

Man Created God in his Image

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My topic has been stimulated by the fact that just as the TOSC Commission brought Adventist biblical scholars and Church administrators from all over the world to study women's ordination in advance of the 2015 GC Session (only to see their recommendations ignored in the debate and decision-making process because Elder Ted Wilson, the GC President, had his own agenda to push), once again there is to be a new Commission studying what hermeneutic should be endorsed as THE acceptable Adventist approach to understanding the Scriptures that will culminate in a similar debate and decision at the next GC Session in 2020. Ted Wilson is already pushing the result he wants frequently in his articles and sermons. For example, in the February 2016 issue of *Adventist World*, he wrote:

“How we read God's Word is important because it helps us know truth from error... We are to faithfully follow and promote the ‘historical-literal method’..., allowing the Bible to interpret itself... The ‘historical-critical method’ when applied to the Word of God reduces its effectiveness as authoritative.” (9)

That is, according to the conservative approach he endorses, we must understand the Scriptures as any unschooled reader would understand them. Everything there is true, especially when read in the King James Version. Biblical scholarship is dangerous!

It is impossible for scientists, and also for those trained in understanding and interpreting historical documents (for the biblical documents are those, written at certain times and assuming certain cultural understandings), and also for those trained to be aware of the social contexts of documents and of how what was written was understood by the writers and those who heard them in those times, to accept literalistic readings of them. My own training in both history and sociology, and what I have read of the work of biblical scholars makes me so aware of the contexts of the various biblical documents that the prospect of the Adventist Church insisting on a literal reading of the biblical texts makes me very nervous.

Let me take a few key examples to illustrate my concern.

1. During the centuries when the first half of the Hebrew Scriptures was written (especially the Pentateuch, Joshua through II Chronicles, and Ruth, Job, and many of the Psalms), each of the tribes that neighbored Israel had its own God, and Yahweh was presented as Israel's tribal God, as one among many, though as more powerful than the others (see such language in many of the Psalms). It was only with time that Israel moved towards monotheism, although the majority of the people still clung to multiple insurance policies, worshiping Baal and even offering their sons as human sacrifices to Moloch (the gods of other neighboring tribes), as I am sure many of us remember from presentations here. Indeed, Abraham accepted that a command that he prepare to sacrifice his son Isaac was from Yahweh.
2. Like the other tribal gods, Yahweh was presented as jealous, angry, willing to order the deaths of men, women, children, and animals of captured tribes or of disobedient Israelites. This seems a far cry from the God of love presented by Jesus. That is, the God presented was a product of the competing, warring tribes of the time. Some of the prophets (notably “second Isaiah” and Amos)

later portrayed Yahweh as loving, and as calling on human beings to care for one another, especially those most in need. But these represented later understandings that were only gradually arrived at over time.

3. Similarly, the Hebrew Scriptures portrayed the physical context of what they then knew of the world as it was then understood. Some of you may have read an article published in SPECTRUM a few years ago, which was written by Fritz Guy and Brian Bull, which explained the three-decker universe that was portrayed in Genesis 1: it had land, with water both bordering it and beneath it, a dome above the land, which kept the water beyond from deluging the land, while allowing rain to penetrate it, and on which the sun, moon and stars were located and moved along preordained paths. This understanding would be totally unrecognizable to scientists today, especially since human beings have travelled in space.
4. It should not be surprising, given how long it took for human beings to arrive at modern understandings in these respects, that the earth was not seen as a globe but as flat, and fixed compared with the sun, moon and stars, which moved across the sky, appearing and then disappearing. Thus, Joshua commanded the sun to stand still in order to lengthen a day. I recently read a chapter from a new book that Fritz Guy and Brian Bull are writing, where they argue that because of these understandings there was no way that the flood could have been conceived of as a global occurrence. Note that the Scriptures do not attempt to correct the then current misunderstandings, but accept them, and are therefore in these ways products of their times.
5. Similarly, the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures also often accepted the prevailing social system. For example, they endorsed the low position of women and the enslavement of defeated enemies and even of members of their own people who were unable to pay their debts. Wives were seen as the possessions of their husbands—indeed, the tenth commandment, which they believed was handed to Moses by Yahweh, seems to support this, for ‘the neighbor’s wife’ is listed after the neighbor’s house in a list of possessions that should not be coveted!

That is, the various portions of the Hebrew Scriptures were products of the locations of their authors and of the understandings of their times, as human beings tried to understand both God and their physical and social environments, and to develop behavioral guidelines. I would not object to a view that includes God trying to help their understanding, which changed in some ways over time, but it is not possible, through the lens of the New Testament and of our advances in our understanding of science and society, to believe that the understandings I have listed were correct and the results of divine revelation. Adventists make no attempt to insist that the earth is flat or the center of our solar system today, in spite of scriptural support for such understandings. Can you imagine our embarrassment if the General Conference, having insisted on a literalistic reading of the Scriptures, then insisted that we argue for a flat earth and that that earth is the center of our solar system? Indeed, are you not chagrined by the recent decisions that only men are worthy of ordination, and that the world and life were created in 6 consecutive periods of 24 hours about 6000 years ago? These too are supported by a literalistic reading of the Scriptures.