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10-2022

## **Should We Use Ellen White's Writings to Interpret the Bible?**

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# Should We Use Ellen White's Writings

By Denis Kaiser



## to Interpret the Bible?



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**T**he scene is still before my eyes—  
a teacher discussed the meaning of a  
biblical text and a student blurted out,  
“But this is different from what Aunt Ellen said”

## Puzzled as to how he should respond, the teacher finally remarked that Ellen G. White (1827–1915), cofounder and prophetic voice of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, was not a trained theologian or biblical exegete.

The incident left behind an unfortunate impression and some nagging questions. As Adventists, we believe that Ellen White was Divinely inspired. If she was Divinely inspired to comment on the Bible, how can we not take her comments seriously? Yet, if she was not a trained theologian or biblical exegete, what real value do her comments on the Bible really have? Should, or can, we use her writings to interpret the Bible? This pitting of the Bible against Ellen White is not only unfortunate but it overlooks various crucial aspects concerning the nature of the Bible, the function of Ellen White’s prophetic gift, and her use of the Bible.

### THE BIBLE IS ADAPTED TO OUR NEEDS

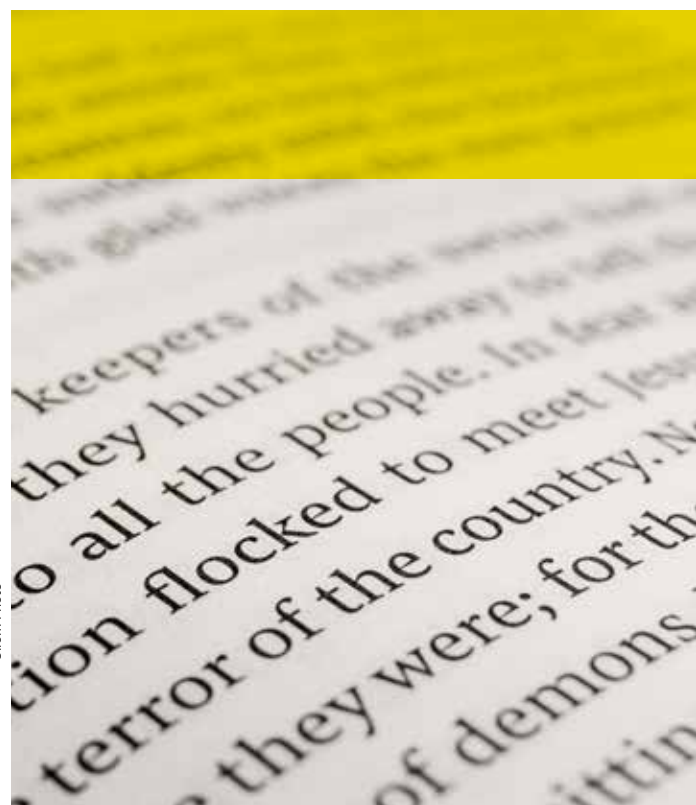
The Bible is surprisingly well adapted to our various needs. One of those needs is the need for our brain to be consistently stimulated for it to continue to grow. In the absence of continued learning and growth, our brains regress and deteriorate. Some people have reasoned that Divine inspiration always communicates clear propositions that lend themselves to a plain reading of the text because the meaning is at the surface of the text. Since God is perfect, He always communicates absolutely and perfectly clear.

Interestingly, Ellen White did not fully share that perspective. In her view, God had “conveyed [His testimony] through imperfect expression of human language” (*Great Controversy*, vi, vii) which at times lacks absolute precision because “different meanings are expressed by the same word [and] there is not one word for each distinct idea” (Ms 24, 1886). Still, she believed in the “perfect harmony” of Scripture because God’s will and plan of salvation were clearly comprehensible as one part of Scripture explained another (*Spiritual Gifts*, 1:116, 117). She also perceived an inexhaustible depth in Scripture that could not be found through “a surface view of the Scriptures” but only through a prayerful, thoughtful and

patient searching for “the precious jewels of truth” and “the precious golden thread” that was “running through the whole [Bible]” (Ms 24, 1886).

In her view, that inexhaustible depth in Scripture continually challenges us to learn more and gain a better and deeper understanding of the Word of God through a deliberate and careful study of the biblical text in its immediate and broader literary context (*Desire of Ages*, 78–79, 253–254). So, we may read and study the Bible for decades and still discover new aspects, nuances and connections that we have never seen before. Besides stressing that a study of the Bible improves and expands our mind and reasoning faculties, she noted that “the Bible is like a fountain. The more you look into it, the deeper it appears” (*Review*, Feb. 25, 1896). She desired for her readers to continually search the Scriptures whose truths will continue to “unfold through the ceaseless ages of eternity” (Ms 26, 1888).

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not afraid. I am acquainted with all your sorrows; I have borne your griefs. You are not warring against untried enemies. I have fought the battle in your behalf, and in My name you are more than conquerors.”

The precious Savior will send help just when we need it. The way to heaven is consecrated by His footprints. Every thorn that wounds our feet has wounded His. Every cross that we are called to bear He has borne before us. The Lord permits conflicts, to prepare the soul for peace. The time of trouble is a fearful ordeal for God’s people; but it is the time for every true believer to look up, and by faith he may see the bow of promise encircling him.

“The ransomed of the LORD shall return,  
 And come to Zion with singing,  
 With everlasting joy on their heads.  
 They shall obtain joy and gladness;  
 Sorrow and sighing shall flee away.  
 ‘I, even I, am He who comforts you.  
 Who are you that you should be afraid  
 Of a man who will die,  
 And of the son of a man who will be made like grass?  
 And you forget the LORD your Maker...;  
 You have feared continually every day  
 Because of the fury of the oppressor,  
 When he has prepared to destroy.  
 And where is the fury of the oppressor?  
 The captive exile hastens, that he may be loosed,  
 That he should not die in the pit,

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## NO NORMATIVE INTERPRETER

The Bible is written in a way that it will progressively open to us its wonders, permitting us to gradually discover its multifaceted aspects and nuances. Therefore, neither Ellen White nor biblical theologians could exhaustively unearth the entire depths of Scripture's meaning. She commented on aspects, facets and nuances of biblical passages, yet never exhausted their meaning. For example, she identified "the pearl of great price" (Matt. 13:45, 46) variously as Jesus (*Acts of the Apostles*, 48), the truths He taught (*Desire of Ages*, 333), salvation (*Selected Messages*, 1:399), and even humans (*Review*, June 18, 1895). While she identified us most often with the merchant, in the latter case she said that Jesus was the merchant who gave everything to purchase us.

When the early Sabbatarian Adventists carried out their studies on the fundamental pillars of faith in the late 1840s, for about two-and-a-half years, Ellen White was unable to comprehend the arguments on the subject under discussion (*Review*, May 18, 1905). Thus, our doctrines were solidly based on Scripture, whereas her visions confirmed insights gained through Bible study and steered people away from extremes and fanaticism. When tensions arose in the church over the right interpretation of certain passages and those involved in the discussions appealed to her writings to settle the conflict because they thought she had previously settled the issue, she repeatedly urged them not to use her writings but to come together and attempt to settle the matter through prayerful mutual Bible study.<sup>1</sup> Her son, W.C. White (1854–1937), concluded that God desired to have it settled through "a thorough study . . . of the Bible and history" rather than "by a revelation" (W.C. White to P.T. Magan, July 31, 1910). Ellen White believed the function of her writings differed from that of Scripture. Unlike Scripture, her writings were not to serve as (an additional) rule of faith and practice, and therefore, her writings were not to take the place of the Bible nor be an addition, either theologically or functionally, to the biblical canon (*Early Writings*, 78; *Great Controversy*, vii).

Since Ellen White did comment on Scripture—for example, in the Conflict of the Ages series, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* and *Christ's Object Lessons*—and she claimed to have been guided by Divine inspiration, some

readers may still find it difficult to grasp then how her inspired comments on Scripture should not be normative and final.

### ELLEN WHITE USED THE BIBLE VARIOUSLY

Above we learned about the inexhaustible depth of Scripture and Ellen White's refusal to function as a final and normative interpreter of Scripture. There are more aspects that illustrate why we should beware of employing her writings in such a way. First of all, there are many biblical passages on which Ellen White never commented. Beyond that we also need to realize, however, that she used the Bible variously and oftentimes she did not even intend to interpret a specific Bible text.

Sometimes she explained the meaning of a text in harmony with its literary and historical context (*exegetical use*), yet at other times she used the language of one or several passages to make statements in harmony with a biblical teaching or the overall message of Scripture although it differs from the direct literary meaning of that respective passage (*theological use*). For example, while she employed the language of John 5:39 mostly as an injunction to study the Bible ("Search the Scriptures") (*Testimonies for the Church*, 2:634), which is theologically true, she sometimes also pointed out that here, Jesus had actually rebuked the Jewish leaders ("You search the Scriptures") (*Desire of Ages*, 211).

At other times, she pointed out links between events, actions or persons in the Old Testament and the life, ministry and death of Jesus or the experience of God's people at the time of the end, perceiving the limited historical pattern as a type of a larger reality of universal significance (*typological use*). A typical example is Abraham's offering of Isaac (Gen. 22), typifying the death of Christ on the cross (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, 147-155).

Since Ellen White was so immersed in Scripture, she often made use of biblical verbiage from multiple biblical passages in completely different contexts without trying to interpret any of those passages, using Scripture more as a literary mine (*parenthetical use*). For example, in a brief paragraph in *Testimonies for the Church* 4:594-595, she utilized the language of at least eight Bible passages without interpreting any of them. She certainly may have employed the Bible also in other ways.

# Ellen White repeatedly urged her contemporaries to settle matters of biblical interpretation and doctrine through mutual Bible study.

### SUMMARY

To avoid creating unhealthy dichotomies between Ellen White's use of the Bible and the exegetical work of Bible scholars, it is important for us to keep in mind that she did not intend to offer a comprehensive, exhaustive and normative interpretation of the biblical text. Neither did she always comment on the exegetical meaning of the text, which is why it is important for us to carefully reflect on how she actually used the biblical text in a given statement. Finally, Ellen White repeatedly urged her contemporaries to settle matters of biblical interpretation and doctrine through mutual Bible study. As we study the Bible closely and carefully, allowing it to speak for itself, we may be fascinated by the richness of Scripture and the deep things of God revealed there. As we turn to Ellen White's writings, we will be able to see then a harmony with the overall message of Scripture and appreciate the spiritual truths and beneficial insights found in her writings. ■

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