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THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION (ISSN 0021-6460) publishes articles concerned with a variety of topics pertinent to SDA education. Opinions expressed by our writers do not necessarily represent the views of the editors or the official position of the Department of Education of the General Conference.

Issued bimonthly, October through May, and a summer issue for June, July, August, and September by the Department of Education, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 6840 Eastern Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20012. (202) 722-6407 or 6412. Subscription price, \$12.25. Single copy, \$2.50. Price may vary where national currencies are different. Printed by University Printers, 537 Grove St., Berrien Springs, MI 49103, to whom all communications concerning change of address should be sent, giving both old and new address. *When writing about your subscription, please enclose the address label from the wrapper in which you received the journal.* Address all editorial and advertising communications to the Editor. Copyright © 1988 by University Printers.

Clarifying the Mission, Renewing the System

There can be no doubt that those involved with SDA education need "wisdom and spiritual understanding for full insight into [God's] will," so that our schools may become more "worthy of the Lord" and, ultimately, "entirely pleasing to him." Surely all those who carry teaching or administrative responsibilities need to be strengthened "with ample power to meet whatever comes with fortitude, patience, and [indeed, with] joy" (Colossians 1:9-11).*

I invite you to reflect for a few minutes on some elements of God's will for Adventist education. While there are many things we do not know about God's will, there are some things we *do* know.

It is God's will that we be actively concerned about the *quality* of SDA education. Of course we all believe that Adventist education should be good education. I have never heard a speech in favor of mediocrity. But *believing* in excellence and *talking* about it are not the same as *achieving* it.

Educational quality ensures that every student learns as much as he or she is capable of learning. It can occur at every level, in every class, and with every student, regardless of background. A remedial reading course can be excellent education. So can a junior-high cooking class or a second-grade spelling exercise.

Good education requires adequate (though not necessarily elaborate) facilities and, most of all, good teachers—teachers who know their subjects and their students and are genuinely interested in both.

Every Adventist school—from elementary through professional level—ought to be committed to excellence. The Seltzer Daley survey reminds us that Adventist families are seriously concerned about the quality of Adventist education, and that they are not willing to pay for inferior education.

Religious commitment is no substitute for good education (any more than for good medical care). Indeed, religious commitment is a *reason* for good education.

In seeking to achieve excellence, however, we must recognize our limitations. One of the great temptations is to try to do too much. This is understandable, because our students need—and their parents want—many things.

What we do, we must do as well as anyone can. A student should be able to learn as much about English at Atlantic Union College as at Stanford or Harvard; as much chemistry at Loma Linda Academy as at some famous Eastern prep school. If we cannot do something very well, and there is not reasonable prospect of doing it well, perhaps we should not try to do it at all. We must not confuse variety with quality.

How shall we proceed? With the guidance of the Holy Spirit we need to be ready to think new thoughts, and to do new things. To this end we need to ask some questions: Should we make some structural changes? Should we have a more integrated, cooperative system of higher education? Should there be more variety within

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DIVINE DRAGON-SLAYER

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nated. Though a bit unusual, it demonstrates beautifully how the Israelites adapted a concept quite familiar to their contemporaries to say something about redemption and the God of Israel.

Numerous passages in the Old Testament describe God as the mighty warrior who, in antiquity, "pierced the dragon," or the "fleeing serpent," who "crushed Rahab like a carcass," and "broke the heads of the dragon on the waters."⁴

As one reads these startling biblical passages, he or she will recognize in the surrounding verses the theme of Creation. Do we have here an innovative way of alluding to the Creator? How are we to relate to such unusual imagery? The story behind all this is rather bizarre, but needs to be told, since most Christians will seldom gain an understanding of these texts through the Sabbath sermon.

The Babylonian creation account, entitled ENUMA ELISH, was widely known in the ancient

world. Briefly, it unfolds as follows: A battle scene is set between Tiamat, the monster goddess of the sea, who created chaos and disaster; and Marduk, a giant warrior whose position among the gods depended upon his military prowess. To conquer the monster, Marduk enlisted the help of winds and weapons. As they began their struggle, the wind blasted into the open, fiery mouth of the dragon, bloating and disarming her.

In a flash, Marduk pierced her heart with a well-placed arrow, completing his conquest with mace blows to Tiamat's head. He then separated her body into two halves. Of the upper one he constructed a dome he called the sky. The lower portion became the earth. Lastly, Marduk formed humankind from the blood and remaining viscera.

Although rather grisly, this story spread widely and was popular among peoples in the ancient Near East. More importantly, it became, in the hands of inspired, creative Israelites, a means of turning attention to the true God who was the genuine Creator.

When many Israelites (especially those in Babylonian captivity) were tempted to trust in idols during

times of trial, biblical writers adapted an ancient, popular myth to make a statement about the God of Israel. "You thought it was Marduk who pierced the dragon and created the world? Let me tell you about the true Creator! He crushed the serpent (overcame chaos and disaster) and created the universe. And now He is able to fight any dragon afflicting you, to help in every situation."

These writers thus used rhetorical devices to draw Israel's attention, by means of creative readaptation, to the only source of life and help in times of distress—the only true God.

A Worthwhile Endeavor

Reading the biblical text through the spectacles of ancient history and culture may not be easy, but it is worth investing the time and energy. In this way, the Bible comes alive. It becomes dynamic and vibrant. Events and characters jump off neatly printed pages into the churning stream of life, and we experience God's activity anew. Such study helps us better understand human and divine behavior, and appreciate God's saving action.

As teachers, the challenge confronting us is at least twofold. We must discover this richness for the sake of our own Bible study. But we must also foster interest among our students and create an atmosphere in which they can understand, appreciate, and utilize the principles of interpretation as they read Scripture.

Suggested Resources

The following recommendations may open some doors for professional growth and development in this area and provide a springboard for classroom application.

Three types of material are important: Old Testament introductions, histories, and reports of archaeological discoveries relating to Old Testament times. Introductions typically deal with background issues and provide information about each biblical book. The one I use for my college classes is *Old Testament Survey*.⁵ Although a bit technical, it is a balanced, mid-

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the system as a whole, and less variety within particular institutions? Should we develop different kinds of postsecondary schools to provide different kinds of education? Should some academies and colleges have higher academic expectations than others? Should more time, effort, and money be invested in recruiting students at all levels? Should teachers be better paid?

If one of our temptations is to try to do too much, another is to be impatient with the process of getting good information. Whenever there is an evident problem, we are in danger of being seduced by a bright idea. But creativity and discussion are not adequate substitutes for gathering data and analyzing the facts.

Let us with Paul pray for wisdom and spiritual understanding so that Adventist education "may bear fruit in active goodness of every kind, and grow in the knowledge of God." We may be sure that He will strengthen us in His glorious might with "ample power to meet whatever comes with fortitude, patience, and joy."^{*}—Fritz Guy. □

Dr. Fritz Guy is Associate Pastor of the University Church of SDA in Loma Linda, California, and Lecturer in Theology at Loma Linda University. This editorial is condensed from a worship talk he gave to the NAD Boards of Higher Education on January 5, 1988.

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