

A Biblical Perspective for Research

Research is purposeful and systematic inquiry that seeks to advance knowledge and understanding. While viewed historically in academia almost exclusively as a function of higher education, research has been advocated more recently as relevant and necessary for students at all levels,¹ mainly in terms of helping them understand and experience core elements of scientific inquiry.

This view is particularly appropriate for Seventh-day Adventist education. Ellen White, who wrote prolifically on the topic of Adventist education, broadly stated, “Instead of confining their study to that which men have said or written, let students be directed to the sources of truth, to the vast fields opened for research in nature and revelation.”²

While the Bible is not a textbook of research methodology, it does lay a

foundation that can enable us to conduct research from a biblical frame of reference. Scripture not only provides examples of individuals who engaged in core activities of research, but also describes key elements found in several types of research, while highlighting a number of research principles.

Examples of Research

Throughout the Bible, various entities are depicted as engaging in research. The Holy Spirit, for example,

conducts in-depth inquiry. While the Spirit, as a member of the Godhead, certainly has knowledge of all things,³ Paul also wrote, “These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Corinthians 2:10, NRSV).⁴ While it may not be entirely clear why an omniscient being would engage in investigation, perhaps the Holy Spirit’s examination

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of all things has more to do with how to most effectively transmit aspects of this deep knowledge to others, which in itself is an important phase of the research process.

The Old Testament also mentions human beings carrying out or advocating research activities. The patriarch Job stated, “I was a father to the needy, and I investigated the case which I did not know” (Job 29:16, NASB).⁵ Apparently, Job’s ability to respond appropriately to the needs of others was based on inquiry, seeking to know and understand the facts of each case.

As he considered “the days of old,” David declared, “I meditate within my heart, and my spirit makes diligent search” (Psalm 77:5-6, NKJV).⁶ David seems to indicate that in the process of making an inquiry, he reviewed existing knowledge, including perhaps his own prior experience, in an endeavor to make sense of life situations.

Influenced perhaps by his father, Solomon held inquiry in high regard, declaring that it is “the glory of kings . . . to search things out” (Proverbs 25:2, NRSV). Furthermore, Solomon conducted his own research, stating: “I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things” (Ecclesiastes 7:25, NIV).⁷

Perhaps one might expect that a prophet, having been given a direct conduit to divine truth, would not require the rigor of research. The apostle Peter, however, observed, “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care” (1 Peter 1:10). The prophet Daniel is a case in point. When he received a vision indicating, “It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated,” Daniel was perplexed as to the meaning of this time period. “I was appalled by the vision,” he reported. “It was beyond understanding” (Daniel 8:14, 27). In an endeavor to resolve the mystery, Daniel searched historical documents. He then reported, “I found from studying

the writings of the prophets that the Lord had said to Jeremiah, ‘Jerusalem will lie in ruins for seventy years’” (Daniel 9:2, CEV).⁸

In the New Testament, the believers in Thessalonica listened to Paul and readily assented to what he taught. In Berea, however, the followers of Christ did not simply accept matters at face value but tested Paul’s

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teaching against the standard of existing Scripture, a comparison of new data with existing knowledge. The author of Acts found this approach commendable, noting, “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11).

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analysis, and the formulation of sound conclusions. “Examine everything carefully,” Paul wrote, “hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21, NASB).⁹ This harmonizes with a prime purpose of research—to discern what is appropriate and of value, to distinguish truth from error.

Types of Research

In addition to cases of individuals engaged in research-related activities, the Bible documents various approaches to research, including aspects of historical, descriptive, quasi-experimental, and qualitative methodologies.

The historical approach. In the biblical canon, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts appear to have been the result of historical inquiry. This two-volume set was written by a physician, Luke, and presented to an individual addressed as “most excellent Theophilus” (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1), likely a person occupying a prominent position in the Roman society.¹⁰ In his introduction to the first volume, Luke observed that “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses.” He then added, “With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:1-4). Notice that in these statements, Luke highlights the use of primary sources and the organized presentation of findings.

While Solomon had wide-ranging interests, including “plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls,” as well as “animals and birds, reptiles and fish” (1 Kings 4:33), a portion of his three thousand proverbs (verse 32) may have resulted from historical research. Ecclesiastes notes, “Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs” (Ecclesiastes 12:9).¹¹

In the New Testament, the writer of the Book of Hebrews appears to have conducted a review of Old Testament history. In chapter 11, beginning with Abel, the author presents a multi-case analysis across the lives of 10 individuals, concluding that faith was a recurring theme in each person's experience (Hebrews 11:39).¹²

The descriptive approach. The Bible documents a descriptive approach to inquiry. When Moses sent representatives of the 12 tribes to search the land of Canaan, he directed them, "Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. See what the land is like" (Numbers 13:17, 18). This statement could be viewed as defining the delimitations and purpose of the study.

Then Moses instructed these individuals to find out "whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not?" (Numbers 13:18-20). These aspects, the characteristics of the inhabitants, towns, land, and vegetation, were the facets or variables of the study.

Moses concluded his assignment to the spies by requesting those carrying out the study to gather a sample: "Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land" (vs. 20). In all, a well-designed approach to descriptive research. Incidentally, as further illustrated in this case, data must also be interpreted. As evidenced in the team report, various researchers can review the same data and yet reach quite different conclusions, depending on their assumptions and world-views (see Numbers 13:26-33).

The quasi-experimental approach. The Book of Daniel presents what may be one of the earliest examples of a quasi-experimental approach to research, a single-factor posttest design.¹³

When confronted with Nebuchadnezzar's dietary regime, Daniel and



three fellow students at the Royal University of Babylon proposed a comparative study. First they set out the research protocol: "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see" (Daniel 1:12, 13). The independent variable was type of diet, with two levels: simple food versus the royal food. Daniel and his three friends formed the treatment group, while the "other young men" were the control. The test was a question of difference. As a result of the study, there were to be findings and conclusions (see Daniel 1:14-16).

The study, by the way, seems to have included a longitudinal component. Three years later, when the students rendered their comprehensive

exam, Daniel and his three friends were found to be 10 times wiser than the magi of the realm (Daniel 1:20), a group, incidentally, that included their instructors.

The qualitative approach. In addition to examples of historical, descriptive, and quasi-experimental research, the Bible also presents instances of naturalistic inquiry. Luke, for example, became a participant observer in Paul's missionary journeys, reporting events that he experienced. Notice the transition to the first person beginning in Troas until Philippi, and then several years later, from Philippi onward to Rome (see Acts 16:10-40; Acts 20:6 onward).¹⁴

Cases of direct observation may be found in Peter and John's examination of the tomb where Jesus had been

buried (John 20:1-8), Gideon's observation of the wet and dry fleece (Judges 6:36-40), and Nehemiah's nocturnal inspection of the ruins of Jerusalem, through which he corroborated interview data (Nehemiah 1:2, 3; 2:11-17). In His day, Jesus remarked that persons would make predictions based on qualitative observations of natural phenomena but were not applying a similar process to the "signs of the times" (Matthew 16:2-4).¹⁵

As has been noted, the Bereans triangulated what they heard with document analysis (Acts 17:11). This crosscheck of data sources fits well with the biblical injunction that a matter is established with evidence from two or three witnesses.¹⁶ Even the witness of the apostles was based on the triangulation of what the Bereans had seen and what they had heard (Acts 4:20).

Principles of Research

In addition to referencing various approaches, the Bible highlights core concepts within research. These include the following principles, among others:

Inquiry is linked to discovery.

Jesus spoke of this relationship when He said, "Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find" (Matthew 7:7). While a spirit of curiosity is a key trait in inquiry,¹⁷ the process of inquiry itself requires an investment of personal effort. Solomon remarked, "If you seek her [wisdom] as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will . . . find the knowledge of God" (Proverbs 2:4, 5, NKJV).

Research builds on prior knowledge. Bidad the Shuhite, for instance, advised, "Ask the former generations and find out what their ancestors learned" (Job 8:8). In a similar line, Paul wrote: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us" (Romans 15:4).¹⁸

Research encounters limitations.

There are matters that transcend the capacity of research. The Book of Job asks, "Can you search out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty?" (Job 11:7,

NKJV; see also Deuteronomy 29:29). God Himself reminds us, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. . . . As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8, 9). Part of the problem is that we "see in a mirror, dimly" and we know only "in part" (1 Corinthians 13:12, NKJV). Beyond these limiting factors, however, there are simply matters that

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" . . . no eye has seen, . . . no ear has heard, and . . . no human mind has conceived" (1 Corinthians 2:9), questions on which even the best designs may come up short.

Research can inform decision-making and guide practice. When David needed to identify qualified personnel, "a search was made in the records, and capable men among the Hebronites were found at Jazer in Gilead." David then placed these individuals "in charge of the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh for every matter pertaining to God and for the affairs of the king"

(1 Chronicles 26:31-32). In another example, Moses warned that if, upon entering Canaan, it was rumored that some of the Israelites had begun to worship pagan gods, research was to precede action. "Let a full search be made, and let questions be put with care" (Deuteronomy 13:14, 15, BBE).¹⁹ Only if the report was found to be true was action to be taken.²⁰

Finally, it seems that *research is a divine directive*.²¹ Jesus stated that every "disciple of the kingdom of heaven" is to be like "the owner of a house who brings out of his store-room new treasures as well as old" (Matthew 13:52). While all that proceeds from the storehouse is of value, some of the treasure is to be fresh knowledge, perhaps a result of research. Solomon also implies that research carries a divine endorsement. After stating, "I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven," Solomon added: "This burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised" (Ecclesiastes 1:13, NKJV). Stated perhaps another way, God has given us the difficult assignment of research, with the intent that we should actively engage in it.

Conclusion

We have briefly examined some instances, approaches, and principles of research that we find in Scripture. The prophet Daniel, as he surveyed the broad scope of history, was told by an angel that an increase in knowledge would be a defining characteristic of "the time of the end" (Daniel 12:4), suggesting a surge in research in the times in which we live.

Given the role of research in contemporary society and in educational practice, linked with the perspective that all activities are to be carried out from a Christian frame of reference (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17), an examination of research from the perspective of Scripture can perhaps serve as a starting point for enabling students to view research as a valuable tool in discovering God's truth.

Or to summarize the foundational concept in the words of Ellen White, “In order to understand the truth of God, there is need of deep research.”²²

This article has been peer reviewed.



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See, for example: Pamela Fraser-Abder, *Teaching Emerging Scientists: Fostering Scientific Inquiry With Diverse Learners in Grades K-2* (New York: Pearson, 2010); Douglas Llewellyn, *Inquire Within: Implementing Inquiry-based Science Standards in Grades 3-8* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2014); _____, *Teaching High School Science Through Inquiry and Argumentation* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2012); National Research Council, *A Framework for K-12 Science Education: Practices, Crosscutting Concepts, and Core Ideas* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2012).

2. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1903), 17.

3. See, for example, Job 21:22; Psalm 139; 147:4, 5; Isaiah 40:13, 14, 28; Acts 15:18; Romans 11:33; Hebrews 4:13; 1 John 3:20.

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8. *Contemporary English Version*, Copyright © 1995 by the American Bible Society.

9. It should be noted that Paul does not state that we are to ingest everything, but rather that all things should be examined. In the physical realm, for example, the goodness of some things can be predetermined by sight or smell. The key concept seems to be that while all things should be subject to analysis, not everything that we examine needs to be assimilated.

10. Luke records Paul’s use of the phrase “most excellent” when he addresses the Roman governors, Felix and Festus. See Acts 24:3 and 26:25.

11. See also Ecclesiastes 1:10, where the author states, “Is there anything of which one can say, ‘Look! This is something new’? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.”

12. Other examples of historical research include the discovery of the lost book of the law during the reign of Josiah (2 Kings 22, 23; 2 Chronicles 34), as well as the priests’ injunction to Nicodemus, “Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee” (John 7:52, NKJV). Incidentally, the prophet Jonah was from Gath Hopher, a town in Galilee (2 Kings 14:25). Biblical passages that seem to allude to aspects of historical research include Psalm 87:6; Isaiah 28:10; and Romans 15:4.

13. An explanation of how this example could be utilized as the basis for a research class activity is found in a monograph prepared for the 35th International Faith and Learning Seminar (2007) by Nicceta Davis, titled: “The Bible and Research: Reflections for the Christian Researcher.” The monograph may be accessed at http://christinthe classroom.org/vol_35a/35a-cc_037-056.pdf.

14. David’s invitation to experience God’s goodness also seems to suggest the researcher as an instrument: “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!” (Psalm 34:8, NKJV). Tasting, particularly, is direct, personal, and intimate. Notice also that the outcome seeks to establish God’s trustworthiness, another key construct in qualitative inquiry. Eve at the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3) may be a further example of experiential inquiry. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve accepted false assumptions and doubted the trustworthiness of God.

15. Another example may be found in Jesus’ instruction to the two disciples of John the Baptist, who had brought the question from John, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” After they stood by for a time, waiting for answer, Jesus told them, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Luke 7:18-22).

16. See, for example, Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19; Hebrews 10:28.

17. Some biblical examples of a spirit of inquiry and curiosity include Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3:2, 3), Herod’s desire to meet Jesus (Luke 9:9; 23:8), the Athenians’ quest for new knowledge (Acts 17:19-21), and the multitude’s desire to meet Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead (John 12:9). See also Genesis 32:29; Judges 13:17, 18; Daniel 12:8, 9; Matthew 24:3; Luke 13:23; John 3:4; 12:20, 21; and Acts 1:6, 7.

18. See also Deuteronomy 4:32; 32:7; Psalm 44:1; 78:3; 1 Corinthians 10:11.

19. Samuel Henry Hooke, trans., *The Bible in Basic English* (London: Cambridge Press, 1965).

20. Another example may appear in the Book of Esther. Although not technically research, Xerxes’ review of the book of the chronicles of the kingdom brought to light the fact that when two of the king’s officers had conspired to assassinate the king, Mordecai, who had uncovered the plot and saved the king’s life, had never been given due recognition (see Esther 6). Beyond the fact that research and sleepless nights seem to go together, this event highlights the concept that activities associated with research can contribute to policy change and ultimately impact people’s lives.

21. Certainly, there may be other principles in Scripture applicable to research. These might include: ethics in research (Matthew 7:12), topic suitability (Numbers 1 and 2; 1 Chronicles 21; Psalm 64:6), care in the use of sources (Jeremiah 8:8; Mathew 4:6, 7; Revelation 22:18, 19), hypothesis testing (Malachi 3:10; 1 John 4:1), and the writing of results (Habakkuk 2:2).

22. Ellen G. White, “Imperative Necessity of Searching for Truth,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 69:45 (November 15, 1892): 706, 707. In a similar vein, White also states: “The word of God must be studied, and this requires thought and prayerful research” (“Timothy,” *The Youth’s Instructor 1852-1914* [Silver Spring, Md.: Ellen G. White Estate, Inc., 2017], 977). “Scientific research opens to the mind vast fields of thought and information, enabling us to see God in His created works,” *The Signs of the Times* 26:11 (March 14, 1900).