

2014

# A Perspective on Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutics

Denis Fortin

Andrews University, [fortind@andrews.edu](mailto:fortind@andrews.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/theology-christian-philosophy-pubs>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Fortin, Denis, "A Perspective on Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutics" (2014). *Faculty Publications*. Paper 76.  
<http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/theology-christian-philosophy-pubs/76>

This Contribution to Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Theology & Christian Philosophy at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact [repository@andrews.edu](mailto:repository@andrews.edu).

# A Perspective on Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutics

---

Deni s Fortin

---

**T**he preamble of the Seventh-day Adventist statement of Fundamental Beliefs states: “Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as their only creed and hold certain fundamental beliefs to be the teaching of the Holy Scriptures.” Along with other Christians, Adventists share a high view of Scripture and accept it as the Word of God to humankind, and their beliefs and lifestyle are formulated as a result of the study of the Bible.

The first Adventist Fundamental Belief is about the Bible.

“1. *The Holy Scriptures*

“The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the

authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history. (2 Peter 1:20, 21; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Ps. 119:105; Prov. 30:5, 6; Isa. 8:20; John 17:17; 1 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 4:12.)”

### **The Nature and Authority of Scripture<sup>1</sup>**

Seventh-day Adventists believe the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God and the revealed will of God to humanity. We make this claim because we also believe the writers of the 66 books that form the Bible were inspired by God to write these books. Given their supernatural inspiration, which goes beyond mere natural insights or intuition, these books therefore have an intrinsic authority located in God Himself. The uniqueness of the Bible is based on its origin and source. The writers did not claim to originate the messages they wrote but often referred to divine revelations for the truths they passed on (Isa 1:1; Micah 1:1).

The Bible has divine authority because in it God speaks through the Holy Spirit. Throughout His ministry, Jesus stressed the authority of the Scriptures. When tempted by Satan in the wilderness, He quoted Scripture in His defense (Matt 4:4, 7, 10). When discussing with opponents He referred to Scripture (Luke 10:26; 20:17) and He readily placed the Bible above human traditions and opinions (Mark 7:7-9). Jesus also believed in the authority of the prophetic word and revealed that it pointed to Him (John 5:39, 46). Repeatedly, Jesus and the apostles issued warnings against false prophets and false teachers who would seek to displace the Word of God as found in the Scripture with their own teachings (Matt 15:1-9; Acts 20:29-30; 2 Tim 4:3-4; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1). Such warnings are evidence that Jesus and the apostles upheld the authority of Scripture and any exaltation of human teachings above the teachings of Scripture undermines the authority of God's Word.

### **The Interpretation of Scripture**

A number of foundational presuppositions undergird an Adventist interpretation of Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

1. Adventists believe that God is a personal being who took the initiative to reveal Himself to humanity and the Bible provides us

## A Perspective on Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutics

with the knowledge to enable us to enter into a saving relationship with Him.

2. The entrance of sin into the world radically altered the relationship between God and humanity and affects how people understand God's will for them. In the interpretation of Scripture, the effects of sin are obstacles that prevent a clear understanding of God's will. Pride, self-deception, doubt, distance and distortion are such obstacles that require the guidance of the Holy Spirit to overcome them (cf. Isa 59:2).

3. The same Spirit who inspired the Bible writers has been promised to illumine the minds of those who seek to understand the meaning of Scripture (John 14:26).

4. Those who read the Bible need a disposition of mind and heart that leads to understanding God's will. Such a disposition cannot be attained only through proper hermeneutical skills and techniques. Foundational attitudes include openness and honesty, faith and humility, obedience and prayer (1 Cor 2:10-14).

Obstacles created by sin also require the use of various rules of hermeneutics to comprehend the meaning of Scripture. Distance from the original authors of the Bible, separation in time, geography, languages and culture necessitate the interpretation of Scripture to our modern context. Already in the Old Testament, priests and Levites had the responsibility of teaching God's Word to the people (Lev 10:11; Deut 33:10) and interpreting the law of God in different situations (Deut 17:8-11; Eze 44:23-24). In the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Levites "read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read" (Neh 8:8). The New Testament also provides examples of this: Philip explaining the book of Isaiah to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8: 30-31) and Paul instructing Timothy to be sure he is "rightly handling" the Word of God (2 Tim 2:15).

### Principles for Biblical Interpretation

Adventists find in the Bible some key principles of biblical interpretation.

1. One key fundamental principle for biblical interpretation

that Adventists have repeatedly referred to is Isaiah 8:20, "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn." The two words *law* and *testimony* point to the two loci of authority in Isaiah's time: the Pentateuch (Torah) and the testimony of the prophets to the previously revealed will of God in the Pentateuch. Jesus referred to these two loci of authority when He spoke of the law and the prophets in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:17), to which Paul added the authoritative revelation given by Jesus and the witness of the apostles (Eph 2:20; 3:5).

Thus both the Old and New Testaments form the authoritative Word of God to humanity. For Adventists this means the Bible, as God's revealed Word, is the *sole standard* of beliefs and practices. While the Bible holds primacy over other means of epistemology, such as nature, reason, and tradition, the Bible has no other comparable or equivalent standard of authority in Christian life.

2. This principle also implies the corollary of the *sufficiency* of Scripture (2 Tim 3:15). The Bible stands alone as the unerring guide to truth and life; it is sufficient to lead one to salvation and it is the standard by which all doctrines and experiences must be tested. All additional pathways to knowledge, experience, or revelation must build upon and remain faithful to the all-sufficient revelation found in Scripture.

3. Another important principle of hermeneutics is the *totality* of Scripture. Adventists affirm with the apostle Paul that "*all* Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). As the standard for doctrine and experience, *all* of Scripture is accepted and not only some sections of it. In this context, Adventists believe that the Bible *is* and does not only *contain* the Word of God. Although we recognize human elements in the Bible, the record of God's revelation is nonetheless trustworthy and an accurate representation of the divine message.

4. The *analogy* of Scripture is a fourth principle of hermeneutics. Since all Scripture is inspired by the same Holy Spirit and all of it is the Word of God, there is a fundamental unity, coherence and harmony among its various parts. Many New Testament authors

supported their points by citing several Old Testament sources. For example in Romans 3:10-18, Paul cites from Ecclesiastes (7:20), the book of Psalms (14:2, 3; 5:10; 10:7), and Isaiah (59:7, 8). This principle also claims that neither Testament supersedes the other, although the later revelation is tested by the former. The Bereans are a good example of this approach (Acts 17:11) and Jesus Himself insisted that the conviction of His disciples be based on the Scripture (i.e. the Old Testament; Luke 24:25-27).

5. A corollary principle to the analogy of Scripture is the principle of Scripture being *its own interpreter*. The underlying unity among the various parts of Scripture allows one portion to interpret another, becoming the key for understanding related passages. Jesus demonstrated this principle during His conversation with the disciples on the road to Emmaus and later that night when He appeared to His disciples in the upper room (Luke 24:27, 44, 45). “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27).

6. Another corollary principle to the analogy of Scripture is the *consistency* of Scripture. Since the Bible has one divine Author, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the various parts of Scripture are consistent with each other. By this principle we mean that the interpretation of individual passages will harmonize with the totality of what Scripture teaches on a given subject. While the different writers may provide different emphases on the same subject or event (e.g. the four Gospels), this will be interpreted without contradiction. Each writer may contribute aspects of the topic or event that are needed to obtain a full and balanced picture. In the end, though, we admit that not all passages of Scripture may be interpreted satisfactorily and some ambiguity may remain (e.g. Peter speaking of Paul’s writings, 2 Peter 3:15, 16)

7. One last principle of interpretation is the *clarity* of Scripture. The Bible is perspicuous and does not require any ecclesiastical magisterium to clarify its meaning. Numerous times in the Bible, readers are encouraged to read the Bible for themselves in order to understand God’s messages to them (e.g. Deut 30:11-14; Luke 1:3-4; Acts 17:11; Rev 1:3). Consequently, the meaning of Scripture is clear and

straightforward and to be taken in its plain, literal sense, unless a clear and obvious figure is intended. Naturally, Adventists recognize that the Bible has a variety of literary genres and structures each requiring a different literary hermeneutical approach. Nevertheless, we believe the intended meaning of the message is clear and contains an objective truth intention, rather than a subjective multiplicity of meanings.

While scholars, Christians and non-Christians, will readily expound on hermeneutical principles and claim that the intended meaning of Scripture can be ascertained by the rigorous applications of these principles, the apostle Paul offered another perspective. Since the original meaning of Scripture and its present application involves the thoughts of God, spiritual things are spiritually discerned. Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and without approaching the text of Scripture in a spirit of prayer, humility and confession, the true meaning of Scripture may never be found. “For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. ... But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2: 11, 14). There is no “neutral” meaning when it comes to Scripture. However good and accurate tools of exegesis and principles of hermeneutics may be, the Bible cannot be studied like any other book. At every stage of the process, spiritual discernment is necessary. God’s Word must be approached with reverence.

### **Philosophical Presuppositions**

An important element in understanding Adventist hermeneutics is its philosophical presuppositions. In his 1998 Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II argued that Christian philosophical presuppositions for a proper understanding of Scripture need to be within the Aristotelian and neo-Platonic philosophical presuppositions we have inherited from early Church Fathers, that such a basic philosophical framework is essential to maintain the faith inherited from the Apostles through centuries of Christian history and theological

## A Perspective on Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutics

formulations. In many ways, John Paul II described the philosophical assumptions of much of Christianity when he argued this point, for most of Protestant theological formulations are also framed to a large extent within these philosophical presuppositions.

In contrast, Adventist theology rejects most of these philosophical presuppositions. Adventism from its beginning did not conceive its theological system within the neo-Platonic presuppositions of the Augustinian and Reformed systems of thought in which an immovable and impassible God exists only in timelessness, or that ultimate reality (i.e. heaven and the inheritance of the saved) is timeless or that the descriptions of redeemed life as found in Scripture are metaphors of this ultimate reality. Adventist theology attempts to make as strong a case as possible in saying that biblical writers did not have this worldview when they wrote Scripture and thus Aristotelian and neo-Platonic philosophical assumptions cannot be part of a faithful hermeneutical approach to Scripture. A couple theological examples should help explain what I mean.

Adventist soteriology is basically Wesleyan Arminian combined with what many Christians believe is a peculiar doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary where Christ is currently active in the forgiveness of sins and judgment. For Augustinian and Reformed theologies, all events of the plan of redemption are the results of decrees God has proclaimed through all of eternity, nothing new as such can be done by God, and the entire plan of redemption is predetermined in God's eternal foreknowledge. However, likely unintentionally at first, Adventism adopted a different system of thought in which God actually interacts with humanity within time and space in various events of salvation history. In this system, God's foreknowledge of future events is only descriptive of human responses and not prescriptive. This important difference in philosophical and theological presuppositions allowed Adventist writers to see all the events of the plan of redemption, as described in Scripture, as truly happening within time and as a linear process in which God is genuinely engaged rather than only a series of preordained punctiliar events shaped in the mind of God in eternity past. Since the Epistle to the Hebrews states that we have a High Priest who is interceding in heav-

en for His people on earth (Heb 7:23-28; 9:24-25), Adventists believe this is really happening; it is not a metaphor of salvation which is a necessary conclusion if neo-Platonic timelessness is accepted as a basic philosophical presupposition when interpreting Scripture. The same goes for the description of heavenly scenes of worship in the book of Revelation (chapters 4-5). When Christians say heaven is real, what do we really mean by this? When pushed to its logical conclusion this expression, if understood within a neo-Platonic frame of reference, is only a metaphor, along with descriptions of worship and music in heaven.

The Adventist doctrine of the non-immortality of the soul is also framed within a rejection of neo-Platonic reality. We believe human life and existence cannot be without a physical body; that thought processes as well as emotions require a physical body. When the physical body dies, human existence enters a state of "sleep" until the day of the resurrection when human existence is reestablished or recreated. At death the breath of life God gives at birth returns to God until the resurrection. This breath of life, however, is not a self-existent ontological entity that represents the ultimate reality of human existence. Human beings don't have a self-existent timeless soul that survives or yearns for a better life without a physical body, as if God's creation of the body had been a mistake, an afterthought, or a temporary necessity to experience salvation. In its own way Adventist theology is non-conformist at a very basic level of philosophical thought.

### **The Role and Ministry of Ellen G White**

Any discussion of Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutics, of necessity, must engage the role and ministry of Ellen G White.

Adventists believe that God bestows upon all members of the church in every age spiritual gifts that are to be employed in ministry for the common good of the church and of humanity. These gifts are apportioned by the Holy Spirit to each believer and provide abilities and ministries needed by the church to fulfill its divinely ordained mission and functions. Adventists believe these gifts are to function for the perfecting of the saints and for the edification

## A Perspective on Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutics

of the body of Christ until His return (Eph 4:8, 11-13). Just as they were needed in the early church to confirm the work of the apostles and to provide guidance to the young congregations, these gifts are also needed today. While Adventists recognize the unique position of the Bible as the sole criterion by which all claims to spiritual gifts must be evaluated, the Bible itself points to a continuing manifestation of spiritual gifts in the Christian Church until the return of Christ and particularly at the end of time. On the basis of Revelation 12:17 and 19:10, Adventists hold that the gift of prophecy is an identifying mark of the people of God in the last days. This gift they believe was manifested in the life and ministry of Ellen G White.

Adventists have argued that while Ellen White's ministry and writings are valued as a genuine gift of the Spirit, her authority is considered secondary to the Bible. Adventists see a similarity between the ministry of non-canonical prophets and that of Ellen White. The Bible describes the work of many prophets who did not write any portion of Scripture. Enoch, Gad, Nathan, Huldah, and even John the Baptist are such non-canonical prophets. Although genuine prophets and empowered by the Holy Spirit to minister to Israel during a particular period of time, these prophets did not write any section of the Bible. Yet their ministry is considered genuine, valid, and authoritative. Adventists perceive the role and ministry of Ellen White in a similar way. Her ministry is believed to be a spiritual gift to the church in the last days to provide guidance to Adventists in the fulfillment of their mission and to help prepare God's people for the second advent of Christ. But her writings are viewed as secondary to Scripture.

During her lifetime Ellen White provided prophetic guidance to the denomination through her influence, sermons, and numerous books and periodical articles. It is estimated that she wrote over 100,000 pages of manuscripts during her 70 years of ministry and addressed a wide variety of subjects and interests. She wrote on many biblical themes, church organization and pastoral ministry, lifestyle issues, education, health and temperance, home life, and mission.

Ellen White's numerous books fall into two major categories.

First, she wrote extensively on biblical themes and stories. Her best known books are part of a series called the "Conflict of the Ages" series which includes five books on the story of the conflict between good and evil, from the fall of Lucifer to the new earth.<sup>3</sup> She also authored *Steps to Christ* (1892) on themes related to the doctrine of salvation, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (1896) on the Sermon on the Mount, and *Christ's Object Lessons* (1900) on the parables of Jesus.

Much of her writings also dealt with various aspects of church ministry and Christian life. Often the contents of her letters, manuscripts, sermons, and periodical articles were reshaped to form books on particular subjects. Such is the nine-volume series of *Testimonies for the Church* published between 1855 and 1909, and books on *Education* (1903), *Ministry of Healing* (1905), and *Gospel Workers* (1915). In her last will and testament she made provision for her estate to continue the publication of her books and also print compilations of her writings as church leaders would see fit. Thus through the years many other books have been published from her published and unpublished letters and manuscripts files. All of Ellen White's published writings are available on CD-ROM and on the Ellen G White Estate website.<sup>4</sup> Her unpublished letters and manuscripts are available for consultation at many research centers in the United States and overseas and are currently in the process of being published by section. Ellen White is the most prolific American woman author in the history of the United States thus far. She is also the most translated author with her book *Steps to Christ* translated into more than 120 languages.

One of the earliest and clearest statements regarding what Ellen White believed to be her relationship to the Bible is the following in 1851, "I recommend to you, dear reader, the word of God as the rule of your faith and practise [sic]. By that word we are to be judged. God has, in that word, promised to give visions [i.e. a reference to her own ministry] in the 'LAST DAYS'; not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from Bible truth."<sup>5</sup>

Ellen White believed in the supremacy and ultimate authority

## A Perspective on Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutics

of the Word of God. The following comment was written in 1888 when many Adventist ministers were debating the concept of righteousness by faith. What I find enlightening in this statement is her understanding of the issues related to critical scholarship and her own strong faith in the Word of God.

“I take the Bible just as it is, as the Inspired Word. I believe its utterances in an entire Bible. Men arise who think they find something to criticize in God’s Word. They lay it bare before others as evidence of superior wisdom. These men are, many of them, smart men, learned men, they have eloquence and talent, the whole lifework [of whom] is to unsettle minds in regard to the inspiration of the Scriptures. They influence many to see as they do. And the same work is passed on from one to another, just as Satan designed it should be, until we may see the full meaning of the words of Christ, ‘When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?’ (Luke 18:8)...

“Brethren, cling to your Bible, as it reads, and stop your criticisms in regard to its validity, and obey the Word, and not one of you will be lost. The ingenuity of men has been exercised for ages to measure the Word of God by their finite minds and limited comprehension. If the Lord, the Author of the living oracles, would throw back the curtain and reveal His wisdom and His glory before them, they would shrink into nothingness and exclaim as did Isaiah, ‘I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of people of unclean lips’ (Isaiah 6:5)...

“Men of humble acquirements, possessing but limited capabilities and opportunities to become conversant in the Scriptures, find in the living oracles comfort, guidance, counsel, and the plan of salvation as clear as a sunbeam. No one need be lost for want of knowledge, unless he is willfully blind. We thank God that the Bible is prepared for the poor man as well as for the learned man. It is fitted for all ages and all classes.”<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps one of the subjects concerning Ellen White’s ministry

that brings up the most inquiries has been in regard to her involvement and influence in the development of Seventh-day Adventist doctrines. Many believe that her visions were the origin of the distinctive doctrines of Adventism. However, a brief look at the historical development of the distinctive doctrines of Adventism reveals a different picture. Adventist pioneers accepted a set of distinctive doctrines based on their study of the Bible, and Ellen White's influence in these early years was often limited to confirmation and clarification of these doctrines. Never was she the initiator of these doctrinal beliefs.

Seventh-day Adventists certainly value the writings of Ellen White and give them a measure of doctrinal and theological authority, albeit secondary to Scripture. But I wonder to what extent the way Adventists use the writings of Ellen White is different from what other evangelical denominations do with the writings of their founders. I've been told that Lutheran pastors are required to affirm their assent to the Book of Concord before they are ordained. Reformed Christians hold in high esteem the writings of John Calvin and the canons of the Synod of Dort. Methodists value the writings of John Wesley and an Arminian theological framework. The Westminster Confession of Faith is an authoritative document for Presbyterians. For Mennonites, the Schleitheim Articles hold a special place. Although these Christian denominations do not categorize these writings as inspired, in contrast to what Adventists do with the writings of Ellen White, nonetheless these documents hold authoritative value in these denominations and serve as a compass for doctrinal orthodoxy and theological education. Yet all these denominations also claim to have Scripture as their sole authority in matters of faith. Perhaps this is one way to see how Adventists perceive the influence of Ellen White in their church.

In conclusion, Adventists understand the Bible to be the revealed Word of God to humanity and seek to understand it faithfully by giving it the ultimate authority: only the Scripture is the standard of faith and experience; it can be read and understood by all people and it is sufficient for salvation. Although we realize we cannot read Scripture without some interaction with Christian his-

## A Perspective on Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutics

tory and tradition, Adventist hermeneutics has strong affinities with the hermeneutics adopted by churches of the Radical Reformation and with those of the Restorationist and Primitivist Christian movements in the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The writings of Ellen White certainly hold a measure of doctrinal guidance and authority, but they are perceived as a secondary authority, under that of Scripture and are used as a theological compass rather than an ultimate magisterium.

---

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Much of the first half of this paper is adapted or summarized from Richard M Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Raoul Dederen, Editor, (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 58-104. Other recent publications on Adventist biblical hermeneutics are George W Reid, Editor, *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, Biblical Research Institute Studies, vol 1, (Silver Spring, Maryland: Biblical Research Institute, 2006); and Gerhard Pfandl, Editor, *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, Biblical Research Institute Studies, vol 2, (Silver Spring, Maryland: Biblical Research Institute, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> See Frank M Hasel, "Presuppositions in the Interpretation of Scripture," *Understanding Scripture*, 29-35.

<sup>3</sup> The "Conflict of the Ages" series includes the books *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1890) which covers the fall of Lucifer to the reign of king David; *Prophets and Kings* (1916) from the reign of Solomon to the end of the Old Testament; *The Desire of Ages* (1898) on the life and ministry of Christ; *The Acts of the Apostles* (1911) on the early church; and *The Great Controversy* (1911) from the fall of Jerusalem to the new earth.

<sup>4</sup> The official Seventh-day Adventist website about Ellen White and her writings is found at [www.whiteestate.org](http://www.whiteestate.org).

<sup>5</sup> *The Christian Experience and Views of Ellen G White* (1851), 64; reprinted in *Early Writings* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1945), 78.

<sup>6</sup> Manuscript 16, 1888 published in *Selected Messages* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958), vol 1, 17-18.