

APPENDIX THIRTY-FOUR

Ellen G. White And Exegesis

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Article by Joseph J. Battistone, “Ellen White’s Authority as Bible Commentator,” *Spectrum* 8(2), Jan. 1977, pp. 37-39.

Two of the most vexing questions concerning Ellen White’s writings concern her interpretation and use of Scripture and our interpretation and the use of her writings. The two questions are related. For example, there is Ellen White’s interpretation of the story of Jesus’ transfiguration (Mat. 17:1-8). The glorious appearance of Moses and Elijah with Christ on the mount is understood as a miniature representation of the second coming of Christ. Moses typifies the saints who will be resurrected at that time; Elijah represents those who will be translated. The credibility of this interpretation is enhanced when we consider the preceding passage (Matt. 16:21-28). At its end is the problematic text, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom” (Matt. 16:28 RSV). By interpreting the transfiguration as a symbolic portrayal of the second advent of Christ, Ellen White resolves the difficulty.

Nevertheless, there are commentators who interpret the figures in the transfiguration scene directly. For them, Moses represents the law, and Elijah the prophets. Instead of the second coming of Christ they see in the transfiguration the atoning work of Jesus. Support for this interpretation can be found in the New Testament.

Some persons in the church view these two interpretations as complementary rather than contradictory. Others, however, find difficulty in accepting an interpretation of Scripture that differs from one advanced by Ellen White. This difficulty arises, to some extent, from the fact that Ellen White’s writings are viewed by Seventh-day Adventists as an inspired — and hence authoritative — commentary on the Bible. But the problem may also develop from a failure to understand in a precise way the purpose of Ellen White’s writings. And if we do misunderstand the nature of her commentary, we will inevitably misinterpret and misuse her work.

It is important to distinguish between belief in the inspiration of Ellen White, and the theory of how inspiration functions. I may believe her writings are inspired and, at the same time, fail to understand and use them correctly. This is why faith cannot be a substitute for skills in thinking and reading.

We need also to clarify the functional difference between contemporary biblical commentaries and the writings of Ellen White. Commentators today often use tools and techniques in their Bible study that Ellen White did not use. Moreover, their approach to Bible study involves techniques that fall outside the scope of Ellen White’s concern. Questions relating to the study of ancient manuscripts, the linguistic and literary character of words in the Bible, the authorship, date and place of a particular writing, or the various literary forms of the material in the Gospels — these are raised from a perspective much different from that of Ellen White’s.

To be sure, the truth of the Bible — the knowledge of God’s saving grace through faith in Jesus Christ — is not dependent upon our ability to answer such questions. Still, the knowledge gained through such inquiry will enhance and render more precise our understanding of saving truth. So, we cannot dismiss the word of biblical scholars as unimportant for a practical approach to Bible study. While biblical scholarship is not

necessary to grasp a knowledge of God's saving power in Jesus Christ, it is indispensable for understanding the historical process by which God's revelation has come to us.

If Ellen White's approach to the Bible, then, is different from that of contemporary scholarship, how are we to understand her contribution to the church? I believe that Ellen White's genius — that is, her divine inspiration — is revealed in her understanding and presentation of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. Here lies the uniqueness of her work. She takes a profound and abstract theological problem — the problem of evil — and discloses in a sublime way its practical significance for each individual. Consequently, her writings assume a sense of urgency akin to that of the Scriptures. Indeed, her keen sensitivity to sin and her profound awareness of the forces of evil operative in the world, have given her ministry prophetic significance for the church. Her works enjoy a unique status in the church, second in importance only to that of the Scriptures.

Without question, the theme of the great controversy is the most important in her writings. It constitutes the basic perspective from which she interprets the Bible.

As a case in point, consider her commentary on the prophet Elijah. Ellen White devotes more space to his life and ministry than to that of any other prophet. Upon reading what she says, two points of emphasis emerge which explain her keen interest in Elijah. First, she refers repeatedly to his character — his unflinching loyalty, dauntless courage and admirable faith. Second, she refers, by way of contrast, to the striking condition of the society of Elijah's time — its alarming apostasy, gross immorality and rampant lawlessness.

The contrast between the character of the prophet and the society of his time are important to Ellen White because of their typological significance in the scheme of the great controversy. This becomes clear in Chapter 14 of *Prophets and Kings*. The entire chapter is a homily on the poverty of spiritual leadership in the modern world, the widespread infidelity and apostasy, and the alarming indifference to the Decalogue resulting from the impoverished leadership. Such abysmal apathy, she argues, is the reason for violence and crime in the world.

One of her major concerns in this chapter is the seventh-day Sabbath. Modern-day Baalism — the counterpart or antitype of Israelite apostasy — comes to surface in the “well-nigh universal disregard of the Sabbath commandment.” While men and women pursue riches, fame and pleasure, she notes, they neglect Bible study, reject God's law, despise His love and ignore His messages. But God has a faithful remnant who will not bend their knee in false worship.

In the chapters on Elijah's ministry, references and allusions to the great controversy abound in the form of brief homilies, object lessons and general counsel. According to Ellen White, Elijah typifies the saints living at the time of Christ's return. The crisis Israel faced on Mount Carmel represents the great test awaiting the church in the last days. Baal worship in ancient Israel corresponds to apostate Protestantism today. Thus, the message to be proclaimed by the remnant church — the “Elijah message” — is essentially a message of judgment.

One further observation is important. In her study of the Old Testament prophets, including Elijah, Ellen White focuses more attention on their actions than on their words. She is more interested in relating the practical results of the prophetic preaching than in explaining the theological significance of the actual messages. Consequently, **her writings tend to be more homiletical than exegetical**. This becomes more apparent in the frequent parallels she draws between the time of the prophets and the period of the church today. These parallels enable

her to draw lessons from the biblical material which relate to the theme of the great controversy.

This points to a fundamental feature of her writings — an interest in the practical nature and value of Bible study. To her way of thinking, Bible study is more than a matter of learning facts or concepts. It is an exercise that generates from an attitude of prayer, faith and humility, culminating in the spiritual edification or enrichment of the student. In other words, there is an inseparable relation between Bible study and character development. The study of the Bible, Ellen White believes, will eventually lead to a dynamic change in the thinking and behaviour of the student.

The tendency of Ellen White to draw attention to the controversy between Christ and Satan, particularly as it relates to the individual, clearly demonstrates her own understanding of the practical significance of Bible study. At the same time, it offers insights into the uniqueness of her prophetic ministry. Through her inspired writings, we gain a better understanding of the role of Seventh-day Adventists, collectively as well as individually, in the closing stage of the great controversy.

The very nature and purpose of her work, then, determine the uniqueness and, hence, the value of her writings. These writings abound with insights into the crafty schemes which Satan employs against the world to counteract the redemptive purpose of God in Jesus Christ. She wishes, first, to alert her readers to the reality of Satan's presence in the world, to his cunning influence in the church, and to the subtle temptations he employs against individuals. She wishes, second, to clarify the nature and consequences of the great controversy between Christ and Satan in order to persuade her readers to choose the way of righteousness and truth. While this takes her over many topics and fields of study — history, religion, theology, science, health, education and others — the basic framework throughout is the theme of the great controversy. What, then, do we mean when we affirm a unique place — a place second only to the Bible — for her writings in the church? We mean that we cannot simply place them on the same level of importance and authority as that of other commentaries. Such a high view of her writings, can be easily misunderstood and misapplied, however. It would be inappropriate to use her writings to settle questions relating to the reading of a text, the meaning of a word, the authorship or date of a biblical book, etc. We would consider it quite strange, for example, to defend the use of the King James Version against modern translations on the grounds that Ellen White used the former and gave no explicit instruction for the need of the latter. And yet, an “all-purpose approach” to her writings leaves us vulnerable to such reasoning.

On the basis of the observations advanced above **it seems more accurate to describe her interpretation of Scripture as primarily a religious exposition of the great controversy theme on a cosmic, historical and personal level, than to characterize it as scientific exegesis in a technical sense.** In no way is such a classification denigratory. To the contrary! It may help prevent further misunderstanding and misuse of her writings. If her writings were designed to answer questions of a scholarly nature, their significance would be restricted to a relatively small group, and would in time become dated. Such is the nature of scholarship. But her writings have a deeper purpose and a wider scope.

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**Excerpt from article by Harold D. Weiss, “Are Adventists Protestants?”
Spectrum, Vol. 4 (Spring, 1972), pp. 75-77**

There is no question that Ellen G. White stands squarely in agreement with this classic Protestant understanding of “Scripture alone.” Her appreciation of the Scriptures as the only source of Christian access to the word of God is well documented throughout her writings. Her understanding that the Scriptures are their own best interpreter is amply demonstrated. It would be preposterous to suggest that she considered herself the one called upon to exercise hermeneutical control over Scripture. Never did she wish to become the one who stands over the word of God and judges it as to what it means. Her words in these matters are quite explicit. In no way did she envision becoming a distraction from the study of the word of God. She never claimed that her writings were a shortcut to the meaning of Scripture.

Thoughtful investigation and earnest, taxing study are required in order for this word to be understood. . . . The evidence of the truth of God’s word is in the word itself. Scripture is the key that unlocks scripture. The deep meaning of the truths of God’s word is unfolded to our minds by His Spirit. (8T, 157)

Mrs. White did not see herself as a guarantor of the meaning of Scripture, in this way drawing people away from Scripture to her own writings, where the meaning of Scripture, supposedly, could be obtained more easily. On the contrary, she insisted on the necessity to study the Bible, because only there are the treasures of God available. She said, “There are truths in the word which, like veins of precious ore, are hidden beneath the surface.” (8T, 157) “These Scriptures are a treasure-house of precious pearls, and all need them.” (CT, 456) “Precious treasure will be secured by those who study God’s Word with earnestness, for heavenly angels will direct the search.” (Ev, 214-215)

Anyone familiar with her writings knows Mrs. White’s position on the principle of “Scripture alone.” It is ironic, therefore, that her writings have come to be used by some as a means of drawing students away from the Scriptures and of establishing the meaning of a certain passage. “Scripture alone” demands, rather, that the meaning of the writings of Mrs. White be determined by the biblical word.

There is no shortage of people who feel that if Mrs. White has interpreted a text of Scripture in a particular way, that is the **only** meaning of the text, and that anyone who interprets the text differently is thereby challenging the authority of Mrs. White. Nothing could be more contrary to her own spirit and practice, and nothing could paralyse Seventh-day Adventism more effectively. At no time did Mrs. White think that when she commented on a passage of Scripture she was declaring its meaning once and for all. This is clear from the fact that she gave different interpretations to the same passage on different occasions. An example of this practice is her interpretation of the parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13): in *Christ’s Object Lessons* she interprets it in terms of the Second Coming of Christ; but in *The Great Controversy* she applies it to the period before the 1844 disappointment, saying that it “illustrates the experience of the Adventist people.” (GC, 393) This indicates that as far as she was concerned the application of a passage of Scripture she had made at one time in no way was to be considered the **only** meaning of the passage.

Mrs. White repeatedly encouraged students of the Scriptures to dig deeper in order to find further meaning. She promised that earnest students would be further illumined by the Holy Spirit and given a deeper view into the mysteries of God.

Those who dig beneath the surface discover the hidden gems of truth. The Holy Spirit is present with the earnest searcher. Its illumination shines upon the Word, stamping the truth upon the mind with a new, fresh importance. . . . The preciousness of truth is realized as never before. A new, heavenly light shines upon the Word, illuminating it as though every letter were tinged in gold. God Himself has spoken to the mind and heart, making the Word spirit and life. (*2SM*, 39)

The worship of the living God is to be continually assisted by an ear that is open to the words “Holy, Holy, Holy,” when these are spoken in a new voice. The Scriptures themselves already said it well: “Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matt. 13:52). This means that there can be no conflict between what Mrs. White may have brought out of a passage of Scripture in her time and what an earnest student of the Scriptures may bring out today. And if with the tools of scholarly research a biblical student establishes the meaning of a passage of Scripture in its original setting, he is in no way contradicting or challenging the meaning that Mrs. White may have given to the same passage. Nor was Mrs. White contradicting herself when she gave a second meaning to a passage of Scripture by considering it from a different perspective.

It is imperative for the church that wishes to carry the Protestant Reformation to its logical limits to strictly enforce in its practice the principle of “Scripture alone”. The Adventist church must therefore insist that Mrs. White is to play the legitimate role for which she was called of God. She was not called to draw people away from an earnest study of the Scriptures, nor to offer herself as a shortcut to its meaning. Rather she was a witness to the necessity of earnest and prayerful Bible study so that new meaning, new veins of precious ore, may be tapped to the glory of God. She is in no way to be considered the guarantor of the meaning of Scripture that makes all further searching unnecessary, and that exercises hermeneutical control over the Bible. No book, in either black covers or red covers, can control the word of God.

The Holy Spirit is still active to energize the mind and the heart of one who diligently searches the mysteries of God’s word. The Spirit alone can guide a man to the presence of the Eternal. As Mrs. White herself said it: “Only by the aid of the divine Teacher can we understand the truths of God’s Word.” (*SD*, 68)

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Excerpt from book by Jack Provonsha, *God is With Us* (Washington, 1974), pp. 17-18

The prophet is best described by contrasting him with what he usually is not, a systematic theologian. (And what a history of doubt and conflict can be attributed to the failure to make this distinction!) The thrusts, not to say the roles, of these two figures sometimes stand out in sharpest contrast in the literature they leave us.

A skilled systematic theologian is by training a careful, if sometimes dull, architect of ideas. He writes like a constitutional lawyer, constantly aware of the host of eagle-eyed colleagues present and yet unborn peering intently over his shoulder, ready to pounce on every show of ineptitude and careless employment of logic. He strains for factual and defensible formulations that can endure the searching scrutiny of his fellows.

By contrast, the concerns of the prophet usually carry him beyond hair-splitting details. His is a message to proclaim and a cause to defend. His tools are poetry, invective, exhortation, and

diatribe — shock weapons, not the instruments of scholarly dissection. His is usually the heat of anguished concern rather than the calculating logic of analysis and synthesis. For this reason his illustrations may at times seem overdrawn and his utterances distorted by overemphasis. The prophet often shouts where the theologian speaks in more measured tones. Prophets usually proclaim and exhort rather than write books on Bible doctrines.

And of course each has his proper time and place. Some things need to be shouted about. Nothing may happen when there is no one with the courage to speak up as vigorously as may be necessary. But because of this the prophetic figure has to be listened to in the immediate and larger context out of which he speaks — certainly if one is attempting to transmute his exhortations into theology. Statements made in one setting must be compensated for by statements made in another if systematic truth is to be realized.



Excerpts from article by Raoul Dederen, “Ellen White’s Doctrine of Scripture,” *Ministry Supplement*, pp. 24F-241

What was Ellen White’s doctrine of Scripture? Did she place her writings on a par with the Bible, or even above it? Did she claim to have given Adventists another Bible? How did she relate to the Scriptures? (p. 24f)

It is impossible to understand Ellen White’s view of the Bible apart from her understanding of inspiration. The method of inspiration as outlined in her writings has hardly anything to do with direct dictation by God to the prophet or Biblical writer. True, she indicates that “the scribes of God wrote as they were dictated by the Holy Spirit,” and that “these men were inspired of the Holy Spirit.” Yet, it is a peculiar kind of dictation that she finds in Scripture. She refers, for instance, to the Bible writers as expressing their ideas in human language, thus presenting in the Bible “a union of the divine and the human” similar to that which existed in the person of Christ. God, by His Spirit, shed light “into the minds and hearts of His servants,” who in turn embodied the thoughts in human language.

Hence, for instance, each of the Gospel writers, though going over the same history, “under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” presented what most strongly impressed his mind. Different aspects of the same truth, but a perfect whole, “adapted to meet the wants of men in all the circumstances and experiences of life.”

At times the prophets learned by natural means the facts that they set down in Scripture. They gleaned their information through experience and observation. But in each instance God sharpened their memory, enabling them to record the Scriptures. Having thus been written by human instruments, the Bible, obviously, “is not God’s mode of thought and expression;” yet though entrusted to earthen vessels, it is nonetheless from heaven, “the testimony of God.”

Ellen White’s view of inspiration seems quite clear. Yet some Seventh-day Adventists in common with other Christians have given the impression that they consider the Bible as having been verbally inspired, and its original autographs inerrant. Certainly, Ellen White’s understanding of the issue gives no support to such a view. Though she referred to the prophet as God’s penman, this by no means suggests that he is to be regarded as a passive instrument submissively passing on words mechanically dictated to him. Rather the whole man is inspired, not just his words. Under the guidance of the Spirit he is a human agency whose whole personality is called upon to convey the word of God in “just the way He wanted it to come.”

It would be irresponsible to deny that there are literary problems, as well as apparent historical discrepancies, such as the differences between the parallel passages in the books of Kings and Chronicles, in the Scriptures, (pp. 24G-24H)

Having determined that Scripture constitutes a major category of divine revelation, we are now in a position to consider another important dimension of Ellen White's doctrine of Scripture, namely the dimension that characterizes her role as interpreter of the Word.

As interpreter of the Bible, Ellen White's most characteristic role was that of an evangelist — not an exegete, nor a theologian, as such, but a preacher and an evangelist. It was not her custom to take a Bible book, for instance, and expound it systematically. She describes her work as not unlike that of the Bible prophets, as that of a messenger, called by God to receive His word and to give a clear message in His name, as well as to give God's people a clearer understanding of the Bible, urging them back to God's Word.

No wonder, therefore, that the prophetic and hortatory mode was more characteristic of her than the exegetical. Though she did not ignore the historical context, she did not always make use of it (cf. *Prophets and Kings*, etc.). The people to whom she was preaching — or writing — were more the object of her attention than the specific people to whom the individual Bible writers addressed themselves. Although quite often elucidating the historical setting of a scriptural passage and the original intent of the author, she was, in the typical prophetic attitude, primarily desirous to press the text into service for the immediate objective, that of the spiritual quickening of her hearers or readers. She lived in a century of evangelistic revival, and her main purpose was to arrest attention and to bring conviction and repentance more than merely to relay information.

In all her counsels, Ellen White is in fact more than an interpreter of Scripture; she never fails to emphasize the **relevancy** of the passage to her readers, and the **importance** of a proper response to the Word of God. Very generally uppermost are the inner spiritual needs of her audience. All is subordinate to the objective of confronting her public with the demands and promises of God. This approach has a way of creating a directness and an urgency so that even more didactic pages are evangelistic in the best sense of the term. (p. 24H)

... by no means did she claim that her writings ought to be received as being in a class with the Bible, and thus an addition to the Biblical canon. "In His word," she writes, "God has committed to men the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience." Still, the fact that God has revealed His will to men through the Scriptures has not rendered superfluous the continued presence and guidance of the Spirit. In the Bible we have "the unerring counsel of God," "all that is needful for the saving of the soul," and Ellen White's testimonies should not be "carried to the front," nor are they "to take the place of the Word." But since little heed has been given to the Bible, "the Lord has given a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light [the Scriptures]." (p. 241)

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