

## ARE THERE ERRORS IN THE WRITINGS?

Stephen Cole

Are any of Swedenborg's limitations imposed on the Divine revelation given through him? Are there scientific inaccuracies? slips of the pen? misunderstandings? From a philosophic standpoint there is a prior question: Even if there were such errors mingled with Divine revelation, would mere men ever be in a position to affirm their existence? Can the human understanding be trusted to identify them? Although one might, from a theoretical consideration, hesitate to answer yes to these questions, nevertheless, some of the obvious candidates for being so identified seem so plain as to leave little doubt. Let us take up just one of these.

In *Apocalypse Explained* 163 the phrase "Behold, I cast her into a bed" (Rev. 2:22) is expounded. The treatment focuses on the word *bed*, which in the Latin is *lectus*. In the course of the explanation twelve other passages which use the word *lectus* are quoted, and their spiritual sense is unfolded. The problem arises with the third passage:

"May the blessings of thy father prevail above the blessings of my parents,...may they be on the head of Joseph, and on the head of the bed of his brethren" (Gen. 49:26). "Joseph," as was said, is the Lord's spiritual church; "the head of the bed of his brethren" is the spiritual that flows into all the truths and goods of that church.<sup>1</sup>

The phrase "the head of the bed of his brethren" is most remarkable. The King James Version for this phrase is: "the crown of the head of him that was separate from his brethren." The *Arcana* has: "the crown of the head of the Nazirite of his brethren" (AC 6437). "Him that was separate" and "the Nazirite" are both legitimate translations of the Hebrew *nazir* in this phrase. "The bed," however, simply cannot be justified.

A translator of the *Apocalypse Explained* offers this footnote to the passage quoted above:

The word *lectus* here is a participle, meaning *one chosen*. Swedenborg read it in his Latin Bible for the noun *lectus*, a bed. In other places he quotes the passage correctly.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The translation is that found in the American Swedenborg Printing and Publishing Society Latin-English edition, 1889, p. 212.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

This would certainly seem an error very embarrassing to anyone insisting on the infallibility of the Writings. This instance was seen by James Hyde as typical of the mistakes made by Swedenborg because he worked from Latin translations rather than consulting the original Hebrew. After suggesting that Swedenborg usually followed his Montano Bible (in which the Latin rendering of the Old Testament is actually that of Sante Pagnino) when quoting this passage (i.e. at AC 3969, 6416; AE 448, 577), Hyde continues:

Why did Swedenborg quote this verse, and not only quote it, but also explain it, in AE 163 under the signification of the word *bed*? The Latin for *bed* (*lectus*) and the perfect participle of *legere* (to choose or select), which is *lectus*, are identical in form. It would seem, then, that having found the passage in question in Schmidt, without reference to the Hebrew, or his usual translation, he took *lecti* to mean "of the bed" instead of "of him that is set apart," and explained it accordingly. Had he referred to Montano, he must have discovered the mistake. Again, that Swedenborg translated from the Hebrew is an inadmissible theory.<sup>3</sup>

Can there be any doubt that this is what happened? Even if another reason for the inclusion of this passage could be suggested, how then does one explain the fact that this is the only place where the Writings accept the Schmidius rendering of this passage? Need one hesitate to conclude from such plain evidence that there are errors in the Writings and that at least some of them can be identified confidently?

So one may reason, if one is willing to make laws by the observation of hard cases. On the other hand, if one is disposed, from principle, to believe that it is beyond the power of human observation and reason to judge any part or aspect of Divine revelation to be faulty, then one may reason differently. One may assume in the face of all hard cases, all apparently obvious errors, that there is, nevertheless, some explanation, however deeply hidden. Is one ever justified, even in the case of an error as obvious as the one here considered, in ruling out the possibility that there is some such deeply hidden explanation? In the present case the answer would seem to be no. For it appears that there is an explanation not so deeply hidden after all.

Assuming that there is a reason other than error for the inclusion

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<sup>3</sup>James Hyde, "Swedenborg's Bibles," *The New-Church Magazine*, 1901; p. 468.

of Genesis 49:26 in AE 163, one then asks how Swedenborg came to choose the passages he did for this number. More attention should be paid to the relation of the *Index Biblicus* to the expository works. Of the passages cited in AE 163, almost all are among those cited in the Old Testament index (Codex 4) and the New Testament index (Codex 5) under the word *Lectus*. There, as in AE 163, the Genesis 49:26 passage follows the two passages from Amos. Noting this, the temptation might be simply to modify the error theory from a misreading of the Latin Bible to a misreading of the *Index Biblicus* or to suggest that the misreading of the Latin Bible took place, not when the *Apocalypse Explained* was written, but rather as the *Index Biblicus* was compiled when Swedenborg was not as familiar with Hebrew.

These speculations are deflated, however, by the observation that there is one passage in Codex 4, the first in fact, that was not carried over into AE 163. The passage is Isaiah 37:24. The reference is to "the choicest firs" (*lectissimae abietes*). This is clear evidence that Swedenborg knew that he was including both kinds of *lectus* (*lectus-chosen* and *lectus-bed*). The form *lectissimae* could not be mistaken for a noun, because superlatives can not be made from nouns — Swedenborg could not possibly have supposed that Isaiah 37:24 was speaking of "the bed-most firs." Thus one is not compelled by the inclusion of Genesis 49:26 in the *Index Biblicus* to assume that he was reading *lectus* as *bed* in this passage. Indeed, one has justification for believing that he was reading *lectus* as *chosen*, especially if a reason can be shown for the inclusion of the passage in AE 163.

Let us imagine Swedenborg at work on AE 163. He begins to get into the explanation of *bed* (*lectus*). He turns to Codex 4. The first entry under *Lectus* (Isaiah 37:24) is not about beds so he passes over it. The second entry (Amos 3:12) is relevant and becomes the first passage quoted in AE 163. The third passage (Amos 6:4-6) becomes the second in AE 163. This passage ends with a reference to Joseph, and the explanation of the passage ends by going into some detail of the signification of Joseph, finally referring to five passages in the *Arcana*. Finishing this, Swedenborg turns back to the Index. Can we not then picture him saying to himself: "This next passage (Gen. 49:26) has nothing to do with bed, but does it not fit in nicely with what has just been said about Joseph"? Is this not the true reason for the inclusion of this passage in AE 163? Do we not find that the explanation of this passage in AE 163 focuses on Joseph and not on *lectus*? One can find the *Apocalypse Explained* getting into such chains of exposition in other cases as well.<sup>4</sup>

What has been suggested here may not be the true or final

solution to the problem of Genesis 49:26 in AE 163, but it does seem far preferable to the solution "Swedenborg made a mistake." The object has been to show that fairly compelling answers can exist for what seem to be almost certain cases of error. If one adds to this the instances in the Old and New Testaments where apparent errors in fact convey Divine secrets, if properly understood,<sup>5</sup> then a strong case exists that mere man should never presume to identify anything in Divine revelation as an error. ■

<sup>4</sup>E.g. AE 365:38, where the basic subject being explained is peace. From peace the treatment turns more specifically to a passage about Salem (which means peace), then to Melchizedek, King of Salem, and finally a passage is quoted relating to Melchizedek without any reference at all to peace.

<sup>5</sup>E.g. Genesis 35:26: "These are the sons of Jacob, who was born to him in Paddan-Aram," and its explanation in AC 4610.

## TOWARD THE BEGINNING OF TIME

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### IV Big Bang via General Relativity

Clearly our view of the first moments of creation will be strongly shaped by the mode with which it is described. This mode is the local description prescribed by Einstein's 1916 general theory of relativity, a theory which is classical in the sense that it does not describe quantum phenomena, but nevertheless is very radical in that it provides a hitherto unknown connection between space and time.

Henceforth space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality.<sup>12</sup>

#### 1) Spacetime Intervals and Curvature

In Newtonian physics, space and time are considered to be quite separate entities. Mathematically they are described by "small"

\* Continued from January-March, 1980 issue.

<sup>12</sup>H. Minkowski, "Space and Time," in *The Principle of Relativity*, annotated by A. Sommerfeld (New York: Dover Pub. Inc., 1923).