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Inspiration and Revelation

The supernatural¹ is somewhat more difficult to study than nature. This is partly because it is not reproducible at will. We do not have access to the supernatural except as it chooses to show itself. This means that most of our evidence on the supernatural is historical. We have to pay much more attention to such things as the character of witnesses, their proximity to the events recorded, and their biases, than we are accustomed to doing with scientific evidence.

All supernatural events say something about God. In some events, we can deduce something about His character by actions which can be observed by anyone present. In other events, so it is

¹ I am using the term “supernatural” to mean that which does not conform to the laws of nature which are the same for all participants regardless of their thought processes. Any such events should tell us something about that part of reality which is beyond, or behind (or whatever your favorite expression is), that part of reality which we call nature. That there is such a part of reality can be deduced from the existence of life.

claimed, He actually sends messages to people. So we have the visions of Paul, Joseph Smith, and Ellen White, the LORD speaking to Moses, and the “we” of Mohammed. These people then become authoritative for their followers. But now we have a problem. For we cannot follow the authority of all these people at once. In such a simple matter as the number of wives a man may have, there is a divergence of opinion. Moses and Joseph Smith do not give any numerical limit, Mohammed says no more than four (except for Mohammed himself), Ellen White says one, and Paul says one if you wish to be a church leader, but otherwise gives no limit. It is not a matter of denying (at this point) the possibility that God spoke to all of them. It is rather that we cannot base our actions on what one authority says without implicitly disagreeing with another authority.

The problem cannot be solved by insisting that each group adhere to its own tradition. For Paul, Ellen White, and Joseph Smith urged their followers to win other people over to their way of thinking and acting, and Mohammed’s followers invented the slogan “the Qur’an, tribute, or the sword” to summarize their relations with other religions.

We have come to an area of controversy in Christendom. Is the Bible authoritative? If so, in what way and for whom? Is it inspired? How is its authority related to other authorities, religious and otherwise?²

One way of attacking the problem is to construct a theoretical model of inspiration and see whether a given writer who claims inspiration fits our theory and see what the implications of our theory are for the question of authority. I find it more useful to try to understand what we mean by authority, and then discuss the implications for inspiration in general and that of particular cases such as the Bible.

Authority

There are two closely related meanings of authority. One meaning is a dependable source of accurate information. I will

² For some groups, such as Seventh-day Adventists, there are other questions that need to be answered, such as, is Ellen White authoritative (or more accurately, should she be)? If so, in what way and for whom? Was she inspired? How should we relate her authority to that of the Bible?

use the unqualified term authority in this sense. The other meaning is a source which is believed to be a dependable source of accurate information. I will use the term reputed authority in this sense. The former sense is of more interest.³ A useful authority is one which predicts phenomena or recommends courses of action, in situations which are occurring or are likely to occur.

One function of authority is as a handy reference. Even if there is no controversy over the proper answers, it may be convenient to have an authority with all the answers listed. Logarithm tables, for example, can be very useful. But a more useful function of authority is arbitration of disputes. If several groups are arguing over some factual information or the proper course of action, one group will often appeal to a reputed authority and if the other group concedes the authority of the source, the argument is settled in favor of the first group. In fact, if an authority cannot function as an arbiter of disputes, it has very little use. Even the "handy reference" kind of authority is capable of functioning in this way. For example, in our culture the value of $\pi = 3.14159265 \dots$ is not in dispute. Formerly this was not so. The ancient Greeks used $\pi = 3 \frac{1}{7} = 3.14285714 \dots$, while the Egyptians used the formula for the area of a circle $A = (\frac{8}{9} d)^2 = 3 \frac{13}{81} r^2$, which presumes $\pi = 3.16049 \dots$. In our own day the approximations $\pi = 3.14$ and $\pi = 3.1416$ are commonly used. If someone needs a value of π accurate to 6 or more places, it is better to trust the first value mentioned than any of the others. On this point the Egyptian papyri are inferior to, for example, the *Chemical Rubber Company Handbook of Chemistry and Physics*.

To make the point another way an authority is useless unless it can stand in the face of uncertainty and contradiction. That is, if there does not exist some situation where you would ordinarily be inclined to believe or act one way, and a given source changes your belief or course of action, then that source actually has no authority for you.

We have come to a frightening aspect of authority. There are sources that claim authority which actually have none, either because they are ignorantly in error (such as people in Columbus' day who believed the earth was flat), or because they have

³There is also the meaning someone or something which one obeys, or should obey. I am assuming that if one believes an authority, one will obey him/her/it.

no respect for truth (such as some used car salesmen). An authority is useful precisely where a falsely reputed authority can do the most damage. If taking all the other facts you know into account, you would prefer to do A, and a reputed authority says to do B, it is important to know whether that reputed authority is in fact an authority. Yet it is at this point that it is hardest to evaluate a reputed authority. If the other facts point to the same course of action as the reputed authority you can evaluate the reputed authority by the other facts, and it is a lot easier to believe the reputed authority, but in that case you don't really need it. The reputed authority comforts but doesn't help.

Suppose that you have a large freckle on your right (or for left-handers left) hand. You go to the doctor, perhaps for something else. The doctor says, "Let me look at that freckle." He (or she)⁴ asks a few questions, looks at it, takes a piece to look at under the micro-

⁴ In general, I have attempted to use gender-neutral language in this book, because the points made usually have no direct connection with gender. I have made three major exceptions; the following passage, the reference to prophets, and God.

English is not ideally suited to gender-inclusiveness. The pronouns are most difficult. "It" connotes a thing, not a person. "He or she" or "he/she" is tolerable for minimal use but rapidly becomes awkward, and to the really picky is not even adequate— it should be "she or he" half the time (and which time should come first?). "He" or "she" forces one to choose gender, in some cases arbitrarily. The gender-inclusive use of "he" was the standard in a previous age, but many do not consider it adequate today. The use of the word "one" is a compromise that is sometimes workable. The mathematically inclined realize that content is more important, and do not worry as much about the form. One simply chooses the form that appears the most helpful and uses it.

However, with these three usages, the personal pronoun is impossible to avoid without the passage(s) becoming extremely awkward. In the present passage I have chosen the masculine pronoun because most physicians in the Western world are male, and because I am mentioning that some of them should not be trusted (I suspect that in general, female physicians are slightly more trustworthy). However, what I say is applicable to both genders, so the pronoun should be interpreted as gender-inclusive. Similarly, the vast majority of reputed religious (and scientific) authorities, or at least of the ones who have been recorded, have been male. There are female reputed authorities, and the same principles apply to them.

God has usually been referred to as "He" in the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is probably partly leftover sexual bias, partly because the masculine pronoun seemed more appropriate for someone with an active role (in itself partly sexual bias and partly generalization from the fact that men are, on the average, bigger and stronger than women), and partly to avoid sexual overtones when discussing the love between God and men. The latter reason is reversed for women, although I suspect not precisely as, in general, women tend to view the relationship aspect of sexuality as more important compared to the physical than men do. I believe that God is beyond the usual delineations of gender, but find "He/She" or "She/He" very awkward to use, and so have chosen to use the more traditional "He". I hope that both those who have trouble with the terminology used and those who agree with it will look beyond the terminology to the concepts discussed.

scope, and then tells you, "I'm sorry to have to tell you, but you have cancer, and because of where it is, your hand will have to come off at the wrist or we will have no chance of curing it." What do you do? It doesn't hurt, and you are really not excited about losing your hand. On the other hand, you have years still ahead of you and are not interested in dying just yet. Is your doctor telling the truth? Or is he just a quack, out to get your money or perhaps unable to tell when just cutting off the skin and grafting over it, or immunotherapy, or acupuncture, will do just as well?

If you are a doctor yourself you might ask to look at the slides, and then go home and get out your own medical books. But if you are not medically trained, and unable to travel easily to get another doctor for a second opinion, you have to figure out whether to trust your doctor or not. And three questions may help you to decide.

First, is the recommended course of action credible? Well, yes, you have heard of cancer and know that the usual treatment is cutting it out if possible. You have never heard of cancer looking like that, but suppose it to be possible. If the doctor had asked you to cut off your other hand, it would have required much more justification.

Second, does the source (in this case the doctor) have a reputation for honesty? Regardless of the other qualifications, if this one is lacking, you cannot trust anything he says unless you can confirm it from another source.

Third, is the source informed? Does the doctor know enough about dermatology to recognize skin cancer? Does he know enough about pathology to read his own slides? Or did he send them to a reputable pathologist? Does he know the best treatment for skin cancer? If the doctor has an excellent reputation, you might be inclined to trust him without even checking it out. On the other hand, if he has ten malpractice cases against him in the past year and was just kicked off the staff of the local hospital for incompetence, you would certainly insist on a second opinion and might even ignore his warning. You may not even have gone to him in the first place.

In obvious cases there will be a consensus of opinion whether to believe or not to believe. But there will be some cases which will be very difficult to decide. And you can never be absolutely certain about the result. Even a good doctor sometimes makes mistakes, and even a charlatan may be giving you an accurate

diagnosis. Reputable medical journals have been known to inadvertently publish fraudulent research. The course of investigation outlined above does not guarantee that no mistakes will be made. It merely offers the best chance of making the right decision.

I am postulating that the same three questions are pertinent when considering the advice of a reputed religious authority. Dishonesty disqualifies. Unreasonableness makes the reputed authority more difficult to believe. And it is vitally important to determine the source of information, and the reliability of that source. This is true whether there is a claim to better insight through piety, the claim of direct control by the Holy Spirit, or reporting the words or works of God.

Honesty

The point about dishonesty deserves explanation and emphasis. Some may reject this as an *ad hominem* argument (“The guy’s a communist [or capitalist or Nazi or black or Christian or atheist or whatever], so everything he says is wrong”). Most scientists are reticent to condemn someone’s work because she doesn’t pay her income tax. Some theologians, too, insist that God can speak through dishonest people. Such arguments miss the point. The point is not that God cannot communicate in a special way to someone who has been dishonest, or even someone who is chronically dishonest. The point is that we can’t trust him or her.

In ordinary life when someone is chronically dishonest we are unwilling to believe anything he says enough to act on it, unless either his word is confirmed by something reliable, or he appears to have no motive for dishonesty in this case (hidden or overt) and motive to be accurate, or it doesn’t cost us anything to believe him. Reputed religious authorities nearly always have a motive for lying that God has revealed something to them, if only to become somebody important. Usually the claim is a powerful way to silence the challenges of one’s detractors in one’s own mind (“Who are they to argue against God? I am but His humble servant”). It also enables one to have a greater measure of control over one’s followers. Lying about one’s religious experience is also relatively safe, at least in the short term. It is difficult for anyone to prove that God did not speak to you if you say that He did. Therefore in order for us to believe a reputed authority who is known to be dishonest, he must either be advising something

with no apparent risk, or something we would believe without his advice. In either case he is not much use.

There are rare exceptions, of course. Assuming the facts of the case in the Bible are accurate, I would be strongly inclined to believe the prophecy of Baalam even though there are grounds for doubting his integrity. He had strong reasons to say the opposite of what he did, or at least to say nothing. This makes his testimony believable. But in general, you cannot trust someone who claims religious authority if he is dishonest.

What about other types of sin? We all are sinners, so if any type of sin disqualified one from being a prophet, there would be no prophets. However, some bad actions have little to do with the ability to accurately report what one sees, at least initially, and they detract from the message primarily as they demonstrate that the prophet's message has not yet transformed all of his own life. An example might be overeating. Other types of sin more directly involve one's integrity and have more direct implications for trustworthiness. Examples might be greed and pride.

Why do scientists dislike *ad hominem* arguments when scientific theology makes this much use of them? First, scientists do not usually deal with theories which purport to offer ways to change human nature, whereas religious theories usually do so. How Einstein treated his friends has virtually nothing to do with whether objects are more massive in motion than at rest, whereas how Jesus treated His friends has a lot to do with whether the God revealed in Jesus loves us unconditionally. Second, scientists deal with repeatable phenomena (if you don't believe it you can try it for yourself), making dishonesty risky and therefore less attractive and less likely. Most religious authority is based on unrepeatable events (we can't manufacture another Jesus), making dishonesty less easily discovered and therefore more tempting. In scientific experiments which are essentially unrepeatable for technical reasons, the integrity of the investigators becomes more important. Third, in one area there is no gap between the two attitudes. If you have been proven to have falsified scientific research, all of your research is considered of no value. Anything co-authored by Dr. John Darsee might as well not have been written. More properly, it would have been better if it had not been written, as it just serves to confuse the unwary. Finally there are actually two kinds of *ad hominem* arguments. There is a world of difference between calling a man an atheist or

a capitalist or whatever and calling him a liar. In the former case his viewpoint may be biased (although then again it may not), but his data still demand explanation. In the latter case his data are also suspect.

The above considerations make me unable to accept the authority of Joseph Smith. He was reliably reported to have claimed supernatural help in finding treasure before his religious career, a claim that I believe to be fraudulent. His religious career gives evidence that this pattern of fraud was not abandoned. One can read many of his revelations as self-serving (for example, those on polygamy). His religious revelations were supposed to come from documents most of which, although tangible, have not left any tangible evidence. The one document which has left tangible evidence is the papyrus from which the *Book of Abraham*⁵ was supposedly translated. The hieroglyphics of this papyrus, which we can now read, bear no resemblance to the text of the *Book of Abraham*. We know he was wrong in this case, we have strong reason to suspect his integrity, and even if the Lord did reveal some things to him, we cannot rely on his word to distinguish between what he received and what he made up. That is, he has no authority.

This is also one of the reasons why Islamic fundamentalists are so upset with Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses*⁶ (not the most important—we will come to that shortly). They perceive that Salman the Persian's comments about the convenience of Mohammed's (for that is obviously who Mahound is) revelations are an attack on his integrity. Salman Rushdie has confirmed that Salman the Persian's questions were his own also.

This consideration also means that Walter Rea's charges in *The White Lie* (or Ronald Numbers' *The Prophetess of Health*)⁷ cannot be refuted by merely establishing that Ellen White did not violate plagiarism laws. The weight of evidence must favor the theory that she did not attempt to pass off as direct divine revelation ideas which she knew she obtained only from someone else. If she claimed that certain ideas were inspired by God, and it can be shown that she actually got them from someone else, it

⁵ Marquandt HM: *The Book of Abraham Found: An answer to Dr. Hugh Nibley's Book "The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, an Egyptian Endowment": As it relates to the source of the Book of Abraham*. Sandy, UT: Marquandt, 1975.

⁶ New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1989

⁷ Rea W: *The White Lie*. Turlock, CA: M & R Publications, 1982, and Numbers R: *The Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.

makes it very difficult to defend her authority but if enough time had passed one could still say that she forgot. But if she can be shown to have known that these ideas came from someone else (whether or not they are wrong), and still denied that they came from someone else but rather claimed that they were directly from God, then her claim to authority must be dropped.⁸

This also means that when someone claims that Moses or Daniel or Paul did not write the books attributed to them, all of the claims for revelation that are made in those books are being judged as worthless. Pious fraud is still fraud. It is important whether such statements in the Bible are accurate.

The problem is not one of error. The problem is one of integrity. There is so much room for lying in reporting religious experience that anything provably short of total honesty makes it probable that systematic deception is taking place.

In scientific terms, that the Bible, or Mohammed, or the Papacy, or Mary Baker Eddy or Joseph Smith, or any other reputed religious authority has authority is a falsifiable hypothesis, at least in principle. This makes some religious people, including some theologians, uncomfortable. How can you have 100% faith in something that might be wrong? I think this uncomfortable feeling is partly due to a misunderstanding of the nature of faith. Faith is not the absence of doubt. Precisely what faith is will be discussed in Chapter 9. For now we only note that Jesus apparently did not hold that faith had to be 100% to be valid. His response to the man who said, "I believe: help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24) was not to rebuke him (as he had earlier), but to heal his son.

Reasonableness

Our next criterion is reasonableness. Of the above criteria, reasonableness may seem the most important, but it is the hardest to use. Part of the problem is that our idea of what is reasonable is often so misguided. I remember reading in the Seventh-

⁵ At this stage in my personal research I have not found anything I can say is deliberately dishonest in Ellen White's writings. That statement is open to change, and should the preponderance of evidence convince me that it is incorrect, then she could not function as an authority for me. But for now I think she is not disqualified as an authority on the basis of integrity.

day Adventist journal *Spectrum* an article⁹ devoted to the idea that we needed to rework Ellen White's scenario of the end of time because it was tied to the 1800's and did not envision the modern world and specifically the rise of communism. Communism appeared to be a permanent part of the world scene and we needed to include it in a new, revised end-time scenario. Today, anyone who argued in that way would be laughed out of court, but it seemed so reasonable at the time.¹⁰ So, although reasonableness is an important criterion, we need to use it humbly only in extreme circumstances, and even then with the recognition that we may still be misusing it.

In fact, carried to the extreme limit, the criterion of reasonableness would completely destroy any authority. For if you only agree with a reputed authority when it is perfectly reasonable (that is, when it agrees with what you already believe), then it has no authority. One might even say that one has faith in an authority only to the extent that the criterion of reasonableness can be ignored.

However, one aspect of reasonableness is important, and that is consistency. An authority cannot recommend two mutually exclusive courses of action, or we cannot choose one over the other on the basis of that authority, and the suspicion will remain that other recommendations of that authority may in fact have the same ambiguity.

A Reliable Source

Our final criterion is that all religious knowledge must be traceable to either observational knowledge or theoretical knowledge, or it is unreliable. This last statement may raise some hackles, but I think it is nonetheless true.

The first objection to this statement is that just because a religious authority does not claim a specific revelation to back up the truth of a statement does not mean that what he says is false, and he is even more likely to be right in his assertion than someone who is not a religious authority. But the reason he is more

⁹ Butler J: "The World of E. G. White and the End of the World." *Spectrum* 10[2]:2-13, 1979.

¹⁰ This does not prove the validity of Ellen White's authority. It is included here to illustrate one of the difficulties in evaluating that authority, and authority in general.

likely to be right is that he has more information, some of which he may not have directly told us, and/or that he has done more clear thinking on the subject. Precisely insofar as you cannot either demonstrate or trust that he has observational or theoretical authority to back him up, you cannot depend on his pronouncements.

The second objection to the statement comes from those who want to take a book, for example the Bible or the Qur'an, as authoritative in every detail without having to justify each part. They say, "But what about God, in His special providence, protecting a book from error in its formation [note that the mechanism is unimportant] and miraculously preserving it for our guidance? Cannot God do that?" The answer is yes, God can do that, but that is not the right question. The question is, did God do that? This question cannot be answered in the affirmative without recourse to either observational or theoretical knowledge. If observations establish highly probable errors in a book, then the theoretical grounds for its inerrancy must be overwhelming before we can assume its inerrancy, and the nagging doubt that we have made a mistake in our theory cannot be dismissed until the observational discrepancies have been resolved.

One final similarity between scientific and religious authority should be noted. A scientist cannot claim to have any intrinsic authority in himself, except in the matter of observing his own psyche. He cannot simply pronounce and it is so. Everything is based either on experiment, which he tries to report without bias, or on theory, which is common intellectual property and (if it is good) appeals to everyone's sense of appropriateness.

Religious authority is similarly transparent. Either it is based on theology, which appeals to all who will see, or it is based on observation of God's activity, which is most authoritative when the relater introduces the least bias. The human instrument is most effective when it is least visible. This is in distinction to, for example, a political authority which has intrinsic authority (what it says goes whether it makes sense or not).

Theoretical Authority will be discussed further under scientific authority. One point needs to be made here. The validity of such authority is, and should be, judged by how well it fits the pieces of the puzzle of life together. The only caution that should be given is that the person judging the validity of a theoretical

authority is making a partly subjective judgment and this judgment is subject to correction as more information is gained and clearer thinking is done, so we should not be too ready to close our minds on that subject.

Observational Authority, on the other hand, is much more difficult to deal with. Perhaps the easiest way to tackle the subject is to distinguish between four different kinds of authority asserted by people who claim to be religious observational authorities. There is repeated authority, scientific authority, historical authority and revelational authority. In theory these are almost mutually exclusive, although in practice they are not always distinguishable.

Repeated authority is simply somebody else's authority that the authority in question repeats. Examples are many OT quotes in the NT, the report brought to Paul by Chloe's family about the Corinthian church (1 Cor 1:11), and the entire book of Luke and much of Acts. Luke was not there personally and he got all his information from what other people had said and written (Luke 1:1-4).

The reliability of such authority is best judged by the reliability of the original authority and the accuracy of its transmission. This is the same standard that one would use in judging a non-religious authority. The reliability of a religious authority in other areas has no necessary relationship to its reliability here, although careless handling of information here might suggest careless handling elsewhere.

Scientific authority can be divided into observational authority and theoretical authority. An example of observational authority is Galileo taking a telescope and pointing it at Jupiter and saying he sees four moons. Assuming the authority is honest, you have to try to account for his observations. An example of theoretical authority is Maxwell predicting the existence of radio waves, or Einstein predicting that stars near the Sun would appear to be slightly out of position.

In point of fact, the two kinds of authority are not completely separable. Galileo (with good reason, but this is still an interpretation) implicitly said that his telescope was a reliable instrument, that the light spots which he saw near Jupiter were not optical illusions, and that they actually circled the planet rather than just moving back and forth in its general vicinity. In fact, there are probably no truly raw pieces of data in science. On the

other hand, Einstein's prediction was based on many observations, some of them apparently defying common sense.

One could postulate a third kind of scientific authority that of the learned scientist or textbook writer. However, as we in medicine are constantly re-learning, this kind of authority is either well supported in the final analysis by experience (or by well-founded theory), or it is often misleading. One has only to think back to the recent controversy over calcium chloride in cardiac resuscitation to find an example. Even experience can be misleading if it is not carefully and critically observed, as illustrated by the history of the use of diethylstilbestrol (DES) for preventing miscarriage.

The same thing holds true for religious authority in general. It too comes in two kinds, observational and theoretical, exemplified by the prophet and the theologian. Again the two kinds are not completely separable, illustrated well by the prophet who makes predictions concerning the future based on his understanding of the meaning (theory) of what he has been shown (observation). Again there is probably no raw data without any interpretation, and it is doubtful that one can become a good theologian without some observational knowledge of God with which to work.

Scientific religious authority is that authority in a religious source derived from making repeated observations and noting a pattern into which they fit. An example is the observation of the man born blind in John 9:32, "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind." This observation is still accurate today except for John 9.¹¹

Another example illustrates the (partial) separability of scientific religious authority. It is the observation in Ps. 37:25, "I have been young, and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his children begging bread." That statement can be questioned on several grounds. How does the author know who is righteous and who is not? Has he followed their history adequately, or has he lost track of the righteous whose children may have been begging bread? How far down does the term translated "children" (*zera*^c — "seed") extend? Does it matter if the descendants themselves are not righteous? (For that matter, did

¹¹ To be accurate, this is partly repeated authority, but most scientific authority eventually becomes repeated authority. In fact, the Bible is all repeated authority in one sense. We have only copies of copies of copies, not the originals.

he really mean what he said precisely? Remember, this is poetry) I accept the statement as a valid generalization (Most righteous people are not forsaken and their children do not beg). That is, it has scientific authority for me. But if I found a righteous man whose children were begging, or even many righteous men whose children begged, it would not cause me to throw out the Psalms as not authoritative, let alone the whole Bible. The basis for this statement is said to be experience, there is no claim for direct revelation, and statements like this may be wrong without disproving such a claim in other areas.

Historical Authority is that authority derived from observing events which are essentially unrepeatable. These may be ordinary events without any obvious divine intervention, events which appear providential, or events which are clearly miraculous. It may not always be easy or even possible in practice, to distinguish between the three, but the distinction is important, so some illustrations may be useful.

An example of ordinary historical authority is Luke's description of some journeys of the apostle Paul described in, for example, Acts 16:11,12. Paul apparently walked the ordinary way onto an ordinary boat which used the usual sail and rowing power to get from one place to another (there may be something miraculous about Paul's purpose, but not about his actions). However, one could not determine at which cities Paul stopped by conducting experiments. We are completely dependent on witnesses, in this case the only surviving witness, Luke. This is different from scientific authority

Ordinary historical authority, like scientific authority and repeated authority, has what I have called separability. A person can misinterpret or not remember properly what he sees in this area without thereby destroying his credibility in other areas. As with scientific or repeated authority, this separability is not complete. Careless handling of the data here would suggest the possibility of careless handling of more serious matters.

An example of providential historical authority is the book of Esther. None of the events recorded are impossible from a mechanistic point of view, but their coincidence is so unusual that the author saw clearly a divine Hand in all of this. The events say something about God's care for His people (Because of this, some with a mechanistic point of view have felt themselves forced to deny the veracity of the story).

Here we start to get into two related questions, dependability and canon (the discussion of canon will be delayed slightly). If a religious authority can be shown to be wrong on the crucial aspects of his reporting of providential history, all conclusions supported by the history are no longer valid.¹² This is true even if the mistakes were made by a careful, honest person. If for example, Esther and Mordecai were shown to be fictitious, or the death decree to be non-existent, the religious authority of the book of Esther would be destroyed. This is in distinction to the previous kinds of authority where honest, careful mistakes have no bearing on the dependability of a religious authority.

It might be protested that we can no more draw logical conclusions from false scientific or ordinary historical data than we can from providential historical data. This is true. But it appears to me that a major reason the Book of Esther got into the canon was because conclusions about God and His care for His people can be deduced from the book. While it may be irrelevant to the main point whether there were 127 provinces in Xerxes' day (Esther 1:1, 8:9—ordinary historical authority), it is not irrelevant whether Esther was queen, because removing her from the story destroys the thrust of the book (It is, of course, harder to believe the important facts if some of the unimportant ones are incorrect).

An example of miraculous historical authority is the account of Jesus visiting the 10 disciples (Judas was dead and Thomas was not there) in the upper room on Resurrection Sunday. From a mechanistic point of view the passage of Jesus through locked doors, let alone His being alive, was impossible. This event was obviously felt to tell us something about God. But it still could be (and allegedly was) observed by everyone there. Another example is the Exodus, as recorded in the Pentateuch. Again it was clearly miraculous. But it could be observed by anyone, and it left traces in history (for example, the Israelites were once in Egypt and were later settled in Canaan).

Dependability is an issue here also. For if a miraculous event can be shown not to have happened, then all the conclusions drawn

¹² I am using the term "valid" in a technical sense. I mean that the conclusions do not flow from the premises. The conclusions may be true, and we may know this on other grounds, but one cannot logically use the history to support the conclusions, and we should stop trying to do so.

from that event are not valid. The apostle Paul saw this clearly. In 1 Cor 15:17-19 he wrote, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied."

This idea strikes at the heart of the usual theological use of the term "Myth". A myth, as I understand the usual use of the term, is a story which did not in fact happen, but which summarizes a theological truth so well that it is worth remembering and repeating on that basis alone. That is, a myth is a story which is untrue at a "superficial" level but profoundly true at a "deeper" level.¹³ It is usually applied to stories that obviously have deep theological significance but which modern science has supposedly proven not to have happened, such as the Genesis story of creation or the resurrection of Christ.

There are myths in the Bible in this sense. They are called parables. No one seriously contends that there were two actual sisters who carried on the activities described in Ezekiel 23. I don't think that Jesus was thinking of a particular householder in Matthew 20. In fact, I doubt that there was a householder who would pay a full day's wage to someone who had worked 1 hour.

But parables have no intrinsic authority. Their authority derives from two different external sources. First is the recognition of the truth in the parable. This is no different from any other theoretical authority; it is entirely dependent on the closeness of fit of the message of the parable to real life. Second is the authority of the teller of the parable. When Jesus used the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matthew 20, our belief that this truly represents God's attitude is heavily influenced by our belief or disbelief that Jesus had accurate information about God from a source which is not commonly accessible. If He did, then the parable can inform us. If He didn't, then the parable either conforms to our previous opinions (in which case we don't need it), makes sense (theoretical authority), or is (and can be safely) ignored.

¹³ This is, I think, the kindest definition. Some would object that they use the term "myth" as a literary term to describe stories about actions of the gods, and "epics" or "legends" to describe stories about actions of humans, and that these are purely objective terms. But it is fair to say that most of them believe that the "myths" they discuss are automatically untrue because of their subject matter, and therefore their use of the term is even more pejorative, as they do not try to say there is any intrinsic value to the stories.

What this means is that **proving some event is a myth guts its intrinsic authority**. In religion we are sometimes too close to the situation to see it. But it is clear in history. One can deduce part of the character of Abraham Lincoln from the true story of his walking 3 miles to return 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ cents he overcharged a customer. But anyone who tried that with the story of George Washington and the cherry tree would be laughed out of town. It says something about later countrymen's respect for George Washington. But it says nothing at all about his character. Another example is the Santa Claus myth. It is a great story but no one does theology based on it.

It is also clear in science. The observations of nature in novels are not a basis for writing physics or biology texts. Nor are psychological studies of characters in novels authoritative for understanding real people (except, of course, those who write and read them). This is true in spite of the fact that many accurate psychological or natural observations may find their way into novels. We just can't be sure they are accurate. For another example, no competent astronomer believes that there are canals on Mars. The fact that several people with relatively primitive telescopes thought they saw them doesn't matter. The fact that it is a romantic notion doesn't matter. With better telescopes, we are able to see Mars more clearly and there are no canals of the described size. The idea is not true. Therefore all conclusions based on the supposed canals, such as the presence of intelligent life on Mars, are invalid. It bears repeating: one cannot draw valid conclusions from an event that did not happen.

Revelational authority is authority derived from events which one person saw or heard, which have left no discernable traces in the surrounding physical universe. Because of this, the only way we can know what happened is to listen to the one who had the revelation.

This means that dependability becomes very important. Since we have no way of checking on what the person saw, or even if he saw anything, and no direct way of knowing who showed it to him, we have to use indirect means of evaluating the truthfulness of his revelation. Does it make sense? Is he the sort of person God might use? Is he honest? Does it fit with the rest of the universe, including previous revelations?

Perhaps this is the place to discuss the concept of canon. Sci-

entific documents do not need special defense. Ordinary historical documents need little defense.¹⁴ But providential history, miraculous history, and revelations all say something about God, and cannot be repeated at will. In addition, they are usually under attack from those who, for one reason or another, do not wish to submit to their authority. Because of this, a culture tends to put a stamp of approval on the works which it feels deserve special protection and respect. This has led in the Christian community to the concept of canon, that is, those books which are authoritative for religion. There are analogous concepts in other religions. The basis for choosing a canon is not usually quite as explicit as outlined above, but most of the time a more subconscious process uses much the same concepts. Notice that although the community chooses the canon, it does so attempting to recognize an external reality. It is not free in theory to choose any books it wants, and its choices can be criticized.

This explains why it is often important to establish authorship for a document. If Barnabas did not write the Epistle of Barnabas, then it may very well have been written by someone who did not have any special authority and it does not have the same evidentiary value as if it was. The same is true of 2 Peter. In addition, if Peter did not write 2 Peter, the writer lied (see 2 Pet 1:1). This also makes the authorship of the books of Moses the crucial issue that conservatives have sensed all along.

This also explains why the book of Esther was included in the canon. In the book, God is not mentioned, and neither is prayer, and it might seem strange at first glance that the book was included. But the writer obviously believed that the events were guided by Providence, as did Mordecai (Est 4:14). Thus the story falls within the realm of reputed historical authority and is worth preserving. This also explains why authorship is not quite as crucial here. Anyone with a knowledge of the facts could have written an authoritative book.

I have described the above categories as if they were watertight. In point of fact they are not. Was the conversion vision of the apostle Paul a revelation or a miraculous event? The surrounding people saw and heard something, but with not nearly

¹⁴ Although they need more than scientific documents—history can not be repeated at will. Therefore it is desirable to preserve original historical documents.

the detail that Paul saw and heard it. When does an event become clearly providential or clearly miraculous? A recent study¹⁵ showed that patients who are prayed for get better more often than those who are not. Does this transform prayer from a miraculous event into science? Perhaps most importantly if we read a theological statement in the writings of someone who has had information from God (either as providential events, miraculous events, or revelation), how do we know whether the statement is based on special knowledge, on general knowledge, or on someone else's information? This differentiation is particularly important if the statement is under attack (If it is clearly true, it doesn't matter too much where it came from).

It may be useful to have a final category of authority called general authority. This is authority with an obscure basis. Theoretically any statement an authority makes can be traced to one of the above sources—that is, another authority, experience, or perhaps prejudice or idiosyncrasy. But with general authority, we are not told and cannot prove where the source was. This leaves us with uncertainty as to how far to trust it. Many scientific textbooks make statements without backing them up with either scientific literature or personal experience. Likewise, many religious authorities make statements without saying whether the statements are directly supported by revelations or not.

This leaves us with a very difficult situation. How do we judge the validity of general authority? I think it is evident that general authority does not have the same absolute claim that authority coming from revelation, history or even scientific observation has. If someone says, "I saw this," we either have to believe that he saw something sufficiently similar to what he thought he saw to account for his observation, or call him a liar. On the other hand, if someone says, "This is so," we can believe he is mistaken without invoking dishonesty. However, general authority does have some validity or the statement wouldn't be made. And the more experience the authority has, the greater our reluctance to discard its general authority.

¹⁵ Byrd RC: "Positive Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer in a Coronary Care Unit Population." *South Med J* 81[7]:826-9, 1988.

Judging Authority

I would submit four principles which can apply in doubtful situations. The first is conservatism. I believe everyone, including people who claim revelations, should be considered to be accurate until one can show credible evidence to the contrary. I think that this is particularly true of canonized works. Therefore, for example, I think that the burden of evidence is on those who would disregard the Bible rather than on those who want to believe it. The same goes for the Qur'an, Joseph Smith, Ellen White, or any reputed authority (although, as the lawyers would say, this presumption is rebuttable). This also goes for statements within the Bible. There always exists the possibility that a given statement is supported by for example, revelation. Therefore no statement should be considered false without good reason.

The second principle is that if (1) one can show cultural influences on a statement, and (2) there is no direct claim to revelation or miraculous or providential event, and (3) the statement can be shown to be incorrect, then the statement can be safely ignored, and ignored without discarding the reliability of the rest of the authority where the statement is found. Thus, the fact that there are four slightly different accounts of the denials of Peter doesn't bother me. Neither Matthew, Mark, nor Luke was there, and they probably (and certainly in the case of Luke) got their information second- or third-hand. Nowhere do they (or John) claim that God revealed to them the exact story. It is entirely reasonable to believe that Peter made three denials of Jesus and that the exact details were seen differently by different individuals and/or got fuzzier with retelling.

The third principle is that the major point (or points) of a revelation (which should usually involve action in addition to belief) must be true for the source to remain reliable. This also applies to historical accounts. Some supporting points may be inaccurate, but they should have some basis in fact. For example, Jeremiah prophesied that another prophet would die within the year (Jer 28:15,16). If that had not happened, Jeremiah could no longer be relied upon when he said, "Thus says the LORD." There is no room for compromise. Thus the authority of a series of revelations is testable in the scientific sense. It is falsifiable, at least in theory.

On the other hand, the fact that Lev 11:6 says that the hare chews its cud doesn't bother me. Imagine yourself as God giving Moses the law of clean and unclean animals. You can argue with Moses (and he with the children of Israel) over whether the hare chews its cud (I can hear the objections now: "But look at that hare. See it chewing its cud. You don't want me to believe my own eyes?"), or you can accept their judgment, and point out that it still doesn't change the bottom line. They still shouldn't eat hares. I think God wisely chose the second course. I would have had a great deal more difficulty if Lev 11:6 had said that hares split the hoof (an obvious falsehood) or that they were clean (a recommendation of inappropriate action based on the actuality of cud chewing and hoof splitting).

This principle is probably the major reason why Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* upsets fundamentalist Moslems so. He calls attention to a reported episode when Mohammed proclaimed verses allegedly from the angel Gibreel (the Gabriel of the Bible) which he later (rightly) repudiated, saying that they were from Shaitan (or Satan). Rushdie's attempted explanation was that they actually came out of Mohammed's own head, as did all the other verses. This may or may not be a good explanation, but even using the most favorable explanation that accepts the story as accurate, it still is true that if Mohammed made that mistake once there is no assurance that he could not have done it again, and done it any number of times, only without it being detected during his lifetime. Put bluntly, for a time long enough to confuse his followers, Mohammed couldn't (or wouldn't) tell the difference between Gibreel and Shaitan, or at least between Gibreel and error. This would effectively destroy the authority of his visions. No wonder fundamentalist Moslems are upset.¹⁶

¹⁶ This would not mean that Islam is pure rot. There is a lot to be admired in Islam. Good Moslems should not drink, smoke, be promiscuous, or eat pork, and I find those prohibitions to be reasonable. Even the 5 pillars are not morally wrong. There is only one God, and Mohammed said a lot of true things, which therefore came from God somehow. If that makes him a prophet, then he was a prophet. Frequent prayers are a good thing. Giving to the poor is a moral requirement. A pilgrimage to places of religious historical significance is not wrong. And neither is fasting in the month of Ramadan. But if Mohammed made this central a mistake it would mean that even if Mohammed (or even the Qur'an) clearly taught the subordination of women, for example, we are not bound by his opinion. This may be another area where he unwittingly made a

Finally, inerrancy in all details should not be expected. If the purpose of revelation and miraculous and providential history is to influence people's major thought patterns and their actions, then it would be very surprising if some of the incorrect minor thought patterns were not incorporated into a revelation or historical account intact. One example is Lev 11:6, noted above. Another is Joshua 10:12,13 where Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, "and the sun stayed in the midst of heaven, and did not hasten to go down for about a whole day". We, who know that the Sun doesn't move relative to the Earth, but rather vice versa, know what the text is talking about, but to the ancients the text was not only phenomenologically accurate but scientifically accurate as well. God did not see fit at that time to correct ancient cosmology. There is an error here in the mind of the writer. That does not invalidate his authority as a witness.

C. S. Lewis illustrated it well. He knew of a girl who believed that poison had "horrid red things" inside, and that was what made it poison. Still, he said, that did not mean that he should disregard a warning she might give that something in her house was poison because of her prescientific concept of poison. He might very well die disregarding her because she had the important part right.

Another illustration may be helpful here. If you were in a primitive land and had a record or a tape of someone giving you information, you would not throw it away because it had "static", or even other voices. If the subject was sufficiently important, you might spend a great deal of time trying to sort out the extraneous noises, but you would listen to the voice you wanted very carefully. If someone tried to persuade you that there really was no voice there because he could prove that there were other noises,

mistake.

I did not discover how damaging *The Satanic Verses* was to Islamic theology until I read the book for myself. The western press that I was exposed to seemed to imply that there were only a few small areas where Muslims could take offense, whereas there are actually two whole chapters devoted to exposing the inconsistencies of Mohammed, and one of them bears the same title as the book.

The standard reply of Moslems to Ruslidie's arguments is that the episode in question never happened. In their favor is that it was first recorded some 300 years later. In Rushdie's favor is that it was recorded by a devout Muslim as an apparently accurate oral tradition.

you would consider that the height of absurdity. Only if the voice itself were invalidated would you consider the recording worthless.

A perceptive reader may note that I have not used miracles as a criterion for accepting an authority. The reason why is that most religions teach that there is a Devil who is also capable of performing miracles. Thus although miracles may prove that a supernatural power is involved, they tell nothing about the identity or reliability of that power. That must still be determined on other grounds.¹⁷

I find the above approach to authority much more useful than trying to approach the problem by defining inspiration. For standard Christian doctrine has it that if something is inspired by God, then it must be true. And standard Christian doctrine also has it that “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights . . .” (James 1:17). This means that if something is true, it is inspired in one way or another, and vice versa. Thus “inspired” becomes just another word for “true”, and our discussion rapidly turns into a circular argument with no falsifiable premises. We still have to ask, “How do you know it is true (or inspired)?” (By this definition I hope this book is inspired!)

In the rest of this work, I intend to follow these principles of dealing with religious authority. Outside of general experience (including scientific experience), my primary source is the Bible. I will give a preliminary defense of that choice in the next two chapters. In the meantime, as long as the premises are clearly stated, you will be able to put proper weight on the conclusions reached from them.

It should be obvious that I do not believe in inerrancy. However, this does not mean that taking the Bible in this way has no

¹⁷ This approach to authority may be applied to the authority of personal impressions, dreams, and voices or visions. Sometimes one has a more or less distinct idea that one should follow a particular course of action which otherwise would not be recommended. Initial questions that should be asked include, “Am I being completely honest? (If I am not, does my impression, or whatever, go against my inclination or along with it?) How unreasonable is the course of action that my impression prompts me to take? Is it consistent with what I believe to be prior revelation? What are the stakes involved? Do I have any idea where my impression came from? How reliable have my impressions been in the past?” If none of the above questions can resolve the impasse, I think that the principle of conservatism should apply. In other words, trust your instincts. They just may be the voice of God.

consequences, or that I think that the authority of the Bible is limited to “religious” ideas. I think that there are some historical, scientific, and/or philosophical ideas which are so in conflict with Biblical authority that they can’t both be right, and at this point I believe that the Bible has more authority in those areas of conflict.¹⁸

¹⁸ For Seventh-day Adventists, one last comment on Ellen White is in order. I take her seriously. However, I also take seriously her statements that “The Bible is the only rule of faith and doctrine”, (FE 126— abbreviations used are those of The Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.: *Comprehensive Index to the writings of Ellen G. White*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1962), that she is “a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light” (CM 125, Ev 257), that “If you had made God’s word your study, . . . you would not have needed the Testimonies” (2T 605, repeated for emphasis in ST 665, also L5198), and that “The testimonies of Sister White should not be carried to the front. God’s Word is the unerring standard. The Testimonies are not to take the place of the Word. . . . Let all prove their positions from the scriptures and substantiate every point they claim as truth from the revealed Word of God.” (Ev 256. Also compare CT 171 [CG 514], CSW 84, GC 204-5, 595, 2T 604-7, 5T 663-8, 6T 393, LS 200-1.) I take this to mean that our primary focus should be on the Bible. Thus I would far rather support a position by two Biblical passages than by twenty E. G. White quotations. Ellen White will primarily be mentioned when there is controversy about her position.