

Ellen G. White and Creationism: How to Deal with Her Statements on Creation and Evolution: Implications and Prospects

Frank M. Hasel
Seminar Schloss Bogenhofen

1. Introduction

The topic of how to interpret Ellen G. White's statements on creation and evolution is important for two reasons. First, any reading of Ellen White quickly confirms the fact that she affirms the biblical teaching of creation as it is established in the Old and New Testament on a literal, historical reading of the text. Second, Jesus Christ himself affirmed the historicity and normativity of the biblical creation account. Therefore, the biblical teaching of creation is a crucial belief that has far reaching consequences for the Seventh-day Adventist (hereinafter SDA) church because we are grounded on the written word of God and follow Jesus, the incarnate word of God. It seems that the issue of creation and evolution has more far reaching implications for the SDA church than the Desmond Ford crisis had in the 1980s. Indeed, what is at stake is much more than simply a conflict that can easily be 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 is so intimately connected with other fundamental beliefs that a change in this point inevitably will affect other foundational teachings of the Bible that we as SDAs uphold.¹

¹ Elsewhere I have pointed out twelve interconnections between the biblical doctrine of creation and other biblical teachings that illustrate the importance of this topic: Creation and the Nature of Man; Creation and Sin; Creation and the Origin and Nature of

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

creation recently has been termed “the Sine Qua Non of Adventism.”² It is “an article of faith on which the Seventh-day Adventist Church stands or falls.”³ Second, Ellen G. White and her statements on creation and related issues inevitably raise some important questions. From its inception, the SDA church has maintained that Ellen White was inspired in the same manner and to the same degree as biblical prophets, even though SDAs believe that her writings are not “another Bible.” A recent book on the fundamental beliefs of the SDA church, published by the Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, unambiguously states: “The writings of Ellen White are not a 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.”⁴ This is also expressed in the official Fundamental Belief 18, entitled “The Gift of Prophecy,” which tells us that “they [the writings of Ellen G. White] also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.”⁵ At the same time, Fundamental Belief 18 affirms that “her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction.”⁶ Therefore, her statements on creation and the origin of life raise

Death; Creation and Theodicy; Creation and Salvation; Creation and the Person and Work of Christ; Creation and Love; Creation and the Nature of God; Creation and the Meaning of History; Creation and Biblical Ethics; Creation and the Sabbath; Creation and Eschatology. (Cf. Frank M. Hasel, “Living with Confidence Despite Some Open Questions: Upholding the Biblical Truth of Creation Amidst Theological Pluralism,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14/1 (Spring 2003): 231. Jiri Moskala has stated that “each of our 27 fundamental beliefs is somehow tied to creation” (Jiri Moskala, “The President’s Page: Creation—The Sine Qua Non of Adventism,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15/2 (2004): 1. It has been pointed out in a noteworthy recent dissertation on this topic that too little attention is being given to the theological consequences of creation and alternative models of (evolutionary) origins of this world and of life on earth (cf. Reinhard Junker, *Leben durch Sterben? Schöpfung, Heilsgeschichte und Evolution*. Studium Integrale (Neuhausen/Stuttgart: Hänssler, 1994), 90–91.

² Moskala, 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (Silver Spring: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Ministerial Association, 2005), 258.

⁵ Ibid., 247.

⁶ Idem., quoting from Fundamental Belief 18, “The Gift of Prophecy.” Herbert Douglas has recently stated that the difference between the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White is one of function and scope, not of authority (cf. Herbert E. Douglass, *Mes-*

HASEL: ELLEN G. WHITE AND CREATION

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 over against science.

While I do not claim to have the answer to all questions, which sometimes are perplexing, I humbly submit some thoughts for further reflection. These issues and their implications, I believe, 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 on creation and related issues.

2. Ellen G. White Affirms Creation

There is no need to spend much time in recounting that Ellen G. White does believe in creation and has affirmed it time and again. Yet it is helpful to briefly remind ourselves of a few aspects that are affirmed by Ellen G. White with regards to creation.

2.1. Ellen G. White Affirms a Supernatural Creation. According to Ellen G. White, creation is not the result of natural causes (PP 113; 3SG 94–95).⁷ Rather, in creation the agency of a personal God is manifest (8T 264). “The earth came forth from the hand of its Maker” (PP 44). For Ellen White all things are created by God (COL 362; cf. Col. 1:16; John 1:3; Heb. 1:2). To her the power to create is “the prerogative of God alone” (PP 264). Creation belongs to God (FW 22), and human beings belong to God by creation (CS 72). Hence, the creation of man did not take place through impersonal factors in nature, but through “the agency of a personal God” (MH 415). Thus, humanity was the crowning act in God’s creation (LHU 48).

2.2. Ellen G. White Affirms a Creation in Six Literal, Historically Consecutive 24 Hour Days. Ellen G. White not only affirms a supernatural creation through a personal God, but she also describes creation as having taken place in six literal, historical, consecutive, contiguous, 24-hour days. The days of creation are not “vast, indefinite periods, covering thousands or even millions of years” (Ed 128; cf. PP 112). To her, “each successive day of creation . . . consisted of the evening and morning, like all other days that have followed” (PP 112). In other

senger of the Lord: The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White [Nampa: Pacific Press, 1998], 416).

⁷ The abbreviations for the writings of Ellen G. White are those used in the Ellen G. White CD-ROM.

words, the days of creation are real 24-hour days, as we know them today (cf. Exod 20:8–11). 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” (3SG 90). 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 (PP 47). The Sabbath was instituted at creation (7BC 979) at the close of creation week (EW 217; PP 111). Therefore the Sabbath is as old as the world itself (GC 455; PP 336) and is a memorial of creation (3SM 318) and a commemoration of creation for all mankind (OHC 343).⁸ Ellen G. White acknowledges: “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” (3SG 93).

2.3. Ellen G. White Affirms a Recent Creation. In contrast to very long periods of time for the development of life on this earth, Ellen G. White clearly rejects “millions of years,” as would be “required for the evolution of the earth from chaos” (Ed 128). Neither did Ellen G. White propose indefinite periods of time since the beginning of creation. Instead, for her the age of the earth is to be measured within a short chronology of a few thousand years.⁹ She clearly connects a short chronology

⁸ On the importance of the creation account as foundation for the biblical Sabbath, see Norman R. Gulley, “Basic Issues Between Science and Scripture: Theological Implications of Alternative Models and the Necessary Basis for the Sabbath in Genesis 1–2,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14/1 (2003): 212–216, 221–228.

⁹ According to Warren H. Johns, Ellen G. White makes about forty-two “6000-Year” and forty-one “4000-year” statements in her writings (cf. Warren H. Johns, “Ellen G. White and Biblical Chronology,” *Ministry* [April 1984]: 20; cf. Gerhard Pfandl, “Ellen G. White and Earth Science,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14/1 [Spring 2003]: 188). The current Ellen G. White CD-ROM lists 62 references about “six thousand years” in her writings and 51 references to “four thousand years.” The former refers to the time since creation, the latter to the time from creation to the birth of Christ.

It is interesting, however, to note that in contrast to some theologians who dared to pinpoint the exact date of the creation of this world (for instance James Ussher, who calculated the exact date for the creation in 4004 B.C.), Ellen G. White makes more general and unspecific time references and often speaks of the “six thousand years” in connection with the work of Satan who is engaged to do his work “for six thousand years” (DA 413; GC ix, 656; PP 342; FLB 72; AG 370). Since Satan was active in his deceiving work even before the existence of this world, she writes: “More than six thousand years of continual practice has greatly increased his [Satan’s] skill to deceive and allure” (HS 133, emphasis added). Speaking about the creation of humankind, Ellen White uses various phrases, such as “for six thousand years” man has “withstood the ever-increasing weight of disease and crime” (CTBH 7). She speaks about “the continual transgression of man

HASEL: ELLEN G. WHITE AND CREATION

with the reliability of the biblical record and warns that those who try to “account for GOD’s creative works upon natural principles . . . are upon

for *over* six thousand years” (CTBH 154, emphasis added) and also writes that “the continual transgression of man for *nearly* six thousand years has brought sickness, pain and death as its fruit” (CT 467, emphasis added, cf. GC 518, 552–3). According to her, the earth has borne witness to the creator’s love “for *more* than six thousand years” (SJ 183). It seems that her time references are not given with the intention of giving an exact date for the creation of this world. She rather tried to convey the idea that the time that elapsed since the six-days creation is to be understood in terms of a short chronology of “*about* six thousand years” (1SP 87, emphasis added).

In one place, when Ellen White specifically addressed the age of the world and wrote about “infidel geologists” who “claim that the world is very much older than the Bible record makes it” and “reject the Bible record, because of those things which are to them evidences from the earth itself, that the world has existed tens of thousands of years,” she referred to the literal seven day creation week as foundational for the fourth commandment of God’s holy law and “that the world is now only *about* six thousand years old” (3SG 91–92, emphasis added). To those who “conclude that the world is older than we have any scriptural record of” (3SG 92), she writes: “*I have been shown that without Bible history, geology can prove nothing. . . . It may be innocent to conjecture beyond Bible history, if our suppositions do not contradict the facts found in the sacred Scriptures. But when men leave the word of GOD in regard to the history of creation, and seek to account for GOD’s creative works upon natural principles, they are upon a boundless ocean of uncertainty*” (3SG 93, emphasis supplied). Here Ellen G. White clearly favoured the facts of the biblical account of history as reliable and normative for the believer over against historical reconstructions, as in geology.

Even though Ellen G. White did not give an exact date for the creation of the world, she definitely affirmed a short chronology of a few thousand years, based on the scriptural record. To blame this position of Ellen G. White just on Anglican archbishop James Ussher’s (1581–1656) dates in the margin of the King James Bible seems to be short sighted. In distinction to Ussher, who was “one of the most learned men of his day,” an outstanding Hebrew scholar who affirmed “the general reliability of the Hebrew text” (Saul Leeman, “Was Bishop Ussher’s Chronology Influenced by a Midrash?” *Semeia* 6 [1977]: 128), Ellen G. White did not propose specific chronological details for the creation week, but carefully spoke of the age of the earth in terms of “*about* six thousand years” (3SG 92, emphasis supplied). We should be aware that it was not just Ussher who displayed an interest in the reliability of the biblical chronologies for placing such events as the creation, flood, and the patriarchal period. As renowned theologian James Barr has aptly stated: “The idea that there was, more or less, 4000 years from creation to Christ was nothing new. Anyone who worked with the figures of the Hebrew Bible would have come somewhere near this total” (James Barr, “Luther and Biblical Chronology,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 72 [1990]: 53). For a helpful discussion on the unique nature and structure of the Chronogenealogies in Genesis 5 and 11 and their relevance for tracing a history of beginnings, see Gerhard F. Hasel, “Genesis 5 and 11: Chronogenealogies in the History of Beginnings,” *Origins* 7 (1980): 23–37, and idem., “The Meaning of the Chronogenealogies in Genesis 5 and 11,” *Origins* 7 (1980): 53–70.

a boundless ocean of uncertainty” (3SG 93).¹⁰ She states: “I have been shown that without Bible history, geology can prove nothing” (3SG 93). Ellen G. White acknowledged that “the bones of human beings and of animals found in the earth, are much larger than those of men and animals now living” and added that “the time of their existence, and how long a period these things have been in the earth, are only to be understood by Bible history” (3SG 93).

Thus, in contrast to very long ages, as proposed by evolutionary theory, and in contrast the so called active “Gap or Ruin & Restoration Theory,” where matter and life were created very long eons ago and multiple cataclysms and creations took place over a very long time period, Ellen G. White supports a recent creation of life and humans and probably even matter.¹¹

2.4. Creation *Ex Nihilo*. Ellen G. White connects with God’s creation by supernatural means the idea that pre-existing matter is not needed

¹⁰ Contra Gary A. Nowlan, who believes that particular convictions about earth history are not essential to our Seventh-day Adventist faith (cf. Gary A. Nowlan, “Jeeps, Geology, and Slippery Slopes,” *Spectrum* 31/4 [Fall 2003]: 47). On the issue of the compatibility of deep time and Adventist theology, see the helpful article of Fernando Canale, “Adventist Theology and Deep Time / Evolutionary Theory: Are They Compatible?” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15/2 (2004): 93–103.

¹¹ A succinct overview of the discussion in early Adventism is given in Gerhard Pfandl, 185–187. It seems that Ellen G. White’s statement in 1904 that “in the formation of our world, God was not indebted to pre-existing matter” (8T 258) was given as a response to some Adventist authors who earlier had suggested that the six day creation took place while the material body of our world was already in existence. Pfandl concludes: “Considering all her [Ellen White’s] writings on the topic, it is unlikely, though not impossible, that she made a distinction between Precambrian or pre-fossil material of the earth and the fossil bearing strata of the earth” (187). A straightforward reading of Fundamental Belief 6, which is largely a quote from Exodus 20:11, gives the impression that the globe itself was created during the six days of creation. It reads: “God is Creator of all things, and has revealed in Scripture the authentic account of His creative activity. In six days the Lord made ‘the heaven and the earth’ and all living things upon the earth, and rested on the seventh day of that first week” (*Seventh-day Adventists Believe* (2005), 78. Cf. also Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993), xii–xiii, and passim. As for the possibility of a passive gap theory, cf. William H. Shea, “Creation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 419, and more recently, Richard M. Davidson, “The Biblical Account of Origins,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14/1 (Spring 2003): 4–43; cf. also Marco T. Terreros, “What is an Adventist? Someone Who Upholds Creation,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 7/2 (Autumn 1996): 147–149, on some theological arguments against a passive gap theory.

HASEL: ELLEN G. WHITE AND CREATION

for creation. “In the creation of the earth, God was not indebted to pre-existing matter. ‘He spoke, 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” (MH 414–15; cf. 8T 258–259). She thus affirms 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” (Hebrews 11:3). To Ellen G. White, “the theory that 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” (FLB 24).

Ellen G. White affirmed the historical reliability of Scripture and understands the events described in the Bible as actual historical happenings, including God’s creation in seven literal days, a global flood, and God’s miracles. Given the clear affirmation of a creation *ex nihilo* in these statements, Ellen G. White does not support the existence of life forms on earth before the six-day creation. She upheld a high view of Scripture, where all of Scripture is believed to be inspired by God and therefore to provide a trustworthy and reliable account of God’s involvement in this world.¹² This raises the question of her relationship to (natural) science.

3. Ellen G. White and Science

While Ellen G. White clearly affirms a literal understanding of the biblical creation account, she is not antagonistic toward (natural) science. We will briefly investigate how Ellen G. White understood science and how she suggests that we deal with science and faith.

3.1. Ellen G. White and her Understanding of Science.¹³ The words “science” and “sciences” occur frequently in the writings of Ellen G. White.¹⁴ She uses the word “science” in a variety of different ways. Often she uses the word “science” in its root meaning of “knowledge”

¹² On Ellen G. White’s understanding of revelation and inspiration, see Frank M. Hasel, “Revelation and Inspiration Including Both Ellen G. White’s Thought About Scripture and Her Own Writings,” in Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds., *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, forthcoming).

¹³ In this section I am indebted to Gerhard Pfandl, 178–181, whom I follow closely.

¹⁴ According to the Ellen G. White CD-ROM, the word “science” occurs 1489 times; the word “sciences” occurs 359 times.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

(from the Latin *scientia*). Thus she writes of “the science of salvation” (AA 474), the “science of the Bible” (MS 24, 1891 in 3MR 434), the “science of Christianity” (CG 296), or the “science of cooking” (CG 372). When the apostle Paul visited Athens, he met “logic with logic, science [knowledge] with science, philosophy with philosophy” (AA 244).¹⁵

She also used the word “Science” to describe physiology, which she calls “the science of life” (ChS 152), or the “science of human life” (CME 33), or the “science of health” (ChS 138). It was especially in the area of health and medicine that Ellen G. White appreciated the findings of medical science and encouraged Seventh-day Adventists to enter these fields (DG 95). She referred to the work of medical missionaries as “scientific work” (CH 370).¹⁶

It is the study of nature, however, that is called “natural science” by her.¹⁷ She believed that “natural science is a treasure house of knowledge from which every student in the school of Christ may draw” (COL 125). Statements like this make it clear that Ellen G. 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 have nothing to do with each other. This would have meant that faith is no longer relevant to all areas of life.¹⁸ Instead she was convinced that God is the ultimate author of Scripture,¹⁹ and she also believed that “God is the author of science,” and therefore, “rightly understood, science and the written word agree, and each sheds light on the other” (CT 426). 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.

3.2. The Relationship Between Scripture and Science. Perhaps one of the most important and encouraging aspects of Ellen G. White’s

¹⁵ For more examples, see Pfandl, 178.

¹⁶ Cf. Pfandl, 178–179.

¹⁷ The term “natural science” occurs some 17 times in her writings, cf. Ellen G. White CD-ROM.

¹⁸ Faith then would be relegated to an existential level at the loss of having to do with history and the real world (cf. Frank M. Hasel, “Living with Confidence,” 234).

¹⁹ To her, “the Bible is God’s voice speaking to us, just as surely as though we could hear it with our ears” (8T 393); it is “the inspired word of God” (ST, March 21, 1906), “the written word of God” (YI, July 24, 1902). On Ellen G. White’s understanding of revelation and inspiration, see Frank M. Hasel, “Revelation and Inspiration,” in Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds., *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, forthcoming.

HASEL: ELLEN G. WHITE AND CREATION

understanding of the relationship between Scripture and science²⁰ is the confidence that both can be in harmony.

3.2.1. *Harmony between Scripture and Science.* For Ellen G. White, nature and the Bible have the same author, and therefore one can expect harmony between them. “Rightly understood, science and the written word agree, and each sheds light on the other” (CT 426). The revealed Word of God and the natural world will be in agreement, “for all truth, whether in nature or in revelation, is consistent with itself in all its manifestations” (PP 114). Thus, for Ellen G. White, there is 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.²¹ To her, atheistic, evolutionary theories are incompatible with biblical faith. To connect these ideas with biblical creation would be a wrong attempt to bring natural science and Scripture into harmony. To uphold the biblical account of creation only because science’s picture of physical process has relaxed in the twentieth century in such a way that it is congenial to religious belief²² would make faith dependent upon science and science the final authority of faith.

3.2.2. *Conflict between Science and Scripture.* Ellen G. 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. She writes: “I have been warned 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” (Ev 593, emphasis added). This science, falsely so-called, is based on conceptions and theories of men 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

²⁰ Pfandl (180) has pinpointed five chapters and articles where Ellen G. White wrote under inspiration concerning the relationship between Scripture and the natural sciences: 1864 “Disguised Infidelity” (3SG 90-96); 1884 “Science and Revelation” (ST March 13, 1884); 1884 “Science and the Bible in Education” (ST March 27, 1884); 1884 “Erroneous Doctrines Dangerous” (ST March 27, 1884); 1903 “Science and the Bible” (Ed 128-134). We could also add her statements in the chapters “A True Knowledge of God” and “Danger in Speculative Knowledge” in *The Ministry of Healing* (1905), 409–438.

²¹ Cf. John Polkinghorne, “The Friendship of Science and Religion,” *Spectrum* 31/4 (Fall 2003): 34.

²² Cf. Polkinghorne, 34.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

their research, become bewildered in their attempts to trace the relationship of science and revelation” (PP 113). 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 the Creator and His works by their own imperfect knowledge of science” (MH 427).²³ When natural causes are the sole explanation for what did take place in creation and the subsequent history of this earth, “science, falsely so-called, has been exalted above God” (CE 84, emphasis added). She specifically warned “against the sophistry in regard to geology and other branches of science falsely so-called, which have not one semblance of truth” (RH March 1, 1898). In other words, Ellen G. White opposes a naturalistic worldview of science that excludes God from scientific enterprise.

3.2.3. *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.²⁴ Ellen G. White wrote in 1894: “Science, so-called, human reasoning, and poetry, cannot be passed on as of equal authority with revelation” (RH Nov. 20, 1894). 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” (MH 438; cf. SC 109). 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 authority. Its divine authority is destroyed” (COL 39).

In contrast to “so-called” science, Ellen G. White believed that “true science” is in harmony with Scripture (CE 66). From this perspective it is possible that science and faith can work together in friendship and in harmony. 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.”²⁵ For Ellen G.

²³ On the role of reason in theology see Frank M. Hasel, “Theology and the Role of Reason,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 4/2 (1993): 172–198; and idem., “Living with Confidence,” 235–237.

²⁴ Frank M. Hasel, “Living with Confidence,” 239–241. On the integration of faith and science, see also Brand, 121–137.

²⁵ Pfandl, 180.

HASEL: ELLEN G. WHITE AND CREATION

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” (CT 425). 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 G. White was well aware of the theory of evolution that was firmly entrenched in the scientific community at the beginning of the twentieth century, particular in regard to geology, which had developed the most detailed account of evolutionary thought and the need of long ages. Therefore she seems to mention especially the science of geology in connection with the issues in creation and evolution.²⁶ “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” (Ed 128-129).

At this point we should remember that while nature and science have God as their author, neither Scripture nor Ellen G. White attribute the quality of inspiration to nature or science. The Bible is God’s inspired book. Nature and science are 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. While Ellen G. White frequently uses the phrase “the book of nature” to speak of God’s creation as revealing something about God’s love and power, she clearly differentiates and distinguishes “the book of nature”

²⁶ Cf. Pfandl, 177–178, who gives some helpful information on the historical background to this discussion. Pfandl points out that during the second half of the 19th Century, Ellen G. White and the pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist church frequently wrote on the subject of geology, creation, and evolution and kept themselves informed on the creation-evolution debate. On the average two articles on these topics appeared every year in the *Review and Herald* between 1860 and 1890.

from the “pages of inspiration” (AA 571), thus indicating that to her the Bible is the final authority.²⁷

4. Implications and Prospects for the SDA Church

On the basis of the priority and superiority of Scripture, some remarkable possibilities open up to the believing scientist and theologian. As Leonard Brand has said: “One who 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 scientists are only familiar with one basic understanding of earth history and do not actively ask critical questions of their paradigm.”²⁸ 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 influence on science by asking questions that could function as a source of inspiration in developing new

²⁷ There are several areas and issues where statements by Ellen G. White do not agree with the current opinion of natural(istic) science. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges is the length of time that is suggested in evolutionary theory and by Ellen G. White. There are other questions in related areas where some have perceived a conflict between Ellen G. White and widespread scientific opinion, for instance when she speaks about volcanic activity. On this and related questions, see the discussion in Herbert E. Douglas, 490–497; Pfandl, 181–183; Warren H. Johns, “Ellen G. White and Subterranean Fires” Part 1, *Ministry* (August 1977): 9–12; idem., “Ellen G. White and Subterranean Fires,” Part 2, *Ministry* (October 1977): 20–22; and more recently, Elaine Kennedy, “When the Earth Crust Explodes,” *Dialogue* 10/3 (1988): 13–16 cf. http://dialogue.adventist.org/articles/10_3_kennedy_e.htm

How do we deal with unresolved questions that are raised by the natural sciences? Elsewhere I have delineated some important characteristics that are necessary if faith and science clash. I suggest a) to allow for a creative tension between faith and science; b) resist the temptation of superficial answers; c) honesty; d) patience; e) humility; f) recognition of the limited nature of scientific knowledge; g) an openness to the reality that God intervenes; h) learning from love. See Frank M. Hasel, “Living with Confidence,” 248–252, for a more detailed exposition of these ideas. See also the helpful discussion in Brand, 121–137; Reinhard Junker, “Die Glaubwürdigkeit der Bibel und die Schöpfungsordnung,” in Stephan Holthaus and Karl-Heinz Vanheiden, eds., *Die Unfehlbarkeit und Irrtumslosigkeit der Bibel* (Nürnberg: Verlag für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft, 2002), 137ff., and Frank M. Hasel, “Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture,” in George W. Reid, ed. *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, Biblical Research Institute Studies, vol. 1 (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005), 27–46.

²⁸ Brand, 133.

HASEL: ELLEN G. WHITE AND CREATION

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."²⁹ Such a perspective opens up new windows of opportunities for fresh investigation of origins on the basis of Scripture.

To Ellen G. White, being a Seventh-day Adventist meant, among other things, affirming a recent, literal creation in six consecutive 24 hour days.³⁰ 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 paleontologist and biologist Leonard Brand has aptly stated: "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.)"³¹ 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"³²

Thus, we as SDAs actually have an advantage over non-religious scientists because our worldview is broader and more open to dimensions

²⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Theology and Philosophy in Interaction with Science: A Response to the Message of Pope John Paul II on the Occasion of the Newton Tricentennial in 1987," in Robert J. Russell, William R. Stoeger, S.J., and George V. Coyne, eds. *John Paul II on Science and Religion: Reflections on the New View From Rome* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1990), 78. Unfortunately, Pannenberg himself does not follow his own advice and seems to advocate the readjustment of theological vision and the reassessment of doctrinal affirmations of the past in the light of modern scientific developments as presented by the theory of the evolution of life (*ibid.*, 78–79). An example of how a commitment to Scripture has helped to develop a new strategy of scientific research that successfully explains some existing phenomena (young deposits where radiometric dating indicates greater ages) is the research into the fossil whales in diatomaceous siltstone and sandstones of the Pisco Formation in Southern Peru by Raúl Esperante and his team (cf. Leonard R. Brand, R. Esperante, A. V. Chadwick, O. Poma Porras, and M. Alomía, "Fossil whale preservation implies high diatom accumulation rate in the Miocene-Pliocene Pisco Formation of Peru," *Geology* 32/2 (2004): 165–168.

³⁰ Contra Nowlan, who proposes that "being a Seventh-day Adventist is much deeper than particular convictions about earth history" (47).

³¹ Brand, 122.

³² Brand, 133.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

that are closed for secular scientists. To respect the biblical creation account and the inspired insights of Ellen G. White on the issue of creation should motivate us to be even more careful in our scientific and theological work than perhaps a non-religious scientist might be because we accept the biblical record (and the insights of Ellen G. White) as inspired and thus as something intrinsically sacred.³³ May this perspective stimulate and motivate us to do sound research and search for better answers.

To dismiss inspired statements made in Scripture and by Ellen G. White as irrelevant, outdated, or incompatible with our faith raises a number of important questions with serious consequences for the SDA church at large.

What is the role of the Bible for our faith and practice? Is the Bible indeed our final norm and ultimate authority, as we profess in our Fundamental Belief 1?³⁴ Can we trust the Bible in statements that tell us about our salvation if those statements are dependent upon historical events (like the historicity of Adam at creation and Jesus Christ the second Adam in Romans 5:12ff) and those historical statements cannot be trusted?³⁵

What role does Ellen G. White and her writings play for SDAs? 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 18 states?³⁶ Are there degrees of divine inspiration?³⁷

³³ Cf. Brand, 133.

³⁴ Fundamental Belief 1 reads: “*The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history*” (emphasis added).

³⁵ On this important question see the excellent dissertation of Marco T. Terreros, *Theistic Evolution and its Theological Implications: A Critical Analysis of the Affirmation that There was Death on Earth Prior to Adam’s Fall and of Related Theological Problems* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University, 1994, published by the author: Medelin: Marter Editions, 2002).

³⁶ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 247.

³⁷ On the question of “degrees of inspiration,” see Frank M. Hasel, “Inspiration, degrees of,” in Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds., *Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, forthcoming.

HASEL: ELLEN G. WHITE AND CREATION

Furthermore, can a God who uses an evolutionary process as His method of creation really be worshipped and adored as good and loving? Does a God who allows countless billions of organisms and life forms to suffer and die and even entire species to be wiped out share the same values and the goodness with which he is constantly revealed in the Bible?³⁸ Does the process of evolution, with its extraordinarily wasteful and cruel mechanisms, which are full of predation, selfishness, randomness, disaster, waste, struggle, suffering, and even the death of whole population groups, not pose a significant problem for the goodness and love of God?³⁹ Aren't the goodness and love of God fundamental to his nature and his desire to save a world that is lost?

In what areas are the Bible and Ellen G. White authoritative for the SDA church? Only in matters of salvation and personal spirituality, or can we trust God's Word and the writings of Ellen G. White also when they touch the complex issue of God's supernatural creation, the flood, biblical history,⁴⁰ etc.?

³⁸ Cf. Philip Clayton, "Metaphysics Can be a Harsh Mistress," *CTNS Bulletin* 18/1 (Winter 1998): 18. Clayton adds: "since revelation rules out a pernicious God, it may ultimately be that one must let go of the idea that God directly brings about the details of the evolving biological world" (ibid.).

³⁹ John Baldwin has pointed out that "the geologic column, if interpreted as the product of millions of years of organic evolution guided by God, actually portrays the way Satan would develop life forms, not God" (John Baldwin, "Revelation 14:7: an Angel's Worldview," in John Tempelton Baldwin, ed., *Creation, Catastrophe and Calvary: Why a Global Flood Is Vital to the Doctrine of Atonement* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 28. On this issue see also the remarkable dissertation by Reinhard Junker, *Leben durch Sterben?* esp. 184ff.

⁴⁰ A helpful and fair discussion on Ellen G. White and the comments made by her son William C. White on her as authority in historical questions can be found in Jerry Allen Moon, *W. C. White and Ellen G. White: The Relationship Between the Prophet and Her Son* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 1993): 427–436. Moon has pointed out [speaking about historical information found in the book *The Great Controversy*] that while for W. C. White "the controlling content of her historical writings was derived from visions, she was often dependent on standard histories for geographical and chronological connections" (Moon, 430–431, emphasis added). However, while W. C. White (and Ellen White herself) did not want to treat her writings as authority on dates and details of history, because she was no trained historian, he "also refused to go to the other extreme of denying that her [Ellen G. White] writings had any degree of authority in history and theology" (Moon, 434). While in the technical sense Ellen G. White was not a historian, W. C. White believed his mother was a historian in a broader sense, where a historian is defined as "one who writes, compiles, or relates history" (Moon, 434).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Does the way we as Christian scientists and theologians do science and present 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 it enriches our faith?

These are some questions that deserve to be taken seriously, and the answer we give to them will have consequences far beyond the issue of creation vs. evolution. It will impact many other fundamental beliefs and ultimately impact our mission and growth.⁴¹

Frank M. Hasel, studied theology in Germany, England, and the U.S.A., where he earned his Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Andrews University. He is an ordained minister of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and member of the Biblical Research Committee of the Euro-Africa Division. Currently he is dean of the Theological Seminary at Bogenhofen and teaches Systematic Theology and Biblical Hermeneutics at Bogenhofen Seminary, Austria, and is the director of the Ellen G. White Study Center at Bogenhofen. frank.hasel@bogenhofen.at

⁴¹ Cf. Katherine Ching, "The Practice of Theological Pluralism," *Adventist Perspectives*, 5/1 (1991): 6–11; and more recently, Ariel A. Roth, "Adventism and the Challenges to Creation" *Adventists Affirm* 16/1 (2002): 19–21.