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Ellen G. White on Biblical Hermeneutics

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ELLEN G. WHITE ON BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	3
INTRODUCTION	4
Chapter	
I. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON INTERPRETING THE BIBLE	5
Introduction	5
The Quest to Understand the Biblical Text	6
Discover and Understand the Biblical Text	7
Examine Teachings, Beliefs and Practices of Seventh-day Adventists	11
Limitations on the Interpretation of the Scriptures.	13
Human Limitations	13
God’s Infinity	14
Warnings against the Use of Higher or Historical Criticism	15
II. FOUNDATIONS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION.	18
Introduction	18
Inspiration and Authorship	18
The Accuracy of the Bible.	20
Perfect Concepts in Imperfect Language.	20
Translation and Copyist Errors	21
Divine Preservation	23
Presence of Contradictions.	23
The Authority of the Bible	24
The Basis of Authority	24
Authority in Faith and Doctrine	25
Authority in History.	26
Authority over Human Wisdom, Judgment, and Experience	26
Authority over the Spirit of Prophecy	27
The Unity of the Bible	29
Basis of Unity	29

<i>Divine authorship</i>	29
<i>Divine illumination</i>	29
<i>Bible study, research and unity</i>	30
The Nature of Unity	30
<i>The diversity of Bible writers</i>	30
<i>Progressive revelation</i>	31
<i>Harmony between the Old Testament and the New Testament</i>	33
<i>Unity, not uniformity</i>	34
III. PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION	35
Introduction	35
The Principle of the Bible Only.	35
All Sufficiency of the Biblical Canon	35
The Place of the Spirit of Prophecy.	37
The Bible is Its Own Interpreter	41
Analogy of Scripture Principle	42
<i>Understand obscure texts</i>	42
<i>Understand the deeper meaning of the text</i>	43
<i>Correct misinterpretations</i>	44
<i>Solve controversies and disagreements</i>	44
Typological Principle	46
General Principles of Interpretation	47
Aim for the Obvious Meaning.	47
Understand the Context	49
Understanding Words and Texts	49
Understanding Subjects	50
Understanding Books and Writers	51
Understanding the Scriptures as a Whole	52
The Target Audience	52
Adventism's Important Rule of Bible Interpretation.	53
New Light	54
IV. CONCLUSION.	58
BIBLIOGRAPHY	60

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA	<i>Acts of the Apostles</i>
BC (7 vols.)	<i>Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary</i>
BE	<i>Bible Echo</i>
CE	<i>Christian Education</i>
COL	<i>Christ's Object lessons</i>
CM	<i>Colporteur Ministry</i>
CSW	<i>Counsels on Sabbath School Work</i>
CT	<i>Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students</i>
CW	<i>Counsels to Writers and Editors</i>
DA	<i>The Desire of Ages</i>
Ed	<i>Education</i>
Ev	<i>Evangelism</i>
EW	<i>Early Writings</i>
FE	<i>Fundamentals of Christian Education</i>
GC	<i>The Great Controversy</i>
GCB	<i>General Conference Bulletin</i>
GW	<i>Gospel Workers</i>
HL	<i>Healthful Living</i>
HP	<i>In Heavenly Places</i>
MB	<i>Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing</i>
MH	<i>The Ministry of Healing</i>
MR (21 vols.)	<i>Manuscript Releases</i>
PK	<i>Prophets and Kings</i>
PP	<i>Patriarchs and Prophets</i>
RH	<i>Advent Review and Sabbath Herald</i>
SAT (2 vols.)	<i>Sermons and Talks</i>
SC	<i>Steps to Christ</i>
SM (3 vols.)	<i>Selected Messages</i>
SP	<i>Spirit of Prophecy</i>
ST	<i>Signs of the Times</i>
T (9 vols.)	<i>Testimonies for the Church</i>
TM	<i>Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers</i>
UL	<i>The Upward Look</i>
1888	<i>The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials</i>

ELLEN G. WHITE ON BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

INTRODUCTION

Most of Ellen G. White's life was spent in the nineteenth century as the foundation of the modern historical-critical method of Bible interpretation was being laid. She frequently commented on the importance of the Bible to our lives and how to interpret it. When the church was faced with difficult issues she successfully guided it, always appealing to Bible principles. This paper attempts to bring together Ellen G. White's views on the objectives, principles, and methods for interpreting Scripture in order to discover the truth about God's teachings and practices in the Bible.

CHAPTER I
GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

Introduction

Studying and interpreting the Bible is a sacred occupation. Ellen White points out, “all who handle the word of God are engaged in a most solemn and sacred work.”¹ The work is not an end in itself, but the insights obtained are to be shared with those who are in darkness so that they may walk in the path leading to salvation.²

Only through careful research in the Bible can an understanding of the principles and methods governing its interpretation be obtained. Concepts such as the unity of Scripture and the analogy of Scripture principle become self-evident as a result of investigating Biblical literature. Ellen White writes that “the searching of the Scriptures” will “reveal the harmony existing between the various parts of the Bible, and the bearing of one passage upon another.”³

The interpretation of the Scriptures requires sound wisdom, which only comes through much prayerful personal effort. Ellen White writes, “We cannot obtain wisdom

¹ Manuscript 4, 1896 in 3MR 430.

² Cf. *ibid.*

³ “Imperative Necessity of Searching for Truth” in RH (November 15, 1892), 706.

without earnest attention and prayerful study.”¹ It is the study of Scripture that generates the quality of wisdom necessary for successful discovery of truth.

The Quest to Understand the Biblical Text

The objective of the interpreter of the Bible is to obtain a clear understanding of what God is saying to us in the text. However, Ellen White notes, there are Scriptural passages that are not clear: “While some portions of the Word are easily understood, the true meaning of other parts is not so readily discerned.”² Behind the words of Scripture there lies an additional significance that must be discovered. In reflecting on Christ as “the truth” she says that “His words are truth, and they have a deeper significance than appears on the surface.”³ In fact, “all the sayings of Christ have a value beyond their unpretending appearance.” Some will discover the value of these statements by Christ and “discern the precious gems of truth, though these may be buried treasures.”⁴

Ellen White warns against an insufficient or superficial grasp of the truth. She strongly encourages striving for a full understanding of truth. “We must not be satisfied with superficial knowledge,” but “seek to learn the full meaning of the words of truth, and to drink deep of the spirit of the holy oracles.”⁵ This enterprise demands “careful thought as to the meaning of the sacred text.”⁶

¹ CE 58.

² TM 107.

³ COL 110. See also SC 90, 91.

⁴ COL 110.

⁵ “Search the Scriptures” in RH (October 9, 1883), 625.

⁶ Ibid.

Much searching of the Bible, therefore, is an indispensable requirement for its understanding. “We do not perceive the meaning of the Word of God without much study.”¹ She says, “Every page of the New Testament Scriptures shines with His [Christ’s] light. Every text is a diamond, touched and irradiated by the divine rays.”² It is only through diligent research in the Bible that persons gain this eye-opening experience of an increasing appreciation of the text. “In order to understand the truth of God, there is need of deep research.”³

A realistic picture of the historical cultural context of the biblical episodes can lead to an improved understanding of their significance in the past as well as their current relevance. To achieve this she suggests the following: “Let us in imagination go back to that scene [at the Mount of Blessing], and, as we sit with the disciples on the mountainside, enter into the thoughts and feelings that filled their hearts. Understanding what the words of Jesus meant to those who heard them, we may discern in them a new vividness and beauty, and may also gather for ourselves their deeper lessons.”⁴

Discover and Understand God’s Truth Personally

Ellen White considers carefully studying and understanding the truth for oneself to be a vital object of any study of the Bible. “The truths of the Bible are as pearls hidden.” Therefore, “They must be searched, dug out by painstaking effort.”⁵ She warns

¹ “Imperative Necessity of Searching for Truth” in RH (November 15, 1892), 706.

² Manuscript 44, 1898 (7BC, 907).

³ “Imperative Necessity of Searching for Truth” in RH (November 15, 1892), 706.

⁴ MB 1.

⁵ 1SM 20.

against being “content to float along with the current, believing because someone else believes. The questions of truth that are submitted to us, are of vital interest, in contrast with the idle traditions that are sustained by human authority and church pretension.”¹ There is a need to become personally involved in the research for the foundation of the truth. She counsels that “we must, through fervent prayer and deep and earnest research, become established and settled, rooted and grounded in the faith, and know, each for himself, that we have the truth.”² This commission to personal Biblical research is never to cease.³

An important task of the interpreter of the Scripture is to rescue God’s truth from the erroneous interpretations that have accumulated throughout the centuries. She writes, “There is a great work to be done by the earnest Bible student; for gems of truth are to be gathered up, and separated from the companionship of error.”⁴

A major objective for interpreters is to obtain a true knowledge of the truth. Through “their research they are to receive light and a correct knowledge.”⁵ To Ellen White this “correct knowledge” is not simply knowledge for knowledge’s sake. It is purposefully obtained so that the interpreters may apply it to their own lives and then share it with “those who are ignorant.”⁶ It is a knowledge that educates others as to the

¹ “In Demonstration of the Spirit” in RH (September 4, 1888), 561.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “The Bible Our Guide” in BE (October 15, 1892), 306.

⁵ Manuscript 4, 1896 in 3MR 430.

⁶ Ibid.

way of salvation. Thus the interpreter's task focuses on the "inculcation of ideas which are light and truth."¹

In the study of the Bible the interpreter has the privilege of exploring the unsearchable riches of Christ. Ellen White says, "The Bible is the mine of the unsearchable riches of Christ."² She encourages people through careful study to dig deeply into this most precious mine to gather its magnificent gems. This study allows the student and scholar of the Scriptures to communicate with God. "The study of the Scriptures is the means divinely ordained to bring men into closer connection with their Creator and to give them a clearer knowledge of His will." The study of the Bible, therefore, "is the medium of communication between God and man."³

In the search for truth, the interpreter will have the opportunity to discover new truth. Bible truths are progressive. "The truth," she says, "is an advancing truth."⁴ Commenting on the Old Testament she mentions, "The significance of the Jewish economy is not yet fully comprehended. Truths vast and profound are shadowed forth in its rights and symbols. . . . Far more than we do, it is our privilege to understand these wonderful themes."⁵ And the more the New Testament is read, "the more instructive it becomes. No one ever wearies of its beautiful words, for they are like precious gems. The

¹ Ibid.

² COL 107.

³ GC 69.

⁴ CW 33.

⁵ COL 133.

deeper the research made into them, the newer and more splendid the light reflected by them.”¹

She further states that “Though the Bible is a revelation from heaven, yet many do not comprehend its divine teaching.”² It is true that “we have some understanding of the inspired books of the Old and New Testament,” but “there is much that even in our day we do not see and comprehend.”³ She urges the “need of deep research,”⁴ that we may discover “new aspects of truth in both the Old and New Testament” and see “the exceeding breadth and compass of truths which we imagine we understand, but of which we have only a superficial knowledge.”⁵ There is a “need of thorough and continuous searching of the Scriptures for greater light. . . . We must watch with earnestness that we may discern any ray of light which God shall present to us.”⁶ “We are to catch the first gleamings of truth,” she says, that “through prayerful study, clearer light may be obtained, which can be brought before others.”⁷ It is God’s will, therefore, that His people “should be ever moving forward to receive the increased and ever-increasing light which is shining for them.”⁸ “We must walk in the increasing light.”¹ It is obvious that

¹ UL 54.

² “The Bible Our Guide” in BE (October 15, 1892), 306.

³ “Imperative Necessity of Searching for Truth” in RH (November 15, 1892), 706.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “The Bible Our Guide” in BE (October 15, 1892), 306.

⁶ 5T 708.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ 5T 708, 709.

the new light and advanced truth bring new responsibilities with it, which are destined to profoundly affect the behavior and mission of the church.

Examine Teachings, Beliefs, and Practices of Seventh-day Adventists

In the quest for truth and new light, part of our research and study should focus on a reexamination of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs. Ellen White indicates that God has revealed new light, and this should “lead us to a diligent study of the Scriptures and a most critical examination of the positions which we hold.” “God would have all the bearings and positions of truth thoroughly and perseveringly searched, with prayer and fasting.” “Believers,” she cautions, “are not to rest in suppositions and ill-defined ideas of what constitutes truth.” “Their faith must be firmly founded upon the Word of God so that when the testing time shall come and they are brought before councils to answer for their faith they may be able to give a reason for the hope that is in them, with meekness and fear.”²

Ellen White encourages an open-minded attitude toward the traditional Seventh-day Adventist positions, saying that “There is no excuse for anyone in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error.”³ She warns against the idea that all the traditional teachings of the church are infallible.

¹ CW 33.

² 5T 707, 708.

³ “Christ our Hope” in RH (December 20, 1892), 785; Also in CW 35.

“The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation.”¹ She says that “in closely investigating every jot and tittle which we think is established truth, in comparing Scripture with Scripture, we may discover errors in our interpretation of Scripture.” And she confidently promised that if such a “search is properly conducted, jewels of inestimable value will be found.”²

In the apologetics of the basic doctrines of the church White pleads for objectivity. “In defending the doctrines which we consider fundamental articles of faith we should never allow ourselves to employ arguments that are not wholly sound. These may avail to silence an opposer, but they do not honor the truth.” She therefore recommends that “We should present sound arguments, that will not only silence our opponents, but will bear the closest and most searching scrutiny.”³

Ellen White advocated openness to others in the study of the Bible, even though we may disagree with them. “We should never refuse to examine the Scriptures with those who, we have reason to believe, desire to know what is truth.” If one holds different views from yours and proposes to investigate that point with you, she asks, “should you rise up, filled with prejudice, and condemn his ideas, while refusing to give him a candid hearing?” “The only right way would be to sit down as Christians and investigate the position presented in the light of God’s Word, which will reveal truth and unmask error.

¹ Ibid.

² “Treasure Hidden” in RH (July 12, 1898), 438.

³ 5T 708.

To ridicule his ideas would not weaken his position in the least if it were false, or strengthen your position if it were true.” “Truth is eternal,” she says, “and conflict with error will only make manifest its strength. . . . If the pillars of our faith will not stand the test of investigation, it is time that we knew it.”¹

She rejects the objection of some to an investigation of the church’s positions for fear that it would “tend to dissension and disunion” because if they would “in even a single point . . . acknowledge themselves in error, other minds would be led to doubt the whole theory of truth.” She says that if dissension “is to be the result of investigation, the sooner it comes the better,” adding, “If there are those whose faith in God’s word will not stand the test of an investigation of the Scriptures, the sooner they are revealed the better; for then the way will be opened to show them their error. We cannot hold that a position once taken, an idea once advocated, is not, under any circumstances, to be relinquished. There is but One who is infallible—He who is the way, the truth, and the life.”²

Limitations of the Interpretation of the Scriptures

Human Limitations

It is important that we should keep in mind human limitations in the study of the Bible. “In the Word of God many queries are raised,” Ellen White writes, “that the most profound scholars can never answer.”³ The reason for this is that the “Word of God, like the character of its divine Author, presents mysteries that can never be fully

¹ TM 107. This investigation should follow the proper principles of interpretation and recognize the proper limitations of research as described below.

² Ibid., 105.

³ 3SM 310.

comprehended by finite beings.” She says, “The entrance of sin into the world, the incarnation of Christ, regeneration, the resurrection, and many other subjects presented in the Bible, are mysteries too deep for the human mind to explain, or even fully to comprehend.”¹ In the research of the Scriptures one may go as deep as possible, “and yet there is an infinity beyond.”²

These human limitations should never be used as an excuse to leave out the study of the more difficult passages. Some have neglected the study of important truths because of the statement, “the secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children” (Dt. 29:29). She says that to the earnest seeker after truth, His Word shall “be ever unfolding.”³ The limitation pertains to our human nature, not to God’s purpose. Said Ellen White,

The fact needs to be emphasized, and often repeated, that the mysteries of the Bible are not such because God has sought to conceal truth, but because our own weakness or ignorance makes us incapable of comprehending or appropriating truth. The limitation is not in His purpose, but in our capacity. Of those very portions of Scriptures often passed by as impossible to be understood, God desires us to understand as much as our minds are capable of receiving. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,” that we may be “thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” 2 Tim. 3:16, 17.¹

God’s Infinity

At the same time we need to keep in mind the limitations that are associated with God’s infinity. The differences between the finite creature and the infinite Creator should always be kept in mind by the Bible student and interpreter. This difference, Ellen White

¹ SC 106.

² 5T 740.

³ COL 127; “The Study of Nature” in *Signs of the Times* (Australian), June 6, 1904, 275.

says, makes it impossible “for created beings to attain to a full understanding of God and His works.”² “The depth of human intellect may be measured; the works of human authors may be mastered; but the highest, deepest, broadest flight of the imagination cannot find out God. There is infinity beyond all that we can comprehend.”³ Illustrating the magnitude and grandeur of the Word of God, she writes,

It is impossible for any human mind to exhaust even one truth or promise of the Bible. One catches the glory from one point of view, another from another point; yet we can discern only gleamings. The full radiance is beyond our vision. As we contemplate the great things of God’s Word, we look into a fountain that broadens and deepens beneath our gaze. Its breadth and depth pass our knowledge. As we gaze, the vision widens; stretched out before us we behold a boundless, shoreless sea.⁴

She indicates, “God cannot be understood by men. His ways and works are past finding out. In regard to the revelations that He has made of Himself in His Word, we may talk, but other than this, let us say of Him, Thou art God, and Thy ways are past finding out.”⁵

Warning against Higher or Historical Criticism

In the light of God’s infinity and His special revelation, Ellen White considers the emerging approaches to the Bible by interpreters who are using higher criticism, later defined as historical criticism. In one of her sermons she asks,

Who is the Higher Critic? It is the Lord God of the universe, who has spread the canopy of the heavens above us, and has made the stars and called them forth in their

¹ Ed 171.

² 5T 703.

³ COL 113.

⁴ Ed 171.

⁵ Manuscript 124, 1903 in 6BC 1079.

order. . . . And the higher critics come in. Who are they? Poor, finite man on probation to see if he will be loyal and true to God that he can stand under the blood-stained banner of Prince Emmanuel, and that he can become a child of God and an heir of heaven. Talk of the critics, the higher critics. We have God; we have His Word in its simplicity.¹

She identifies higher criticism as one of Satan's tools to deceive, stating that "today, by the pleasing sentiments of higher criticism, . . . the enemy of righteousness is seeking to lead souls into forbidden paths."² The influence of higher criticism is compared to the destructive effect of the rabbinical traditions in Christ's days.³

The reason for her strong opposition to higher criticism are that (1) it effectively destroys faith in the Bible,⁴ and (2) it undermines the concept of the Bible as divine revelation and takes away the uplifting power of God's Word: "The work of 'higher criticism,' in dissecting, conjecturing, reconstructing, is destroying faith in the Bible as a divine revelation; it is robbing God's Word of power to control, uplift, and inspire human lives."⁵

In looking beyond present limitations that encumber Bible students and scholars, certain difficulties in the understanding of the Scriptures will be removed as God sees fit. "Some passages," Ellen White remarks, "are placed beyond the reach of human minds, until such a time as God chooses, in His own wisdom, to open them."¹ Yet other "passages of Scripture will never be perfectly comprehended until in the future life Christ

¹ Manuscript 43a, 1894; Sermon, "Seeking Heavenly Treasures" in 1SAT 255.

² AA 474. The other tools are "evolution, spiritualism, theosophy, and pantheism" (Ibid).

³ MH 142.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ed 227.

shall explain them.”² Commenting on eternity and the “unsearchable mysteries in the plan of redemption which finite minds cannot comprehend,”³ she says that “a long lifetime of prayer and research will leave much unexplored and unexplained.” But she assures that “what we know not now, will be revealed hereafter.”¹

¹ 1T 377.

² GW 312.

³ 4T 444.

CHAPTER 2
FOUNDATIONS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Introduction

The foundations of the interpretation of the Bible rest on three major components of the nature of the Scriptures. They are the uniqueness of the Bible, its authority, and its unity of witness.

Inspiration and Authorship

On crucial questions of inspiration and authorship of the Scriptures Ellen White is clear. “The Bible points to God as its author.”² Yet this realization does not come automatically. “A settled faith in the divinity of the Holy Scriptures,” she writes, comes to those who “through personal experience” have “a knowledge of God and His Word.”³

At the same time interpreters must understand the human dimension in the process of inspiration. She observes that the Bible “was written by human hands, and in the varied style of its different books it presents the characteristics of the several writers.

¹ 5T 301.

² GC v.

³ MH 462.

The truths revealed are all ‘given by inspiration of God’ (2 Tim. 3:16); yet they are expressed in the words of men.”¹ The process of inspiration through which God communicates His eternal truth to man she describes as follows: First, is God who qualifies persons to communicate His truth. “God has been pleased to communicate His truth to the world by human agencies, and He Himself, by His Holy Spirit, qualified men and enabled them to do His work.”²

Next it is God who selected the subject matter for the Bible writers. “He guided the mind in the selection of what to speak and what to write.”³

Furthermore, God communicates through human language that is not perfect. “The treasure [of truth] was entrusted to earthen vessels, yet it is, none the less, from Heaven. The testimony is conveyed through the imperfect expression of human language, yet it is the testimony of God.”⁴

Genuine believers recognize His divine authorship: “The obedient, believing child of God beholds in it [the Bible] the glory of a divine power, full of grace and truth.”⁵

It is important that interpreters realize that the Bible writers, not their words, are inspired. How the language of humans can be considered as God’s Word, she carefully describes as follows:

¹ GC v.

² 1SM 26. She also states that “the Infinite One by His Holy Spirit has shed light into the minds and hearts of His servants” (1SM 25).

³ 1SM 26. She continues saying that “He has given dreams and visions, symbols and figures; and those to whom the truth was thus revealed have themselves embodied the thought in human language.”(1SM 25).

⁴ 1SM 26.

⁵ Ibid.

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers. It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.¹

The divine-human composition gives the Bible its uniqueness. She states that the "Ten Commandments were spoken by God Himself, and were written by His own hand. They are of divine, and not of human composition. But the Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human."² As illustration she refers to Christ's nature, saying that "Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that 'the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.' John 1:14."³

The Accuracy of the Bible

Perfect Concepts in Imperfect Language

"The Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language."⁴ Therefore the challenge for the student of the Scripture is to understand God's perfect thoughts clothed with imperfect human language. In speaking about "God's condescension" in reaching

¹ Manuscript 24, 1886 (1SM 21).

² GC v, vi; 1SM 25.

³ GC vi.

⁴ 1SM 20.

“fallen human beings where they are,” Ellen White writes that “the Lord speaks to human beings in imperfect speech, in order that the degenerate senses, the dull, earthly perception, of earthly beings may comprehend His words.” She adds, “The Bible, perfect as it is in its simplicity, does not answer to the great ideas of God; for infinite ideas cannot be perfectly embodied in finite vehicles of thought.”¹ Therefore, “the Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language.”

She states, “Jesus, in order to reach man where he is, took humanity. The Bible must be given in the language of men.” But one has to realize that “Everything that is human is imperfect.” Different meanings are expressed by the same word, “and there is not one word for each distinct idea.”²

However, she says, one should not forget that “the Bible was given for practical purposes.”³ This means that human language, imperfect though it may be, can still function as an accurate vehicle for divine communication of eternal truths.

Translation or Copyist Errors

In responding to the often asked question whether the Bible contains translation or copyist errors, Ellen White comments, “This is all probable, and the mind that is so narrow that it will hesitate and stumble over this possibility or probability would be just as ready to stumble over the mysteries of the Inspired Word, because their feeble minds cannot see through the purposes of God. Yes,” she adds, “they would just as easily

¹ Ibid., 22.

² Ibid., 20.

³ Ibid.

stumble over plain facts that the common mind will accept.”¹ And she assures that “All the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth.”²

Down through the ages specific attempts were made to change certain words in the Bible. These changes were not best in spite of the presumed good intentions of the copyists. Such resulted in the development of textual variants: “I saw that God had especially guarded the Bible; yet when copies of it were few, learned men had in some instances changed the words, thinking that they were making it more plain, when in reality they were mystifying that which was plain, by causing it to lean to their established views, which were governed by tradition.”³

In colorful terms she describes those trying “to correct the errors of the Bible.” “In seeking to make plain or unravel mysteries hid from ages from mortal man, they are like a man floundering about in the mud, unable to extricate himself and yet telling others how to get out of the muddy sea they themselves are in.”⁴ She says confidently, “No one can improve the Bible by suggesting what the Lord meant to say or ought to have said.”¹

It is interesting to note that Ellen White does not emphatically state that the Bible contains mistakes. She only refers to the “possibility or probability” of copyist mistakes or manipulations and indicates that in some cases, through changes, the plain meaning of the text has become mystified or more difficult to understand.

¹ Ibid. 16

² Ibid.

³ EW 220, 221.

⁴ 1SM 16.

Divine Preservation

Ellen White speaks with confidence of how God preserved the Sacred Scriptures. She writes that the Bible text was supernaturally guarded. “It came fresh from the Fountain of eternal truth, and throughout the ages a divine hand has preserved its purity.”² “God had faithful witnesses to whom He committed the truth, and who preserved the Word of God. The manuscripts of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures have been preserved through the ages by a miracle of God.”³

Presence of Contradictions

The claim that the Bible contains contradictions Ellen White outright rejects. It may *seem* that there are contradictions, but in reality there are none. Those who see contradictions in the Scripture come to such conclusions because of their “imperfect comprehension of either science or revelation,”⁴ and “superficial knowledge” of the Bible.⁵ She adds that rightly understood, science and revelation are in “perfect harmony.”⁶

¹ Ibid.

² CT 52.

³ Unpublished Letter 32, 1899. Available at the White Estate.

⁴ CE 193.

⁵ 1SM 20.

⁶ CE 194.

The Bible is “to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will.”¹ “Man is fallible,” she states, “but God’s Word is infallible.”² Therefore, the Bible is “the unerring standard” by which all ideas must be tested.³

The Authority of the Bible

The authority of the Bible is revealed by God’s authorship, God’s Word, the revelation of His Will, the supreme infallible, unerring standard, and the Biblical witness or testimony of these facts. The following statements are expressions of Mrs. White’s position.

The Basis of Authority

The basis of the authority of Sacred Scripture is that the Bible is God’s voice. “The Bible is God’s voice speaking to us, just as surely as though we could hear it with our ears.”⁴ In it we see a revelation of God’s will. “The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will.”⁵

She points to Wycliffe as an example of the Reformers who recognized with implicit faith the Bible as “the inspired revelation of God’s will” and “a perfect revelation of God’s will.”⁶ “Man is fallible, but God’s Word is infallible.”¹ “We are to receive

¹ GC vii.

² 1SM 416.

³ MH 462.

⁴ 6T 393.

⁵ GC vii.

⁶ Ibid., 93.

God's word as supreme authority"² and "the unerring standard."³ "The Bible points to God as its author,"⁴ and "the evidence of the truth of God's Word is in the Word itself."⁵

Authority in Faith and Doctrine

The Bible is the authority in faith and doctrine. The Bible, Ellen White says, is "the revealer of doctrines"⁶ and "the standard by which all teaching . . . must be tested."⁷ "True Christianity receives the Word of God as the great treasure house of inspired truth and the test of all inspiration."⁸ "The Bible, and the Bible alone," she emphasizes, "is our rule of faith."⁹ And she calls for a return "to the great Protestant principle—the Bible, and the Bible only, as the rule of faith and duty."¹⁰ Although she is not generally in favor of creeds, nevertheless she urges people to adopt the Scriptures as a creed for their lives: "The Bible, and the Bible alone, is to be our creed."¹¹

¹ 1SM 416.

² 6T 402.

³ MH 462; ST (Australian), June 6, 1904, 275.

⁴ GC v.

⁵ 8T 157.

⁶ GC vii .

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 193.

⁹ CSW 84.

¹⁰ GC 204, 205.

¹¹ 1SM 416.

Authority in History

The Bible is also an authority in history and provides the only truly objective history. Speaking of the accuracy and non-bias of Bible history, Ellen White says that “Here only can we find a history of our race, unsullied by human prejudice or human pride.”¹ She states that the Bible “lights up the far-distant past, where human research seeks vainly to penetrate.”² “In God’s Word alone we find an authentic account of creation.”³ “Here only do we find an authentic account of the origin of nations.”⁴

Authority over Human Wisdom, Judgment, and All Experience

The Bible has the final authority over human wisdom and judgment, and not vice versa. Ellen White writes, “The ingenuity of man has been exercised for ages to measure the Word of God by their finite minds and limited comprehension.”⁵ “But the Word of the Lord is not to be judged by a human standard,”⁶ and “Philosophy cannot determine the ways and works of God; the human mind cannot measure infinity.”⁷ “Man’s measurement of God will never be correct.”⁸

¹ CE 65.

² Ibid.

³ CE 38.

⁴ CT 52.

⁵ ISM 18

⁶ 5T 301.

⁷ 6BC 1079.

⁸ “Science and Revelation” in ST, (March 13, 1884), 161.

She warns that “Scriptures need not be read by the dim light of tradition or human speculation. As well might we try to give light to the sun with a torch as to explain the Scriptures by human tradition or imagination.”¹ On the superiority of the Bible, she states, “God’s holy Word needs not the torchlight glimmer of earth to make its glories distinguishable,” because “It is light in itself—the glory of God revealed, and beside it every other light is dim.”² From her perspective, “The Word of God is the standard by which all . . . experience must be tested.”³ It is the “test of experience”⁴ and “the sole bond of union” among the believers.⁵

Expressing her personal attitude towards the supreme authority of Scripture she says: “I would have both my arms taken off at my shoulders before I would ever make the statement or set my judgment upon the Word of God as to what is inspired and what is not inspired. . . . Never let mortal man sit in judgment upon the Word of God.”¹

Authority over the Spirit of Prophecy

The Bible also has authority over the Spirit of Prophecy. For Ellen White the Bible is the “authoritative, infallible revelation” of God’s will, but this does not abolish the need for continual guidance by His Spirit. “The fact that God has revealed His will to men through His Word, has not rendered needless the continued presence and guiding of

¹ COL 111.

² Ibid.

³ GC vii.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ 1SM 416.

the Holy Spirit.”² This guidance after apostolic times has been called “Spirit of Prophecy.” She claims that the Bible as well as the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy are inspired by the Holy Spirit: “The Holy Ghost is the author of the Scriptures and of the Spirit of Prophecy.”³

Ellen White considers her writings to be revelations from God.⁴ She states: “I do not write one article in the paper expressing merely my own ideas. They are what God has opened before me in vision.”⁵ She relates that God’s angel told her, “In all your communications, speak as one to whom the Lord has spoken. He is your authority.”⁶ This unique inspiration has given her writings a place above all other writings in relation to the Scriptures. In Biblical research, therefore, the writings of Ellen G. White, as Spirit of Prophecy, should be more authoritative than other research tools and commentaries.

She herself still recognizes the Bible as the supreme norm by which everything ought to be tested, emphasizing that “The Spirit was not given—nor can it ever be bestowed—to supersede the Bible; for the Scriptures explicitly state that the Word of God is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested (1 John 4:1, Isaiah 8:20 quoted).”⁷

¹ 7BC 919.

² GC vii.

³ Letter, 92, 1900 in 3SM 30.

⁴ 5T 691.

⁵ Ibid., 67.

⁶ Letter 186, 1902 in 17MR 63.

⁷ GC vii.

The Unity of the Bible

The Basis of Unity

The basis of the unity of the Sacred Scriptures is related to its divine authorship, the Bible student's personal experience, and the divine illumination accompanying the study, the thoroughness of study and research, and the revelations of the Spirit of Prophecy.

Divine authorship. Fundamental to the unity of the Bible is its divine authorship.¹ Although it was written by various persons, each writer, she says, “under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, presents what is most forcibly impressed upon his own mind—a different aspect of truth in each, but a perfect harmony through all.”² In addition the unity of the Bible needs to be experienced personally. Through “personal experience” in “the knowledge of God and His Word” one develops a “settled faith in the divinity of the Holy Scriptures” which brings conviction “that truth can never contradict itself.”³ From her own experience White testifies: “I saw that the Word of God, as a whole, is a perfect chain, one portion linking into and explaining another.”⁴

Divine illumination. Divine illumination is necessary in order to discover the unity of the Bible. Not everyone has this insight. Only “those whose hearts are in

¹ GC v.

² Ibid., vi.

³ MH 462.

⁴ EW 221.

harmony with truth and duty will search the Scriptures with a heart prepared to receive divine impressions.” Through these impressions, “the illuminated soul sees a spiritual unity, one grand golden thread running through the whole, but it requires patience, thought, and prayer to trace out the precious golden thread.”¹

Bible study, research, and unity. With thorough study and research of the Scriptures a beautiful unity can be discovered. “There is not always perfect order or apparent unity in the Scriptures,” Ellen White says. “The miracles of Christ are not given in exact order, but are given just as the circumstances occurred, which called for this divine revealing of the power of Christ. The truths of the Bible are as pearls hidden.”² However, “he who earnestly searches the Scriptures will see that harmony exists between the various parts of the Bible; he will discover the bearing of one passage upon another, and the reward of his toil will be exceedingly precious.”³ The use of the analogy of Scripture principle will especially reveal this unity. It is “by comparing Scriptures referring to the same subjects” that “you will see beauty and harmony of which you have never dreamed.”⁴

The Nature of Unity

The diversity of Bible writers. Ellen White discusses the nature of the unity of the Bible in the light of the diversity of writers and styles. She says that the Bible was

¹ 1SM 20.

² Ibid.

³ “The Bible Our Guide” in BE, (Oct. 15, 1892), 306.

⁴ 4T 499; cf. Ed 123.

“written by human hands; and in the varied style of its different books it presents the characteristics of the several writers.”¹ The Lord gave His Word “through different writers, each having his own individuality, though going over the same history. Their testimonies are brought together in one Book, and are like the testimonies in a social meeting. They do not represent things in just the same style.” “Each has an experience of his own,” she says, “and this diversity broadens and deepens the knowledge that is brought out to meet the necessities of varied minds.”²

In another instance she writes,

Written in different ages, by men who differed widely in rank and occupation, and in mental and spiritual endowments, the books of the Bible present a wide contrast in style, as well as a diversity in the nature of the subjects unfolded. Different forms of expression are employed by different writers; often the same truth is more strikingly presented by one than by another. . . . As presented through different individuals, the truth is brought out in its varied aspects. One writer is more strongly impressed with one phase of the subject; he grasps those points that harmonize with his experience or with his power of perception and appreciation; another seizes upon a different phase; and each, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, presents what is most forcibly impressed upon his own mind—a different aspect of the truth in each, but a perfect harmony through all.”³

She adds, “the Creator of all ideas may impress different minds with the same thought, but each may express it in a different way, yet without contradiction.”⁴

Progressive revelation. The concept of progressive revelation plays an important role in understanding the nature of Biblical unity. This concept is God’s design and is carefully interwoven throughout the Scriptures. Ellen White writes, “The Lord gave His

¹ GC v.

² 1SM 21, 22.

³ GC vi.

⁴ 1SM 22.

Word in just the way He wanted it to come.”¹ In introducing the idea of progressive revelation, she says, “The Scriptures were given to men, not in a continuous chain of unbroken utterances, but piece by piece through successive generations, as God in His providence saw a fitting opportunity to impress man at sundry times and divers places. Men wrote as they were moved upon by the Holy Ghost.” She adds, “There is ‘first the bud, then the blossom, and next the fruit,’ ‘first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.’ This is exactly what the Bible utterances are to us.”²

She describes the limitations of the Bible prophets in understanding their own messages, stating that the prophets prophesied and “longed to understand that which they foretold; but to them this privilege was not given. They longed to see what we see, and to hear what we hear, but they could not.”³ Quoting 1 Pet. 1:10-12 she says, “the prophets to whom these great scenes were revealed longed to understand their import.”⁴ These prophets “were favored with the special illumination of the Spirit,” but “did not fully comprehend the import of the revelations committed to them. The meaning was to be unfolded from age to age, as the people of God should need the instruction therein contained.”⁵ She says that “mysteries into which angels desired to look, which prophets

¹ Ibid., 21.

² Ibid., 19, 20.

³ 6T 19.

⁴ Ed 183.

⁵ GC 344.

and kings and righteous men desired to understand, the remnant church will carry in messages from God to the world.”¹

Harmony between the Old Testament and New Testament. An important way Scripture reveals its unity is in the harmony between the Old and New Testament. Of this harmony Ellen White comments, “The Word of God includes the Scriptures of the Old Testament as well as of the New. One is not complete without the other.”² “The Old and New Testament are linked together by the golden clasp of God,”³ and they “are inseparable, for both are the teachings of Christ,” forming “an inseparable whole—the one depending upon and illuminating the other.”⁴

Commenting on the interrelation between the two, she says, “The Old Testament sheds light upon the New, and the New upon the Old. Each is a revelation of the glory of God in Christ. Both present truths that will continually reveal new depths of meaning to the earnest seeker.”⁵ Thus, “there is no discord between the Old Testament and the New. In the Old Testament we find the gospel of a coming Saviour; in the New Testament we have the gospel of a Saviour revealed as the prophecies had foretold. While the Old

¹ 6T 19.

² COL 126.

³ 5BC 1147.

⁴ Ibid., 1094. Cf. COL 128. About the Old Testament she writes: “It is the light from the prophetic past that brings out the life of Christ and the teachings of the New Testament with clearness and beauty” (DA 799), and “the doors of the New Testament are unlocked with the key of the Old Testament” (Ev 579). Regarding the New Testament she says that it “explains the Old” (AA 381), and makes plain “the types of the Jewish economy”(Ed 124).

⁵ COL 128.

Testament is constantly pointing forward to the true offering, the New Testament shows that the Saviour prefigured by the typical offerings has come.”¹

She also mentions that “the Old Testament is the gospel in figures and symbols. The New Testament is the substance. One is as essential as the other.”² With this intimate unity one can understand her perceptions that “The Saviour is revealed in the Old Testament as clearly as in the New.”³ Viewing this unity in the light of progressive revelation, she writes that “the New Testament does not present a new religion; the Old Testament does not present a religion to be superseded by the New. The New Testament is only the advancement and unfolding of the Old.”⁴

Unity, not uniformity. The manifestation of the divine revelation in the lives of the different Bible writers resulted in unity, not uniformity. She says that “the Lord gave His Word . . . through different writers, each having his own individuality.” “Each has an experience of his own, and this diversity broadens and deepens the knowledge that is brought out to meet the necessities of varied minds.” Consequently, “The thoughts expressed have not a set uniformity, as if cast in an iron mold, making the very hearing monotonous. In such uniformity there would be a loss of grace and distinctive beauty.”⁵

¹ 6BC 1095. She points out that the Old and New Testament relationship is vital as a witness to Christ’s mission, stating that “the miracles of Christ are a part of His divinity; but a stronger proof that He is the world’s Redeemer is found in comparing the prophecies of the Old Testament with the history of the New” (DA 799).

² 2SM 104.

³ DA 799.

⁴ 6T 392.

⁵ 1SM 21, 22. She elaborates: “It is seldom that two persons will view and express truth in the very same way. Each dwells on particular points which his constitution and education have fitted him to appreciate.” (Ibid., 22).

CHAPTER 3
PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPETATION

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the major principles of Biblical interpretation. These principles include the principle of “the Bible Only” showing the sufficiency of the Biblical canon and its relation to the Spirit of Prophecy, the principle of the Bible as its own interpreter with the analogy of Scripture principle and typology, and general principles of interpretation, dealing with the understanding of the obvious meaning, context, words, texts, subjects, books, writers, and the Biblical canon. It concludes with the most important rules of interpreting the Scriptures and new light.

The Principle of “the Bible Only.”

The All-Sufficiency of the Biblical Canon

The Bible Only principle points to the all-sufficiency of the Biblical canon. This means that the search for truth has the Biblical canon as its central focus. Ellen White explains that because of the departure from Bible truth in our time there is “need of a return to the great Protestant principle—the Bible, and the Bible only, as the rule of faith

and duty.”¹ The Biblical revelation is an all-sufficient and “authoritative, infallible revelation” of God’s will, “the test of experience,”² “our standard for every doctrine and practice,”³ and the “only infallible authority in religion.”⁴

Thus she states that “Searching the Scriptures alone will bring the knowledge of the true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent.”⁵ In the quest for truth, therefore, it is not imperative to search extra-Biblical sources to arrive at Bible truth. These sources can be helpful in so far as they are in harmony with the Scriptures, but one needs to keep in mind that the divine revelation in the Scriptures is fully adequate in the search for truth. “All that man needs to know and can know of God,” she says, “has been revealed in His Word and in the life of His Son, the great Teacher.”⁶ “Human talent and human conjecture have tried by searching to find out God. But guesswork has proved itself to be guesswork. Man cannot by searching find out God. This problem has not been given to human beings.”⁷

As to the religious value of extra-Biblical sources, she says, “The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the

¹ GC 204, 205.

² Ibid., vii.

³ “To Brethren who shall assemble in General Conference” (August 5, 1888) in *1888 Materials*, 44.

⁴ GC 238.

⁵ FE 415.

⁶ 6BC 1079.

⁷ Ibid.

majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith.” She recommends the Bible as the sufficient and ultimate authority, stating that “Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain ‘Thus saith the Lord’ in its support.”¹

“True Christianity receives the Word of God as the great treasure house of inspired truth, and the test of all inspiration.”²

The Place of the Spirit of Prophecy

In following the principle of “the Bible and the Bible Only,” what is the place of the Spirit of Prophecy? The Bible, Ellen White writes, reveals the promise of additional guidance by the Holy Spirit. “The Spirit was promised by our Saviour, to open the Word to His servants” with the specific goal “to illuminate and apply its teachings.”³ In addition God has promised in His Word to give “visions 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.”⁴

This manifestation of the Holy Spirit is needed because “little heed is given to the Bible.” Therefore, “the Lord has given a lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light.”¹ Ellen White makes the following comparison: “In ancient times God spoke to man by the mouth of prophets and apostles. In these days He speaks to them by

¹ GC 595.

² Ibid., 193.

³ Ibid., vii.

⁴ EW 78.

the testimonies of His Spirit.”² These testimonies are not an addition to the Bible, she states, but “God has seen fit in this manner to bring the minds of His people to His Word, to give them a clearer understanding of it.”³ The testimonies have not been given by the Holy Spirit to give “new light” but “to impress vividly upon the heart the truths of inspiration already revealed.”

She emphasizes that “additional truth is not brought out; but God has through the *Testimonies* simplified the great truths already given and in His own chosen way brought them before the people to awaken and impress the mind with them, that all may be left without excuse.”⁴ Nevertheless, God revealed to her some types of light to correct error and reveal truth: “The Lord has given me much light that I want the people to have; for there is instruction that the Lord has given me for His people.” She adds that “This is now to come before the people, because it has been given to correct specious errors and to specify what is truth.”⁵

The manifestation of the Spirit following the 1844 Great Disappointment is even more remarkable when one realizes that during that time Ellen White could not understand some of the difficult passages of Scripture that the Adventist pioneers were wrestling with. She writes,

During this whole time I could not understand the reasoning of the brethren. My mind was locked, as it were, and I could not comprehend the meaning of the Scriptures we

¹ “An Open Letter” in RH (January 20, 1903), 15; CM 125.

² 5T 661.

³ Ibid., 663.

⁴ Ibid., 665.

⁵ Letter 127, 1910 in 3SM 32.

were studying. This was one of the greatest sorrows of my life. I was in this condition of mind until all the principal points of our faith were made clear to our minds, in harmony with the Word of God. The brethren knew that when not in vision, I could not understand these matters, and they accepted as light direct from heaven the revelations given.¹

The formation of the foundations of Seventh-day Adventist teachings show the intimate relationship between the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy, manifested in the experience of Ellen White. The truth—“especially concerning the ministration of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary, and the message of Heaven for these last days, as given by the angels of the fourteenth chapter of Revelation”—she says, “has been sought out by prayerful study, and testified to by the miracle-working power of the Lord.” It is God Himself, she declares, who “through His Word and the testimony of His Spirit” has revealed the permanence of these “fundamental principles that are based upon unquestionable authority.”²

The development of the organization of the Adventist Church after 1844 from a movement without any organization to an organized church is another example of the role of Ellen White in guiding believers to the Scriptures. Her appeals led the disorganized Adventists to study the Bible on the subject of Gospel order. Quoting the angel who spoke to her in vision, she wrote, “‘The church must flee to God’s word and become established upon gospel order, which has been overlooked and neglected.’ This is indispensably necessary in order to bring the church into the unity of the faith.”³

Subsequent Bible studies by the Adventist pioneers resulted in the adoption of the simple

¹ 1SM 207.

² 1SM 208.

³ EW 100.

New Testament principles of church organization during the nineteenth century. During her ministry she points believers to the importance of the Bible in church organization. She states, “The ancient Israelites constituted God’s church. Today we should take notice of how God organized this church. . . . And He designs that we should learn lessons of order and organization from the perfect order instituted in the days of Moses, for the benefit of the children of Israel.”¹ About the New Testament church, she points out, “The organization of the church at Jerusalem was to serve as a model for the organization of churches in every other place where messengers of truth should win converts to the gospel.”² After the early Seventh-day Adventists adopted this Biblical model the Church experienced its most successful growth.

So the influence of Ellen White has been to point the church back to the Bible as its guide rather than to serve as a separate authority independent of Scripture. Her use of the expression “the Bible and the Bible only” illustrates her view of the relationship between her writings and the Scriptures. When one analyzes how she uses this expression, one discovers that she contrasts it with “our own views and ideas,”³ man’s traditions regarding the Sabbath and the Law of God,⁴ opinions of scholars, scientists, theologians,⁵ “the sayings and doings of men,”⁶ human wisdom,¹ false visions,² churches

¹ GC Daily Bulletin, Jan. 29, 1893, 23; 1T 653.

² AA 91.

³ “A Missionary Appeal” in RH, (December 15, 1885), 770.

⁴ GC 448.

⁵ Ibid., 595.

⁶ CSW 84.

steeped in tradition from which the early Adventists separated themselves,³ the “religions of fable and traditions,” and “imaginary . . . religion of words and forms,” and “human theories and maxims.”⁴ These phrases show that her usage of the “Bible only” is employed to contrast Biblical truth with the unbiblical position of human religious traditions and maxims.

In no instance, however, was this expression ever contrasted with her own writings, because “the Holy Ghost is the author of the Scriptures and of the Spirit of Prophecy.”⁵ Therefore “it is impossible that the teaching of the Spirit should ever be contrary to that of the Word.”⁶

This unique relationship between the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy has given the latter a place above all extra-Biblical sources. Consequently in the study of the Bible, the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy hold a superior position over other research tools.

The Bible Is Its Own Interpreter

Ellen White was concerned that Scriptural passages and subjects should be studied in the context of the whole Biblical canon. One “should learn to view the Word as

¹ FE 200.

² 2SM 85.

³ CW 145.

⁴ PK 625, 626.

⁵ Letter 92, 1900 in 3SM 30.

⁶ GC vii.

a whole, and to see the relations of its parts.”¹ In the interpretation of Scripture she strongly emphasizes the need of employing the principle of “the Bible is its own interpreter” as the key for the Bible student to unlock the treasure house of truth. She cautions that “we are not to accept the opinions of commentators as the voice of God” because “they were erring mortals like ourselves.” “God,” she says, “has given reasoning powers to us as well as to them. We should make the Bible its own expositor.”² This principle is applied in two major ways: through using the analogy of Scripture principle and the typological principle.

The Analogy of Scripture Principle

The analogy of Scripture principle, also called the Scripture principle, is defined as collecting together all passages on a topic and carefully comparing them to discover their meaning. She explains, “Make the Bible its own expositor, bringing together all that is said concerning a given subject at different times and under varied circumstances.”³ It should be emphasized that the texts to be compared must deal with the same subject matter.⁴ Many find this principle to be very beneficial in studying the Bible.

Understand obscure texts. This principle was used throughout the Reformation⁵ and in the Second Advent Movement, out of which the Seventh-day Adventist Church

¹ Ed 190.

² TM 106.

³ “Search the Scriptures” in RH (October 9, 1883), 625.

⁴ FE 187; CT 437; 4T 499.

⁵ GC 173, 203.

developed.¹ She especially recommends the Scripture principle for understanding obscure passages. “Study the difficult passages,” she says, “comparing verse with verse, and you will find that Scripture is the key which unlocks Scripture.”² “Scripture must be compared with Scripture” with “careful research and prayerful reflection” to understand the passages whose meanings do not appear on the surface.³ Quoting the attitude of the German princes at the Diet of Spires in 1529, she writes, “The Holy Scriptures ought to be explained by other and clearer texts.”⁴

Understand the deeper meaning of the text. The Scripture principle is used to reveal the hidden and true meaning of texts. In order to reveal the deeper meaning of the text she recommends that “The Bible is its own expositor. One passage of Scripture will prove to be a key that will unlock other passages, and in this way light will be shed upon the hidden meaning of the Word. By comparing different texts treating on the same subject, viewing their bearing on every side, the true meaning of the Scriptures will be made evident.”⁵ She says: “You must dig in the mine of truth till you find its greatest treasure, and by comparing Scripture with Scripture you may find the true meaning of the text.”⁶

¹ Ibid., 324.

² “Our Great Treasure-House, XIV. Hidden Treasure,” in ST (September 5, 1906).

³ CE 59 ; SC 90, 91 .

⁴ GC 203.

⁵ FE 187; cf. CT 437.

⁶ “Bible Study” in ST (September 26, 1895), 602.

New insights open themselves before those who use this principle. “The Bible is its own interpreter, one passage explaining another. By comparing Scriptures referring to the same subjects, you will see beauty and harmony of which you have never dreamed.”¹

Correct misinterpretations. The Scripture principle is used to correct misinterpretations. Ellen White notes that it is “very easy to put a false interpretation on Scripture, placing stress on passages, and assigning to them a meaning, which, at the first investigation, may appear true, but which on further search, will be seen to be false.” The key to discover this false interpretation, she observes, is the analogy of Scripture principle, stating that “If the seeker after truth will compare Scripture with Scripture, he will find the key that unlocks the treasure house and gives him a true understanding of the Word of God.”²

Solve controversies and disagreements. The Scripture principle is to be used to solve disagreements. Reflecting on her personal experience in the Second Advent Movement she states that the Great Disappointment in 1844 “would teach them, as only such an experience could, the danger of accepting the theories and interpretations of men, instead of making the Bible its own interpreter.”³ It was then, in a time of crisis and strong disagreement among the Second Advent believers, through the careful application of the analogy of Scripture and the typological principle to the sanctuary of Dan. 8:14, that the mystery of the Disappointment was solved. “The subject of the sanctuary,” she says, “was the key which unlocked the mystery of the disappointment of 1844. It opened

¹ 4T 499.

² Manuscript 24, 1896 in 3MR 430.

³ GC 354.

to view a complete system of truth, connected and harmonious, showing that God's hand had directed the great advent movement and revealing present duty as it brought to light the position and work of His people.”¹

In solving disagreements, she states: “If there is a point of truth that you do not understand, upon which you do not agree, investigate, compare Scripture with Scripture, sink the shaft of truth down deep into the mine of God's Word,” adding that “You must lay yourselves and your opinions on the altar of God, put away your preconceived ideas, and let the Spirit of heaven guide into all truth.”² It is “the searching of the Scriptures,” she says, that “would reveal the harmony existing between the various parts of the Bible, and the bearing of one passage upon another.”³

During the year 1888, when Adventists were involved in major controversies, she emphatically stated, “It is the word of the living God that is to decide all controversies.”⁴ She explained, “The word of God is the great detector of error; to it we believe everything must be brought. The Bible must be our standard for every doctrine and practice. We must study it reverentially.”⁵

¹ Ibid., 423.

² TM 476.

³ “Imperative Necessary of Searching for Truth” in RH (November 15, 1892), 706.

⁴ “To Brethren who shall assemble in General Conference” (August 5, 1888) in *1888 Materials*, 45.

⁵ Ibid., 44.

The Typological Principle

For Ellen White, the typological principle, the second major application of the principle of the Bible and the Bible only, applies the analogy of Scripture principle to the type and anti-type relationship. Ellen White fully endorses the typological principle as a legitimate exegetical tool in the formation of doctrine.

Its importance is seen in the faith of Christ's disciples. "Their faith," she says, was founded on the witness about Christ "by the types and prophecies of the Old Testament."¹ "Important truths concerning the atonement are taught by the typical service."² The Old Testament "is as verily the gospel in types and shadows as the New Testament is in its unfolding power."³ Christ is the "originator" of the "Jewish system of worship, in which, by types and symbols, were shadowed forth spiritual and heavenly things."⁴ This system of worship reveals a "two-fold system of law"—the moral and ceremonial law. The ceremonial law is "founded on Christ," and instituted because of "man's transgression of the moral law."⁵ Its ritual pointing to "future redemption"⁶ represents the "gospel in symbol."⁷ "Great truths" are revealed by the types of the ceremonial system which has as its "central object" to direct persons to "the Lamb of

¹ DA 799

² GC 420.

³ 6T 392.

⁴ 7BC 933.

⁵ 6BC 1094, 1095.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ PK 489.

God that was to take away the sin of the world.”¹ In the Old Testament, she comments, “we find the gospel of a coming Saviour; in the New Testament we have the gospel of a Saviour revealed as the prophecies had foretold. While the Old Testament is constantly pointing forward to the true offering, the New Testament shows that the Saviour prefigured by the typical offerings has come.”²

The scope of the typological relevance of this system pertains not only to Christ’s sacrifice but also to His ministry, showing that “the ceremonial system was made up of symbols pointing to Christ, to His sacrifice and His priesthood.”¹

General Principles of Interpretation

There are several general principles of interpretation Ellen White stresses that focus on an interpretation that aims at the obvious meaning of the passage or text, the need to understand the Biblical as well as the historical context, the understanding of words, texts, subjects, books, Bible writers, and the Scriptures as a whole. The following principles express Ellen White’s counsels to Bible students on these topics.

Aim for the Obvious Meaning

Ellen White indicates that “the truths most plainly revealed in the Bible have been involved in doubt and darkness by learned men, who, with a pretense of great wisdom, teach that the Scriptures have a mystical, a secret, spiritual meaning not apparent in the language employed.” She rejects this position, stating that “the language of the Bible

¹ PP 594.

² 6BC 1095.

should be explained according to its obvious meaning, unless a symbol or a figure is employed.”²

She warns that the “plain teachings of the Word of God are not to be so spiritualized that the reality is lost sight of. Do not overstrain the meaning of sentences in the Bible. . . . Take the Scriptures as they read.”³ “The application of the Scriptures must be such that the meaning shall be easily discerned.”⁴

This approach she illustrates with Christ’s counsel to His disciples, stating that “They were not to put a mystical interpretation upon the plain teaching of the Scriptures, and draw from theological stores to build up some man-made theory. It was through putting a mystical meaning upon the plain words of God, that sacred and vital truths were made of little significance, while the theories of men were made prominent.”⁵

Finally she notes that “the more closely we adhere to the simplicity of truth, the more surely do we comprehend its deep meaning.”⁶ She encourages fellow believers, stating, “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.”⁷

¹ PP 365; cf. GC 352.

² GC 598, 599.

³ 1SM 170.

⁴ 7T 267.

⁵ 5 BC 1089.

⁶ HP 139.

⁷ 1SM 18.

Understand the Context

The historical-cultural context is important because of its practical value. She remarks that “an understanding of the customs of those who lived in Bible times, of the location and time of events, is practical knowledge; for it aids in making clear the figures of the Bible and in bringing out the force of Christ’s lessons.”¹ In addition, it is important to carefully study the Biblical context.

She warns against the practice of some who “in order to sustain erroneous doctrines or unchristian practices” use certain “passages of Scripture separated from the context, perhaps quoting half of a single verse as proving their point, when the remaining portion would show the meaning to be quite the opposite.”²

As an example she mentions Judas who caused confusion by introducing “texts of Scripture that had no connection with the truths Christ was presenting.” “These texts,” she says, “separated from their connection, perplexed the disciples, and increased the discouragement that was constantly pressing upon them.”¹

Understanding Words and Texts

Ellen White sees value in an awareness of the original meaning of the words of Scripture. She suggests going back into history in our “imagination” to enter into the thoughts and feelings of those who heard the words of the Bible proclaimed to them. In “understanding what the words of Jesus meant to those who heard them, we may discern in them a new vividness and beauty, and may also gather for ourselves their deeper

¹ CT 518

² GC 521.

lessons.”² She calls for thorough study of the full meaning of the words of the Bible, stating that “we must not be satisfied with superficial knowledge, but must seek to learn the full meaning of the words of truth, and to drink deep of the spirit of the holy oracles.”³

To understand the texts of the Bible, Ellen White recommends the verse-by-verse method. “In daily study,” she says, “the verse-by-verse method is often most helpful. Let the student take one verse and concentrate his mind on ascertaining the thought that God has put into that verse for him, and then dwell upon the thought until it becomes his own.”⁴ To find the deeper or hidden meaning of the text one ought to use the analogy of Scripture principle. This principle, she points out, makes one passage a “key to unlock other passages, and in this way light is shed upon the hidden meaning of the word,” and “the true meaning of the Scriptures will be made evident.”¹

Understanding Subjects

Ellen White also encourages the topical study of the Scriptures. The principle to keep constantly in mind is that in order to arrive at the true understanding of a certain topic it is crucial that the researcher should study and compare all texts dealing with the same subject matter throughout different time periods and in various life situations. She points out that the Bible explains itself when one brings together “all that is said

¹ DA 719.

² MB 1.

³ “Search the Scriptures” in RH (October 9, 1883), 625.

⁴ CT 461.

concerning a given subject at different times and under varied circumstances.”² The significance of this approach becomes clearer as she reveals the complementary nature of Bible subjects, stating that “every prophecy” is “an explanation of another, every truth a development of some other truth. . . . Every principle in the Word of God has its place, every fact its bearing.”³

Understanding the Books of the Bible and Its Writers

The books of the Bible show a variety of style and subjects, revealing the characteristics of the various writers. She indicates that the Bible books “present a wide contrast in style, as well as a diversity in the nature of the subjects unfolded. Different forms of expression are employed by different writers; often the same truth is more strikingly presented by one than by another.”⁴ To understand these books and authors, it is essential to see Scripture as a unity. This is highlighted by her statement that “each gospel is a supplement to the others . . . every truth a development of some other truth,” and “The types of the Jewish economy are made plain by the gospel.”⁵ She therefore suggests a study of Scripture in order “to see the relation of its parts.”¹

¹ Ibid., 437; cf. FE 187.

² CSW 42, 43; RH (October 9, 1883), 625

³ Ed 123, 124.

⁴ 1SM 25. Cf. GC v.

⁵ Ed 123, 124.

Understanding the Scripture as a Whole

Ellen White recommends the use of the analogy of Scripture principle for an understanding of the whole Bible and its interrelationships. This is especially relevant because of the complementary nature of all prophecy and Bible truths. She says that “every principle in the Word of God has its place,” and “every fact its bearing.”² “Scripture is to be compared with Scripture” and the student of the Bible should “learn to view the Word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts.”³

The Target Audience

The message of Scripture is aimed at all people. In the interpretation of Scripture, therefore, the common people as well as the scholar can participate in obtaining truth. However, one should never lose sight of the fact that “The Bible was given for practical purposes.”⁴ “The Bible,” she remarks, “was written for the common people as well as for scholars, and is written within the comprehension of all.”⁵ She cautions that “the Bible was not written for the scholar alone; on the contrary, it was designed for the common people.”¹ “It was written,” she says, “in a plain, simple style to meet the understanding of the common people; and, with proper explanations, a large portion of it can be made

¹ Ibid., 190.

² Ibid., 124.

³ Ibid., 190.

⁴ 1SM 20.

⁵ “Thoroughness in Christian Work” in RH (January 27, 1885), 50.

intensely interesting and profitable to very small children.”² And because “it was designed for the common people,” she says, “the interpretation given by the common people, when aided by the Holy Spirit, accords best with the truth as it is in Jesus.”³

Adventism’s Important Rules of Interpretation

The principles of interpretation employed among the Adventist pioneers of the Second Advent Movement are strongly endorsed by Ellen White. She recognizes their validity for Seventh-day Adventists: “Those who are engaged in proclaiming the third angels message are searching the Scriptures upon the same plan that Father Miller adopted.”⁴ In his book *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology*, she says, William Miller “gives the following simple but intelligent and important rules for Bible study and interpretation.”⁵

The first rule points to the significance of each word of a certain subject studied within the Biblical canon: “Every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible.” This stresses the importance of the immediate context of Bible passages. The second rule focuses on the need to consult the whole Bible in studying the Word of God: “All Scripture is necessary, and may be understood by diligent application

¹ SC 89. She adds: “The great truths necessary for salvation are made clear as noonday; and none will mistake and lose their way except those who follow their own judgment instead of the plainly revealed will of God” (Ibid.).

² CG 513, 514.

³ 5T 331.

⁴ “Notes of Travel” in RH (November 25, 1884), 738.

⁵ Ibid.

and study.” The third rule asserts that the Bible can be understood by faith: “Nothing revealed in Scripture can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering.” The fourth rule brings out the vital role of the analogy of Scripture principle in the formulation of doctrine and practice: “To understand doctrine, bring all the Scriptures together on the subject you wish to know, then let every word have its proper influence; and if you can form your theory without a contradiction, you cannot be in error.” This indicates that no study about a doctrine or teaching is valid or conclusive until all Biblical texts are studied. The fifth rule states that “Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a teacher to expound to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of his sectarian creed, or to be thought wise, then his guessing, desire, creed, or wisdom is my rule, and not the Bible.”¹ “The above,” she says, “is a portion of these rules; and in our study of the Bible we shall all do well to heed the principles set forth.”²

New Light

Ellen White sees Biblical revelation unfolding itself with time. The understanding that the Bible prophets had of their messages was in proportion to the needs of their time. Ellen White writes that “even the prophets who were favored with the special illumination of the Spirit did not fully comprehend the import of the revelation committed to them. The meaning was to be unfolded from age to age, as the people of God should need the

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

instruction therein contained.”¹ This implies that “present truth,” God’s special message for the hour, could vary from time to time. Comparing today’s understanding of Bible truth with that of Christians of past generations, she says:

Those who lived in past generations were accountable for the light which was permitted to shine upon them. Their minds were exercised in regard to different points of Scripture which tested them. But they did not understand the truths which we do. They were not responsible for the light which they did not have. They had the Bible, as we have; but the time for the unfolding of special truth in relation to the closing of this earth’s history is during the last generations that shall live upon the earth.²

On Proverbs 4:18, “the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day,” she comments that “increasing light is to shine upon us.”³ “The truth is an advancing truth, and we must walk in the increasing light.”⁴ She says, “new light will ever be revealed on the Word of God” to those who have a living relation with Christ, and “many gems are yet scattered that are to be gathered together to become the property of the remnant people of God.”⁵

The following principles are recommended to evaluate unfolding revelation. Ellen White encourages believers to be open and receptive to further truth: “There is no excuse for anyone in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error.”⁶

As an essential condition for the reception of new light she emphasizes the

¹ GC 344.

² 2T 692, 693.

³ CW 35.

⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁶ Ibid.

necessity of accepting light already present. “Let them give heed to the light which already shines upon them, and they will receive greater light.”¹ New light, she says, will always be in harmony with earlier revelation and will not have the tendency “to unsettle faith in the old landmarks.”²

Further light will also manifest a general harmony with the established faith of the believers. “God has not passed His people by, and chosen one solitary man here and another there as the only ones worthy to be entrusted with His truth. He does not give one man new light contrary to the established faith of the body.”³ She predicts that “one will arise, and still another, with new light which contradicts the light that God has given under the demonstration of His Holy Spirit.”⁴ “The only safety” for the church is to receive “no new doctrine, no new interpretation of the Scriptures, without first submitting it to brethren of experience.”⁵ She counsels that this ought to be done in “a humble, teachable spirit, with earnest prayer,” and if these experienced believers “see no light in it, yield to their judgment; for ‘in the multitude of counselors there is safety.’”⁶

For the sake of the unity to the Church and its successful mission she urges

¹ GC 528: cf. LS 199; 2T 606, 607 in which she stresses the acceptance of the light through the *Testimonies* as a condition for further revelation.

² CW 49.

³ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶ *Ibid.*

members not to publish private interpretations of texts.¹ “The Reformation,” she says, “was greatly retarded by making prominent differences on some points of faith and each party holding tenaciously to those things where they differed.”² A similar situation would develop today if views should be published “in decided opposition to the faith or truth as it has been taught by us as a people.”³ Solemnly she warns: “Begin to draw apart and feel at liberty to express your ideas without reference to the views of your brethren, and a state of things will be introduced that you do not dream of.”⁴

In the quest for new and advanced Bible truth it is wise to keep in mind Ellen White’s words that “The Bible is yet but dimly understood. A lifelong, prayerful study of its sacred revealings will leave still much unexplained.”¹

¹ Ibid., 79, 76.

² Ibid., 76.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The methodology Ellen White recommends for the interpretation of the Bible is very similar to the methods used during the Reformation. She has no room for an approach that demands a “neutral” or “detached” attitude towards the Bible. A prerequisite for successful interpretation is obedience to the will of God and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. The major objective of interpretation is to obtain a personal knowledge of the will of God and to share this with others to prepare them for eternal life.

Those involved in the interpretation of Scriptures, she says, should recognize the Bible as God’s unique, authentic, infallible revelation. It has been specially guarded by divine providence throughout the centuries. Its authority is derived from the fact that God is its author. It is His voice and therefore His revealed will. The divine authority gives the Bible authority over every discipline. This means that the Bible is the norm and the unerring standard to which natural science and history are subject. In no way would Ellen White allow the Bible to be subjected to the investigation of science as is the practice with any other ancient document. It must not be judged by any human standard. She also warns against ascribing different degrees of inspiration to the various parts of Scripture.

¹ Ibid., 82.

The methods of interpreting Scripture are to be derived from the Bible itself because it is its own interpreter. The interpretation is to be done within the context of the whole canon of the Bible. The Biblical revelation is fully sufficient. It is therefore not imperative to use non-Biblical sources in order to arrive at a clear understanding of Bible truth. Within the Biblical canon there exists unity and harmony. Difficult passages or texts are to be interpreted through the analogy of Scripture principle or the typological principle with the understanding that the Bible does not contradict itself.

One of the most beneficial ways to study Scripture is with the verse-by-verse method. Topical study is also recommended. She urges the interpreters not to be satisfied with the obvious literal meaning but to search beyond it to discover the hidden meaning of the words and the fuller import of the text. She cautions people always to remember that the Bible was given for practical purposes and written for the common people as well as for scholars.

Although Ellen White recognizes the significance of the Biblical context and the historical-cultural background, she has no use for higher criticism with its historical-critical method. This is due to the presuppositions of this method toward the Bible which lead to interpretations and conclusions that diminish faith in Scripture as divine revelation and rob it of its authority over a person's life. She therefore warns people not to use this approach because it destroys the Bible as a converting and life-changing power.

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