

Journal of the Adventist Theological Society, 9/1-2 (1998): 160-166.
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Ellen G. White's Conceptual Understanding of the Sanctuary and Hermeneutics

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The subject of hermeneutics has received much attention within Adventism in recent years. This is certainly not a new discussion, but as each new generation of believers takes ownership of the Seventh-day Adventist doctrines, message, and mission, old issues resurface and require new answers. I believe one way of finding answers to our current questions is to look at the way our pioneers studied Scriptures and found answers for themselves.

In this paper, I wish to present how Ellen G. White's literal or plain reading of Scripture influenced her understanding of the sanctuary doctrine. She understood the doctrine of the sanctuary to be the basis of the Seventh-day Adventist message. In a 1906 letter to G. C. Tenney, she commented: "The correct understanding of the ministration [of Christ] in the heavenly sanctuary is the foundation of our faith" (Letter 208, 1906). Ellen White's conceptual understanding of the heavenly sanctuary and its ministries is a good example of the impact of hermeneutics upon one's belief system. Based primarily upon chapters in two of her most popular books, one in *Patriarchs and Prophets* and the other in *The Great Controversy*,¹ this study will show how she conceived many parallels between the heavenly sanctuary and its ministration and the earthly tabernacle and its services as a result of her hermeneutical principles.

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1958), and *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1950). I will give in-text abbreviated references to these two books.

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“According to the pattern”

Ellen White built her understanding of the sanctuary doctrine on parallels she saw between the heavenly sanctuary and the earthly tabernacle that Moses and the Israelites built in the Sinai desert after their exodus from Egypt. Her insights were shaped by her belief in the literalness of God's instruction to Moses. “Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you” (Ex 25:8, 9 NIV).

In spite of its apparent simplicity, this story has raised a number of perennial questions, in particular: What was this pattern Moses saw? and how real was it? Although a number of theologians have dismissed the literalness of the heavenly pattern, this was not the case with Ellen White. Relying upon this story in Exodus and other texts of Scripture which also refer to it, like Hebrews 9:23,24, she concluded that Moses saw a real sanctuary in heaven and built the earthly copy accordingly. “God Himself gave to Moses the plan of that structure, with particular directions as to its size and form, the materials to be employed, and every article of furniture which it was to contain. . . . God presented before Moses in the mount a view of the heavenly sanctuary, and commanded him to make all things according to the pattern shown him” (PP 343).²

This idea is very important if we are to grasp Ellen White's understanding of the doctrine of the sanctuary. Her belief in a heavenly pattern in the construction of the earthly tabernacle stems from the hermeneutic which leads to her literal reading of Scripture and is based, I believe, upon two basic concepts in her thought.

Heaven is a real place. The first basic concept is that there is a real heavenly temple of which the earthly sanctuary and its services were but a miniature representation. In other words, since God himself showed Moses the original heavenly temple as the pattern for the building of the earthly tabernacle, there is no doubt in Ellen White's mind that the heavenly sanctuary is a real place. According to the account given in Scripture, the earthly sanctuary was neither “invented” nor “devised” by Moses in the Sinai desert. “That sanctuary in which Jesus ministers in our behalf,” affirmed Ellen White, “is the great original, of which the sanctuary built by Moses was a copy” (PP 357).

Heaven is the abiding place of a real God. This leads us to the second basic concept in Ellen White's thought: the heavenly sanctuary is the abiding place of a real God. Like the biblical prophets,³ Ellen White believed God is a real God and not simply an immaterial force or some metaphysical power. He truly exists; He is a personal being. God is a transcendent being, not a pantheistic influence in the universe.

² Ellen White indicates in her earlier writings that Moses saw a miniature sanctuary in heaven as the pattern to follow on earth. See *Spiritual Gifts* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Pub. Association, 1858-1864), 4:5.

³ See Isaiah 6:1-2; Psalm 9:4; Daniel 7:9-14; Malachi 3:1.

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In the course of His relationship with Israel, God desired to dwell close to His people. Hence, the earthly tabernacle became His dwelling place as He sojourned with them to the promised land. He dwelt in the sanctuary, manifesting His visible presence in the Shekinah above the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant (Ex 25:22).

Although faithful to Scripture, this concept of pattern must be kept in perspective. Ellen White remarked that no earthly structure could represent the vastness and glory of the heavenly temple, the abiding place of the King of kings. "Yet important truths concerning the heavenly sanctuary and the great work there carried forward for man's redemption were to be taught by the earthly sanctuary and its services" (PP 357; GC 414).

For Ellen White the concept of a real sanctuary in heaven is of unquestionable importance. Based on her literal reading of Scripture, this basic concept influences her understanding of the whole doctrine of the sanctuary, its services, and the mediatorial ministry of Christ in heaven. Her clearest expressions on the sanctuary services both on earth and in heaven were articulated in the chapter "The Tabernacle and Its Services" in *Patriarchs and Prophets* (343-358) and in the chapter "What is the Sanctuary?" in *The Great Controversy* (409-422). These chapters will be the basis for the remainder of our study in this paper.

Comparisons of the Superior to the Inferior

Ellen White used a number of parallels or comparisons to highlight the reality of the heavenly sanctuary and its ministry as a pattern for the earthly tabernacle. The six parallels from these two chapters that I would like to outline in this study go from the superior (the heavenly pattern) to the inferior (the earthly shadow). In each comparison she clearly saw that the direction of the parallel is from the heavenly pattern to the earthly shadow. The cue is undoubtedly from heaven.

The Two Divisions of Christ's Mediatorial Ministry. The first parallel deals with the two divisions of Christ's mediatorial ministry. "As Christ's ministration was to consist of two great divisions, each occupying a period of time and having a distinctive place in the heavenly sanctuary, so the typical ministration consisted of two divisions, the daily and the yearly service, and to each a department of the tabernacle was devoted" (PP 357).

In this comparison she conveyed two important points which are again based on her literal reading of Scripture. First, if in the Old Testament the services in the tabernacle have two divisions, daily services and a yearly ritual, it is because in heaven after His ascension Christ was going to have two phases to His mediatorial ministry. Second, if the earthly tabernacle has two different apartments, the holy and most holy places, it is also because at His ascension Christ's mediatorial ministry was going to be performed in two different places in the heavenly sanctuary. Thus, for Ellen White, the ministration of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary is divided according to time and place and is the reason

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for the various temporal and spatial aspects of the earthly services. What happens in heaven is the norm for what happens in the earthly tabernacle.

Daily Intercession. A second parallel Ellen White makes is in reference to the daily intercessory services. “As Christ at His ascension appeared in the presence of God to plead His blood in behalf of penitent believers, so the priest in the daily ministration sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice in the holy place in the sinner’s behalf” (PP 357).

Here Ellen White refers to the daily services performed in behalf of individuals. As she understands these levitical services, the repentant sinner brought his offering to the tabernacle and, placing his hand upon the head of the animal, confessed his sins. This symbolic gesture represented the transfer of guilt from the individual to the innocent victim. After the individual had slain the animal, she holds, the priest took the blood of the sacrifice and entered the holy place to sprinkle the blood in front of the veil before the ark of the covenant.⁴ “By this ceremony the sin was, through the blood, transferred in figure to the sanctuary” (PP 354).

She indicates that this ceremony was an earthly representation of Christ appearing in the presence of God at His ascension to plead his blood in behalf of penitent sinners. Thus, she believes, part of Christ’s heavenly ministry after His ascension is to transfer our guilt from ourselves to heaven through His blood. His blood shed on the cross was the death penalty for our guilt and He, both sacrifice and priest, takes the benefits of His sacrifice and pleads before the Father on our behalf.

She provides another fascinating comment on this in *The Great Controversy*: “As anciently the sins of the people were by faith placed upon the sin offering and through its blood transferred, *in figure*, to the earthly sanctuary, so in the new covenant the sins of the repentant are by faith placed upon Christ and transferred, *in fact*, to the heavenly sanctuary” (GC 421, emphasis added). Again notice here that she is consistent with her understanding of the parallel between the superior heavenly reality and the inferior earthly shadow. The transfer of sins from the sinner to the earthly tabernacle is symbolic. She uses the expression “in figure” to describe this transfer. It is a symbolic transfer. Yet, where does the real transfer of sins through the blood of Christ occur? In heaven. She

⁴ Ellen White understands that “In some cases the blood of the victim was not taken into the holy place” (PP 354). In such cases, as found in Leviticus 4, the priest ate part of the victim and/or placed blood on the altar of burnt offering. However, “Both ceremonies alike symbolized the transfer of the sin from the penitent to the sanctuary” (PP 354-355); (see also the Appendix Note 6 in PP 761). In actuality, of course, the blood of daily sacrifices was only rarely carried into the holy place—for the sins of a priest or the whole people—but the process serves as a useful synecdoche for atonement. The biblical text mentions only once that the placing of the hand on the head of the victim so it can “make atonement” was accompanied by confession (Lev 16:21), but perhaps we can generally assume that a person who brought and sacrificed an expensive animal was repentant and seeking cleansing from sin.

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uses the expression “in fact” to describe the reality of a transfer of sin between the repentant sinner and Jesus dying on the cross.

The Record and Cancellation of Sin. This brings us to the third parallel, which deals with the record of sin after confession and repentance. “The blood of Christ, while it was to release the repentant sinner from the condemnation of the law, was not to cancel the sin; it would stand on record in the sanctuary until the final atonement; so in the type the blood of the sin offering removed the sin from the penitent, but it rested in the sanctuary until the Day of Atonement” (PP 357).

Ellen White’s thought here differentiates between the repentant sinner who is released from the guilt of sins and the record of sins transferred to the sanctuary. Based on her reading of the levtical daily and yearly services, she concludes that while the sinner is released from the guilt of sin, because the innocent sacrifice has paid the price through death, the sin has been transferred to the sanctuary and abides there, in the presence of God, until the Day of Atonement services. Again her comparison is from the superior reality in heaven to the shadow on earth. The Day of Atonement ceremonies in the earthly sanctuary were patterned after the divine way of dealing with sin.

End Time Judgment and Yearly Judgment. The fourth comparison deals with the judgment. Reading from Revelation 20:12, Ellen White refers to the day of judgment in which the dead are to be judged according to their works, as written in the heavenly books. “Then by virtue of the atoning blood of Christ, the sins of all the truly penitent will be blotted from the books of heaven. Thus the sanctuary will be freed, or cleansed, from the record of sin” (PP 357-358). Here we find that the blood of Christ, which was used to plead in behalf of sinners and to transfer the guilt of repentant sinners to the very presence of God, is also efficient to cleanse the heavenly sanctuary from the record of all the sins accumulated there.

This heavenly procedure was depicted on earth through the cleansing of the tabernacle on the yearly Day of Atonement. She also conceives the typical Day of Atonement ritual to be a figure of the final day of judgment as depicted in Revelation 20.

In this fourth comparison we see that Ellen White believes in the double efficacy of the blood of Christ, to be at the same time the means of transferring to heaven the sins of repentant sinners (according to Leviticus 4) and to be the atoning sacrifice to cleanse the heavenly sanctuary from the record of sins (according to Leviticus 16:15-17). Many theologians have wondered how the blood of Christ could, at the same time, be used to transfer our guilt to heaven in the antitypical daily service and also have the cleansing power to accomplish the yearly ritual of the Day of Atonement. This provides no difficulty for Ellen White. Christ’s blood accomplishes both the daily and yearly blood rituals.

Final Blotting Out of Sin. The fifth parallel deals with the blotting out of sin. “As in the final atonement the sins of the truly penitent are to be blotted

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from the records of heaven, no more to be remembered or come into mind, so in the type they were borne away into the wilderness, forever separated from the congregation" (PP 358).

At the end of the final judgment, when sins are blotted out from the presence of God, they will never be remembered again. This truth, Ellen White explains, was portrayed on the Day of Atonement when after the sanctuary was cleansed of the sins accumulated therein for a year, the high priest transferred them symbolically upon a scapegoat which was sent into the desert to die.

This comparison brings out another point in Ellen White's understanding of the forgiveness of sins. Only the sins of the repentant sinners are truly forgiven or blotted out in the final judgment. The conclusion is that other sins are not blotted out and sinners bear their consequences and receive judgment according to their works.

Satan Is the Scapegoat. The last parallel deals with the imagery of the scapegoat, its identity, and the end of the great controversy. "Since Satan is the originator of sin, the direct instigator of all the sins that caused the death of the Son of God, justice demands that Satan shall suffer the final punishment. Christ's work for the redemption of men and the purification of the universe from sin will be closed by the removal of sin from the heavenly sanctuary and the placing of these sins upon Satan, who will bear the final penalty. So in the typical service, the yearly round of ministration closed with the purification of the sanctuary, and the confessing of the sins on the head of the scapegoat" (PP 358).

Ellen White's identification of this scapegoat as Satan is closely integrated with her understanding of the origins of the cosmic great controversy. She understands Satan to be a real evil angelic being and the originator of the concept of sin and the instigator of all sins that caused the death of Christ. Therefore, as a matter of universal justice, she believes Satan is ultimately responsible for the death of the Son of God. This, she also believes, was the intent of the scapegoat ritual on the Day of Atonement which foreshadowed Satan's destruction as the author of sin. Thus "will Satan be forever banished from the presence of God and His people, and he will be blotted from existence in the final destruction of sin and sinners" (GC 422).⁵

⁵ Most non-Adventist theologians have had difficulties with this interpretation of the scapegoat as Satan, preferring to understand that Jesus is the scapegoat who bore sins into the wilderness away from his Father. However, the interpretation of the scapegoat as Satan can be supported from Scripture when one looks closely at the Hebrew words used in Leviticus 16:8, "He [the high priest] is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat" (NIV). The sentence structure lets the reader understand that the lots were cast between two individuals, one for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat. Furthermore, many scholars have noted that the Hebrew word for scapegoat, *azazel*, refers to a deity of the wilderness in other Semitic languages, even though the etymology for this usage in Hebrew is inconclusive thus far. Although the sentence structure clearly allows for the lots to be cast between two individuals, the Lord and Azazel, one should be careful to not conclude from this that Satan is some type of god: however pretentious he may be, he never was

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What impact does Ellen White's literal reading of Scripture have upon her conceptual understanding of the sanctuary? The impact is immense. She truly believed the testimony of Scripture about a real heavenly sanctuary as the pattern for the earthly tabernacle. In fact, she saw this heavenly sanctuary in vision, which made the testimony of Scripture even more forceful to her. The heavenly pattern is not only in the physical appearances of the earthly shadow, although a faint reflection of the heavenly they may be. It concerns also all the mediatorial services and ministry. All the daily and yearly rituals were depicting through symbols the future mediatorial ministry of Christ in heaven. What happens in heaven is the cue for what happened in the earthly tabernacle. The superior heavenly sanctuary and its ministries are the reality depicted through symbols on earth.

Ellen White concludes this series of comparisons with a reference to the great controversy theme. This theme is, I believe, at the center of her theology. "Thus in the ministration of the tabernacle, and of the temple that afterward took its place, the people were taught each day the great truths relative to Christ's death and ministration, and once each year their minds were carried forward to the closing events of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, the final purification of the universe from sin and sinners" (PP 358).

divine. It also seems clear from the contrast that the Lord or Jesus cannot represent both individuals. For further study on this subject, see Arnold V. Wallenkampf and W. Richard Leshner, eds., *The Sanctuary and the Atonement: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Studies* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1981), 120-125.