men—with both sides convinced that they have demolished the opposition, while believing that they themselves remain unscathed.⁵

included in a definition of the grammatico-historical method of Bible study, which is generally viewed as an alternative to the historical-critical approach. It does, however, capture many of the central concerns of historical-criticism that are peripheral to the grammatical-historical method. We will further define the historical-critical method as we examine each of the four groups, as the definition changes slightly for each group.

⁴The grammatico-historical or historical-grammatical method is typically concerned only with the final version of the text, and uses the tools of grammar to interpret scriptural passages within the larger historical context found within the Bible itself to determine what the passage meant to the original audience. According to Robert L. Thompson in his book on hermeneutics, the scholar utilizing the grammatico-historical interpretation of Scripture “[Interprets] each statement in light of the principles of grammar and the facts of history. Take each statement in its plain sense if it matches common sense, and do not look for another sense” (*Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002], 155). A good explication of the division between the historical-critical and grammatical-historical methods was recently published by Richard M. Davidson of Andrews University, whose outline and comparison chart provided some of the framework for my analysis in this paper. I largely agree with Davidson on his approach to Scripture. But I find that his lumping of all approaches to Scripture into two basic categories, while useful for some purposes, such as showing the extreme elements in the debate over scriptural authority, obscures some important distinctions and overlooks potentially moderating positions that this paper will explore (“The Authority of Scripture: A Personal Pilgrimage,” *Spectrum*, 34/3 [2006]: 38-45).

⁵A good example of one such exchange is the publication of Alden Thompson’s left-leaning *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1991) and the right-oriented response to it, edited by Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson, *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (Berrien Springs: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1992). See also Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Receiving the Word*

Rather than two approaches, there have been, in the larger Christian world, at least four main ways to approach the historical-critical method over the last century or so.⁶ The differences in approach are driven in part by the different, underlying epistemological presuppositions of the various methods. Indeed, this paper is an overview of the epistemological underpinnings of biblical study methods, rather than a study of the methods per se, which are dealt with largely in an appendix chart to this paper.

This more nuanced division will help clarify the actual differences that exist between the various approaches to truth, reality, and biblical authority. The intended result will be a clearer understanding of the Adventist epistemological base. It will show how this base supports and encompasses many of the concerns found on the right, for objectivity and meaningful propositional truth, and on the left, for the importance of subjectivity and human experience.

The paper will proceed by briefly describing the four competing approaches to truth and biblical interpretation. It will then focus on the three of these having common roots in an epistemological view known as foundationalism—the view that all reliable knowledge must be rooted in absolutely verifiable or certain foundational beliefs. It will then describe the fourth approach, termed holistic biblical realism, which unlike foundationalism, requires only reliable beliefs at its base. Finally, we will look at the implications of biblical realism for Bible study methods generally, and for the Adventist biblical studies community in particular.

2. Four Main Approaches to Biblical Interpretation

The four main approaches to Bible study methods discussed here are described in two ways: first, by describing what presuppositions they have regarding the nature of reality and how one obtains reliable knowledge or truth; and, second, listing how they relate to the methodology, or tools, of historical criticism. (See the chart at the end of this paper where all four groups are laid out and analyzed according to their central components.)⁷

(Berrien Springs: Berean Books, 1996). The resulting stalemate seemed to open the door to even more radical, reader-response criticism of the Bible within the Adventist Church and to other postmodern approaches that resulted in more extreme forms of cultural relativizing of biblical teaching. See, e.g., Alberto Timm, “A History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on Biblical and Prophetic Inspiration (1844-2000),” *JATS* 10/1-2 (1999): 531-539; idem, “Historical Background of Adventist Biblical Interpretation,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005), 10-11.

⁶These four do not all meaningfully exist in the Adventist Church, but their influences have been felt therein.

⁷My chart is somewhat modeled on the one designed by Davidson, but rather than two groups, I identify four and modify some of his categories, while adding

The first group accepts a naturalistic-foundationalist presupposition, which denies the possibility or existence of miracles, and fully embraces all elements of the historical-critical method. The second group replaces the naturalistic presupposition with what I term experientialist-foundationalist presupposition. This view does not entirely deny miracles and revelation, but emphasizes personal experience as central and controlling in the search for truth. This group also accepts a robust version of the historical-critical method.

The third group uses what is termed the propositional-foundationalist presupposition, which stresses the avenue to truth found in inerrant statements of propositional truth found in an inspired writing. This group rejects historical-critical methods almost entirely, substituting for them something it terms the grammatico-historical method.

The fourth and final group has presuppositions that I call holistic biblical realism, a central tenet of which accepts a basis for truth that is something less than objectively certain. This group rejects a full-scale version of the historical-critical method, although it uses some of the tools considered part of the historical-critical arsenal, such as versions of literary and form analysis, and discussion of cultural context and authorial intent. This group uses a sort of expanded grammatico-historical approach, and thus is labeled the expanded grammatical-historical school (or HCM+) on the appendix chart.⁸

All four groups will be discussed in greater detail below.

2.1 The Foundationalist Schools: Groups One to Three

Groups one to three, the historical-critical method with naturalistic foundations, the historical-critical with experiential foundations, and the grammatical-historical method with propositional foundations, are quite diverse in their views of method and biblical authority. But they are united by one important point: they all have presuppositions rooted in what has been termed the foundationalist view of knowledge and truth that is associated with the philosophy of modernism.⁹ Put simply, foundationalism is the system of

others of my own. See Davidson, 40.

⁸At least one scholar has called this the historical-biblical method (Davidson, 40). This may be a good name for it, but as this paper is focusing on the presuppositions rather than comparing the methods themselves, I do not want to complicate the paper by injecting new terms that require further definition.

⁹I am indebted for this observation to Nancey Murphy and John Perry. Murphy's book *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International, 1996) sets out in detail how a modernist conception of truth, known as foundationalism, served as the criteria by which both the liberals and fundamentalists structured their theology (ibid., 11-35). John Perry applied Murphy's insights specifically to the issue of inerrancy

modern philosophy that grew out of the skepticism of Descartes and which insists on a demonstrable and certain base for knowledge.¹⁰

As theologian Nancey Murphy put it:

from Descartes' time, the ideal of human knowledge focused on the general, the universal, the timeless, the theoretical—in contrast to the local, the particular, the timely, the practical. In short, it is the quest for universal knowledge that drives the modern quest for *indubitable* foundations.¹¹

Foundationalism does not merely imply that one is building a tower or structure of knowledge on particular basic truths and assumptions. Any system of beliefs requires certain basic assumptions and presuppositions to support it. Foundationalism also makes a claim about the quality of reliability and assurance of those foundations, requiring them to be certain, secure, and demonstrably verifiable. As the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* puts it, foundationalism says that knowledge must be seen as a “structure raised upon *secure, certain* foundations.”¹²

Descartes was a rationalist, but his method has become associated generally with both rationalism and empiricism, and with the scientific method generally. Under this schema, only those things demonstrated, either empirically or by certain reason, are taken as established and true.¹³ There are various manifestations of foundationalism in modern thought, such as forms of empiricism, logical positivism, rationalism, and scientism. Many Christians, most of whom would reject these systems of thought as universal systems of truth, have nevertheless accepted the foundationalist standard of knowledge upon which they are built. Different Christian groups have built on it in different ways. Three of these epistemological methods are described below.

2.1.1. *The Fundamentalists—Propositional Certainties*

Examining the third group listed above, most conservative Bible scholars object to the historical-critical method of Bible study. They reject its application of skeptical, scientific methods to the Bible. What would surprise many of these same scholars, however, would be to discover that Christian fundamentalism,

in evangelical circles (“Dissolving the Inerrancy Debate: How Modern Philosophy Shaped the Evangelical View of Scripture,” *Quodlibet: Online Journal of Christian Theology and Philosophy* 3 [Fall 2001].

¹⁰Murphy, 12-13.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 13, emphasis original.

¹²*Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. “Foundationalism,” ed. Simon Blackburn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 145, emphasis supplied.

¹³Murphy, 13.

most notably with its verbal inerrancy view of the Scriptures, shares a common philosophical assumption with their opponents—an acceptance of foundationalist standards of truth and knowledge.¹⁴

John Perry and Nancey Murphy convincingly argue that nineteenth-century evangelicals, confronted with the modern philosophical standard of truth, one that required absolute certainty in its foundational truths, insisted that the Scriptures could meet the standards of this model. They took on the burden of showing that the Scriptures were reliable and could serve as the foundation of theology, not only because there was evidence that they were “inspired” by God, but because they were impeccable in detail, entirely unified, and inerrant in all areas.¹⁵

The fundamentalists made the criteria of true conservatism the affirmation of verbal inspiration and inerrancy of all parts of the Bible. They made the Bible the heart of a system of “propositional foundationalism,” a system of truth built squarely upon the objective propositions of Scripture.¹⁶ But to play this role under the modernist test for truth, every teaching, every text, every word of the Bible must be inerrantly the words of God. Only this could provide certainty under the modernist, foundationalist standard for Christian theology.

They took upon themselves the burden of demonstrating that the Bible met this standard. As one biblical conservative of the nineteenth century put it:

I wish to shew that the contents of the Bible are revealed to us, not as temporary and occasional, true at one age, but admitting modification at another, but as certain facts, true once, and for ever, and for all men. To do this, . . . I must show that the Bible is one complete book, of which all the parts are interchangeably bound together, and then the character which is asserted of one part will be applicable to the whole. Nay more, the very proof of this unity will go far to shew, that the doctrines of the Bible are not parts of a progressive, human science, but of fixed and divine revelation.¹⁷

Based on this position, these conservative fundamentalists essentially rejected both the ideology and the tools of the historical-critical method. Any sense that the text may have developed or been based on existing sources, whether written or oral, detracted from the Bible as coming from the mouth

¹⁴Perry, 1-3.

¹⁵Murphy, 15-19; Perry, 2-3.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Boyle lecturer Edward Garbett wrote this in 1861; cited in John Sandys-Wunsch, *What Have They Done to the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 300, emphasis supplied.

of God to the ear and pen of the prophet.¹⁸ Copying and transcription errors were acknowledged to exist, so a very limited form of textual criticism was accepted as being a necessary part of making sure the most adequate text was being dealt with. But even this was viewed with some level of apprehension and fear.¹⁹

In some ways, the fundamentalists have lost the argument, at least in the eyes of larger society, by tacitly agreeing to have the debate on foundationalist terms. One can never affirmatively prove all or even most aspects of the Bible as empirically or positively true, or even that it is completely internally consistent and free from discrepancy. Harold Lindsell, theologian, editor of *Christianity Today* in the 1970s, and apologist for inerrancy, is famous in evangelical circles for trying to reconcile the different Gospel accounts of Peter's denial of Christ by creating a scenario where Christ made two predictions, which unfolded just as he had said: the cock crowed three times, and Peter made six denials.²⁰ But even this accounting does not resolve all the problems, but rather makes all the accounts seem even more inadequate and incomplete.

Even the most died-in-the-wool inerrantist has to admit that, autographs aside, the Bible today certainly has variations and mistakes due to copying and translating. But this has not prevented the fundamentalist project from continuing, and the battle for the Bible on the playing field of modernist standards of truth continues to the present.

2.1.2. *The Liberals—Naturalistic Commitments*

Other Christians, in the first of the three groups described above, confronted by the same, modernist standard of truth, reacted differently than their conservative brethren. They accepted that the Bible did not meet this new, scientific test of truth. They went looking for another foundation for certainty and truth, and believed that they found it in “experience.”²¹ The philosophical roots of this approach are to be traced to German idealism, especially starting with philosophers Immanuel Kant and G. W. Hegel, whose

¹⁸A chief theological spokesman for fundamentalism on this point in the early twentieth century was J. Gresham Machen, whose chief contribution to the public debate was *Christianity and Liberalism*, which has been described as the “chief theological ornament of American Fundamentalism” (Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 190-192).

¹⁹This fear probably helps to account for the rise and persistence of the KJV-only movement within fundamentalist circles. In a sense, it is a backdoor way to have copies of the original autographs—one can have a relatively modern version that God has blessed and ordained as the true, “received” version.

²⁰Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

²¹Murphy, 22-24.

philosophies effectively denied the possibility of special revelation of divine truths, and moved the search for truth inward to intuition and experience.²²

These philosophies were mediated to the theological world by German theologian F. D. Schleiermacher, termed by many the “father of modern Protestant theology.”²³ Schleiermacher moved religious truth from consisting of a system of biblical propositions to being defined by an experience and feeling of utter dependence on God. He proposed that “human experience—specifically the feeling of absolute dependency—rather than authoritative propositions about God were to be seen as the source of theology.”²⁴ In this framework, the Bible was a human construct, produced perhaps by the best of human reflections on God, but understood as entirely produced within history by humans. It was thus to be analyzed as a purely historical document. The flowering of the higher-critical method of Bible study thus occurred in Germany, cultivated by figures such as Ferdinand Christian Baur, David Strauss, and Julius Wellhausen.

Those Christian thinkers influenced by the German idealists and the higher critics can be roughly divided into two main camps. The first was comprised of those whose insistence on empiricism and scientism was so strong that they denied the validity of all experiences not presently repeatable. They thus embraced an essentially naturalistic view of Scripture, denying all miracles and supernatural intervention. They also rejected notions of creation, the fall, and the need for a substitutionary atonement. They were the true skeptics, such as Bauer, Strauss, and Renan.²⁵ These were joined by those who did not deny a spiritual world as such, but denied the possibility of miracles, or at least historical knowledge of them, such as Bultmann and Käsemann.²⁶ These are the classic liberals.

2.1.3. *The Neo-Orthodox—Experiential Certainties*

The other experientialist camp, the second group identified above, arose largely in response to these liberals. This group, primarily consisting of the movement labeled as neo-orthodox, did not deny miracles and God’s ability to act in history. They also embraced concepts of man’s fallen nature and need for redemption. But they viewed the Bible as primarily, if not exclusively,

²²Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Twentieth Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1992), 25-40.

²³Ibid., 39-40, 44.

²⁴Ibid., 44.

²⁵Charles Davis, “The Theological Career of Historical Criticism of the Bible,” *Cross Currents* 32 (Fall 1982): 275-276 (on Spinoza’s skepticism); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Historical Criticism: Its Role in Biblical Interpretation and Church Life,” *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 246-248 (on Spinoza and Strauss).

²⁶Fitzmyer, 253-254.

a record of nonpropositional, spiritual experiences that was to guide readers to have similar experiences. This stood in contrast to the Bible as a bearer of propositional truth. They, too, accepted the higher-critical method in its fullness.

Their new mantra, though, was that the Bible “contains” the word of God rather than the Bible’s “being” the word of God.²⁷ It contains the historical record of God’s dealings with the faithful in the past, but is much like other historical records, and thus should be treated in essentially the same manner as other documents.²⁸ The Bible becomes the word of God to us as we are guided and inspired by those experiences to have our own experiences with God today.²⁹

As the emphasis was placed on subjective experience, objective, historical reality became less important. Indeed, some in the experientialist camp believed that it was irrelevant as to whether ancient biblical stories were actually true. Rather, what was important was the power of the ideas they conveyed.³⁰ Thus, where it could be shown that the Bible was in conflict with positive, scientific truth, it did not need to be taken literally. One could still believe in the essence of the experience that was being conveyed. In all areas where science apparently showed the Bible in error, the findings of science were to be accepted, as the Bible was concerned with spiritual truths, not historical or scientific matters.³¹

Thus it is that groups known for battling one another in the theological arena, the fundamentalists, the classic liberals, and the neo-orthodox, are joined by their acceptance of the modernistic terms and definitions of the terrain upon which they fight—that of foundationalism. But this is not the only ground upon which to approach either the Bible or other truths about God and the world. To this alternate approach we now turn.

2.2. Holistic Biblical Realism: Group Four

The fourth and final group accepts an expanded version of the grammatical-historical method and holds to a presupposition termed here holistic biblical realism.³² This approach challenges the notion of foundationalism, that only

²⁷Ibid., 249.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid., 257-258; Murphy, 23-24.

³⁰Sandys-Wunsch, 250-251.

³¹Ibid., 301-303.

³²Holistic biblical realism is a phrase coined for this paper. It describes a methodology implicit in much of Adventist Bible study and scholarship over the last century or so. The phrase is a description of an epistemological position and not a hermeneutical approach, although it has implications for hermeneutics. This method

absolutely verifiable, empirically demonstrable truths can serve as the basis for obtaining useful and important truths about God and the world.

In the world in which we live, no one holds beliefs or makes choices in life based on standards of absolute, empirical, demonstrable certainty. Rather, we all live based on likelihoods and the preponderance of the evidence. All of us, saints and skeptics, live lives of faith—based on rough-and-ready experience—whether to fly in jet airplanes, drive complicated vehicles on busy freeways, or marry the spouses we choose. Occasionally planes crash, cars break down, and marriages disintegrate. Yet we do not allow our very imperfect and incomplete knowledge of how these mechanisms and institutions function to prevent us from flying, driving, or marrying. Indeed, philosophers of science have come to understand that the conclusions of science itself rest on inadequate, incomplete, and imperfect information.³³

has some relationship to the epistemological emphasis of the Scottish Common Sense philosophy strongly influenced by the writings of Thomas Reid, who opposed the classical version of foundationalism for an epistemology of knowledge based on standards short of absolute certainty and on sources other than empirical observation. Mark Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and Evangelical Thought,” *American Quarterly*, 37/2 (Summer 1985): 220-221; Terence Cuneo and Rene Van Woudenberg, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8. It does not embrace all that is associated with common-sense philosophy, however; especially its ethical and methodological aspects that generally restrict the search for truth to a Baconian/Lockean empirical inquiry (*ibid.*, 221-222). Thus holistic-biblical realism is not interchangeable with common-sense realism. Holism (or rather its variant “wholism”) has already been used by at least one Adventist scholar to describe Adventist theology more broadly. See Julius Nam, “‘Quo Vadis, Adventism?’ An Appeal for ‘Wholism’ as an Integrative Principle for Adventist Theology,” a term paper originally submitted at Andrews University in 1996 that can be found at <<http://progressiveadventism.com/2007/10/19/quo-vadis-adventism-an-appeal-for-wholism-as-an-integrative-principle-for-adventist-theology>>.

³³Indeed, philosophers have come to realize that it is the same kind of imperfect evidence that scientists use in carrying out experiments and coming to scientific conclusions. A group of leading philosophers in epistemology and philosophy have elaborated a school of thought known as “Reformed Epistemology,” which has as a main contention that a belief in God is no less rational and warranted than scientific beliefs, which are based on similar kinds of “basic” proposals that support belief in God (Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality* [Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1983]; Christian Smith, ed., *The Secular Revolution* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003], 11). The arguments have impressed even atheist philosophers, one of whom, Richard Rorty, conceded that now “we atheists should stop praising ourselves for being more ‘rational’ than theists. On this point they seem to me quite right” (cited in Stephen Louthan, “On Religion—A Discussion with Richard Rorty, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 27/2 (1996): 179).

Why should spiritual truth claims be held to higher standards than truths about living, or even those of science? Biblical realists think they should not. They believe that their standard for accepting the Bible as truthful is no less certain or reliable than the standard used by all people to make fundamental, yet practical decisions in life. Indeed, the evidences available for the inspiration and authority of the Bible are often more reliable than the evidence upon which we base these other decisions that we make every day.

There is a large amount of external, observable evidence that supports the belief that the Bible is not an ordinary book produced by purely human means. This evidence includes fulfilled prophecies of the fate of kingdoms and empires; many accurate claims about history; profound insights into the human condition and nature; the consistency of its teachings across 1,500 years and more than two dozen authors; and the extraordinarily powerful and influential ethical and spiritual nature of those teachings, qualities that seem well beyond the ken of the fishermen, farmers, and primitive tribesmen who were its authors. None of these points are absolute proof of divine authorship, either singly or in combination. But the combination of them does offer external, observable, meaningful evidence that is objective in the sense that it can be shared and commented upon by and to others, that the claims of this book to divine origination should be carefully considered.³⁴

In other words, biblical realists do not have indisputable or absolute or certain proof that the Bible is the inspired word of God. But they do have substantial evidences that the Bible is more than the product of human endeavor. These evidences, when matched against its claims to divine authorship, give them a meaningful basis to test by experience its claims to being the Word of God. This objective, or external, evidence is then confirmed and made certain by the experiences and fruits of the Christian life: the peace, joy, and love that following its precepts brings. This assurance

³⁴Representatives of this school of thought are Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical Critical Method* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1977); Richard M. Davidson, "The Authority of Scripture"; Carl F. H. Henry, "The Use and Abuses of Historical Criticism," in *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1979); Grant R. Osborne, "Historical Criticism and the Evangelical," *JETS*, 42/2 (1999): 193-210; Fernando L. Canale, *Back to Revelation-Inspiration* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001); and Ekkehardt Müller, "Guidelines for the Interpretation of Scripture," *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005), 111-134. Most Adventist theologians, I believe, would be in this category, although as with all categories, there is overlap and imprecision. I do not claim that any of those listed here hold to *all* the positions I set out for this group in this section or on my chart. But these positions tend to cohere among this group. A good summary statement that is generally reflective of this view, though it focuses on hermeneutical rather than epistemological issues, is the "Methods of Bible Study" document, voted by the General Conference Committee at Annual Council on October 12, 1986 in Rio de Janeiro (<<http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/documents/Method%20Bible%20Study.htm>>).

is not a demonstrable or objective certainty, but one for which evidence does exist, and which provides a personal experience that can be witnessed to and testified about.

C. S. Lewis once said that “the very *kind* of truth we [moderns] are often demanding was, in my opinion, not even envisaged by the ancients.”³⁵ The specificity and certainty of truth the modern mind demands—or often thinks it demands—is not the kind of truth the Bible offers. We should beware of measuring the Bible by standards of truth that it itself does not accept. If we accept the modernist standards of truth, we will either make unwarranted claims of certainty and objectivity regarding biblical truth; or we will abandon biblical truths for those of our own experiences and wisdom. Ultimately, biblical realists have confidence in this probabilistic rather than absolutist approach to epistemology because they believe that it is supported by the Bible itself.

3. Holistic Biblical Realism—A Biblically Supported Model

To deal adequately with the topic of the epistemology implicit in the Bible would require an entire article, or book, of its own. All that can be done here is to sketch briefly some of its broad contours. The Bible contains an implicit philosophy of realism—of the existence of a real, external world that the mind of man has been created to understand meaningfully, although not completely or perfectly, but “as through a glass darkly” (1 Cor 13:12). The world itself “declares” (Ps 19:1) the glory and existence of a Creator who placed a physical and moral order into it that the mind of man can understand, “so that men are without excuse” (Rom 1:20).

It recognizes that these truths are so fundamental to reality that to deny their existence is ultimately to deny reason itself. The Bible says that the “fool has said in his heart, there is no God” (Ps 53:1), not merely because it is unwise to live without reference to eternity or divine judgment. Rather, the denial of a Creator and an ordered creation also makes impossible any reasonable confidence that human reason can engage with reality at all. Yes, there is no absolute proof of God’s existence and involvement with the created order. To deny his existence, however, is to reject the very ground of reason that forms the argument for denial.

How can a person know if he or she is making true statements about the universe if they have no basis of knowing whether their observations and thoughts have any meaningful connection with that universe? To make an argument that denies a universal intelligence is to become agnostic about the basis or effectiveness of my own intelligence—hence it is to embrace my own irrationality or foolishness. On the other hand, our ability to interact meaningfully with both the physical and moral universe is ongoing evidence that our minds have been constructed to engage reality. It is evidence that the

³⁵C. S. Lewis to Prof. Clyde Kilby of Wheaton College, 7 May 1959, *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed., W. H. Lewis (San Diego: Harcourt, 1988), 480.

Word of wisdom, the Son of reason, is indeed the light that “lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9).

3.1. Reliable External Evidence

The Bible anticipates that acceptance of its truths will not be based on absolute certainty but rather on meaningful, observable evidence, that is confirmed by experience. The “foundation” of its truth system is one that “no man can lay . . . other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:11). Not only is Christ the logos of reason and understanding that has undergirded human reason since creation, but he is also a historical person for whom external, observable evidence exists.

His life and work are not “cunningly devised tales,” because of the testimony of the “eyewitnesses of His majesty,” which are enhanced by the external “more sure word of prophecy” (2 Pet 1:16-19). These eyewitness accounts and fulfilled prophecies do not provide absolute proof of the truth or divine inspiration of the Bible. Absolute proof would dispel the need for faith, which the Bible indicates is the “assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). If all were seen and demonstrated, faith would not be needed. Christ rebuked all foundationalists when he told doubting Thomas, “because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed” (John 20:29).

In telling Thomas this, however, Christ did not undermine the importance of evidence as the basis of belief. Indeed, his life was filled with signs and miracles that attested to his heavenly origins and helped those listening to him accept his otherworldly claims. It was he who said when it came to matters of salvation, “come now, let us reason together” (Isa 1:18). He met Satan on the grounds of temptation with appeal to the propositional truths of God’s word—“It is written” was his repeated refrain. He talked about his death and resurrection as being the great sign of his claims of divinity (Matt 12:39).

3.2. Confirming Internal Experience

Evidence and propositional claims on their own, however, are not enough. If the spirit of the message of the prophets is not imbibed, “neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead” (Luke 16:31). Jesus refused to perform miracles for their own sake, even when it could have saved his life when facing Herod (Luke 23:8-9). He knew that a knowledge of and total commitment to God’s word divorced from a real experience with God would produce selfish and rigorous zealots. “In them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39). It is the subjective, personal experience of the objective truths of God’s word that provides the only safe assurance of truth and knowledge: “O taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps 34:8).

It is the combination of probabilistic evidences for truth and the meaningful experiences of fellowship with God and man that provides the biblical realist with his or her grounds of certainty. It is the certainty that John describes as based on God’s Word of truth *and* the internal witness of

the Spirit. He begins his first epistle by speaking of his objective, concrete encounter with the Divine reality: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life” (1 John 1:1). He ends the book emphasizing the internal, subjective experience of God: “The one who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself” (5:10). Finally, he can announce the certainty that comes with this divine combination of objective evidence and subjective experience: “these things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order *that you may know* that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:10, 13; emphasis supplied).

To summarize, biblical realists know that in this world there is no such thing as an objective spiritual certainty—that would nullify faith. However, a mere subjective certainty would lead to a merely relativistic outlook. Rather, they hold to a combination of objective evidences and subjective experience that might be referred to as a “holistic certainty.”

4. *Biblical Realists and Interpreting the Bible*

For the biblical realists, both objective evidences and subjective experiences play a fundamental role in discovering truth. This approach impacts hermeneutics, or methods of Bible study and interpretation. Biblical realists are able to approach the Bible with a greater freedom than those who require every portion of the Bible to be an empirically provable and demonstrably certain basis of their faith. The biblical realist believes that the Bible is true, even infallible,³⁶ in those things that the Bible itself holds itself out as an authority on—as a teacher of doctrine, correction, instruction in righteousness, and in the reporting of salvation history. They also believe that the Bible places its doctrines in historical contexts and narratives that are inseparable from those doctrines. Thus it also provides authoritative and true reports of the events of creation and history.

The fall of man, the entry of sin, and the need for Christ’s atonement presuppose the kind of perfect beginning and rapid fall from grace that are described in the Genesis account of creation. Also, the rapidity of the world’s descent into sin, given the sinful tendencies of man, along with the history-based nature of the scriptural narrative, underscores and supports the short-chronology of human history that it records. The competing scientific story of evolution, with its story of development by means of death and extinction over long periods of time prior to the fall or even the creation of Adam, is wholly at odds with this theological and narrative history of the Bible, and is thus rejected by proponents of this view. Likewise, God’s covenant promises to Noah, in connection with the rainbow, presuppose and are only meaningful in the context of a universal rather than a local flood.

³⁶Ellen G. White states: “The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of his will” (*Great Controversy*, 1911, [Ellen G. White Estate, *The Complete Published E. G. White Writings*] vii, emphasis supplied).

Realists recognize that, whether through human errors in observation, copying, or translation, minor discrepancies exist in biblical accounts.³⁷ However, they believe that these are unimportant to the teaching or material meaning of the text, and view them much as a lawyer treats nonmaterial discrepancies in the testimony of truthful witnesses to the same event—as indicia of the lack of collusion or artificial manipulation of the text or memory.³⁸ In this way, the minor discrepancies actually become supportive evidence of the reliability of the copying and transmission of biblical texts.

Biblical realists also believe that the Bible authors usually wrote using their own words, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to express ideas and thoughts given to them by the Spirit.³⁹ They believe all the Bible actually teaches or claims, whether doctrine or history, but they do not believe in verbal inspiration, and do not feel compelled to defend every word or expression in the Bible as being that of God himself.⁴⁰

³⁷Ellen G. White states: “Some look at us gravely and say, ‘Don’t you think that there might have been some mistake in the copyist or the translators?’ This is all probable . . . [But] all the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth” (*Selected Messages* [Ellen G. White Estate, *The Complete Published E. G. White Writings*], 1:16).

³⁸Maier notes: “Keep in mind that dissimilarities may be due to minor errors of copyists, or may be the result of differing emphases and choice of materials of various authors who wrote under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit for different audiences under different circumstances. It may prove impossible to reconcile minor dissimilarities in detail which may be irrelevant to the main and clear message of the passage” (“Methods of Bible Study,” 70-72, par. O).

³⁹It may be too limited to refer to this as “thought inspiration,” as that rubric implies that the prophet, once given a thought, is left to his or her own devices in expressing it, whether in writing or speaking. But the Holy Spirit is involved here also, as inspiration does not work merely on the thoughts or words, but on the whole person, influencing all capacities and actions. “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 expressions *but on the man himself*, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of men are the word of God” (White, *Selected Messages*, 1:21, emphasis supplied). Also, “God has been pleased to communicate His truth to the world by human agencies, and He Himself, by His Holy Spirit, qualified men and enabled them to do his work. *He guided the mind in the selection of what to speak and what to write*” (White, *Great Controversy*, vi-vii, emphasis supplied).

⁴⁰“The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic,

These discrepancies do not affect the substantive doctrinal and historical claims of the Book. Any discrepancies, realists believe, are nonmaterial due to the Holy Spirit's oversight of the Book that God has ultimately authored through his prophets. They believe this not because they have proven it, but because the evidence for God's authorship is sufficient for them to believe it when it says it is useful for "doctrine, reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16).

Realists will use certain tools that have become identified with the historical-critical methods, such as literary and form analysis, insofar as it aids in understanding the text and the intent of the author.⁴¹ They are interested in the historical context also as an aid in understanding the author and his audience.⁴² They seek to understand the intent of the author, as well as the understanding of the original audience. But they do not stop here, and believe that the biblical authors often spoke, under the guidance and direction of the Spirit, things the author did not fully comprehend, as described in 1 Pet 1:10-11. Thus they hold to a kind of *sensus plenior*, where the writings of the prophets hold a fuller meaning than the prophets themselves understood.⁴³

Other tools of the historical-critical method they are less interested in, such as the genetic and redaction questions. They believe that the final form of the text is the important question. They can believe that prophets and biblical writers drew on sources, written and oral, and combined that with their own writings under the guidance of the Spirit. Where these other sources came from is very often impossible to determine, and the question becomes irrelevant if one believes that the Spirit directs the final form.⁴⁴

5. *Adventism and Biblical Realism*

The Adventist community has been privileged to have a prophetic voice that has kept it closer to the biblical standard of truth than some other faith communities. Ellen White, in her widely influential *Steps to Christ*, described the nature of Christian truth claims with amazing balance. Writing as the fundamentalist/liberal wars were heating up, she avoided both extremes. She touched first on the probabilistic nature of the objective evidence for Christianity:

in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not his pen" (White, *Selected Messages*, 1:21).

⁴¹Grant R. Osborne, "Historical Criticism and the Evangelical," *JETS* 42 (June 1999): 193-210; Davidson, 40; Maier, 84; Müller, 117-119.

⁴²Davidson, 40; Maier, 82; Müller, 116.

⁴³Davidson, 41; Maier, 87-88.

⁴⁴Davidson, 40-41; Maier, 87-88.

God never asks us to believe, without giving sufficient evidence upon which to base our faith. His existence, His character, the truthfulness of His word, are all established by testimony that appeals to our reason; and this testimony is abundant. Yet God has never removed the possibility of doubt. Our faith must rest upon evidence, not demonstration.⁴⁵

She then in the same chapter turns to the experiential component of the Christian's knowledge and certainty:

There is an evidence that is open to all—the most highly educated, and the most illiterate—the evidence of experience. God invites us to prove for ourselves the reality of His word, the truth of His promises. . . . And as we draw near to Jesus, and rejoice in the fullness of His love, our doubt and darkness will disappear in the light of His presence.⁴⁶

These quotes, and others like them, helped most Adventists avoid the more extreme elements of fundamentalism and liberalism of the larger Christian world. Still, Adventism has not been immune from the larger currents in the wider world, and fellowship in the Adventist community of scholars has eroded over the last two or three decades to the detriment of the church.

The model of truth underlying the methods of Bible study represented by holistic biblical realism contains both objective, propositional elements as well as subjective, experiential elements. Almost all Adventists would agree that both elements are necessary for a balanced Christian view. But personality type, stage of life, and individual needs and interests often cause each of us to emphasize either experience or proposition, sometimes at the expense of the other.

A community of scholars can help provide a balance that each individually might not be able to attain. However, if suspicions and distrust—even if driven by the very legitimate concern of the inroads of liberalism and fundamentalism from the larger Christian community—splinter the Adventist community of scholars, that balancing can no longer take place. A mutual distrust can drive those on either side to align with the foundationalist Christian communities that they have most in common with—whether it be the experientialists or the fundamentalists. This then hardens the distrust on the other side. In staking out polemical positions, the common-middle ground of holistic biblical realism can easily be overlooked.

Another paper could trace the swerving of a portion of the Adventist scholarly community into the fundamentalist camp in the 1920s, and the overcorrection into the experientialist camp in the 1960s and 70s.⁴⁷ Both

⁴⁵Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Ellen G. White Estate, *Complete Published Ellen G. White Writings*), 105, emphasis supplied.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 111-112.

⁴⁷Indeed, quite a fine overview of this story can be read in Alberto Timm, "A History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on Biblical and Prophetic Inspiration (1844-

extremes, it seems, are always with us—it is just a question of relative proportion. As a community, we may find it helpful and constructive to reaffirm our heritage of what I here term as “Holistic Biblical Realism,” which incorporates both propositional and experiential concerns.

Choosing to share and fellowship with only those who hold and embrace one’s particular emphases will only lead to further groupthink in the divided wings of an already partially fractured theological community. The opposite extreme, where all variety of opinions, no matter how extreme or unbiblical, coexist under a big tent labeled “Adventist community,” is equally problematic. It disregards the basic premise of a community—which is shared value commitments—and overlooks one of its most important functions—providing meaningful accountability to and for its members. Adventist members should not have to worry that their children are being taught things at Adventists universities that undermine central beliefs of the church.

Neither option can be the vision that Christ has for his church. These scenes would, however, confirm the beliefs of those who claim that the principles of Protestantism—especially those regarding the authority of Scripture—lead inevitably to a fracturing and fragmenting of truth and spiritual community, or to a disregard for the very notion of truth.

Adventist Christians rightly have a high regard for truth. We believe that God sanctifies through truth, and that truth is found in his Word. “Sanctify them through thy truth; thy Word is truth” (John 17:17). But sometimes we overlook how this truth is demonstrated to the world—which is mentioned in the next few verses: “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (John 17:21). Rather than being divided by secular philosophical visions of the truth, may this community yet be united by our shared and holistic beliefs and experiences of the One who is Truth.

APPENDIX A Summary of Four Approaches to Bible Study and Interpretation*				
	Naturalistic Foundationalism Historical Critical Meth.	Experiential Foundationalism Historical Critical Meth.	Biblical Realism Grammatical Hist. Meth.	Propositional Foundationalism Grammatical Hist. Meth.
Definition	Tests claims and understands data of Bible according to strict standards of empirical, positive scientism on purely materialistic grounds.	Subjects Bible to scientific standards, though allows for God's acts in history. Sees truths of the Bible in the experiences described rather than in its claims.	Seeks reasonable evidence to support divine claims of the Bible, and then to understand the historical and theological claims of the Bible according to its own criteria of reliability.	Seeks to verify and establish truth claims and data in Bible as absolute and inerrant in all respects, thus verifying the authority of Scripture and its divine authorship.
Objective	Dissects Bible to understand its formation and transmission as a purely human cultural artifact and expression.	To understand experiences of people with God in the past in order to guide modern encounters with God.	To understand truths taught <i>and</i> experiences in the Bible to provide a framework and test for beliefs and experiences of Christians today.	To define objective truths of Bible as clearly and exactly as possible so that orthodox belief may be achieved and maintained.
Presuppositions	Naturalistic norms/correlation—no possibility of non-material causes.	Experiential norms—miracles may or may not have happened, what is important is the subjective experience of the people involved.	Miracles can occur. Although the Bible record is a combination of divine and human authorship, it exhibits some of the limits that the latter entails.	Miracles occur and the Bible is almost entirely a divine product with little or no human contribution—writers were basically transcriptionists.

Criticism	Criticism—methodological doubt; if it cannot be seen or shown today, it should be disbelieved.	Skepticism—factual “truth” is largely irrelevant; experience is important.	The Bible, the believer, and the community of Christ are in a dialogue that seeks to gain fuller views of biblical truth and deeper experiences with God and each other.	The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.
Analogy	Analogy—if it cannot be verified by reason and experience today, it cannot be believed.	God can act in ways we have not experienced, but today we “know” that many people in past have mistakenly attributed natural acts to him, and we can sift the true from the false in the Bible.	Experience, tradition, and human reason provide reality checks that can cause one to examine the Bible more closely to see if one is correctly interpreting it, but Scripture is the ultimate authority.	Our present experiences can provide no insights into the truths of Scripture or how to understand and interpret Scripture. Only the Bible can be used to understand the Bible.
Unity	Disunity—Scriptures are disparate collection and not a unified whole. The intent of each author is a separate, distinct thing that is not reconcilable with other authors and, at times, even with his own views internally.	Unity of Scripture is not in teachings or beliefs, but in experiences of encounters with God. Authors may or may not agree with each other in beliefs and factual claims.	The Bible is a unified collection of books, each of which make a unique contribution to the larger whole. Each book should be understood on its own terms, as well as how they combine into a unified, whole picture of God and truth.	The Bible is essentially a single, perfectly consistent, and unified book, thus no need to be concerned with emphases or theologies of individual authors or books—results in cut-and-paste theology.

Time/Place	Time/culture conditioned—Scriptures are entirely a product of their own time and place. The only thing to discover is the human author's communicative intent.	Time/culture conditioned—Yes, although narratives and stories reveal universal relational experiences and principles.	Time/culture—The Bible shows a progressive revelation of God to humanity of his character and principles; however, new truths do not contradict, but amplify and supplement the old.	Time/culture—Except in a few obvious instances, time and place are largely irrelevant to inquiry. Truth is truth, whatever the time and place. Further, all God's people at most times understand most Bible truths.
Research Tools	Full panoply of HCM, including historical context, source/literary, form, and redaction criticisms.	Basically uses HCM, although principles of analogy and correlation not fully accepted, as authors are viewed as being guided by or at least experiencing the divine.	Uses some of the methods associated with HCM, such as types of literary and form analysis, and also accepts role of prophet as acting, at times, under guidance of Spirit, as editor/redactor of existing materials that are reworked into new forms and messages. However, the focus is on the message of the final form.	Basically rejects HCM, except for textual analysis (evaluate variant readings) and some very limited literary analysis.
*The chart should be relatively self-explanatory given the content of the paper. Any chart and creation of categories in this area will be both under-inclusive and over-inclusive, as well as imprecise. Each of the categories could be divided and subdivided into further categories. But the four are sufficient to illustrate the paper's main points. The categories represent ideal types, and not precise checklists of real-world identification. Thus some theologians will not fit clearly in any category. The categories represent characteristics often found together, and are a helpful division for the purposes of this paper in understanding how the Bible has been approached by various groups in the larger Christian world and how those approaches relate to their underlying epistemologies.				