

ELLEN WHITE AND CREATION

Ellen White's definition of science was fundamentally different from that in common use today.

The issue of Creation and evolution has more far-reaching implications for the Seventh-day Adventist Church than the Desmond Ford issue had in the 1980s. What is at stake is much more than simply a conflict that can be easily tucked away as a clash between faith and science that otherwise has relatively little impact on the rest of what we believe.

The doctrine of Creation is so prominent in the Bible and in the writings of Ellen White—and it is so intimately connected with other fundamental beliefs—that a change in this point inevitably would affect other foundational teachings of the Bible that we as Adventists uphold. Thus, Creation recently has been termed “the Sine Qua Non of Ad-

ventism.”¹¹ It is “an article of faith on which the Seventh-day Adventist Church stands or falls.”¹²

Ellen G. White's statements on Creation and related issues inevitably raise important questions. From its inception, the Adventist Church has maintained that Ellen White was inspired in the same manner and to the same degree as biblical prophets. Adventists, however, do not believe that her writings are “another Bible.” A recent book on the fundamental beliefs of the Adventist Church, published by the ministerial association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, unambiguously states: “The writings of Ellen White are not a

*Frank M. Hasel, Ph.D., is Dean of the Bogenhofen Seminary in Austria.

substitute for Scripture. They cannot be placed on the same level. The Holy Scriptures stand alone—the unique standard by which her and all other writings must be judged and to which they must be subject.”¹³ This is also expressed in the official Fundamental Belief No. 18, entitled “The Gift of Prophecy,” which states that the writings of Ellen G. White “also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.”¹⁴ At the same time, Fundamental Belief No. 18 affirms that “her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction.” Therefore, her statements on Creation and the origin of life raise crucial questions on important topics such as the nature and scope of inspiration, the relationship between the writings of Ellen G. White and the Bible, proper hermeneutics, and the authority of inspired writings as opposed to science.

These issues and their implications are crucial not only for our understanding of Ellen G. White and her statements on Creation and evolution but also for our understanding of the biblical position of Creation and related issues.

Ellen G. White Affirms Creation

There is no need to spend much time recounting that Ellen G. White did believe in Creation and affirmed

it time and again. Yet it is helpful to briefly remind ourselves of a few aspects that were affirmed by Ellen G. White with regard to Creation.

Ellen White affirmed a supernatural Creation. According to her, Creation was not the result of natural causes.¹⁵ Rather, in Creation, the agency of a personal God is manifest. “The earth came forth from the hand of its Maker.”¹⁶ For Ellen White, all things were created by God.¹⁷ To her, the power to create was “the prerogative of God alone.”¹⁸ Creation belongs to God, and human beings belong to God by Creation. Hence, the creation of Adam and Eve did not take place through impersonal factors in nature but through “the agency of a personal God.”¹⁹ Thus, humanity was the crowning act in God's creation, not of Satan.

Ellen White affirmed a creation in six literal, historically consecutive 24-hour days. The days of Creation were not “vast, indefinite periods, covering thousands or even millions of years.”²⁰ To her “each successive day of Creation . . . consisted of the evening and morning, like all other days that have followed.”²¹ The days of Creation were real 24-hour days, as we know them today. She “was shown that the first week, in which God performed the work of creation in six days and rested on the seventh day, was just like every other week.”²² Thus the seventh 24-

hour day of Creation week forms the basis of the institution of the Sabbath day at the beginning of the world. The Sabbath was instituted at the close of Creation week. Therefore, the Sabbath is as old as the world itself and is a memorial of Creation and a commemoration of Creation for all humankind. Ellen White wrote: “Just how God accomplished the work of creation in six literal days he has never revealed to mortals. His creative works are just as incomprehensible as his existence.”¹³

Ellen White affirmed a recent Creation. In contrast to very long periods of time for the development of life on this Earth, she clearly rejected millions of years as would be “required for the evolution of the earth from chaos.”¹⁴

Neither did she propose indefinite periods of time since the beginning of Creation. Instead, for her, the age of the Earth was to be measured within a short chronology of a few thousand years. She clearly connected a short chronology with the reliability of the biblical record and warned that those who try to “account for God’s creative works upon natural principles . . . are upon a boundless ocean of uncertainty.”¹⁵ She stated: “I have been shown that without Bible history, geology can prove nothing.”¹⁶ She asserted that “the time of [fossils’] existence, and how long a period

these things have been in the earth, are only to be understood by Bible history.”¹⁷

Thus, in contrast to very long ages as proposed by evolutionary theory and in contrast the so-called active “gap or ruin-and-restoration theory,” in which matter and life were supposedly created eons ago and multiple cataclysms and creations took place over a very long time period, Ellen White supported a recent creation of life and humans.

Creation Ex Nihilo

Another aspect that Ellen White connected with God’s supernatural Creation was the idea that pre-existing matter was not needed for Creation. “In the creation of the earth, God was not indebted to pre-existing matter. ‘He spake, and it was; . . . He commanded, and it stood fast.’ Psalm 33:9. All things, material or spiritual, stood up before the Lord Jehovah at His voice and were created for His own purpose. The heavens and all the host of them, the earth and all things therein, came into existence by the breath of His mouth.”¹⁸ She thus affirmed what the writer of the Epistle of Hebrews stated under inspiration: “Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.” Heb. 11:3.”¹⁹ To her, “the theory that

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God did not create matter when He brought the world into existence is without foundation. In the formation of our world, God was not indebted to pre-existing matter.”²⁰

Ellen White affirmed the historical reliability of Scripture and understood the events described in the Bible as actual historical happenings, including God’s creation of the Earth in seven literal days, a global flood, and God’s miracles. Given the clear affirmation of a Creation *ex nihilo* in these statements, Ellen White did not support the existence of life forms on Earth before the six-day creation. She upheld a high view of Scripture, in which all Scripture is believed to be inspired by God and therefore provides a trustworthy and reliable account of His involvement in this world. This raises the question of her relationship to natural science.

Ellen White and Science

While Ellen White clearly affirmed a literal understanding of the biblical Creation account, she was

not antagonistic toward natural science. The words *science* and *sciences* occur frequently in her writings. She used the word *science* in a variety of ways. Frequently, she used it in its root meaning of “knowledge” (from the Latin *scientia*): “the science of salvation,”²¹ “the science of the Bible,”²² “the science of Christianity,”²³ or “the science of cooking.”²⁴ When the apostle Paul visited Athens, he met “logic with logic, science [knowledge] with science, philosophy with philosophy.”²⁵

She also used the word *science* to describe physiology, which she called “the science of life,”²⁶ “the science of human life,”²⁷ or “the science of health.”²⁵ It was especially in the area of health and medicine that Ellen White appreciated the findings of medical science, encouraging Adventists to enter these fields. She referred to the work of medical missionaries as “scientific work.”²⁹

It was the study of nature, however, that she called “natural science.” She believed that “[n]atural science is

A harmonious relationship between Scripture and science can occur, however, if science is integrated into faith in such a way that Scripture is retained as the superior and ultimate authority. Ellen White wrote in 1894: “Science, so-called, human reasoning, and poetry, cannot be passed on as of equal authority with revelation.”

a treasure house of knowledge from which every student in the school of Christ may draw.³⁰ Statements like this make it clear that Ellen White was not antagonistic toward natural science. She did not keep faith and science separate from each other or relegate faith and science to different areas that had nothing to do with each other. This would have meant that faith is not relevant to all areas of life. Instead, she was convinced that God is the ultimate author of Scripture, and she also believed that “God is the author of science” and therefore “[r]ightly understood, science and the written word agree, and each sheds light on the other.”³¹ This raises the important question of the relationship between Scripture and science, especially as it touches upon questions in the area of Creation and evolution.

The Relationship Between Scripture and Science

Perhaps one of the most important and encouraging aspects of

Ellen White’s understanding of the relationship between Scripture and science is the confidence that they can be in harmony.

For Ellen White, nature and the Bible have the same author, and therefore one can expect harmony between them. The revealed Word of God and the natural world will be in agreement for “[a]ll truth, whether in nature or in revelation, is consistent with itself in all its manifestations.”³² Thus, for Ellen G. White there was indeed a friendship between faith and science—but not in the sense that God brought into being a creation that evolved according to evolutionary processes for billions of years. To her, atheistic, evolutionary theories were incompatible with biblical faith. To connect these ideas with biblical Creation would be a wrong attempt to bring natural science and Scripture into harmony.

Conflict Between Science and Scripture

Ellen White was keenly aware

that such harmony is not possible when modern science is conducted independent of any explanation of God and even in opposition to God’s Word. “I have been warned,” she wrote, “that henceforth we shall have a constant contest. *Science, so-called*, and religion will be placed in opposition to each other, because finite men do not comprehend the power and the greatness of God.”³³ This science, falsely so called, is based on conceptions and theories of humans to the exclusion of the wisdom of God as revealed in His written Word. She warned that “when professedly scientific men treat upon these subjects from a merely human point of view, they will assuredly come to wrong conclusions. . . . The greatest minds, if not guided by the word of God in their research, become bewildered in their attempts to trace the relations of science and revelation.”³⁴ For her, “one of the greatest evils that attends the quest for knowledge, the investigations of science, is the disposition to exalt human reasoning above its true value and its proper sphere. Many attempt to judge of the Creator and His works by their own imperfect knowledge of science.”³⁵ When natural causes are the sole explanation for what took place in Creation and the subsequent history of this Earth, “*science, falsely so-called*, has been exalted above God.”³⁶ She opposed a

naturalistic worldview of science that excludes God from scientific enterprise.

The Integration of Science Into Faith

A harmonious relationship between Scripture and science can occur, however, if science is integrated into faith in such a way that Scripture is retained as the superior and ultimate authority. Ellen White wrote in 1894: “Science, so-called, human reasoning, and poetry, cannot be passed on as of equal authority with revelation.”³⁷ In her book *The Ministry of Healing* she wrote: “Only that which He sees fit to reveal can we comprehend of Him. Reason must acknowledge an authority superior to itself. Heart and intellect must bow to the great I AM.”³⁸ Elsewhere she wrote: “Many professed ministers of the gospel do not accept the whole Bible as the inspired word. One wise man rejects one portion; another questions another part. They set up their judgment as superior to the word; and the Scripture which they do teach rests upon their own authenticity. Its divine authority is destroyed.”³⁹

In contrast to “so-called” science, Ellen G. White believed that “true science” is in harmony with Scripture. It has been correctly pointed out that “the platform from which Ellen White considered the natural sciences was the Bible. She had

absolute confidence in Scripture and believed that everything, including scientific theories, had to be measured by the Word of God.⁷⁴⁰ For Ellen White, “the Bible is not to be tested by men’s ideas of science, but science is to be brought to the test of the unerring standard.”⁷⁴¹ This means that she integrated natural science into faith. The integration of science into faith implies that faith—or Scripture—has priority over science.

It seems that Ellen White was well aware of the theory of evolution that was firmly entrenched in the scientific community at the beginning of the 20th century, particularly in regard to geology, which had developed the most detailed account of evolutionary thought and the need of long ages. Therefore she seemed to mention especially the science of geology in connection with the issues related to creation and evolution. “Geology has been thought to contradict the literal interpretation of the Mosaic record of the creation. Millions of years, it is claimed, were required for the evolution of the earth from chaos; and in order to accommodate the Bible to this supposed revelation of science, the days of creation are assumed to have been vast, indefinite periods, covering thousands or even millions of years. Such a conclusion is wholly uncalled for. The Bible record is in

harmony with itself and with the teaching of nature.”⁷⁴²

It should be remembered that though nature and science have God as their author, neither Scripture nor Ellen White attribute the quality of inspiration to nature or science. The Bible is God’s inspired book. Nature/science is not. Nature is God’s creation and came into existence through God’s special design. As such it reveals something about God, its Creator. But nature and science are not inspired. Furthermore, nature as it presently exists is affected by sin and therefore might render an ambiguous perspective that needs the clear and trustworthy revelation of God’s inspired Word on the origins of life on this Earth. Though Ellen G. White frequently used the phrase “the book of nature” to speak of God’s creation as revealing something about God’s love and power, she clearly differentiated and distinguished “the book of nature” from the “pages of inspiration,”⁷⁴³ thus indicating that to her the Bible was the final authority.

Implications and Prospects for the Adventist Church

On the basis of the priority and superiority of Scripture, some remarkable possibilities open up to the believing scientist and theologian. As paleontologist and biologist Leonard Brand has said: “One who

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accepts the Bible as a reliable record of events is not hampered by that worldview, as many would claim, but actually has an advantage. Most scientist are only familiar with one basic understanding of earth history and do not actively ask critical questions of their paradigm.”⁷⁴⁴ In other words, faith does not prevent the believer from thinking. It rather enables the believer to think properly—according to God’s revealed will and thus to search for creative new solutions that are in harmony with God’s Word.

Thus, rather than adapting biblical ideas to the latest outlook in science, Scripture can have a unique input on science by asking questions that could function as a source of impetus in developing new strategies of scientific research. Wolfhart Pannenberg’s remarkable words deserve to be taken seriously: “The theologian must not be too quick to

adapt theological ideas and language to the latest outlook in the sciences, especially where such adaptation requires substantial readjustment of traditional doctrine. The theological vision of the world can also function as a challenge to science and as a source of inspiration in developing new strategies of research.”⁷⁴⁵ Such a perspective opens up new windows of opportunities for fresh investigation of origins on the basis of Scripture.

To Ellen White, being a Seventh-day Adventist meant, among other things, affirming a recent, literal Creation in six consecutive, 24-hour days. In dealing with the complex issues of Creation, we have to remember that our faith cannot be based on science as our final authority, but must be based on God’s Word—even when we have questions without answers. As Leonard Brand has aptly stated:

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as His method of Creation really be worshiped and adored as
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“The God of the Bible is the greatest scholar of all time, and Scripture deals in the highest levels of scholarship, not just in comforting inspirational themes. (When God arranged to have Genesis written, He knew vastly more about radiometric dating than we will ever know.)”⁴⁶ If God “knows much more than we do about earth history, and if we know Him and trust His Word we can benefit from the insights in Scripture.”⁴⁷

To dismiss inspired statements made in Scripture and by Ellen G. White as irrelevant, outdated, or incompatible with a naturalistic understanding of Creation raises a number of important questions with serious consequences.

Is the Bible indeed the final norm and ultimate authority in professing Fundamental Belief No. 1? Can biblical statements about salvation be trusted if they are dependent upon historical events (like the historicity

of Adam at Creation and Jesus Christ as the second Adam)?

What role do the writings of Ellen G. White play for Adventists? Can we still maintain that her writings are “a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction” and also “make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested” as Fundamental Belief No. 18 states? Are there degrees of divine inspiration?

Furthermore, can a God who uses an evolutionary process as His method of Creation really be worshiped and adored as good and loving? Does a God who causes the suffering and death of countless billions of organisms and life forms—even the extinction of entire species—share the same values and the goodness with which He is constantly revealed in the Bible? Aren’t the goodness and love of God fundamental to

His nature and His desire to save a world that is lost?

Does the way Christian scientists and theologians do science and theology erode or enrich our faith in God’s supernatural Creation? How can we engage in science and theology and pass on our findings in such a way that this engagement enriches our faith?

These are some questions that deserve to be taken seriously, and the answer we will give to them will have consequences far beyond the issue of Creation versus evolution. It will impact many other fundamental beliefs and ultimately impact our mission and growth. □

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