



*"Watchman,
what of the night?"*

The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night: if ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come. Isaiah 21:11-12

A BIBLICAL HERMENEUTIC

Consultation II Compromises Adventist Heritage

Hermeneutics is the study of the methodological principles used in the interpretation of the Bible. Simply stated this means the study of how to interpret the Bible to arrive at the truth. Among the principles of interpretation is the much derided "proof text" method, as well as the various methods employed by modern critics of the Scriptures including what is called the "historical-linguistic" method. The word - hermeneutic - is derived from the Greek word - hermeneutikos - which in the infinitive form means, "to interpret." On the way to Emmaus, Luke tells us that Jesus "beginning at Moses, and all the prophets, . . . expounded (diermēneuō) unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself." (Luke 24:27) In other words, Jesus interpreted the Scriptures to the two disciples. To interpret the Bible is not wrong, but what method should one use - that is the present issue.

To put the issue plainly so that there be no misunderstanding, did our pioneers who brought together the system of Adventist doctrine known as historic Adventism use the wrong method of Scriptural interpretation? Our spiritual forefathers used the proof text method in arriving at the faith they proclaimed to the world. The

present day Biblical scholars of the SDA Church who have received their graduate training in the "universities of Babylon" have adopted other methods in their interpretation of the Bible; and this has resulted in the denial of some of the very basic doctrines of the Adventist faith. In other words at the very foundation of the present theological crisis in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the matter of hermeneutics. To this very basic and real question we shall address ourselves in this thought paper.

What was the proof text method used by William Miller and other early Adventist students to arrive at their positions of truth? They believed the Bible was the Word of God spoken directly to the time in which they lived. To them, the Bible was a living Book, which speaks afresh to each generation a special message which God had pre-designed to be proclaimed as present truth. Sensing this, they brought together from the whole Bible supportive texts and experiences which sustained, enlarged, and gave unity to a message which they believed to be truth for that time. This would presuppose a Divine Design in the giving of the Scriptures by the Spirit of God to chosen human instrumentalities. If this be so, then the Divine Design takes precedent over the immediate application of a given passage in the Bible to future generations as they study that portion of Scripture.

What do the Scriptures themselves teach? From the book of Hebrews, we learn that "God. . . spake in times past. . . by the prophets." (Heb. 1:1) Further, we are

told in addition to the voice of the prophets, God spoke to us by a Son in humanity. (Heb. 1:2) Was the voice of God by any prophet - or by the Son - limited to the generation, or the locality where the prophet lived? If this be so, then the "historical-linguistic-contextual" method of Bible interpretation would have validity, and take priority. To deny a Divine Design in the giving of the Bible, we are left with only a study of the times in which a given message was given with only a hope of ascertaining from that experience some lesson that would prove helpful to meet our present need. But that Son through whom God spoke tells us plainly, there is a Divine Design. He stated to the religious leaders of His day - "Ye search the Scriptures, because ye think that in them ye have eternal life; and these are they which bear witness of Me." (John 5:39 ARV) To His own followers, He began at Moses, and in all the Writings, He focused their attention on revelations which pointed to His ministry and death. (Luke 24:25-27) Jesus called them "slow of heart to believe all that the prophets" had written. The prophets had written to their own generation, the message of God for that time; but that was not all they had written! The Spirit of Christ which was in them testified to future events - His sufferings and the glory that should follow. (I Peter 1:10-11) To find the Divine Design of God in Scripture, one must bring together, from what the prophets have written, all that pertains to the purposes of God for a given time, and to do so one gathers here a little, and there a little. This is to use the "proof text" method!

The "proof text" method used by Christ as He interpreted the Scriptures is the same method used by His disciples after He "opened. . . their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures." (Luke 24:45) One has only to read the first gospel to see its use in operation. An event in the life of Jesus is cited. Then following the historical accounting is written - "Now all of this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying" - and the prophet is quoted. (See Matt. 1:22; 2:6, 17, 23; 3:3) Moved by the Spirit, Peter on the Day of Pentecost used the same method. (Acts 2:16, 25, 34-35) Paul's

recorded sermon in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia follows the same hermeneutic. (Acts. 13:32-37) These chosen men of God - called and instructed by the Son - turned the world upside down altering the course of history as per the Divine Design.

An interesting summary is to be found in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. It reads:

To the first Christians, who were Jews, the law and the Prophets were already sacred. Their national sacred writings were to them the oracles of God, though they could no longer be regarded as containing the whole truth of God. The coming of the Messiah had revealed God with a completeness that could not be discovered in the Old Testament.

The word of the Lord was authoritative as even Moses and the prophets were not. Yet since all the hopes of the Old Testament seemed to these Jewish Christians to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ, they more than ever were convinced that their national sacred books were divinely inspired. From this source they drew, if not the articles of their creed, at least the proofs and supports of their doctrines. Christ died and rose again, according to the scriptures.

All the writings of the Old Testament spoke of Christ to them. Legal enactment, prophetic utterance, simple historical record, and more emotional psalm, - all alike could be covered by the phrase "the scripture says," all were treated as of one piece, and by dilligent use of type and allegory single passages torn from any context could be used as proof-texts to commend or defend belief in Christ. (Vol. 3, p. 499, 1958 ed.)

One can view the method of the apostles as "single passages torn from any context" or one can perceive it as spiritual discernment by which the Divine Design which "was kept secret since the world began" was understood from "the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God. . . for the obedience of faith." (Rom. 16:25-26)

Some Recent History

Consultation I met following the Glacier View Conference in 1980 which considered

the challenge of Dr. Desmond Ford to basic Adventist teaching. Coming on the heels of this confrontation, the meeting was anticlimactic. Events which followed the meetings at Glacier View widened the gap between the hierarchy and the theologians of the Church. From Sept. 30 to Oct. 3, 1981, the Church's scholars were called to meet with the hierarchy in what was designated as Consultation II. The turmoil following the Glacier View meetings had cast suspicion on the Church's teaching ministry, and they in turn had grave doubts in regard to the intent of the hierarchy. This meeting in Takoma Park was to be an attempt to resolve the crisis, and rebuild bridges between the two groups.

Three main areas of conflict were on the agenda for discussion: Academic Freedom, Pluralism in Adventist Doctrinal Belief - a concept as dangerous as any presently facing the Church, but outside of the scope of this present thought paper - and Biblical Interpretation. This latter item became paramount. On Wednesday night, Elder Neal C. Wilson presented the delegates with position papers which represented the view of the hierarchy in regard to Biblical Interpretation. These papers emphasized "the divine element and virtually ignoring the human element in inspiration, an approach which virtually the entire Adventist teaching ministry [the theologians] believed to be catastrophic." (Spectrum, Vol. 12, #2, p. 44) Simply stated the two viewpoints represented the conflict between the "proof text" method, and the "historical-critical" method.

One month following Consultation II, the Adventist Radio Network aired a panel discussion held in the Sligo Church which reviewed the results of the meeting. The panel was chaired by Dr. Roy Benton, President of the Washington DC Chapter of the Association of Adventist Forums. Members of the panel were - Dr. James Londis, the Senior Pastor of the Sligo Church; Dr. Wm. G. Johnson, Associate Editor of the Adventist Review; Dr. Gary Roth, Associate Director of the Department of Public Affairs of the General Conference; and Elder Arthur Keough, Acting Head of the Department of Religion at Columbia Union College.

This panel discussion revealed that re-

sulting from Consultation II a compromise was reached between the pioneer Adventist method of studying the Scriptures, and the methods used by the Church's theologians which they were taught during their graduate work in non-Adventist universities. Londis stated that the position papers presented by Wilson representing the view of the hierarchy could not be accepted by the scholars. He noted that the scholars in committee sessions presented passage after passage illustrating the difficulty of interpretation if they were not allowed to use "certain kinds of approaches to Scripture that they had really learned and developed out of their graduate study." In the give and take of the panel discussion, Londis sought to illustrate the position of the scholars by citing Matthew's use of the writings of the prophets. He said - "Just because Matthew uses Isaiah in a certain way that the Jews understood and were comfortable with, does not mean that I in the 20th Century can use Isaiah in quite the same way. The main thrust of the historical [critical] new methods, or the modern methods [of the interpretation of the Scripture] - the main thrust of those methods is that the first primary responsibility of anybody who studies the Bible is to determine what the original writer meant to say when he wrote the text." Then Londis continued: -

The problem has come when it becomes obvious that Matthew does not always take Isaiah's meaning as the primary meaning for himself. There are other meanings - Messianic meanings, meanings about Christ, for example, that Matthew sees in the text and he uses it that way. And Matthew could do that because the Jews used the Bible that way. The Jews tended to use symbolism in Scripture, any kind of analogies or parallels for them were almost the same as what we would call logical proof. We can't do that anymore.

Johnson in his comments called for what he termed an "Adventist hermeneutic," and then defined what he didn't mean by advocating this approach. He stated -

What I don't mean by an Adventist hermeneutic - I don't mean that an Adventist hermeneutic will be one that goes first to Ellen White and interpret the Scripture through Ellen White. I do not mean that.

But I think that an Adventist hermeneutic will be aware of what Ellen White has said in any particular area, on any topic, and in any comments on Scripture that we may be studying. Seems to me that we as Adventists cannot be unmindful of that, but I would hope that we would always go first to Scripture and struggle with that.

However, in defending the compromise arrived at Consultation II, Johnsson invoked a rather non-analogous comparison of a position taken by Ellen G. White in regard to the doctrine of inspiration. Calling attention to the fact that most fundamental Christians of her day believed in verbal inspiration of the Bible, while critics denied any form of inspiration, Johnsson noted that Ellen White advocated "thought inspiration" in the writing of the Bible. This was in his thinking an example of avoiding the extremes in her day - a compromise position. Now according to this reasoning, the Church has again avoided what is perceived to be the extremes in methods of interpretation, the proof text method on the one hand, and the extreme use of the "historical-critical" method on the other hand. Roth on the panel summarized it this way - The "methodological approaches of our scholars are more diverse than thought; used more selectively than thought; and subordinated more often than thought to revelation and the Holy Spirit. (All quotes of panel members are from a taped recording of the discussion.)

How the resulting hodge-podge method will function in actual application is still not clear - but one thing is clear - the method used by our spiritual forefathers to arrive at truth has been relegated to the trash heap of history as an unacceptable extreme position in interpreting the Bible.

Why the Crisis?

What has brought about this state of affairs whereby our historic position of interpretation can be cast aside so readily in a confrontation between the hierarchy and theologians in an endeavor to find unity? True, we have placed in positions of responsibility in the teaching ministry - supposedly to meet accreditation requirements - men who are learned in the wisdom of Babylon's Seminaries, even one who has been schooled by the

Jesuits. [The latter admits in the publication of his Sabbath research - "To assure the reader that I have earnestly striven for objectivity, I might mention that in a few places my interpretation of certain Bible texts and historical data differs radically from the traditional position of my Church." (From Sabbath to Sunday, p. 6, Original Ed.)] But this is not the whole story. Some of the very ones who have, and who will be weeping tears over this trend, must shoulder some of the responsibility of the present crisis.

The charge is leveled by the advocates of the "historical-critical" method of interpretation that those who use the "proof text" method ignore the Biblical languages and thus ignorantly approach the study of the Bible. It is stated this way - "The proof text method is unaware that the same Hebrew or Greek word may have different meanings, which can be determined only by the context in which it is used, or that translators may have rendered it by different English words, and that different Hebrew and Greek words are sometimes rendered into English by the same English word. (Spectrum, Vol. 10, #4, p. 21) This sentence is merely a refined way of saying that those who use the proof text method are ignoramous, and really cannot be trusted with handling the Word of God. Sadly, in many instances, this is all too true. Those who thus bring reproach upon the study of the Word of God must share equally in the present crisis with those who seek to follow methods learned in the seminaries of Babylon.

I recall an invitation which was once extended to me to become academic dean of an unstructured educational program with the view of so organizing it to reflect an educational level of at least a Junior College. Before accepting this call, I felt I should submit to the head of this self-supporting institution certain studies which I believed should be a part of the two-year curriculum. So I did, and included the study of New Testament Greek in the program. The suggestion hit a "buzz saw" and I was reminded that the counsel of Ellen G. White forbade such a study. The individual in his ignorance did not realize that Ellen White was writing about the classical Greek of the poets and literary men of Greek culture;

and not about the koiné Greek spoken by the common people in the Roman world to whom the gospel was preached. No wonder, God through the prophet Hosea declared, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." (Hosea 4:6) Of interest is the fact that beginning with the first issue of 1898, one year after A. T. Jones became Editor-in-Chief, the Review & Herald tried to encourage the ministry and laity to learn New Testament Greek. Lessons were placed each week in the section of the church paper set aside for "The Home School." (See, R&H, Jan. 4, 1898, p. 19) One can only conjecture how this would have effected the present crisis had the ministry and laity responded positively to this opportunity, and had this opportunity been continued.

Then tragically on the other extreme are those who are "educated fools." These men walking in high places within the Church are not even worthy of the name, Christian. To question the interpretation of a Gospel writer in his use of the Old Testament prophets, is to question Christ Himself. To Matthew as well as to the others in the upper room, Jesus opened their understanding they they might understand the Scriptures. (Luke 24:45) If therefore, Christ gave to them the qualifications to interpret that which His Spirit (I Peter 1:11) had inspired the ancient prophets to pen, who am I to lift up myself and declare Matthew's interpretation unacceptable in the 20th Century? In other words, we have "antichrists" in the pulpits of the Adventist Church today. (TM, pp. 409-410)

A Biblical Method

The first and paramount concept in the study of the Bible is to recognize that the Holy Scripture is God's Book expressing the thoughts and objectives of God, albeit penned by human instrumentalities. To study the times in which a prophet lived, or the circumstances necessitating the message first in order to interpret the message proclaimed by the prophet is to begin at the wrong end of the process of understanding. The Bible reveals the divine viewpoint of the matter telling us how God is viewing a particular problem, or event of history. To understand first the divine viewpoint helps one to properly evaluate the circumstances of the human

event. To put it simply - Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is not a matter of private interpretation for "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." (II Peter 1:20-21) Besides God's viewpoint expressed through prophets in regard to specific events in human history, there is over and above all specific revelation regarding a particular event, the unfolding and revealing of the Divine Design of God's program and purpose for the human race. This is called "the Scripture of Truth" and it is plainly stated that only Michael held with Gabriel in the revelation of the things pertaining to this Divine Design. (Dan. 10:21) One dare not forget that wherever in the Bible, be it Old Testament or New, Michael is the name used to designate Jesus Christ in His controversy with Satan. (Jude 9; Rev. 12:7; Dan. 12:1) Behind all the writings of Bible is the struggle between the God of truth, and him who abode not in the truth. (John 8:44) To gather together the revelation of this conflict between Christ and Satan is to gather here a little and there a little - the proof text method. (Isa. 28:9-10)

Further, to properly understand the Word of God - even in the context of the times in which that history or revelation was written - one must consider the purpose of God in the over-all conflict - the cosmic struggle. For example, all that is written about Abraham in the book of Genesis is not all that Abraham did - it is not a diary. But that which is written, and there are many intriguing items of human interest revealed, yet that which is recorded regarding Abraham is primarily a revelation of God's purpose and design to ultimately bring to pass the time when all who so choose shall enjoy the blessing which came, and which is to be realized through the Seed of Abraham.

In the New Testament so that the Divine Design might be more fully understood, the Holy Spirit sanctioned the principle of typology. To put it simply, and bluntly, the events which occurred in the history of the past - the wilderness wandering, for example - were types to be applied for the learning of those upon whom the ends of the world have come. (I Cor. 10:11) Moreover, this concept of typology is used in the book of Hebrews as it relates the

sanctuary of the Old Covenant with the heavenly sanctuary of the New Covenant. It is not a matter of us telling God what heaven is like; He is telling us that to understand what He is doing in heaven, one needs to understand His revelation in the earthly representation that He gave through Moses at Mt. Sinai.

When you correlate the typological method of interpretation with the proof text method in perceiving the Divine Design of God for the human race, you have the basic hermeneutic upon which the Advent Movement was doctrinally established. Thus the present rejection of this basis of Biblical interpretation opens the way for the acceptance and propagation of those heresies which are presently being projected which deny the message of the cleansing of the sanctuary in 1844, and the revelation of God's glorious design in the final atonement. However, an illiterate defence against these Satanic encroachments will not spell victory for the truth. It has been well illustrated in the outcome of Consultation II, that experience in Church administration, and learning the art of political maneuvering to maintain the structure of the hierarchy, is not the preparation essential to stand in defence of historic Adventism. When compromise of truth becomes the "coin" for a common currency to facilitate the medium of exchange, the end results can be a spiritual depression with no recovery.

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POSTSCRIPT

Can you write a book from my viewpoint? The answer is understandably - "No." From whose viewpoint was the Bible written? If we believe what the Bible says about itself, it was written from God's viewpoint - and vantage point! How can you best interpret what I would write? By knowing me - right? How can you best understand the Bible? By knowing God? Is not this life eternal? (John 17:3) Have not the Scriptures been searched because men believed that in them was to be found eternal life?

But did not Matthew, John, Isaiah, and Jeremiah - all write the books under their names? True. From their viewpoint? If

so, then to know them, the background of why they were writing, is the primary and first essential priority for interpretation. But if writing as holy men inspired by the Spirit of God - then, though writing in their own words, they were expressing the viewpoint of God. Right? If this then be so, from what point of reference do we then seek to understand the Scriptures? Is not the real framework for understanding and appreciating the Word of God properly called the Divine Design? So this whole issue of hermeneutics reduced to its lowest common denominator is how do we view the Bible - the works of men, or the revelation of God through human instruments?

POSTSCRIPT - II

As noted in the first article, Dr. Wm. G. Johnsson was one of the panelist in the discussion of Consultation - II. In the most recent Adventist Review, (April 29, 1982), Dr. Johnsson has been named "editor-in-chief-elect" according to an announcement by Elder Neal C. Wilson. Because of sensitiveness of this position as editor of the official organ of the Church, information needs to be made known as to his theological thinking in crucial areas now effecting the Church. During the panel discussion, the chairman noted Dr. Johnsson as an "expert" in the book of Hebrews, a book which figures largely in the present crisis in the Church. When responding to the chairman's comment and question on the book of Hebrews, Johnsson referred modestly to himself as a "student of Hebrews" noting that he had written his doctoral dissertation in 1973 at Vanderbilt University, giving special emphasis on Chapters 9 & 10. He then commented that his conclusions from the research "differs substantially from the way that Dr. Ford understands Hebrews 9 & 10." To the casual listener of the panel discussion, it would appear that because his conclusions differed from Dr. Ford's, he was, therefore, a "historic" Adventist in belief.

The Dissertation is entitled - "Defilement and Purgation in the Book of Hebrews." Far from confirming the historic Adventist understanding of the book of Hebrews, it

as completely nullifies that understanding as does the position of Dr. Desmond Ford. The approach and method of interpretation differs. Johnsson refers to his method of interpretation as the "phenomenology of religion," in other words, the ritual of religious experience and practice as it relates to the concepts expressed by a Biblical writer. As to source, he wrote: - "It is a remarkable fact that one must go back as far as 1889 to the work of Westcott to find the methodological antecedent of the dissertation." (p. 434) [Westcott here noted was the member of the Westcott-Hort team which produced the Greek Text which replaced the Textus Receptus.] Dr. Johnsson views the "pamphlet" of Hebrews as a piece of religious literature, and not as a theological writing, thus the issue of where Christ went upon His ascension is a moot question. He views the message of Hebrews as primarily teaching that there are "not many means of purgation, but one par excellence (blood); not many applications of blood, but one application of one blood (Christ's); not inevitable oscillation from defilement to purgation and back again to defilement, but once-for-all breaking of the cycle." (p. 432) While taking seriously the language used in Hebrews as it relates to the worship ritual of the Jewish sanctuary service, Johnsson denies that the language points to an "allegorizing or typologizing wherein each article of furniture or detail of ritual is held to have a 'spiritual' counterpart." (p. 429) In other words, the services of the Hebrew sanctuary were not a shadow or example of the heavenly, but rather speaks merely a message as it relates to a religious man's experience.

Johnsson describes how he as an exegete approached his study of the book of Hebrews. He indicated the study of "defilement and purgation in the book of Hebrews" led to some "overarching conclusions." One that the language directs the reader to the fact the book is "first of all religious, and to approach it accordingly. That is to say, he has been alerted to the necessity of a deliberate bracketing-out of all questions of 'truth' or 'value' as he allows the text to reveal its own re-

ligious 'value' and internal logic." (p. 425) He faulted the research of the latter 19th Century (the era of Jones and Waggoner) as manifesting "a tendency to read into Hebrews ideas from outside the document - from other writings of the New Testament or from dogmatic theology." (p. 80) Then he adds - "So long as the Pauline authorship was adhered to, it was inevitable that the teaching of Hebrews would be assimilated to those of the Pauline corpus." (pp. 80-81) He then concludes - "It seems reasonable furthermore, to ask the exegete that he make a deliberate effort to 'hear' the text before him, sedulously [diligently] putting aside voices from other New Testament writings or his own religious tradition." (p. 81)

Quoting with approval Bultmann's evaluation of Bousset's Kyrios Christos, Johnsson wrote - "we see our task as roughly equivalent to Bousset's." (p. 21) What did Bousset set forth? "The religion of earliest Christianity appears. . . as essentially a cult-piety which sent forth as its flower: mysticism." (p. 20) Then in his concluding chapter, Johnsson asks - "Does not the congruence of these ideas [defilement and purgation] in Hebrews to universal religious patterns suggest the possibility of restating Christianity in terms of a modern purification myth? Intriguing as these questions are, they cannot be followed in this study. We must leave the motifs of defilement, blood, and purgation with our anonymous author [He refers to the writer of Hebrews as "auctor ad Hebraeos."] and his equally unknown readers." (p. 446) [Johnsson suggests the ones to whom Hebrews was directed were "a Qumran-style community." (p. 446)] Such is the thinking and theology of the editor-in-chief-elect of the Adventist Review.

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FIRST REACTION - Today (Apr. 26), we received a copy of the long-awaited book - The White Lie. The cover of the paperback edition is Satanic, repulsive, and an affront to the refined sensibilities of scholarly research.

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