

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE



**INTERPRETING
ELLEN G. WHITE'S
EARTH HISTORY
COMMENTS**

CINDY TUTSCH

**Interpreting Ellen G.
White's Earth History
Comments**

Ellen G. White

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Overview

This eBook is provided by the [Ellen G. White Estate](#). It is included in the larger free [Online Books](#) collection on the Ellen G. White Estate Web site.

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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Introduction

This essay focuses first on the biblical view of a prophet's role in relation to Ellen G. White. It examines how to responsibly interpret Ellen White's earth history comments in general, and her flood statements in particular. It briefly considers Ellen White's imago Dei model in relation to earth history, and her views on orthodoxy and pluralism. Finally, a case study looks at the comments made by Ellen White regarding the Genesis flood.

Chapter 1—The Biblical View Of A Prophet’s Role

The Seventh-day Adventist church authenticates its claim that Ellen White has received the prophetic office on the basis of several biblical “tests,” from which we will draw three. 1. [Isaiah 8:20](#) Ellen White does not contradict the testimony of the prophets who went before her, that is, the biblical prophets. She speaks “according to the law and to the testimony”. Through speech, writings, and example she held up Scripture, never swerving in her submission to the Word of God. 2. [1 John 4:1-3](#). Ellen White bears unequivocal witness to the Divine-human nature of Jesus Christ. 3. [Matthew 7:15-20](#). Ellen White devoted her life to pointing persons to Jesus, simultaneously engaging in efforts to combat systemic injustice and continually ministering to the poor and marginalized.

[2] Ellen White was instrumental in the establishment of many educational and publishing enterprises. She oversaw the expansion of the church’s healing ministry through the development of Western sanitariums, known today as primary acute-care hospitals. Ellen White also initiated the establishment of the Loma Linda Sanitarium, now Loma Linda University. Her prolific pen (over 100,000 manuscript pages) included counsel, admonition and wisdom on topics as wide ranging as salvation, health, leadership, careers, relationships, parenting, social justice, and education. Though she described historical events, particularly those events impacting the great controversy, she is not considered to be either a historian or a scientist.

Paul’s doctrine of “spiritual gifts” provides compelling evidence in favor of prophetic activity after New Testament times. Prophecy, including the divine gift of supernatural revelations and visions ¹ is included in all of Paul’s lists of the gifts of the Holy Spirit ([Ephesians 4](#); [1 Corinthians 12](#); [Romans 12](#)). There is no inference that one gift would cease, while all the rest would continue.

¹Endnotes L. H. Christian, *The Fruitage of Spiritual Gifts* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1947), 9.

From its inception, the Seventh-day Adventist church has always maintained that Ellen White was inspired in the same manner and to the same degree as Biblical prophets. Though her writings are not “another Bible,” the difference is in function and scope, not in authority.² Although Ellen White herself considered the Bible to be the test of faith and practice,³ she believed her messages were from God “for the comfort of His people and to correct those who err from Bible truth.”⁴ She rejected the “smorgasbord” approach to her writings, stating “There is no half-way work in the matter. The Testimonies are of the Spirit of God or of the Devil.”⁵ Nor did she make a distinction between the inspired and the less inspired testimonies, the authoritative commentary and the non- authoritative.⁶

Prophets are an agency through which God chooses to reveal Himself to humanity. His communications to prophetic messengers often occur through visions.⁷ Like biblical prophets, Ellen White experienced physical phenomena while in vision. Eyewitnesses, including several physicians, reported that she did not breathe while in vision, even while speaking.⁸ Though this phenomena is not as crucial as other tests of her authenticity, it does preclude restricting her ministry to that of mere pastoral or devotional benefit. A “good person” would not receive manifestations from evil spirits. Therefore, either the resurrected Lord Jesus did actually give messages to His people through Ellen White, as she claimed,⁹ or she is a false prophet, a liar, and not worthy of even devotional credibility.

²Herbert Douglas, *Messenger of the Lord* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1998), 416.

³Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1855-1909, 1948), 4:170, 175.

⁴Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, 76 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1882, 1945).

⁵Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 4:230.

⁶Ellen G. White, *Letter 92*, 3 July 1900, letter to J.H. Kellogg, Corrangbong, Australia.

⁷The Holy Bible: [Numbers 12:6](#), [Daniel 7:1](#).

⁸E. Hilliard, “The Reminiscence of Early Days,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, vol 109, 15 Dec. 1932: 1184-1185.

Martha D. Amadon, “Mrs. E. G. White in Vision,” *Note book Leaflets: Misc. Leaflets No. 2* (Ellen G. White Estate, Silver Spring, MD).

⁹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 5:667, 668.

“The Biblical writers were absolutely certain that the infinite God can and does communicate with finite human beings. They never argued that human language was any kind of barrier to direct communication from or with God. In fact, with great frequency God is referred to as the actual Person speaking through the prophet.

“For example, Elijah’s words in [1 Kings 21:19](#) are referred to in [2 Kings 9:25-26](#) as the oracle that ‘the Lord uttered... against him’ (RSV). Elijah is not even mentioned in the 2 Kings passage. The message of a prophet was always considered equivalent to direct speech from God. In fact, this identification of a prophet’s words with God’s words is so strong in the Old Testament that often we read of God’s speaking “through” a prophet, and disobeying a prophet’s word was tantamount to disobeying God.” ¹⁰

Virtually every book of the New Testament (with the exception of Philemon) mentions doctrinal error while advocating for purity of the faith, unity of the church, and the exclusion of false doctrine. ¹¹ It appears, then, that an important function of a messenger of the Lord is to assist the church, engaged in Bible study and debate, in identifying and expunging error from its corporate teachings. ¹²

In 1855, a study committee at Battle Creek reported “To say that [the testimonies of Ellen White] are of God, and yet we will not be tested by them, is to say that God’s will is not a test or rule for Christians.” ¹³

Though Ellen White’s voice was a unifying factor through Adventism’s gigantic crises of pantheism, righteousness by faith, and church organization, perhaps there has never been a time in the history of our church when the need for a message from the Creator has been more urgent than today. Amid syncretists and multi-faceted pressures to pledge allegiance to theological/scientific pluralism,

¹⁰Jo Ann Davidson, “God ‘s Word: Its Origin and Authority,” *Ministry Magazine*, Jan. 2003.

¹¹James R. Edwards, “Jesus Wasn ‘t a Pluralist,” *Christianity Today*, 5 April 1999:64-67.

¹²The Holy Bible: [Acts 15:1-2, 27-29](#), [Jeremiah 1:9](#) 1 [Thessalonians 5:19-21](#).

¹³Joseph Bates, J.H. Waggoner, and M.E. Cornell, [The Review and Herald](#), December 4, 1855, p. 79.

Ellen White's voice can still be heard, calling this movement to a unity based on the enduring principles of the Word of God. ¹⁴

¹⁴“But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms. 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 majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain “Thus saith the Lord” in its support.”—Ellen G. White, [The Great Controversy](#), 595.

[3] Chapter 2—White’s Imago Dei And Earth History

The theme of Ellen White’s educational model is imago Dei, restoration in humanity of the holistic image of God.¹ The challenge to the accomplishment of that anthropological center of purpose is found in her larger framework: the conflict between Christ and Satan. Central to this framework is the authority of Scripture, which declares (1) Christ as Creator of all, (2) the Sabbath as the culminating commemoration of the six literal day Creation event, (3) the complete restoration of Eden in the second dominion, including unveiled God/humanity communication, absence of death and predation, and (4) the continuance of 7th day Sabbath memorials to God’s creation initiative. In White’s great controversy framework, Satan continues with increasing intensity his diabolical efforts to thwart those purposes.

Because this model is central to all of Ellen G. White’s writings, it is impossible to remove one segment of the structure without seriously compromising the integrity of all her writings. Ellen G. White’s theological authority hinges on maintaining the framework of her primary purpose. Even as Skinner’s philosophy crumbles with the removal of behaviorism and Descartes’ theories capsize without the paradigm of doubt, Ellen White cannot be correct in her salvific doctrines if she does not correctly define the nature of the Creator and the Creation account. As Christ is either the incarnate God, as He claimed, or He is a liar, Ellen White cannot be merely a pious writer of platitudes on education and devotional life. Her entire ministry hangs or falls on the acceptance or rejection of her central model.

Ellen White’s biblically predicated great controversy model, then, is authoritative in determining the continuing veracity of such pivotal doctrines as salvation, the Sabbath, the mystery of death, the parousia, and the sanctuary. Thus, questions of the origins and

¹Ellen G. White, [Education](#), 15, 16 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1903, 1952).

primary purpose of the Sabbath (whether, for instance, a memorial of a six-day literal creation or a memorial of deliverance from Egypt) become more significant in terms of Ellen G. White's authority than do discussions of areas of less significance, such as two earth creations, precise earth age, or the source of volcanoes. However, with paradigms in geology and radio-metric dating in continual flux and change, time and discovery may even bring vindication to some of these controverted concepts.

Chapter 3—Ellen White On Orthodoxy, Pluralism, And Liberation From Societal Mandates And Scientific Trends Impacting Biblical Teachings On Earth History

Although Ellen White uses the phrase “unity in diversity,”¹ and stated “Instructors in our schools should never be bound about by being told that they are to teach only what has been taught hitherto,”² she maintained that the landmarks and pillars of Adventist truth were to remain. Concepts that impact the science of geology which she “was shown” to be identified as permanent include six literal, empirical, historical 24-hour days of creation, culminating with a literal 24-hour Sabbath day of rest, and human life on earth non-existent before the literal creation week described in Genesis.³ Recognizing that all truth in a fallen world is vulnerable to distortion, Ellen White continually repeated her clarion call to elevate Scripture over humanity’s ideas of science.⁴ True science, in her view, must always be brought to the test of the unerring standard of Scripture.⁵

Ellen White was aware of ideas similar to the uniformitarianism of James Hutton. She was also aware of the scholarly scorn leveled against the notion of a recent historical creation week, similar to the scorn offered by Schleiermacher’s caricature in 1829 that only “gloomy creatures” believe in ancient literalism. In this milieu of Genesis reconstruction with its converging concept of “deep time,” she could state both, “The work of creation cannot be explained by

¹Francis D. Nichol, *SDA Bible Commentary*, 7 vols. plus supplement. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1970), 6:1083.

²Ellen G. White, *Manuscript 8a, 1888*, Ellen G. White Estate, Silver Spring, MD.

³Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 4 vols. (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association 1858, 1860, 1864) 3:90-93.

⁴Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1913, 1943), 425.

⁵Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1903, 1952), 128-134.

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science,”⁶ and “True science and the Bible religion are in perfect
harmony.”⁷

Not only did Ellen White reject popular scientific notions of her day relating to geology, she recognized that higher criticism could undermine the Genesis account of Creation by proposing hierarchical concepts of polygenesis, thus providing a religious rationale for the preservation of racial hierarchy.⁸ In an era where notions regarding the biological, social, and civilizational inferiority of the Negro were commonly accepted as scientific,⁹ Ellen White challenged science by such statements as “The Black man’s name is written in the book of life beside the White man’s. All are one in Christ. Birth, station, nationality, or color cannot elevate or degrade men.”¹⁰

[4]

Thus, like Christ, Ellen White demonstrated both inclusiveness in her ministry and a Spirit-driven ability to filter through conflicting claims to define truth. Her unique voice contrasts with the increasing solidarity in biblical reconstruction and revisionism of her time and ours.

“Believe in the Lord your God, and you shall be established; believe His prophets, and you shall prosper.”¹¹ These are encouraging words for the Adventist discussion of earth history and the meaning of Ellen White’s statements on the subject to which we now turn.

⁶Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, 414 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1905, 1942).

⁷Nichol, *The S.D.A. Bible Commentary* 4:1167.

⁸Leslie N. Pollard, *Embracing Diversity* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 107

⁹*Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁰Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958, 1980), 2:488.

¹¹The Holy Bible: *2 Chronicles* 20:20.

Chapter 4—Interpreting White’s Earth History Statements With Particular Reference To The Genesis Flood

We now examine a brief case study of how we today might best interpret Ellen White’s comments on earth history, focusing primarily on the Genesis flood. We need, first of all, to review the source of her information regarding earth history. In at least three places regarding earth history we find White making the following claims: “I was then carried back to the creation and was shown that the first week, in which God performed the work of creation in six days and rested on the seventh day, was just like every other week.”¹ Regarding the size of pre-flood animals she writes: “I was shown that very large, powerful animals existed before the flood, which do not now exist.”² Finally, concerning geology White says: “I have been shown that, without Bible history, geology can prove nothing.”³ Thus, her information on the history of the creation and flood came, according to her claims, from divine visions regarding these historical events.

The above statements by Ellen White help to explain her strong conviction, evident in the following quotation, regarding the authority and reliability of God’s Word concerning earth history: “There should be a settled belief in the divine authority of God’s Holy Word ... Moses wrote under the guidance of the Spirit of God, and a correct theory of geology will never claim discoveries that cannot be reconciled with his statements.”⁴

This statement also shows that the relationship between field evidence and the biblical account of the flood is a crucial issue.

¹Ellen G. White, [The Spirit of Prophecy 1:85](#). (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1870, 1877, 1878, 1884, 1969).

²[The Spirit of Prophecy 1:87](#).

³[The Spirit of Prophecy 1:88](#).

⁴Ellen G. White, [Patriarchs and Prophets, 114](#) (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1890, 1958).

Commenting upon this point White writes, “relics found in the earth do give evidence of conditions differing in many respects from the present, but the time when these conditions existed can be learned only from the Inspired Record.”⁵ Here White indicates that the implications which human research draw from field data can extend only so far and no further. In other words, the implications that a Christian geologist may draw from field data need to be informed and guided by biblical claims, i.e., by a worldview constructed by the Bible. This is an example of what today we would call a rejection of methodological naturalism in favor of creationist catastrophism. An example of Ellen G. White's implied application of the latter model or worldview of catastrophism is that on one hand the relics or the fossils, which White describes as “men, animals, and trees many times larger than now exist,”⁶ correctly establish that different conditions existed in the past than exist now. So far so good on the interpretation of field data and the biblical claims. On the other hand, according to Ellen White, if we were to claim that these same fossils show that life forms existed millions of years ago, we would be drawing an unwarranted implication from the field data.⁷ Why would this be so? According to White, the answer lies in a statement-of-faith claim that “[i]n the history of the Flood, inspiration has explained that which geology alone could never fathom.”⁸

Explaining some implications of the historical event of the flood, White notes that during the Flood humans, animals, and trees were “buried, and thus preserved as an evidence to later generations that the antediluvians perished by a flood. God designed that the discovery of these things should establish faith in inspired history; but ... the things which God gave them [i.e., to us humans] as a benefit, they turn into a curse by making a wrong use of them.”⁹ These words are encouraging regarding the relation of paleontology and the biblical record as intended by God. In other words, according to Ellen White, Deity encourages the search for and study of fossils, and actually intends that their discovery should help to ground

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⁵Patriarchs and Prophets, 112.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

personal belief in the historical reliability of the Genesis account of the creation and the Flood. This forcefully illustrates that White believed that the accounts of [Genesis 1-11](#) are divinely intended to be interpreted historically, and not only theologically. Thus, according to Ellen White, the only true biblical understanding of the creation and the flood accounts is to interpret them as referring to empirical, historical events which are of interest to the natural sciences.

These quotations show us how Ellen White would have us interpret her statements on the Flood today. It seems that she would have us take her flood comments by faith as divinely given insights into the true historical nature of what happened during the Genesis flood. These insights can help to formulate sound, scientifically responsible field research projects. Thus, her statements not only serve us devotionally, they are also profitable in supporting the only truly biblical interpretation of the creation and the flood. ¹⁰

Viewed in the light of her statements on time and the flood presented above, we can safely say that were Ellen White alive today, she would hold to a recent historical creation week and a global flood even in the face of challenges presented by radiometric dating and paleontological research. She would encourage us to persevere in faith in the historical reliability of [Genesis 1-11](#), and to pursue research informed accordingly.

In conclusion, we note that while Ellen G. White's comments concerning earth history may produce a crisis today, (as Christ's comments demanded hearing and discernment in His time) that crisis can result in healthy discussion that ultimately strengthens the church body by promoting Christ as Creator, Lord of the creation-commemorating Sabbath, and King of Eden restored.

¹⁰Karen K. Abrahamson, John T. Baldwin, "Ellen G. White on Creation and Evolution," Andrews University Theological Seminary, July 2003.