

REFLECTIONS ON REVELATION

RON BISSELL

During the 1990s there has been much debate in the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church concerning the extent to which, if any, historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation might be used by SDA theologians.¹ This debate has focused attention on questions about the nature and function of revelation and inspiration.

Three books have been of particular significance. The first, written by Alden Thompson, uses historical-critical methodology and has been at the center of much of the debate.² The second, consisting of a number of essays by conservative SDA scholars, came as a strong negative response to Thompson's book.³ The third book, written by Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, is the most recent major conservative contribution to the debate.⁴

Revelation Defined

What is revelation? The term has been used to express several different ideas. It may refer to (1) the *means* by which God makes Himself and His will known to human beings; (2) the *uninterpreted content* of what is made known; (3) the *correctly interpreted meaning* of that which is made known; or (4) the entire *process* by which God makes Himself and His will known.

Given these possibilities, it would not be surprising if disagreements sometimes arose over issues in revelation simply because the parties involved were not really talking about the same thing. To avoid confusion, a clear, concise, and comprehensive definition seems essential. The following definition is suggested:

¹Debate increased significantly in 1990-91 with the publication of several articles in the *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* by conservative SDA scholars opposed to the use of historical-critical methods.

²Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1991). Publication of this book by an official publishing house of the SDA Church, which has traditionally been known for conservative biblical scholarship, has been criticized by a number of conservative SDA scholars, pastors, and administrators. Others have expressed strong support.

³Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson, eds., *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1992).

⁴Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Receiving the Word: How New Approaches to the Bible Impact Our Biblical Faith and Lifestyle* (Berrien Springs, MI: Berean Books, 1996). One primary thesis of this book is that debate in the SDA Church over a number of lifestyle issues constitutes a spiritual identity crisis. In Koranteng-Pipim's view, this crisis has been brought about by the use of historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation by a number of "liberal" SDA scholars.

Revelation is God making known His existence, attributes, character, and will to intelligent beings so they might experience relationship and enjoy fellowship with Him. This definition views revelation as a process which includes means, content, and meaning.

Characteristics of Revelation

The above definition identifies the fundamental purpose of revelation and provides a basis for exploring its nature. It also suggests implications concerning what some of the characteristics of revelation might be.

Revelation is an evidence of God's love. "God is love," according to 1 John 4:8. God making Himself known to intelligent beings in order to have fellowship with them is consistent with the nature of love. Love requires an object. It desires a loving response from and fellowship with the one(s) loved. If this response is to contribute to meaningful fellowship, it must come from beings who possess intelligence, knowledge, and the ability to choose whether or not to respond positively. Fellowship can only exist where there is at least some degree of mutual knowledge and understanding. God reveals His existence, attributes, character, and will to human beings so they can respond positively to His love and enter into fellowship with Him if they are willing to do so.

Revelation is both cognitive and experiential. In order to make God known, revelation must include information about Him. It is cognitive and propositional in the sense that this information can be understood and communicated to others in declarative statements which describe Him, tell of what He has done, and make known to others what He has revealed concerning His will. Revelation also includes a non-rational dimension. This may be experienced as a personal encounter with the Infinite, and helps to develop fellowship at an emotional level.

In revelation, the cognitive and experiential dimensions are complementary. Though not necessarily conceptual, any encounter with God results in concepts. The cognitive dimension is experience perceived, defined, and understood. Conversely, concepts may evoke emotion. Both the rational and non-rational elements are necessary in order for beings with both emotions and intellect to enjoy fellowship. How can fellowship occur in an emotional void or be meaningful in a conceptual vacuum?

Revelation is trustworthy. By definition, "revelation" reveals: it makes known. If it is not trustworthy and true—if it conveys misinformation—it does not make known, and cannot be truly called revelation. This applies, however, only to the ultimate *message* of revelation. That which is *not* true may be, and often was, used in Scripture as a *means* of revelation or as the *uninterpreted content* of revelation.

Examples abound in the Bible. Figures of speech, parables, allegories, and most dreams and visions used in the Scriptures are not literally or factually true, yet they are used to convey important perceptions of truth.¹

¹Daniel in vision saw a struggle between two animals in which a he-goat defeated a ram (Dan 8). What he saw was not actually happening, did not happen, and will not happen *literally*. According to the interpretation given in Dan 8, the ram represented Medo-Persia and the he-goat represented Grecia.

Revelation is progressive. The various means by which revelation comes to human beings may be described as “revelation events.” Considered individually, and even collectively, they do not present all that is true, but only segments of what is true, which are given within and appropriate *first* to a particular context of time, place, and circumstances. As time passes, new understandings of truth are made known through new revelation events, or are derived from applying principles implied in past revelation events to new circumstances.

Basic principles do not change,¹ but the revelation, understanding, and application of what is true does. God makes Himself and His will known at different times, to different persons, under different circumstances, and in different ways.

Perceptions of what is true which are revealed by and about God through time are cumulative. At the very best, however, revelation on this earth will always be incomplete. Now, we only “see through a glass darkly.” The finite can never fully comprehend the infinite.

Revelation must be correctly understood. If revelation, by definition, means to make someone or something known, it must be understood in order to be “revelation.” To the extent that it is not understood, or is misunderstood, it conceals rather than reveals and can hardly be truly called “revelation.”

Elements of Revelation

The process of revelation is fundamentally that of communication. The same elements are involved in both. These include (1) one who wishes to communicate a message, (2) the intended message, (3) a means of communication, (4) the content of the message sent, (5) an intended receiver, (6) the message received, and (7) the message as it is understood by the receiver. Problems with any one of these elements may prevent communication—and revelation—from being completed. Each of the elements is important, but of special importance to the debate among SDAs are the means, the content, and the meaning of revelation.

The means of revelation. According to Alden Thompson, revelation “suggests some kind of special input from God, a message from Him to His creatures on earth.” This may include visions, dreams, a voice from heaven, “a wrestling match and a dislocated hip (Jacob); a wet/dry fleece (Gideon); words chiseled in stone by God’s finger (Moses); and finally, the ultimate revelation of God in Jesus Christ.”² “When a prophet says ‘The word of the Lord came to me,’ or ‘I saw,’” Thompson declares, “we know we are dealing with revelation.” But in his opinion, this is not true of insights gained through other means, such as research. When Luke apparently read, compared, and used oral or written sources relating the events of Christ’s life in writing his gospel, he explains, “we are dealing with Spirit-led research, *not* revelation in the technical sense.”³

Thompson’s definition of revelation as “a visible or audible intervention by God (a ‘vision’)”⁴ seems to be based on viewing revelation primarily in terms of

¹The idea that truth never changes does not apply in every situation. The assertion “it is raining in Manila” is only true when it *is* raining in Manila. When it is not, the assertion is false. In this instance, truth is changing and dynamic rather than static and unchanging.

²Thompson, 47.

³*Ibid.*, 48.

⁴*Ibid.*, 57.

means. This may be why Raoul Dederen observes about *Inspiration* that “one finds no precise definition of revelation in the book,” but that “no such ambiguity exists regarding the *means* of revelation.”¹

Lack of a clear distinction between the *means*, the *content*, and the *meaning* of revelation may be one reason why Thompson appears to see a dichotomy between research and revelation, and states that not all of Scripture came by way of revelation.² Another reason may be the implication that revelation consists only of *supernatural* phenomena. Thus, according to Thompson, information that came to Bible writers through means other than direct, miraculous intervention by God was not revelation at all, or at best, only a much lower level of revelation. This raises the question of what means should appropriately be regarded as a part of the process of revelation.

General and special revelation. Many theologians divide revelation into two categories, “general,” and “special.” “General” revelation is seen primarily as “natural,” while that which is “special” is “supernatural.” These terms seem usually to refer more to the *means* by which revelation is communicated than to the content or meaning of revelation, though these may be involved to some extent.

The psalmist was referring to “natural” revelation when he exclaimed, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth His handiwork” (Ps 19:1). Paul may have had this passage in mind when he insisted, “The invisible things of Him [God] from the creation are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead” (Rom 1:20).

“Special” revelation is given by God for several reasons. First, it explains that distortions and cruelty in nature are the result of sin, not aspects of nature created by God. This helps to prevent questionable conclusions about the character of God. Second, it gives many specific details about God, His will, the existence, nature, and consequences of sin, and the means of salvation He has provided which are important to salvation but cannot be communicated through “natural” revelation. Third, the effects of sin upon human nature make correct interpretation of “natural” revelation impossible without divine assistance. Defective human reason needs the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

While the term “special” revelation is often used to refer primarily to supernatural revelatory intervention such as prophetic dreams and visions and the direct voice of God, it is also used with reference to the Bible as a whole. This fact suggests several questions. Most of the Bible was not communicated by means of dreams, visions, or a voice from heaven. Much of it consists of accounts and exhortations based upon oral or written historical records, research, observation,

¹Raoul Dederen, “On Inspiration and Biblical Authority,” in *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, ed. Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1991), 93. The fact that Thompson wrote in a popular style may explain the lack of a precise definition, but when his book is read by scholars, this lack makes it more difficult to determine his views concerning revelation.

²This may also be why Dederen finds some of Thompson’s assertions to be “surprising, even stunning.” Dederen cites several references in which Ellen White affirms that the Bible in its entirety is God’s revealed word. Yet he concedes that Thompson’s thesis is “not without merit,” and seems in some degree to share his understanding of revelation when he declares, “I do not want to convey the impression that, in my view, everything in the Bible is the outgrowth of revelation.” *Ibid.*, 97-98.

study, reflection, and meditation. Does the Bible give any evidence that these sources of information should not be regarded as means of revelation? Or does their use in the Bible make these more "mundane" sources of information "special" revelation? Is the distinction between "general" and "special" revelation always crystal clear? Might *all* revelation ultimately be "special," since human reason needs the guidance of the Holy Spirit to correctly understand all revelation?¹

Various means of revelation used. The means by which God "spoke" to human beings, as reported in the Bible, were many and varied. He seems to have spoken face-to-face with Adam and Eve (Gen 3). Both Enoch (Gen 5:22) and Noah (Gen 6:9) are said to have "walked" with God. In Genesis, the "Lord" in human form appeared and spoke to Abraham, Lot, and Jacob. The voice of God thundered from Mt. Sinai, overwhelming the people of Israel (Exod 19:14-20:19; Deut 5:1-27). Moses spoke with God "face to face" (Exod 33:11; Deut 34:10). Yet God also made known His will to Moses through his father-in-law Jethro, revealing the plan for leaders to be chosen as judges for the people (Exod 18:1-26).

Relatively "unspectacular" means of revelation were apparently used to make spiritual perceptions of truth known to the authors of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and others. Revelation came to the psalmist through observation and reflection upon the starry heavens (Ps 8:3-9). Significant literary dependence seems evident between Kings and Chronicles. Although revelation content came to Daniel through dreams and visions (Dan 2, 7, 8), and through an angel (Dan 9:20-27), it also came through research into the writings of Jeremiah (Dan 9:1-2).

There is much evidence to suggest that the writers of the Gospels received part of what was revealed to them through a study of the OT Scriptures and much from either oral or previously written accounts of the life of Christ. Matthew frequently presents events in Christ's life as fulfillments of OT prophecies, which he cites. Tradition holds that Mark gained most of the information for writing his gospel from Peter at Rome. Luke was aware of, and may have used other written materials for his Gospel (Luke 1:1-4). Many Bible scholars believe that Matthew and Luke used Mark and a hypothetical source of oral or written sayings and teachings of Jesus designated as "Q" in writing their gospels.² Information about problems at Corinth which were addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians was revealed to him through members of the household of Chloe (1 Cor 1:11). Most of the exhortations and admonitions in Paul's writings, in fact, seem not to have come through dreams or visions but through the guidance of the Holy Spirit as he reflected upon issues and problems confronting the various churches to which he wrote.

Were these "less spectacular" sources of information and truth not valid means of revelation? Should they be regarded as any less valuable, less inspired, or less authoritative means of revelation than the more dramatic "supernatural" means?

¹Like a number of other theological distinctions, the distinction between "general" and "special" revelation is useful and may be necessary for theological and/or philosophical analysis and discussion. From the layman's point of view, however, the difference may sometimes seem less than clear.

²Some scholars believe that Matthew was written first, then Luke, and that both were conflated by Mark. Evidence relating to the "Synoptic problem" is very complex. There is, however, quite general agreement among Bible scholars that there was some kind of interdependence among these three Gospels.

The content of revelation. While dreams, visions, study, observation, reflection, and meditation may be used as *means* of revelation, they do not constitute revelation in its fulness. The same is often true of the *content* of revelation. Although the content may sometimes require little interpretation, this is often not the case. The *content* of Pharaoh's dreams which was related to Joseph, and the *content* of the visions of Daniel were not the sum and substance of the revelations which came to them. When Peter was told in vision to arise, slay, and eat "unclean" animals (Acts 10:11-16), the *uninterpreted content* of the vision was not the revelation. The vision was not given to teach that the OT distinction between clean and unclean meats had been canceled, but rather that he should preach the gospel to Cornelius and other uncircumcised, "unclean" Gentiles at Caesarea (Acts 10:19-28).

The meaning of revelation. It is ultimately the *correctly interpreted meaning* of revelation that completes the process and constitutes the fulness of revelation. It should be noted, however, that a particular revelation event in which content is presented through some means of revelation may sometimes have multiple meanings and/or applications. Peter applied Joel's prediction that God would "pour out" His Spirit in the last days to events on the Day of Pentecost (Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:14-18). Yet along with many other Christians, SDAs have generally held that this prophecy will receive a further and more complete fulfillment just before the second advent of Christ.

Biblical instructions often take on new and different meanings as the principles upon which they were based are applied to new situations. The biblical requirement of circumcision during OT times meant *physical* circumcision. Under the New Covenant, it means *spiritual* circumcision of the heart. Knowing what revelation *meant* when it was given is important. Knowing what it *means* in the context of our time, place, and circumstances may be of equal or even greater importance.

Revelation and Inspiration

Inspiration is generally seen as something related to revelation, but not always as a part of revelation. The definition of inspiration as "the Spirit's special urging of a messenger to speak or write ('a fire in the bones')"¹ is a case in point. This definition implies that there is some relationship between revelation and inspiration, but does not explain the connection or identify the purpose of inspiration.

If revelation is indeed a *process*, as these reflections on revelation suggest, then inspiration is an integral part of that process. Both the intimate connection between the two and the purpose for inspiration seem clearly evident in the definition that *inspiration is God, through the Holy Spirit, preserving the spiritual essence of revelation while motivating and superintending the transmission of revelation content through human channels.*

Perhaps the most explicit and comprehensive biblical passage concerning inspiration is 2 Tim 3:15-17. According to this passage, the Scriptures were given by inspiration of God, (1) to make one wise unto salvation through faith in Christ; (2) to present trustworthy and authoritative doctrine, reproof, correction, and

¹Thompson, 57. This definition immediately follows his definition of revelation.

instruction in righteousness; and (3) to help believers become “perfect [mature], thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” The idea that revelation must be trustworthy requires that significant biblical revelation content concerning salvation, doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness must have been communicated accurately through the Scriptures.

One of the more sensitive questions debated among some SDA scholars is whether minor errors or factual discrepancies in the Bible would prove that it was not inspired. Thomson’s book is based on the premise that a number of such “mistakes” are found in the Bible, but that these are not of such a nature as to put its inspiration in doubt. One of his primary purposes in writing the book, in fact, was to encourage development of a broad understanding of inspiration which can retain faith in the inspiration of the Scriptures in spite of these “problems.”¹

Thompson’s views are troubling to a number of conservative SDA theologians. Koranteng-Pipim repeatedly expresses what for most SDAs is a legitimate and important concern—the need for belief in the full inspiration, trustworthiness, and authority of the Scriptures must be maintained. However, his apparent belief that any inaccuracies whatever in the original manuscripts of the books of the Bible would compromise the credibility and authority of the Scriptures² raises a number of questions.

Is reporting various events related in the Bible with total historical, chronological, and mathematical accuracy in every detail a crucial purpose of biblical inspiration? Would such precision prove conclusively that the Scriptures were inspired and a lack of it prove that they were not?³ Does the Bible claim inerrancy for itself or for inspiration? Is it necessary in order for the spiritual message of the Bible to be trustworthy?

Upholding the perfect accuracy of the *original manuscripts* seems to be based more upon theological presuppositions than upon practical considerations or evidence. We do not have the original manuscripts. We only have what we have—copies which appear to have minor errors. If inerrancy is terribly important, should not all copies and translations which we have of the original manuscripts be without any errors as well?

If the answer to these questions is no, and there are minor errors or discrepancies, insistence that the Bible is free from all mistakes could lead to unrealistic expectations and result in eventual disillusionment if mistakes can be shown. Or it could foster so great a sense of need to resolve perplexing problems that questionable explanations might be accepted, however illogical or unconvincing they might seem to others.

¹Thompson’s premise and purpose are clearly evident in his preface, in his inclusion of two documents by Ellen White discussing inspiration at the very beginning, and throughout his book. For the material from Ellen White, see Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1958, 1980), 1:15-23, and the “Introduction” to *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1950), v-xii. *Selected Messages* presents a balanced approach. On one hand it firmly upholds the Bible as the revealed word of God. Yet it also recognizes imperfections in the Bible arising from the human limitations of its various authors, who, Ellen White declares, were “God’s penmen, not His pen.”

²Koranteng-Pipim, 244-45.

³According to the Bible, the proof of its inspiration seems to lie elsewhere. Among the evidences it gives are God’s ability to foretell the future (Isa 46:8-10) and the effect of inspired writings upon the human heart (Heb 4:12; 1 Pet 1:22-23).

Revelation and Illumination

The ultimate test of revelation, like that of communication, is whether the spiritual message it attempts to convey is correctly and clearly understood by the one(s) for whom it is intended. Contrary to a popular cliché, the medium is not the message when it comes to revelation. Often the uninterpreted content is not the message, as has been demonstrated above. Interpretation is frequently needed when revelation content is given. And it is also often needed at later times when changing circumstances call for new and different applications of spiritual principles presented in previous revelation.

One question which has brought controversy among Christians and has been debated in recent years among SDAs is the extent to which revelation and inspiration may be culturally conditioned.¹ To some, the idea that they might be culturally conditioned is incompatible with faith in the trustworthiness and authority of the Scriptures. It seems clear, however, that some things in the Bible were very much related to time and place, and were not permanent or universal. One example is the setting up of cities of refuge in Israel.² These cities were important in a society in which a person had the right to avenge the death of a relative, but when later systems of justice were established, they were no longer needed. Was the command to establish these cities culturally conditioned? Yes. Was it inspired? Yes. Was it meant to be for all times and places among God's people? Evidently not.

Because of the need for an accurate understanding of the content of revelation, and because fallen human nature is unable to fully grasp spiritual realities (1 Cor 2:12-14), the guidance of the Holy Spirit is necessary to ensure correct interpretation. For the purposes of these reflections on revelation, this guidance or "illumination" may be defined as *God, through the Holy Spirit, enlightening the minds of human beings so they might correctly interpret, understand, and apply the spiritual message of revelation.* Without this illumination, revelation is incomplete.

Revelation and Reason

As essential as the guidance of the Holy Spirit is in helping fallen human beings to understand the content of revelation, God does not as a rule bypass the cognitive, reasoning faculties with which He endowed beings whom He created in His image.

Such counsel as "there is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prov 14:12), and Paul's insistence that human wisdom is foolishness with God (1 Cor 2:20-25) stand as warnings against undue reliance upon unaided human reason. These warnings have been echoed, perhaps amplified, by a number of SDA scholars, especially with respect to the use of

¹This question has been especially important to Christians who believe, according to the instruction of Paul (1 Cor 11:3-10), that women's heads should be covered in public worship. It has also been significant in SDA discussions concerning the role of women in the church and whether they may be ordained to the gospel ministry.

²Num 35:6-33. If one person who accidentally killed another fled to one of these cities before an avenging relative could kill him, he could remain under protection until it could be established that the death was indeed accidental, not murder.

historical-critical biblical hermeneutics. Faith in the Scriptures must stand above reason, it is said, and the “methodological doubt” associated with historical-criticism is to be avoided at all costs. One must start from a position of faith.

Such warnings are important and necessary, but it is possible to go too far. Uncritical acceptance of anything and everything that claims to be inspired will surely lead to confusion and deception. The Bible is not alone in claiming to be inspired. If it is regarded as inspired simply because it claims to be so, on what grounds should other works making such claims be rejected?

While a negative “methodological doubt” rooted in unbelief would not be a fair or reasonable mind set from which to approach the Scriptures, a positive, open-minded “methodological doubt” that seeks evidence before and upon which to establish belief seems not only appropriate but necessary. This may be one reason why evidence has been given upon which to base faith in the Scriptures. External sources such as archaeology and history have confirmed the essential accuracy of much of the Bible. While this does not prove the inspiration of the Bible, a total lack of such evidence would raise serious questions about its veracity.

The Bible itself presents the fulfillment of predictive prophecy as evidence of its inspiration (Isa 41:21-23; 42:9; 46:9-10). And the effects of the message and teachings of the Bible may be seen in changed human lives. These and other evidences for the inspiration of the Bible are given to appeal to reason. It thus seems clear that the use of human reason is important in weighing the evidences for belief in the Bible.

Reason is also essential for interpreting the Bible. It has been and must be used—in humility and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit—to develop hermeneutical principles for interpreting, evaluating, and applying the content of revelation. The Holy Spirit is given as a Guide to human reason, but not as a substitute for human reason.

Conclusion

Reflecting upon recent and current debates in the SDA Church about revelation and inspiration has suggested to me a number of tentative conclusions. First, revelation is a process, not just an event. The process is that of communication: it includes all the elements of communication. Second, the means, the content, and the meaning of revelation are three essential elements of this process. It is incomplete without all three. Third, terms used in discussion and debate on revelation and inspiration should be defined clearly, concisely, and comprehensively. The definitions suggested above are given with the hope that they will help to point the way toward even better definitions which may not bring agreement on all the issues involved but may at least help to clarify them. Fourth, reason and a certain amount of positive, open minded “methodological doubt” are not inimical to developing faith in the inspiration, trustworthiness, and authority of the Scriptures. Reason is necessary for both weighing the evidences for belief in the inspiration of the Scriptures and for interpreting the Bible. Finally, the ultimate purpose of revelation is to make known God’s existence, His attributes, His character, and His will so that human beings may choose to accept and enjoy fellowship with Him. It is given as one of the greatest evidences that God is love.