

On the Nature of Inspiration

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Introduction

At issue in the present paper is what it means for a prophet to borrow words and phrases from existing literary sources. The immediacy of this topic for Seventh-day Adventists derives from the fact that Ellen G. White did a considerable amount of such borrowing. And we can be glad that she did. It is one value of her work that by seeing at close range how God works through a prophet living in our own time, we can better understand the work of the biblical prophets. Thus, in the way she worked, as also in the content of her various messages, Ellen White is "a lesser light, pointing people to the greater light."¹ Because she wrote and said what she did, we can have a clearer understanding of the Scriptures. This was always her goal and now, even in the criticism directed against her, she is achieving it.

If Ellen White had been unlike the biblical prophets in any significant way, as for example in the matter of using literary sources, the illustrative value of her work would be diminished. But in fact she is not unique and there is much we can learn from her work--by which I mean the way she did her work--that can help us understand better how they did theirs.

No one likes a living prophet. Prophets have a way of saying things we do not want to hear. It is much easier to respect the giants of the past who are at least delicate enough to point out the sins of people long dead rather than our own. But be sure of this: If any one of the biblical prophets had lived in our day, the same people who rise up against Ellen White would rise up against these men too or against anyone else God might send saying the same things.

(29) "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. (30) And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' (31) So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. (32) Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!" (Matt 23:29-32; see also Jer 42:1-43:3)

The bitter attacks brought against Ellen White by those who should have been her friends are merely one more factor in a long list of others that make her work similar to that of the biblical prophets of the past. Take Jeremiah for example:

(1) When Jeremiah finished telling the people all the words of the Lord their God--everything the Lord had sent him to tell them--(2) Azariah son of Hoshaiah and Johanan son of Kareah and all the arrogant men said to Jeremiah, "You are lying! The Lord our God has not sent you to say, 'You must not go to Egypt to settle there.' (3) But Baruch son of Neriah is inciting you against us to hand us over to the Babylonians, so they may kill us or carry us into exile to Babylon. (Jer 43:1-3)

Let us say for argument that the charges of Ellen White's critics are true--every bit--and that she got her ideas from earlier writers instead of the Holy Spirit. The hypothesis is crudely

testable. Let those who hold such views pick their champion--the best writer they can secure for the task. Give him or her unlimited research and editorial assistance over any period of time they might like in the Library of Congress or the best libraries of Europe. Withhold nothing. But when it is all over let that individual come forward with a work comparable in conception and depth to *The Desire of Ages*. It cannot be done. If what I am saying is true, then we need to rework our concept of the role literary borrowing plays in the prophetic process, and not for Ellen White only--for the biblical prophets as well.

In what follows I take John the Revelator and Paul as case studies of inspired writers borrowing from earlier sources, some of them secular in nature. Here we study both men as examples of prophetic method.

Two Case Studies of Borrowing in the New Testament

Any writer's work must be judged not only by the words he uses but by what he makes them say.² A thought that has little significance in one person's mouth can be profound when stated by another. Meaning cannot be divorced from the mind of the one who expresses it. And so the fact that one author borrows from another can mean almost anything. Stating the same thought another way, literary borrowing, taken in and of itself, means almost nothing.

The men who wrote the various books of the Bible relied on and borrowed extensively from each other. Indeed, doing so is one of the few biblical tests we have of their genuineness. "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn" (Isa 8:20). Moreover, inspired writers sometimes borrow from non-inspired sources. There are two things this fact does not imply. First, it does not imply that both sources were inspired. And second, it does not imply that neither source was inspired.

John the Revelator borrowed

Revelation contains allusions to more literary sources than any other book of the Bible.³ The apparatus to the second edition of the United Bible Societies Greek text⁴ for that book cites 347 word groups which refer to an external source--sometimes more than one. If these were listed in a table, at fifty-five lines per page, it would fill six pages and part of a seventh. What I list below is merely a summary of the verses which contain phrases that would have to be listed in such a table--a table of contents as it were for the larger array of data.

Table 1
Verses in Which the Book of Revelation
Cites Earlier Sources

Chap	Verses	To	From	Total
1	1,4,4,5,5,5,6,7,7,7,8,8,8,13,13,14,14-15,16,17,19	20	12	20
2	2, 6, 7, 7,8,9,10,10,12,14,16,17,17,18,20,20,22,23,23,26-27	20	16	29
3	3,3,4,5,5,5,7,8,9,9,9,10,12,12,14,17,19,20	18	12	22
4	1,2,3,4,5,5,6,6-7,8,8,8,8,9,9,10	16	10	11
5	1,1,5,5,6,6,7,8,9,10,12,12,13	13	9	14
6	2,4,5,8,10,12,12-13,13-14,15,16,16,17	12	11	17
7	1,3,10,14,15,16,17,17,17	9	7	17
8	3,3,4,5,5,7,8,11,12	9	7	13
9	2,3,4,6,7,8,9,13,20,20	10	9	21
10	4,5-6,6,7,9-10	5	6	11
11	1,2,4,5,6,6,7,7,8,11,12,13,15,17,17,18,18,18,19,19	20	14	19
12	2,3,4,5,5,7,9,10,14,17	10	9	17
13	1,2,5,7,8,8,10,13,13,14,14,15	12	6	18
14	1,2,3,5,7,8,8,10,10,11,13,14,15,18,20	15	13	20
15	1,3,3,3,3,3,4,4,5,6,7,8	12	7	8
16	1,1,2,3,4,5,5,6,6,7,7,10,11,12,14,15,16,17,18,18,19,20,21	23	18	21
17	1,2,4,4,8,8,12,14,16	9	7	18
18	2,2,3,4,5,6,7-8,8,8,9,10,11,12-13,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,23,23,24	25	22	24
19	1,2,2,3,4,5,5,6,6,6,7,8,10,11,11,11,12,13,13,15,15,15,15,16,17-18,19,20,21	28	20	21
20	3,4,6,8,8,9,10,10,11-12,11,12,12-13,14,15,15	15	11	15
21	1,2,2,3,4,5,5,6,6,6,7,8,8,10,11,12-13,15,16-17,19,22,23,24,25,25,26,27	26	22	27
22	1,2,3,4,5,5,5,6,8-9,10,12,12,12,13,14,15,16,16,17,18-19,19	21	17	21

In the above table the column labeled "To" shows the number of references or allusions within a given chapter to a source document, the column labeled "From" shows the number of verses from which such references are made, and the column labeled "Total" shows the total number of verses in the chapter. Examples where one passage of Revelation alludes to another are not included in this summary.

From the above the reader can gain some appreciation for how large a task it would be to assemble a complete list of John's literary allusions.⁵ My purpose here is merely to illustrate something of their scope. In chaps. 4, 11, 15, 16, 18, and 19 the number of allusions to earlier literature exceeds the number of verses in the chapter, while in chaps. 1, 20, and 22 the two numbers are equal (see table).

The encyclopedic use John makes of the Old Testament in stating the message that he received from God illustrates an interesting point, which in this context may be considered an aside. I have had occasion to suggest elsewhere that, while most of the documents contained in the Bible are not apocalyptic in nature, the result of combining them is.⁶ John in effect has done this. He has brought together parts of virtually the whole Jewish canon. As divided in our English editions, the Old Testament contains thirty-nine books.⁷ Of these the only ones he does not use in some way are Joshua, Ruth, Ezra, Ecclesiastes, Jonah, Habakkuk, and Haggai.⁸ In addition he does refer to Baruch 4:35; Enoch 9:4; 14:22; 25:5; 27:3; 2 Macc 13:4; 3 Macc 2:5; 5:35; Ps of Sol 17:23-24, 34 (31); Sirach 1:8 (eleven times); Tobit 13:7, 11, 18; and Wisdom 16:9.

John's exquisite apocalyptic tapestry was crafted, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, from virtually the entire body of writings available to him--canonical and otherwise. If John is an example of an inspired writer, we must conclude that using documentable sources does not limit such a writer's inspiration.

Someone might object that John does not quote, but merely reminds us of his sources by alluding to them,⁹ and therefore cannot be charged with borrowing in the present sense. Such an objection begs the real question, which is where John gets his information. Did it come from the Holy Spirit by divine revelation or from his long acquaintance with the Old Testament? I maintain that the revelation which the Holy Spirit gave to John could only have been resonated as it did in the mind of a person as familiar as he was with the earlier revelations of the same Spirit. Thus, while the revelation God gave John could have been given to someone else, it probably could not have been received by anyone else, i.e., unless they were as well read in the Old Testament as he was. There is a synergy at work in this crowning masterpiece of inspiration that should not be minimized.

Paul borrowed

In any event Paul does quote his sources. While he quotes Scripture extensively, in this paper our attention will be confined to his four uses of extrabiblical material. The sources he quotes in Acts 17:28a and b; 1 Cor 15:33; and Titus 1:12 have nothing to do with Christian faith or values and in any other setting would be considered hostile to them.

From Cleanthes or Epimenides the Cretan. There is a question whether Paul's statement, made in Athens, "For in him we move and breath and have our being" (Acts 17:28), is borrowed from Cleanthes or from Epimenides the Cretan. Cleanthes' work has been lost but what Epimenides wrote is as follows:

"They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high--the Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies! But thou art not dead; thou art risen and alive for ever, for in thee we live and move and have our being."¹⁰

Paul uses the above statement more than once. It appears also (with attribution) in Titus 1:12.

From Aratus. The second quotation we will consider, also in Paul's sermon at Athens, is from an earlier writer named Aratus. His work, entitled *Phaenomena*, was written in poetic form as a tribute to an earlier prose work by the distinguished mathematician Eudoxus of Cnidus (c. 390-337 B.C.), who in turn had studied with Plato. In his opening paragraph Aratus extols a deity that his translators have called "Zeus." The word is not Greek *zeus*, however, nor is it the word *theos* commonly used for God in the New Testament. The word Aratus uses is *dios*, cf. Latin *deus*), which is not the proper name of any deity.¹¹ In any event, there is no way to make the context a Christian one. Here is one translation of the passage Paul quotes from Aratus:

From Zeus [*Dios*] let us begin; him do we mortals never leave unnamed; full of Zeus are all the streets and all the market-places of men; full is the sea and the heavens thereof; always we all have need of Zeus. For we are also his offspring; and he in his kindness unto men giveth favourable signs and wakeneth the people to work, reminding them of livelihood. . . .¹²

Like a white lily reaching upward toward God from the mud that feeds it, what Paul draws from the pantheistic materialism of the authors mentioned above, known only too well to his hearers, is the following:

(26) God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. (27) "For in him we live and move and have our being." As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring" (Acts 17:28).

From Menander. Here material intended for common use is directed to a more noble purpose (see Rom 9:21). But perhaps the best illustration of the point I am trying to make is Paul's use of a line from "Thais" by Menander, a prolific writer of comedy. From this play only seven lines are preserved, but one of those seven shows us what Paul was borrowing from when he wrote to the formerly dissolute members of the church in Corinth, who were probably also familiar with it:

Sing to me, goddess, sing of such an one as she: audacious, beautiful, and plausible withal; she does you wrongs; she locks her door; keeps asking you for gifts; she loveth none, but ever makes pretence.

Communion with the bad corrupts good character.¹³

When Paul takes over the same line, however, the context bears no similarity to that of the original. He uses Menander to make a point in a way designed to capture the attention of his readers:

(33) Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.' (34) Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God--I say this to your shame. (1 Cor 15:33-34)

Discussion

There are any number of gross theological errors that a reader could support from the intertestamental literature, which John sometimes draws on. And what can we say about the secular Greek sources that Paul cites on no fewer than four occasions? But somehow John and Paul got more from their sources than was in them originally. What guided them to the one fleck of good in a sea of words that surrounding anyone else would have washed up nothing of lasting value? The answer can only be that they were led by the Holy Spirit.

Just here is a point that must not be missed. One way of telling where a thought comes from is to notice carefully where it goes to. I am not referring now to the words as such--their meanings can be looked up easily enough in dictionaries--but the thought that the words are used to convey. In a number of cases both John and Paul quote words whose prior use can be clearly demonstrated. The Holy Spirit did not inspire Aratus to say, "'We are his offspring'" (Acts 17:28) in his treatise on natural history. But Paul's later use of those words was indeed inspired. From this I conclude that using borrowed words is not the same as using borrowed thoughts. Different minds can put the same words to widely different uses.

Was Paul's concept of God the same as that of Aratus when the latter spoke in pantheistic terms of Greek *Dios*? Was he adopting a pagan concept of the nature of man when he quoted the words, "'We are his offspring'" (Acts 17:28)? Or in all such cases was he merely

expressing a biblical thought in words appropriately borrowed for the occasion? Beyond this, what impact did Paul want his words to have on those who heard them? What was his purpose for wanting them to have that impact? These are the questions that bring us to the heart of the matter. It may be that we still have something more to learn about what inspiration is and is not, and--when it is manifested--how it works.

Going beyond the words and the thoughts now to the situation that nurtured them, we might also ask what drove Paul to expose himself to ridicule by addressing the high council of Athens in the first place? i.e., why did the occasion to quote Aratus ever arise? And after his speech was over and Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, took a public stand for Christ in the face of similar ridicule (see Acts 17:34), what emotions must have welled up in Paul's heart? Why did those emotions arise instead of others? Here we have thoughts and purposes that bear no similarity whatever to those of Aratus some 300 years earlier.

Conclusion

Words are not hermits. They live in company with thoughts and intents. Thus, words alone do not generally constitute the locus of inspiration. By themselves they can be very barren things (see 2 Cor 3:6). Instead the locus of inspiration is the mind of a person moved upon by the Holy Spirit to use them for some purpose. As the Spirit of God breathes life into the prophet's words they receive a power that they did not have before and could not acquire in any other way. They bring spiritual life to the hearts of those who hear and cherish them.¹⁴

When evaluating the inspiration of Ellen G. White let us not do so in a shallow manner. After we finish demonstrating that she drew on the earlier work of other writers, let us go on to show what use she made of the borrowed material. (And please bear in mind that she did not borrow everything she wrote.) It was Jesus who said, "by their fruit you will recognize them" (Matt 7:20). What fruit did her ministry bear? How does her fruit compare with that of the authors whose work she uses? And, not insignificantly, how does it compare with that of her critics?

Let us not be so wise in tracing out Ellen White's sources--real or imagined--that we forget to consider what she made the borrowed words mean, why she chose those words instead of others, and what results followed from her use of them. Let us not be so wise that we become fools and fail to discern the moving of the Spirit of God among us. When our Lord needed a donkey, He had to borrow one (see Matt 21:1-5; Mark 11:1-3; Luke 19:29-31). Let us learn what we can from this fact.

If we do not understand such simple things as using words to accomplish a purpose that goes beyond them, how will we ever understand something really profound like the incarnation? The ultimate act of borrowing in all our vast universe is Jesus' act of taking human flesh here on planet Earth. As our Creator, human flesh--the flesh of a creature--was entirely foreign to Him. More than that, He inherited it after four thousand years of sin had had its baleful influence on our race. And yet the life that He lived in human flesh bears no relation to the difficulties He faced which should have prevented Him from living that way. Thus, we can only agree when Christ tells us, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing" (John 5:63). This statement finds application in the spoken words of the prophets, the written Word of God, and ultimately in the living Son of God.

In discussing Ellen White it is not my purpose to deify the messenger because of the message. Prophets are people, but my point is that they do not speak on their own behalf. The words uttered derive their force from the thought which lies behind them and this has its origin in the infinite mind of God. Let us go beneath the surface of the matter. It is the source of the thoughts and not of the words which should primarily occupy us.

Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

¹"Little heed is given to the Bible, and the Lord has given a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light" (Ellen G. White, *Colporteur Ministry* [Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1953], p. 125).

²Let me offer an anecdote from Sandburg as an illustration of this principle: "Farm boys in evenings at the store in Gentryville, a mile and a half from the Lincoln cabin, talked about how Abe Lincoln was always digging into books, picking a piece of charcoal to write on the fire shovel, shaving off what he wrote, and then writing more. Dennis Hanks said, 'There's suthin' peculiarsome about Abe.' It seemed that Abe made books tell him more than they told other people" (Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln*, 3 vols. [New York: Dell, 1954], vol. 3: *The Prairie Years*, p. 38). The same principle would apply whether we are talking about reading (as in the present illustration) or writing (above).

³For the problem of determining when John is and is not consciously alluding to his various Old Testament sources see Jon Paulien, *Decoding Revelation's Trumpets: Literary Allusions and Interpretations of Revelation 8:7-12*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 11 (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1988); reviewed by Steven Thompson in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 28 (1990): 269-71. Some of these same issues were raised on a smaller scale in Hardy, "New Testament References to Daniel," *Historicism* No. 1/Jan 85, 10-11.

⁴In the third edition references are included only when they represent actual quotations or allusions of unquestioned intent. This marks a change in editorial policy from the second edition, which is more inclusive and therefore more helpful in identifying all possible allusions. In his dissertation Paulien mentions only the third edition (see *Revelation's Trumpets*, pp. 106, 122).

⁵"As the method for evaluating allusions is further refined, a more accurate listing of allusions for the entire book of Revelation can be achieved" (*ibid.*, p. 432). According to Paulien a complete list is still a desideratum.

⁶In its quiet but pervasive orientation toward Christ Dan 11 is a microcosm of Daniel, and Daniel in turn is a microcosm of Scripture. Note the claim carefully. Daniel is not unusual within the larger body of inspired writings when those writings are taken as a whole. On the contrary, it is representative of their central thrust. And the things that make Daniel apocalyptic are precisely the things that make it representative. The single most important of these is a timeless interest in and focus on the work and person of Christ. That work has a beginning and end. It takes place on earth as well as in heaven. Its purpose is to defeat Satan, the author of evil. Thus, whereas most of the canonical books are not apocalyptic individually, their cumulative effect is" (Hardy, "The Christocentric Orientation of Daniel and of Scripture Generally," *Historicism* No. 1/Jan 85), pp. 6-7.

⁷As divided in the Hebrew Old Testament there are twenty-four books--corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Books that Jewish tradition counts differently than we do are: 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, the twelve minor prophets, Ezra-Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles.

⁸In the Jewish manner of counting, only three documents would be left out (Joshua, Ruth, and Ecclesiastes). John does refer to Ezra-Nehemiah, if the two are considered one document, and to the book of the twelve minor prophets.

⁹"In the words of J. P. M. Sweet, John 'never quotes a passage verbatim, but paraphrases, alludes, and weaves together motifs in such a way that to follow up each allusion usually brings further dimensions of meaning'" (Paulien, *Revelation's Trumpets*, p. 102). "The problem of identifying allusions to the Old Testament in Revelation becomes even more complicated when we discover that John appears on many occasions to have recalled loosely from memory, adapted the Old Testament language to fit his need, or used a different text tradition than we have available to us" (ibid., p. 103).

¹⁰"The whole of this extract is quoted (in Syriac) by the Syriac father Isho'dad in his commentary on this passage (probably based on Theodore of Mopsuestia). He ascribes the words to a panegyric of Minos over his father Zeus; we learn, however, from Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* i.14.59.1 f.) that the second line (Kretes aei pseustai, kaka theria, gasteres argai), quoted in Tit. i.12, comes from a work of Epimenides the Cretan (see of *ver.* 23). Rendel Harris (*Exp.* VII.ii [1906], pp. 305 ff.) suggested that the panegyric in question might be the poem by Epimenides on Minos and Rhadamanthys referred to by Diogenes Laertius, i.112. Or it might come from his *Theogonia* (Diog. Laert., i.III). . . . Epimenides argues from living men to a living god; our Lord in Lk. xx.37 f., etc., applies the converse argument from the Living God to living men in a life beyond this" (F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952], p. 338). The editors of the second edition of the United Bible Societies *Greek New Testament* (New York: American Bible Society, 1968) give Cleanthes as the author.

¹¹In a different context consider the following passage from Diodorus of Sicily: ". . . they held a meeting of the Assembly, and after deliberating on forming a democracy of their own they all voted unanimously to make a colossal statue of Zeus [*Dios*] the Liberator and each year to celebrate with sacrifices the Festival of Liberation and hold games . . ." (*Diodorus of Sicily*, 12 vols., trans. C. H. Oldfather, Loeb Classical Library, [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946], p. 313).

¹²*Callimachus: Hymns and Epigrams, Lycophron*, trans. A. W. Mair; *Aratus*, trans. G. R. Mair, 2nd ed., Loeb Classical Library, no. 129 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 381.

¹³*Menander: The Principal Fragments*, trans. Francis G. Allison, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1921), p. 356-57.

¹⁴"The creative energy that called the worlds into existence is in the word of God. This word imparts power; it begets life. Every command is a promise; accepted by the will, received into the soul, it brings with it the life of the Infinite One. It transforms the nature and re-creates the soul in the image of God" (Ellen G. White, *Education* [Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1952], p. 126). See Hardy, "Bible Study and Sanctification," *Historicism* No. 25/Jan 91, pp. 54-55.