Key Questions on the Bible’s Inspiration—Part 2

Ways to Identify Contemporary Higher Criticism

Excerpted from the Author’s Must We Be Silent?

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Introduction
In part 1 we begun by clarifying the issues at stake in the attempt by some thought leaders to use contemporary higher criticism (the “historical-critical method”) in the interpretation of Scriptures. In this Part 2 of the discussion we shall identify some ten key questions that will enable readers to determine whether or not a person is employing the assumptions of higher criticism to undermine the Bible’s authority.

Ten Crucial Questions on the Bible

To help focus the debate over the appropriateness of the historical method in Seventh-day Adventist scholarship, I will now briefly summarize the crucial issues that underlie the present hermeneutical debates in the church, pointing out some possible areas of agreement and disagreement.

1. Divinity and Humanity of Scriptures: There is a unanimous recognition of the fact that the Bible is both divine and human. Like Jesus at his incarnation, the Bible is a mysterious union.

Issue #1: Can Adventist interpreters separate the human from the divine? If so, by what criteria?

Notice that Ellen White challenged the tendency of some to separate the human and divine elements in Scripture, conferring uninspired status upon some portions of the written Word. [15] Indeed, Bible-believing Adventists recognize the impossibility of separating what is divine from what is human in Scripture. They also recognize that attempting to do so denies the basic unity of Scripture.

Against this liberal view, Adventists assert that the Bible is ultimately the product of one Divine mind, the Holy Spirit; hence, a theological unity runs through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. This unity means that we may compare Scripture with Scripture to arrive at correct doctrine. It makes the later inspired writers the best interpreters of earlier inspired writers.

2. The Use of Human Sources: Both sides of the hermeneutical quarrel affirm that, in addition to direct divine revelation through visions, dreams, and theophanies, the inspired writers also used human sources in composing their material. [16]
**Issue #2:** Does the use of human sources render some parts of Scripture as uninspired? In other words, are visions or dreams (the “I saw” and “I heard” parts of Scripture) more inspired than the biographical sections that are not based on direct divine revelation? Did the NT writers correctly use the OT sources they cited?

Bible-believing Adventists have always recognized that because the Holy Spirit guided the Bible writers in their selection and use of historical and literary sources, all Scripture is inspired and manifest a remarkable unity in content. Therefore, Ellen White warned: “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” (E. G. White, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7:919-920). Contrary to the claims of liberal (source) critics, the Spirit’s superintendence of the Bible writers is the grounds for comparing Scripture with Scripture to arrive at a biblical doctrine. [17]

3. The Use of Imperfect Human Language: Seventh-day Adventist scholars acknowledge that God did not dictate each word of Scripture to the Bible writers. Instead of a mechanical (dictation) mode of inspiration, the Holy Spirit condescended to the level of the Bible writers, guiding them even as they employed their own imperfect human language to communicate divine truth. [18]

**Issue #3:** Does the use of imperfect human language to communicate divine truth mean that the words the Bible writers employed are not important? Does the fact that “infinite ideas cannot be perfectly embodied in finite vehicles of thought” [19] imply that the truthfulness of Scripture’s message is thereby compromised?

Bible-believing Adventists maintain: “The very fact that God selects fallen beings to convey the revelation of Himself to other fallen beings, in human language, with all its foibles and imperfections, is by itself an unfathomable act of condescension. While we do recognize divine accommodation in the Scriptures, we must guard against pressing the concept of accommodation so far as to deny or distort the true meaning of Scripture.” [20]

4. Cultural Elements in Scripture: As a perfect Communicator to human beings, God has spoken in the language of His listeners, using the cultural expressions, idioms, thought forms, etc. of the listening audience living at a particular time in history. Thus Scripture, being historically constituted, contains certain cultural elements, some of which are relative to the Bible times. [21]

**Issue #4:** Does God’s communication to people in a particular historico-cultural setting imply that Scripture is culturally conditioned—that is, does the message of Scripture suffer from the limitations, prejudice, or ignorance of the Bible writers? [22] If so, by what criteria can interpreters isolate the culturally conditioned content from its trans-cultural message?

Adventists reject liberalism’s “cultural conditioning” argument which relativizes and arbitrarily picks and chooses from the message of the Scriptures. Instead, they insist: “Although it was given to those who lived in an ancient Near Eastern/Mediterranean context, the Bible transcends its cultural backgrounds to serve as God’s word for all cultural, racial, and situational
contexts in all ages” (“Methods of Bible Study” Report). They also recognize that “although the biblical instruction is relevant to all cultures and time, it was given to a particular culture and time. [Therefore,] Time and place must be taken into account in application.” As a general principle, Bible-believing Adventists “assume the transcultural and transtemporal relevancy of biblical instruction unless Scripture itself gives criteria limiting this relevancy.” [23]

5. Diversity in Scripture: It is generally recognized by Adventist scholars that each Bible writer had a particular theological purpose in mind in composing and presenting the relevant materials. Thus, there are diversities, different styles, and different emphases in Scripture.

Issue #5: In composing their respective accounts, did the Bible writers embellish, change, or distort the facts? That is, were the inspired writers sometimes untruthful in what they wrote (however minor or unimportant their alleged embellishment, changes, or distortions may have been)? Are things said by the different Bible writers in different ways at different times, and with different wordings and emphasis, necessarily inconsistent? Or should we view the different emphases as different aspects of the same truth, with a perfect harmony through all?

Bible-believing Adventists affirm: “A superficial reading of the Scriptures will yield a superficial understanding of it. Read in such a way, the Bible may appear to be a jumble of stories, sermons, and history. Yet, those open to the illumination of the Spirit of God, those willing to search for the hidden truths with patience and much prayer, discover that the Bible evidences an underlying unity in what it teaches about the principles of salvation” (Seventh-day Adventists Believe. . ., 14; cf. The Great Controversy, vi[24]).

Contrary to the claims of our contemporary higher critics, Ellen White wrote: “As presented through different individuals, the truth is brought out in its varied aspects. One writer is more strongly impressed with one phase of the subject; he grasps those points that harmonize with his experience or with his power of perception and appreciation; another seizes upon a different phase; and each, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, presents what is most forcibly impressed upon his own mind--a different aspect of the truth in each, but a perfect harmony through all. And the truths thus revealed unite to form a perfect whole, adapted to meet the wants of men in all the circumstances and experiences of life” (The Great Controversy, vi).

6. Parallel Biblical Accounts: Adventist Students of the Bible have always recognized that sometimes when Bible writers report even the same events, their accounts tend to vary in specific details and in some cases, some do not mention certain details (e.g., 2 Sam 24 and 1 Chron 21; 2 Kings 18-20 and 2 Chron 32; Mark 5:2 and Luke 8:27; Matt 21:33-44, Mark 12:1-11 and Luke 20:9-18, etc.). [25]

Issue #6: Should different parallel accounts be viewed as complementary or contradictory? Beyond a mere spiritual unity, are the parallel accounts actually consistent with the facts the writers reported?

For Bible-believing Adventists, rather than looking for alleged contradictions in the parallel accounts (e.g., the different ways the Gospel writers presented their accounts), we must look for underlying harmony. They agree with Ellen White: “The Creator of all ideas may impress
different minds with the same thought, but each may express it in a different way, yet without contradiction.

The fact that this difference exists should not perplex or confuse us. It is seldom that two persons will view and express truth in the very same way. Each dwells on particular points which his constitution and education have fitted him to appreciate. The sunlight falling upon the different objects gives those objects a different hue" (Selected Messages, 1:22, emphasis supplied; cf. The Great Controversy, v, vi). [26]

7. Mistakes, Inaccuracies, and Errors in Scripture: Adventist scholars are agreed that there are transmission errors in Scripture---errors that apparently crept into the text during the process of copying the manuscripts (e.g., occasional discrepancies due to copyist glosses, slips, misspellings, etc.) and which can be ascertained and corrected by comparing the various available manuscripts.

Issue #7: Apart from copyist and translator errors, can we find factual errors in the Bible, such as errors in the historical and scientific details in the Bible?

While acknowledging with Ellen White that “there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators," [27] Bible-believing Adventists reject liberalism’s claim that the factual mistakes (e.g., errors in history and science) are traceable to the Bible writers themselves. [28] “It is clear that while the ancient manuscripts vary, the essential truths have been preserved. While it is quite possible that copyists and translators of the Bible made minor mistakes, evidence from Bible archeology reveals that many alleged errors were really misunderstandings of the part of scholars. Some of these problems arose because people were reading Biblical history and customs through Western eyes. We must admit that humans only know in part---their insight into divine operations remains fragmentary.” Because perceived discrepancies in the Scriptures are often “products of our inaccurate perceptions rather than actual mistakes,” Bible-believing Adventists are cautious in declaring the things they cannot understand as errors (Seventh-day Adventists Believe, 11).

8. Biblical Infallibility: The Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs #1 states in part: “The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history. ” Ellen G. White also repeatedly refers to the Bible as an “infallible” guide for faith and practice. [29]

Issue #8: Should Seventh-day Adventists continue to uphold and defend the assertions in their Fundamental Belief #1 and the writings of Ellen G. White that the Bible is infallible? [30] If so, what is the nature and extent of this infallibility? Is it limited only to issues of salvation but does not extend to non-salvific issues that the Bible touches upon (e.g., science, history, ethical lifestyle, etc.)? Specifically, should instantaneous creation out of nothing (“creatio ex nihilo”) be excluded from the “matters of faith”? Should a literal 24-hour six-day creation be outside the
matters of faith? Should a literal world-wide flood in Noah’s day be separated from the matters of faith? etc. In short, can we extricate matters of faith from their accompanied facts of history, science, geography, etc.?

Against the claims of higher critical scholars, Bible-believing Adventists affirm the full trustworthiness or reliability of Scripture in all that it touches and touches upon. In the words of the just released (2000) Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology (vol. 12 of the SDA Commentary series), “Scripture is true in everything it says”: “The implications of the complete veracity of Scripture are clear. Not only do its authors tell the truth in what they say about God and salvation but also in regard to other matters. The historical narratives of the Bible are to be accepted as reliable and true. Among these authentic accounts of real events are the creation of the world and the first human beings in six days, the fall of Adam and Eve, the universal flood, the lives of the patriarchs, the history of Israel, the Gospel narratives, and the story of the Spirit-led origin and development of the apostolic church.” [31]

9. Thought Inspiration and Verbal Inspiration: How should Adventists describe their view of inspiration without being misunderstood? The expressions “thought inspiration” and “verbal inspiration” are now so loaded that they mean different things to different people. Because liberal scholars have hijacked these terms and injected them with new meanings, a brief discussion is in order.

In the revised edition of the Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia (1976), the entry under the “Inspiration of Scripture” states that “SDA’s do not believe in verbal inspiration according to the usual meaning of the term, but in what may properly be called thought inspiration.” [32] The usual meaning of “verbal inspiration” referred to is “verbal dictation” or the mechanical view of inspiration, which sees the Bible writers as some passive junior secretaries who merely transcribed what the Holy Spirit dictated to them. [33]

Also, Adventists have historically employed the phrase “thought inspiration” to emphasize that the Spirit did not dictate the words of the Bible to its human writers. Instead, when God inspired the Bible writers, their personalities were not effaced nor their style set aside. They still retained their individual human traits, even their forms and styles of literary expression, as the Holy Spirit infallibly guided them in their communication of divine truth using their own vocabularies. Though the Bible writers were “God's penmen, not His pen” (Selected Messages, 1:21), their messages can be trusted "not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God" (1 Thess 2:13). [34]

However, in recent times some within our ranks have employed the phrase thought inspiration to mean that because God did not dictate the messages that are recorded in Scripture, therefore in revelation God did not impart any messages to the Bible writers. (This is neo-orthodoxy or Barthianism disguised as thought inspiration!) [35]

Observe that neo-orthodox theologians (or Barthians, following the Swiss theologian Karl Barth) are liberal scholars who hold that the Bible is not the word of God but can become the word of God at the moment the Bible speaks to a person in a significant personal encounter. In a subtle denial of the Bible’s inspiration, these theologians suggest that until the Bible becomes
the Word of God, it is merely the word of humans, or at best a human document that contains the Word of God. In the words of a former assistant professor of New Testament at Andrews University, we cannot equate the Bible with the Word of God. For, “the words of the book [Bible] are the words of the prophets which only tangentially reflect the Word of God. Nothing on earth is the ultimate expression of God. To make the Bible such is bibliolatry, just another form of idolatry.” For him, “the Bible as a book can and must be studied as any other book.” [36]

In effect, liberal scholars have hijacked the term thought inspiration to propagate their neo-orthodox view. At the same time that some within our ranks are re-interpreting thought inspiration along Barthian lines, some are also employing the term verbal inspiration to suggest that the Bible is not always trustworthy in its historical or scientific assertions. The tendency within such quarters of Adventist scholarship is to utilize the expression verbal inspiration to caricature the views of Bible-believing Adventists who are still upholding the church’s position on the full inspiration and trustworthiness of Scripture.

For example, among those who have understood verbal inspiration in the popular sense of the word, some have proceeded to argue (erroneously) that since God did not dictate Scriptures to the Bible writers, the human words of the inspired writers cannot always convey God’s message in a trustworthy manner (cf. issues #3, 7, and 8 above). To such, the Bible is not fully trustworthy in the realms of science and history; it merely contains “a great deal of accuracy.” [37]

Because of the non-uniform and confusing manner in which contemporary Adventists use the terms “thought inspiration” and “verbal inspiration,” it is important to demand from those who use these expressions a clear explanation of what they mean. In Receiving the Word, I have employed the clumsy phrase “verbal propositional inspiration.” On one hand, when inspiration is described as “propositional,” it suggests (contrary to neo-orthodox views) that God actually communicated information to the recipients of divine revelation. On the other hand, when I describe inspiration as “verbal,” I argue that despite the inadequacies of human language, because of the Spirit’s guidance, the thoughts, ideas, and words of the Bible writers accurately convey God’s message revealed to them. [38]

**Issue #9:** Given the fact that the terms “thought inspiration,” and “verbal inspiration” are quite elastic, is the above definition of “verbal propositional inspiration” an adequate description of the SDA position, or should we employ a different expression to avoid being misunderstood as subscribing to either a neo-orthodox view inspiration or a mechanical (dictation) view of inspiration?

Adventists would need to come up with an adequate expression to capture their high view of inspiration and trustworthiness of Scripture. [39] Such an expression must take into consideration the facts that in the inspiration of the Scriptures (1) “God inspired men—not words”; (2) “the Bible, then, is divine truth expressed in human language”; (3) “the Bible is the written Word of God”; (4) “the Bible does not teach partial inspiration or degrees of inspiration”; (5) the guidance of the Holy Spirit “guarantees the Bible’s trustworthiness”; and (6) “many alleged errors” or “perceived discrepancies” are “really misunderstandings on the part of scholars” or are often the “products of our inaccurate perceptions rather than actual mistakes” (
Seventh-day Adventists Believe. . ., 8, 10, 11).

10. Hermeneutical Implications of Sola Scriptura: As a Protestant denomination, Seventh-day Adventists historically have embraced the idea that “the Bible and the Bible only” is our rule of faith and practice. This sola scriptura principle raises a number of crucial questions: For example:

**Issue #10a:** Biblical Assertions or Phenomena. In developing a doctrine of Scripture, should the so-called phenomena (apparent mistakes and discrepancies) of Scripture hold priority over clear, explicit, biblical assertions? (This issue concerns the inductive and deductive approaches.)

**Issue #10b:** The Use of Extra-Biblical Data. Should an insistence on sola scriptura require interpreters to interpret Scripture solely on the basis of the Bible, and not by any extra-biblical data--whether ancient (e.g., data from ancient Near-Eastern cultures, Jewish, Greco-Roman, and traditions of the church Fathers), or modern (archaeology, science, psychology, public opinion, etc.)? In other words, should Scripture be its own interpreter?

**Issue #10c:** The Place of Ellen G. White. Given the fact that the Bible itself teaches us to listen to God’s true prophets, and given the fact that Seventh-day Adventists recognize Ellen G. White as a recipient of the true gift of prophecy, what should be the relationship between her writings and the Bible? Should her inspired counsels and insights on biblical truth be given more weight than the theological/exegetical insights of any uninspired authority or expert, whether church leader or scholar?

**Issue #10d:** New Light from the Spirit. Can the Holy Spirit lead believers today into new truths or new light that contradict truths already established in His inspired Word?

**Issue #10e:** The Question of Science and History. Which authority should be accorded the highest authority when the interpretations and conclusions of modern science and secular history conflict with that of Scripture?

The above questions constitute the hermeneutical implications of our historic stance on the Protestant affirmation of the Bible and the Bible only (sola scriptura). In addressing these questions, Bible-believing Adventists are guided by Fundamental Belief #1, which reads in part: “The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history.”

Indeed, “the Word of God is the great detector of error; to it we believe everything must be brought. The Bible must be our standard for every doctrine and practice. We must study it reverentially. We are to receive no one’s opinion without comparing it with the Scriptures. Here is divine authority which is supreme in matters of faith. It is the Word of the living God that is to decide all controversies” (The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials, 44, 45).
Bible-believing Adventists respond to the above questions in the following words of Ellen G. White: “God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain ‘Thus said the Lord’ in its support.” (The Great Controversy, 595, emphasis mine).

Conclusion

In the heated debate over the legitimacy of employing aspects of contemporary higher criticism to interpret the Bible, much of the discussion have tended to be more noteworthy for their breadth than for their depth. Very often false issues have been raised and straw man arguments have been presented to mask what is really at stake in the battle over the Bible. The purpose of this chapter was to clear away the smokescreen so as to identify the real issues in the debate.

While other important questions can also be raised, in my opinion, the issues outlined in this chapter constitute the key hermeneutical questions in the current Seventh-day Adventist conflict over the Bible. If Adventist biblical scholars are “to reach consensus on principles of interpretation,” [45] they would have to candidly answer the following questions: Is the Bible fully inspired, internally consistent, and the sole-governing authority for faith and lifestyle? Does inspired Scripture present a fully trustworthy/reliable account in all of its assertions, or does it merely contain “a great deal of accuracy” in its historical and scientific details? These questions define the nature of the bug in Adventist hermeneutic.

The responses we give to the specific questions identified in this chapter will determine whether or not we subscribe to the historical-critical method. More importantly our candid responses will ultimately determine what our attitudes toward God’s Word will be: trust or doubt, confidence or skepticism, submission or criticism. The implications and consequences of our responses have been captured by Ellen G. White:

Man can be exalted only by laying hold of the merits of a crucified and risen Savior. The finest intellect, the most exalted position, will not secure heaven. Satan had the highest education that could be obtained. This education he received under the greatest of all teachers. When men talk of higher criticism, when they pass their judgment upon the word of God, call their attention to the fact that they have forgotten who was the first and wisest critic. He has had thousands of
years of practical experience. He it is who teaches the so-called higher critics of the world today. God will punish all those who, as higher critics, exalt themselves, and criticize God’s Holy word (Review and Herald, March 16, 1897).

As we grapple with the above hermeneutical issues, may we be led to humbly receive the Word. For, by receiving the Word of the Lord, we are also receiving the Lord of the Word. This is the ultimate corrective to the hermeneutical bug in contemporary Adventist approaches to the Bible.

Endnotes

[15] Mrs. White wrote: “The union of the divine and the human, manifest in Christ, exists also in the Bible. . . . And this fact, so far from being an argument against the Bible, should strengthen faith in it as the word of God. Those who pronounce upon the inspiration of the Scriptures, accepting some portions as divine while they reject other parts as human, overlook the fact that Christ, the divine, partook of our human nature, that He might reach humanity. In the work of God for man’s redemption, divinity and humanity are combined” (Testimonies for the Church, 5:747; cf. The Great Controversy, vi).

[16] See my Receiving the Word, 48-49.

[17] Observe the following distinction between liberalism’s literary (source) criticism and Adventism’s literary analysis. Higher criticism’s literary (source) criticism is the attempt “to hypothetically reconstruct and understand the process of literary development leading to the present form of the text, based on the assumption that Scriptures are the product of the life setting of the community that produced them (often in opposition to specific scriptural statements regarding the origin and nature of the sources.” But in the Adventist approach, literary analysis is simply the “examination of the literary characteristics of the biblical materials in their canonical form, accepting as a unity those parts of Scriptures that are presented as such, and accepting at face value the specific scriptural statements regarding the origins and nature of the biblical materials” (Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” in Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology,
95).

[18] Rather than speaking in grand superhuman language, “The Lord speaks to human beings in imperfect speech, in order that the degenerate senses, the dull, earthly perception, of earthly beings may comprehend His words. Thus is shown God’s condescension. He meets fallen human beings where they are. . . . Instead of the expressions of the Bible being exaggerated, as many people suppose, the strong expressions break down before the magnificence of the thought, though the penmen selected the most expressive language” (Selected Messages, 1:22). Again, “The Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language. Jesus, in order to reach man where he is, took humanity. The Bible must be given in the language of men. Everything that is human is imperfect. Different meanings are expressed by the same word; there is not one word for each distinct idea” (ibid., 1:20). Thus, in their attempt to communicate infinite ideas in finite human language, the inspired writers sometimes employed figures of speech, like parables, hyperbole, simile, metaphor, and symbolism. But even this figurative language conveys clear, literal truth.


[22] Robert M. Johnston, for example, seems to hold this view when he writes that because God’s messages were delivered through human instrumentalities, thus bearing the impress of human expression in Scripture, “It is necessary to sort out what is human expression and divine message, even though all are inspired.” For him Scriptures are reliable and trustworthy only in the sense that they guide the hearer or reader “in the direction God wants him or her to go.” However, he explains, the “attendant details with which the message is infleshed, but which are not an essential part of it, may have their origin in the culture or personality of the human messenger” (Johnston, “The Case for a Balanced Hermeneutic,” Ministry (March 1999):11).

[24] Writes Ellen White: “Written in different ages, by men who differed widely in rank and occupation, and in mental and spiritual endowments, the books of the Bible present a wide contrast in style, as well as a diversity in the nature of the subjects unfolded. Different forms of expression are employed by different writers; often the same truth is more strikingly presented by one than by another. And as several writers present a subject under varied aspects and relations, there may appear, to the superficial, careless, or prejudiced reader, to be discrepancy or contradiction, where the thoughtful, reverent student, with clearer insight, discerns the underlying harmony” (The Great Controversy, vi. emphasis mine).

[25] Ellen White wrote: “In our Bible, we might ask, Why need Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the Gospels, why need the Acts of the Apostles, and the variety of writers in the Epistles, go over the same thing? The Lord gave His word in just the way He wanted it to come. He gave it through different writers, each having his own individuality, though going over the same history. Their testimonies are brought together in one Book, and are like the testimonies in a social meeting [testimony service]. They do not represent things in just the same style. Each has an experience of his own, and this diversity broadens and deepens the knowledge that is brought out to meet the necessities of varied minds. The thoughts expressed have not a set uniformity, as if cast in an iron mold, making the very hearing monotonous. In such uniformity there would be a loss of grace” (Selected Messages, 1:21-22).


[27] Ellen G. White’s recognition of copyist and translator errors has often been misquoted to mean the existence of factual errors (e.g., errors in history, science, geography, etc.) traceable to the Bible writers themselves. This is her statement: “Some look to us gravely and say, ‘Don’t you think there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators?’ This is all probable, and the mind that is so narrow that it will hesitate and stumble over this possibility or probability would be just as ready to stumble over the mysteries of the Inspired Word, because their feeble minds cannot see through the purposes of God. Yes, they would just as easily stumble over plain facts that the common mind will accept, and discern the Divine, and to which God’s utterance is plain and beautiful, full of marrow and fatness. 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, 1:16, emphasis supplied).

[28] For examples of some of the alleged discrepancies or mistakes in Scripture, and a
response to some of them, see *Receiving the Word*, 241-247, 279-302.

[29] Regarding scriptural infallibility, Ellen White states that the Holy Scriptures “are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His [God’s] will” (*The Great Controversy*, vii; cf. 68, 102); they are “the only infallible authority in religion” (ibid., 238; see also 89, 177), and “the only sufficient, infallible rule” (ibid., 173). For Ellen White, Scripture shares in the infallibility of God. “God and heaven alone are infallible” (*Selected Messages*, 1:37; cf. *Testimonies to Ministers*, 30, 105). “Man is fallible, but God’s Word is infallible” (Selected Messages, 1:416). She left no doubt that the Bible is “an unerring counselor and infallible guide” and the “perfect guide under all circumstances of life” (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 100); “an unerring guide,” “the one unerring guide,” “the unerring standard,” “an unerring light,” “that unerring test,” and “the unerring counsel of God” (*Acts of the Apostles*, 506; *Testimonies*, 5:389; *Ministry of Healing*, 462; *Testimonies*, 5:247, 192; Testimonies, 4:441).

[30] The words “infallible/infallibility” derive from the Latin infallibilitas, suggesting the quality of neither deceiving nor misleading. Thus, to declare Scripture as infallible means “to assert the Bible’s divine origin, truthfulness, and trustworthiness, never denying, disregarding, or arbitrarily relativizing anything that the Bible writers teach” (*Receiving the Word*, 366).

[31] Peter van Bemmelen, “Revelation and Inspiration,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, 43.

While it appears that Ellen G. White herself never used the expression “verbal inspiration” in her writings, her son W. C. White employed that phrase in its popular usage as a reference to the mistaken theory of mechanical (dictation) inspiration, a theory that would also not allow an inspired writer to make revisions in his/her original manuscripts. W. C. White argues accurately that none of the leading Seventh-day Adventist pioneers, including Ellen G. White, ever subscribed to verbal inspiration (understood here to mean mechanical [dictation] inspiration). Notice how W. C. White and Arthur L. White explained the meaning of verbal inspiration and why the pioneers rightly rejected such a view (understood to mean mechanical dictation inspiration):

“Mother has never laid claim to verbal inspiration, and I do not find that my father, or Elder Bates, Andrews, Smith, or Waggoner, put forth this claim. If there were verbal inspiration in writing her manuscripts, why should there be on her part the work of addition or adaptation? It is a fact that Mother often takes one of her manuscripts, and goes over it thoughtfully, making additions that develop the thought still further” (W. C. White Letter, July 24, 1911; cf. 3 Selected Messages, 437; 454; emphasis mine). Writing to S. N. Haskell in 1911, W. C. White again pointed out that: “There is danger of our injuring Mother’s work by claiming for it more than she claims for it, more than Father ever claimed for it, more than Elders Andrews, [J. H.] Waggoner, or Smith ever claimed for it. I cannot see consistency in our putting forth a claim of verbal inspiration when Mother does not make any such claim” (W. C. White to S. N. Haskell, October 31, 1912).

Arthur L. White concurs: “To make any changes at all in the text of a book written under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, especially a book as widely circulated and studiously read as The Great Controversy, was recognized by Ellen White and the staff at Elmshaven as something that would raise questions in the minds of Seventh-day Adventists. There were many who, jealous for Ellen White and the Spirit of Prophecy, held, for all practical purposes, to a theory of verbal inspiration in the work of God’s prophets. An action disavowing this stance was taken by the General Conference in session in 1883. But by 1911 this was either unknown or forgotten by Adventists generally” (Ellen G. White Volume 6: The Later Elmshaven Years, 1905-1915, 322; cf. 337). “Many of the questions had their foundation in faulty concepts of inspiration. The prophet was thought of as a mechanical agent, speaking or writing each word dictated by the Holy Spirit. This ‘verbal inspiration’ concept at times led to the expectation of more from Ellen White than was justified—more than was demanded of the prophets and apostles of old” (ibid., 91; cf. 365-366).

It is clear from the above statements that the historic Adventist position has been to reject verbal inspiration, understood to mean a mechanical dictation inspiration, a mistaken theory that would also prevent an inspired writer from revising or expanding upon his/her earlier manuscripts.

Ellen White continues: “It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mid and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God” (Selected Messages)
Neo-orthodoxy, it must be remembered, “perceives revelation as a subjective personal divine-human encounter rather than as an objective communication of propositional truth. The Bible is, therefore, reduced to a mere human testimony of that encounter.” See Alberto R. Timm, “A History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on Biblical and Prophetic Inspiration (1844-2000),” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 10/1-2 (1999): 514. In a well-documented study, Timm, a scholar in Adventist studies, noted that the Association of Adventist Forums and its Spectrum magazine became the main forum for those who assumed a “revisionist-critical stand” on the church’s understanding of the inspiration of Bible writers and Ellen White. “Several articles advocating encounter revelation and the use of the historical-critical method came out in Spectrum, setting the agenda for many discussions on inspiration during the period under consideration (1970-1994)” (ibid.). He backed this by citing all the articles published in this magazine that had historical-critical assumptions. An extended bibliography of such historical-critical works is found in footnotes that almost fill pages 517-519, notes 204-217.


See, for example, the following works by George R. Knight: *Reading Ellen White: How to Understand and Apply Her Writings* (Hagerstown, Md: Review and Herald, 1997), 105-118; “The Case of the Overlooked Postscript: A Footnote on Inspiration,” *Ministry* (August 1997):9-11; Anticipating the Advent: A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists (Boise, Id: Pacific Press, 1993), 106-107. While Knight seems to define verbal inspiration as mechanical dictation (a view that he correctly rejects), he suggests that inspiration does not guarantee a fully trustworthy biblical account in all of Scripture’s historical and scientific details (a subtle error we challenge in Receiving the Word). In his opinion, the Bible is only trustworthy “as guide to salvation,” not fully trustworthy in the realms of history and science. When he writes that the Bible contains “a great deal of accuracy” in its historical and scientific detail, he is suggesting that there are “factual errors” in the inspired Book (Knight, *Reading Ellen White*, 116, 111, 110; idem, *Anticipating the Advent*, 106-107).
Key Questions on the Bible’s Inspiration—Part 2

[38] See Receiving the Word, 368. Apparently misunderstanding my phrase “verbal (propositional) inspiration,” one reviewer of my Receiving the Word has claimed that I believe in mechanical (dictation) inspiration (see, George Knight’s review in Ministry [December 1997]:30; cf. his “The Case of the Overlooked Postscript,” 9-11). It should, however, be pointed out that in the two places I employed the expression “verbal (propositional) inspiration,” I was always careful to add that this expression should not be confused with mechanical (dictation) inspiration, a mistaken theory which claims that the Holy Spirit dictated each single word of Scripture (see Receiving the Word, 51, 265), and a view in which the Bible writers are perceived as passive junior secretaries who merely transcribed what the Holy Spirit dictated to them (ibid., 366-367). Because I am not fully aware of the theological dynamics in the non-English speaking regions of the Adventist world, I have not utilized the clumsy phrase “verbal (propositional) inspiration” in translations of Receiving the Word into other languages.


[41] Ellen White repeatedly emphasized, “Make the Bible its own expositor, bringing together
all that is said concerning a given subject at different times and under varied circumstances” (Child Guidance, 511). “I saw that the Word of God, as a whole, is a perfect chain, one portion linking into and explaining another” (Early Writings, 221). We must submit to “the Bible as the word of God, the only sufficient, infallible rule,” which “must be its own interpreter” (The Great Controversy, 173). “Scripture interprets scripture, one passage being the key to other passages” (Evangelism, 581). “The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture” (Education, 190).

While upholding sola scriptura and thus referring to her works as the lesser light, Ellen White herself described her two-fold function in the church as follows: “God has, in that Word [the Bible], promised to give visions in the ‘last days’; not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from the Bible truth” (Early Writings, 78; emphasis mine). The light God gave her, she explains, “has been given to correct specious error and to specify what is truth” (Selected Messages, 3:32; emphasis mine). Notice that the writings of Ellen White are not to establish a new rule of faith apart from the Bible. Rather, they have been given the church to “comfort” God’s people (when they are in the right path), to “correct” them (when they err from the truth) and to “specify” what is truth (when they are not sure). With so many confusing, conflicting voices involved in biblical interpretation, can anyone doubt the importance and urgency of the Spirit of Prophecy in the hermeneutical enterprise?

For Ellen White, the answer is very simple: “The Spirit was not given--nor can it ever be bestowed--to supersede the Bible; for the Scriptures explicitly state that the word of God is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested” (The Great Controversy, vii). Again, “The old truths are essential; new truth is not independent of the old, but an unfolding of it. It is only as the old truths are understood that we can comprehend the new” (Christ’s Object Lessons, 127-128). Ellen White discredits the claims of the revisionist proponents of “present truth” or “progressive revelation.” Anticipating the modern reinterpretations and applications of Scripture which contradict Scripture, she wrote: “When the power of God testifies as to what is truth, that truth is to stand forever as the truth. No after suppositions contrary to the light God has given are to be entertained. Men will arise with interpretations of Scripture which are to them truth, but which are not truth. The truth for this time God has given us as a foundation for our faith. One will arise, and still another, with new light, which contradicts the light that God has given under the demonstration of His Holy Spirit. . . . We are not to receive the words of those who come
with a message that contradicts the special points of our faith” (Selected Messages, 1:161).

[44] Ellen G. White affirmed the full trustworthiness of the Bible’s historical and scientific accounts. First, the Holy Spirit “guided the pens of the sacred historians” in such a manner that “the Bible is the most instructive and comprehensive history that has ever been given to the world. . . . Here we have a truthful history of the human race, one that is unmarred by human prejudice or human pride” (Gospel Workers, 286; Fundamentals of Christian Education, 84-85; cf. Education, 173). There are no distortions in the biographies and history of God’s favored people for, in the words of Ellen White, “this history the unerring pen of inspiration must trace with exact fidelity” (Testimonies for the Church, 4:370). Whereas uninspired historians are unable to record history without bias, the inspired writers “did not testify to falsehoods to prevent the pages of sacred history being clouded by the record of human frailties and faults. The scribes of God wrote as they were dictated by the Holy Spirit, having no control of the work themselves. They penned the literal truth, and stern, forbidding facts are revealed for reasons that our finite minds cannot fully comprehend” (ibid., 9).

Second, the Bible’s science is also authentic. “Its sacred pages contain the only authentic account of the creation. . . . There is harmony between nature and Christianity; for both have the same Author. The book of nature and the book of revelation indicate the working of the same divine mind” (Fundamentals of Christian Education, 84-85). “Inferences erroneously drawn from facts observed in nature have, however, led to supposed conflict between science and revelation; and in the effort to restore harmony, interpretations of Scripture have been adopted that undermine and destroy the force of the Word of God.” Ellen White rejected naturalistic evolution and the long ages of geology. “Geology has been thought to contradict the literal interpretation of the Mosaic record of the creation. Millions of years, it is claimed, were required for the evolution of the earth from chaos; and in order to accommodate the Bible to this supposed revelation of science, the days of creation are assumed to have been vast, indefinite periods, covering thousands or even millions of years. Such a conclusion is wholly uncalled for. The Bible record is in harmony with itself and with the teaching of nature” (Education, 128-129).