

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE

**BASIC PRINCIPLES
OF UNDERSTANDING
ELLEN G. WHITE'S
WRITINGS**

HERBERT E. DOUGLASS

**Basic Principles of
Understanding Ellen G.
White's Writings**

Ellen G. White

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Overview

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About the Author

Ellen G. White (1827-1915) is considered the most widely translated American author, her works having been published in more than 160 languages. She wrote more than 100,000 pages on a wide variety of spiritual and practical topics. Guided by the Holy Spirit, she exalted Jesus and pointed to the Scriptures as the basis of one's faith.

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By Herbert E. Douglass

*“God has spoken! But what has He said? Every utterance, every written document, demands interpretation. And the need increases in proportion to the distance the text stands in time and culture from our own.”*¹

Hermeneutics is the science of interpreting literary documents. We use this term when we attempt to understand the writings of secular writers such as Homer, Plato, and Shakespeare, as well as inspired writers such as Moses, Paul, and Ellen White. Hermeneutical rules help us understand what writers meant by what they said.

Ellen White noted the need for hermeneutics when she suggested, “Let us in imagination ... sit with the disciples” on the Mount of Blessing ([Matthew 5](#)). “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.”²

¹Raoul Dederen, “Introduction to Hermeneutics,” ed., Gordon M. Hyde, A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics (Washington, D. C.: Biblical Research Institute, 1974), pp. 1, 2.

²[Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing, 1.](#)

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What It Meant and What It Means

Here we are advised to study (1) what the words “meant” in 30 A.D., and (2) what we should understand them to “mean” to us today. That study must follow the rules of hermeneutics if two or more people are to agree on what a document originally “meant” and what it “means” today. ¹ Further, the goal of hermeneutics is not only to understand what an author meant but to make sure that the author is not misunderstood. ²

Here are some basic rules of hermeneutics:

- If a document is in a foreign language, a knowledge of that language is needed, including an understanding of that language’s structure and idioms. Although especially true of the Bible with its Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek documents, understanding the idioms and peculiarities of nineteenth-century American English is helpful in understanding Ellen White. Merely a dictionary knowledge is not sufficient.
- The type of literary form must be recognized—whether prose or poetry, prophecy or history, allegory or parable, etc. Both the Bible and the writings of Ellen White require this awareness.

¹For a study of the rules of hermeneutics, see Gerhard F. Hasel, “Principles of Biblical Interpretation,” Gordon M. Hyde, editor, *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics* (Washington D.C.: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1974), pp. 163-193; Miroslav M. Kis, “Biblical Interpretation and Moral Authority,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, Autumn, 1995, pp. 52-62. George R. Knight, *Reading Ellen White: How to Understand and Apply Her Writings*, (Hagerstown, Md., Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1997).

²First-century Quintilian, a master in the history of persuasive theory, wrote: “We must take care, not that it shall be possible for him [reader or hearer] to understand, but that it shall be utterly impossible for him not to understand!” —*The Institutio Oratorio of Quintilian*, book VIII, chap. 2, Nos. 23, 24 (translated by John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation of Sermons*, Revised Edition by Jesse Burton Weatherspoon (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), p. 241.

- The historical context, including the precise time of writing, must be understood before correct deductions can be made, especially if the document deals with ethics, interrelationships with contemporary civil powers, and prevailing thought patterns. To understand the Bible and the writings of Ellen White, students must be aware of historical context.
- A knowledge of the climatic and geographical factors that influenced the writer is helpful. Much of the Bible, for example, would be obscure without a knowledge of Palestinian geographical conditions and the impact of its climate. Large parts of Ellen White's observations and counsel become more understandable when we recognize these factors.

[2]

- In order to think like the writer and to “hear” like his or her hearers, we today must try to “see” what they saw and “hear” what they heard. We must learn all we can about the character and personality of the author as well as the general personal interplay of the people referred to in the document being studied.
- Readers must discover what Bible statements meant to the prophet's contemporaries before focusing on what they should mean today. This will protect students from “seeing” in the Bible only what they are looking for.³
- In the study of the Bible, we accept the implicit Biblical understanding that the Old and New Testaments together form a canon that contains the record of God's unique revelation to human beings. Thus the Bible is its own best interpreter, providing a unifying theological context for understanding any particular chapter and verse. This same principle of unity and coherence will

³“This does not mean ... that the original author or the original audience fully understood God's purpose in sharing the future with them. But what God would say to us about the end [of the world] will not contradict what He said to them.... To read these texts as though they were written exclusively for us is to launch ourselves into a bizarre journey that may appear Biblical, but will in fact lead us far from the truth.”—Jon Paulien, *What the Bible Says About the End-Time* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1994), p. 36.

help students understand more clearly the totality of Ellen White's thoughts.⁴

The challenge to understand what the Bible means is not a modern phenomenon. Early in the New Testament the need for interpretation arose with Philip's question to the Ethiopian: "Do you understand what you are reading?"

And he (the Ethiopian) said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" ([Acts 8:30, 31](#)). The role of guide is performed best by those who faithfully follow the principles of interpretation (hermeneutics).

⁴"Explaining Scripture by Scripture ... was the great principle of the Reformation."—D'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation*, p. 501.

Understanding Ellen White

We are in a better position to understand what Mrs. White meant than we are to understand many other writers, for we have massive amounts of material in the form of letters, diaries, interviews, sermons, general manuscripts, periodical articles, and published books.

In addition, we have a voluminous file of contemporary observations, written by people who knew Ellen White well. Hundreds had received direct, written “testimonies” from her and, in turn, expressed in writing their appreciation for her counsel. Men and women for more than seventy years watched her closely, heard her often, and waited eagerly for her next written testimony, article, or book. Their comments hold much legitimacy as we discuss her authority and relevance. Their understanding of what she said contributes much to our attempt today to determine what she meant.

¹

As noted earlier (see pp. 256-283, 344), Ellen White’s contributions in areas such as health, education, and theology, are more fully understood if her prevailing Great Controversy Theme is recognized. That theme provides her coherent unity and helps to explain her use of historical sources and her application of Biblical passages.

¹We can be thankful that Ellen White lived in an age prior to the extensive use of telephones, E-mail, and the delete button on a computer. What normally would be transmitted today by a short telephone call, required a written document.

Danger of Blind Obedience

However, it is one thing to acknowledge and accept this prevailing principle, it is another to answer the question as to how this principle is applied and understood in the breadth of her counsel in numerous areas of thought. Confidence in Ellen White is essential, but blind confidence should not be substituted for careful thinking when it comes to what she means today.

In understanding her writings it is helpful to note again how revelation-inspiration works as revealed in Biblical writings.¹ The comparison between one's understanding of Biblical writers and Ellen White can be seen in such areas as reader's attitude, thought or verbal inspiration, infallibility, the meaning of *sola scriptura*, the use of common sources, and the difference between the sacred and the common. What we know about how Bible writers were inspired is helpful to our study of Mrs. White's writings, and what we know about how God spoke through Ellen White can help us understand how God spoke through prophets in ancient times.

For Ellen White, the Bible is best understood by those who [3] accept it as the Word of God: "I take the Bible just as it is, as the Inspired Word." When anyone finds it necessary to "define that which is inspired and that which is not, they have stepped before Jesus to show Him a better way than He has led us."² She believed that "the Bible was given for practical purposes"³ and that "no one need be lost for want of knowledge, unless he is willfully blind."⁴

¹See pp. 16, 120, 173, 421.

²Selected Messages 1:17.

³Selected Messages 1:20.

⁴Selected Messages 1:18.

Attitudes Make a Difference

However, she recognized that there are problems in communication. “Minds of different education and thought receive different impressions of the same words.” Thus, “it is difficult for one mind to give to one of a different temperament, education, and habits of thought by language exactly the same idea as that which is clear and distinct in his own mind. Yet to honest men, right-minded men, he [an author] can ... convey his meaning for all practical purposes.” But if the reader “is not honest and will not want to see and understand the truth, he will turn his words and language ... to suit his own purposes.”¹

Ellen White lamented that some mistreated her writings as they did the Bible: “This is the way my writings are treated by those who wish to misunderstand and pervert them.... In the very same way that they treat the writings in my published articles and in my books, so do skeptics and infidels treat the Bible. They read it according to their desire to pervert, to misapply, to willfully wrest the utterances from their true meaning.”²

One problem that Jesus had with the religious leaders of His day was that they misused and abused the Old Testament and thus did not recognize Him as their Messiah. Ellen White noted that these leaders were “unaccustomed to accept God’s word exactly as it reads, or to allow it to be its own interpreter.” The Jewish leaders read the Old Testament “in the light of their maxims and traditions.... They turned with aversion from the truth of God to the traditions of men.”³

One’s attitude in reading the Bible is fundamental to a correct understanding of what the Bible means. This is more important than trained scholarship. The Jewish leaders with their scholarship did not recognize Jesus. On many occasions Ellen White emphasized

¹Selected Messages 1:19.

²Ibid.

³Ms 24, 1891, cited in MR, vol. 19, p. 253.

that “selfishness prevents us from beholding God. The self-seeking spirit judges of God as altogether such a one as itself. Until we have renounced this we cannot understand Him who is love.”⁴ She gave this promise: “Everyone who diligently and patiently searches the Scriptures that he may educate others, entering upon the work correctly and with an honest heart, laying his preconceived ideas, whatever they may have been, and his hereditary prejudice at the door of investigation, will gain true knowledge.”⁵

In summary, Ellen White provided several suggestions as to how to study for truth:

- We should invite the Holy Spirit to help us in our study.⁶
- We must be willing to obey the truth.⁷

⁴[The Desire of Ages](#), 302. “The perception and appreciation of truth, He said [[John 7:17](#)], depends less upon the mind than upon the heart. Truth must be received into the soul; it claims the homage of the will. If truth could be submitted to the reason alone, pride would be no hindrance in the way of its reception. But it is to be received through the work of grace in the heart; and its reception depends upon the renunciation of every sin that the Spirit of God reveals.”—[The Desire of Ages](#), 455. See also pp. 312, 313.

⁵Ms 4, 1896, cited in MR, vol. 4, p. 56. Jon Paulien, in beginning a list of hermeneutical principles, wrote: “Pray earnestly for a learning attitude and an openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit whenever you pick up the Bible for deep study. Without prayer and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, the work of even the finest scholar may go subtly astray. God’s ideas are not naturally mastered by secular minds. I have found the following prayer helpful: ‘Lord, help me find the truth on this subject, no matter what the cost.’ Knowing the truth will cost you something, but it is well worth the sacrifice to understand God’s mind.”—*What the Bible Says About the End-Time*, p. 37. (See also Jon Paulien, “The Interpreter’s Use of the Writings of Ellen G. White,” Frank B. Holbrook, ed., *Symposium on Revelation, Book 1*, (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992.)

⁶Without the enlightenment of the Spirit, men will not be able to distinguish truth from error, and they will fall under the masterful temptations of Satan.”—[Christ’s Object Lessons](#), 411.

⁷“Whenever men are not seeking, in word and deed to be in harmony with God, then however learned they may be, they are liable to err in their understanding of Scripture, and it is not safe to trust to their explanations.”—[Testimonies for the Church 5:705](#). “Belief is not an intellectual act; belief is a moral act whereby I deliberately commit myself.... Belief must be the will to believe.”—Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, p. 265.

- We must be open-minded, even prepared to surrender previously held opinions. ⁸
- We should expect to discover new truths. ⁹
- We should expect “new” light to harmonize with old truth. ¹⁰
- An interpretation may be wrong if it is accompanied by an unChristlike spirit.

[4] In the context of the 1888 General Conference session, Ellen White wrote to those who were still antagonistic to her and to Elders Jones and Waggoner: “These testimonies of the Spirit of God, the fruits of the Spirit of God, have no weight unless they are stamped with your ideas of the law in Galatians. I am afraid of you and I am afraid of your interpretation of any Scripture which has revealed itself in such an unChristlike spirit as you have manifested and has cost me so much unnecessary labor.... Let your caution be exercised in the line of fear lest you are committing the sin against the Holy Ghost.... I am afraid of any application of Scripture that needs such a spirit and bears such fruit as you have manifested.” ¹¹

⁸“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.”—[Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers](#), 105.

⁹“In every age there is a new development of truth, a message of God to the people of that generation. The old truths are all essential; new truth is not independent of the old, but an unfolding of it. It is only as the old truths are understood that we can comprehend the new.”—[Christ's Object Lessons](#), 127; “Although great and talented authors have made known wonderful truths, and have presented increased light to the people, still in our day we shall find new ideas.”—[The Review and Herald](#), June 3, 1890.

¹⁰“One will arise, and still another, with new light, which contradicts the light that God has given under the demonstration of His Holy Spirit.... We are not to receive the words of those who come with a message that contradicts the special points of our faith. They gather together a mass of Scripture and pile it as proof around their asserted theories. This has been done over and over again during the past fifty years. And while the Scriptures are God's Word, and are to be respected, the application of them, if such application moves one pillar of the foundation that God has sustained these fifty years, is a great mistake.”—[Selected Messages](#) 1:161.

¹¹[Letter 83, 1890](#), cited in MR, vol. 9, p. 330.

Thought or Verbal Inspiration

But Ellen White saw additional problems that could arise when one asks, How does the infinite, infallible God speak to finite, fallible men and women? How does a person, many years after the appearance of a prophet, understand his or her divinely inspired messages written hundreds, even thousands, of years before?

For some, it seems easier to believe that God dictated the words that the prophet faithfully recorded. For them, this method would avoid mistakes by eliminating human error.

For others, this dictation method not only ignores reality, it opens the door unnecessarily to an enormous list of problems that discredits what God has been trying to do. ¹

Ellen White identified with those who accepted the concept of thought inspiration rather than verbal inspiration. She recognized that “the writers of the Bible had to express their ideas in human language. It was written by human men.... The Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language.... Everything that is human is imperfect. Different meanings are expressed by the same word; there is not one word for each distinct idea.... The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression.... 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 and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.” ²

What shall we make of this recognition of enormous diversity of expression and logic, as diverse as there are writers? How can later readers of these prophets find coherence and unity in what all declare to be “the word of the Lord”? The unity of the message is

¹See pp. 16, 120, 173, 421.

²[Selected Messages 1:19-21](#). “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.”—[Selected Messages 1:21](#).

guaranteed by the one Author who inspired them all. Ellen White wrote: “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.”³

Yet the unity of the Bible is not always apparent to the casual reader. “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.”⁴

Biblical scholars have compared the divine-human union in Jesus Christ with the divine-human union in the writing of the Bible. Ellen White endorsed this comparison: “The Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language. Jesus, in order to reach man where he is, took humanity.”⁵ “The Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human. 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](#)).⁶

Jesus was born a Jew, not an African or a Norwegian. He probably was less than six feet tall. Humanly speaking, He was limited

³[Selected Messages 1:22](#).

⁴[Selected Messages 1:20](#). “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. And as several writers present a subject under varied aspects and relations, there may appear, to the superficial, careless, or prejudiced reader, to be discrepancy or contradiction, where the thoughtful, reverent student, with clearer insight, discerns the underlying harmony.”—[Selected Messages 1:25](#). Gottfried Oosterwal noted: “Whenever God reveals Himself He does so in the cultural dress of the people who are the recipients of His message.... Though it takes on the diverse forms of human culture, God’s truth itself comes from outside that culture. It sometimes stands above it, sometimes over against it. But whether in or above or over against culture, it always transcends it. Revelation and culture, integrated as they are, relate to each other as substance to shadow, meaning to form, content to the vessel that carries it.”—“Gospel, Culture, and Mission,” *Ministry*, October, 1989, p. 22. See also Niels-Erik Andreasen, “From Vision to Prophecy,” *Adventist Review*, Jan. 28, 1982.

⁵[Selected Messages 1:20](#).

⁶*The Great Controversy*, p. vi.

by the DNA of His genetic background. Nevertheless, He revealed the Word of God, His message, in its purest sense.⁷

The Bible as we know it today was written by limited “men who differed widely in rank and occupation, and in mental and spiritual endowments.”⁸ The Author of the Bible spoke to various men who all had varying insights, some more limited than others. Yet each writer would grasp “those points that harmonize[d] with his experience or with his power of perception and appreciation.” When the written messages are finally put together, all these “different aspects of truth” are seen to be in “perfect harmony.” Together, limited as each writer may be, they “form a perfect whole.” These varied experiences and perceptions of its many writers present to later readers, in all places and in all times, the Word of the Lord “adapted to meet the wants of men in all the circumstances and experiences of life.”⁹

[5]

In a significant letter to a young physician, David Paulson, Ellen White tried to steer him away from a verbal-inspiration viewpoint. Dr. Paulson, a remarkable man of faith, had much to do with establishing Hinsdale Sanitarium and Hospital, Hinsdale, Illinois. She wrote: “In your letter you speak of your early training to have implicit faith in the testimonies and say, ‘I was led to conclude and most firmly believe that *every* word you ever spoke in public or private, that every letter you wrote under *any* and *all* circumstances, was as inspired as the Ten Commandments.’”

She continued: “My brother, you have studied my writings diligently, and you have never found that I have made any such

⁷Richard Rice wrote: “The divine-human character of Scripture is incompatible with the idea that the Bible is a mixture of the human and the divine. The Bible has a variegated texture.... The differences have led people to conclude that certain parts of the Bible are divinely inspired, while others are merely human, so we can get the pure Word of God by separating the two.” But the two aspects of Scripture, the divine and the human, are inseparable. The Bible is not a combination of the words of God and the words of men. It expresses the word of God in the words of men. Eliminate the human and you will also eliminate the divine. “The union of divine and human in the Bible is a little like the genetic combination of two parents in a child. Some things about a child remind you of its mother. In other ways, it resembles the father. But there is no way to separate the two without doing violence to the person involved.”—*The Reign of God*, (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1985), p. 26.

⁸The Great Controversy, p. vi.

⁹Ibid.

claims, neither will you find that the pioneers in our cause ever made such claims.

“In my introduction to *The Great Controversy* you have no doubt read my statement regarding the Ten Commandments and the Bible, which should have helped you to a correct understanding of the matter under consideration.” She then quoted substantially from her own introduction to *The Great Controversy* and from an earlier pertinent statement found in volume 5 of the *Testimonies*.¹⁰

In summary, to understand the Bible and the writings of Ellen White, the important difference between thought revelation and verbal inspiration must be clear. Although verbal inspirationists (whether students of the Bible or the writings of Mrs. White) claim to enjoy greater security in possessing the exact word from God, they have great difficulty trying to explain what appear as “errors,” “contradictions,” or “discrepancies.” The false assumptions of verbal inspirationists have caused much of the confusion and loss of confidence among those who have tried to study inspired writings.

Those who believe in thought inspiration understand the prophet to be God’s “penman,” not His pen. God works through the mental processes of His messenger, inspiring the thoughts, but, under the guidance of the Spirit allowing the messenger to choose the way the thoughts are to be expressed.

Ellen White’s introduction to *The Great Controversy* has given us clear insight as to how prophets work. Recognizing that discrepancies may exist in the Bible and that “perfect order or apparent unity” may not be present at times, she concluded: “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.”

11

¹⁰Selected Messages 1:24-31.

¹¹Selected Messages 1:16, 20. “Defining inspiration is like catching a rainbow. When we have put forth our best efforts, there will remain an elusive factor, an element of mystery. Inspired writings may be known, but never fully grasped. Instead, they grasp us—for through them God speaks to humanity.”—William G. Johnsson, “How Does God Speak?” Ministry, October 1981.

Infallibility

Infallibility is a characteristic of God alone, not His messengers. Created beings cannot possibly be infallible; they are always dependent on their Creator, always short of ultimate perfection, always becoming what God intended them to be.

Although the message God reveals through His messengers is without error, the message is conveyed through error-prone, fallible messengers. That is why Ellen White called prophets God's penmen, not His pen. And that is why she said bluntly: "In regard to infallibility, I never claimed it; God alone is infallible."¹

Therefore, infallibility is not "on trial" in the prophet's words, whether in the Bible or in the writings of Ellen White. What is at stake is the search for that infallible authority which God is communicating through His messengers. God's messages breathe with infallible authority. The search for accuracy in understanding God's infallible messages depends, in part, on a person's faithfulness to the rules of hermeneutics, uncontaminated by human philosophical presuppositions.

[6]

¹Selected Messages 1:37. "God and heaven alone are infallible."—Ibid.

Sola Scriptura (Bible only)

“The Bible and the Bible only” was the fundamental premise of the Protestant reformers, whether Luther in Germany, Zwingli and Calvin in Switzerland, or Farel in France. In other words, for the Reformers the Bible replaced human authorities. But this heroic insistence on the “Bible only” as the Christian’s rule of faith and practice calls for three observations: (1) the Reformers had difficulty accepting the entire Bible, (2) they did not understand fully the continuance of spiritual gifts that the Bible expressly teaches, and (3) they differed widely as to what the Bible meant. Clearly, the slogan was not sufficient in itself.

The first observation is supported by the fact that Luther had great difficulty with the books of James, Hebrews, and Revelation. Calvin virtually discarded the book of Revelation. Other Reformers rejected the Old Testament. In fact, later Reformers who tried to get the main Reformers like Luther to see the completeness of the entire Bible were themselves treated like heretics. ¹

The second and third observations, for our purposes, relate particularly to Ellen White. What was her understanding of that vital Protestant principle, “The Bible and the Bible only”? ² She used the phrase often and with precision. She used it as the Reformers used it—as authority; that is, the Bible stood above and alone in contrast with papal dogmas, councils, and the writings of church fathers. For her, as with the Reformers, salvation truth is found in the Bible, not in papal decrees or the votes of church councils.

She wrote: “The grand principle maintained by these Reformers ... was the infallible authority of the Holy Scriptures as a rule of

¹Sabbatarian Anabaptists in the 1520s asserted that the Old and New Testaments were indivisible. “In this view they were far in advance of their time.”—Gerhard Hasel, “Sabbatarian Anabaptists of the Sixteenth Century: Part II,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 6 (1968), p. 28.

²[The Great Controversy, 243.](#)

faith and practice. They denied the right of popes, councils, Fathers, and kings, to control the conscience in matters of religion.”³

She also used this “vital principle” in sharp contrast to the Zwickau enthusiasts in Luther’s time who permitted themselves to be guided primarily by their feelings—which they assumed were the leading of the Holy Spirit. She wrote: “They rejected the great principle which was the very foundation of the Reformation—that the Word of God is the all-sufficient rule of faith and practice; and for that unerring guide they substituted the changeable, uncertain standard of their own feelings and impressions. By this act of setting aside the great detector of error and falsehood, the way was opened for Satan to control minds as best pleased himself.”⁴

For Ellen White the Bible was always the test of truth. No other standard was either necessary or legitimate: “I recommend to you, dear reader, the Word of God as the rule of your faith and practice. By that Word we are to be judged.”⁵ In 1909, at her last public appearance in a General Conference session, after finishing her sermon she left the podium for her seat. But she returned, and, holding up the Bible she had been preaching from, opened it and held it out with hands trembling with age, saying, “Brethren and Sisters, I commend unto you this Book.”⁶

She contrasted the phrase, “the Bible and the Bible only,” with human views and any other way of expressing “unbiblical positions of religious traditions, experience, ecclesiastical position and human reason.”⁷

³The Great Controversy, 249; see also pp. 89, 291, 596. “[Luther] firmly declared that Christians should receive no other doctrines than those which rest on the authority of the Sacred Scriptures. These words struck at the very foundation of papal supremacy. They contained the vital principle of the Reformation.”—The Great Controversy, 126.

⁴The Great Controversy, 186.

⁵Early Writings, 78 (1851).

⁶Bio., vol. 6, p. 197. In 1898, recounting the Newcastle evangelistic meetings in N.S.W., Australia, Ellen White wrote: “We do not conceal our banner of truth at all. We let them know that we are Seventh-day Adventists because we believe the Bible. The Bible and the Bible only is the foundation of our faith. Before these meetings close, the people will know from the Scriptures why we are a peculiar people. The Word is the foundation of our faith.”—Ibid., vol. 4, p. 374.

⁷Damsteegt, “Ellen White on Theology,” Journal of the Adventist Theological Society, Autumn, 1993, p. 129.

[7] Biblical prophets always pointed to the previously accepted Scriptures as the test of faith and practice. Long before the Old Testament was even envisioned, men such as King Josiah ([2 Kings 22](#)), Ezra and Nehemiah ([Nehemiah 8](#)), and Daniel ([Daniel 9](#)) referred to previous prophets as bearers of God's Word. It never even entered the minds of many of these prophets that their writings would eventually be classed with the writings of Moses. When Paul proclaimed the gospel, the Bible that he used as authority was the Old Testament. He had no idea that his letters would constitute a major part of what would be called the New Testament.

Each Bible writer was later judged to be authoritative because his writings met the test of [Isaiah 8:20](#)—"To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." Further, those who read these writings discovered the voice of God speaking to their souls. Truly, one of the primary tests of a prophet is his or her harmony with previous inspired messages. ⁸

Thus *sola scriptura* means that all claims to divine authority must meet the standard of previously accepted prophetic messages. Appeals to personal feeling or to dramatic experiences, on one hand, ⁹ or appeals to human authorities such as church councils or respected theologians, on the other, are not, in themselves, evidence that God has spoken.

The slogan, "The Bible and the Bible only!" means that every later prophet would have his or her messages judged by their faithfulness to earlier messages. Further, this phrase means that all that the Bible has taught is to be honored, including its declaration that the "gift of prophecy" would continue to the end of time. Thus, *sola scriptura* does not mean that God does not intend to add information

⁸"The Bible must be your counselor. Study it and the testimonies God has given; for they never contradict His Word."—[Selected Messages 3:32](#); "If the Testimonies speak not according to this word of God, reject them. Christ and Belial cannot be united."—[Testimonies for the Church 5:691](#).

⁹"Even the work of the Holy Spirit upon the heart is to be tested by the Word of God. The Spirit which inspired the Scriptures, always leads to the Scriptures."—[General Conference Daily Bulletin, April 13, 1891](#), cited in [Selected Messages 1:43](#).

to men and women through the “gift of prophecy”—for that would be a non sequitur; it would deny a Biblical principle.¹⁰

Early Adventists knew that accepting Ellen White as a messenger of God would lead to misunderstandings with other Christian groups. Early in his wife’s ministry James White made it clear that the Christian “should pray fervently to be aided by the Holy Spirit in searching the Scriptures for the whole truth, and for his whole duty. He is not at liberty to turn from them to learn his duty through any of the gifts. We say that the very moment he does, he places the gifts in a wrong place, and takes an extremely dangerous position. The Word should be in front, and the eye of the church should be placed upon it, as the rule to walk by, and the fountain of wisdom.”¹¹

Early Adventists also knew that other Christians would claim that the ministry of Ellen White violated the Protestant principle of “the Bible and the Bible only.” But Adventists responded “that it was *because* of their confidence in the Scriptures that they accepted Ellen White’s ministry as vital to them.”¹²

¹⁰“In ancient times God spoke to men by the mouth of prophets and apostles. In these days He speaks to them by the testimonies of His Spirit. There was never a time when God instructed His people more earnestly than He instructs them now concerning His will and the course that He would have them pursue.”—[Testimonies for the Church 5:661](#).

¹¹[The Review and Herald, April 21, 1851](#); see also [The Review and Herald, February 28, 1856](#).

¹²Roy Graham, “How the Gift of Prophecy Relates to God’s Word,” *Adventist Review*, Oct. 14, 1982. “During the ages while the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testament were being given, the Holy Spirit did not cease to communicate light to individual minds, apart from the revelations to be embodied in the Sacred Canon. The Bible itself relates how, through the Holy Spirit, men received warning, reproof, counsel, and instruction, in matters in no way relating to the giving of the Scriptures. And mention is made of prophets in different ages, of whose utterances nothing is recorded. In like manner, after the close of the canon of the Scripture, the Holy Spirit was still to continue its work, to enlighten, warn, and comfort the children of God.”—*The Great Controversy*, p. viii.

Use of Common Sources of Information

When God speaks to prophets He does not install a dictionary or an encyclopedia in their minds. Prophets take the inspired message and do their best to convey that message in language and thought forms that will do justice to the message. Some (such as Peter) needed others to help them with their grammar; ¹ others (such as Luke) gathered as much as they could from contemporary sources in order to set forth the truth that burned within them. ² Paul used contemporary writers to better establish contact with his Grecian audiences. ³

Old Testament writers often depended on oral reports or earlier documents in preparing their messages. Moses did not need visions to describe the story of his birth or to recount the historical narratives he placed in Genesis. The books of Joshua and Judges were probably compiled during David's monarchy, according to internal evidence. The authors of Kings and Chronicles obviously used sources that they often referenced. In fact, the authors at times quoted from other Old Testament books without crediting their sources: compare [2 Kings 19:1, 2](#) with [Isaiah 37:1, 2](#), and [1 Chronicles 10:1-3](#) with [1 Samuel 31:1-3](#). ⁴

¹See pp. 14, 15. For Ellen White's use of copy editors, see p. 109.

²Ellen White reached out to contemporaries to help her with dates and other information. At times she sent out a manuscript draft on autobiographical material to friends who "were present when the circumstances related occurred, for their examination before they were put in print." If they found "incorrect statements in this book, they will immediately inform me."—[Selected Messages 3:58](#). See p. 111.

³For examples of Paul using extra-Biblical sources, see comments on [Acts 17:28](#); [1 Corinthians 15:32](#); and [Titus 1:12](#), in SDABC, vol. 6.

⁴For a careful review of extra-Biblical sources, see Delmer A. Johnson, "The Sources of Inspired Writings," *Adventist Review*, Dec. 30, 1982.

The New Testament presents many instances of borrowing from non-Biblical sources, such as the Wisdom of Solomon,⁵ 1 Enoch,⁶ *Testimonies of the Twelve Patriarchs*,⁷ and the Palestinian Targums.⁸

Ellen White forthrightly explained why she used various historians as she traced “the history of the controversy in past ages.” She wrote: “In pursuance of this purpose, I have endeavored to select and group together events in the history of the church in such a manner as to trace the unfolding of the great testing truths that at different periods have been given to the world.”⁹

How did she use these historians? She noted: “In some cases where a historian has so grouped together events as to afford, in brief, a comprehensive view of the subject, or has summarized details in a convenient manner, his words have been quoted; but in some instances no specific credit has been given, since the quotations are not given for the purpose of citing that writer as authority, but because his statement affords a ready and forcible presentation of the subject. In narrating the experience and views of those carrying forward the work of reform in our own time, similar use has been made of their published works.”¹⁰

⁵Compare [Romans 1:20-31](#); [9:20-22](#) and Wisdom of Solomon—C. H. Dodd, “The Epistle of Paul to the Romans,” in Moffatt’s *New Testament Commentary*. James Moffatt, ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932), VI, p. 27; Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 160.

⁶Compare many references in [Romans 2 Cor.](#), [Eph.](#), [Colossians 1](#) and [2 Thessalonians 1 Tim.](#), [Heb.](#), [Jude](#), and [Rev.](#) with 1 Enoch—Leonard Rost, *Judaism Outside the Hebrew Canon* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1976), p. 200; R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), II, p. 180.

⁷R. H. Charles, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, (London: SPCK, 1925), p. 39.

⁸William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), p. 88; Martin McNamara, *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1966), pp. 83, 85. Sylvester Q. Case provided a useful review of some of these extra-Biblical sources in an unpublished paper, “When a Prophet Borrows From Extra-Biblical Sources: A Brief Survey of Biblical Evidence,” Andrews University, 1982.

⁹[The Great Controversy](#), xi.

¹⁰[The Great Controversy](#), xi, xii. References to those “in our own time” would include such works as those of J. N. Andrews and Uriah Smith.

As all prophets did, Ellen White had to supply the human language to convey the grand thoughts and arching panoramas that she either saw in vision or sensed in other times of divine communication. Her capacity to supply appropriate language and style matured as the years went by—as any study of her personal manuscripts and published writings will indicate. At times she recognized that others had written with beauty and precision on certain subjects that she wanted to make clearer in her writings. To better clothe those divinely revealed truths she utilized borrowed expressions. Speed truth along with as much human grace as possible was her compelling motivation.

Some have raised two questions regarding both Biblical writers and Ellen White: How does borrowing affect the authority of the writer? Does the borrowed material become inspired? The questions arise because inspiration is misunderstood as mechanical dictation (verbal inspiration).

Probably the two questions would not be asked if it were understood that prophets are permitted to find the best methods at their disposal to convey the thoughts God has given them.¹¹

What, then, is the value of the borrowed material? It seems logical that if God revealed His message to prophets, He would also assist them in conveying the message in human language. Ellen White noted that God “guided the mind in the selection of what to speak and what to write. The treasure was entrusted to earthen vessels, yet it is, nonetheless, from Heaven.”¹²

¹¹See pp. 16, 120, 173, 375, 376, 421. Harold Lindsell wrote: “When we say the Bible is the Word of God, it makes no difference whether the writers of Scripture gained their information by direct revelation from God as in the case of the Book of Revelation, or whether they researched matters as Luke did, or whether they got their knowledge from extant sources, court records, or even by word of mouth. The question we must ask is whether what they wrote, wherever they may have secured their knowledge, can be trusted.”—*The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p. 20. Robert Nicole stated: “If God did not guide the sacred writers in the choice of the material that they decided to incorporate into their own text, then it will be forever impossible to distinguish between what is truly God’s Word and what may be simply an accurate record of a fallible source. To the extent that any material appears endorsed by the sacred writer, it must be viewed as endorsed by God as well.”—*Inerrancy and Common Sense*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1980), p. 89.

¹²*The Great Controversy*, pp. vi, vii.

In a way, God did not expect the Biblical writer to “reinvent the wheel.” He led Paul to borrow from the apocrypha in developing a substantial part of [Romans 1](#). He led him to find useful material, at least to hearers in his day, in the Jewish Targums (Aramaic translation or paraphrase of a portion of the Old Testament) in developing [1 Corinthians 10:1-4](#) and [2 Timothy 3:8](#). He led John to find generous help from contemporary sources such as the Targums and 1 Enoch. If the language already available seemed to help the Biblical author to speed his message preparation along, he prudently borrowed for his purpose. No doubt many of his contemporaries recognized quickly from where the writer had borrowed his material. To the receivers of the prophet’s message, such borrowing was no problem: they saw the big picture of the writer’s message.

Likely many in Christ’s day recognized His references to extra-Biblical sources that He used to develop His messages—messages that were truly original.

But His use of sources had nothing to do with the authority or originality of His messages. ¹³ [9]

Does borrowed material become inspired? Only in the sense that it assists the writer to state his message more clearly. This may lead to another question: Why did not Paul and John give credit to the authors of the borrowed material? Perhaps they believed, as did Ellen White, that “every gleam of thought, every flash of intellect, is from the Light of the world.” ¹⁴ This conviction that God is the Author of all truth may have been one reason for not feeling the need to reference their frequent borrowings.

¹³For a study of the relationship between Jewish rabbinic parables and Christ’s parables, see Harvey K. McArthur & Robert M. Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990). “The originality of Christ’s teaching, which is abundantly clear from the Gospel records, did not prevent Him from incorporating into His teaching much that was good in what earlier teachers had taught.”—W. D. E. Oesterley, *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* (London: SPCK, 1925), p. xxi.

¹⁴[Education, 14](#).

Distinguishing Between the Sacred and the Common

Prophets obviously mix common, everyday information with the divine message. When Paul referred to contemporaries with appreciation, that was not the divine message. When he asked Timothy to find the cloak and books that he had left at Troas and to “come before winter,” that was common, everyday talk ([2 Timothy 4:9-21](#)). When we read the genealogy of the families of Israel since Adam, we are reading common historical information, not a message given by revelation. ([1 Chronicles 1-8](#)).

Ellen White recognized this distinction between ordinary information and the divine message: “There are times when common things must be stated, common thoughts must occupy the mind, common letters must be written and information given that has passed from one to another of the workers. Such words, such information, are not given under the special inspiration of the Spirit of God. Questions are asked at times that are not upon religious subjects at all, and these questions must be answered. We converse about houses and lands, trades to be made, and locations for our institutions, their advantages and disadvantages.”¹

This distinction appeared in a 1909 letter where Ellen White was “troubled” about the former manager of the Paradise Valley Sanitarium, E. S. Ballenger. She wrote that Ballenger was “denying the testimonies as a whole because of what seems to him an inconsistency—a statement made by me in regard to the number of rooms in the Paradise Valley Sanitarium.” In an earlier letter she had commented that the sanitarium had forty rooms, when it had only thirty-eight.

She continued: “The information given concerning the number of rooms in the Paradise Valley Sanitarium was given, not as a revelation from the Lord, but simply as a human opinion. There

¹[Selected Messages 1:39](#).

has never been revealed to me the exact number of rooms in any of our sanitariums; and the knowledge I have obtained of such things I have gained by inquiring of those who were supposed to know.... For one to mix the sacred with the common is a great mistake. In a tendency to do this we may see the working of the enemy to destroy souls.”²

Students of prophetic writings should know how to separate the sacred from the common. Sometimes the question is asked in terms of what is inspired and what is not. (Obviously the distinction should not be based on whether we agree with a particular portion of a prophet’s writings.) The 1909 incident regarding rooms at the Paradise Valley Sanitarium is one example of a “common” reference. Other examples are found in Mrs. White’s hundreds of letters wherein she spoke of the weather, shopping lists, the garden, or her grandchildren. But sooner or later she would direct the reader’s thought to his or her spiritual needs or some church activity. That shift would be a clear signal to readers that they were now listening to a message that went beyond “common” themes.

Only a small percentage of Ellen White’s published writings deal with “common” topics, as anyone may readily see. She could write: “In these letters which I write, in the testimonies I bear, I am presenting to you that which the Lord has presented to me. I do not write one article in the paper expressing merely my own ideas. They are what God has opened before me in vision—the precious rays of light shining from the throne.’ It is true concerning the articles in our papers and in the many volumes of my books.”³

[10]

Mrs. White makes no distinction between the inspiration of her books, articles, or letters when they are giving spiritual counsel. This eliminates the position some have made that only her books are inspired. Those taking that position forget that much in her books was first written in article form.⁴

²Selected Messages 1:38.

³Selected Messages 1:29.

⁴In 1897 Ellen White wrote from Australia to John Wessels in South Africa, suggesting that he come to Australia to help in establishing the sanitarium work. The letter included matters that she had been shown regarding his family, but some things she had not been shown, and she made this clear: “I have not been given the message ‘Send for Brother John Wessels to come to Australia.’ No; therefore I do not say, I know that this is the place for you. But it is my privilege to express my wishes, even though I say, I speak

Further, it is clearly the case that Bible writers “mixed” extra-Biblical sources with their vision-based messages. One cannot then dismiss a prophet’s work simply because some portion of the book contains material from sources other than divine revelation. If prophets include the writings of others to better express truth, that material is not understood as merely “common” in the sense we have been using the term.

not by commandment. But I do not want you to come because of any persuasion of mine. I want you to seek the Lord most earnestly, and then follow where He shall lead you. I want you to come when God says Come, not one moment before. Nevertheless, it is my privilege to present the wants of the cause of God in Australia.... A work is to be done here, and if you are not the one to do it, I shall feel perfectly resigned to hear that you have gone to some other locality. I have been shown that it were better for you and the other members of your mother’s family to be in some other locality, because where they are, the companionship and associations are not the most favorable to their spiritual healthfulness.”—[Letter 129, 1897](#), parts of which may be found in [Selected Messages 3:58, 59](#). Here we have a good example where Ellen White clearly differentiated between her opinion and revealed information, similar to Paul’s experience as noted in [1 Corinthians 7:6](#).