

Is Scripture Historically Conditioned?

Kwabena Donkor

I. *The Notion of Historical Conditioning*¹

What does it mean to say that the Bible is historically conditioned, and how can this allegation be made when the Bible explicitly says that all of Scripture is inspired by God? (2 Tim 3:15-17). To begin with, when contemporary critical theologians say that the Bible is historically conditioned, they are making a statement about the cognitive status of the Bible. In other words, the factual content of the Bible is subordinated to history and hence to culture.

Two words need careful attention in order to understand the notion of historical conditioning clearly: history and condition. A condition is defined as something that is essential to the appearance or occurrence of something else. In this case, historical conditioning means that “history” is essential to the appearance of the Bible. For many theologians this is not to say that *history* is that which *caused* the Bible to appear; rather, history was an essential element in the appearance of the Bible. They will probably agree in principle that God or the Holy Spirit is the principal *cause* of the Bible, but according to their understanding *history* was a prerequisite in order for the Bible to come about in its present form. In any case, one’s conception of the manner in which God or the Holy Spirit caused the content of the Bible to come about is essential to one’s understanding of what is implied in the phrase “historical conditioning.”

In the phrase “historical conditioning,” history is what the Bible is claimed to be subordinated to. But what is history? The classical understanding of history in theology was the biblical one which included the following convictions: (1) The overall course of the historical process beginning with the creation is being shaped by God; (2) God recurrently intervenes in the process; (3) He intends to bring the process to a triumphant close. The Enlightenment, however, generated its own view of history in which divine intervention was deemed impossible. Indeed, in the development of German historicism, the dominant idea was that each society produces its own distinctive values in the course of its history, thus making all values relative.² Biblical history from this point of view is a human product which may or may not be factual, a view that came to be applied to biblical history.

II. *Revelation/Inspiration and Historical Conditioning*

What is the relationship between the idea of historical conditioning and conceptions of revelation/inspiration? Any theory of revelation/inspiration that does not give full credibility and authenticity to biblical history sooner or later succumbs to the notion that the Bible is historically conditioned.

There have been two primary ways in which the authenticity of biblical history has been undermined. The first way is what may be called “the way of transcendence.” Here, God is deemed so absolutely transcendent that He is considered incapable of *causing* revelation-inspiration at the historical level. Neo-orthodoxy is a case in point. Karl Barth’s emphasis on God as the Wholly Other strictly makes Him unknowable and indescribable, even in revelation. As Harvie Conn has correctly noted, “Barth’s commentary underlined also a new indifference to history in the world of theology . . . Revelation does not enter history. It only touches history as a tangent touches a circle.”³ The result of such an approach to revelation-inspiration is that the *cause* of the Bible’s cognitive content (God’s revelatory act), and the *condition* of the Bible’s appearance (history) are divorced from one another.

The second way in which the authenticity of biblical history has been undermined may be called “the way of immanence.” In Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, the case appears to have been made for limiting the grasp of reason only to space and time. The implication of this epistemological move, which

Friedrich Schleiermacher keenly grasped, was that any possible divine-human interaction had to occur in a zone of the human person other than the rational. Besides the zone of reason, however, any other zone of interaction meant that the divine-human interaction would be *non-cognitive*. Schleiermacher's choice of the zone of feeling as the locus of the divine-human encounter is well known to have blazed the trail for liberal theology. The hallmark of liberal theories of biblical inspiration, therefore, remains the persistent denial of cognitive content to the revelation-inspiration event. Rudolf Bultmann's demythologization project is a case in point. At the heart of his project is the conviction that the presentation of Jesus in the New Testament is not history, but the thought patterns of people who wished to understand themselves in the context of their cultural circumstances. Similar approaches to the Old Testament have led some to deny any historical value to the stories of the creation, fall, flood, etc.

III. Revelation/Inspiration, Historical Conditioning, and Interpretational Method

The undermining of revelation-inspiration noted above consists precisely in the weakening of the divine involvement in human history. Thus, human history is understood by and large as creations of human societies and cultures. This ontological levelling of history, including biblical history, is what makes room for the charge of "historical conditioning" with respect to the Bible. The conclusion seems inevitable that if all historical products are purely human products, they are to a great degree time- and place-specific. Consequently, the Bible as a human intellectual product may be amenable to investigation and analysis using the most fitting method. For textual analysis and interpretation, the historical-critical method has come to be the definitive method of interpretation for those who follow the foregoing understanding of history.

With the presupposition that the Bible contains nothing more than subjective, human theological interpretations and utterances, the value of the historical-critical method for its practitioners is that it "is supposed to guarantee the objectivity of the interpretation and its suitability for the biblical text in question."⁴ The significance of this point is worth reinforcing. To commit to the use of the historical-critical method is to say that it is one's primary means of deciding what is of objective value in the Bible. But the issue is that when such a commitment is made to the historical-critical method, it comes with a certain understanding of history, of inspiration, and consequently of the Bible as a historically-conditioned human document. Of course Seventh-day Adventists also attempt to make distinctions in Scripture regarding matters that have universal and eternal applications over against those that have local and temporary significance. Such differences, however, are established on criteria and principles that are quite different from those discussed above.

IV. Historical Conditioning vs. Historical Constitution

Traditional Adventist biblical interpretation follows New Testament practice by assuming "the transcultural and transtemporal relevancy of biblical instruction unless Scripture itself gives criteria limiting this relevancy."⁵ Implied in this transcultural assessment of biblical instruction is the belief that there is no vicious hermeneutical gap as such between biblical times and our own day. But if Adventists deny any historical conditioning of the Bible, it is not the same thing as disregarding any historical component of it.

One of the remarkable things in E. G. White's view of Scripture is the fact that while she affirmed the Bible's absolute authority, she recognized its human element.⁶ Recognizing the absolute authority of the Bible, even in its imperfect human form is a way of acknowledging that the Bible is historically constituted.

In regard to the Bible, Adventist thought, therefore, distinguishes "conditioning" from "constituting." While the former implies a negative and even pejorative subordination of the *cause* of the Bible (God's revelatory act) to history, the latter sees history as the very zone or mode within which God *causes* revelation-inspiration to take place. To say that the Bible is historically constituted is to say that its cognitive content is

caused by God in the historical realm. Understanding the Bible as historically constituted causes the issue of historical conditioning to become a non-issue since the supposed gap between cause and condition is eliminated.

V. *Revelation/Inspiration and Historical Constitution*

Traditional Adventist theology sees the Bible as historically constituted because of its understanding of the nature of revelation-inspiration. 2 Peter 1:19 shows clearly that God is the originator of Scripture. As Raoul Dederen puts it, “What Peter emphasizes here—and what is emphasized in the whole corpus of prophetic writings when this particular topic is addressed—is that the prophets spoke *because* they were ‘moved by the Holy Spirit.’”⁷ In other words, God is the *cause* of Scripture, not the impulse of man, although He employs historical means—the prophets and other historical phenomena—to bring about biblical meanings. In Hebrews 1:1 we are told that in speaking to the prophets God used “many ways,” to which the prophets as historical beings could relate. Yet the Bible places no hermeneutical distance between God’s causal activity and the human speaking or writing, that is, the prophets were careful not to identify what they said and wrote as their own message. The prophets’ various expressions bear this point out: “The word of the Lord came” (Jer 1:11-13; Joel 1:1); “The hand of the Lord was on me” (Eze 3:22); “Thus says the Lord” (Amos 1:3); and “Hear the word of the Lord” (Hos 4:1). Moreover, through the activity of the Holy Spirit, all of the prophets’ speaking and writing is made dependable and trustworthy (2 Tim 3:16). From these biblical indicators, it seems quite clear that the basic cognitive content of the Bible, as a historical phenomenon, is as God would have it. This is what it means to say that the Bible is historically *constituted*.

VI. *Revelation/Inspiration, Historical Constitution, and Biblical Interpretation*

To take the position that the Bible is historically constituted has important ramifications for its interpretation. Meaning is directly related to the method one employs, while method in turn ought to be determined by the subject matter to be studied. In Adventist hermeneutical practice, the method deemed best fitted for a *historically constituted* Scripture, in which divine and human elements are inextricably interwoven, is the grammatical-historical method.

The practitioner of the grammatical-historical method intends to take seriously not only the grammatical and literary features of the text, but also the history recorded in Scripture. Such an approach has a few notable implications. First, it carries the implication that the interpreter wishes to hear the text on its own terms. Behind this first implication is a second concern, that the text has a fixed, definite meaning that should not be muffled. Closely allied to the second concern is a third, namely, that the text, when correctly understood reveals truth that corresponds to reality and, therefore, has transcultural significance.

¹For a short discussion on this issue see Fernando Canale, *Understanding Revelation-Inspiration in a Postmodern World* (Berrien Springs, MI: Fernando Canale, 2001), 188-190.

²D. W. Bebbington, “History,” in Sinclair. B. Ferguson, David E. Wright, and J. I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 307.

³Harvie M. Conn, *Contemporary World Theology: A Layman’s Guidebook* ([Nutley, NJ] Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973), 15.

⁴Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 87.

⁵Richard Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, edited by Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 86.

⁶“The writers of the Bible had to express their ideas in human language” (1 SM, 16). “There is not always perfect order or apparent unity in the Scriptures . . . The Bible must be given in the language of men. Everything that is human is imperfect” (1 SM, 20). “The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity” (1 SM, 21).

⁷Raoul Dederen, “The Revelation-Inspiration Phenomenon According to the Bible Writers,” in Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson (eds.) *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1992), 16.

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