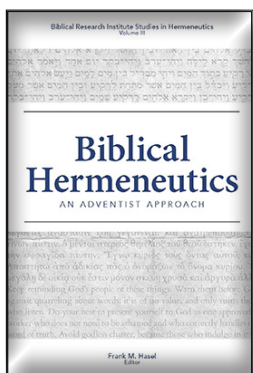


BOOK
NOTES

Frank M. Hasel, ed.,

***Biblical
Hermeneutics:
An Adventist
Approach***

(Silver Spring, MD:
BRI/Review and Herald
Academic, 2020), 488 pp.,
USD 14.95



The Biblical Research Institute (BRI) of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has published a new landmark book: *Biblical Hermeneutics. An Adventist Approach*. It is the continuation and actualization of four other books on hermeneutics, previously published by BRI in 1974, 1985, 2005, and 2010.

The book is a response to a request from the floor at the 2015 General Conference Session in San Antonio to research and study the matter of Adventist hermeneutics and publish the findings in a book.

BRI selected a group of twelve expert scholars and professors, all of whom hold doctoral degrees in their respective fields, and assigned to them the fourteen chapters of the book. The chapters deal with a number of important aspects of biblical interpretation, such as presuppositions in hermeneutics; biblical hermeneutics and the trustworthiness of Scripture; biblical variants and textual transmission of Scripture; the relationship of history, the Bible, and hermeneutics; culture and the Bible; faith and science and the Bible; principles of biblical interpretation; the inner-biblical use of Scripture by Bible writers; principles of biblical apocalyptic interpretation; conditional prophecies and the role of Israel in the Bible; the Genesis account as a test case for biblical hermeneutics; a survey of early Adventist principles of biblical interpretation; the relationship between the prophetic gift and *sola Scriptura*; and recent trends in methods of biblical interpretation. Every chapter is written from a high view of Scripture and presents up-to-date scholarship on various aspects of biblical interpretation.

The book is a significant contribution to a better understanding of Adventist hermeneutics. Anyone interested in the subject will benefit from the insights and the careful research that is presented.

In several chapters I found outstanding discussions of issues that often do not receive adequate attention when it comes to biblical hermeneutics. For instance, in chapter 2, Frank M. Hasel provides a sound approach to what it means to develop biblical principles that are faithful to what Scripture itself affirms. Among other things, he offers some valuable insights into the proper use of human reason when it comes to the process of interpretation. His call to approach the biblical text with intellectual openness, honesty, and carefulness, dealing with it in the context of love, fidelity, and obedience, reminds us that the act of biblical interpretation always involves a spiritual dimension that should not be overlooked.

Other chapters equally convey the faith-affirming approach of the entire book. This is apparent not only when text-critical questions are competently addressed by Clinton Wahlen in the chapter “Variants, Versions, and the Trustworthiness of Scripture,” or when the inner-biblical hermeneutic of Bible writers are illustrated in an excellent and well-informed chapter by Richard M. Davidson. Rather than following modern critical interpretations that often claim that New Testament writers read something into the text that actually is not found in the Old Testament (eisegesis), he competently shows that the New Testament writers actually were faithful to the intended meaning of the Old Testament and practiced careful exegesis. The chapter “Culture, Hermeneutics, and Scripture” by Clinton Wahlen and Wagner Kuhn tackles the challenging question of what is culturally relative and what is universal in Scripture, providing some helpful thoughts for further reflection. Another hotly debated area is the historical reliability of the Bible because it is here that biblical criticism often finds its initial entering wedge to doubt the trustworthiness of Scripture. Here Michael G. Hasel does a masterful job in pointing out the significance of the historical nature of Scripture and its reliability and has highlighted its importance for biblical theology. His rigorous scholarship is up-to-date, careful, and provides the reader with some important recent archeological findings. In another chapter he also competently illustrates how different hermeneutical approaches impact our understanding of the creation account in Genesis. To understand different hermeneutical approaches and to see the changes that follow from them in our understanding of many important biblical teachings such as the Sabbath, marriage, the origin of sin, the nature of salvation, and the second coming, to name but a few, shows how hermeneutics affects our theology, message, and mission.

Last, but not least, the final chapter of the book, “Recent Trends in Methods of Biblical Interpretation” by Frank M. Hasel, is in many ways a highlight and culmination of the whole book. He provides a helpful bird’s-eye view of the historical and philosophical background that led to a variety of different historical-critical methods that have dominated much of biblical scholarship up to now. He then judiciously analyzes a number of more recent approaches to biblical hermeneutics that have reacted to some of the dominant critical methods. These newer hermeneutical approaches have never received an official response by the church and deserve careful attention. In doing so he

competently interacts with current scholarship within the Seventh-day Adventist Church as well as with the larger theological world around us. His informed treatment of a modified use of the historical-critical method (by Stuhlmacher and others), which has found followers even with some Adventist scholars, is an eye-opener. Perhaps the most important part, however, is his balanced analysis and concise overview of some newer hermeneutical approaches. They include canonical criticism, various literary approaches, reader-response criticism, some postmodern approaches to biblical interpretation, and christological hermeneutical approaches. His treatment provides much-needed orientation for a new generation of Adventists who are confronted with these newer methods. It seems that this brief presentation is one of the first serious attempts to interact with these newer hermeneutical approaches from a more official Seventh-day Adventist perspective. Some of these approaches might look very attractive because they do not critically reconstruct the history behind the biblical text, as in classical historical-criticism, but instead focus on the canonical shape of the biblical text or emphasize the dynamics of some literary features of the canonical text. But the crucial relationship to historical reality and the propositional truth of divine revelation is often compromised in these methods. Furthermore, in several postmodern approaches it is no longer the biblical text as such that is authoritative and has the final word, but it is the reader in front of the text who determines its meaning. This amounts to a massive shift in the interpretation of Scripture where ultimately the reader constructs the meaning of the text. This leaves us with no control over its ever-changing meaning. Even with a Christ-centered hermeneutic—as appealing as it might sound to some ears—where Christ becomes the hermeneutical key to interpret the meaning of Scripture, we ultimately end up with a canon within the canon and finally practice some form of content criticism where the content of Scripture is criticized, even in the name of Jesus. While it is impossible in one chapter to cover every new method that has emerged during the last fifty years or so, the author does an excellent job by focusing on some significant approaches that have become prominent in certain quarters. While fairly pointing out some strengths in various methods, he also raises several legitimate concerns and points out some dangers that are inherent in several of these newer methods.

The whole book makes clear that Seventh-day Adventists endorse an approach in biblical interpretation that is faithful to the self-claims of Scripture, that respects the canonical shape of the biblical text, and that affirms the historical character and truthfulness of the biblical message. As such, the biblical text remains determinative for a genuine Seventh-day Adventist biblical hermeneutic. Neither the modern readers with their constantly shifting perspectives nor Jesus Christ should be superimposed on the biblical text. Instead, the biblical text, which is historically constituted and divinely inspired, remains the determining factor for

any authentic Adventist hermeneutic. The various chapters of the book admirably illustrate this approach for different aspects of the hermeneutical task.

There is one aspect, however, where I perhaps see the need for some further clarification. On pages 402–404 the author of this chapter clearly explains the difference between canonical and noncanonical prophetic *messages*. The difference is functional: the first one has ruling authority; the second does not. God gives the Bible its canonical function. While the canonical authors retain the ruling authority by which every other prophet needs to be tested, it would have been helpful if the author had unfolded the divine authority of extrabiblical prophets more clearly, because what the noncanonical prophets say in the name of the Lord also comes from God. If they are inspired by the Holy Spirit, then it is God who speaks and the prophet He sends is vested with His authority. For example, John the evangelist, a canonical prophet, says that John the Baptist, a noncanonical prophet, was “sent from God” (John 1:6) to give testimony about Christ for everybody to believe the Christ of his message (John 1:7), because his message was given to him by God (John 1:35).

This question aside, I highly recommend this book to every pastor and teacher in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In fact, it should be on the desk of anyone seriously interested in the subject of biblical interpretation. It significantly advances our understanding of important hermeneutical questions and gives valuable guidance to those who seek to gain a deeper understanding of the Bible. It can serve well as a textbook on biblical interpretation for our colleges and universities. Having read every word of this book, I am impressed by the serious scholarship, clarity, and fairness with which every writer unfolds and explains the Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutic in various important areas. One can clearly sense the faith-affirming approach of every author, where the canonical text of Scripture is accepted as the final authority for all of our theology. As such it is a most welcome and much-needed resource that every serious Seventh-day Adventist should read.

Reviewed by
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“It is one thing to treat the Bible as a book of good moral instruction, to be heeded so far as is consistent with the spirit of the times and our position in the world; it is another thing to regard it as it really is - the Word of the Living God, the Word that is our life, the Word that is to mold our actions, our words, and our thoughts. To hold God’s Word as anything less than this is to reject it.”

Ellen G. White, *Education*, 260.
