IN THE BEGINNING
Science and Scripture Confirm Creation
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From its beginning the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been strongly committed to the biblical doctrine of Creation. The church has taught that in one week the world was created by God and that this week occurred a relatively short time ago – less than ten thousand years. It has not accepted the contention that the created order is many millions of years old and that the world as we now know it came into being as a result of processes of geological change and natural selection over an immense period of time.

Between 2000 and 2005 the church conducted an extensive series of conferences on science and religion. Conferences were held in many of the divisions of the world church and by the General Conference itself. One significant outcome of these conferences was a consensus statement, which reaffirmed the traditional understanding of the church on the subject of Creation. Another significant outcome was evidence of considerable struggle on the part of some to continue to affirm that traditional position.

This collection of essays has been written with the underlying assumption that it is very important for the church to speak with one voice on the question of origins. In the midst of a cacophony of voices that offer numerous alternatives, the Seventh-day Adventist Church understands the Bible to teach that those who have a special role to play in the proclamation of the gospel in the time just before the return of Jesus Christ will remain committed to the creatorship of God. They are called and are to call others to “worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water” (Rev 14:7, NKJV). They see in this message of the first angel of Revelation 14 an overt reference to the fourth commandment of Exodus 20 – the commandment that calls upon all human beings to remember the creatorship of God by honoring him through faithful observance of the Sabbath. The clear implications of God calling for a people who will boldly proclaim his creatorship is that the people to whom the message is proclaimed have abandoned this belief and that those who proclaim it have not!

There are no simplistic explanations or rationalizations here. The authors of this book are well aware that in an age when science and the scientific method dominate public opinion, those in the minority with a different worldview are often treated with contempt. They are also aware of many difficult questions asked of those who wish to believe the biblical account of Creation, and the perceived conflict between the conclusions of science and the teachings of the Bible. They would probably even admit that they do not have answers to some of the questions asked by science and some scientists. However, this book ably demonstrates that it is still entirely possible to defend the traditional Adventist positions on Scripture, Creation and the Flood and not be a scientific or a theological illiterate. It demonstrates that there are questions to be asked of science which defy answers on the basis of science alone.

Unfortunately, among many who used to be called “evangelical,” recent years have increasingly seen shifting attitudes to the Bible and its teaching on Creation. Bowing to what they perceive to be
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the weight of scientific evidence, they have abandoned a more literal reading of Genesis for one that they see as synthesizing the claims of science with the claims of the Bible. In so doing, they fail to do justice to either – especially Scripture. What has resulted is an ever-increasing pressure on the dwindling minority who still stand in the tradition of the evangelical understanding of revelation, inspiration and the authority of Scripture. There is a trend to accept theistic evolution by many within this group, especially those from churches which were once known as “evangelical,” but who have capitulated to a new attitude to the Bible and the pressures of evolution. Included among this group are some Seventh-day Adventists and former Seventh-day Adventists, some of whom have the capacity to exercise significant influence over others.

In the light of such developments this book has been written to provide a sound biblical, intelligent, reasoned basis for continuing belief in the Bible and the biblical teaching of the creatorship of God. It devotes a number of essays to the Bible itself – how we received it, how we read it and how we regard its authority. It openly espouses a reading of Genesis that accepts a short chronology. Does it present answers to every question? It does not. Some matters are just not as cut and dried as we would like them to be – either from biblical or scientific standpoints. There are some aspects of this topic on which we will need to reserve judgment until we have more evidence or better understanding. Perhaps there are some things we will only understand when the great cosmic controversy is ended. Whatever the case, this series of essays has been compiled in order to provide a reasoned, substantial basis for acceptance of the biblical account of Creation and to affirm the faith of those who choose to believe.

I commend this work to you and to the whole church as a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussion on origins. It does not pretend to have the last word. That prerogative is God’s alone. It provides foundations upon which the structure of belief can be built and adds new perspectives to foundations already laid. Its credibility is in no small way established through the reputations of the contributors, all of whom hold earned doctoral degrees and currently hold or have held major positions in universities and colleges of advanced education around the world. Several are experienced authors with many books and articles in scholarly journals to their credit. Their integrity, as well as their scholarship, makes this book an important contribution to the creation/evolution debate and to the defense of the biblical view of origins.

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Introduction

Is another book on origins really necessary?

It would be easy to suggest a negative reply to the question. The constant stream of origins-focused books and well-informed articles at every level is surely enough to answer most questions the average reader might have concerning the beginnings of the cosmos, the world and human life itself.

Certainly this appears true of our own community of faith. Among the more recent works from Adventist authors that could be mentioned – all in a long line of scholarly, informed and readable studies stretching back many decades – are Ariel A. Roth, *Linking Science and Scripture* (1998), John Ashton, *In Six Days* (1999), John Baldwin (ed.), *Creation, Catastrophe and Calvary* (2000), Leonard Brand, *Beginnings* (2006), Colin Mitchell, *Origins: Accident or Design?* (2009) and L. James Gibson and Humberto Rasi (eds.), *Understanding Creation* (2011). These works, and many others from Adventist publishing houses around the world, argue the case for a biblically based understanding of earth and human history in keeping with basic Adventist belief. They contain a wealth of important information from different perspectives on many aspects of creation and the relevant science, and all repay careful reading.¹

However, for a number of reasons a positive answer to the question can also be argued, and those reasons provide the basis for this book. They include:

- The desirability of new perspectives and fresh voices that will strengthen confidence in the biblical account of origins.

- The creation/evolution debate continues to raise new questions, both within the scientific community and among believers who recognize the significance of origins for the church and the wider world.

- Conflicting views on what appear to be basic issues, not only between evolutionary and Christian scientists, but also between Christian writers on origins issues. This is certainly true of the wider Christian scene, whose literature often impinges on the thinking of some within the Adventist community.

- The discovery of new data and new interpretations of old data constantly appear in the scientific literature and call for careful examination and comment from an Adventist Christian viewpoint.

- New challenges within the church, which seemingly often arise from a lack of understanding the material already available or, of even greater concern, from presuppositions apparently shaped by the prevailing secular scientific paradigm that *a priori* exclude the existence of the supernatural and any possibility of divine activity or revelation.
The foregoing are reason enough for the continuing discussion of origins, related as it should be to the particular needs of the times and communicated in a way that can be readily understood by all interested members of the body of Christ.

This book comes from such a context. It has been written by well-trained and informed Adventist theologians, biblical scholars and scientists from three continents, many with wide administrative experience in the church as well as academic training in various disciplines. It is intended to clarify and affirm the biblical view of earth and human beginnings. It recognizes that how we understand origins affects virtually everything else we believe as Adventist Christians. It is aimed at the average reader and is not intended to be a dialogue between academics, although we may not have entirely succeeded in achieving that particular goal!

Most of the publications mentioned above are heavily weighted towards science and the evidence from the natural world that supports a Creation and Flood model of earth origins. This is entirely understandable and necessary, for that is where the battle with secular evolution is being fought and where many of our younger people, and some older ones as well, need help. The selective use of scientific data is one of the important arguments to be brought against the advocates of evolution, so the case for evolution justifiably needs challenging on its own terms – the use and interpretation of the data. This emphasis does, however, give the impression that science and scientific opinion are the primary authority on origins, which, of course, is the prevailing worldview.

Readers of this book will notice a different emphasis: there are several more chapters from a biblical and theological standpoint than there are of a scientific nature. This imbalance is intentional and reflects an important truth concerning the theme of this book and the Christian understanding of origins. It is the conviction that the truth about origins is not derived solely, or even primarily, from science and the natural world. For Christians, particularly for Adventists, the truth about origins comes initially from divine revelation, from Scripture.

This does not mean that Scripture is always easy to understand, or that, in fact, we do understand it completely or even sufficiently. Those who have wrestled, sometimes for years, with the original languages, the themes and constructions of various books of the Bible and with early earth history know that well enough. But it does mean that the biblical text has primacy, that divine revelation as the principal source of truth takes precedence over mere human considerations and over interpretation of the data that is found in nature. That is why we regard nature as God’s second book and not his principal mode of revelation. All the scientists who have contributed to this volume concur with that view.

On the other hand, neither does it mean that science is to be undervalued. Science has made an enormous contribution to the betterment of society and to the advancement of human understanding in many areas and, as some of the chapters in this book will demonstrate, to the better understanding of origins. All the contributors to this book respect science and scientists, especially Adventist scientists who in the main are just as well qualified as their secular counterparts and many of whom work at the cutting edge of discovery and data interpretation in many scientific disciplines. They know better than most the strengths and weaknesses of the contemporary scientific endeavor.

So while this book argues strongly for the primacy of divine revelation, it is also based on the premise that theology and science, correctly understood, complement each other. The Bible and nature both contain truths concerning origins. Theologians and scientists therefore need to talk to
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each other and listen to each other in the same way that theologians and biblical scholars need to listen to each other and in the same way that Old Testament and New Testament scholars need to listen to each other. And scientists within the Christian tradition need to listen to theologians and biblical scholars as much as do secular scientists. For the sake of the church at large we need to emerge from our own specialist refuges and dialogue. Only so can we collectively and responsibly define and defend the truth about origins.

There are two important corollaries to the foregoing. First, when we speak of science we refer to science correctly understood and correctly undertaken – to authentic science as opposed to science that has arrogated to itself an aura and an authority beyond credibility and beyond demonstrability. This may seem obvious, but in fact it is not, since much contemporary science has lost its moorings and is afloat on a sea of unproven and unsubstantiated speculation. The frequently referred-to “scientific method” is, or should be, a process that investigates facts and phenomena with the objective of acquiring new knowledge or correcting knowledge previously obtained. It is, or should be, based on empirical and measurable data. Scientific theory is quite legitimate, even necessary, in this process provided that ultimately it can be tested by verifiable experimentation and valid data and be discarded when the evidence, or lack of it, so requires.

Unfortunately, much contemporary science does not match these criteria. In some disciplines science has become highly speculative as well as selective in its use of the available data. Some of the chapters in this book clearly demonstrate the truth of these assertions. Of even greater concern is the willingness of some scientists to actually distort the data in order to substantiate a preconceived theory. A notable example of this disturbing fact has been brought to public attention by the acclaimed TV documentary series All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace, recently screened in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, including Australia.

The series examines the idea that since the mid-twentieth century human thinking has been shaped by the computer culture and the dream that computers and the perceived model of stability in the natural world hold the key to a better and more stable world. In this context the series explores the hypothesis that the natural world is a self-regulating system widely believed to be in a state of dynamic equilibrium. This theory, developed in the 1960s, had an enormous impact on the development of ecological theory and policy, as it still does. Discussing the “use and abuse” of these concepts, the series challenges the theory, candidly pointing out that its originators deliberately distorted the data to make it fit the theory, and then introduced it to a world searching for answers to the daunting problems of ecology, economics and failed political solutions already evident in the mid-twentieth century. Later research, however, proved conclusively that the earth is not a static self-regulating ecosystem, but is in a state of constant flux. Referring to the “chaotic instability of nature” the films argue convincingly that the ecological theory of dynamic equilibrium “is an illusion” based originally on deliberately distorted data. One source refers to the idea of a “self-regulating eco-system” as “a fantasy based on cybernetic ideas that were projected on to nature in the 1950s by ambitious scientists.”

There is clearly more here than a discussion of early ecological theory. This alarming revelation raises fundamental questions about the assumed objectivity of contemporary scientific inquiry that will not be welcomed by those scientists willing to distort the evidence in support of a cherished theory. It should be equally unwelcome to those – and there are many – who are just as willing to
ignore evidence that contradicts their particular view. It also demonstrates the passive compliance of a public conditioned to accept without question the confident pronouncements of the scientific community, whether proven or not. The far-reaching influence of theories so generated is remarkable and is deep cause for concern. That there are obvious parallels in much of this to the development and promulgation of evolutionary theory is quite obvious and cannot be left unchallenged.

Also of concern is the fact that the established and widely respected scientific method, which resulted from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, is based on the idea that there is ultimately no purpose in life, human existence and therefore in the world itself, and on rejection of the Bible and biblical authority. It cannot be doubted that this is now the prevailing attitude in Western culture and in many parts of the world influenced by Darwinian and neo-Darwinian thinking. The astute and articulate Lesslie Newbigin recognized this. Arguing that any effective communication of the gospel in our culture must recognize where that culture stands, he says:

For there can be no question that for the ordinary educated person in our society, the real world is not the world of the Bible but a world that can be explained, and is being more and more fully explained, without reference to the hypothesis of God.5

We should recognize the significance of that observation for our own particular world mission, in any area of the world where the contemporary scientific method prevails.

There is a second corollary to the need for dialogue between scientists and theologians. It is that the theology should be biblical theology, and not theology of some other kind, infected by philosophy, secularism, humanism or prevailing cultural norms. True theology, especially for Adventists, is biblical theology. It recognizes the fact of divine revelation and the consequent authority of Scripture and draws its understandings of God, humanity and the world principally from that source. Newbigin, again, reminds us of the deleterious effect of Enlightenment thinking on the modern scientific worldview and consequently on the status of the Bible:

Under this light, the Bible can have no privileged status. It is part of the whole corpus of ancient literature. The events it records are to be understood by placing them within the unbroken network of cause and effect that links all history together. The ideas it expresses, whether in myth, saga, or legend, are to be understood by relating them to the similar beliefs of other ancient peoples. And the religious experience to which it bears witness is to be understood as part of the religious experience of the human race as a whole.6

The “sacred book,” he says, “has been desacralized.” That can never be the basis of an Adventist understanding of the Bible and it is of great concern that theology shaped by such humanistic, Enlightenment principles rather than by biblical theology seems to be preferred by some, with potentially far-reaching and devastating consequences for the future of the church.

So the dialogue between theologians and scientists in the church that needs to take place or to continue can only be profitable on the basis of these two important corollaries: that the science and the scientific method are authentic and not derived from secular humanism and that the theology is genuinely biblical theology derived from Scripture. That said, we all need to see as much as possible of the whole picture, vast and complex as it is, and not be satisfied to remain in our own particular
small corner. If God still wants to speak to us from both Scripture and nature we must listen to what he says and to each other for the benefit of the whole church and every believer, to say nothing about our collective responsibility to tell the story to a confused world.

In addition to providing biblical, theological and scientific arguments and data in support of the biblical teaching of Creation, this book also seeks to address the growing challenge of theistic evolution – the view that God used the evolutionary process to create the world and to bring all life into existence. Apart from the fact that the concepts of creation and evolution are inherently and etymologically contradictory, there is no biblical evidence whatever that supports evolution in any form. These facts alone should be sufficient to halt theistic evolution in its tracks. Evolution is still evolution in whatever guise it comes, another fact that cannot be avoided.

In recent times theistic evolution has replaced the biblical view of Creation in many evangelical churches that once professed allegiance to a thoroughly biblical theology of origins. The evidence is available from a number of sources. If only thirty years ago anyone had predicted that this would happen, he or she would have been regarded with incredulity. David Wells, distinguished professor of historical and systematic theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological seminary and a lifelong evangelical himself, says in his powerful and articulate analysis of the evangelical scene, No Place for Truth, “I have watched with growing disbelief as the evangelical Church has cheerfully plunged into astounding theological illiteracy.” Theological illiteracy leads to theological confusion and to theological accommodation. Theistic evolution is, in the mind of this writer at least, a classic example of that confusion and accommodation. There is, however, evidence that theistic evolution is already claiming the attention of some within our own ranks, as hard to believe as that may be.

It will not be out of place, therefore, to remind ourselves of the basic presuppositions of contemporary science that undergirds evolutionary theory. The evidence again is abundant, but since it is explored in more detail in at least two chapters that follow it will be sufficient to refer to only one or two of many sources that could be cited. Phillip Johnson, a Harvard graduate and professor emeritus of law at the University of California at Berkeley when he wrote the following, identified the fundamental problem with evolutionary theory as its prior commitment to atheism. “Modern science protects its grand theory of evolution by starting with the basic assumption that God is out of the picture and by sticking to that assumption through every discouragement.”

Richard Lewontin, a high-profile evolutionary scientist offers an extraordinarily candid assessment of the reality in coming to the same conclusion:

We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, in spite of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is an absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.
The molecular biologist Michael Denton concurs with this assessment but goes even further when he argues at the conclusion of his incisive and persuasive book, *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*, that Darwinism continues to be promulgated in the face of “hostile evidence.” “The priority of the paradigm,” he says, “takes precedence over common sense.”

The articulate and well-argued works of Phillip Johnson and Michael Denton and others of a similar nature, to say nothing of the works by Adventist authors cited earlier, lay bare the weaknesses, inconsistencies and omissions of evolutionary theory in a way that demands honest and objective consideration. That intelligent, supposedly well-informed Christians can subscribe, quite willingly it would seem, to any form of evolution in the face of such persuasive evidence is a great mystery. Surely prior commitment to a materialistic paradigm cannot be the reason? Yet it cannot be eliminated entirely, for it is part of the fundamental problem. What is beyond question is that if theistic evolution gathers momentum within the church, the consequences for Adventist theology, to say nothing of the historic Christian teaching on which it is built, will be dire indeed. This book was conceived and has been written in the hope that it will help to prevent such a catastrophe.

Within this overall context, the chapters and topics in this book proceed in the following order:

Chapter 1 lays a foundation for succeeding chapters by reviewing the basic question of divine revelation and consequent biblical authority. It argues that since Scripture is ultimately of divine origin, the outcome of a revelatory process initiated by God, its authority takes precedence over all other sources of information concerning origins, as it does in all other aspects of Christian belief. Authentic Christianity is judged by its allegiance to revelation and imposes on its followers the obligation to take Scripture seriously, even if it is not always fully understood or requires faith in some of its assertions.

In chapter 2 Robert K. McIver provides the first of several studies on Genesis, self-evidently a crucial book for understanding origins. Here he discusses the key issues of the transmission and credibility of the Genesis text. He points out that, like the entire Hebrew Bible, the textual history of Genesis is “one of remarkable survival” and that in spite of many challenges and difficulties through the millennia the Genesis text as we have it today is “essentially what was originally written” and therefore a credible basis for understanding the Creation account.

Chapter 3 deals with the important question of what the Bible as divine revelation claims for itself. Christianity has derived from Scripture a theology of God, of Christ, of sin and salvation, and Adventism has drawn from its pages theologies of the Sabbath, the sanctuary and last events, among other doctrines. But is there a theology of Scripture? What does the Bible say about itself? Jo Ann Davidson explores these questions from the biblical text, justifying the confidence we have in it as the source and foundation of our beliefs and our worldview.

In chapter 4, and in the context of the preceding chapters, H. Ross Cole establishes the fundamental importance of the book of Genesis, pointing out that it is much more than a record of primeval and patriarchal history. By examining the various themes in the book, particularly in the early chapters, he clearly demonstrates that Genesis is a critical introduction to the entire Bible and to biblical theology as a whole. Major strands of Adventist theology thus originate in the Genesis text and only reach fulfillment in later centuries and later books of the Bible.

Laurence A. Turner, another Old Testament scholar, continues the emphasis on Genesis in chapter 5 with a careful analysis of Genesis 1 and 2 in which he argues convincingly that these two
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chapters contain much more than the record of Creation. Genesis 1 and 2 are rich in theology as well as history, and were so intended from the beginning; facts that are sometimes lost in the continuing debate over origins that often focuses on history and chronology. Readers may be particularly interested in the sanctuary symbolism already found in these two chapters.

Chapter 6 considers another important matter concerning Genesis – the question of its origin. How did it come into existence? It is suggested here that perhaps we should reconsider the so-called tablet theory proposed some years ago, and endorsed by prominent Genesis scholars and archaeologists at the time. If Genesis was originally written sequentially on a series of tablets in ancient times and in accordance with the customs of the time as the text itself indicates, and later compiled by Moses, it would significantly strengthen confidence in the historicity of the Genesis record.

In chapter 7 Richard M. Davidson discusses the crucial issue of time in relation to Creation as indicated in Genesis 1 and 2, particularly in chapter 1:1-3. This is careful textual analysis at its best and establishes from the opening words of Scripture a convincing basis for the relatively recent origin of life on earth while leaving open the question of the age of universe as a whole, including that of planet Earth. Dr. Davidson’s fair and balanced analysis of the so-called gap theory in Genesis 1:1 is of particular interest.

In chapter 8 Paul B. Petersen reminds us that it is not only in Genesis that we read of Creation. The Bible throughout speaks repeatedly of God and his creation and any objective evaluation of the biblical teaching of Creation must take into account the entire biblical testimony, not only the opening chapters of Genesis. It is an important argument, for as this author points out many aspects of biblical theology are rooted, not only in the book of Genesis, but more specifically in its teaching about Creation.

Steven Thompson takes up another vital aspect of the biblical witness in chapter 9 when he discusses the New Testament use of the Genesis text. He does this in the context of pagan views of origins that circulated widely in the first-century world at the time the New Testament was being written. Emphasizing that Creation was a core New Testament belief, this is an interesting approach to the fact that creation was also an important element in the proclamation of the early church to a pagan society. There are relevant lessons for today to be gleaned here, as the author points out.

William G. Johnsson, former editor of the Adventist Review, examines an equally critical dimension of the biblical witness in chapter 10 when he examines the New Testament emphasis on the Christocentric nature of Creation, arguing that it is more fundamental to a thoroughly Christian understanding of origins than even the Genesis text itself. The chapter develops the thesis that the proper study of Creation begins with the Creator, Jesus Christ, according to the testimony of the New Testament writers. It is a persuasive argument, and provides at least seven major theological problems for advocates of theistic evolution and progressive creation.

Chapter 11 brings us to the first of the essays written from a scientific perspective. In this chapter Timothy G. Standish presents the evidence for intelligent design from molecular biology. While pointing out that intelligent design is not precisely the same as biblical creationism, Dr. Standish contends that irreducible complexity and specified complexity are “compelling arguments” in the debate with contemporary neo-Darwinism. Here is some of the evidence often overlooked or ignored by evolutionary advocates.
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In chapter 12 Grenville J. R. Kent combines his understanding of the Old Testament with persuasive data from cosmology to argue that the cosmos itself provides irrefutable evidence of design and purpose. Within this biblical context such evidence also strongly supports the view that planet Earth, the “privileged planet,” is the outcome of intention rather than mere chance. Cosmology thus combines with molecular biology to argue in favor of purpose and design, both of which presuppose an intelligent mind.

Evolutionary literature and most evolutionists speak as though the case for evolution was proved and watertight. In chapter 13 Professor John C. Walton reminds us that this is not the case. With careful attention to detail he exposes several of the weaknesses and gaps in evolutionary theory, concluding that neo-Darwinism needs to be “drastically scaled down” since its pretensions “have not stood up” to critical examination. “Evolution in any guise,” he says, is a “limited theory” that “cannot explain the origin of life or the origin of species.”

Another aspect of the evolutionary manifesto that deserves much wider recognition is the fact that many scientists, including many who are not Christian, are critical of evolutionary theory. There are several reasons for their doubt and in chapter 14 L. James Gibson examines five major areas in which these scientists have questions, surveying some of the relevant literature and providing many candid quotations from well-qualified scientists who are not persuaded that the evidence always supports the claims of evolution’s most strident advocates.

Chapter 15 focuses on geology. The Genesis record of early earth history is widely disbelieved on account of the Flood as well as the Creation record. Ariel A. Roth, the church’s leading authority on Flood geology and paleontology, discusses several geological and geophysical phenomena in addition to fossil evidence, which can only be satisfactorily explained by a worldwide flood of Genesis proportions. The geologically validated biblical flood account substantially increases confidence in the credibility of Genesis as a whole.

In chapter 16 Reinder Bruinsma turns from theory and belief to practice, examining some of the undesirable consequences of evolutionary thinking in society, and arguing that the implications of belief in natural selection and the survival of the fittest will inevitably be seen in human attitudes and actions, which in the recent past have already included eugenics and Nazi theories of race betterment. He warns that “the dangers of immoral and destructive” behavior arising from Darwinian theory are likely to increase in the secularized Western world.

In the context of the preceding chapters Lael Caesar asks a crucial question in chapter 17: Is theistic evolution a valid option for Christians who claim to accept the Bible as the authoritative word of God? Discussing several major doctrines shared by historic Christianity and mainstream Adventism he demonstrates that theistic evolution undermines each one, effectively destroying what for centuries has been regarded as authentic Christianity and at the same time posing a considerable threat to historic Adventism. Dr. Caesar ends the chapter and the book by pointing out that theistic evolution “leads to the abandonment of central biblical teachings.” It is, he says, “perhaps the most serious theological challenge of our time.”

Readers will note that several themes and topics relevant to the creation/evolution discussion are referred to by more than one writer. Divine revelation, the authority of Scripture, the theology of Genesis, theistic evolution and the New Testament witness to creation, for example, are all discussed in more than one chapter. In the chapters dealing with scientific issues, intelligent design, the Genesis
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Flood and the flaws and omissions of evolutionary theory are mentioned by more than one writer. We do not regard such discussion as unnecessary overlapping but rather as complementary, for different authors present various aspects of a theme from their own perspectives and in the context of their own particular topic. The significance of these themes to the affirmation of the biblical creation account and to the critique of the evolutionary paradigm is thereby greatly strengthened.

While all the foregoing and what follows might seem to be a comprehensive defense of the biblical creation account, in reality it is not so. The vastness and complexity of the subject, both from biblical and scientific perspectives, requires that at best it can only be regarded as a modest attempt to bring further understanding to one of the fundamental beliefs of Adventist Christian theology. We offer this collection of essays from this standpoint – as complementary to the many excellent studies already available and certainly not as the last word on a topic that has engaged the church for centuries but which has also become in recent times the focus of world attention. We offer it in the hope that it will bring some affirmation and some clarification and some certainty to believers everywhere and much thanks and praise to the Creator himself.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES
1. The recent study by David C. Read, Dinosaurs: An Adventist View, came to our attention too late to be referenced in this book. It deals with many more aspects of the creation/evolution debate than the title suggests, and is recommended reading for all who are interested in the discussion of origins.
2. The title is taken from a poem by 1960s poet Richard Brautigan.
3. Particularly episode 2, “The Use and Abuse of Vegetational Concepts.” Quotations are from the script of this episode.
6. Ibid., 42.
Chapter 1

REVELATION AND THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Bryan W. Ball

Revelation may be defined as the self-disclosure of God to humankind. Any knowledge that human beings may have of God, therefore, is not the result of their own diligent inquiry but is the outcome of God’s gracious initiative and his will to be known. Without this revelation, God would remain hidden and incomprehensible. G. S. Hendry says, “Knowledge of God must be given by God himself.” That which is thus revealed is the foundation of all Christian understanding of this world and the world to come. The significance of such revelation to Christianity and to Christian belief and witness can hardly be overstated. Paul Helm correctly observes, “Revelation is central to Christianity, and it is hard to see how Christianity could proceed without appealing to it.”

Adventist theologians have generally agreed with this historic view of revelation. They also accept the proposition that revelation is “the ultimate question” underlying many contemporary issues in society and in the church. One suggests that revelation is the “crucial question” for theology today, making the important point that the Bible’s primary claim is not simply to inspiration, but to revelation. More recently Raoul Dederen has related the issue to the whole church stating, “Few issues are of more crucial significance for Christians than the nature and purpose of God’s self-revelation.” In his recent study of revelation and inspiration Fernando Canale even argues the importance of the topic because “Christian theology is in crisis.”

This high view of revelation underlies the defining claim of Christianity to be a revealed religion. That the Judeo-Christian God is a God who actively seeks mankind is Christianity’s distinguishing characteristic. This seeking God is known through his self-revelation, principally in Christ, but also in Scripture. This historic understanding of God and revelation has in recent years come under attack, and we do well to heed Leon Morris’s warning, “We can no longer take the traditional idea of revelation for granted.” That the issue has already impinged on Adventist thinking is evidenced in the Adventist Theological Society publication Issues in Revelation and Inspiration (1992), a response to Dr. Alden Thompson’s book Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers (1991). The debate continues to simmer and is not likely to go away. The evangelical theologian J. I. Packer once said of revelation, “The real subject under discussion is the essential nature of Christianity.” The significance of that remark should not escape us at this critical time.

These matters give rise to a series of related questions: What is revelation? Can it be understood? Has it occurred? Does the Bible itself have anything to say on the matter? Is the Bible the result of divine revelation? If it is, then what is an appropriate response? Not least are the questions relating to revelation and reason, whether or not revelation occurs in propositional form, and if God’s
self-revelation is just that – a disclosure of himself and not also of information about him. Within the confines of this chapter we will attempt to answer some of the questions in the hope that we can determine whether or not Scripture should continue to have authority in the life of the church, in the formulation of belief and in the lives of individual believers, as it has done for the best part of two millennia.9

Revelation Historically Understood

It will be helpful to begin with a brief survey of revelation as understood historically.

The Early Church. It is clear from the New Testament that the first Christians accepted totally that God had revealed himself in Christ and also through Scripture. Scripture for them was the corpus of Old Testament writings, which Christ himself had frequently cited and to which he had appealed to authenticate his own identity and mission (Luke 24:25-27, 44-47). That God had come to earth in Christ and that he was the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy was undoubtedly the keynote of apostolic proclamation as is apparent from even the most cursory reading of Acts. But the emphasis on Scripture as witness to the facts concerning Christ and as being revelatory and with redemptive purpose itself is equally clear (e.g., Acts 13:32-34; 17:1-3; 18:28).

When Paul wrote to Timothy, c. AD 64, concerning “Scripture,” noting that Timothy had known from childhood “the sacred writings”10 and claiming “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim 3:16),11 he wrote initially to Timothy himself without thought of those in centuries to come. Similarly, when Peter, c. AD 67/68, declared that in “Scripture . . . men spoke from God” (2 Pet 1:20-21) he was addressing first-century Christians. Peter’s recognition of Paul’s epistles as “Scripture” (2 Pet 3:16) endorses both Paul’s writings and the status of Scripture itself. Paul’s final evangelistic endeavors in Rome, focused on Jesus and “the kingdom of God,” based on frequent appeal to “the Law of Moses and the Prophets” and his citation from Isaiah (Acts 28:23-28), is incontrovertible evidence of his respect for God’s Word as a revelation of the divine purpose. Christianity spread rapidly across the first-century Roman world primarily as a result of the proclamation of both Christ and of Scripture’s witness to Christ. It cannot be doubted that early Christians maintained a high view of Scripture for several centuries.

The Medieval Church. That major changes in Christian thinking occurred from at least the third century onward is widely recognized. Many of these changes related to beliefs about Christ, the virgin Mary, apostolic authority and therefore about Scripture itself. As the medieval period developed, the view came to prevail that Scripture of itself was insufficient, especially for ordinary people, and that it needed to be interpreted and authenticated by the church. Tradition came to assume an ever-increasing role in the life and teachings of the church.

Tradition includes customs and practices that arose in various places and that were later accepted as norms of Christian belief and practice, often formally endorsed by the church. During the medieval period the chief source of tradition became conciliar pronouncements and church decretes – ecclesia docens, church teaching – that assumed the same, or even a superior, authority to that of Scripture. In the view of the medieval church itself “unwritten traditions formed a second, independent, original, authentic source of information and doctrine alongside Scripture,” a position that was always unacceptable to historic orthodoxy.12 The original revelation in Scripture had become insufficient, obfuscated and devalued.
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The Reformation. The sixteenth-century European Reformation was essentially a reaction against tradition and the subsequent errors and abuses that crept into the church as the medieval era unfolded. The defining call of the Reformation became *sola Scriptura*, the Bible only, reaffirming the foundation of authentic Christian belief. Diarmaid MacCulloch says of that era, “Authority was to be respected. . . . This was particularly the case with the greatest authoritative text of all, the Christian Bible.”13 One of the enduring achievements of the Reformation was the translation and printing of the Bible in the vernacular languages of Europe. Luther’s German Bible and Tyndale’s English New Testament shaped the language and cultures of their peoples, ensuring that Reformation principles continued to prevail for centuries.

A significant outcome of the Reformation emphasis on God’s Word was recovery of the “sufficiency of Scripture” – the conviction that man’s knowledge of God and everything necessary for salvation should be derived from the Bible. Packer says that as a result of this rediscovery, “The Bible was set up, according to its own demand, as judge of those traditions which had previously been supposed to supplant it.”14 “The Reformation can only be understood properly as the desire to return to apostolic Christianity with its fundamental convictions about Scripture and divine revelation. Protestantism was thus born, and from it the nonconformist churches later emerged with their uncompromising insistence on Scripture as the normative guide for all religious belief and practice.

The Enlightenment. For three hundred years or more the Reformation view of Scripture dominated Protestantism and much of the civilized world. Alister McGrath states that the Bible was “central to the life of Western European society in a way that we cannot begin to imagine today.”15 It was, in fact, the single most formative influence in the final development of Western civilization. But that was to change dramatically in the eighteenth century with the coming of the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, resulting in the secularization of Western European thought.16

Under the influence of the Enlightenment principles of rationalism, individualism and subjectivism, many thinkers of the time, like Voltaire and Hume, came to believe that they had been emancipated from the “tyranny” of the church and Scripture. Intellectual objections were raised against Christianity and the Bible. Louis Berkhof speaks of the “chill winds of Rationalism” that swept over Europe, under which

Man became intoxicated with a sense of his own ability and goodness, refused to listen and submit to the voice of authority that spoke to him in Scripture, and reposed complete trust in the ability of human reason to lead him.17

This humanistic attitude led to rejection of the biblical revelation as traditionally understood and reflects an unjustified confidence in the unaided human mind and its ability to discover religious truth for itself. The Bible became devalued and was to be interpreted just as any other book. Divine revelation and biblical authority were replaced by human wisdom and personal judgment. History has repeatedly demonstrated the persistent attraction of this viewpoint and its devastating consequences for the individual and for society.

The Contemporary Scene. Much could be said of the prevailing eclectic scene and current views of revelation,18 but space restricts us to only two observations.

We note firstly the continuing influence of Enlightenment thinking, especially in academic circles where it prevails across most disciplines, including theology and biblical studies in many
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institutions. Here it first led to a radically critical view of the Bible, resulting in the reinterpretation of Scripture according to Enlightenment principles. The so-called documentary hypothesis, according to which the Pentateuch is a late compilation (c. sixth century BC) from several different sources rather than the work of one author or compiler, Moses, is a classic example. The New Testament has also been radically reinterpreted. Much of the life and teachings of Jesus have been rejected as myth, especially his miracles and the resurrection, and Jesus himself widely regarded, not as the Son of God as historically understood, but as an itinerant peasant preacher or a social revolutionary intent on undermining Roman authority in Palestine.

Second, revelation itself has been redefined. It is now widely held that revelation is not a phenomenon that occurs through words about God, that is, in the Bible, but that it is a disclosure of God himself, an encounter of the human with the divine. Martin Buber, an Austrian Jewish philosopher (1868-1965), encapsulated encounter theology with his now-famous dictum “I-Thou” that succinctly represents this point of view – revelation principally as “encounter.” It has to be said that there is an important truth here. If the purpose of revelation is redemptive, then it must ultimately lead to some kind of interaction between God and humans at a personal level. But is it only this “encounter” that is the revelation of God? Or does revelation occur at another level? Do words, spoken or written, play any part in the revelatory process of bringing about an encounter between God and human beings? The remainder of this chapter will attempt to answer this most fundamental question concerning divine revelation.

The Biblical Witness to Revelation

It has been asserted that the Bible has relatively little to say concerning revelation, that revelation is a concept imposed on Scripture, and that what it does say, particularly in the New Testament, refers mainly to the revelation of Christ at the last day. We must, therefore, allow the Bible to speak for itself to determine if such claims are sustainable.

The Old Testament. Consideration of some Old Testament texts tells us explicitly that revelation occurred at various times throughout Old Testament history and that it is a basic idea in Old Testament theology. Such texts confirm our basic understanding of what revelation is – disclosure of that which otherwise would be known only to God: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever” (Deut 29:29). The experience of the prophet Samuel further affirms revelation and recognizes the fact that it occurs through the words of the Lord, and at a time of God’s choosing: “The Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord” (1 Sam 3:21). David claimed that he had been the recipient of divine revelation, “For you, O Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, have made this revelation to your servant, saying, ‘I will build you a house’ ” (2 Sam 7:27). Centuries later the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged that Daniel’s God was a “revealer of secrets” (Dan 2:19, 22, 28-30, 47; cf. 10:1). The repeated emphasis on revelation throughout this entire passage is impossible to ignore. Amos 3:7 reaffirms that revelation undergirds God’s mode of communicating with the prophets, “The Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.” On the basis of these texts alone it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that revelation occurred throughout the Old Testament era, that it was so recognized and that it frequently involved communication by word.

Many scholars recognize that the Old Testament God is portrayed consistently as “active” and
as “speaking” and that these two characteristics are definitive of the Judeo-Christian God. This understanding is confirmed by the text of Genesis 1 and 2, seminal chapters of the Bible by any criteria. The Creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 testifies to the “active” God of the Old Testament by the use of several verbs denoting action, including “created,” “made,” “separated,” “formed,” “blessed,” “breathed,” “planted,” “caused” and so on. Beyond the various activities ascribed to God by these verbs, they also imply intention, planning, oversight and, not least, sovereignty. This early representation of the “active God” in the opening chapters of the Bible is foundational to a correct understanding of God and is frequently reiterated throughout the Old Testament.

But God also appears in Genesis 1 as the “speaking God,” who uses words to explain himself and to bring to about his purposes. The repeated use of the phrase “God said” in the Creation account not only indicates the manner in which creation took place, thereby providing the psalmist with the basis for his assertion “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host. . . . For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (Psa 33:6, 9), but also fittingly introduces us to the God who will continue to speak throughout the Old Testament. The verbs “to say” and “to speak” appear more than any other verbs in the Old Testament text, most frequently with reference to God. They repeatedly underline the fundamental nature of the Old Testament God as a God who makes known his will and his wishes in verbal form.

It is often claimed by those who are attracted to the idea of encounter revelation that God’s principal method of revelation in Old Testament times was through various acts at specific points in history and in his encounters with specific individuals at times of crisis in their lives. “The central feature of the biblical revelation is that it was given in real history, among real men in the crises of their national and individual lives.”22 While revelation is undoubtedly communicated within the context of history, and indeed includes God’s acts in history, many would question that the historical dimension was its “central” feature.

Ned Stonehouse draws an important conclusion from the role of Moses during the Exodus and in the wilderness experience of Israel. Noting the “greatness” of Moses in biblical and Israelite history, his “distinctive place in the history of revelation” and “the historical character of the Old Testament revelation,” Stonehouse remarks:

The word of the Lord which came by Moses could be and was, because of its historical character, handed down to the people from generation to generation. It is obvious that in the transmission of this special revelation the fact of its being so largely committed to writing was highly significant. The fact of its inscripturation assuredly did nothing to modify its essential character as revelation.23

The resultant writings were incorporated in the Pentateuch, and the word thus written then became God’s revelation of his past dealings with his people for succeeding generations.

Morris cites several Old Testament prophetic passages, all of which refer specifically to the word of the Lord as it came to the prophets, including “The LORD said to me” (Isa 8:1); “The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD” (Jer 7:1); “I heard the voice of one speaking” (Ezek 1:28). Morris argues convincingly against the view that revelation does not occur through the words of the prophets, for time after time that is precisely what the prophets themselves claim:

I cannot see why men should write in this way if what they wanted to tell us was
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that they had given the matter thought and were now prepared to let us have their considered conclusions. If words mean anything they are reporting disclosures. They are saying that God spoke to them, revealed himself to them if you like.24

So when we allow the Old Testament writers to speak for themselves, we find that they insist that they are communicating what God first has communicated to them. “They may not use our term but they are recording what we call revelation.”25

The New Testament. The New Testament Greek words that are translated “reveal” and “revelation” in English versions are the verb *apokalupto*, to unveil or uncover, and the related noun *apokalupsis*, an uncovering, or an unveiling. The “unveiled” already exists prior to any *apokalupsis* and without being unveiled would remain hidden. This, as we have seen, is precisely what the basic Christian concepts of God and revelation contain. But it is more than God himself who is unveiled through the revelatory process. Knowledge and facts relative to God’s redemptive purposes are also revealed.

The verb *apokalupto* is attributed to Jesus twice in Matthew 11:25-27, once of his Father and once of himself, thereby claiming for him an equal authority to reveal what is normally hidden. Elsewhere, while the Old Testament continually uses phrases like “Thus says the Lord” (e.g., Jer 31:2, 7, 15, 23, 35, 37), the New Testament records the repeated declarations of Jesus, “I say unto you” (e.g., Matt 5:18, 22, 28; John 5:19, 24-25). Here, surely, is the reason why his words elicited such astonishment, “For his word possessed authority” (Luke 4:32). It was the authority of divine revelation, equal to the authority of the Old Testament prophets. Jesus further asserts “knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” had been given to the disciples, indicating that revelation imparts understanding (Matt 13:11, NIV). And in response to Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ, he said to Peter, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father, who is in heaven” (Matt 16:17).

Similarly, the Pauline epistles demonstrate the crucial significance of revelation in Paul’s thinking. Romans 1:16-17; 1 Corinthians 2:10; Galatians 1:12; Ephesians 1:17-18; 3:3-5; Philippians 3:15 and Colossians 1:26-27 all require careful consideration since they testify explicitly to revelation and since none of them refers to the revelation of Christ at the end of the age. Most of them relate specifically to Paul’s own experience. Space restricts extended discussion of these texts, but Galatians 1:11-12 deserves mention on account of its unambiguous witness to revelation in Paul’s own experience. Paul says that the gospel he preached was not man’s gospel, “For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation [apokalupsis] of Jesus Christ.” These texts alone confirm that revelation was a defining factor in Paul’s life and therefore in the development of the Christian message.

In addition to these specific references there are numerous passages in which revelation is clearly assumed or implied, both in the Pauline writings and in other New Testament passages, for example, 1 Corinthians 11:23; 15:3; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; 1 Thessalonians 2:13-14; Acts 26:12-18; John 15:15 and so on. How, in the face of all this textual evidence, it is possible to doubt that revelation is a fact in the New Testament record, unrelated to any reference to the revelation of Christ at the *parousia*, is almost beyond comprehension.

We are confronted with a mass of evidence from both Old and New Testaments to the reality of revelation, to its immense significance in the divine purpose and to the fact that it is much more
than simply “encounter,” important though that is, but that it frequently includes words that impart knowledge and understanding and that necessarily have revelatory significance themselves. Morris summarizes the significance of the biblical witness to revelation rather neatly when, having argued at some length that revelation occurs through the words of the prophets, he says, “I do not see how it is possible for a Christian to reject the idea that God has disclosed at least something of himself and still be authentically Christian.”

General and Special Revelation

The significance of revelation as a key concept for understanding the Bible and even perhaps for the survival of Christianity in an ever-increasingly secular culture has been recognized for some time. The terms “general revelation” and “special revelation” have been used in the attempt to explain and clarify the concept of revelation and it is necessary to consider these terms and their implications more carefully.

General Revelation. General revelation is the more recent term for what in the medieval period was usually called “natural revelation.” It refers to the fact that there are evidences in nature and within human experience that testify to God’s existence and that are evident for all to see. These evidences are generally held to include the cosmos that surrounds us, certain aspects of the natural world in which we live and the innate sense of right and wrong that exists in all human beings. Kant’s memorable phrase, “the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me” is still a useful summary of the scope of general revelation.

The Old Testament, for example in Psalm 19:1-6, and the New Testament, in Romans 1:18-20, bear witness to the fact that God has revealed something of himself in nature. Paul seems to be quite clear on this, saying that God’s power and his divinity “have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom 1:20). Such revelation, however, has generally been held to be limited, perhaps awakening the conscience, an awareness of God and a desire to know more of him, but inadequate for a full understanding of either God or humanity and hence for salvation. Gordon Clark says, “The planets above and the plants below show some of the wisdom and power of,” but argues that the cosmos and the creation do not reveal the full wisdom and power of God and that neither omnipotence nor righteousness are necessarily conclusions to be drawn from the stars.

Special Revelation. Special revelation refers to God’s self-disclosures in Christ and in Scripture, both necessitated by humanity’s natural alienation from God, the result of innate human sinfulness with its “ignorance” and “darkened understanding” (Eph 4:18; Col 1:20). The symbiotic relationship between Christ and Scripture is so close as to be in some respects virtually inseparable. Both are expressions of the divine “Word,” the very logos of God. Christ the incarnate Word and the Bible the inscripturated Word, each bearing witness to the other, Christ testifying repeatedly to the role of the Written Word and the Written Word testifying clearly and consistently to the incarnate Word. We are concerned here particularly with the function of Scripture, the Written Word, as God’s special revelation.

While it is undeniable that the natural human alienation from God is the fundamental reason for all revelation, it is also true that special revelation is necessary on account of human finitude as well as fallenness. Revelation akin to what we now term special revelation began in Eden before the writing of the Old Testament commenced and before human sin. Clark argues that the necessity of
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special revelation became apparent as soon as humans were created, in other words on account of their creatureliness as well as, and before, their sinfulness.

When Adam was created and placed in the Garden of Eden, he did not know what to do. Nor would a study of the Garden have led to any necessary conclusion. His duty was imposed upon him by a special divine revelation. God told him to be fruitful and multiply, to subdue nature, to make use of the animals, to eat of the fruit of the trees, with one fateful exception. Thus moral norms, commands and prohibitions were established by a special and not a general revelation. Only so could man know God’s requirements, and only so could he later learn the plan of salvation.33

There is therefore a twofold necessity for special revelation: human ignorance and human sinfulness. That this Edenic revelation to the first humans occurred through verbal communication is clear. The record says, “God said to them, ‘be fruitful and multiply’” and “God commanded” (Gen 1:26; 2:16). Here is the speaking God in communication with the first man and woman.

From then on, as Old Testament history unfolded and as the Old Testament text shows, God revealed himself through a succession of remarkable acts. But it is equally clear that he also revealed himself through the written account of those mighty acts. How else could succeeding generations know about those deeds and their significance? It is so obvious from a thorough reading of the Bible, especially in the case of the Old Testament, that one wonders why it has ever been disputed. Morris criticizes the artificial distinction between the deeds of God and his words, that is, the more recent view that revelation occurred in the acts of God but not in verbal form or through the written record. His perceptive comments are worth noting:

We have no access to the deeds except through the record. If the record is unreliable then we do not know what God did and accordingly we do not know how he revealed himself. We have lost the revelation. . . . It is impossible to be rid of the words if we are to find revelation in the deeds. It is the words and the deeds together which make up the revelation.34

With reference to the New Testament Stonehouse declares that by its very nature this new revelation, “no less surely than the old, was virtually crying out for inscripturation in order that the Church might be provided with assured knowledge of the fulfilment of the divine purpose of redemption.”35

Concerning “special” revelation Morris speaks of “the scandal of particularity that we cannot evade.”36 It is a protest against those who dislike the idea of special revelation or who deny it altogether. Enlightenment thinking, still very much evident today, rebels against the view that mankind needs assistance to discover truth, let alone to counter the effects of fallenness and sin and the consequent need of salvation. The “scandal of particularity” is a reflection, perhaps an extension, of Paul’s “scandal of the cross” – “we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling-block [Greek skandalon, an offense] and to the Greeks foolishness” (1 Cor 1:23). To the Jews the idea that the death of a common criminal crucified under Roman law could have any religious significance was abhorrent. To the Greeks the idea that the death of any man for the salvation of others was irrational foolishness, “so much silliness,” as Lenski puts it.37 The scandal of the cross was universally offensive in the pagan Greco-Roman first-century world, as it and the record that bears witness to it still are to many.
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Part of that offense, that “scandal,” lies in its particularity. Caiaphas thought it was “expedient” for one man to die for the people (John 18:14). In the divine purpose it was essential: “By one man’s obedience, many will be made righteous” (Rom 5:19). Special revelation was necessary to explain the meaning of that astonishing act of grace and to make it universally known. Humans could not have discovered it or understood it without such assistance. But in our time, under the baneful influence of Enlightenment thinking pushed to its limits, both the act and the explanation are offensive. The scandal of the cross has become the scandal of particularity in our time. One special man, the one of God’s own choosing, and the special revelation that testifies to the meaning of his life and death are equally offensive to the “Greeks” of our day.

Morris argues that this scandal of particularity cannot be avoided because particularity was in the divine purpose from the beginning:

It is what God has done in Israel that matters not what he did in the nations generally, what he did in Jesus that is important, not his action in men in general. It is in the death of Jesus that the atonement for men’s sins was wrought out and not in the deaths of the martyrs who through the ages have lived and died for the truth.38

Authentic Christians can never deny the uniqueness of Christ or his atoning death, for they are integral to the Christian proclamation. Neither can they deny the uniqueness of the special revelation through which the record and the meaning of that life and that death have been made available, the “particularity” of Scripture. The Bible is unique. It holds a special place in the literature of the world, because it is the product of divine revelation. Nothing is comparable with it. It is incontrovertibly special. Morris is absolutely correct when he says, “We do not do justice to the facts . . . unless we see the Bible as unique.”39

Special Revelation as Rational Proposition

We must now address two crucial aspects of the revelatory process, particularly as they relate to special revelation: the extent to which reason is involved, and whether or not special revelation is in any sense propositional.

Revelation and Reason. The centuries-long debate concerning revelation and reason has generally resulted in acknowledgment that reason is an important factor in the human response to revelation. This is to say that revelation would be pointless if those for whom it occurred did not know about it or understand it. In the twentieth-century discussions of revelation the emphasis on revelation as “encounter” has been seen by many as unbalanced, misleading and contrary to the biblical revelation itself. Archbishop William Temple spoke for many, as he still does, when he stated, “revelation can, and in the long run must, on pain of becoming manifest as superstition, vindicate its claim by satisfying reason.”40 More recently John Macquarrie has argued strongly in defense of reason as being necessary to understanding the revelatory process, declaring that he “must part company with the many theologians who in recent times have claimed that the content of revelation is a personal encounter.”41

The importance of reason appears in the Old Testament through the repeated claims that the prophets declared “the word of the Lord” in texts such as Isaiah 1:18, with God’s own invitation to man (sinful) to “reason together,” and the many references to understanding and knowledge throughout
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the Old Testament text. It is, however, in the New Testament, notably (although not exclusively) in the epistles, that the mind and reason are most stressed, perhaps in view of the prevailing emphasis on reason and rational discourse in the Greco-Roman world, which early Christianity wanted to reach with the gospel. Frequent use of words such as mind (nous), understanding (sunesis and nous), knowledge (gnosis and epignosis), to make known (gnorizo) and to consider (katanoeo, literally meaning to perceive thoroughly) is sufficient to make it abundantly evident that reason is an essential element in the human response to revelation. In Colossians 2 Paul’s hope that believers may have “full assurance of understanding” and “knowledge of God’s mystery” (v. 2) follows the revelation already made of that mystery, Christ and the gospel (1:25-27). In Ephesians 1 the “spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him [Christ]” and the “enlightenment” of the Ephesian believers (1:17-18) is contrasted with the “darkened understanding,” “futile minds” and “ignorance” of the unenlightened Gentiles (4:17-19). Paul’s plea that Christians offer “reasonable” service and be “transformed” by the renewal of their minds (Rom 12:1-2), his own testimony to serving God with his mind (Rom 7:25) and his exhortation that Christians should be “fully convinced” in their minds (Rom 14:5) combine with much else that could be cited to illustrate just how crucial reason is in the experience of New Testament Christians. It seems indisputable that God’s revelation in Scripture is cognitive, addressed to the mind and leading to knowledge and understanding that otherwise would not be attainable.

Reason itself requires objective consideration of all relevant data, and while space does not permit further investigation of this defining human faculty and its role in the revelatory process enough has been said to underline its critical significance. Centuries of theological reflection on the biblical witness and on normal human experience strongly indicate that revelation comes to human beings through words that convey knowledge, that impart understanding and that ultimately lead to self-knowledge and a radical life-changing “encounter” with God. It may be claimed, therefore, that reason among other things, is necessary to

• understand what revelation is,
• perceive how it takes place,
• determine whether or not it has occurred,
• interpret what it means,
• communicate to others its content and consequences.

It is impossible to conceive of any meaningful self-disclosure of God to humans that bypasses the mind and the understanding. Through the special revelation in Scripture, “God stoops to make himself known in ways we can grasp and understand. He comes to us in categories of thought and action which make sense to us.”

The more recent understanding of revelation as primarily “encounter,” a nebulous, mystical concept, is the outcome of post-Enlightenment existentialism, itself an unbalanced and unbiblical reaction to reactionary Enlightenment rationalism. Ironically, the revelation to which Scripture and reason bears witness and which conveys knowledge and understanding also leads to a personal, inner experience that far surpasses the mystical, ill-defined “encounter” of existential theology. It asserts “Christ in you, the hope of glory” and “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in
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me” and “the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you” (Col 1:27; Gal 2:20; Rom 8:11). It is perhaps significant that Joseph Scriven wrote the immensely popular hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” under the influence of the strongly biblical preaching of the Second Great Awakening in North America almost seventy years before Buber published Ich und Du. The biblical revelation is rational, cognitive and informative, but it is also redemptive and ultimately relational.

Revelation as Propositional. For most of the past hundred years the belief that revelation occurred through words and statements came under sustained attack. Due largely to the influence of encounter theology the concept of propositional revelation became widely regarded as outdated and even misleading. Paul Helm notes that in the twentieth century the idea was “fiercely controverted” even though it had been regarded “as commonplace” in the earlier centuries of Christianity. While the attack has abated more recently, the underlying antipathy to it lingers in certain quarters, evident for example in the suspicion with which doctrine is regarded, even rejected, by some and also in the tendency to be selective with regard to which words of revelation to accept.

Bernard Ramm regarded the phrase “propositional revelation” as “inept” – we might at least agree that it is insufficient – yet the idea it is intended to convey is unequivocally fundamental to the divine-human dialogue. Simply stated it is that God has revealed himself and his purposes through words. We have already seen substantial evidence of the fact that from the beginning God has addressed human beings verbally, firstly through the spoken word and subsequently through the written word. We here make the point that propositional revelation, correctly understood, is a consequence both of the “speaking God” of history and Scripture and the “hearing man” of God’s own creation. It is necessary both on account of God’s own determination to use words in the revelatory process and on account of man’s singular ability to reason, his inherent rationality. Noting the “spiritual importance of the word,” Morris states that “Rational intercourse depends on the use of words” and that it is “not easy to see” how propositional revelation “can be resisted.”

G. E. Ladd asserts that both God’s deeds and his words constitute revelation, but argues that the deeds require the words in order to become of revelatory significance to future generations, “God did not act in history in such a way that historical events were eloquent in and of themselves,” he says. “The historical events are revelatory only when they are accompanied by the revelatory word.” The prime example is God’s supreme self-revelation in the death of Christ. That Christ died is a simple historical fact. But propositional revelation informs us why he died, emphasizing in so doing the love of God. These are not “bare” historical facts, as Ladd explains:

The cross by itself did not speak of love and forgiveness. Proof of this may be found in the experience of those who watched Jesus die. Were any of the witnesses overwhelmed with a sense of the love of God, conscious that he [or she] was beholding the awesome spectacle of atonement being made for his sins? Did John, or Mary, or the centurion, or the High Priest throw himself in choking joy upon the earth before the cross with the cry, “I never knew how much God loved Me”? Ladd then states, “It was only after the interpretive word was given to the disciples that they came to understand that the death of Christ was revelatory of the love of God.” The event required explanatory words, propositional statements, indeed a whole series of propositional statements. These statements were incorporated into the New Testament, which became the substance of divine
Revelation and the Authority of Scripture

Revelation and the authority of Scripture revelation for generations to come. Without them, the greatest single revelatory act of God in history, the “Christ event,” would have been lost in antiquity and Christianity would not have survived.

Propositional revelation is a logical and inevitable consequence of the fact that God has spoken to mankind. It is also an inevitable consequence of inherent human rationality and the use of words in normal discourse. Far from being outdated, misleading and irrelevant, propositional revelation demonstrates the shallowness of the ill-defined “encounter,” the Enlightenment alternative to the historical reality. Propositional revelation is also the necessary corollary to God’s will to be known by rational man. Morris concludes, “We need not, accordingly, be surprised at the place words occupy in revelation. They are God’s way of making his truth known to people” and again, “It is only in the measure that we can trust the record that we can apprehend the revelation.”

Revelation and Authority

It remains to consider briefly the ultimate question, that of authority. Should God’s revelation in Scripture, the “Word of God,” be regarded as authoritative, that is to say, authoritative in the areas it specifically addresses?

Historically, the answer is clear and unequivocally affirmative. The phrase “Word of God” arises from the Bible’s own testimony about itself and ever since the Reformation, Protestant creeds and confessions of faith have affirmed the authority of the Word in the life and belief of the church and in the lives of individual believers. Two that have influenced Protestant belief in the English-speaking world are the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1562) and the Westminster Confession of Faith (1643). The former refers to the authority of Holy Scripture, the “canonical books of the Old and New Testament” that “contain all things necessary to salvation.” Article 1 of the Westminster Confession specifies “the divine authority” of Holy Scripture, to which “the Church is finally to appeal.” These two documents alone have shaped Protestantism around the world and reflect the deep conviction of millions of Christians throughout the centuries as well as the nature of historic Protestantism itself. Only the most liberal of liberal theologians would deny any authority to Scripture, although many have come perilously close to doing so in our time.

Of more immediate relevance, however, is that reason requires a similar conclusion. If the Bible is a special divine revelation, received therefore as the very Word of God, it would be irrational to deny it the authoritative status it has been accorded throughout Christian history. If God has spoken, rational man must listen. Morris insists that since revelation has occurred in and through the Bible, “it is a book which has authority.” There is no logical way of avoiding this conclusion. To think otherwise would be contrary to reason. The attribution of authority to Scripture “follows from the fact” that the Bible testifies to divine revelation. Packer refers to “the normative authority of Scripture,” explaining that unless “we have direct access to revelation normatively presented, by which we may test and correct our own fallible notions,” we are left “to drift on a sea of speculations and doubts.”

An insidious challenge to the notion of biblical authority arises from the prevailing contemporary mind-set. It is not merely rejection of biblical authority that concerns us, although in the context of the present discussion this is clearly the major issue, but the rejection of authority per se. Colin Gunton identifies “the heart of the modern offence with revelation.” It is, he says, “Rooted in the problem of authority and the way it appears to violate human autonomy.” It is, in short, the pervasive influence
of humanistic, Enlightenment thinking, the authority of Scripture being its most notable casualty, certainly from a Christian viewpoint. The enthronement of “reason only” over revelation has led to a significantly unreasonable conclusion. In her justly acclaimed analysis of the global battle over God, truth and power in modern society, *The World Turned Upside Down*, Melanie Phillips concludes that the present decline of Western culture results from the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment assault on the authority of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. “The attack on Western civilization at its most profound level is an attack on the creed that lies at the very foundation of that civilization.”

Nor is Phillips a lone voice crying in a modern wilderness. Half a century ago Harry Blamires began his perceptive analysis of contemporary Christian thought, *The Christian Mind*, an acknowledgment that Western civilization was in already in deep trouble by the mid-twentieth century, with the startling assertion, “There is no longer a Christian mind,” arguing that contemporary Christianity had “succumbed to secularization.” The heart of Blamires’s argument is that the true Christian mind is defined by its supernatural orientation, its conception of truth and its acceptance of authority. “Our age,” he declared, “is in revolt against the very notions that are crucial to Christian thinking and acting.” Contemporary secularism, he went on, heavily biased as it is towards individualism, subjectivism and atomistic intellectualism, is quickly eroding what remains of the Christian mind, . . . oriented towards a truth revealed, demanding, and divinely guaranteed, whose objective certitude and authoritativeness are alike distasteful to a secularism deeply committed to self-culture as opposed to self-discipline, and to a destiny of mastery as opposed to rigorous service.

In explaining that the Christian mind is defined by its acceptance of the authority of revelation Blamires wrote,

One cannot seriously contemplate the first elementary truths of Christianity – the doctrine of the divine creation of man and his world, the doctrine of redemption, and the doctrine of the church, without realizing that here is something which is either authoritative and binding or false, deserving of submission or of total neglect.

More recently David Wells has reminded us that churches with roots in the Protestant Reformation accept that truth is revealed in the Word of God. “There is unanimous agreement,” he says, “that this authoritative truth lies at the heart of Christian life and practice, for this is what it means to live under the authority of Scripture.” Such is the very essence of Protestant identity. All this, and much more, underlines the binding claims of this special revelation that tells us so clearly of the eternal Christ, the creative Word, and explains what it means to believe in him and to be his disciple. It is an authority that cannot be avoided or evaded for those who claim discipleship. As Blamires so poignantly puts it, “It is either the bowed head or the turned back.”

The claims of biblical authority apply at every level of church life and to each individual Christian. Indeed, Christian authenticity is determined, at least in part, by the response to God’s authoritative revelation in Scripture. Christian leaders, Christian professionals, doctors, teachers, lawyers, writers, pastors and preachers, academics in all disciplines, tradesmen, business executives, parents and students, as well as every professing member of Christ’s body, are all by virtue of their claim to be Christian inevitably subject to the authority of Scripture. Difficult as it may be at
times, the constant eroding pressure of secular, humanistic culture must be recognized for what it is and resisted in the name of authentic Christianity, certainly in the name of authentic Adventist Christianity. At a time when the contemporary challenge to biblical authority was becoming increasingly obvious in the Protestant world, the influential Dutch theologian G. C. Berkouwer pointed out that its authority was threatened not only from without, but also from within, by those who “really do not subject themselves to this authority and do not manifest the reality of their confession in their daily lives.”66 These perceptive words are undoubtedly still relevant. It is, in the final analysis, “Either the bowed head or the turned back.”

**NOTES AND REFERENCES**

9. The important question of inspiration lies beyond the parameters of this essay, except to note that it is a critical aspect of the revelatory process that has resulted in a book that is divine and human, comparable in this respect to God’s preeminent self-revelation, our Lord Jesus Christ. The divine/human nature of Scripture makes careful interpretation essential. Interpretation, inerrancy and illumination, important though they are, are also not considered simply through limitations of space.
11. Quotations from the Bible are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
16. Enlightenment thinking began to appear from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, reaching its high point during the early decades of the eighteenth century.
19. Michael Green states, “It is one of the basic assumptions of the modern critical method that the Bible is in all respects to be treated exactly like any other ancient book,” in Morris, Revelation, 8.
22. Ibid., 295.
25. Ibid., 22.
26. Ibid., 28.
27. From the conclusion to his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788).
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30. The divine Logos, the “Word” of God, who was with God from the beginning (John 1:1-2) and who was God, himself the source and substance of divine revelation, is characterized by a word of great profundity, logos, which also carries in it the inherent meanings of reason, mind, speech and communication. It is ideally suited to convey the essence of revelation.

31. See, e.g., the chapter by Pierre Marcel, “Our Lord’s Use of Scripture” in Henry, ed., Revelation and the Bible.

32. This is not to overlook the distinctions between the two and the supremacy of the incarnate Word, as set forth for example in Hebrews 1:1-3.


34. Morris, Revelation, 44.

35. Stonehouse in Henry, ed., Revelation and the Bible, 84.

36. Morris, Revelation, 47.


38. Morris, Revelation, 47.

39. Ibid.


41. Macquarrie, Christian Theology, 96.

42. The rare Greek word logikon translated “reasonable” in many English versions signifies rationality; see A. Souter, A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960) 147; cf. the marginal notes in ESV and NKJV.


44. Proposition in the sense in which it is generally used in discussions of revelation means, of course, more than “assertion” or “proposal” but words in the broader sense. Thus Scripture, while a verbal revelation, is more than bald theological assertions.

45. Helm, Divine Revelation, 21-22.


47. Morris, Revelation, 117-118.


49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 31.

51. Morris, Revelation, 118.


55. Ibid., 136.


57. Gunton, Theology of Revelation, 32.


60. He also includes its awareness of evil and its concern for the person.


62. Ibid., 130.


64. Wells, No Place for Truth, 99.
